



FEATURE: ARCHITECTURE/DESIGN

TINKER HATFIELD

WORDS: SARAH JAYNE FELL

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FROM **CONCRETE AND STEEL** TO **CUSHION AND AIR**

The Nike Air Max 90 Story

The legendary Air Max 90 owes its existence to the creative genius of Tinker Hatfield, now vice-president of design and special projects at Nike, but originally employed as an architect, designing showrooms and office spaces. Asked by Nike to start designing shoes in the eighties, Hatfield brought his passion for architecture and his eye for innovative design together. As he explains, 'What you design is really a culmination of everything that you've seen and done in your life previous to that point'. And so Hatfield travels extensively, seeking inspiration as well as an understanding of people from all corners of the world in an attempt to translate these experiences into fresh, cutting-edge design.

A trip to Paris ignited the creative spark that was to become the Air Max 90. The George Pompidou Centre in Paris (a collaborative design by Renzo Piano, Richard and Sue Rogers, Edmund Happold and Peter Rice) is renowned for its revolutionary and controversial design. It contrasts so starkly against the traditional French architecture it is set amongst that it commands attention and shocked the public of the day. Hatfield describes how 'this large almost machine-like building sort of spilling its guts out into the world' shook not only the world of architecture but the world of urban design. The building stands with its inner-workings exposed to the world; its escalators, air ducts and heating shafts are attached to the exterior to save space, while its glass walls reveal the multiple levels of the building and its interior, right down to the very people that frequent its museums. Not only is it structurally compelling with its exposed skeleton of mechanical systems, but it is also painted in bright colours that make it visible from a distance, adding to the striking nature of its appearance.



The New York Times noted years later when the building won the 2007 Pritzker Prize that it had ‘turned the architecture world upside down’. The Pritzker jury said the Pompidou ‘revolutionised museums, transforming what had once been elite monuments into popular places of social and cultural exchange, woven into the heart of the city.’ For many years it was the most visited museum in Paris, surpassing even the Louvre.

This controversial yet groundbreaking architectural accomplishment inspired Hatfield to pursue a similar approach to shoe design. At the time he was working with Nike to improve the original Air Max; their goal was to increase the size of the airbag inside the sole to enhance cushioning and flexibility in the shoe but also widen it to ensure stability. The airbag was hidden, encased in polyurethane, and so most people did not really understand the concept of the Nike Air. The problem with the new, larger airbag was the logistic of getting it into the shoe, as it was getting closer and closer to the edge of the midsole on both sides.

Hatfield’s solution? Cut a big hole in the midsoles and let the bag be exposed, allowing people to see the fundamental workings of the shoe and increase its efficiency by saving space and accommodating the larger bag. Form follows function, just as the George Pompidou Centre had exemplified.

Hatfield also used the dramatic colour scheme of the Pompidou that had so inspired him, taking colour to the max and launching the Air Max 90 with a thick bright red band around the bottom which, in later models, brightened to infrared. Just like the Pompidou, Hatfield wanted people to take notice of this shoe, even shake them up a little. As he explains:

‘Generally something that’s actually a little more progressive and well designed is either loved or hated. There’s no middle ground. I look for that kind of design result. People will either love it or hate it. If they’re kind of in the middle, I think that means you didn’t do too much. That means you just sort of maintained some status quo. That’s simply not my job; that’s not what I care to do. I don’t want to be a status quo designer that skates by, with the lowest common denominator work.’

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Hatfield initially faced much scepticism from Nike, who thought that the shoe would look too vulnerable having its empty interior exposed – it did not look like a ‘normal’ running shoe. But they ran with it, and never looked back as the Air Max 90 quickly became one of the fastest selling running shoes of its time.

This year, Nike has launched the Air Max 90 Premium, a recreation of the classic Air Max 90 shape, but made from premium materials like ostrich leather and high quality mesh. It is once again available in the distinctive infrared colour wave among many others, all true to Hatfield’s ideals of creating a shoe that will not go by unnoticed.

The Air Max 90 Current, launched at the same time, is Nike’s next step in its evolution. Take Nike Free, add the Air Current and the Air Max 90 and you get a hybrid that says speed even when you’re not running. Air Max 90 Current uses eighteen years of Nike innovation. The Nike Free natural flex and feel is crossed with the Air Max 90 outsole, and the Air Current mesh forefoot brought to bear on the upper. The result? Free, flex, fast – at any speed. Accented, of course, with infrared.

Hatfield today says that he is fully convinced that had he not seen the Pompidou Centre, he would not have suggested that they expose the airbag and let people see inside the shoe. ‘Nike nurtures and cherishes the creative process, the process of innovation,’ he says, which allowed him to express his vision in the form of a shoe that has revolutionised the history of footwear.