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BLACKPOOL'S PLEASURE DOME
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UNITY, PROPORTION AND RHYME

Winter Gardens Blossom

The traditional British seaside resort is currently undergoing a revival. Richard Wilcock describes the Grade II Blackpool Winter Gardens which have been refurbished by David Quigley Architects in the spirit of the original

INTERIORS



Several factors have contributed to the revitalisation of the traditional British seaside resort. The boom in the leisure sector, the increasing cost of holidays abroad and the growing aggravation of getting there, and pure nostalgia combined with last year's hot summer. Fortunately, the economic decline of the British seaside in the sixties and seventies has meant that many of the original buildings of the Victorian, Edwardian and inter-war eras have survived redevelopment.

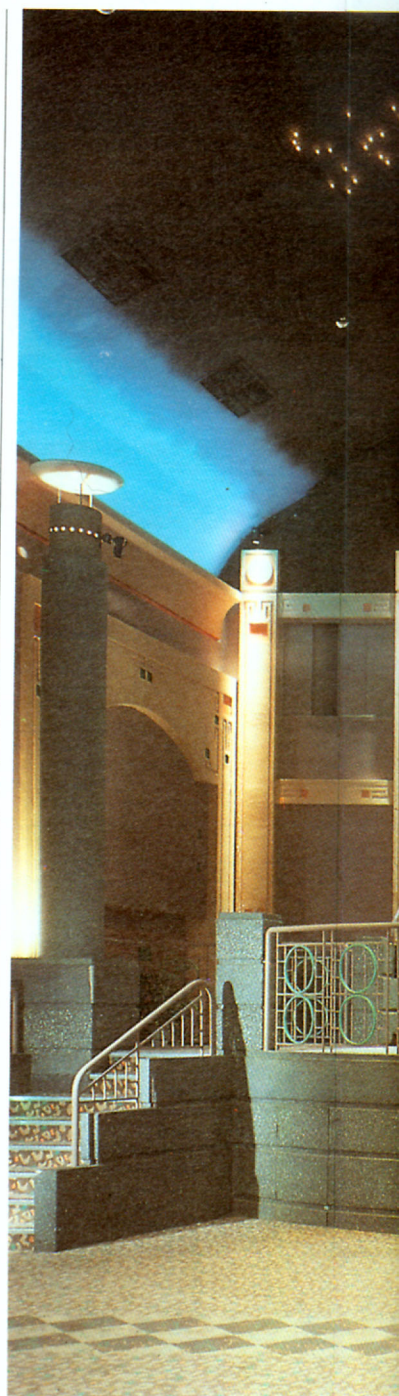
One of the earliest buildings to survive in Blackpool is the Winter

Gardens which were constructed in 1875-8. The original buildings were successively added to to create an entertainment complex covering four acres. Major spaces include the Opera House, the Empress Ballroom and the Pavilion. Prior to setting up his own practice in September 1986, Quigley was an associate with Terry Farrell where he worked on projects such as the Charles Jencks house and Charing Cross station. Another Farrell project he worked on was the master plan for the refurbishment of the Blackpool Winter Gardens, for the First Leisure Corporation. When Quigley left, Farrell presented him with the commission for implementing the proposals.

Quigley has always been fascinated by seaside architecture and for his thesis at architectural school he designed a pier. Also, working for Robert Venturi in 1982-3, he learnt about the use of vivid colour and neon as part of a new architectural vocabulary. With the help of Kenneth Lindley's book *Seaside Architecture* (1973) Quigley researched the background of this building type. Starting with John Nash's Brighton Pavilion and progressing through the heyday of the Victorian and Edwardian seaside, he found this kind of 'fantastic' architecture in early cinemas and the 'atmospheric' super cinemas of the thirties. Quigley picks out some key words which define this style: escapist, redolent of far-off places, ephemeral, novel, excessive, nostalgic, free from normal restraints.

The Winter Gardens are heavily used by holiday-makers and for exhibitions and conferences throughout the year, so the work was split into several short independent contracts, which were slotted in between bookings over a period of two and a half years. For example, the space which was most radically transformed – The Arena – was completed in 12 weeks. There was 24-hour working with nine-hour shifts and the project was handed over only four hours late. After the lunch time hand-over, and with the paint hardly dry, the Arena played host to a dinner/dance that same evening for 500 people.

Work to the exterior of the complex included restoration of the original faience, new signs, lighting, and new canopies and entrance doors. The idea was to advertise the pleasure and



Above left and above, the Arena of the Blackpool Winter Gardens was designed to give the impression of an 'outside room'



PHOTOGRAPHS: MGM STILLIS

excitement available inside and to make the building more welcoming. This was particularly important on the Victoria entrance which faces the shore and acts as a beacon to attract people from the Promenade. The other main entrance on Church Street leads into the domed Rotunda. Here Quigley designed a new terracotta, cream and blue colour scheme with a new geometric rubber floor, developed with Harefield, which echoes the original terrazzo floors in other areas of the building.

The Rotunda leads into the Floral Hall which is, in fact, a long 'street' acting as the main circulation route for

the complex. Quigley produced a co-ordinated colour scheme, signage and new floor coverings and lighting as a background to symbolic elements which define the 'front doors' to the major spaces along the street: the Opera House, the Galleon Bar, the Empress Ballroom, the Pavilion, and the Arena.

The Arena was formerly the Alpine Bar which had a 1950s interior, 'Fred Flintstone stuff' according to Quigley. It is a large oblong room which can have a variety of uses: a family show in the summer, discos, dinners, and exhibitions. The brief was to make a place with an 'atmosphere of

expectation, excitement, suspense, unpredictability'. In the spirit of other spaces in the Winter Gardens, Quigley tried to create an 'outside' room. The existing curved ceiling was painted black and sprinkled with points of light, 'constellations of stars'. Daylight was deliberately excluded so that the atmosphere inside could be controlled. Continuous lighting around the cornice can be altered to create different moods with sunset and sunrise modes.

One of the main problems of the room was that the entrance from the Floral Hall was at an upper level. People had to negotiate a long uninviting flight

of stairs before reaching the floor. Quigley turned this problem into a brilliant opportunity and made the stair the focal point of the room. A large steel-framed structure was inserted, with independent foundations, incorporating wide flights of stairs at different angles with places to stop and watch the activity below. A bar was positioned on the intermediate landing to ensure that the stair was constantly buzzing with activity. This imposing structure is flanked by two towers: one housing a lift for the disabled and the other a projection room. Columns incorporating lighting surround the room and increase formality.

In the true spirit of seaside buildings, Quigley's inventive detailing, often in cheap materials, constantly delights. But it is the feeling for texture and the playful use of colour which is most impressive. The carpet, specially designed by Quigley, and made by BMK, is a surrealistic interpretation of terrazzo and marble tiles worthy of Edward James's house at Monkton, and the 'substantial' columns are, in fact, plastic drainpipes covered in an unusual textured render.

Originally the render was to be ordinary sand and cement with painted decorations, until Quigley discovered a firm of local plasterers which had developed a technique of using crushed sea shells. Different types of shells –

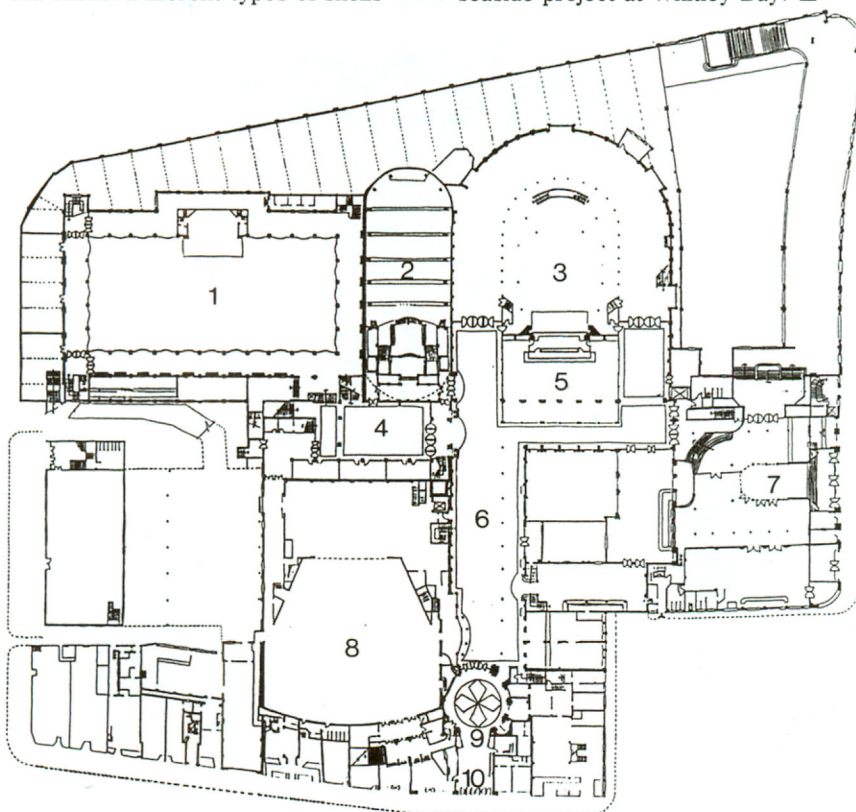
obtained from fish restaurants in Fleetwood – are used to create the various colours – mussel shells give the grey for the columns and 'rustication', and lighter coloured shells are dyed for the inset squares and banding. The result is a lustrous, textured finish with a surprising depth of colour.

Quigley had studied detailing in render on seaside buildings such as Brighton Pavilion and also on Nash's houses in Regent's Park. On this project the plasterers began by using the traditional method of fixing battens to the sub-surface to create recessed detail, but this proved to be too time consuming for the length of the contract. With Quigley, they developed a method of simply cutting the detail into plasterboard like fretwork before applying the final finish.

Other phases of work at the Winter Gardens included the creation of a new foyer to the Ballroom, refurbishment of the Victoria Street entrance lobby, and redecoration of the 1930s Opera House and the Empress Ballroom.

Quigley describes his approach to the refurbishment of the Winter Gardens as 'creative reuse' not restoration. It is gratifying to discover an architect with the talent and sense of humour to continue the great tradition of the British seaside. It will be interesting to see his approach in his next major seaside project at Whitley Bay. □

Client: First Leisure Corporation PLC; Leon Williams and Peter Hurst (Technical Services), Nigel Patterson and Jim Vincent (Operations Directors)
Architects: David Quigley Architects; David Quigley, John Chatman, Uma Mahadevra, Charles Hussey and John Davis
Quantity Surveyors: Holden and Lee, Blackpool; Richard James, Leon Haig and Barry Hodge
Engineer: David Bateman
Contractor: Salthouse Contractors (The Arena); Brook Construction (Floral Hall, Rotunda, Victoria Street lobby, Victoria Street façade); Wilkinson Builders (Church Street façade)



Plan of Winter Gardens complex
 1 Empress Ballroom
 2 Arena
 3 Pavilion
 4 Ballroom Foyer
 5 Palm Café
 6 Floral Hall
 7 Victoria Entrance
 8 Opera House
 9 Rotunda
 10 Church Street Entrance



Top left, the Floral Hall acts as a circulation route. Above left, the Victoria Entrance faces towards the sea. Above right, the Ballroom Foyer, with specially designed carpet and balconies. Right, the colourful interior of the Rotunda

