

GRAND DESIGNS

Modern Homes / Architecture / Design / Interiors / Property

New look!
More houses
More inspiration
More advice



April 2010 £3.50

Light and space

50 pages of contemporary homes

Dream locations

Property hotspots and design destinations



Vertical gardens

The new fashion for outdoors

Tomorrow's world

Space-age eco technology

PLUS! Latest design ideas for modern kitchens & bathrooms

9 771742 069024



Kevin McCloud

This month, the surreal imagery used in the film Avatar has got Kevin thinking about equally mind-boggling things he's seen in the real world, plus he asks why science fiction seems to have turned its back on futuristic architecture

So who did you go and see *Avatar* with? If it was your other half, then good choice, because there was plenty of romance, albeit amongst blue aliens with tails. But the first time I saw the film was in the company of my old mate and former collaborator Bruce Munro, the lighting designer. We sat in the back row drinking Saint Estèphe disguised in water bottles, getting quietly sozzled as pterodactyls swooped in front of us.

What makes the film – and what made us both gasp out loud – are the settings. Anyone old enough to remember Roger Dean's airbrushed album covers for Yes will be very familiar with the concept of floating mountains. They're old hat. Indeed the entire film relies on James Cameron's memory of Sixties and Seventies popular culture: a jumbled visual re-expression of Isaac Asimov sci-fi mixed up with some Tubular Bells, Terry Gilliam, Oz, and the Banana Splits. Painted blue. Crazeeee.

You know what I'm talking about: there's the mile-high tree that falls over; the luminescent foliage; and the weeping willow of tinselling, glowing threads, the floating, pulsating seeds of which are the souls of ancestors.

Bruce has spent the last 10 years producing experiences just like this, but in the real world. He gave up on the mile-high tree, but has successfully imaged into reality the kind of impossible setting that Cameron safely procures from software. That's a lot harder than sitting in front of a screen in Santa Barbara, because Bruce does his job in fields with miles of wiring and fibre-optic cabling. The result is a mind-boggling adventure. I once spent a November stood in, and mesmerised by, Bruce's Field of Light, a collection of what appeared to be dozens of floating intergalactic cities, each subtly changing colour, stretching into the distance. The Field has been in residence at the V&A museum and the Eden Project, but if you haven't seen it you can get some idea of the effect at fieldoflight.co.uk.

Munro is now appealing for a million used CDs and DVDs to lay across a landscape, so you could always send him your old copies of *The Abyss* and *Titanic* (see cdsea.co.uk for details). Meanwhile, I suspect some Hollywood

art directors are still having to take mind-bending drugs to dream up their next CGI-soaked fantasy sci-fi setting. They should have just looked at what Bruce was doing on nothing more than good red wine.

Space-age architecture

On the subject of science fiction and architecture, can anyone point me in the direction of a really inspirational recent film? *Avatar* is all about the natural setting, while its human interiors are the same drab, grey, grungy backdrops that have been deployed in everything from *Bladerunner* to *Space 1999*. The last time science fiction got properly futuristic was back in the Sixties, with Ken Adam's sets for *Dr Strangelove* and the Bond movies, and in Roger Vadim's silly but mind-blowing *Barbarella*.

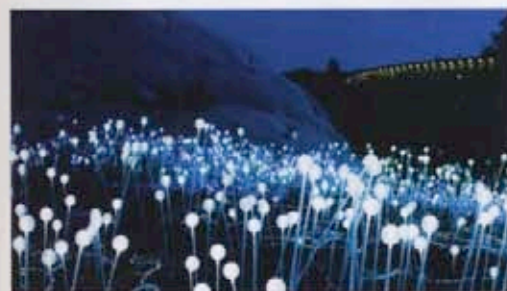
And then, of course, there was Stanley Kubrick's mighty *2001: A Space Odyssey* which I went to see on my tenth birthday in 1969. It showcased space-age furniture only just available in the real world, including George Nelson's Action Office designs and the blobby Djinn chair by

Olivier Mourgue. But most of all, it depicted how the weightlessness of space would effect architecture, with no distinction between ceilings, floors and walls.

Everything that followed plonked actors' feet firmly back on the studio floor and seemed to refer back to the technology of the Sixties. Why?

Well, the Sixties were the decade of the Space Race, that fevered rush towards one technological goal. Perhaps that's why, in design terms, we find it easy to keep referring back to that era from the more diffuse and jumbled twenty-first century. Perhaps a lack of clear direction now means we don't have the confidence to predict the future any more. **GD**

Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey featured such space-age furniture as George Nelson's Action Office designs and the blobby Djinn chair by Olivier Mourgue



*left The original Action Office range by George Nelson for Herman Miller (0845 226 7202; hermanmiller.com)
far left Bruce Munro's stunning Field of Light installation at the Eden Project in Cornwall used 6,000 acrylic stems, through which fibre-optic cables ran, each crowned with a clear glass sphere. It covered an area of 60x20m and used 24,000m of fibre-optic cable*

IN THE DIARY

April will see Kevin working on lighting designs to celebrate Heal's bicentenary; helping to launch a WWF campaign to save Britain's chalk streams; and spending a day filming in a field of hemp, from which the housing development he's overseeing in Swindon will be constructed