

PIN-UP



MAGAZINE FOR
ARCHITECTURAL
ENTERTAINMENT

ISSN 19339755



9 771933 975000

Featuring
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ISSUE 6
Spring Summer 09
USD 10.00
EUR 9.90

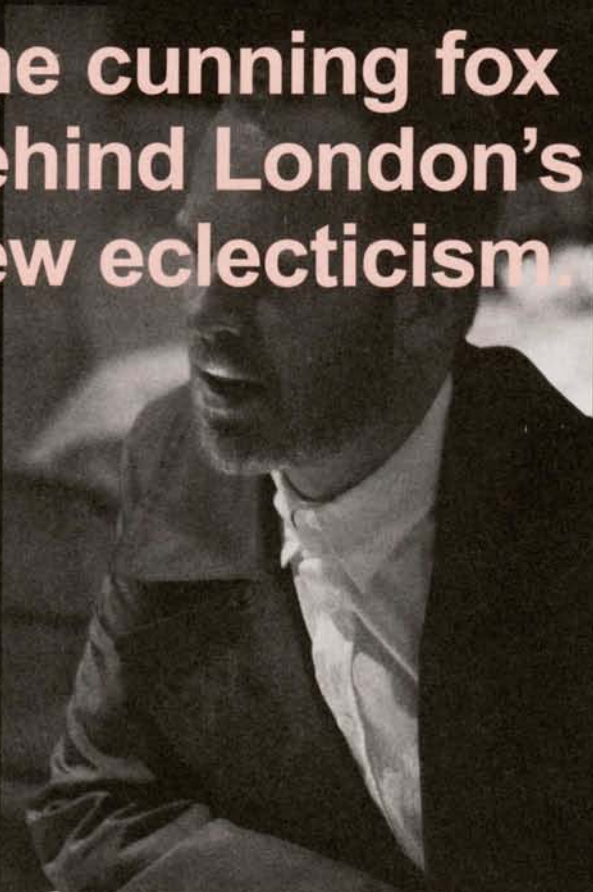


London



David Kohn designed the temporary restaurant FLASH at the Royal Academy of Arts in London.

**The cunning fox
behind London's
new eclecticism.**



One of Kohn's first projects was Stuart Shave Modern Art, a contemporary-art gallery on London's Eastcastle Street.

DAVID KOHN





FLASH's design incorporated illustrations by Will Broome, a carpet by Rory Crichton, and art by Popper and Teplin.

David Kohn is a tall and rather good-looking redhead — one of a new breed of architects who hide their geekiness well beneath a suave exterior and excellent communication skills. I met him at Burlington House, home of the Royal Academy, where Kohn created FLASH, a temporary restaurant for former fashion designer Pablo Flack and business partner David Waddington, the boys from Bistrottheque, East London's most fashion-forward eatery. It's early evening and the restaurant is buzzing with all the right people: V&A curators, *Vogue* staffers, brand wranglers, gallery owners and their artists, dippily clad stylists and fashionistas. It's very un-London, this obsessive clan gathering, much more New York. Amid all this buzz, Kohn is having his portrait taken. In fancy clothes. Normally reserved, he is clearly enjoying his own fashion show.

Caroline Roux: So what's that you're wearing, David?

David Kohn: This is a brown silk trench coat by Yves Saint Laurent. Isn't it great? And these trousers — I wouldn't have picked them out, but I love them. I usually wear something baggier.

Kohn runs off to change. A serious architect doing looks! He returns in a ocean-blue, sharply fitted, 70s-style linen Tom Ford jacket, complete with heavily machined large lapels and glaring white buttons. He's mightily pleased with himself in this pimpish jacket, grinning from ear to ear.

K: I'd never think to wear anything by Tom Ford, but it does sort of work. The Yves Saint Laurent felt smart and sophisticated, though. There was so much fabric in the coat, it looked eccentric hanging on the table, and I wouldn't have thought it would look good. Did it look good? It felt great!

CR: It looked as great as it felt. And FLASH, does it look as great as it feels? Are you happy with the results?

DK: For me it was a test of how to work with different people and bring together all the different parts: the illustration by Will Broome, a carpet by textile designer Rory Crichton, the paintings by Simon Popper and Alexis Teplin, and the massive Swarovski chandelier designed by Giles Deacon. You can work with that many people and be totally ideologically consistent. For me, working on FLASH with all these other creative minds was actually a steep learning curve. They had ideas; I had to be flexible.

CR: How did you get involved in FLASH in the first place?

DK: Last year I decided to look at restaurant design with the students at London Metropolitan University, where I teach. So I invited Pablo from Bistrottheque to be a critic. We put together a publication of essays written on restaurant design, from Marinetti's "Manifesto of Futurist Cooking" to a Flaubert piece describing a meal in *Madame Bovary*, and a Baudrillard essay about the social critique of judgment. We also went to Vienna with the students to visit all these iconic restaurants. Hermann Czech, one of Europe's most academically serious architects, came with us — he's amazing. He's able to theorize the relationship with the client, and was always pointing out that designing restaurants is about the identity of the restaurateur. The role of the architect is simply to create a background, a stage on which the restaurant business is played out.

CR: Creating FLASH must have been a gift after all that research.

DK: Well, the room we were given for FLASH presented a lot of opportunities but at the same time it felt very flabby.



The large chandelier at FLASH was designed by Giles Deacon using hundreds of Swarovski crystals.

Opposite, a round-collared Y-3 wool jacket with white trim and a white poplin shirt from Loewe by Stuart Vevers.

It's too wide for its height, because it used to be twice as high. On the plus side, it had these beautiful cast-iron columns and a series of very high windows along one wall. What I'd picked up from all those Hermann Czech lectures and all those Austrian cafés was that you should have an idea for everything — everything you touch and see, from the overall space to an idea for the spacing between the tables. I found that really reassuring.

Multiple outfits later, we realize it's late and we've missed an opening for Jonathan Meese at Stuart Shave's Modern Art gallery on Eastcastle Street. Kohn designed the gallery in 2008, after Adam Caruso and Peter St John,

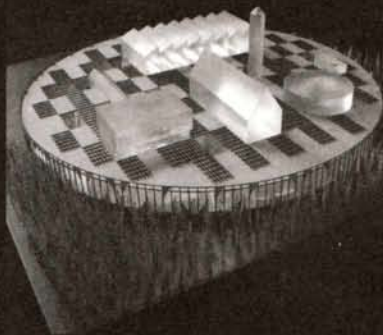


The Museum of Childhood's perspectival stone cube pattern. © H el ene Binet/Caruso St John Architects

of reasons. I've done lots of competitions in Norway, and I think it would be interesting to work in Italy and the US. I lived in New York and studied at Columbia for a year. It was 1995–1996, and I remember being really frustrated because Columbia was going through the beginning of its digital phase. They had paperless studios. There was no model making, no sketching.

I'd come from Cambridge, on a Fulbright exchange, and I was being told to wipe the slate clean. The forms that could come out of this software fascinated everyone but I found it completely depressing; and it was all without material! It would be something seamless and incredible that could work at any scale. O.K., but how do you build it? I felt that there was very little space for a discussion about the social, political, and cultural implications.

CR: So if Columbia was a disappointment, what about New York?



In 2008 Kohn won the second prize for Heterotopia, as part of a competition to design the arts space of the future.

DK: New York was fantastic. I lived for half the year on Riverside Drive, up near Harlem, and for the other half on Renwick Street, off Canal Street by the Westside Highway — it was incredible. There were four of us and you could do anything in there. There were loads of small clubs and bars then, they'd spring up every month. Avenue A was as far as exciting New York life went. It's funny to think you can walk to the end of Alphabet City and find a nice restaurant. Then you'd walk to the end of Eighth Avenue, and it felt like the edge of something. People were opportunistic and it felt very free. Cambridge was very dull after that.

CR: After working for Caruso St John, your first independent project was Stuart Shave's gallery, completed in 2008.

Now you're designing a house for him in Norfolk. Stuart has described himself to me as a "hobbyist architecture enthusiast,"

but I have a feeling he's more entrenched than that. For a start he invests in great design — he has a beautiful Jeanneret desk from Chandigarh in his gallery office.

DK: He's become almost obsessive. He knows all the new architecture blog sites. He sees these commissions as opportunities to find out about things and enjoy them. The more divorced an end-user is, the more the architect has to create that dialogue artificially. You can end up with a responsibility to someone you'll never meet. But Stuart's involvement has also meant that his taste has changed a lot. I saw him this morning and he freely admits that he's moved from a rather minimalist position to a more eclectic architecture. At the beginning I'd show him things like Lina Bo Bardi's houses, where it's all about back ground and landscape, and he was talking about John Pawson. Originally half the house had a patented super-expensive Swiss glazing system. But gradually it softened and, two years on, we have a Crittall system [a homegrown system, designed in the 1930s and still popular in British domestic and light-industrial architecture]; so the building is now referencing different technologies from different periods and playing with ideas of domesticity. Half the house was a huge void before — Stuart wanted this long concrete bench and an island kitchen; everything was objectified. Now there are two brick volumes, all exposed and painted white. The living room is still huge, but smaller than it used to be. The architecture is about the things happening in it, the animation of people, furniture, and art.

CR: Do you own any art?

DK: I have one piece of art; it's a drawing by Ernesto Cavallano, which I bought with Margherita. He's a New York-based artist and I'd been following his work for a while and waiting for a piece to come onto the market. I appreciate the craft of it; it has a heavily illusionist quality; it's figurative and abstract and moves between the two in a way I find compelling. The series comes from a love story about this couple who meet and are torn apart, and she turns into a space ship and he turns into a tree. It's a bizarre story.

CR: Did Stuart advise you on buying it?

DK: Err, he actually doesn't really know about it. I got it from White Cube ...

— Caroline Roux is a London-based architecture and design writer. She regularly contributes to *The Times*, the *Financial Times*, *Blueprint*, and more.