When is a recycling plant a work of art? When it's painted with light, of course. **Jonathan Glancey** investigates

Waste not

If you've got it, flaunt it. Waste, that is. Tons of the stuff, from thousands of homes and workplaces, all waiting to be burned and turned, as if by magic, into the sweetest exhaled air. Or almost.

This beautifully-lit building is a waste reclamation centre at Tyseley in the West Midlands. It is an impressive, necessary and brutally functional building that, in most eyes, is very ugly.

Yet, with a little help from Martin Richman, an artist who works with light, it has been transformed from a sorry site into a sight for sore eyes.

This simply, if joyously, thought-out lighting scheme changes our perception of brutal and mysterious buildings such as this waste station: a journey past them becomes an adventure for the eye, something to look forward to on the way home from work in winter.

Effectively, coloured light manipulates the building like some giant, abstract canvas; as one motors past, the concrete structure slips between two and three dimensions, our mind's eye caught out by a trick of the light on a grand scale. This gradual transformation of our night-time landscape is becoming slowly yet increasingly subtle as architects, proprietors and local authorities begin to see the advantages of making even the beastliest building beautiful.

Many buildings have been floodlit, yet this is often crudely done in a great wash of white or orange light that makes architecture monstrous and destroys the darkness of the night skies above us.

What artists such as Richman can do is "paint" buildings in light, illuminating specific surfaces exactly so that there is no seepage or spillage of light into the sky and thus little danger of blotting out stars on clear, wintry nights.

Light fantastic: Tyseley waste plant shines in the dark. Let's hope that superstores won't seek the lit-up look

What makes such chameleon adventures in light so enjoyable is that they represent the same building to us in several guises. They also have the potential to make truly frightening buildings, such as nuclear power stations, for example, objects of contemplative beauty. The power station at Dungeness in Kent is already impressive by night; just imagine if Richman got his hands on it. We would learn to stop worrying and love the splitting of the atom.

Richman himself is a talented and articulate artist who has worked for years with light, creating series of simple, ethereal installations in homes, galleries and public buildings, such as the Anvil Theatre, Basingstoke, that make even th most workaday spaces special.

He has been obsessed with the nature of changing light ever since he can remember — as a little boy playing on the south coast beach near where he was brought up, as the same little boy attending a romantically-lit synagogue on Saturday mornings.

Richman's star, as Tyseley proves, has risen. But what if that talent falls into the wrong hands? We'll have monstrous superstores and malls trying to prettify themselves beyond the desperate cosmetics offered by architects. His is a beautiful art; but, as with anything electrical, it should be handled with care. ■