





take a bow

What's the view from your office window like? Go on, have a break – you've no-doubt earned one – and watch the world outside for a moment. Right, are you back with us now? Feeling refreshed? Most of you will have been looking out at cityscapes and neighbouring offices no doubt. Others will have been able to see sculptured grounds and modern business parks. Some, like us, will simply have been watching the rain and leaves fall in equal measures.

a lucky few of you will, in true David Blaine style, have spent hour after hour watching old man Thames roll serenely past your offices. One company in particular, however, can trump even you riverside types. This company is not actually positioned next to the Thames, it's positioned in it.

The company in question is the Boulton Group – a UK property company, specialising in commercial lettings and sales. Established in 1987, the Group is the inspiration of brothers Steven and Clive Boulton Brooks and has since rapidly matured, now holding and managing a substantial commercial property investment portfolio in excess of £350m, with a rolling development programme of over £20m.

The Group has regional offices in Hereford and Birmingham, but it is to the Capital – and, to be more precise, to Chelsea's Cadogan Pier – that we have ventured. Before we board, we meet with designer Adam Dawe, who tells us how this unusual office scheme came about in the first place. 'They used to work on a barge they were renting on this mooring, and they decided they wanted to build their own offices, but stay in the same location. They asked me to come along – they already had the concept and the hull – and actually make it all work; an interior office space that would be floating on the river, and naturally I was very excited by that.'

'We started working on the boat next door about six years ago,' adds Boulton Director Nigel Jeffery. 'Then we grew to a bigger boat'



and now through to this boat. So, it's been a part of our history really. We started on water in the first place because one of my co-Directors was actually living on board that first boat – which then became the office.

'The last boat was very outdated, and we needed something bigger cleaner and better to reflect what we are about. I think we have achieved that. Adam did a superb job. All the hard work was done behind the scenes, but the finishing touches make all the difference I think. This really is a great shop-window for the company.'

Had Adam ever tackled a floating project before, we ask? 'No, never – like I said, it was really exciting. It was such a fresh brief. For

me it was a challenge, I like to do things very much from the ground up – bespoke integrated design rather than just doing a new colour scheme. It was an opportunity to create lots of built-in features – in fact the brief required that.'

We start the tour of our first ever office-boat (would that make it a maiden voyage?), naturally enough, at the reception area. Even though we probably shouldn't be, we can't help being a little surprised by the standard of the fit-out and, in particular, the corporate, professional feel of the space. We're not even sure what we were expecting, but any silent fears we may have had regarding a floating office and gimmick-design are immediately allayed. It is clear from the moment you enter the space that this is a quality working office environment – albeit one that ever so slightly undulates.

The reception area features strong, elegant Boulton Group branding together with high quality fixtures and finishes, as you would expect from any land-based scheme for such a prestigious organisation. With space at something of a minimum, a 'hidden' cloakroom/storage wall is both a neat and functional addition.

Turning right (to the stern?) we enter the smart Boulton boardroom, and again high design standards are followed here. We'll let Adam take over. 'We originally wanted to make the boardroom slightly bigger, but for technical reasons we couldn't, so we now have a deck space outside – which is fantastic in summer. The shape and size of the boat obviously put limitations on what we could do, this was our starting point. I didn't see things as problems, I saw them as challenges.'

'We've used a lot of great finishes in the boardroom – such as the wallpaper – and a slightly different approach to the lighting. The colours aren't your standard office scheme, yet it is quite subtle – we've worked hard to harmonise everything together, including three different floorcovering colours. I designed the office's entire lighting scheme – we used very standard fittings, but tried to make them a little more interesting, so we've got these recessed boxes and a

chandelier, giving this room a slightly different feel from the working space. The whole boat's design is clean and simple, quite minimal, but not too hard-edged. It's a comfortable space. I took a lot of my inspiration for shapes and designs from the elements – wind, water, air – and the man-made shapes used for harnessing these.'

This almost sub-conscious representation includes wave-shaped profiles for the chairs, door glazing and also the table itself – as well as stunning artworks. As in the reception area, rich blue, warm cherry and copper (even the exterior of the vessel itself is painted in a copper tone) are subtly present here, combined with neutral shades and aluminium.

Heading back past reception, we enter the main working space of the office. 'Although the receptionist can feel part of what is going on in the open plan office, we didn't want visitors to see straight through as they entered – so the print/utilities room was located between these areas, it's rear wall creating some privacy for the staff,' Adam explains. 'People know there is something going on behind here, although it's not a closed space. It is quite informal, but we still have a bit of crowd control, if you like. We tried to differentiate the various areas, so the carpet changes shades to pick out the changing functions, while also getting away from that boring, continuous feel.'

Walking through, a number of Adam's bespoke elements immediately take your eye. 'We have used aluminium tambour shuttering – which I inverted on its side – as cladding,' he continues. 'For the staircase I wanted one continuous band of glazing to flow right down to the bottom – almost like a river. We have hidden away the utilities from the main floor space – I knew what equipment they had and designed this area accordingly. In fact the entire space is tailored to their needs. It's nice to be able to do that as opposed to creating an office that anyone can just walk into. We could be much more specific.'

'The desking, for example, features this great wing-shaped profile which has a wonderful feel to it. When someone spends eight hours a day sat at a desk, it's nice to be able to be sat at something they feel good at. Again, we have used cherry here. This main working area needed to be flexible – there may be only two people working in here one day and eight another day. I decided to make 6m running workstations with filing underneath that can be moved around. So to maintain flexibility, each workstation has only one central leg supporting the whole run.'

One real issue was that, on the South side of the boat, light bounces off the water and into people's eyes, therefore a specialist window treatment – that could block the glare while not eliminating the fantastic views – was required here, together with secondary blinds.

The two Boulton Directors who work out of the Chelsea space each have cellular offices to the far end of the working area. The symmetrical spaces carry many of the design elements we have seen throughout the environment, and also feature a couple of smart extras, including a hint of signature Jasper Morrison.

Downstairs there is extra, flexible space that Boulton may well expand into in the future, but it is presently not required and is sub-let to another company. This lower level also holds a smart kitchen area, bathrooms and a secondary meeting room space. One particularly interesting fact about the boat is that it doesn't have an engine, and was delivered all-but-complete to Chelsea.

Heading back up to deck level, the light is fading fast and the full effect of the neighbouring Albert Bridge can now be appreciated. And it's only when we're back on terra firma that we realise we've thoroughly enjoyed our journey to hull and back (oh come on, we had to get at least one boat-pun in!) ●



essential ingredients

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| Client: | • The Boulton Group |
| Design: | • Adam Dawe
adamdawedesign@hotmail.com |
| Photography: | • Joanna Vestey |