

CASE STUDY

BLACKPOOL FLOOR SHOW

A fresh approach to floor design, appropriate to seaside architecture, can be seen in David Quigley Architects' refurbishment of the Winter Gardens, Blackpool, Lancashire. Susan Dawson reports from the sea front.



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1 The Winter Gardens entrance has been relit and refurbished to match the seaside exuberance of its interior.
2 The new Arena structure is much more than a staircase, its multi-level circulation and bar areas provide a dramatic setting to the many activities — disco, conference, exhibition — taking place.



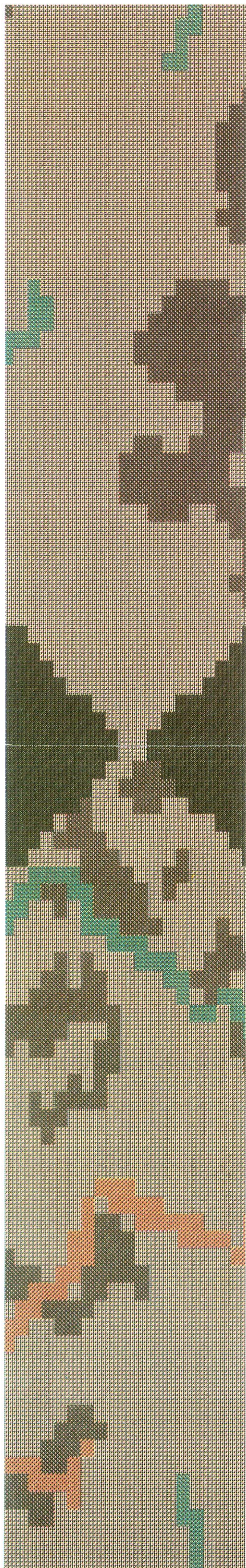
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One of the few places where facadism and fantasy are quite justified is the seaside, with its long historical tradition of pushing architectural expression to its limits — Brighton Pavilion, the great Victorian piers — a tradition that today has been transferred inland to theme Parks such as Camelot and Alton Towers. Blackpool's Winter Gardens is one of the last great seaside examples, a huge four-acre complex started in 1870 which includes the famous Empire Ballroom, the Opera House Theatre and an extraordinary variety of meeting rooms, public spaces, cafés and bars, many created in the 1930s by unemployed set designers from Pinewood Studios.

Its current refurbishment, to attract the convention/conference circuit, was a project originally given to Terry Farrell, who later passed it on as a leaving present to his associate, David Quigley. Because the complex could house a whole range of different activities, from ballroom dancing to pigeon fancying, and because each of the key spaces already had a different theme and atmosphere, David Quigley decided to retain and em-

phasise this separateness, rather than unifying the whole.

The largest space, and that in which major structural work was carried out, is the Arena with a brief requiring maximum flexibility — to serve as conference centre, exhibition hall or disco — with 'an atmosphere of expectation'. Formerly a billiard hall, it was an uninviting space deep below ground level and very wide, with one magnificent feature, a curved 'sky' ceiling sparkling with constellations of spotlight stars. Retaining this ceiling, but demolishing the rest of the interior, the architect has revitalised the Arena with a grand film-set staircase, cascading symmetrically down to three vast landings, wide enough to include a bar, and if necessary, a whole troupe of Busby Berkeley dancing girls. It is a place to linger and watch, to see and be seen. Yet this glitzy stage set is achieved by finishes and components which are very inexpensive; the impressive columns are in fact standard plastic sewage pipes clad in a resin-based render containing crushed sea shells. This process, Testa Teres, developed by a local



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Fleetwood firm, was also used by Farrell in some areas of Tobacco Dock in London's Docklands, and the iridescent underparts of the sea shells give a magical sparkle in strong light. The Arena carpet pattern was inspired by the shapes and colours of these sea shells, linked to the effect of terrazzo — the original floor covering — recreated to a very large scale. The link is established by bands of carpet simulating terrazzo tiles, set on the diagonal, with streaks of marbling in the same colours as those of the body carpet. For the rear of the bars on the landings, Altro's non-slip Safety Floor was specified.

The Rotunda, another grand ambulatory space, is, with the Floral Hall, the main artery of circulation in the Winter Gardens. Its magnificent columnated and arched interior, restored and repainted, has been enhanced with a new floor, inspired by the original terrazzo floor destroyed in the 1960s. Original colours used on the walls, in particular the warm brown/red of the original faience plinth which encircles the Rotunda, were used as the basis for the floor design. Its shapes, of a large scale in keeping with such a vast area, create a geometric pattern with a contemporary feel which simultaneously refers to the shapes in the dome above, the ribs of maroon plasterwork echoed by the pattern of ribs on the floor. 'Terrazzo', a material developed by Harefields and now produced by High Profile Polymers, recreates the feel of the original terrazzo floor. Its manufacture is not unlike that of terrazzo itself: coloured rubber chips are added to the solid rubber base during the mixing process, and the result is pressed into 14mm thick slabs. These are left to cure and harden, after which the slab is split into 4mm thick sheets and then sanded to 3.25mm thickness, smooth on the top surface and rougher on the bottom to give extra grip to the adhesive. The architect worked closely with the manufacturer in establishing the relationship, in percentage terms, between the colours of the rubber matrix and the terrazzo chips, and the sizes of the chips, to obtain the effect required.

At the Church Street entrance, both the exterior and the foyer are designed to give a hint of the delights within. New pilasters in the foyer identify the entrance, constructed, as before, of well disguised plastic drain pipes, and capped with magnificent square lights, fabricated from simple mild steel tee sections with coloured acrylic inserts, by a local ships' chandlers in nearby Fleetwood. The angular geometric patterned carpet in the foyer is loosely based in design and colour on a small sample of Victorian linoleum found in the ballroom beyond. This strong pattern, based on a loom width of 27 inches with a staggered 36-inch repeat, creates the discipline on which the whole of this section of the building is designed, and new doors and columns align with the 27-inch carpet grid. Where, around the perimeter, existing steel columns interfere with this discipline, the carpet changes in design to a small scale polka-dot version of the original. Adjacent offices are also carpeted in a smaller scale variation on the design.



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Choice of carpet

The architect first met three suppliers selected by First Leisure Corporation's purchasing manager and chose BMK because they could match the colours and patterns required, and also because they provided a sophisticated computer printout mock-up showing, at full scale, the proposed design and colour. This printout became the basis on which designs were discussed in terms of pattern thickness, and body colour, and from which full scale coloured samples were made. The carpet used throughout the Winter Gardens is a heavy contract (49 oz per yd²) Axminster weave using 80 per cent wool, 20 per cent nylon 3 ply yarn with a backing made of jute and cotton.



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3 A section of the final computer printout produced by BMK showing a full-scale mock-up of the design of the Arena 'terrazzo tile' carpet.

4 A side bar on the main floor of the Arena.

5 A strong geometric carpet design, surrounded by a matching finely-dotted border, dominates the foyer.

6 The original colours of the Rotunda are used in High Profile Polymers' rubber Terrazzo floor.

7 Crushed seashells, the aggregate base of the render with which the Arena columns were clad, also inspired the carpet design.

8 In certain areas this carpet is also inlaid with a diagonal square pattern simulating terrazzo tiles.

A very tight process of decision-making ran through the job, due to the letting requirements of the Winter Gardens, some areas being completed in 12 weeks. The carpet, although laid in three days, required six weeks to make, as only two 27-inch looms were available, and its design and colour, established at the outset, became the basis for wall colours rather than the reverse, as is usually the case.

Like the best seaside architecture, the Winter Gardens is larger than life, designed to be experienced rather than to be lived with,

pushing architectural expression to its limits. Yet it also shows, and here David Quigley's experience with Farrell on Charles Jencks' house tells, how five per cent of the cost of finishes gives ninety per cent of the impact. Quigley enthuses on the low cost, efficiency and capability of northern craftsmen — Wigan metalworkers, Fleetwood chandlers, Blackpool plasterers — whose work has produced dramatic effects with simple, low-cost materials, avoiding in his words the 'architectural gluttony' of luxury finishes, yet achieving the same longevity of wear. ■



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Credits

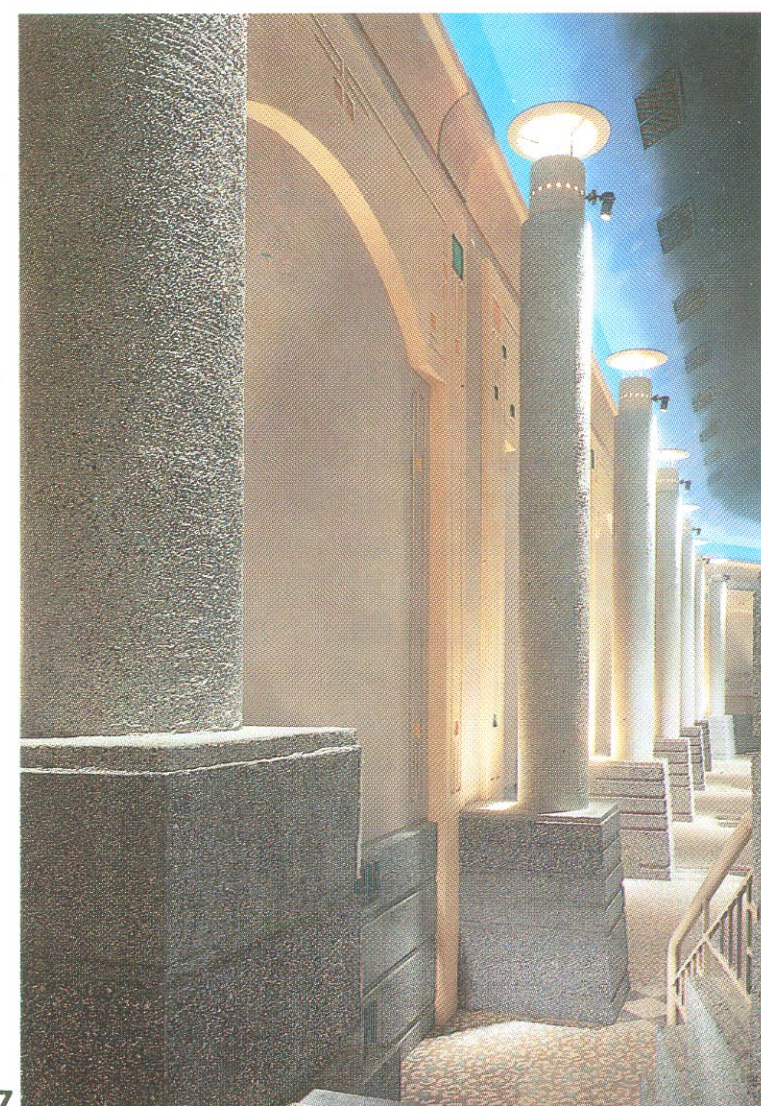
CLIENT First Leisure Corporation; TECHNICAL SERVICES DIRECTOR Leon Williams; ARCHITECT David Quigley Architects; JOB ARCHITECT John Chapman; QUANTITY SURVEYOR Holden & Lee; STRUCTURAL ENGINEER David Bateman; MAIN CONTRACTORS Arena: Salthouse Construction; Ballroom foyer, Floral Hall and Rotunda: Brook Construction; Facades: Wilkinson Brothers

Suppliers

SIGNAGE Harper Signs **[1016]** SEA SHELLS RENDER (TESTA TERES) Wyre Plasterers **[1017]** RUBBER TERRAZZO FLOOR High Profile Polymers **[1018]** FOYER AND ARENA CARPET BMK **[1019]** FLOORING TO BAR AREAS Altro **[1020]** LIGHTING Cosalt Contract Lighting **[1021]** and Philips **[1022]** PAINT Crown **[1023]**

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Photographs by Alastair Hunter



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