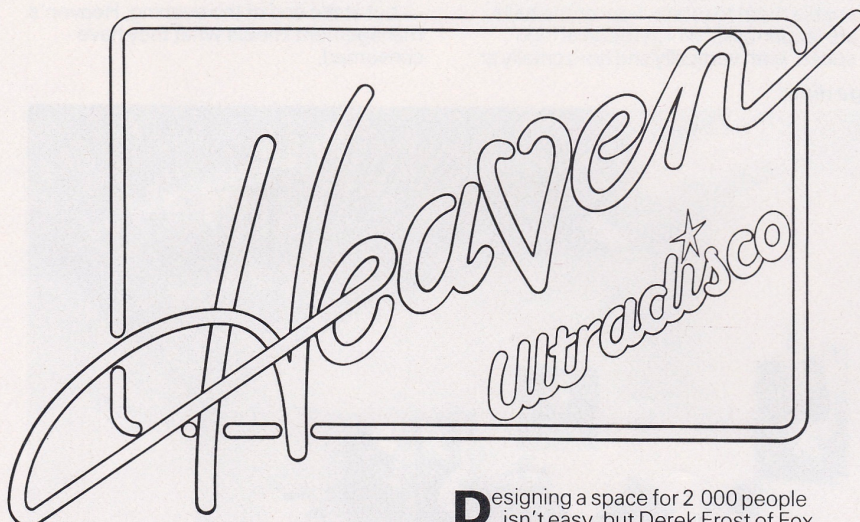


UK INTERIOR DESIGN MAGAZINE - HEAVEN

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Festive fun on Heaven's dance floor, late on New Year's Eve.



There aren't many places of entertainment in Britain designed specifically for gay people. But many gays find themselves uncomfortable in 'straight' bars and discos. Jeremy Norman's late night gay disco opened its doors to the public (members only) in December 1979. Ann Clark reports on the design that has made it such a success.

Designing a space for 2 000 people isn't easy, but Derek Frost of Fox Linton Associates has done just that. Frost was asked by Jeremy Norman (ex-owner of London's Embassy Club) to design Heaven, a high-tech, 'ultradisco' for gay people, using more than 5 000sq ft of floor space. The site, previously the home of London's Global Village, lies beneath a series of Victorian arches under Charing Cross mainline station, stretching southwards towards the Thames.

Subterranean sounds

Situated incongruously among Embankment sandwich bars, secondhand bookshops and

bookmakers, the entrance to Heaven at first looks somewhat undistinguished. But inside its cavernous depths everything changes. Lights and sounds assail the visitor from all sides, compelling him (or her) to enter what seems, after all, an imaginable heaven. As Norman and Frost wanted to focus on light and sound they toured discos in the States before embarking on Heaven. But they didn't plagiarise American disco ideas; they had their own plans for Britain's largest disco. With an experienced team of contractors, including Illusion Lighting (well known for their work for Régines) and Harwell Instruments (Harwell lists Elton John among its clients), the design was completed in only three months.

Functional design

Heaven's existing industrial look prompted Frost's choice of exposed surfaces, unplastered brickwork, massive steelwork, studded rubber and bright clean colours. This bold and dramatic background emphasises the bare structures of the underground space and is a powerful and dark stage for the surrounding action. Frost's design of the furnishings and decor eschews all embellishment; it concentrates instead on the directional focus of light and sound. This simplicity and paring down to fundamentals makes the disco singularly masculine and appealing to an audience that justifiably wants no truck with 'pretty or stereotyped seductive effects.

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Hard hats

At the centre of Heaven's three arches is a 3 000sq ft dance floor in stained black oak. High above the floor hang a myriad lights and scaffold tubes suspended in the black void beneath the vaulted ceiling. Frost knocked out more than 60ft of mezzanine floor to leave only a balcony overhanging the arch. He made the whole area matt black except for the brilliant lighting hung from the dark scaffolding grid and a bright yellow painted steel staircase and balustrade. On the lower level the dance floor leads to a 50ft L-shaped bar coloured black with bright yellow safety helmets hung in striking symmetry along one of the walls. These hard hats, the potent symbol of the construction worker, ironically subvert the image of the macho American male. Behind the bar bottles of spirits stand stacked on small tiers of metal scaffolding. Leading off the balcony on the upper level is an American diner in bright orange with a curved, corrugated aluminium ceiling. The diner — a nicely self-indulgent note in the design — serves fast food and is decorated with 'Rude food' posters that juxtapose human flesh with visually similar 'cuts' of meat.

Next to the dance floor, in another arched space, is a huge eight-sided free standing bar. The blue and silver bar room with its sleazy and somnolent atmosphere has all the marks of an

American pool hall (pool tables and gaming machines are positioned at one end of the enormous room). Here people linger comfortably on the tall bar stools, or on the surrounding soft seats. Smoke hangs in the air below the pin spots and on one wall an eight foot star shines shimmering through glass brick.

The prevailing blueness of the bar intensifies Heaven's nocturnal character: the disco only opens at 10.30pm. But more pervasive is the feeling of space suggested everywhere by the over-arched ceiling. Like some fantastical vision of outer space, the darkness of the dance hall whizzes with stars and atoms. To further emphasise the enormous height of the disco space to follow, Frost hung a low suspended ceiling over the entrance hall, concealing the arched void, its rise and fall marked by lines of neon.

High spots

The high-tech style of Heaven demanded unusual and constantly changing lights to mix in exciting combination with the music. So Frost and Tony Gottelier, of Illusion Lighting, concentrated on neon and used its startling colour and versatility to extraordinary effect on the dance floor.

To cut through the inevitably smokey atmosphere they used a variety of highly directional light sources in different combinations with shafts of coloured light. At the top of the arch and down the length of the room they placed five large pyramids built from 2in steel tubing. These create 3D supports for the lights and a mounting for all the electrical cables. Down the centre of the ceiling Gottelier installed five atomic balls and mirror balls with 4-colour hoops of neon gyroscoped about the central sphere. The neon rings are controlled in sequence and suspended independently of the balls to enable them to rotate. Four of the balls are 'super-balls' which rotate at high speed, both vertically and horizontally at

the same time. This dazzling effect is created by sixteen bullet beam spots connected to the light controller via a zoner. These same lamps criss-cross in coloured sound-to-light movement from ceiling to floor, using some eighty pink fittings controlled by a series of sound-triggered sequences.

Close encounters. . .

At either end of the dance floor Gottelier installed two clusters of 500 watt theatrical fresnels fitted with barn doors and connected to theatrical dimmers. The two groupings, suspended at different heights flood the whole dance area with sheets of strong colour. Gottelier also used theatrical follow spots and blue and red lanterns to lower the ceiling height. To outline the perimeter of the dance floor he routed in a channel of Astralight, a series of miniature, intensely bright white lights set into clear rectangular polycarbonate tube.

To create the impression of floating in space, Gottelier made a special light from 32 sections of blue neon which he installed on steel wire at random throughout the room. To this 'instant flash' controlled lighting Gottelier added a series of directional but vertically placed white spinning UFO lights. These create the illusion that the room is rotating. At the far end of the room the neon-lit Heaven logo luridly glares like a sign at the end of a tunnel.

Kool aid

Heaven's beer is Heineken lager specially imported by Whitbread. More special is the system by which Whitbread pipes premeasured and prerecorded ice cold drinks from refrigerated cellars to the bar. Not only do dancers get the cool refreshment they need — literally on tap — but at the end of the evening, Heaven's management knows what they have consumed.

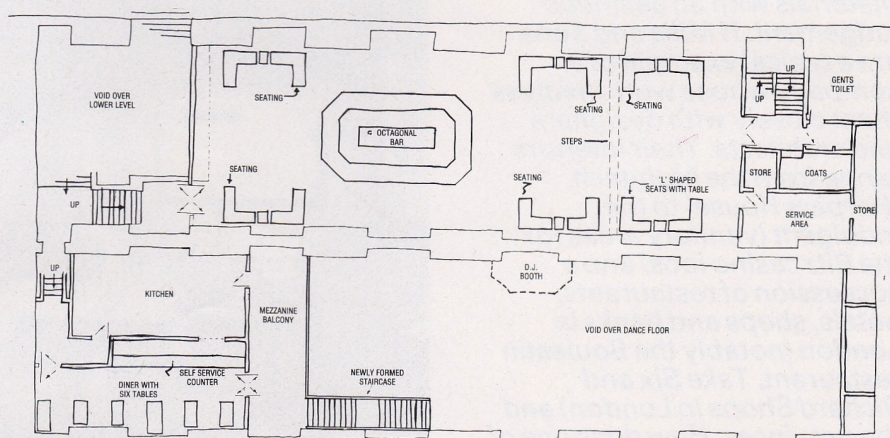
Rude food posters adorn the fast-food orange diner





Licence to dance

Norman's large investment more than justifies the time and labour spent on Heaven. But implementing Frost's design was not as easy as it looks. Almost half of the three month period was devoted to negotiations with the Greater London Council. District surveyors and health inspectors had to be satisfied on all accounts: the electrics, lights, and fire and safety precautions were all subject to the most exacting rules and regulations. Almost more important, when the transfer licence was granted and the alterations made, the music and dance licence had to be applied for through the District General's office. This took a long time and, on this final application, the future of Heaven stood or fell. But any venture as ambitious as Heaven, involving such large groups of people, would be subject to the same public and legislative stringencies. Frost and Norman's hard won approval for this 'ultradisco' can only be vindicated by the hundreds (and thousands) of people who nightly flock through its doors.



Floor plan showing upper level of Heaven.

Credits

Designer: Fox Linton Associates Ltd
 Lighting: Illusion Lighting International;
 Harwell Instruments
 Seating: Aerofoam
 Ventilation systems: Electронаire
 Studded rubber flooring: Pirelli
 Steel work: J A Orchard Ltd
 Bar system: Whitbread

