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MS Berner Oberland

by Leslie & Naomi Falkson. All photos by Authors.

Mention the magic initials BLS to a fellow enthusiast and it is a safe bet that shipbuilding is unlikely to spring to mind as a major activity of that illustrious organisation. Similarly, one would not immediately regard the charming and medieval town of Thun as a centre for heavy industry.

In the normal way this would be correct thinking but we are now approaching the end of an exceptional ten-month period which will see the emergence of a brand new and most elegant passenger vessel on Thunersee when the **BERNER OBERLAND** makes her maiden voyage on 21st March next with 1000 invited passengers aboard. Also, to be factual, the BLS yard is re-assembling the 'sliced' sections of a ship that was built in Germany and transported overland in a series of 'wide load' deliveries.

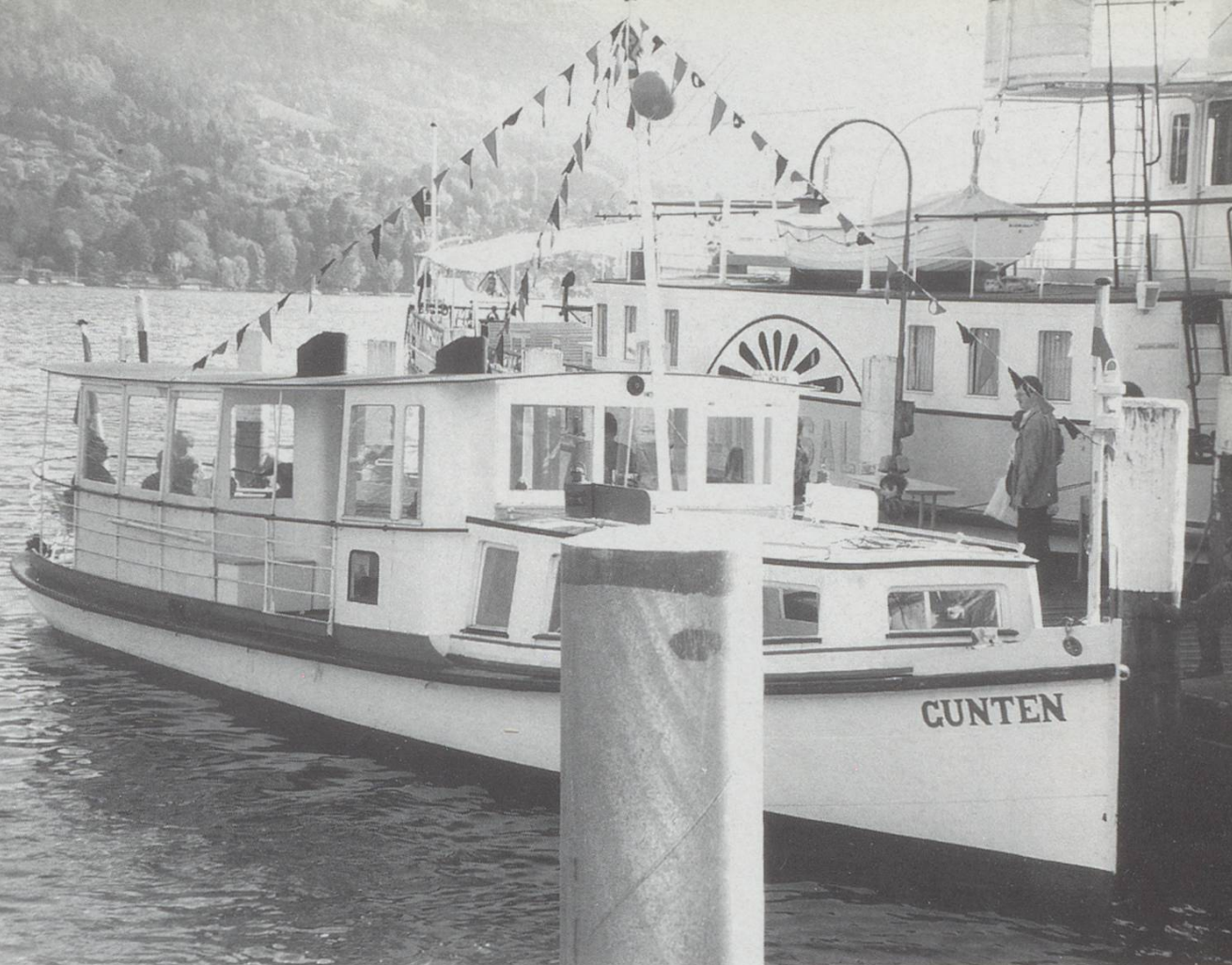
Readers may remember our brief initial report that appeared in Swiss Express last June and we have followed her progress eagerly ever since the project was announced.

When we visited the Thun yard in March 95 we were disappointed to learn that the delivery programme from originating builders Meidericher Schiffswert in Duisburg had been delayed indefinitely because bad weather and heavy flooding in the Nordrhein-Westfalen region had prevented the work from proceeding to schedule.

Assembly of the hull finally began on 17 May 1995 in the overhaul and maintenance shed where the facilities include powerful winding gear and a well-ramped slipway for drawing craft out of the water as and when required.

Construction is in the capable hands of the regular BLS workforce, assisted and supervised by technicians from Duisburg in constant attendance.

On 18 October 1995 we were treated to a private inspection of the work in progress and it was comforting to be trusted to roam freely, photograph at will and to chat with the men while they worked, all without the 'benefit' of



Opposite page: An artists impression of MS Berner Oberland on Thunersee. Supplied by BLS

Above: MS Gunten, capacity 60 passengers, operating special trips on the open day.

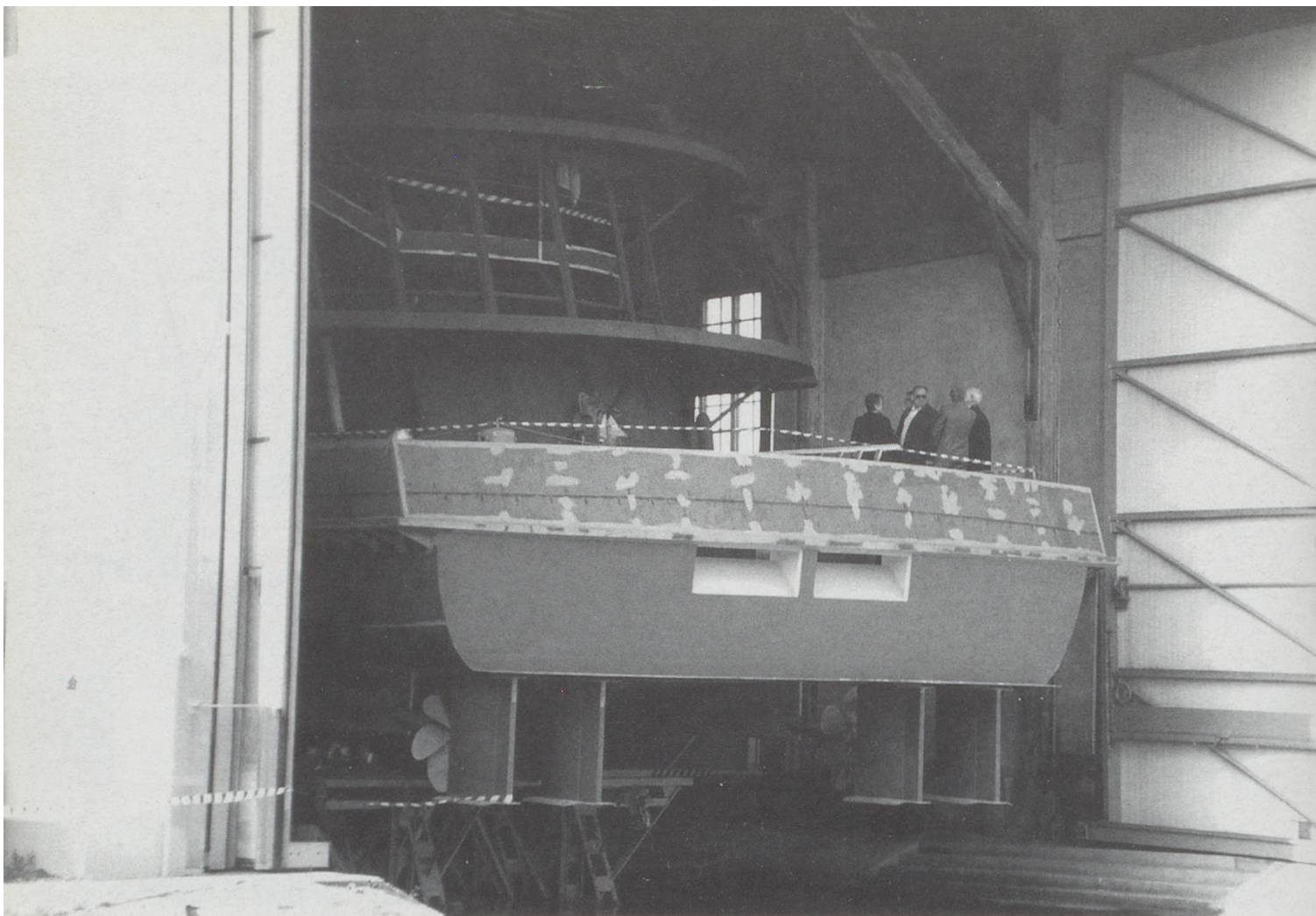
protective headgear or overalls. As in so many other applications, the Swiss philosophy appears to be "We rely on you to use your intelligence to avoid damage, accidents and personal injury" and possibly that is why vast lengths of railway track remain unfenced with minimal problems resulting. A refreshing change from the frequently overbearing and petty requirements laid down by the Health & Safety Executive in the UK.

By then the twin Detroit Diesels had been installed, together with the transmission and steering gear, and the superstructure was complete. Compressors, air reservoirs, fuel and water tanks were also in place. Pipe-fitters and electricians were busily engaged on performing their skills and deafening crashes echoed through the vast shed as the 'metal bashers' went about their business, shaping and coaxing large steel panels into desired contours and position. Truly a scene of vigorous but highly organised activity!

During our visit it was mentioned that ten days

hence there was to be an open day at the yard so that the good burghers of Thun could check on the work in hand for themselves; there is obviously much interest in the area from potential passengers and BLS is understandably astute in fostering that interest.

Returning on 28 October 1995 we were impressed to find that all was now ship-shape with only the largest components remaining unfitted on the decks and temporary safety barriers erected, largely it would appear, to prevent children from toppling into the atrium void rising through the ship. A few craftsmen were engaged in demonstrating their pipe-fitting skills to groups of onlookers and the catering section had even provided a handsomely decorated dining table set with white napery and four covers. Complete with its chairs it formed an admirable centre-piece to the presentation, made more so by the incongruous setting, and nearby were displayed tempting sample menus to whet the appetites of prospective voyagers. As on the present Thunersee fleet, all food



Above: Slightly too long for the shed, the stern protrudes through the doors. Twin screws and four skegs are clearly shown in this shot as well as the aft superstructure.

preparation is in the capable hands of the Freienhof Hotel, under the personal supervision of its genial director, Carlo Platzer.

Other attractions on offer were short trips on two of the veterans of the Thunersee fleet - MS Spiez (capacity 200 with 60 under cover and 40 accommodated in the refreshment saloon) and MS Gunten (capacity 60/30/20) - at 5Sfrs per head. We were fortunate in our choice of the smaller of the two and it was a great pleasure to be able to glide almost silently to Oberhofen and back in perfect weather and in company with a very happy compliment of local folk.

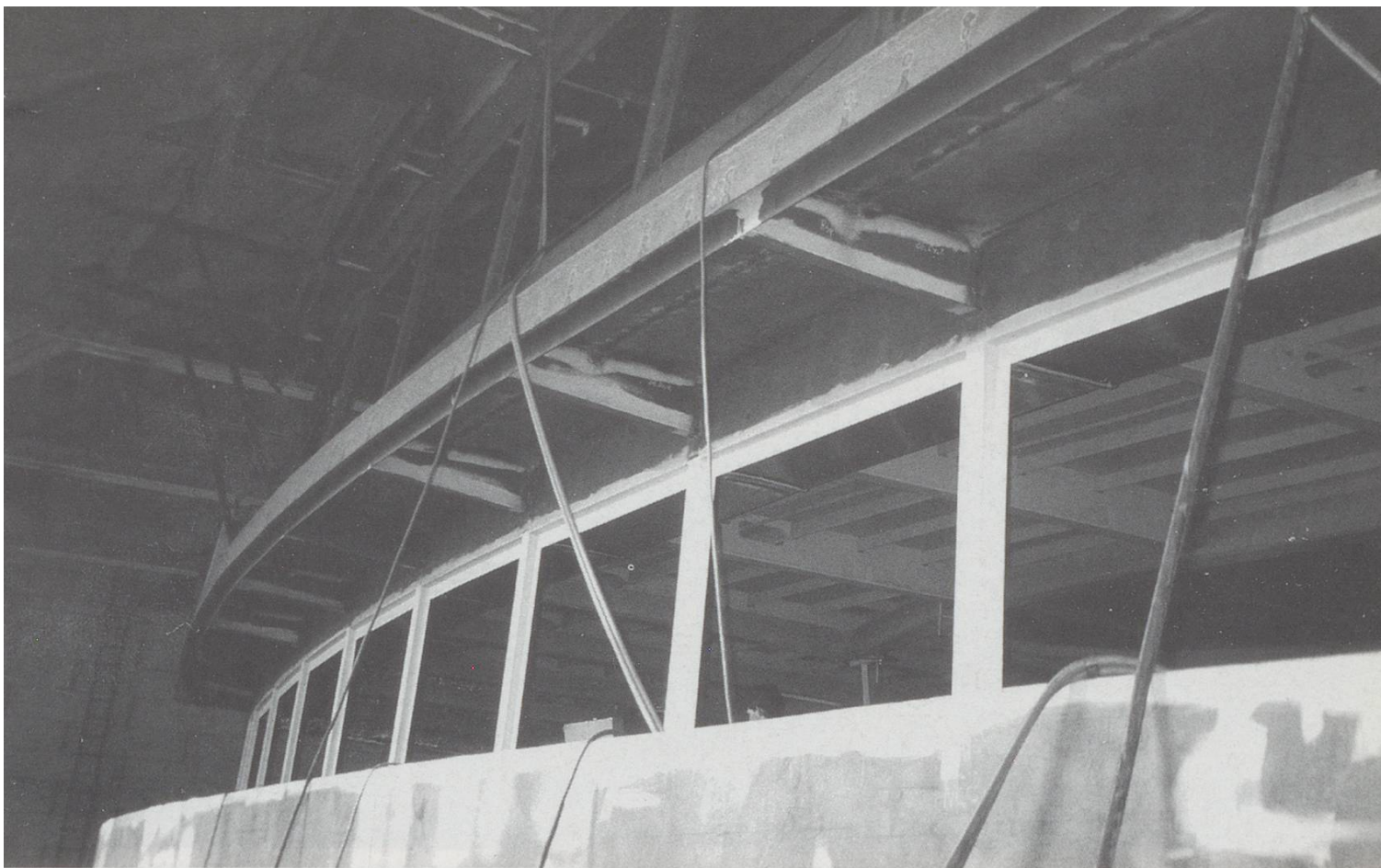
As mentioned above, she will undertake her maiden passage on 21 March 1996. Entering regular passenger service the very next day and equipped with the last word in marine technology, plus CCTV to assist the skipper as he reverses the ship down the canal from Interlaken, MS Berner Oberland will also be available for private charter.

We are sure all members of the Swiss Railways Society will join us in wishing her and her crew and owners many, many years of safe and successful cruising on the delightful Lake of Thun.

In conclusion we give the following statistics:

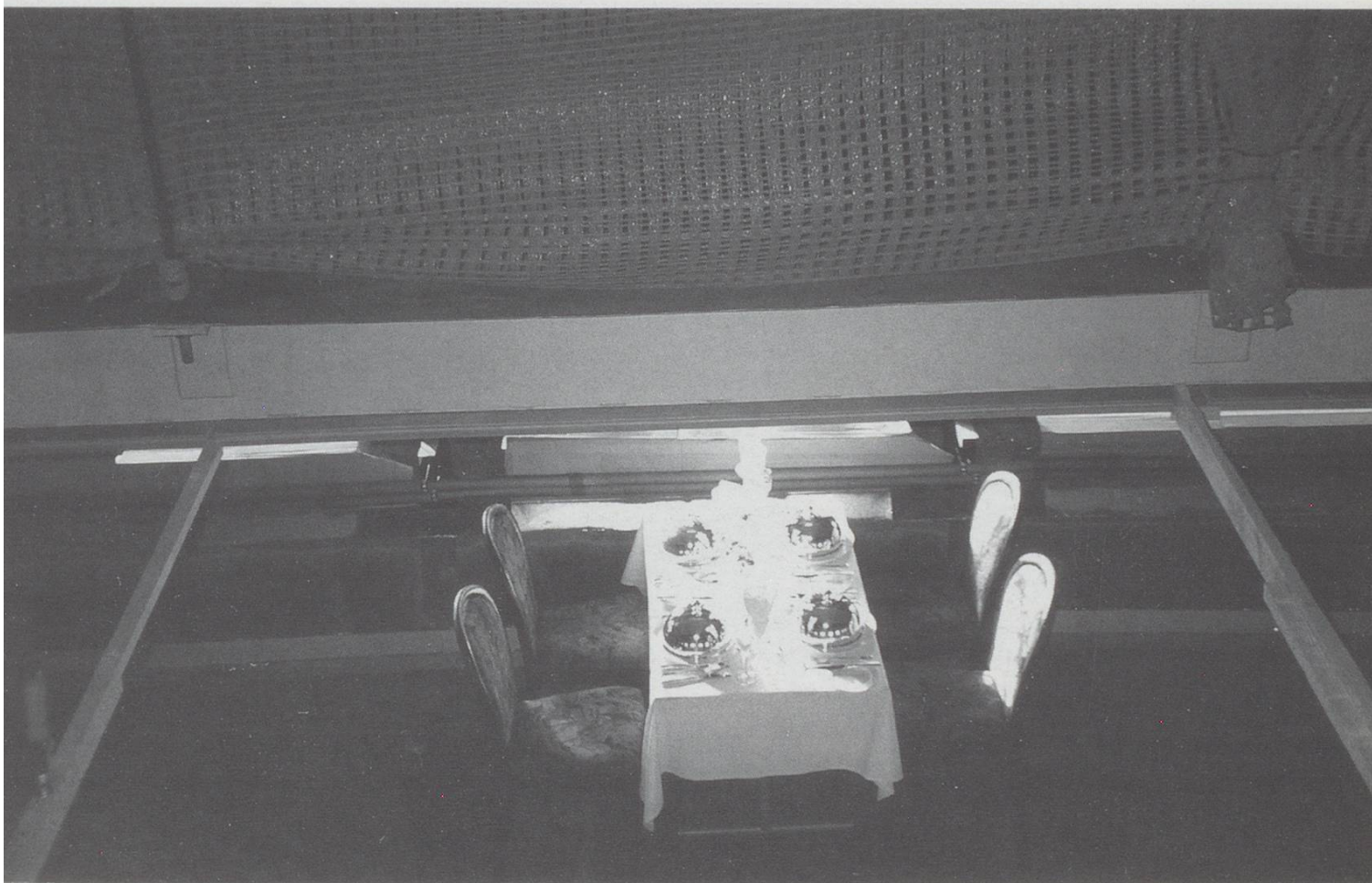
Capacity:	1000 passengers
Length overall:	57.00 metres
Beam overall:	12.00 metres
Height:	11.00 metres
Draught:	1.60 metres
Weight:	440 tonnes
Power:	2 x 450 kW
Speed:	27 kph

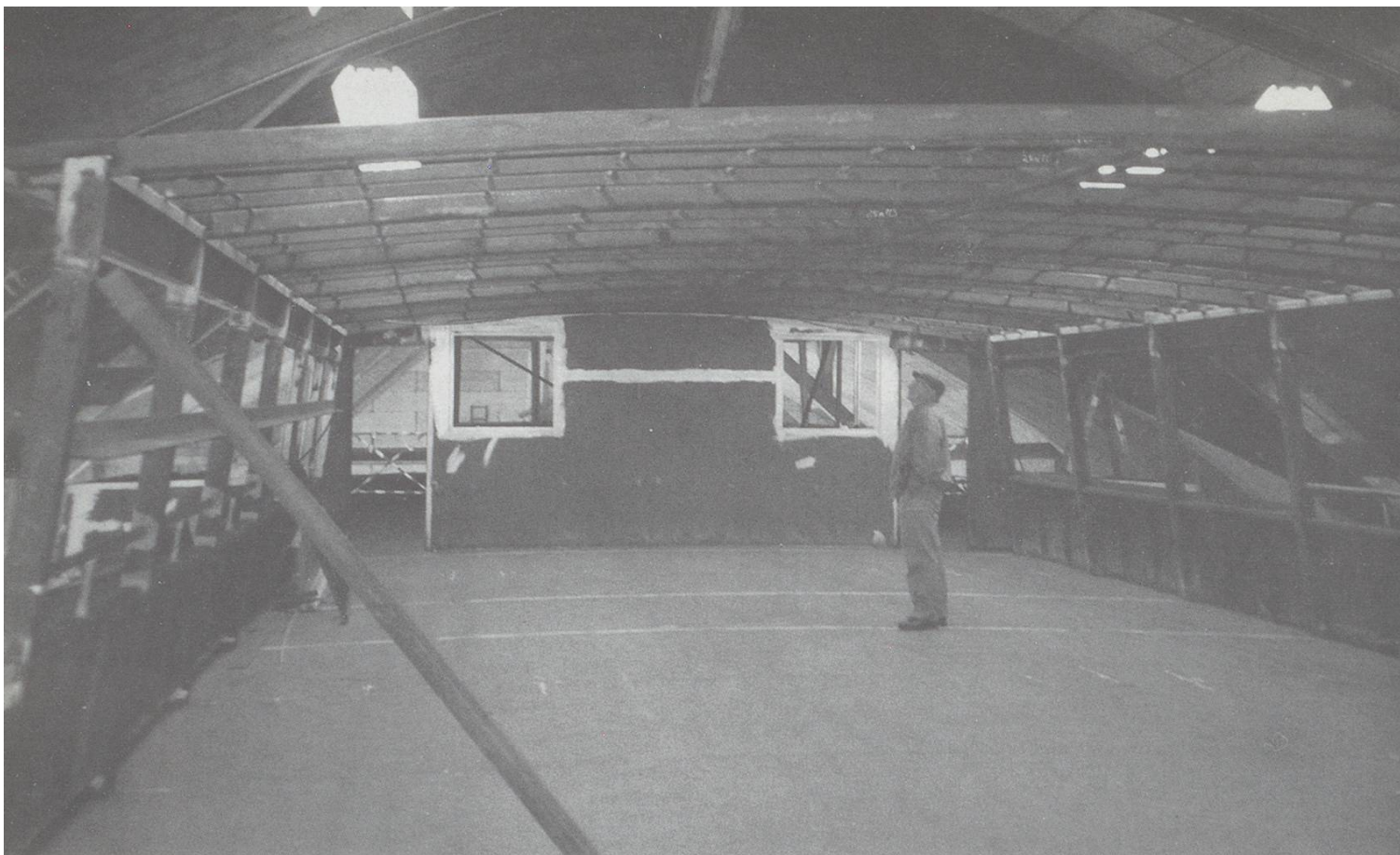
The distributed literature does not make it clear whether the stated figure 27kph is the service speed or the maximum; we shall probably have to wait until trials have been completed and evaluated to learn the answer.



Above: Superstructure in place, red primer coat and first white undercoat is evident.

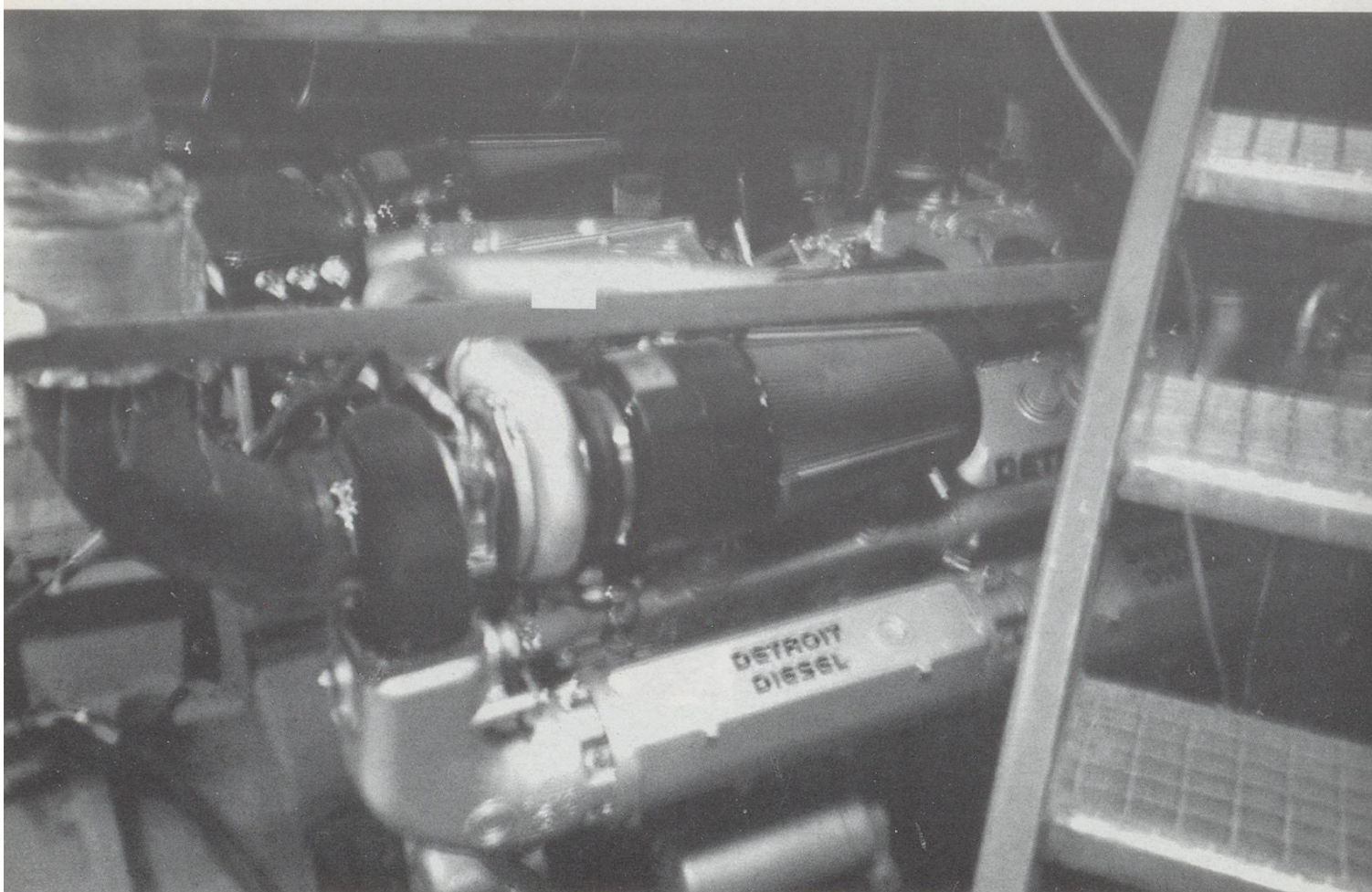
Below: An incongruous but, nevertheless, elegant sight of a dining table set for four passengers of the future. Decor's still on the primitive side, though!

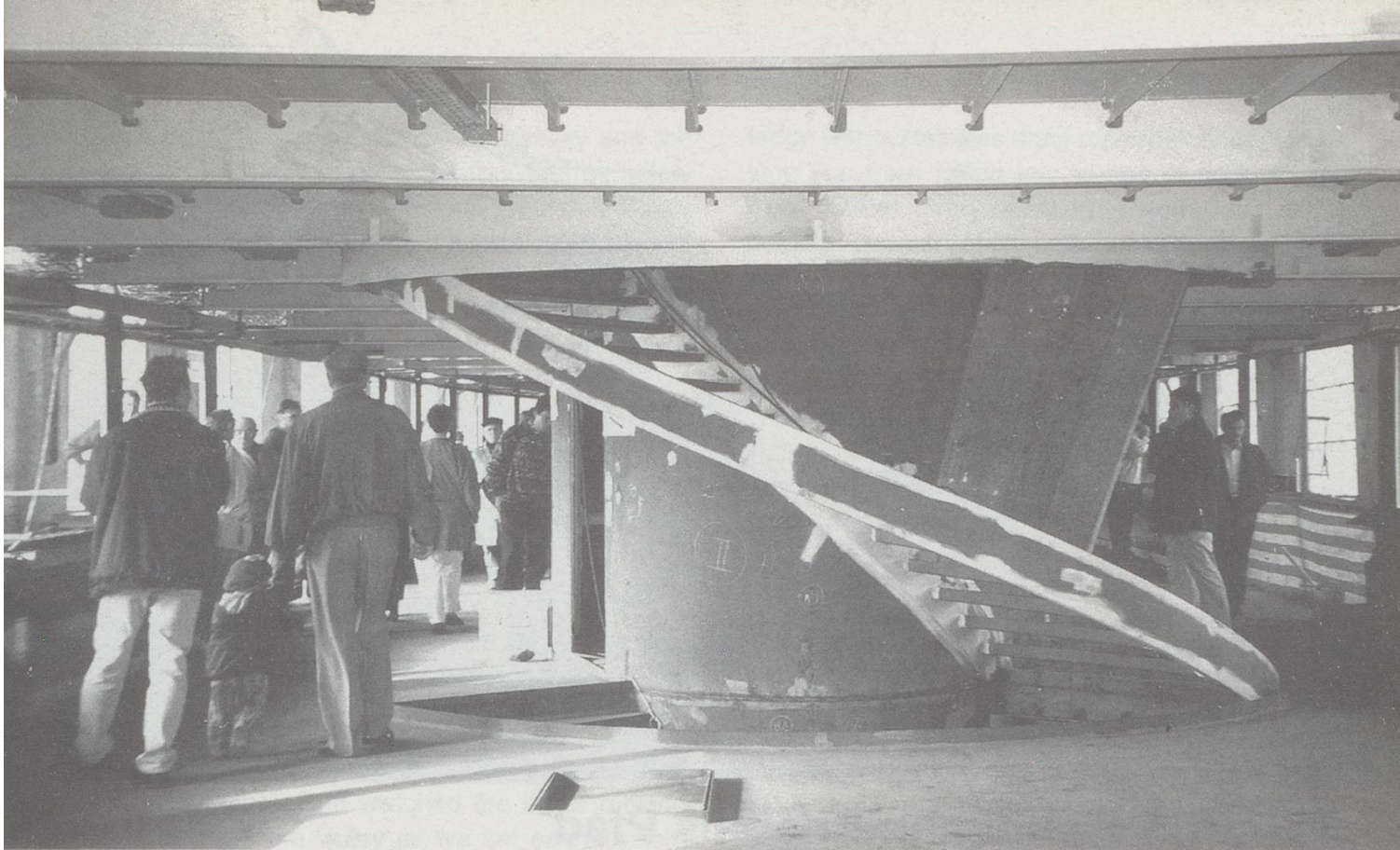




Above: Inspecting the spars which will support the sun deck, notice how close the roof of the shed is to the vessel.

Below: The starboard Detroit engine installed, note turbo fitted, each has an output of 450kW.





Above: The companion way spiralling up through the decks

Below: Looking down to the Main Deck via the atrium.

