



Ruth Pavey

GARDENING

British Library gets a change of greenery

Landscaper Dan Pearson has designs on softening the library's hard architecture

UNLIKE the Millennium Dome, which had a bad press before, during and after its brief span of opening, the British Library on Euston Road has lived down much of the abuse heaped upon it before the public were allowed in in 1997.

In general, people now like it. Even so, few would say that the approach across the piazza, an austere, exposed courtyard, with Paolozzi's dark statue of Newton brooding over it, lends a sense of relaxed welcome.

Perhaps this is as it should be; the library was not, after all, built as a place of beckoning entertainment.

Nevertheless, in connection with the "Writer in the Garden" exhibition, moves are afoot to ease the visitor's sense of arrival.

To this end, the designer, Dan

Pearson, has rethought the planting.

Various friends I have tried out with this information have responded, "what planting?", thus reinforcing Pearson's view that the piazza is dominated by its hard landscaping.

In his words, aesthetically, the planting acts as little more than green architecture, and the plants were "standard issue municipal".

Rather than offer a verdant respite from the rigours of the Euston Road, or of scholarship, they were "elevated, contained and untouchable".

Instead, through his choice of plants and the manner in which they will be allowed to grow, Pearson aims to feed people's imagination and knowledge, and to make them feel more comfortable.

There are practical constraints which make this tricky.

Because the floor of the piazza is the roof of the archive, the weight of soil it can bear is limited, so greenery cannot be



A member of the Indoor Garden Design team lays plants in the British Library piazza.

Picture by Josh Lustig

extended at will.

Also, some of the planters are very high-sided.

Only huge bronze Newton is in a good position to see into the longest of them.

But, contrary to the famous story about him, gravity and a falling apple, he isn't allowing any plant to feed his imagination.

He's far too gripped by whatever he's trying to work out at his feet to be looking about him, or wondering whether Dan Pearson's choice of rosemary,

lavender, fig, bay, myrtle and vine are going to make a difference to the little people below.

The Highgate firm, Indoor Garden Design, has for several years had the planting and maintenance contract with the British Library.

So it was with Christine

Bagley, their exterior manager, that I sat leaning against Newton's bronze stool on a sunny day last week, looking down as Dan Pearson and the Indoor Garden Design team got on with the new planting (only part of which is happening now, the rest is scheduled by the end of the year).

Christine reckons they are going to enjoy Dan's new regime of greater informality, with the strawberry vines being encouraged to spill down from the high planters, the figs being grown into "big mounds" and the bays allowed to put up "huge spears".

These descriptions are Dan's own, imparted to me in the few minutes he could spare from planting tree ivy, making 'phone calls', disappearing, then returning in the evening to give a good talk about two commissions he has been undertaking in Japan, one urban, one rural.

Hearing about these three diverse pieces of work, one could pick up some of his guiding principles.

Put at their baldest, these include that less is more, contact with the natural world is good for us, and that gardeners had better work with nature than against it.

To see how the British Library piazza develops we need to be patient, there will be apple trees, mulberry trees, things that take time, but it seems that the people there were blessed in their choice of designer.

□ *The Writer in the Garden exhibition continues at the British Library until April 10. It's well worth seeing.*