

→ SET in Parliament

# A big idea in art and science

Courage, urges Ian Gibson

**I recently met a young, London-based artist, Laura Williams, who told me about a project she has been developing – a tidal-powered moon clock called ALUNA.**

The project is an eloquent expression of current keenness to bring art and science closer together. The support of the Wellcome Trust and NESTA has been notable in this respect.

Art and science are in fact closer together than we often assume. Both question, challenge and ideally work towards improving society, and both are experimental and creative processes. Art is also a powerful channel for people to connect to science. It can illustrate, demonstrate and encourage people to engage with science and give them a sense of ownership and empowerment, rather than leave them alienated and distrustful. Last year's light show beside the A46 by Richard Box, artist in residence in the Department of Physics at Bristol University, was an inspiring demonstration of how electromagnetic fields work.

## The clock

ALUNA is a steel structure clad in curved, translucent glass, forty metres wide and five storeys high. Underneath the glass lies a matrix of light emitting diodes (LEDs) which provide

the illumination for its three rings and are powered directly by renewable energy harnessed from the tides using on-site turbine technology. The illumination of the three concentric translucent glass rings allows us to follow the Moon's movements, its current phase and the ebb and flow of the tides.

I was struck, not only by the aesthetic grace of ALUNA, but by its imaginative combination of design, cutting edge technology, tidal energy, scientific precision and age-old knowledge of our planet and its natural rhythms. In its structure and design, we see how far we have come in terms of technology and innovation; in the thinking behind it and the understanding it offers, it reconnects us to the thoughts and discoveries we have made along the way and without which we wouldn't have got where we are today. As we are faced with the terrible prospects of climate change, over-consumption and an increasingly punishing pace of life, it reminds us that this reconnection between past and present is vital for safeguarding our future.

## Support needed

So where can we see ALUNA? No doubt you'll be disappointed to hear that it has not yet been built. However, it has been met with enthusiasm

in several high-up quarters, and has so far gathered sponsorship to a value of over £300,000, largely as services in kind, and the backing of several high-profile organisations, companies and endorsers – leading scientists, astronomers, artists, theologians, musicians and technicians.

What it needs is a viable site, the funding and the official support to see it through to realisation. The team is ready to carry out detailed feasibility studies and prototype work as soon as enough money has been raised and the best possible site is found.

Regarding the site, ALUNA could be situated anywhere, but ideally it should be on the edge of tidal waters in or near to an urban environment. There is growing interest in the UK and Australia towards it becoming a dual-hemisphere project. Although the northern hemisphere project has previously been focussed on Merseyside, the team is now looking for other UK sites (you can find out more from the website: [www.alunatime.org](http://www.alunatime.org)).

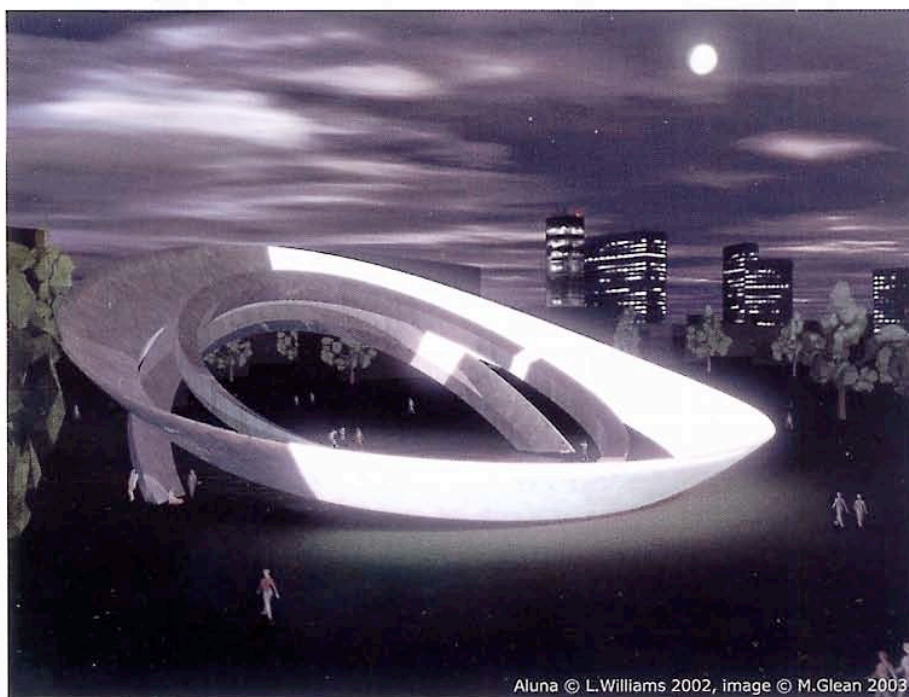
## Make me change my tune!

If we really want to demonstrate our seriousness about all our current science-related concerns, we need to have the courage to take on bold projects and big ideas that help integrate science into our culture. They are by no means lacking.

It is a shame that Merseyside has not seized on this opportunity, with Liverpool set to be the European City of Culture in 2008. However the project could be tied in with other programmes, such as the 2012 Olympic bid, or built simply for its own, valuable, sake.

Sadly, it would seem, there is a lack of will and commitment to embrace big ideas and provide the necessary support to make them real. The Science and Technology Select Committee has come to this conclusion on various issues in recent years. It would be nice once in a while if I could be encouraged to change my tune.

Aluna: reconnecting past and present.



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