The creation of a studio

In the beginning (of the '50s), IBM created some office blocks in a beautiful Hampshire country estate named Hursley. Now, the site interior was without form and void of modern collaborative spaces. Dust covered the face of the disused ground floor of D-Block West. But the Spirit of Design Thinking was hovering over the face of the enterprise. And Phil Gilbert said, "Let there be a light, modern studio here." And, behold, it came to be. And everyone saw that it was very good.

1950s to early 2000s
Design at Hursley

IBM has had a software lab in the leafy Hampshire village of Hursley (just outside of Winchester, UK) since the late 1950s. The site was formerly a privately-owned country estate and deer park and has its own interesting history, including being used by the military during both world wars. In fact, part of the iconic Spitfire airplane was designed on site.

There has also been some form of design and user research activity on site for at least four decades. In the 1970s a Human Factors lab was created, where custom-built observation rooms enabled staff to observe what was then termed human-computer interaction with IBM hardware and software products. However, by the early 2000s these facilities had largely fallen into disuse so the space was re-purposed and the old equipment was moved into the Hursley site museum.

2012
The emergence of IBM Design

In 2012 there were a dozen or so UXers, as they were then called, working on site, but most were working as the only designer on their product or portfolio. Engineering teams didn't always understand the value of user research and design and, as a result, it was generally hard to have a significant impact on the overall user experience of any given product. These were dark times indeed.

However, in January 2013 Phil Gilbert, Pierre Henri Clouin, and Charlie Hill visited Hursley to speak about the formation of the new IBM Design business unit and about something called IBM Design Thinking, which they were just beginning to roll out. This visit also sparked initial discussions around the formation of a new design studio at Hursley.

2013 to 2015
Designing a studio

The design team, inspired by the company-wide design initiative, started re-evaluating pretty much everything.

Fed up with being dispersed across the site, the team found a disused office space, cleared it out, and simply moved in. While this makeshift workspace was far from ideal, this simple act of bringing all of the designers together had a huge impact.

Taking a "let's seek forgiveness rather than permission" approach, the team liberated some neglected whiteboards, brought in some tools from home, and started hacking the space. Soon every available wall and window pane was being used to explore user journeys and possible new designs. Post-It deliveries to site rocketed.

In the meantime, Andy Gatford, Brian Peaston, and Ed Moffatt continued to push for IBM Design to invest in a new studio at Hursley. One of the distinctive things about this period was that the whole design team was actively involved in the planning of the studio. As it would become our space we wanted a say in every aspect of the design. The team used IDT techniques to come up with requirements, big ideas, and priorities. We even requested furniture samples to try out. Our research concluded, among other things, that certain whiteboards were not as robust as they claimed(!) and that the Techo Sidiz office chair was definitely the best model for chair races...

In early 2015, we were given the official go-ahead to start building the studio, although with less budget than we'd hoped. Sadly, both the micro-brewery and hot tub had to be axed from the plans.

2015
Studio launch & studio life

Building contractors moved in for some months, but on the 6th November 2015, IBM Studios Hursley officially opened. This was an amazing day and an important milestone for the Hursley site.

But, of course, this is by no means the end of the story; in fact, it's really just the prologue to the ongoing tale of this vibrant IBM design studio.

In just over three years we've hired over 20 super-talented designers into the studio; run countless IBM Design Thinking workshops for various product teams; hosted numerous client engagements; had parties, Nerf gun wars, picnics, and film screenings; and led the design charge for products including App Connect, Blockchain, CICS, Messaging, and Watson IoT Platform.

And the best is still to come...

Sadly, both the micro-brewery and hot tub had to be axed from the plans