



**BUILDING** ■ Rags to riches: David Kohn's gallery in the garment district

*Christophe Graefe on cultural questions raised by the Stuart Shave gallery's move from east London to the West End. Photos: Ioana Marinescu.*

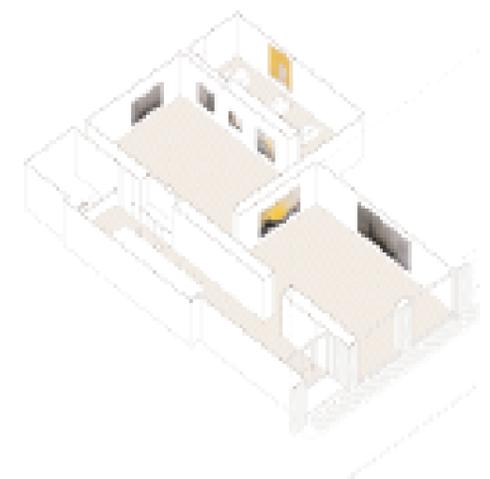
Over the last three or four decades, art spaces and galleries have become indicators and catalysts of functional and demographic changes in cities. The Alternative Art Spaces Movement, recuperating New York's SoHo warehouses for artists' initiatives in the 1960s, established a precedent for similar developments in other cities, invariably setting in motion the process of using existing buildings first as studios, then creative offices, followed by the influx of property developers realising lofts or boutiques. These trajectories are well documented and critically studied, and they tend to show an extreme degree of similarity. The peregrinations of New York galleries from SoHo to the meat packing dis-

trict and on to the Lower East Side provided a model, in the 1990s, for the 'discovery' of Hoxton, Shoreditch and the East End in London, or more recently for the emergence of literally dozens of galleries in central (formerly East) Berlin. The tensions produced by the comprehensive realisation of the value of areas once occupied by light industries or the wholesale trade are also well researched. What started out as an attempt at creating oases of self-determined artistic activity and a politicised art practice, usually – or unavoidably if one believes in the inevitable nature of mechanisms in the property market – has been absorbed into the transformation of cities into lifestyle experiences.

*Above* The gallery features full-height glazing to the Eastcastle Street frontage. *Below/right* 'Before'; axonometric.



The moves of art galleries ushering in another phase of gentrification – the term itself having become a cliché – no longer hold the promise of novelty. Merely the speed with which even the remotest area endowed with a certain marketable post-industrial grittiness is being discovered and processed may point to the limitations of this systematic. Once Dalston, Deptford and New Cross have been successfully colonised, where next? There may well be a tipping point at which these apparently inevitable developments grind to a halt, stopped by an end to the resources, when the last area of interest has been found or the absence of spaces with a low economic value presents an unsur-





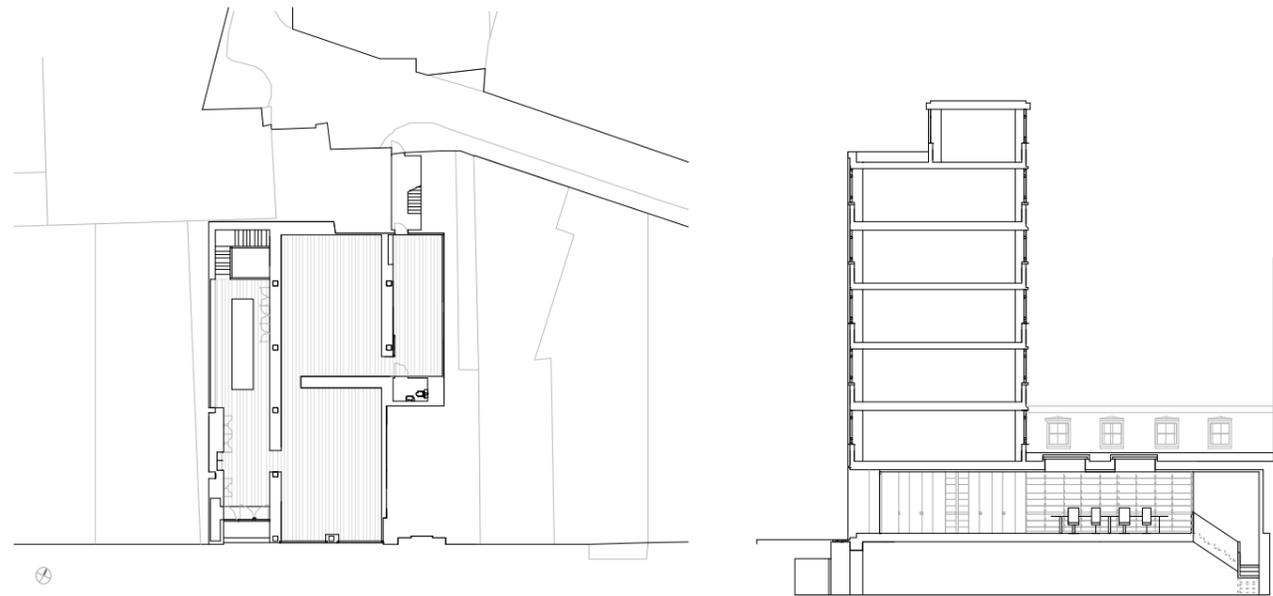
mountable difficulty for a new generation of pioneers. In any case the predictability of the process can only mean that the initial proposal of a somehow more authentic condition supporting artistic production is no longer tenable (if it ever was). Urban romantic roughness is probably going to share the fate not only of all other marketing strategies,

**Above** The facade, formerly recessed behind columns, has been brought forward to the building line.  
**Plan/cross section** The gallery occupies the ground and basement levels of the existing building; the 540sq m project cost £380,000 and was on site for 12 weeks.

but also of alternative lifestyles, with their limited lifespans.

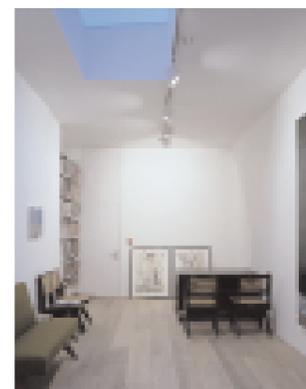
If the galleries that participated in the eastward move of the London art scene in the 1990s were to open premises in the West End this could well be a sign that the romantic charm of the alternative art space – and of commercial galleries following the model – is finally or temporarily broken. Whether this also implies an abandonment of the notion of art as a politicised practice, or if the hopes invested in the idea are merely redirected elsewhere – council estates, suburbs, shrinking industrial cities? – remains to be seen. In any case, the new gallery spaces for the White Cube near Regent Street and the Haunch of Venison near Bond Street appear in an area historically defined not by decay but by conspicuous consumption; an environment where, one could argue, the alliance between luxury and commerce was invented. The question arising from the change of location doesn't pertain just to the economics of property. A gallery consciously locating itself in the context of consumption can no longer rely on the aesthetics of the artist-workshop or industrial warehouse or other forms of physically tangible production. In this environment galleries, almost by necessity, are back where they started – an exclusive and peculiarly distinct form of showroom, ultimately a shop.

The history of the area north of Oxford Street is marked by small businesses that served the nearby department stores and speciality shops. The neighbourhood, originally a self-contained village for affluent middle-class residents (complete with a market building designed by James Gibbs, demolished in the early twentieth century), developed into a small cluster of the West End rag trade. Functionally it was closely connected with the tailors or fashion shops and their clients; eco-



nomically and socially it became a small pocket tucked between the bustle of Oxford Street, the quiet professional dealings further north and the bohemia of Fitzrovia. However the exodus of what remained of the tailoring industries (something the local authority unsuccessfully tried to prevent) left this area somewhat stranded. An ideal environment, it seems, for being developed into an enclave of niche boutiques, restaurants, bars and, presumably, art galleries.

The building that now houses the new gallery of Stuart Shave Modern Art is an utterly anonymous piece of architecture. An infill of six storeys with a seventh top floor set back from the street, it represents the utilitarian end of British post-war functionalism. Its formal gestures, an undecided assertion of the asymmetry of the stair



tower and the three-bay section containing offices, the bands of Crittall windows, the cheap muddy brick surfaces forming a frame for slightly lighter brick balustrades; all this belongs to the standard repertoire of buildings of the period which mostly remain unnoticed. Here, the functional arrangement was given a more pretentious note by a fairly weak attempt at formalising the entrance to the ground floor by recess-

**Above** Principal exhibition spaces.  
**Left** Director's office and third gallery space.



ing the facade to create a porch divided by two spindly columns.

In designing a new space for the gallery on the ground and basement levels David Kohn has conspicuously avoided anything that would have elevated the existing building out of its anonymity. If anything, the refurbishment has been led by the wish to improve the given situation with small, rather subtle changes. The entrance, which somewhat overwhelmed the intended asymmetry of the composition and afforded the ground floor a pretentious but dysfunctional front area, has been adjusted to introduce a calm regular grid of windows and masonry, almost unnoticeably modulated by the slightly wider piers of the now tripartite ground floor facade. The floor-to-ceiling windows, separating the interior from the pavement, only at second sight reveal themselves as enormous glass sheets glued to steel window frames and the door, though monumental in dimension, is deeply conventional.

The windows set flush with the masonry, the piers clad in hard grey engineering brick and the panels hiding letterboxes and air treatment apparatus present a continuous surface, each element denoting a particular

**David Kohn Architects writes:**

*The gallery occupies the ground floor and basement of a modest 1950s office building. The approach was to exploit the positive attributes of the existing building and context to the gallery's advantage. Engineering brick piers in the new shopfront create a precise and suitably proportioned base to the brick-clad structure above while the optically clear flush glazing accentuates connections to the street. The interior layout is like a house, with a deep entrance loggia, lobby and changes of direction at the entrance to each room that heighten the sense of remove from the street. While the gallery spaces are firmly in the tradition of the 'white cube', the client's characteristic lack of formality informed the design. The office space is within the gallery, offering an informal relationship between the public and private sides of the business. Oak floors and off-white wall linings ensure that the white hanging walls are framed within an interior architecture concerned with comfort as well as aesthetics.*



situation in defining the relationship between the street and the interior – a gallery space immediately next to the pavement and protected by sheet of glass, a niche containing the new entrance and allowing for a moment of hesitation and adjustment. Yet they also help in establishing a distinct image for the gallery among the local shops, offices and restaurants. Before actually entering the gallery visitors are invited to construct for themselves an experience of distance and a set of boundaries between the outside world and the gallery as a sphere of contemplation and exclusivity.

The fact that, once inside, one is confronted not by an exhibition room but by a space used as an office confirms the intuitive understanding, clearly intended by the architect, of the interior as a space of concentration. The layout of the gallery is conceived as a careful extension into the depth of the building of the rules set out in the facade. The width of the brick piers provides the dimensions for the thickness of partitions between the entrance/office and the two exhibition spaces. Walls and ceilings are plastered, lighting is in recessed tracks (except when positioned against rooflights),

and air treatment units are hidden within partitions, all to aid visual and mental concentration. The floor, covered in coarse cross-sawn oak panels, provides an evenly modulated surface, smooth yet offering grip. All this is part of an established repertoire for contemporary art spaces, and as such contributes to the notion of the gallery as a territory that operates within the distinct field that is the art market, with its particular requirements and rules.

Kohn's concern for combining well-designed well-made standard products with bespoke elements informs the solutions for fittings and furniture. It is here that the architect explores something beyond accomplished professionalism; an interest in questioning both the repression of traces of manufacturing processes in industrial products and the emphasis on precisely these traces where an object is hand-made. In Kohn's design approach neither the standard industrial product nor the bespoke are fetishised, but follow a series of similar rules and become absorbed into a whole of local technical and material situations.



back to twentieth century traditions in Scandinavia and southern Europe, where sensitivity for material and detail in modern design was sustained and absorbed into a contemporary, essentially bourgeois lifestyle. Such overtones of unobtrusive elegance may imply a critique of the unreflected assumptions governing commercial and retail architecture. They are also a response to what may be a new acceptance of the commercial nature of the art market or, as Kohn notes, 'a bow to the crowd as the curtain closes', leaving the floor to the connoisseur while the artists stay where they have been, in the workshop.

*Christoph Grafe is an architect and writer based in Amsterdam and London, and associate professor of architectural design at Delft University of Technology.*

**Above** Purpose-designed office table with Dieter Rams' shelving system.

**Left/below** Cupboard handles; entrance detail (phs: DKA).

**Project team**  
Architect: David Kohn Architects; design team: David Kohn, Jack Green (project architect); Irene Leuthold; structural engineer: Alan Baxter & Associates; m&e engineer: Mendick Waring; client: Stuart Shave.

**Selected suppliers and subcontractors**  
Contractor: Rem Projects; shopfront: Glassbuild; flooring: Solid Wood Flooring; bespoke joinery: Winchester Interiors; bespoke furniture and fittings: 2D/3D; terrazzo: WB Simpsons & Sons; electrical: Sparkforce; lighting: Erco; aluminium panels: Ultimet Alloys; shelving: Vitsoe; facade facing brick: Faro grey from Taylor Maxwell; facade glazing: Pilkington Optiwhite; structural glazing silicon: Dow Corning 895; external masonry paint: Keim; entrance mat: Bonafloor Tuftguard Classic; underfloor heating: Uponor; floor screed: Isocrete Self-level Renovation; rooflights: Glazingvision.

