When Will Alsop first designed his Jubilee Line underground station in North Greenwich, there were two things he did not expect. He did not expect to have a Norman Foster bus interchange dropped on top of it: and he did not expect the world's biggest circus tent, in the shape of Richard Rogers' Millennium Dome, to land alongside. Still, these things happen. At any moment - possibly tomorrow, possibly even before you read this, so coy is London Underground about its much-delayed project - the station opens, along with the first stretch of the new tube down from Stratford. Which means the whole Dome business is finally entering the realm of reality.

When the firm of Alsop, Lyall and Stormer landed the station job back in the early 1990s, the idea was that it would be buried beneath a gargantuan docklands-style redevelopment. Then came the Dome, and the rapid re-planning of the area led to Foster's surface interchange, perched like a gull's wing over one end of Alsop's buried box. The Dome mushroomed a few yards away, and a canopied boulevard will connect the two. Assuming the engineers get the other end of the line sorted out in time, millions of people will experience Alsop's station en route for the New Millennium Experience next year.

Although it began life in a different world, this palatial, ultramarine blue subterranean space with its leaning mosaic columns and dramatically suspended concourse is the perfect introduction to the architectural sequence that follows. This is no hole-in-the-corner tube station: it is the biggest on the new line, the biggest in Europe. The tower of Canary Wharf would easily fit on its side inside it, with room for quite a few other buildings as well. It optimistically anticipates becoming an interchange for a further tube extension down into the Royal Docks, and is sized to suit.
Will Alsop Underground

Cerulean depths

From the calm interior of this enormous sunken building with its sheer blue glass wall, you rise into the light beneath Foster's airy canopy. Right now there's nothing to do here, unless you happen to be one of the thousands of construction workers employed in the area. Many people, I suspect, will take the short ride down from Stratford just to stand and gawp at the Dome, before plunging anew into those cerulean depths to return home. This is the first of the big showpiece underground stations on the new Jubilee Line, since all the architecture from there up to Stratford is above ground. There are good stations by Chris Wilkinson, Troughton McAslan, Van Heyningen & Haward, but they are in a suburban transport corridor. It is only when the tube dives under the river and arrives in Alsop's North Greenwich that the real fun begins.

Other subterranean landmarks are on parts of the line that open later, passing through Canary Wharf (by Foster, and as different from North Greenwich as chalk from cheese) and so on south of the river through an architectural sampler of stations by various hands - Ian Ritchie, Richard MacCormac, Weston Williamson and others. The final section - which must open late this autumn, or heads will roll - turns north again, passes through a deep cavern of a station designed by Sir Michael Hopkins beneath his new Westminster building for MPs, and joins up with the existing Jubilee Line at Green Park.

The distinct character of each of these stations is no accident. In the past, stations on new tube lines have tended to be uniform - little more than expanded tunnels. But the commissioning client here for the Jubilee Line project, Roland Paolletti, had better ideas, saw them through, and deserves to be regarded as one of the great public patrons. After all, the expensive delays to this project have been because of engineering problems, not the architecture programme. Delays are soon forgotten, but the spatial experience is permanent. The below-ground stations on the new Jubilee line take the form of various kinds of giant boxes rather than the usual tangle of macaroni. And as soon as you have a definable volume such as a box, you have exactly the same potential for real, diverse architecture as you get in the streets above.

Alsop's North Greenwich, then, is both unique and a foretaste of what is to come. From there, a short walk takes you - if you have the necessary security clearance - into the Dome. Here, again, we are now dealing with actuality rather than pipe-dreams, as the various "zones" take shape. Even the famous Body Zone with its giant shop mannekin-meets-Henry Moore human figures can now be seen - although the spiky metal framework for the figures, with no flesh yet on the bones, makes them look at present more like an Eduardo Chillida sculpture. Nothing to be seen yet of Zaha Hadid's Mind Zone, but
alongside, the metal "petals" that will make up Eva Jiricna's Spirit Zone are starting to arrive. The big central arena with its circular levitating stage is built: beneath the floor, tunnels for the performers remind you of the way the Colosseum in Rome worked.

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