Breaking new ground

Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts
UEA NORWICH

Spring 2005 – the collections have been stored, the older furniture auctioned off, the staff housed in temporary offices. Now the fabric of the Sainsbury Centre's main building is being stripped down ready for renewal. The countdown to reopening has begun

On a freezing morning in late February, snow swirls in the air and the Sainsbury Centre is alive with activity. Not the usual art-and-academic variety, which is temporarily confined to the Crescent Wing and Portakabins, but the activity of hard hats, steel toecaps and DayGlo safety jackets. The refurbishment - and partial transformation - of the original building is under way.

Already a small village of portable buildings has sprung up in the fenced compound behind the Centre, and a steady flow of contractors' vehicles moves in and out. Inside, meanwhile, Norman Foster's 1978 landmark is now a bare, cavernous space. Carpets, lighting and glass partitions have all gone, and the builders have stripped away the slatted metal blinds, exposing glass skylights and structural steel in the roof, and ducting and insulation materials in the corridor-width wall spaces. The floor is strewn with defunct cabling; a red, spray-painted outline marks the soon-to-be-excavated atrium linking the main building to the Crescent Wing galleries; and in the restaurant area a team of five is hard at work on a hydraulic platform, removing climate-control units mounted in the walls.

"There's no time to waste," says John Claydon, on-site contract manager for principal contractor Kier Eastern. "This is a complex project, with a high volume of work to get through in a relatively short period of time." A glance at the project schedule shows just how much there is to do. It lists 164 separate activities, but still doesn't reveal the full complexity and interdependence of the various tasks.

"Each of the activities on the schedule could easily be shown as four or five separate ones," explains Claydon. "And they'll take a lot of man-hours. Right now we've got 30 to 40 people on site each day, rising to around 100 at the peak. During the project we'll be using up to 40 subcontractors, from local carpenters to a major electrical contractor from Peterborough and mechanical engineers from Cambridge. The companies supplying the glass skylights and the metal blinds will even be sending over specialist installation teams from Austria and Italy."

As well as managing subcontractors and suppliers, Claydon and his team hold weekly meetings with UEA's estates department and Sainsbury Centre staff, and are visited two or three times each week by a project architect from Foster & Partners, something Claydon greets with enthusiasm. "That level of involvement from the architect is exceptional," he says. "Having Foster & Partners on site so regularly is great, because it shows a real attention to detail and it means any issues are resolved quickly and clearly."

Now the 'stripping and demolishing' phase is almost over, the refurbishing and new-build phases are about to begin. The structural steelwork will be cleaned, any defective steel replaced and new mechanical and electrical services will be installed. External works, including new paving, bollards and cycle racks, will start in May. Work on the new main-entrance canopy and doors will begin in June, and a new public lift between the main gallery and the basement will be installed in August.

A critical phase early on is the excavation of the new atrium. "The first thing we'll do," says Claydon, "is stabilise the ground, so the excavation doesn't affect the existing foundations. Then we can create that new space."

Ground stabilisation isn't the only challenge associated with the excavation of the atrium; another is to minimise the disruption to the Sainsbury Centre staff. The heavy plant normally used to break through reinforced concrete would create high levels of noise and vibration, and would fill the existing basement spaces with dust. To avoid these problems, the contractors have come up with a novel solution.

"We've sealed off the existing basement corridors, leaving only fire-escape doors in place," says Claydon. "But we've also come up with a quieter, cleaner way to break up the concrete floor. Instead of using a heavy-duty drill, we're going to cut the floor into chunks, then put a bolt into the centre of each section and lift it out whole. It'll be a lot less intrusive."

Another key phase will be the installation of the 360 new glass skylights, which begins in May. Each day, the Austrian suppliers will remove eight panes in the morning and install eight new ones in the afternoon. On rainy days , a rooftop shelter will be erected over that day's section of rooftop, so the interior of the building is open to the elements as little as possible.

By the end of the summer months, the major structural work will have been completed, the new mechanical and electrical services will have been installed, and the installation of motorised blinds will be well under way. As November approaches, the final details will be slotted into place. But even once the construction and fitting-out is done, there will be a lot to do before the Sainsbury Centre reopens: the temperature and humidity control systems must be monitored and adjusted before any objects can be displayed, for instance, and the lighting systems set up for the reinstalled permanent displays and first temporary exhibition.

On the day that exhibition opens, an exciting new era will begin for the revitalised Sainsbury Centre.

Written by Charlie Watson