

# Creating the People Magnets

Group Northern Design Limited has a proven track record of designing profitable discotheques which remain successful for longer than most before needing a major refurbishment. This does not happen by chance, and we invited **Malcolm Brocklesby**, Chairman of the company, to explain their approach to projects, and in particular to The Dome and Paradise Lost, two new First Leisure Corporation venues featured in the first two issues of **Lighting and Sound International**.

## The Design Process

The conception of a disco is a complex process involving a mixture of commercial judgement, inspiration, and basic practical experience on the part of both client and designer. This relationship between client and designer is crucial, and it is important for us to tune in to our client's style and method of operation as quickly as possible as an established relationship can save a lot of time. When you are discussing abstract ideas such as the ambience or the feel of a venue it is a great help to have a common data base of completed projects for reference. On the other hand, a new client can frequently trigger an entirely fresh line of thinking.

Most projects start with a client assessing the potential of an existing venue or perhaps a new site, and establishing the main commercial parameters. This is the stage when we usually become involved. The main information we need really boils down to answering three basic questions: what type

of customer does our client want to attract? what does he want them to do once they have come through the door? and what is the capital budget for the project? In addition, there may be other specific requirements such as a theme or a particular house style.

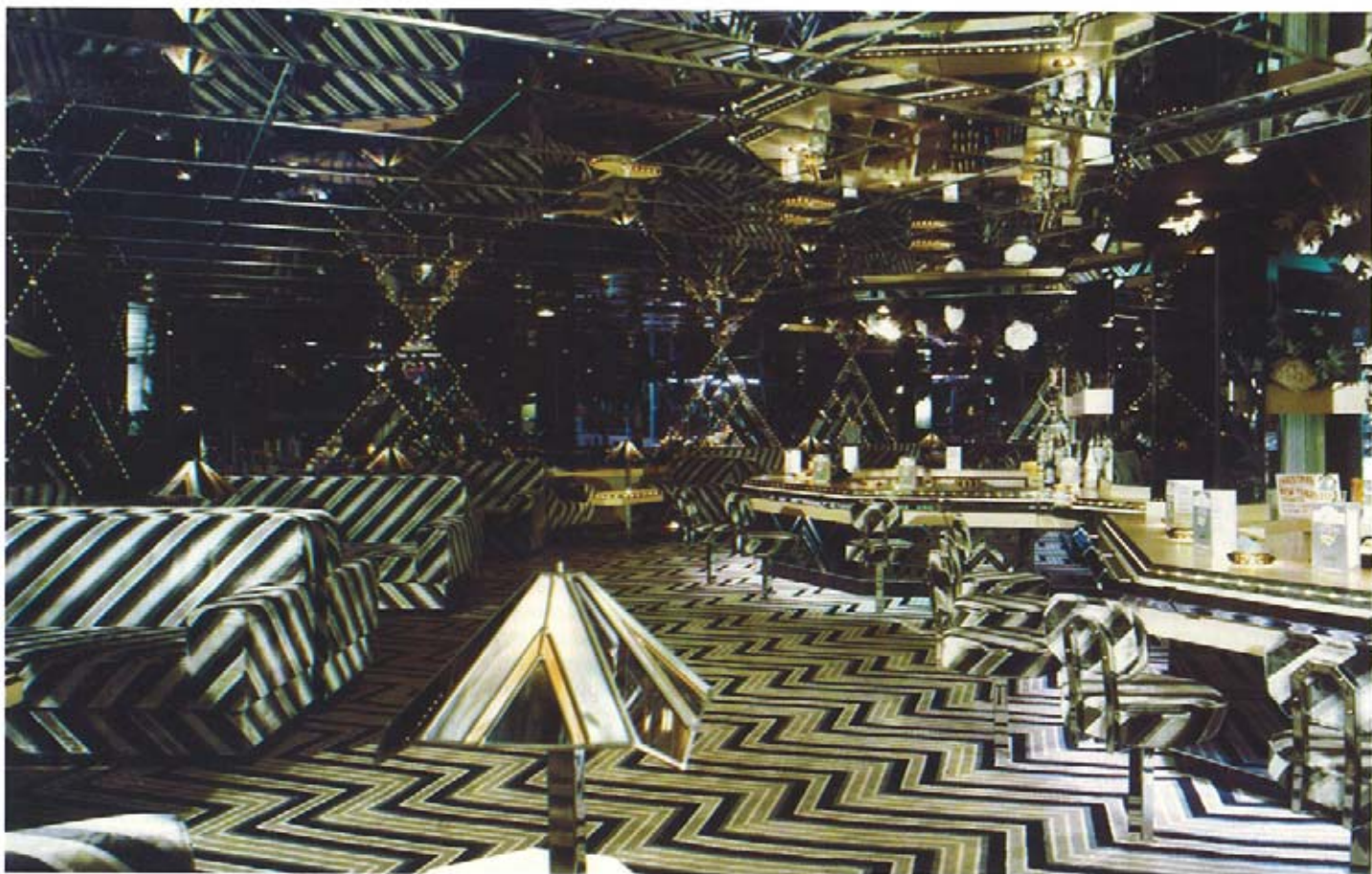
Our first job is to develop the design concept, and right from the word go our approach must be based on the commercial facts of life. Disco design is not about trendy designs or flashy light shows: it is about pay back on investment. A white elephant, however gorgeously decorated and brilliantly illuminated, is still an elephant and is still white!

The careful thinking through of the project at this stage is absolutely vital and Terry Wheeler, Group Northern's managing director, takes personal responsibility for the initial development of the concept. Firstly the basic layout must be worked out. Is the venue a single focus operation with the visual emphasis concentrating on one point or is it to be a multi-focus operation with a

number of individual areas? Where is the best place for high impact spots like the dance floors, the DJ console, the promenade and the main bars? Where do the quieter places, the smoochy sitting out areas, and the restaurants want to be? What changes in level are needed? How will the circulation floors work when the venue is full? Are the secondary bars in the most strategic locations? Are the service areas suitable? Does the plan make the best use of the available space? Does it involve any unnecessary structural work? And most important of all, are the fire exits adequate?

This is where experience counts. Group Northern has twenty years background of working for most branches of the leisure industry—on pubs, bistros, restaurants, theatre clubs and seaside amusement venues as well as discos. And we believe we have learnt the hard way what works and what does not, and how to exploit existing buildings to the full.

The skeleton of the project has now been mapped out. The next stage is to clad the



Paradise Lost—a romantic and sophisticated setting to attract the upper end of the disco market.





A fantasy setting in South Yorkshire—The Seventh Heaven, Doncaster (First Leisure).

bare bones with the bars and balustrades, with screen and visual features, and with finishes and furnishings. The style of the decor may be influenced by a required theme or perhaps by the local competition; but in all cases it must be geared to the type of customer we are seeking to attract. Whatever approach is adopted, however, basic principles apply. Decor is not just passive decoration, it is an active ingredient of the project. Each feature has a job to do: it may be leading the eye in one direction or breaking up the sight lines in another, it may create interest to lead people up to a higher level, it may encourage people to stay in a particular place for a while, or it may even create a cold spot to move people away from an area where congestion might occur. It is all a subtle form of social engineering, but on no account must it appear to be so.

We have created the static setting and now we introduce the vital element of excitement, movement and vitality, the lighting. I have put this last because that is its logical place in the description, but the ideas have been evolving along with other aspects of the design and, like the decorations, lighting is not an end in itself—it is there because it has a job to do.

Let us take the general lighting first. There must be sufficient light for people to move around in comfort, but as far as possible this should be used to highlight design features and enhance the effects they have been designed to achieve. But such lighting can and should do much more than just point up static features. It should be parts of the total ambience control system with dimming and sequence control, capable of suddenly lighting an area by bringing in neons or introducing movement by chase lighting, tivolis or mechanical devices such as mirror balls, or cross-faded to bring in an entirely new colour scheme. Each of the main areas should be separately controlled so that they can be lifted or softened during the course of the evening.

Finally, we return to the focus of activity, the dance floor and the lighting rig. Group Northern does not have its own in-house effects lighting designer. It is a complex and rapidly moving technology and we have found it better to make use of the services of a company specialising in this field. In our projects for First Leisure we have worked closely with Effects Lighting of Leicester. We create the setting and explain the type of effects which we are seeking to achieve, but we do not usually become involved in the detailed technology.

## Contract Control

Now we come down to earth with a vengeance—the total concept has to be turned into fact. Time is money for the operator, and a whole army of trades have to be integrated and controlled within a very tight contract period. The key is running the project on a commercial rather than a 'professional' basis. Group Northern usually take full contract responsibility and here, too, experience is vital. Our management team, headed by John Galbraith, have been doing this kind of work for many years and have developed a particular expertise in running



Terry Wheeler (left), Group Northern's managing director, with chairman Malcolm Brocklesby.

such contracts. The Dome was a £1.25 million project and was completed in 18 weeks. Paradise Lost was somewhat larger and took 20 weeks, and for most of the time both were running together. To be sure there were occasions when things became somewhat hectic on site, but without detailed planning such time-scales would have been impossible.

## The Dome

Late in December 1984 First Leisure asked us to put forward ideas for converting the Birmingham Night Out into a discotheque. This posed a particularly difficult problem for us because the venue was only a few hundred yards from Pagoda Park, a highly successful disco we had completed for First Leisure a month or so before. A key element of our brief was that whatever we proposed, it should be totally different from Pagoda Park.

Pagoda Park is a multi-focus operation on two main levels with a Japanese garden theme. The setting is soft and romantic, designed primarily to attract the girls. It is, in effect, an oriental fantasy setting and the dance floor lighting, although providing excitement and vitality, is by no means hi-tech.

Terry Wheeler based his scheme for the Night Out on the concept of a 50-ft. diameter geodesic dome filling the well of the auditorium and rising up to the full height of the ceiling. In contrast to Pagoda Park this was very much a single focus venue which named itself The Dome.

The lighting effects were well covered in the November issue of *Lighting & Sound International* and there is no merit in repeating them now. All I would say is that Effects Lighting have achieved the impact we were seeking, and have created a brilliant focus over the dance floor. At times it resembles something out of *Close Encounters*, at others the feel of a nuclear reactor about to go critical. But at all times it is *there*, in the centre of the venue, pulsing with latent vitality.

The point I would stress, however, is that while the dome is the focal point of the

venue it is by no means the whole story. The hard, space-age aspects of the geometric steelwork of the balustrades are balanced by the vibrant colouring of the pink and blue fluorescent stripes in the black carpet. Coupled with this, the reflections from the countless mirrors on the walls and screens tweak double and treble visual mileage out of the high impact features. These in turn are off-set and softened by the warmer colours for the fabric upholstery and the decorative treatments in the peripheral areas. Around the dance floor four spectacular fountains, which also incorporate the base speaker bins, introduce a natural visual and audible feature which contrasts with the surrounding technology.

People can dance within the dome beneath a light show second to none. In addition the voyeurs can watch the action from the high level balconies or from the bridge which spans the old stage area behind the DJ console. The venue is served by nine separate bars and on different levels around the auditorium there are seating areas for people to watch the show or where couples can relax and talk. There are three dining areas including one a la carte restaurant with a quiet and sophisticated ambience to match the menu. There is also a totally separate area where customers can dance and drink to a resident group.

In short, dramatic and exciting as the dome itself is, there is a lot more to *The Dome* than just the 'dome'!

## Paradise Lost

Paradise Lost, another major project for First Leisure, is a very different story. Here the brief was to convert the wide open spaces of Bailey's at Watford into a romantic and sophisticated setting to attract the upper end of the disco market. The original premises comprised a large, rectangular room with a stage to one side. At first floor level there were two spacious areas at either end, linked by a balcony opposite the stage leaving a great open area in the centre.



The problem was how to break up the formal theatre club layout to create an interesting and romantic setting where people could wander from one area to another, yet always come across new and exciting places and unexpected views.

The solution was a new gantry which was installed to span the stage area and eliminate dead ends by giving full circulation at the upper level. In addition we slung a zig/zag bridge across the central void linking the two sides, creating an ideal spot for voyeurs looking down onto the multi-level cluster of dance floors below. On the ground floor, to the left of the entrance, a split level island bar was formed serving the main area at one side, and creating a secluded lounge area to the other. At the far end of the room further changes of level disguised by glazed screens were introduced, leading to a small bistro and burger restaurant. A similar principle was used to form an a la carte restaurant and other quiet lounge areas at first floor level. The two levels were linked by a dramatic mirrored staircase adjacent the entrance rising up around a spectacular fountain. A second feature staircase was sited at the far side of the dance floor.

On the back wall of the original stage Terry Wheeler created a stunning water cascade feeding a number of rocky pools and fountains around the dance floor which in turn are crossed by small bridges and walkways. The upper level decor is based on a zig-zag pattern of soft pinks and greys which is carried through the carpet, the upholstery, the bar finishes and the tinted mirrors to the walls and joinery features. The same patterns are repeated at the lower level, but in delicate shades of grey with the lighting playing a major role in creating the colours. Square section chrome balustrades pick up and reflect the theme of the design and the sparkle of the lights.

As at The Dome, mirrors form an essential part of the scheme. Around the edge of the balcony horizontal strips of mirrored glass are used to disguise the mass of the structure while at high level above, panels set at 45 degrees reflect the action on the dance floor and other areas from whichever angle they are viewed. Mirrors are widely used on the walls and bars, and in the lounge bar areas mirror patterns incorporating tivoili lighting create an intricate kaleidoscope of cross reflections. In two of these areas the problems of limited headroom was dramatically overcome by mirrored ceiling tiles.

In addition to creating a sense of subtle mystery and excitement, mirrors also have an important role in creating a visual link between the two floors, enticing people up to the higher level. This link is further enhanced by the rise and fall DJ console which can be hydraulically lifted up to the balcony level or any intermediate position.

By comparison with the Dome, the illumination effects at Paradise Lost are subtle and diffused. Instead of the dramatic highlighting of hard mechanical shapes the approach at Watford is to enhance the romantic sophistication of the setting by introducing an extra dimension of movement and fantasy. This is typified by the treatment of the trees which are positioned around the dance floors. We used natural, cut trees

adorned with delicate, silk blossoms and in addition we hung strips of star-tube from the branches like magic tendrils or fireflies gleaming amongst the foliage.

Wide use was made of star-tube in other areas, picking out the diagonal patterns of the tinted mirrors on the walls, the edges of the bar counters, tables and stair nosings. A tivoili chandelier above the main staircase was reflected many times over by the angled mirrors, creating the skyline of some strange ethereal city of the night.

In addition to the use of strategically placed downlights and pin spots, the general lighting was augmented by stained glass fittings, and these reflected the diagonal design theme and neons running around the periphery of the balcony. The fountains and the water cascade were illuminated by submerged fittings, and mirror balls, separate and in clusters, add further sparkle and movement.

Above the dance floors there are four chrome, space-frame rigs, highlighted with neon, and supporting a battery of coloured spots, scanners and helicopters with further high powered floods that can be brought into operation when live turns are performing. A smaller dance floor at the upper level has its own array of lighting effects. The whole of the lighting system is controlled from the main light and sound control room overlooking the floor. It is programmed for maximum flexibility, incorporating a wide range of sequences and light-to-sound operation.

Instead of following the hi-tech path, we developed an integrated scheme taking disco lighting into new and uncharted realms of romance and fantasy.

## What Happens Next?

Let me start by considering the recent trends as we have seen and how we reacted to them. Firstly, I should qualify my comments by saying that the venues which Group Northern have created are aimed at the over-20 age-group and that this is the market sector I am really discussing.

One of the most noticeable trends has been the increased scope and cost of projects, and this has been only partially due to the cost of light and sound systems. In fact, the proportion of this element in the total scheme has reduced. The extra spend has been incurred by a more complex and imaginative treatment of the setting as a whole, and by improved detailing and quality of the fittings and furnishings. There has also been a move to provide much better catering facilities. Music and dance remains the focus, but the concept of the discotheque has expanded to enable a wider band of people to enjoy a wider range of facilities in an interesting and exciting environment.

Quality, in all its aspects, is important and provided the design and the management is right, it pays off. Quantity, however, does not come cheaply and such venues must have a reasonable life expectancy between major re-fits. There is a school of thought which believes the market is fickle and will always demand change and something new. But where does this leave us?

I do not believe that the disco-goer is inherently as fickle as is sometimes suggested. You cannot bank on their loyalty, but based on our experience over the last ten years, if a concept is right and well managed it does have staying power. The pop music scene is indeed a very transient one which is always wanting something new and different, but there is a reason for this. The music industry is geared to the sale of records and the last thing it wants is a static market. It looks for and encourages pop music with strong initial impact and little depth, something which will sell hard but not last. Instant obsolescence is the name of the game; the market is fickle because the product has made it so.

A discotheque, on the other hand, is a capital intensive project which needs a reasonable life-span to achieve the required pay back, and it must be designed accordingly. If you think about it, this can be done.

A late night venue is catering for something very fundamental and very long lasting. It is a place where young (and youngish) men and women can go to enjoy themselves and meet each other, and where couples and groups can relax in an exciting and different environment. Music and dancing will always be a vital part of the mix, but the key is to create a mini-world with an ambience far removed from that of their daily lives. The element of fantasy is vital. You may lead them through a romantic setting such as Paradise Lost or into the space age world of the Dome or into other different regions of the imagination. But wherever you take them, there are certain basic rules.

The setting must be one where the girls feel more glamorous and alive than they do for the rest of the week, and where men feel more assured and sophisticated. Then the layout must cater for the poser and the voyeur; there must be places where a boy and girl can meet easily and then talk and drink. There must be areas where couples or groups can relax and chat when they are not dancing, and there must be attractive eating places. The design must never be superficial: it must provide genuine interest. Detail and lighting must work together making different parts of the venue trigger the eye and the imagination in different ways and at different times, so that people will come back again and again without becoming bored. And finally, once someone has come through the door into the fantasy world it must be real. In this concept there is no room for the obvious impermanence of a stage set. The quality of everything they see and touch must reinforce the concept of making unreality seem real.

So what sort of picture does this project in our crystal ball? In technical terms I see an ever closer and more subtle integration of lighting and sound within an ever more sophisticated design concept that provides an ever wider range of experiences and facilities. And what will such places look like?

Here, I'm afraid, all my crystal ball shows is a bewildering kaleidoscope of countless alternatives. The key elements are fantasy and imagination, and with the technology and experience we have at our disposal, the potential seems endless.

All I do know is that it will be hugely exciting and creative.



First Leisure's 'The Avenue' at Gillingham—for "pinstripes" at lunch time and the younger "trendy set" in the evening.





Down Town, Manchester—vitality and profit in the basement of the Hotel Piccadilly, Manchester (Embassy Hotels).



Pagoda Park, Birmingham—a touch of the Orient in the Midlands (First Leisure).



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