Beleaguered art centre finally opens
But are the displays at The Public worth the Arts Council’s £35m funding?

LONDON. The Public art centre in West Bromwich, UK, has finally opened. Planned since 1993, it was inaugurated on 28 June last year. Its displays then closed after two days because they were too complex and were not working. By the time they reopened on 29 August 2009, total costs of the dramatic Will Alsop-designed building had escalated to £65m.

When The Art Newspaper visited The Public, we found that most of the original works had been scrapped, such as Usman Haque’s Flowers of My Secrets, which comprised drawers containing virtual flower-beds. Technically, the installations simply didn’t function, and had to be replaced. A large glide of steel trees on the upper level, part of a work by designer Ben Kelly, remains, although the electronics do not work.

The main surviving work is Blast Theory’s Flypad, in which visitors create avatars that fly around the atrium. The new, simplified interactives are fun, at least for children, although it is debatable whether they should be deemed works of art, in terms of Arts Council funding.

Along with the permanent interactive displays, there are temporary exhibits: two small photographic displays (Kim Abeles’s panorama of West Bromwich’s High Street and John Bulmer’s images of the Black Country), a documentary film on Malcolm X’s visit in 1965 to the West Midlands by Steve Page, a group of five political sculptures from the Frank Cohen collection, and three films on The Public and its area. Although the visual arts were originally intended to be the centre’s strength, it also presents theatre, music and film.

Overall the initial displays are reasonable, but what is causing the controversy is the cost. The Arts Council has put in £35m, making it one of its most expensive projects. Initially The Public planned to charge £7 for entry to the permanent displays, and was hoping to attract 100,000 visitors a year. Although the charge has now been dropped, the interactives are only open to the general public three days a week (and on two additional days for groups). Sustaining visitor numbers may well prove a challenge.

Marlin Bailey

British Museum to spend £1.25m on prints

LONDON. The British Museum in London hopes to make its largest acquisition of prints since 1902. It wants to buy 7,250 mezzotints from Christopher Lennox-Boyd, a specialist who has assembled a collection of 50,000 works over 40 years. The museum has been through them all, selecting mezzotint prints from the 17th to 19th centuries, which it lacks. The agreed price is £1.25m. So far the British Museum Society has pledged £300,000, the Art Fund has offered £250,000 and a request for £585,000 is to be considered by the National Heritage Memorial Fund. Lennox-Boyd had earlier auctioned two groups of prints at Christie’s (12 March 2008 and 25 February 2009), which raised £468,000. The National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, bought 65 of his most important prints between 2001 and 2004. M.B.