



Domestic bliss

'neutral in colour', even though they very much wanted to paint it blue. It seems dictatorial, but if people accept the need for (expensive) expert advice and experience in other areas of their lives, there is no reason why it should be deemed inappropriate when applied to the very complex issue of ordering domestic space.

Soane understands that people have their own 'vision of how they want to live', but only two per cent of houses are specially commissioned. In his new book, *New Home*, a survey of contemporary house design, he looks at some of those rare specimens. But most people are living in off-the-peg products that never quite meet their needs or desires, explaining the immense popularity of TV makeover programmes. For Soane, this is not necessarily a problem, but it does mean architects should acknowledge that architecture is 'still quite aesthetically driven', and that architectural opportunities do essentially boil down to questions of aesthetics.

Soane's seven years of experience at Conran have surely helped in this process of acceptance, after an architectural training at Cambridge and the Bartlett (now more fashion-driven but formerly pretty worthy in its approach to the science of building). As he says: 'Conran always collaged things together, operating at the boundaries of architecture and interior design. It was not, he acknowl-

edges, 'particularly an architectural practice', but the fact that serious architecture is now trying so hard to reclaim the territory of decoration simply shows, he suggests, that Conran may have been ahead of the game after all in its refusal to treat the concept of decoration as in any way embarrassing.

At Project Orange, with his partner Ash, Soane is setting out to make those concerns more explicit. Their practice 'catalogue', which will be published under that name by Black Dog in September, will certainly do that. Based on the Habitat catalogue format, it is defined by the publisher as 'a crossover book', bridging the architecture, DIY, homes and interiors markets. The work it presents explores the question of 'brands and identities', not necessarily distinguishing between interiors and architecture, and aiming 'to sum up identity and mood in quite an abstract way'. So now, so passé, one might say. But not without well-established architectural roots. Soane describes his architectural precedents as more Nigel Coates and NATO (Narrative Architecture Today) than, say, the more 'ironic' Fat, taking him back 30 years and more into architectural history.

There remains a ready forum for such interests at the Bartlett, and this is where Soane runs his unit, evocatively titled 'Serious Glamour', encouraging students to feel 'what it's like to be in spaces with character or narra-

tive' as the starting-point for creating interior spaces. 'Architects talk a lot about inhabitation', says Soane, but often they hate it when their clients actually move in. That professional antipathy to the reality of inhabitation is Soane's own pet hate but, on the other hand, his unit field trip to the hotels of New York might indicate more of a weakness for the 'glamour' of particular lifestyles than a genuine interest in engaging with the often uninspiring quality of normal everyday lives.

To an extent, there seems to be a contradiction between Soane's stated aims in a small-scale, unglamorous project like the MFI kitchen – neutral, orderly, essentially 'architectural' in flavour, transcending (or ignoring) the particular personalities of his clients – and his wider agenda for a more liberal, decorative, exuberant approach to design, involving frequent collaborations with other designers outside the narrow field of architecture. But, of course, there were the financial restrictions to take into account, and the issue of adding value to the property. Unfortunately, that is the nature of small practice, forcing a level of engagement with a world that hardly figures in the sightlines of a large international practice such as Conran.

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● James Soane's book, *New Home: Architecture and Design*, is reviewed on page 52