

Everything in The Garden will be lovely

A special report
on the Royal Opera House Extension
by ANTHONY McCALL

Apart from hitting the headlines this summer over the threatened withdrawal of funds by the new Labour GLC, which was not a crisis of its own choosing, the Royal Opera House has chosen a deliberately low profile over the subject of its extensions. However, Cue was granted an interview with Robin Dartington, the development project manager, to keep readers abreast of progress before the official announcements are made nearer the time of opening.

Phase One is due for completion in February 1982, and will serve primarily to meet artists' needs. In style it matches the original 1850s Barry exterior of the main house, while the interior (on seven floors) will be modern. Whether there will be two more phases, as first envisaged, remains to be seen. Fund-raising has proved such an uphill struggle that the idea of an overall development scheme, split into separate phases, has had to be deferred in the interest of expediency. A more mundane approach is being looked at, alas, probably more expensive in the long run, which looks no further ahead than the next building stage. 'Small is practical' thus becomes the order of the day, however much this limits the options, and so it will probably remain, unless a fairy godmother crawls out from under one of the few commercial or charitable stones left unturned in this country, with a large cheque in her hand. But the prospect, even for our most prestigious of theatres, seems remote.

Solving the various backstage problems, and even the front of house needs, in order of priority, was, and remains, an invidious task. Nevertheless, artists came out top of the list and will now be able to enjoy fairly modest comfort, by international standards, but at least not the cramped and antiquated conditions of the Victorian building, which put one in mind less of stardom and glamour than of an Outward Bound course. The existing rooms are being refurbished for ballet, and opera will be housed entirely in the new extension, with wardrobe, rehearsal rooms and chorus room all under one roof. So there will be separate quarters for each company. 'By and large' explains Dartington, 'the old objectives are not totally lost. But it must be stressed because it is simply not understood, that this first phase is only a step forward. It will do nothing for the stage, nor make the technical operation of the theatre more ambitious - as yet.

'The next part was expected, for instance, to provide for additional artists' facilities, like canteen, music studios, ballet studios and the like. But it hasn't got off the ground, and I think it has now missed



The Royal Opera House extensions follow the classical elevations of the original building.

its chance. The stage will now probably be seen as the major priority, and what resources there are, should go on that.'

He summed up the planner's dilemma nicely in the face of continual financial pressures. 'I used to think in terms of stage one, two and three, but it doesn't honestly happen like that. Hereafter it might be stage two a, b, c, d and e. It is what we call in management terms, an over-constrained problem. In other words, there is no solution which matches all the constraints. There is no way of proceeding, which does not have disadvantages.

'And of course', he added, 'in the arts world, it is difficult to get people to accept disadvantages. Therefore it is necessarily, a fraught development programme.'

Why especially in the arts world? A remark like that can't be let by without at least some discreet clarification. 'Because they're there not to compromise, but to do their best' Dartington feels. 'The whole point of art is to aspire to the best, not just to turn something out because they've got to get it out by Friday.'

The original plans drawn up in December 1977 were for 98,000 sq ft, with planning permission for only 55,000 sq ft. Cost went way over as well, to £9.3 million, at 1978 prices. The interior was 'far too busy', says Dartington, and the whole project had to be drastically cut back. 'The target was over-reached in three ways: in area, in cost and in the extent of the allowable disturbance'. The projected rear stage (on the site of the

present dressing rooms) was dropped for reasons of economy and it was decided to refurbish existing dressing rooms instead of locating them all in the new building.

The new extension is a concrete frame building on deep pile foundations, whereas the Barry house, which it copies exactly, was built of brick on very shallow foundations, which you can't build today because it would be far too labour intensive. Planning permission stipulated an exact copy of the Barry style, which 'is not as much as twice the cost, but certainly more' says Dartington. John Mowlem are acting as management contractors, working on a fee, rather than a profit from the building. Under their wing is a string of some 21 sub-contractors. Architects, the GMW Partnership, who did the Commercial Union and P & O buildings in the City, specialise in very well worked out and finished jobs, most of them large, and many abroad. They were chosen by the Royal Opera House back in 1963, when the market move was mooted and they were acting for the Market Authority.

An interesting insight into the financing of a project this size is the problem that faced Sir John Tooley and his colleagues in 1977, after they'd decided to opt for a reduced phase one building, and to leave various features for incorporation in later plans. The appeal had been launched in October, and by December, the money raised was losing value while it sat in the bank and inflation merrily whittled it down and