

SOLUTIONS: RETAIL & LEISURE

Project

Whitechapel Dining Room

Architect

Project Orange

Location

Whitechapel Gallery,
Whitechapel High
Street, east London

By Pamela Buxton

Robbrecht & Daem and Witherford Watson Mann may have got the headlines but they weren't the only architects working on the £13.5 million redevelopment of the Whitechapel Art Gallery. Project Orange was part of a third tier of architects and designers working on mini sub-projects to the main event. And regardless of pecking order, its project, the Whitechapel Dining Room, has

turned out to be one of the most externally visible elements of the whole project with a site right alongside the pavement of busy Whitechapel High Street.

Those peering in will get a good look at the classic and elegant design of the 40-cover dining room. What they won't be able to see is the great thought that has gone in to creating a commercial catering operation in such tight back of-house facilities, in particular the difficulties of getting the necessary servicing into a listed building.

"So many strategies were required to make a 19th century building work to 21st century requirements," says Project Orange director James Soane. "It's like coming in and doing surgery – taking something apart and sewing it back together again in a different



The dining room:
classic and elegant.

way with modern technology."

The site was a 35sq m former library room close to the bookshop with a narrow corridor leading beneath an existing staircase and past escape exits to a micro kitchen tailored specifically to the style of cooking on the menu. Opposite the entrance to the main dining space is a second, smaller private room served by the same kitchen.

Adequate services were a priority, as Soane says, no one wants food smells escaping into the galleries. Taking advantage of the generous 3.6m floor-to-ceiling heights, the ceiling was lowered above the waiter's station at the back of the room to accommodate cooling equipment with two louvres to take air in and out. A new cornice was created to match the rest using moulds of the original. Foot level radiators were incorporated into wooden panels beneath the long sides of the dining room.

'We decided early on there wouldn't be any art there. It's all about the food'

Layout is brasserie style, with two walls of banquette seating and tables and stand-alone tables in the middle. At one end are the windows onto the pavement, at the other, the waiter station and access to the kitchen. The original windows on to the street were preserved and secondary glazing was added as part of the base build.

The main feature of the dining room is the bespoke oak panelling that lines the two long walls, broken up by a regular rhythm of lighting and mirrors. Project Orange settled on this after exploring other options such as darker



The private dining room.

panelling and decorative tiling inspired by the gallery building's Arts and Crafts heritage.

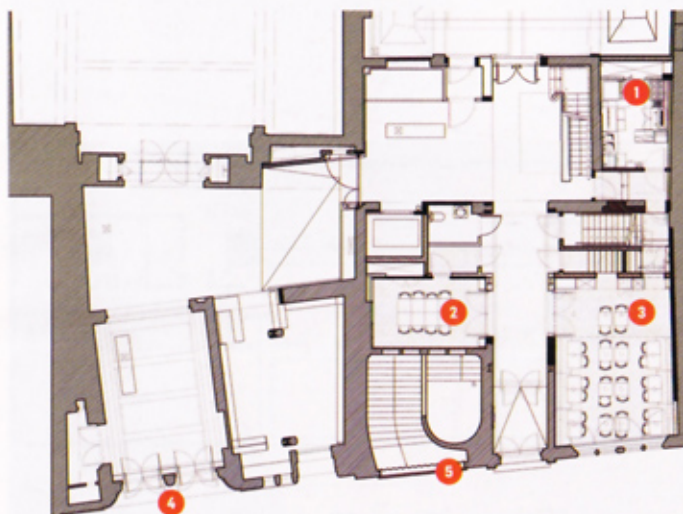
"You could paint it pink and get designer furniture in but Iwona [Blazwick, director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery], was clear she wanted something that would age well and be classic. We

decided early on there wouldn't be any art there. It's all about the food," says Soane.

Contractor Woodcraft Joinery created all the solid-tipped, veneered panelling from English oak including the banquette, which incorporates dark claret Andrew Muirhead leather upholstery. This matches the waiter station, and the wine rack above, and is also used in the private dining room. Here, the panelling opens to give access to services. There is original wood panelling elsewhere in the gallery, so this approach to the walls seemed particularly appropriate.

"We wanted to connect back to that warm feeling. But by treating it in a very modern way, it's not too oppressive like a boardroom," says Soane.

There are two other references to the room's past: card indexes from the former library; and the original wood floor, which was



SITE PLAN

- 1 Kitchen
- 2 Private dining
- 3 Main dining room
- 4 Main gallery entrance
- 5 Tube station entrance



PROJECT TEAM Interior architect Project Orange, **Contractor** Woodcraft Joinery, **Services engineer** Max Fordham, **Project coordinator** Mott MacDonald, **CDM coordinator** Tetra Consulting, **Catering consultant** Catersure



DRINKS TROLLEY

Installing a bar was unfeasible in such a small dining room, so instead Project Orange designed a bespoke drinks trolley that sits near the kitchen door but

can be wheeled around if required. The chunky trolley was made out of oak by Woodcraft Joinery to match the rest of the woodwork in the Whitechapel Dining Room and has a built-in ice bucket.

KITCHEN SERVICING

Resolving the kitchen servicing was one of the biggest challenges of the dining room. Project Orange worked with services engineer Max Fordham to find a way of threading the ducts from the kitchen and dining room through the building and out after the main gallery redevelopment was largely complete. A stand-alone system was required.

"There was very little space for any services. For a well-serviced building, you need a lot of space," says Max Fordham project engineer Christine Wiech. "It had to be designed very carefully to fit in and had to meet requirements of several architects dealing with the



The micro kitchen that serves the restaurant.

architecture, and environmental health requirements in terms of noise and odours."

Another complicating factor was that the library was listed, and the extraction site was very close to a party wall, which couldn't be touched. The solution was to take the kitchen extractor duct through the ceiling and into an air-handling unit on the kitchen roof containing an extraction fan, attenuator and carbon filters. The extract duct enters a riser (which contains another attenuator) and is supported by a structural frame. The air is discharged vertically upwards some 9m above the kitchen roof level and above the roof level of the neighbouring properties.

CARD INDEX

When the Whitechapel Art Gallery took over the neighbouring library for its extension, it was keen to find new uses where possible for some of the library fittings and furnishings. Project Orange was happy to oblige when offered a set of oak index files that would make ideal drawers for cutlery and other small items. Thirty-five of them were cleaned and slotted into a new oak framework within the Dining Room waiter station, acting



as a subtle but appropriate reminder that the room was once a library.

"It's a bit of mix and match. It doesn't match the new oak but that's fine. It gives the idea of longevity," says James Soane.

lifted, restored and re-laid in both the main and private dining rooms.

Chairs in both rooms are a 1956 design by Hans Wegner with tactile, curved contours and a grey seat. These chairs were first launched in 2005 and are produced by Carl Hansen & Son. These are combined with chunky oak tables, again designed by the architect and made by the contractor. Alvar Aalto-designed pendant lighting is by Artek with Talo

Halo wall lights in the private dining room by Artemide.

The Dining Room, with food by head chef Maria Ella, opened last month after 14 weeks on site and has extended hours with its own entrance after the gallery is closed.

"At night, you get a sense of the street beyond and the neighbourhood. When you're outside looking in, you see this little world of people having a good time," says Soane.

Tried. Tested. Approved.

