

AD Architectural Design

# Food + Architecture



# Menu-Driven Design:

## An Interview with James Soane of Project Orange



For architect James Soane, the relationship between food and design in a restaurant is integral. In a conversation with **Helen Castle** he explains how over the years he has devised his own distinctive 'thematic' approach – a process that is not only accessible to clients but also gives full consideration to the menu and the particular cuisine that is served.





Opposite, top  
James Soane of Project Orange. 'Orange' was formed in 1992, as an 'extracurricular' collaboration of young architects, who used it as a means of exploring ideas and entering competitions. In 1997, Christopher Ash and James Soane established a new company - Project Orange. In 2001, Soane left his position as a director at Corran and Partners to join the office full-time.

Opposite, bottom  
The new Indian takeaway chain Delhi Deli looks to modern India with its hybrid of contemporary and traditional elements and patterning.

Above right  
Mood board for the original concept of London pizza takeaway, Basilico.

Below, left  
Exterior of Delhi Deli.

Below, right  
Citron Café at the Fitzwilliam Hotel, Dublin, completed in 2001. The name 'citron' was used to conjure up a fresh Mediterranean image, reflected in the menu as well as the ambience.

It is clear from talking to James Soane that more than anything else he and his partner Christopher Ash are intent on creating the right setting for each client. For Soane, every project has to 'stand on its own'. This amounts to a rejection of signature architecture and its accompanying autographed vocabulary, which is rolled out in every instance with 'a suitcase of details'. If there is a consistent formal approach, it surfaces in 'an overall sense of trying to express the condition of the modern through contemporary juxtapositions'. The emphasis is placed on talking and communicating to clients. As Project Orange explain in their office statement: 'We have ideas about how buildings are designed and we believe that these should be accessible to everybody who has an interest in the projects'.

This is narrative-propelled design: the designers compose a thematic or story directly out of the practice's understanding of the essential components of the brief. The themes are tailored to each project and so can vary greatly in their complexity. At the Citron Café in the Fitzwilliam Hotel in Dublin, for example, the thematic is a straightforward allusion to the 'citron' or lemon of the restaurant's title. The fruit is used throughout the interior to evoke connotations of Southern European warmth and freshness: the walls are citrus coloured - bright yellow and lime; the choice of materials is Mediterranean - there is white terrazzo on the floors; and even the lamp shades are inspired by the lemon's ovoid form.

In Delhi Deli, a chain of Indian takeaways by Project Orange, which had its first site opening in South London this summer, the thematic is less literal and more dynamic than that of Citron. It is described by Soane as 'the collision of the



traditional and modern Indias'. In its richly textured interior and exterior surfaces, the colourful kitsch of 21st-century India is artfully played off against traditional patterning and handcrafted detailing: the facade appears at first glance as a modern metallic box, though on closer inspection it is a layer of handcrafted zinc petals cut to a profile derived from Mogul designs; and the inside is lined with frenzied patterns, juxtaposed with brick-tiled floors and woven-front counters.

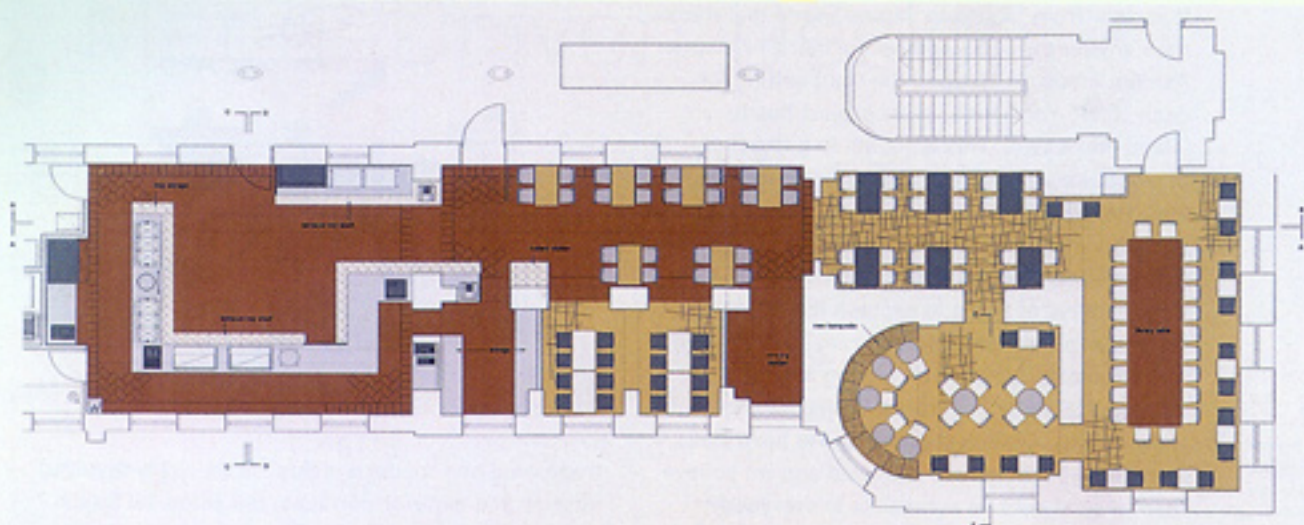
Project Orange's main tool for communicating these thematics to clients is the 'mood board'. This is a montage of images that conveys the potential 'feel' of a scheme, providing a glimpse of the sort of styles and components that it may include. A conscious bid for legibility, it abandons the specialist media of the architect - the drawing or the computer-generated image - in favour of the sort of visual language people encounter in their everyday lives through magazines and tv.

The original mood board for the up-market pizza takeaway Basilico, for example, features a number of pictures of cookers. This highlights the wood-burning oven with its stainless-steel mouth, which is the main culinary and design focus of the shops. The selection of images featuring natural or rustic materials anticipates the use of rough oak for panelling and benches in the final scheme; and the inclusion of a snapshot of a girl in sunglasses says something more far-reaching about the desire to make this a sophisticated and metropolitan outfit.

Where food is involved, the menu is an essential starting point for this process. (In addition to their restaurant work, Project Orange have under way a number of domestic projects and a large-scale scheme for a hotel in Chelsea.) For Soane, the relationship between food and design in a restaurant is integral. To succeed at a high level, a restaurant has to be strong on all counts, which includes design, food and service. The menu thus often provides essential food for thought. When the architects at Project Orange began work on Delhi Deli, they got together and cooked a curry made







## AUSTERITY GLAMOUR



THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM LONDON





from ingredients supplied by the clients. This emphasis on making set the tone for the entire project, opening up ideas about the way things are made in India. This resulted in the rich patterning of the interior and exterior and the earthy contrast of the brick floors; made out of clay, the brick also refers to the clay oven that gives such a decisive flavour to the food.

Alternatively, when a design concept has preceded the menu, it can exert its own influence over the food. When Project Orange devised 'Austerity Glamour' as the thematic for the café at the Imperial War Museum in London, it was apparent that bangers and mash were going to be more appropriate fare for a play on postwar culture than burgers and fries.

At a point when restaurant design seems to be more about producing fashionable scenery for the clientele – a trend epitomised by the lavish refurbishment of Mayfair eatery Cecconi's by Madonna's favoured designer David Collins – this all seems to be going against the grain. However, it is an approach that for James Soane has been formulated through a long period of informal collaboration and now a formalised partnership with Christopher Ash, and tested out through his professional experience.

Until 2001, Soane was a director at Conran and Partners. Here he led a number of fit-outs and construction projects around the world, including two major projects in Tokyo – Kamiyamacho, a new-build luxury housing project, and the Ark Hills Club and Spa. When discussing Gustavino's, the bar and restaurant at Bridgemarket in New York, which he also worked on for Conran's, he couches it in similar

terms to his Project Orange work. Occupying a huge site beneath the Queensboro Bridge, the restaurant, he explains, took its 'narrative' from its site and location. On a huge scale, it had the 'condition of being an inner landscape' with its own 'beach and deck' – the deck being the timber-clad mezzanine for formal dining that floats above the main interior space or 'beach'.

The success of Project Orange's approach has been most visibly borne out in London by its concept design for Basilico. Since the original two the client has developed the brand and rolled out a further three in London (Chelsea, Swiss Cottage and Highgate). As an up-market pizza takeaway, it has filled the gap in the home-delivery market for those who want quality food fast. The thin-crust pizzas, baked in wood-burning ovens, are made from fresh ingredients often garnished with rocket. On the high street, these culinary aspirations are expressed by the fact that Basilico has the presence of a restaurant rather than a takeaway. Design elements, such as the black and white chequerboard floor, the distinctive green colour scheme of the basil-leaf logo designed by Studio Myerscough, and the substantial deli-style counter, mark it out as stylish and Italian.

Reinvented or recast as a building type of Italian descent, Basilico has left behind the homogeneity of the Anglo-American pizza chain, and this is a leap which Soane and Ash are set to make again with Delhi Deli. Looking to contemporary India for inspiration, they have reached beyond the established anglicised genre of the local Indian restaurant with its flocked wallpaper, dark interior and ornate light fittings. Delhi Deli's flip-up canopy and display hatch puts the cooking station on display and likens it to the kiosks of the Indian street vendor – the emphasis being placed on food being prepared before your eyes. ▀

Opposite top and middle  
Plan and elevation of the café  
at the Imperial War Museum,  
London.

Opposite bottom  
Mood board for the Imperial  
War Museum.

Above  
Basilico, Lavender Hill,  
completed in 1999. Project  
Orange devised the original  
concept for the chain and  
oversaw the completion of the  
first two units in Lavender Hill  
and Fulham Road.