

LIGHTING+SOUND *International*



NEW YEAR AT CANARY WHARF

PHOTO: OLYMPIA AND YORK

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FEBRUARY 1992

ARCS, LIGHTS AND LASER ART

'Light Year' launches 1992, Year of New World Order

A loose consortium of artists and lighting specialists were allowed the run of Canary Wharf to sing in the New Year. Using the building as a canvas, a contemporary alternative to Nelson's column traditional focus for seasonal revelry, shone out from the winter mist. Tony Gottelier discovers how the developers were persuaded and how the project was implemented.

Living and working under the shadow of the giant Canary Wharf development, monumental artist Peter Fink and performance artist Anne Bean suffer the same stresses and strains as other local inhabitants, resulting from the massive and on-going redevelopment of the entire London Docklands area. While others banded together to sue the LDDC, an action paradoxically made public while Fink and Bean were actually fulfilling their alternative action, they had a different vision.

Why not use the building, itself a monumental construction - the UK's tallest building, a fifty-plus floor office tower capped with an illuminated glass pyramid and possibly the only real architectural monument to the Thatcher era - as the canvas for a vast artwork and in this way return some immediate and tangible pleasure to the long suffering people of the area?

Having rejected the Cristo option and others, though there are those who would still like to wrap the building, the field of choice was narrowed down to a light painting, using the tower as an easel supporting a huge kinetic sculpture. This perception, they say, was

inspired through living nearby, where, through artists' eyes, they constantly see the building changing colour in the different lights of sunrise, sunset, the changing seasons and so on. This they also felt, erroneously as it turned out, would have the added commercial value to help sell it to the PR and marketing people at Olympia and York, the building's Canadian owners, struggling to let the rest of the two-thirds empty floors of high-rise, high-rent offices. But these are not traditional artists' materials, so how to set about it?

Peter had already achieved considerable acclaim for his audacious, 21m long steel wave, which is installed on the promenade in Newport, Gwent, on which project he had met Martyn Butler, survivor of a thousand laser shows and commercial laser associations. Butler would provide the technical solutions and the link to the mysterious twilight world inhabited only by laser and lighting people and other readers of L+SI.

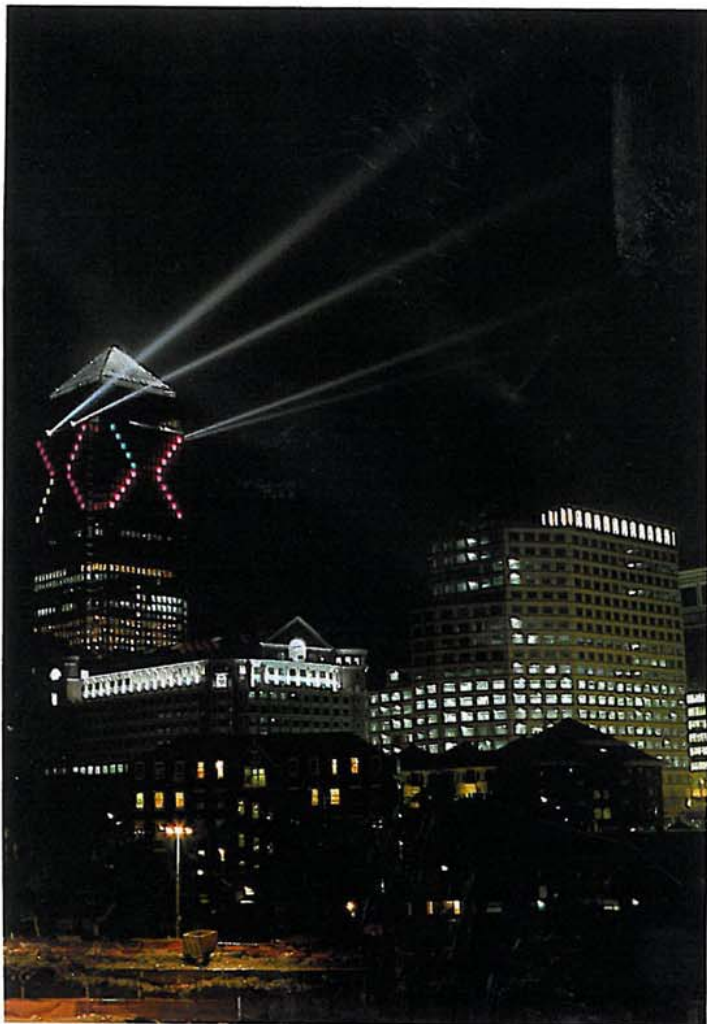
I imagine that many hours of brainstorming followed, before a formula with sufficient pizzazz was evolved to sugar the pill for the marketing people, the anticipated paymasters. Speaking for the trio, Martyn Butler told me, "Our vision of the tower as an Icon of the 90s, and more significantly '92, was an obvious hook to us, and its convenient location close to the Greenwich Meridian gave the final touch to the concept to herald in the Year of Europe." With the provisional title for the project of 'Light Year', the three formed Map Productions in June 1991.

Peter went off to sell the concept to O&Y, while Martyn talked to the various legislative authorities, including the CAA, for the various consents, not expected to be an easy task following the 'little local difficulty' incurred by Jean-Michel Jarre who had a similar idea at an earlier date.

Surprisingly, it was Peter Fink who found that he had picked the short straw for, as he quickly discovered, Olympia and York were distinctly cold on the idea in the UK. "The PR and marketing people really didn't understand what we were on about, although they did finally get the picture during the eventual 'dry-run' over Christmas."

Not to be deterred, and armed with computer renderings, drawings, and video simulations, Fink headed across the Atlantic to beard Mrs Thatcher's favourite property developer and O & Y owner, Paul Reichmann, in his Toronto penthouse. "It was the same story, I spent nearly an hour with him, but until I put over the simple notion of a digital grid, counting down the time to the New Year, I knew I was struggling to put across the relevance." More importantly, perhaps, Peter discovered that Reichmann, through his company, is a substantial patron of the arts and that there was a whole department in Canary Wharf called Arts and Events. So the sponsorship was to come from their budget, placing it exactly where Fink wanted it to be - as Art!

(While it's easy to be cynical about such philanthropy, 'it wouldn't happen without a



Aimed at the City - west-facing xenon STX skylights 'putting their best beams forward.'



Window display: close-up of the digital grid in X formation. Note also the interesting STX cloud effects.

photos: Robin Chaphekar

commercial edge, would it' - though Peter Fink believes it's absolutely straight up, art for arts sake - does it really matter as long as it happens? And if, as a by-product, it helps to make such developments viable, rejuvenating dilapidated, down-at-heel districts, arguably to the benefit of all, and the arts get some money, and the community gets the art, who cares? This has become a routine part of the enlightened North American approach to property development, especially in erstwhile dying Cities, and it works, so why knock it?)

While Fink might have preferred not to play such an obvious card, as his artistic sensibilities would have tended towards a less structured approach, he at least persuaded Reichmann to grant him a further fifteen days of performance after New Year's Eve to allow a little more artistic licence. So the green light for 'Light Year', now the agreed title for the event, and back to the UK and to face the huge scale of the task in front of them.

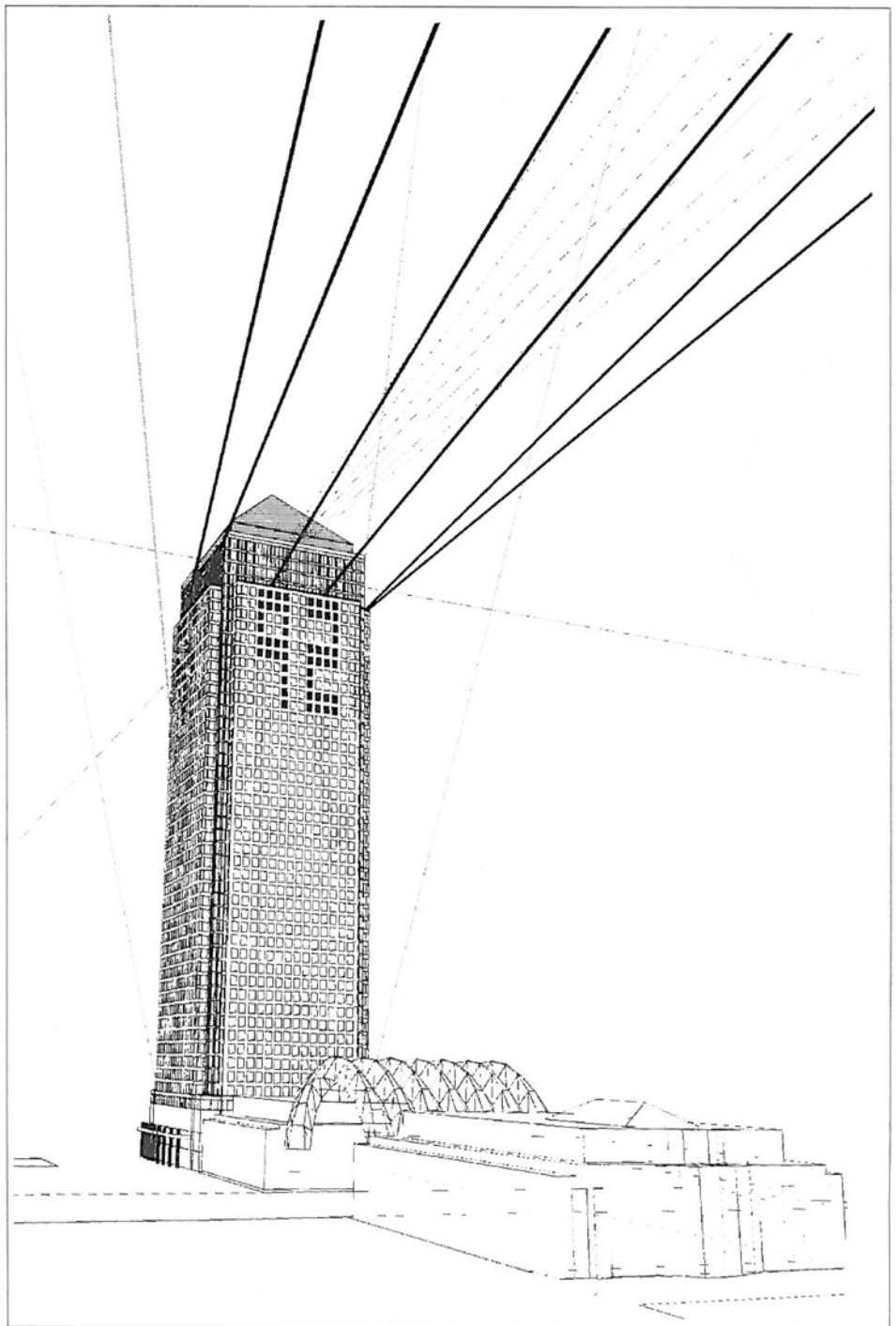
In the meantime, Martyn Butler had made good progress with the authorities and when he surveyed the building for services he was staggered to find adequate power and water on every floor, including three phase! Also, now that they were dealing with Canary Wharf's internal Arts and Events department, headed by Helen Marriage and Luke Sapsed, experienced in organising performances in the Cabot Hall and other events within the complex, matters took a decided turn for the better. "They really couldn't have done more to accommodate us in very difficult circumstances with hundreds of building contractors still running all over the building," Butler commented.

"Mind you, it was as well that there are so many empty floors at present, as this really did facilitate matters."

Armed with CAA clearance Butler and his partners in Map Productions formulated the final touches to their ambitious concept. Light Year would involve a composite of three main lighting components, lasers firing out the compass points, xenon searchlights to emphasize the structure and provide animation, and a larger than life-size back lit digital grid which, on New Year's Eve would count down to '92, sourced from the atomic clock at Rugby by radio signal. Later, this would take on a more random form as the grid was reshuffled every three days as the fifteen day performance evolved. And on the 31st, for one night only, the mandatory fireworks.

Butler now set about building his technical team and sourcing the required equipment. In many cases the two were synonymous, via his own Horizon Laser company he engaged Howard Batchen and Rob Calderwood of Image Systems and RSVP respectively to provide and install the four 5 watt Argon heads with control by Mike Fielding of DRAIG to create a radial compass in the sky. Additional beam effects directed at the City centre would be provided by a 5 watt Krypton and a 20 watt large frame Argon supplied by Continental Lasers, complete with the nomadic Gino Malocca at the helm. Following the success of Jean-Luc Michaud's Alien Products joint performance with LD Andy Doig at the Salisbury Cathedral Spire Appeal, the same combination was selected with fourteen Alien 4kW xenon STX Skylights (actually Martyn and Jean-Luc first met each other at September's PLASA Show). Through a previous contact with his new partners in Leisure Services (UK) based in Westerham, Ian de le Vingne late of LSD-Le Maitre, took on responsibility for the digital grid and its control which would be by two Pulsar Masterpieces. The New Year firework spectacular would come from Andrew Jolliffe's Fox Fireworks.

The fact that none of the three control systems



One of Andy Doig's CAD 'looks' for Light Year.

could talk to each other - even Doig's pet Apple, rotating 'looks' on a CAD program, couldn't be in direct touch with Alien's board sitting next to it - seemed of little significance. "This is art, man," I was told forcibly by Peter Fink. "It's supposed to be spontaneous, not a programmed show." Well, I am sure that wasn't the case on December 31st, but I take the point, it probably wasn't vital and everyone was in touch with each other by radio. (Though not on the night of my visit, the loaned handsets having been summarily withdrawn when, without anticipating the consequences, Canary Wharf's security company were sacked.)

So, starting at the top, the lasers were set up on a convenient all-round balcony at level M2, above the fiftieth floor, and located at the base of the pyramid which houses all the plant for the building, making the requirement of 1200 gallons of water per hour, 800 feet off the ground, something less of a problem. A convenient overhang below the pyramid also provided weather protection for the lasers, although a temporary cabin was erected as the control station and to house the large frame system and the Krypton.

Alien and Andy Doig, fresh from Meteorlites' contribution to the Laserpoint's Oman venture reported in December, plus STX operator Brigitte Lacoste, set up camp on the 48th floor with two luminaires at the same level, eight more one floor below, and four, with gel scrollers fitted, right down at floor six to give some proportion and scale to the whole vista. All external luminaires were secured to the structure with 150kg of ballast in anticipation of inclement weather, which was just as well, when winds of 70 mph were recorded on December 23rd. Parametric synchronization from level 48, some 700 feet above, involved a data network of over 2km of cable passing through the building. "Thank God there was plenty of room in the ducting," commented Jean-Luc Michaud, "though M16, who are rumoured as a possible future tenant, may not have been so impressed."

Two floors below, de le Vingne set up his control station consisting of two 108 channel Masterpieces into 160 dimmer channels which were distributed over ten floors in individual dimmer racks, in this case involving over 10kms of mains and data cable. The idea, for New Year's Eve, was to simulate a digital grid by using



Everything blazing - arcs, lights and lasers together.

80 windows on the West face of the tower to form the individual pixels, ten windows high and eight across, with a gap of two between. Each window was filled with a gauze on a transmobile frame, these would then be moved to different widows in successive performances, to allow for the five proscribed changes. "A medium had to be created especially in order to maximize colour registration on the inside but with good daylight reverse transmission to avoid obscuring the windows during the day," Ian explained. "This involved a special weave of fabric and gauze in a hitherto unused combination."

Astute readers will have noticed that 160

dimmer channels were not necessary to achieve the initial display envisaged, but by allocating two dimmer channels to each window, with different colours on each and two lanterns per channel, it allowed for both colour change and more flexibility for the successive days of performance when all the screens were moved to form new, more random, patterns. On subsequent nights these sequences would stretch across at least two elevations of the tower at a time, interfacing across a corner, so that eventually the effects would be seen from all angles of viewing. The intricacy of the format made programming pretty complex, to say nothing of the numerical display, and an LED mimic was found to be essential to enable the operator to set up his cues.

The complexity of creating these looks also meant that Pulsar's Andy Graves, whose prime role is one of customer support, put in a great deal of time helping at the kitchen sink of the control system to assist Ian and his team to familiarize themselves with the new board, while cooking up cues concurrently. Through his close involvement it was discovered, early enough to take avoiding action, that linking two of the Pulsar boards together in the conventional way does not give a simultaneous response from the second of the two, which would be essential for precise synchronization of the display in the second-by-second countdown. To overcome this, a remote time-clock module was connected to the external control sockets of both boards in parallel, and this in turn also facilitated the radio input from the atomic clock at Rugby. Commenting on the role of Masterpiece, de le Vingne told me, "the fact that such a powerful, yet moderately priced control system came into existence was pivotal for us, because the budget, in relation to what we had to achieve, was not exactly what you would call

generous."

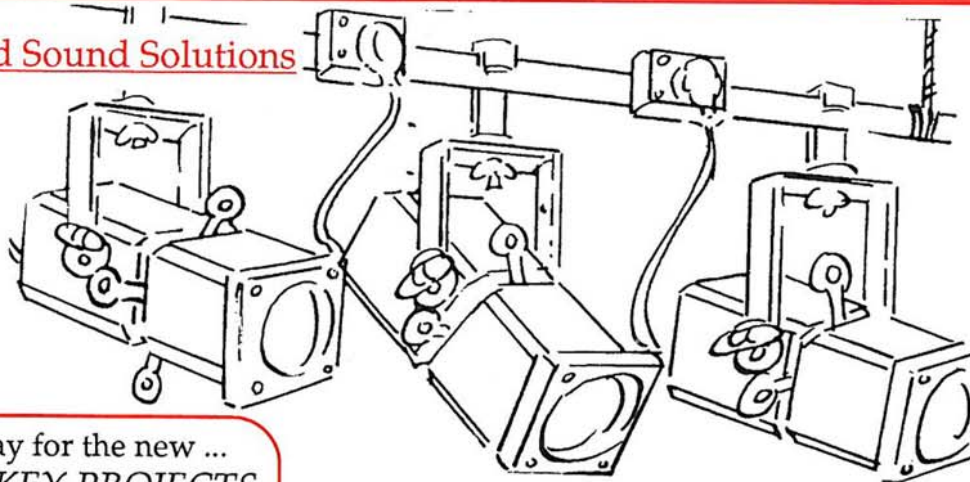
By this time, of course, the marketing men had seen a rehearsal and were beginning to get the point. Suffice to say that, come Hogmanay, the streets below were jammed with thousands of people, to the extent that the reciprocal countdown to midnight could be clearly heard from the top of the tower. And, of course, at the zero hour, for 15 seconds, the sky was alive with the sound and colour of, what Fox describe as, 'a pyrotechnic salute of awesome proportions'. Fired from a site below Westferry Circus and based on a thematic of silver and violet, the display consisted of a rapid crescendo of coloured star shells (peonies and chrysanths) and noise effects (maroons and maroon and cracks.)

The acres of newsprint and miles of video tape consequently generated, and a world-wide TV audience of multi-millions, are testimony to the power of the event as an attention-getter, which must have caused some retrospective red faces in that particular department.

And the picture on the front page of the London Times on New Year's Day, with Canary Wharf blazing out '92 in 150 foot high pink and red characters and wreathed in exploding fireworks, twinned alongside a similar picture of the Kremlin, not only heralded the dawning of a new era in world order, but elevated Canary Wharf to the monumental status of that other great traditional focus of seasonal celebrations, Nelson's column and Trafalgar Square. And I can tell you that the view from M2 with the lasers and searchlights reaching into the far distance was even more breathtaking for the privileged few who were allowed access.

One wonders if it will be repeated in years to come? Possibly, but Peter Fink has a grander vision, which explains the subsequent visit of Lord Palumbo, president of the Arts Council, to see for himself what it was all about.

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