

down. Six months further hard work brought fresh plans for an amended building, at a cost of £7.8 million, all in. But again, on a sum of that size, every week that building work was delayed added some £30,000 to the cost, just to keep up with inflation. 'So with the time-clock running, the thing was put together fairly rapidly' recalls Dartington, 'and started in July 1978. That's when the concept was agreed for this exact amount of accommodation and so forth. Budgets were set for all aspects of the work; and those budgets have been juggled since. But now, apart from a further increase in inflation, we are very close indeed, within a few per cent, of the original budget'.

As for the building schedule, it is about three weeks late, or seems likely to be by February. Which, on a four-year project, is not bad, as he points out. 'As far as we can tell so far, we have not compromised any major aim, so it's not coming through too badly'.

Dartington's function is a trifle complex. He is an employee, to put it simply, of the National Building Agency, who were asked by the Covent Garden management to supply a management consultant as a specialist to the project, to act on their behalf. In addition, he has a colleague, employed by the ROH, who works alongside him as an interface between artists and him, to ensure their practical considerations are constantly taken into account.

How did the mixture of personalities, logistics of the operation and sheer pressure of work, make the day-to-day running of the project, I wondered? 'I can't be everywhere at once' he replies good-humouredly, 'but I rove around making sure people know what they're meant to be doing, and that they are doing it'. He is a slim, youngish-looking professional man, whose manner, one imagines, manages to combine efficiency with diplomacy, with most people he comes across. He displayed patience and an orderly mind as he ran through the development programme; no grand airs, but an awareness of the several clashes of interest between artists, architects and planners, and cash limitations. 'I think I ought to say that the architects' advice is fairly dominant on the aesthetics of the overall conception' he explains. 'But on internal planning, the ROH is acting as a very strict, and informed client. There is a wealth of experience among the staff, on a scale unmatched almost anywhere else. My, or indeed our theatrical understanding, he says motioning to the builders outside the window, is thus bound to be not only inadequate, but even incorrect sometimes. So a tremendous amount of consultation goes on with its users - the management, and artists. But at least we're going to fail having tried' he laughs.

But to return to the artists' extension, there were some intriguing architectural headaches to cure. As Dartington put it dryly, 'You get all sorts of funny things happening in classical buildings - it's often all a big botch-up'. Owing to the different uses of the old and new buildings, which share an identical exterior, the rooms inside the new have different ceiling and floor levels.



*Without unduly altering the scale, windows are slightly enlarged to improve the light in the modern interior.
(photos Richard Belsham)*

For example, to give more light in the ballet rehearsal studios the window sizes were upped slightly, without unduly changing the scale on the exterior. Also, in modern buildings, there are far more services, like heating, ventilation and so forth, so the spaces are not, in the main, grand at all in the extension, but rather, like a continuation of the old, with trunking and wiring visible in the corridors. 'Because it had to be a classical building, we couldn't add more bits to it when the money became available' says Dartington, 'as you would with a factory. The exterior had to be finished completely in phase one. So with a shortage of money, a gap was left internally between the old and new buildings, to become a light well, instead of being filled from the start'.

After this extension is completed, what other choices will compete with stage improvements, for the next phase? Dartington: 'Apart from the efficiency of the stage operation, the prospect of a small second theatre has always been a possibility, or even a second large one. It could conceivably be connected with the video operation they have set up, to film live performances for television and eventually for sale across the world. Video may transform the Royal Opera House in time, who knows. That option is unlikely, though.

'Storage would probably be improved as part of the technical phase, somewhere under the stage. A new get-in would be needed as well. It's always been visualised from James Street, but now that that has been made into a cul-de-sac, with pedestrians walking everywhere, one wonders if giant pantechinons won't become something of a hazard. Bow Street,

which will remain a thoroughfare, could be a freer place in which to operate. That would present tremendous problems, but I don't see any area which doesn't. Get-ins are now from the car park to the south of the main building, and already parking is banned whenever scenery is being delivered. It goes up from the ground level to stage level by hoist; but although the hoist is too small for its requirements, it is all that can fit into the masonry of the present building. So there are plenty of hurdles to clear on that side of things, too.'

Dartington outlined front of house improvements, at some stage, which is rarely mentioned, being low on the list of priorities. 'Hitched on to one of these phases, will be much better public facilities. Better places to get a drink, maybe a bite to eat, or buy books, which are obviously very crushed at the moment. The higher you go in the house, the worse it is. A lot of people spend quite a lot of money, in absolute terms, even for the cheaper seats, and the facilities are pretty primitive, purely for enjoyment.'

The next phases, wherever they may sprout from, will not copy the Barry style again, it seems. As the building moves further away from the main house, style will be taken rather, from the Covent Garden Piazza, like the colonnaded Bedford Chambers. Some of the architectural exercises carried out in the past already look dated: there will be much less glass, since energy costs have soared. As each stage takes shape though, and the buildings creep towards the Piazza, the area will have a theatrical Acropolis as its new focus capable of transforming the neighbourhood.