

Francis Reid visits the Trade Fair at the 1981 Netherlands Technical Theatre Congress

When James Twynam was plotting CUE I he invited me to become a regular contributor. I happily agreed—but with one proviso. I would never ever write product reviews. The wisdom of this decision became apparent very early when my colleague Walter Plinge became subjected to the wrath of the lamp industry after a subjective comment about the relative merits of par lamp voltages. (Incidentally, visitors to "Showlight 81" were given an opportunity to observe that "hell knoweth no fury like a provoked lamp manufacturer".) Mind you, while I was chuckling over Plinge and the Pars, I was being lambasted by a firm of theatre consultants whose credit I had omitted from a favourable building review—even though the credit list had been lifted from their own user's manual for the theatre in question.

However, as CUE enters its third volume, I am tempted to make a once only entry into the stormy waters of product reporting, whether I am but dangling a toe or leaping in with both feet will doubtless become apparent from my post bag in due course!

The crunch in product reviewing is that judgements have to be made on a snap basis in an alien environment—in a showroom or on an exhibition stand. The only real way to test a product is on stage under normal production conditions. But even then, it is only under protracted use that certain shortcomings become apparent. Most (? even all) manufacturers have had embarrassing experiences when products have exhibited problems only after months in user service—faults such as programme loops in memory controls, and mechanical deficiencies in luminaires.

I hesitate to point out that motoring correspondents do extensive test driving of new cars: I have no wish to see a queue of control systems lining up at my stage door. And only the mass consumer market can support exercises on the *Which?* principle of buying production line output for a series of independent tests to destruction.

So theatre technology has to rely on the minefield of snap subjective judgements for new product assessment. And a minefield it sure is. Believe a data sheet: write a few kind words and earn the smiles of the makers and the scowls of their opposition. And vice versa. Either way, you will probably get it wrong . . . as many users will be delighted to inform you. Pity that a manufacturer's own sales team feel such a need to believe uncritically and totally in their product. Talk to a distributor who can choose which product he sells (whether on sole agency or not) and you will get a much more objective assessment.

replacing the slightly dingy existing terrace on ground level.

A river walkway will connect up with Chiswick Mall and Hammersmith hope that it won't be long before you can walk up the river to Hammersmith Bridge from Putney and down the other side again. Negotiations are underway with the last remaining property owners.

When the site is finished, close on 1,000 people will be working and living there so it is expected to generate its own business and form a new community, with most of its needs catered for. They will be arranged around a central square, which will have low housing blocks dotted around and across it, asymetrically, and trees and greenery interspersed, all on a slightly raised level, to permit the underground car parking to 'breathe'.

The tower block of offices is intended to give the effect of a solid wall, with the lightweight tinted glass on three sides leaning against it. There are to be two shades of glass, one light, one dark. And to give emphasis to the block's height, the darker glass will be at the bottom, getting "more powdery at the top", in Will Alsop's words. The top is to be a roof with a balcony around the top floor, so you can walk out on it. Lift and stairs are designed to attach to the rear, against the solid outer wall.

The media centre, running parallel to Crisp Road and the river, across the square from the riverbank, rises to half the height of the office block, its top rounded in two smooth semi-circles, one higher than the other, and the entire length of rounded roof covered in tinted glass, looking "like the fuselage of a Wellington Bomber, using the geodesic principle" puts in Alsop, smiling mischievously.

The residential housing, which is distinguished by its more human scale and variety of styles, faces the media centre across the square (or at least the back of them do) and marches from the riverside right across the square like so many toy soldiers, in the form of four and five storey blocks, each in a slightly different style but conforming to an overall design and scale.

On the ground level of both types of housing, there is provision for local amenities, whether wine bars or shops. Those facing the square will have rooftop gardens, with a protective wall and gabling and a gazebo for each house, where you can "sit and view the river" says Alsop, putting on a Bloomsbury accent, "and sip your afternoon tea". Nor are all the windows square shaped: to the rear of the houses, there is an informal approach to the design, leaving the front to keep up formal appearance and impress. The small windows are bathrooms ("because you don't need much light, quite apart from privacy requirements"); the big round windows are kitchens; and the big square ones bedrooms. "Once you know that, you can sit there and decode the houses" laughs Alsop.

The residential blocks have the curious feature of balconies on each level made from latticed timber. They fulfil a dual function: when drawn up, they can act as

shutters or screens, allowing light to percolate through into the sitting room behind. Draughts are excluded by glass windows in front. The idea allows for light control, as well as the quality of light; and as this side faces south, it could prove useful at almost any time of year. When lowered, they become a strong wooden platform for one or two people to sit out on, or even to have dinner.

To speed up the whole planning process, a fee management contractor has already been appointed, Cubitts, who are on tap with advice, while the architects finish the detailed designs. "For example", says Alsop, "I can say, this is the material I want. Now if we do this in pre-cast panels or *insitu* concrete, which will be quicker? I don't really mind, it's not important to the design".

Poor old Riverside have to keep going right throughout the day during the building, which apparently was a hard nut to crack initially, but eventually the solution was found. Ventilation regulations, even on a temporary basis, are the stickiest problem, if premises are to continue functioning throughout rebuilding.

There is quite a rush to get the development underway by next spring, because otherwise everything will grind to a halt for the borough election in May. It always does. Outline planning permission is being dispensed with, since everything so far has been worked out in close partnership with Hammersmith's planning department already. For those interested in the finer points of classification, the arts are seen as neither residential or commercial, but leisure. Likewise, television production (in the Media Centre) is looked upon as a cross between offices and leisure . . . but not commercial as such. So the ratios of different developments of Riverside are perhaps fortuitous, since Riverside Studios, with its huge hangar-like studio spaces, accounts for a large amount of leisure space. This helps to allow more profitable housing and offices to be built, whose rentals return, at least in part, to Hammersmith, defraying the cost of subsidising Riverside Studios every year. Indeed, I have heard it said that without the development scheme, the end of Riverside Studios was virtually in sight.

The Hammersmith Riverside Arts Trust, to give it its full name, should be in for a change of fortunes, however. If the precision of the specification for building materials in anything to go by, the details of the scheme should go through smoothly by the end of 1985. The white bricks used for building the walls of the Media Centre, which are interspersed with darker colours like pink, to set them off, will not be achieved by using a finish, but by using glazed red bricks—"so they don't drop off after a few years", says Alsop chuckling, with that knowing look in his eye. I do believe we shall hear more about these young architects, who incidentally finished their studies at the Architectural Association . . . that hothouse of new ideas, which turns out above rather like Eton . . . individuals, above all else.