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By Christoph Grafe

The evolution of the restaurant, and its essentially ephemeral character, is encapsulated at Puck and Pip in The Hague, says Christoph Grafe. Pictures by H el ene Binet

Public dining has a rich history of associations with shameless excess and decoration, even vulgarity. In the 15th century an alchemist's recipe specified 60 gold ducats, diamonds, rubies, sapphires, jaspers or other precious stones as the ingredients of a mixture that was to restore its consumer to a happy, if unbalanced, existence. Three centuries later a "restaurant" was, in fact, a luxury consomm e, the sort of food offered to jaded members of the privileged classes whose delicate digestion or physical arrangements would not support more robust fare.

As the restaurant became a place, rather than an excessively luxurious restorative liquid, precious materials were applied to interior decoration and, in due course, industrially produced ornamental mirrors and glass replaced the diamonds. But a hint of vulgarity has remained, which has clearly suited these institutions for dining in public.

Distinguished by decor

Ostentation, whether in the form of excess or its opposite, accompanies a seemingly limitless spirit of invention: in the preparation and presentation of food; in the creation of atmospheric illusions or in business concepts. Together they produce the sort of powerful myth that makes a restaurant find its clientele and establish itself in the market of urban consumption. From the gilded and mirrored salons of early 19th century Paris to the concept-driven chains of today, restaurateurs have sought to distinguish themselves by offering decor for fictions of conviviality and success expressed through tangible and transient luxury.

The effects and methods deployed are almost by definition ephemeral, their locations often characterised by a limited life span, and they are essentially nomadic. The history of restaurants is one of continuous migration, of those who establish and manage them but also of the concepts that emerge in one place only to be copied elsewhere — in another city and different culture.

“The history of restaurant design is one of continuous migration”

It is this productive pattern of copying successful formulas and types that brought us Thomas Verity's Criterion in Piccadilly Circus emulating a Parisian restaurant of the Second Empire in Victorian London, or Wagamama's take on the Japanese noodle bar sufficiently imitating the original to retain credibility, yet also essentially adapted to the requirements of a new host culture.

Designed by the London based artist/designer Mark Pimlott and the Dutch architect Zeinstra van Gelderen, the twinned restaurants Puck and Pip opened recently in the Hague. They advertise themselves as "pure Californian" and have brought a type of cuisine to a city that is itself a product of assimilating cultural influences. The reference to a cuisine originating on the American west coast may suggest culinary eclecticism, and the promise of a 21st century version of the fantasy land of Cockaigne, all its products being of high quality and fresh. For an interior design the reference to California offers few points of departure given the densely urbanised surroundings, with the possible of exception of using Eames-inspired furniture.

The location, at any rate, could not be less west coast. Occupying a corner of two inconspicuous back streets in the posher part of The Hague, the place has to make its environment rather than benefiting from it.

The design — a large room exhibited as an extensive, open and extraordinary space, private, yet highly visible to the passer-by — affords Puck, the larger of the two establishments, a strong and, at night, overpowering presence. Large windows create a sense of immediacy, diners sitting almost on the pavement but protected, and allow the view into what is a brightly lit dining room with an open kitchen. The arrangement is as straightforward as it is theatrical, the interior presenting itself as a series of separate but interconnected stage settings. Individual tables form a foreground and middle ground populated by a temporary collective of diners seeking and ignoring each other's presence. In this perspective the kitchen occupies the role of a backdrop, a visible machine in the background.

A series of stages

"It is from the loge that one discovers the existence of another, almost secret room"

Entering through the solid oak door on the corner, the visitor is momentarily caught in half obscurity, enveloped in a floor-to-ceiling curtain imprinted with black lines vaguely representing foliage, before

proceeding to the light and transparency of the dining room. Here the interior reveals itself from a new vantage point; what from the outside had been perceived as a large single space now presents itself as a series of stages, separate scenes defined by the surrounding surfaces and dominated by a thick column clad in a pattern of vertical brown, grey and ochre mosaic stripes. Informed visitors may or may not recognise the column as a solid paraphrase of Mies's famously unexecuted 1919 scheme for Berlin's Friedrichstrasse. No recognition is required, however, to appreciate the concave-convex form of this element as a stylish, delicately frivolous object evoking faint memories of Italian post-war interiors.

The associative reading of the restaurant as pastiche Milan 1955 appears to be confirmed by the brown terrazzo floor, the curtain of anodised aluminium rods in copper, bronze and silver on one side and the mirroring steel surfaces of the kitchen. Yet separately or together, none of the elements completely supports this or any other stereotype. Nor is the juxtaposition of disparate elements a collage, as all belong to one family of graphically modulated surfaces in earth colours, the few silvery metal surfaces providing isolated moments of sparkle. In the background foliage-printed panels suggest Arcadia, their pattern derived from a Rembrandt engraving.

Viewed from the street the kitchen appeared as a backdrop. Here it emerges as a separate theatre, overlooking as well as being overlooked by the diners. The aluminium curtain conceals another separate dining area and a wine bar. Its slightly raised floor level denotes its character of a loge, its enclosure signifying privilege and privacy, both absent from the undifferentiated seating arrangement of the larger space. It is also from the loge that one discovers the existence of another, almost secret room, in fact another restaurant serviced by the same kitchen and reached by a broad flight of stairs down to the basement.

Hidden places

This unexpected and extensive netherworld consists of a passage, its walls lined with tables and banquettes. The wooden tunnel leads to a second room which houses, lurking in the darkness, a compact wooden maze for seating.

Visitors to the two establishments, upstairs and downstairs, might remain blissfully unaware of each other's existence, were it not for the double height hall of mirrors, a circular stair connecting the two levels. In this most hidden of places the design's strategy of mingling received and recognisable images reaches a hallucinatory climax. It is a space of slightly awkward encounter — serving also as vestibule for the lavatories — and of transition between different environments, the mirrors creating an illusion of the infinite within a contained room and of a reality that is complete in itself, although it is only ever experienced as part of a passage. The dematerialised surfaces provide a powerful antidote to the subtle and ambiguous handling of

foregrounds and backgrounds everywhere else. The treatment of this literally marginal circulation space as a Wunderkammer of reflecting images is an inversion of the conventions of the restaurant.

Rather than consuming its outer shine, one is immersed in the diamond, emerging puzzled and possibly restored, to confront the world and the tangible, multi-layered reality of the social theatre that is artfully and subtly staged here.