

# PLANTING ON THE PENINSULA

The Millennium Dome on the Greenwich Peninsula was the focus of the UK's New Year celebrations. It is expected to attract 12m visitors in 2000. Dan Pearson's task of designing the gardens on this harsh, exposed, post-industrial site bounded on three sides by the River Thames was no mean feat, argues Jinny Blom

An eleventh hour call from the New Millennium Experience Company in January last year altered the subsequent course of our work quite unexpectedly. Our initial meeting at the Dome, in diabolical weather, was fired by the incredible enthusiasm of the assembled team from NMEC and Richard Rogers Partnership. In spite of the increasingly dire deadline for creating something from scratch, their vitality and energy was inspiration enough to convince us to take the work on.

The design brief was clear and unromantic: transform an old barge jetty in the river into a garden, which would be inaccessible to the public; provide a substantial screen to block the visitors' view of permanent portacabins at the Meridian Plaza leading from the Dome to the river; and disguise a functional, but ugly London Underground ventilation shaft in the middle of the main entrance plaza (the public's first view of the Dome). Finally, nothing could be planted in the ground — everything was to be containerised. And it all had to look beautiful on 31st December 1999!

## ORDNANCE JETTY

The design for the Ordnance Jetty evolved from the strong ecological landscape theme already being implemented along the riverfront by Richard

Rogers Partnership. The jetty became an 'inhabited island' recreating the derelict pier as a safe haven for native plants and wildlife. A vast planting bay was built onto the jetty using reclaimed timber from the river. This was planted to create an estuary habitat using plugs of soil salvaged from a local waste ground. This soil was rich in wild flower seed and full of young birch and goat willow saplings. The transplantation process was a great success and the jetty is now settling into its role as a roost for migrant birds and an ark for wild plants.

## THE LIVING WALL

The Meridian Plaza, so named because it is bisected by the Meridian Line, is the site of the Living Wall. The Living Wall exists to separate the 'back of house' portacabins from the Plaza and to link the Dome with the Thames and the riverside walk. The brief to create a feature 180m long, 6m high and 1.6m deep — with the additional constraint of not being able to plant into the ground — was unusual. A physical screen in the form of a simple wooden hoarding 5.5m high running the full length of the Plaza from the Dome to the river was erected. At its base is a long, deep cast concrete trough into which a green corridor of stylised woodland was planted. A shallow reflective canal runs along the length of the wall, amplifying the significance of water on

Below: A section from Dan Pearson's plan for the Living Wall. The planting takes the visitor on a journey from organised, horticultural planting adjacent to the Dome to a more naturalistic conclusion beside the River Thames. In keeping with the area's ecological theme, native or semi-indigenous species have been used. Planting is containerised



the whole site. The Dome is designed to collect rainwater, which is re-used to flush the toilets and electricity is then generated from the waste.

Graphic use of colour on the hoardings and a scintillating lighting design emphasises the planting. The lighting, designed in conjunction with Spiers and Major, makes use of the grid attached to the backboards with light units placed at each junction of the grid. At the Dome end the lighting is static, but moving towards the River Thames, the lights come off and on intermittently, mimicking water. The wall is also underlit and floodlit, giving diverse textural impact.

Pearson has been inventive with the planting. A simple woodland theme unites the wall with the jetty. Graceful silver birch underplanted with semi-indigenous grasses and wild columbine give a very gentle feel to an otherwise tough area. Drama is to be found in the use of large stands of willow logs cut into wave forms. This sculptural response using willow as giant hardwood cuttings is a metaphor for the new millennium — the creation of a new life from an old source carrying on into the future. As the wall nears the river the woodland breaks down into soft mounds of turf studded with cowslips and rushes, blending out into nature and the ebb and flow of the tides.

## HANGING GARDENS

The design and planting for the main entrance plaza required a very different approach. The huge London Underground vent enclosure (30m by 30m and 10m high), dominates the view. It was felt that rather than try to shrink the vent, we should encourage people to see it and respond to it almost as a vertical park. Critical analysis of the vent structure revealed that the upper sections were architecturally interesting and provided a springboard to the final design solution. A tiered structure evolved using bands of strictly defined planting on three levels. Each level was painted in a subtle, but specific colour to emphasise the linear nature of the design. A seat runs along the base on all three sides to encourage it as a meeting place.



NICOLA BROWNE/NVEC

The planting is bold and dramatic, emphasising the epic scale of the environment. Being so close to the Dome meant that the planting had to be powerful if it was to be seen. The three planted sides of the Hanging Gardens face due north, west and south giving differing climatic conditions for the types of planting chosen. The bands of planting create linked themes as they wrap around the structure. On the northern face greens predominate, huge *Pinus nigra* planted as a panel run onto a length of *Betula utilis*, on a lower level there are *Phyllostachys aurea* and, lower still, *Arbutus unedo* and *Phormium tenax*. The size and graphic nature of the planting belies the fact that all the plants are containerised. The west face is softer and more coloured, *Betula utilis* wraps around from the north, phormiums, *Eleagnus ebbingeii* and *Cotinus* and *Tamarix* in silvers and pinks. On the southern façade, the structure of the planting softens down further, becoming diffuse and relaxed, trapping light and the motion of the wind.

The end result is unusual and pleasingly graphic, providing a simple but effective solution to a tough and uncompromising brief.

JINNY BLOM IS A FREELANCE GARDEN DESIGNER AND ASSISTANT TO DAN PEARSON. THEY ARE BASED AT 80c BATTERSEA RISE, LONDON, SW11 1EH; TEL/FAX: +44 (0)20 7924 2518. THE CONTRACTORS WERE WATERERS LANDSCAPE, TEL: +44 (0)1344 628 081.

THE EXHIBITION AT THE MILLENNIUM DOME IS SCHEDULED TO LAST A YEAR. FOR TICKET ENQUIRIES CALL: +44 (0) 870 606 2000.

Above: The Hanging Gardens provide a green focal point in the hard landscape of the Dome entrance. Hanging Gardens planting is graphic and linear with broad bands of species wrapping around a box structure like a living sculpture. It is formed by a series of planters raised from the ground onto a steel framework. The backdrop is formed by boards 6m high and the walls are 35m by 35m long

