

WORKS: DAVID KOHN ARCHITECTS

PROJECT TEAM Client and art direction Bistrottheque, Architect David Kohn Architects, Structural engineer Alan Baxter & Associates, Illustrations Rory Crichton, Chandelier design Giles Deacon, Crate construction and installation Williams & Hill

The sublime and the aedicule

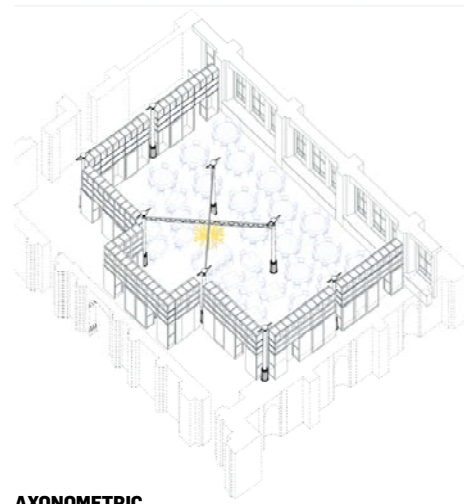
Architect David Kohn has teamed up with cult restaurateurs Pablo Flack and David Waddington to create a temporary dining space for the Royal Academy, deploying a host of artists and designers to startling effect, says **Ellis Woodman**

Pictures by Ioana Marinescu

Completed in 1870, 6 Burlington Gardens was the last project to be realised by James Pennethorne and was far from his happiest commission. The brief was to house the offices and examination rooms of the University of London on the site of a garden at the rear of the Royal Academy. As a planning exercise it was a straightforward task, but the sensitivity of both the site and programme ensured that the choice of iconography was the subject of heated debate.

Pennethorne's client ultimately obliged him to reimagine his gothic scheme as an Italianate palazzo, liberally adorned with statuary depicting the heroes of the Enlightenment. If the architect begrudged the stipulation, nothing in the final building suggested so. Indeed, one wishes that Pennethorne had served his client's ambitions rather less energetically. The facade's splendour feels wasted on the relatively humble Burlington Gardens, and the suspicion that the building has pretensions to a grandeur that lies beyond its reach is in no way dissipated by the realisation that its epically scaled central stair gives onto a plan half the size one is expecting.

The University of London remained in residence for less than 30 years before decamping to South Kensington. The building then accommodated a modest parade of tenants before the British Museum took it on in 1970 as a home for its ethnographic collection. It continued to operate as the Museum of Mankind until 1997 when – following the relocation of the British Library to St Pancras – space became avail-



AXONOMETRIC

able to reunite the holdings with the museum's main collection at Great Russell Street.

The building was bought by the Royal Academy in 2000 with the aim of implementing a scheme by Hopkins Architects to integrate it with Burlington House, substantially expanding its exhibition space. Finding funding, however, proved a struggle and it wasn't until Charles Saumarez Smith's appointment as secretary to the Royal Academy two years ago that the project began to make substantial progress.

Last year, a competition was held (which was won by David Chipperfield Architects), while the building was leased to a

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commercial gallery, Haunch of Venison, for four years in a deal which will help fund the redevelopment. Under this agreement, the Royal Academy retains the use of the building for three months each year, when it will stage the annual GSK Contemporary season, a series of small exhibitions of new art, the first of

which is now running.

The Royal Academy has plans to expand its commitment to contemporary art and sees the redevelopment of 6 Burlington Gardens as central to achieving that ambition. In the short term, it envisages the GSK Contemporary season as a means of building up a different kind of audience to the one it currently attracts.

The decision to invite Pablo Flack and David Waddington to run a "pop-up restaurant" in the building for the first GSK Contemporary season leaves little doubt about where it is hoped such an audience might come from. The pair's restaurant and cabaret bar, Bistrottheque, has established itself as a byword for East End hip, drawing a crowd that certainly has little overlap with the one you might find at the Royal Academy's summer show.

In recognition both of its short lifespan and the suburban setting of its setting, Flack and Waddington have dubbed their Burlington Gardens operation Flash. As the name suggests, they have sought to create an ambience that is rather more showy than the white-painted warehouse aesthetic that characterises Bistrottheque. However, the Wolsley this is not. What Flack and Waddington have created is something that serves the Royal Academy's ambitions for 6 Burlington Gardens far more effectively: a bridge between the worlds of Mayfair and Bethnal Green.

The Bistrottheque team discovered their architect David Kohn when he asked them to critic the restaurant interiors designed by his students at London Metropolitan University. Kohn was drawn to this area of study because it necessitated an engagement with issues of comfort, architectural character and decoration – subjects that are often marginalised within student work as a consequence of the primacy given to urban and programmatic considerations.

Kohn's witty and ingenious design for Flash builds on those investigations. It occupies a large room – originally used for exams – accessed directly off the ground floor lobby and punctuated by cast-iron columns. Bizarrely, before the introduction of a floor after the departure of the University of London, the space was originally twice the 6m height it is now. In its current condition, it has a sprawling, serial quality which Kohn's intervention seeks

to mitigate.

The dining area is conceived as a room within a room – a space partitioned off from a penumbra of back-of-house functions by a newly constructed wall. This construction stops shy of the ceiling but engages six of the columns, drawing them into a focused expression. It also closes the two outlying bays of windows that line the west elevation from view with the effect that the three still visible form a more emphatically

symmetrical composition.

On arrival, we have to cross the gap between Pennethorne's enclosure and Kohn's, exposing us to the rear face of the partition before we pass through – an experience akin to that of an actor making his entrance on stage. Sure enough, what lies beyond is an environment of heady theatricality. Glowering at us from the ceiling is a vast crystal chandelier conceived by the fashion designer Giles Deacon as "a psychedelic

Death Star, with elements of punk". Illustrator Will Broome has designed an equally trippy suite of crockery, while assorted East End artists and designers have installed work on Kohn's partition.

The wall itself is far from a neutral surface: it is assembled from the type of timber crate conventionally used for packing artworks. Paradoxically, that choice lends it a sense of contingency but also a far more architectural char-

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acter than if it had merely been designed in plasterboard. In this respect, it is significant that the proportions of the crates have been carefully selected – giving the wall a tripartite order that resonates with the classical surroundings – and that their orientation has been varied so that some present a flat face to the restaurant while others offer an aedicule. As John Summerson has pointed out, the word "aedicule" derives from the Latin "aedicula",

meaning a little building, and it is tempting to see the crates in that sense: as little buildings that stack up to form a bigger building which, in turn, occupies a bigger building still. The wall's lower level accommodates the multiple doors through which the waiting staff make their entrances and exits. Where no door is required, Kohn has created a dummy opening in the form of a mirror of equivalent dimension.

The reading of the wall as an

unstable plane prone to apparitions and disappearances is consolidated by the decorative treatment that illustrator Rory Crichton has applied to it. Crichton has followed Kohn's brief to create a free interpretation of the grotesque imagery that characterises Etruscan wall painting, concocting a fictive garden populated by strange creatures. These vinyl images are partly concealed by an acoustically absorbent layer of felt, which has been cut to a

The trellis motif on the walls and carpet is by illustrator Rory Crichton.



Kohn excludes two windows from view, offering a more emphatically symmetrical composition.