

There's art at the heart of it

Stiff & Trevillion's St Alban restaurant in the West End for the client team who ran the Ivy and the Wolseley opened in 2006. Partner Mike Stiff goes back for seconds



The all-white interior has given way to colour.



We first looked at this Regent Street site when it became available eight years ago. Then, someone else did an Italian restaurant that failed. Two years ago, Chris Corbin [the restaurateur behind the Ivy and the Wolseley, with partner Jeremy King] phoned and asked us to have a look. It's a big site, with the kitchen at the same level as the restaurant, so they can bring the food in at the back, cook it, and bring it out. It's like a conveyor belt — and that's what attracted them as operators.

St Alban's plan is quite logical. The waiters stick to a one-way system — food comes out of the kitchen at one end, and you dump the dirty plates at the other. They don't have a formal bar, so all the drinks and coffees are prepared in this screened-off area, and the waiters run in and pick them up. At the entrance, staff stand behind the reception desk so they can make eye contact with the customers as they come in.

The way the interior has developed since we opened in November 2006 is quite interesting. Originally, it was a white space — the ceilings, columns and walls were all one. The artist Michael Craig-Martin was commissioned to do two large murals on the curving corner walls, on an off-white background. So the main colour emphasis was the furniture — red, purple and blue upholstery on the chairs and banquettes.

A year ago, the clients and Michael added more colour, painting the curving plaster wall in the entrance green and pink. Some Damien Hirst artwork was put in about six months ago. There's a nice connection as he was tutored by Michael. A lot of people think the pink is a bit too strong, but that was Michael's choice. Yes, we could have picked up the bluey-green of the upholstery, but blue is a difficult restaurant colour. At night when you have artificial light on, it can be atmospherically cold, so restaurateurs don't often use blue.

As soon as we put the colour on the walls, the



The murals are by Michael Craig-Martin, the carpet by Ege.

When you change one thing, you have to change something else — it's like seasoning food



The entrance on Regent Street.

PHOTOS: MARILEE WAINSTEINBERG

columns looked wrong. Originally, we didn't want to make a statement out of them, we thought they'd just blend with the ceiling. But when we added all the colour, they looked a bit obvious. So we decided to mirror them, I think it adds a bit of glamour.

Two months ago, we changed the windows. They had been acid-etched with Craig-Martin drawings, but etched glass creates glare and in bright daylight, it's hard to look at. So we removed it to change the drawings, but then decided the plain glass was nicer. At first, we had the idea that people shouldn't see in, that it would be like the Ivy. But in fact it works like this, and you also get a sense of the outside. Michael's pink murals for the far corner went in two weeks ago.

In fairness, the original murals were perhaps a little tame. The colour is full on now, which I think works. You're not getting much daylight in that corner, and it used to feel a bit Siberian.

The problem with the white room was two-fold. Part of the skill in designing restaurants is

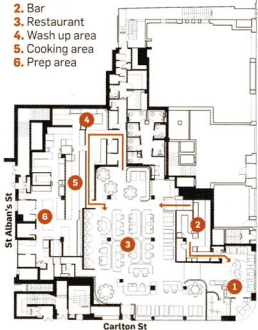
to create spaces that work well both during the day and at night. In daylight it was difficult to mediate between the daylight and artificially lit spaces as the contrast was too high. Also, the windows were causing a problem. If you had the white room now without the acid-etched windows, it would work. But when you change one thing, you often have to change something else — it's like seasoning food.

We had the printed nylon carpet made by Ege. It gives the room an acoustic quality that makes it comfortable to be in. Using carpets or not is one of the biggest conundrums in restaurant design. In some places you want that buzzy, noisy Wagamama experience, but if you want a space where people stay for a couple of hours, there's nothing worse than having to shout at your guest. The Ivy has carpet, for instance, but the Wolseley has a marble floor and a very different atmosphere. It was a big decision, but I think the right one.

The chairs are Knoll Saarinen from the ▶

Plan

- 1. Entrance
- 2. Bar
- 3. Restaurant
- 4. Wash up area
- 5. Cooking area
- 6. Prep area



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◀ 1960s, and we designed the banquettes with the same leg shape. We used driftwood to give them another texture, then upholstered them in Kvadrat fabric. I was a bit worried about the Kvadrat in terms of red wine spilling on it. But we haven't had to reupholster any of it, except once where a nervous member of staff spilled some food on the first day.

We mocked up the waiter stations and the reception desk in MDF before we had them made properly. They are finished in purple lacquer. The slate tops on the waiter stations match the slate we used on the walls around the bar. The lacquer has had a few bashes, but it is repairable — this hinged bin on the reception desk has taken a knock and needs a look.



Craig-Martin's pink sets off a Hirst painting.



Mirrored columns add "a bit of glamour". Damien Hirst's Jubilation is on the wall to the right.

We installed an automated cloakroom system. The product comes from the dry cleaning industry. You tap in a number and it rotates to bring your coat round, so we can fit loads into quite a tight space. It wasn't too expensive and works well.

The male and female loos lead off the same vestibule. We used Vitra's Ross Lovegrove sanitaryware, the loos are autoflush on movement sensors. The wall covering for the loos is metalised mosaic glass Cristex tile. The lacquered doors still look good, as do the Allgood door handles — a vintage design that's been in its catalogue since the 1970s. The fabric wall covering is by Vescom, a nice product that's worn well. But we put a lot of effort into making sure it would be all right.

The lighting has always been a burden. You've got two types in the ceiling coffers, low-voltage

tungsten and cold cathode, so you can boost the daylight during the day and bring it right down to warm at night. The success is that the tables are nicely lit — the problem is lighting the artwork. But we realised it was the background colour of the artwork that was wrong. With the pink, we don't have a problem.

St Alban is a very different operation to the Ivy, but the similarity is the quality of the management and service. It's probably the best service in London, which is what Chris and Jeremy are all about. It's also about flexibility, and the design has certainly been an evolutionary process. But every restaurant Chris and Jeremy have ever done has evolved. It's part of designing a restaurant.

Mike Stiff was speaking to Elaine Knutt.

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'I've been in this industry for over 30 years, and you can still learn'

Mitchell Everard, St Alban general manager

You can look at drawings, and think about what you want to achieve. But it's like your home. Three months after you move in, you think, "I want to move that."

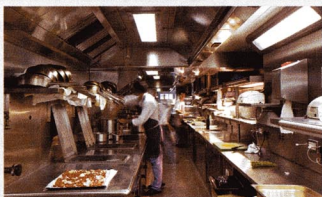
We have this one-way system, but the reality is that people do come in here [at the wrong end]. It's just a matter of being careful. People work in the space, they get used to it. There aren't collisions as people get to understand the space.

Constant review

When we started, we had the designs on the glass because we were paranoid

that people would feel they were in a goldfish bowl, that they were too exposed. So we went with that for 18 months, but you constantly review what you have, and we took the decision to remove the images from the glass. Afterwards Michael Craig-Martin said, "It looks great", and secondly customers said, "Brilliant." The section next to the window has become one that people gravitate to. I've been in this industry for over 30 years, and you can still learn huge lessons.

Before we started, when we were looking at



The kitchen area is a one-way system at St Alban.

the computer images, I was petrified we would have colour overkill. The reality was that people soak up so much colour and it wasn't so bold as we first thought. So you look at it again.

It's been evolving over 18 months, and there are still bits and pieces we're looking at.

Lighting changes

For instance, the lighting along the windows and in

the cloakroom was related to the frosted glass, and now there's less need for them.

The waiter stations have been really successful, but there have perhaps been problems with the weight of the cutlery we've put in going onto the runners of the drawers. You can't get everything perfect.

As the restaurant and menu evolve, so do the requirements on the space. What we've found is that the space has coped with that — everything we've needed to do as the restaurant has moved on has been possible.