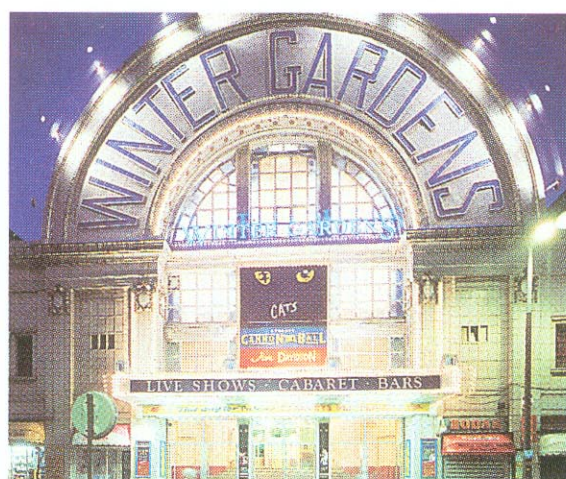


FANTASY ARENA

The Winter Gardens complex in Blackpool is a unique piece of Victorian 'seaside architecture'. So when it came to a late 'eighties refurbishment, David Quigley Architects fashioned an interior to fuel those holiday fantasies. Carl Gardner reports

BY SEA



The seaside is a strange place and its architecture is unique...it all started with the Nash pavilion at Brighton, which was all about travel and Empire...other builders continued the tradition. Being at the seaside, on the edge of the ocean, gives seaside architecture a certain whimsical quality.'

David Quigley, of David Quigley Architects (DQA) speaks with the authority of someone whose graduate thesis was on...seaside architecture. So who better to work on the refurbishment of Blackpool's Winter Gardens, incongruous scene of so many serious political party conferences? An ex-associate of Terry Farrell, Quigley took the commission over from Farrell, with his mentor's generous blessing, when he left to set up DQA in 1986.

The Winter Gardens itself is a curious place – a rambling, slightly anachronistic four acre complex of theatre halls, bars, restaurants and function rooms, all heavily themed or decorated in impressively kitsch recreations. Owners First Leisure have spent around £1.7 million on this latest round of refurbishment, for which DQA were responsible. Yet curiously, so large is the place, much of it still has that delapidated, run-down, end-of-pier feel – with the

exception of certain key areas.

Much of DQA's work was involved with restoring and repainting the faded plasterwork and faience and the installation of new signage, lighting and carpets. The Opera House theatre, the Empress Ballroom and the Floral Hall and Rotunda have all benefitted. Elsewhere, on the Church Street and Victoria Street facades, restoration was accompanied by an attempt to give both entrances a more welcoming, transparent feel, through the use of glazing and focussed lighting.

However in one area, the Arena, a large multi-purpose function room (where a Heseltine speech might follow boxing, pigeon-fanciers or a disco from one week to the next), DQA got the opportunity to design an entire interior from scratch. Quigley certainly didn't betray the tradition of seaside fantasy: 'We wanted to create an "outside room inside, a sort of courtyard" – we were looking for a room that was different from the others, that would create a sense of anticipation and excitement.'

The long rectangular space, previously referred to not-so-affectionately as 'the rat-pit', is approached down a flight of stairs at one end. DQA installed a dramatic winding staircase, with various places to stop and look: 'We tried to give a real

sense of entry and arrival – it's a voyeur's staircase,' Quigley explains.

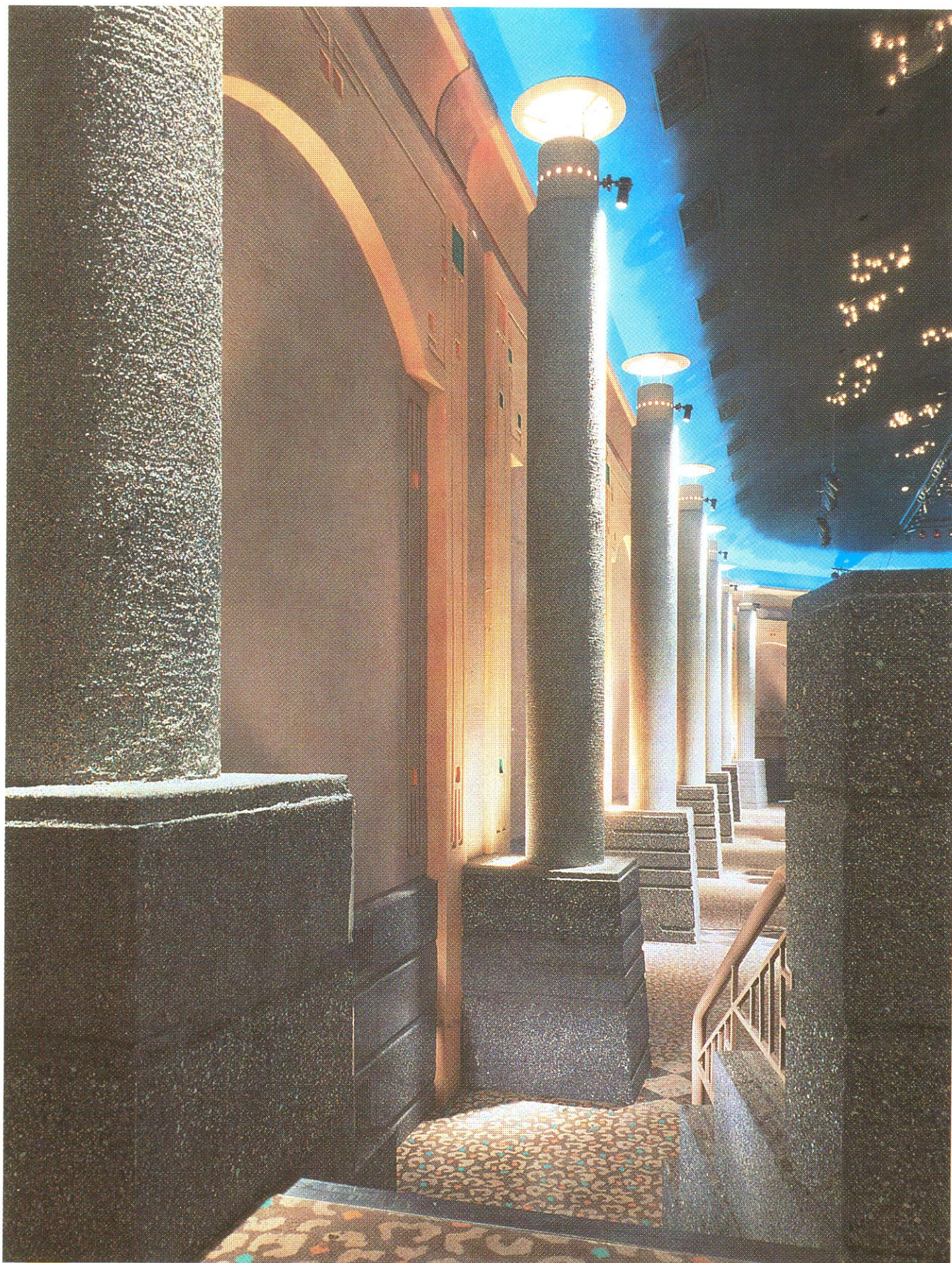
A further problem was how to give some discipline to such a long, windowless space. DQA chose to install a colonnade of tall, free-standing, vaguely Egyptian columns down either side, which symbolically support the 'sky' above. The columns themselves are made out of sections of plastic water-pipe – 'I worked with Terry Farrell on the TV-am studio, and learnt these stage-set type techniques,' Quigley adds. Inside they



LEISURE

The highly eclectic post modern entertainment architecture and decoration (left) by David Quigley Architects at Blackpool's refurbished Winter Gardens complex

An example of contextual design for Blackpool – the striking exterior of Winter Gardens (top); and acceptable pastiche internally, with its mixture of art deco and classical Roman (above)



contain a 60W GLS fitting in the top, which both shines through a row of drilled holes, and shines back from a reflector mounted above.

In fact it's the lighting which makes the space. 'We did lots of experimentation with lights,' Quigley claims. The 'sky', for example, is punctuated by clusters of low-voltage 'stars' and edged by a blue 'horizon', lit by hidden fluorescents behind the cornice. The lighting around the sides of the stairs is a simple fluorescent set behind a strong piece of translucent perspex.

Elsewhere, 'all the lighting, such as the column downlights, is designed to reveal the surfaces, with rebound light for the spaces,' Quigley explains. The columns are emphasised by a single 300W tungsten halogen behind each one, 'which throws the column forward'.

The rough-cast surfaces of columns, walls and plinths, which Quigley chose to highlight, are wor-

thy of mention. Appropriately – and fantastically – enough for the seaside, the render is made of crushed sea-shells, mixed with a special resin. The shells, sourced from nearby Morecambe's fish restaurants, 'offer a gleam and lustre and depth of colour you can't get from anything else,' Quigley claims. And he's even taught his teacher a thing or two – Farrell is using the same technique on one of his Docklands projects.

Stylistically the unique space has the same sort of post-modern, ad hoc eclectic quality which Farrell favours – Egyptian, mixed with strains of 'thirties art deco and classical Roman. Quigley even claims the decorative patterning of walls and balustrades was derived from Nash: 'We studied the buildings of Nash in Regent's Park, where he developed a simple vocabulary of lines and shapes...here we developed a strong geometric vocabulary, using squares and circles.'

The new £0.5 million Arena face-lift has a strong visual character, certainly. One's reservation has to be how well the finishes and flooring (the strongly patterned 'terrazzo' floor is in fact a tailor-made BMK carpet) will stand up to the 'heavy knocking around' the building receives. After only months, walls are beginning to show distinct signs of wear and tear – ongoing maintenance will be vital. After all the Arena and the rest of the Gardens may have another 100 years of fiery Heselstine speeches and disco-going pigeon-fanciers to contend with.



The rough-cast surfaces of walls and columns which span the perimeter of the Arena (top) are made from crushed

sea-shells Hollywood comes to Blackpool – Quigley's theatrical 'Spielberg-esque' set for the Arena (above)