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INTERIORS

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Be fruitful and multiply

How Project Orange went from part-time venture to thriving business

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The composer and the collagist

Complementary talents have helped James Soane and Christopher Ash turn Project Orange into a practice with ever-widening appeal

Words Jessica Cargill Thompson Photographs Ed Tyler

What defines a Project Orange interior, from a decadent bar in Bangalore to a boutique-meets-business hotel in west London to high-street chain Monsoon? Certainly there's quality and craftsmanship, a freshness and a timelessness. There's enough colour and quirky details to hold the attention, but not enough to overwhelm. For the definitive answer, I ask practice directors Christopher Ash and James Soane, as dapper and genial as their interiors, how someone would spot a Project Orange scheme. "You can't," they tell me. "That's the point."

The best word to sum up BD's Interior Architect of the Year is "variety" — in the projects they take on, the balance of interior commissions to architecture, the range of clients, and the countries they work in. But what characterises a Project Orange scheme is a mind-set and a methodology. They describe their projects as "narrative-based", each telling its own story, which could be about the history of the building, its use or the culture of its setting.

So the late sixties concrete shell of the Chiswick Moran Hotel inspired a mid-century "West Coast meets west London" feel, with dark woods, decorative screens and an Eames pattern carpet, studiously avoiding the more obvious and kitsch "fun palace" route. For the Gunroom bar at Eynsham Hall, a country house hotel in Oxfordshire, the idea was a modern twist on the traditional hunting lodge: contemporary chairs upholstered in traditional prints to contrast with the Chesterfield sofas in bright yellow and the standard lamps in folded aluminium.

The narrative approach manifests itself quite literally in mini "mood books" produced for the client at the start of each job as a way to communicate the design concept. For the Gunroom,

it was a smart colour booklet, cheesily called "Eynsham Hall Revisited", full of aspirational photos, material swatches, inspiring objects, suggested colour palettes and evocative sound-bites. For a recent successful pitch to Urban Splash for the book-end building at the Tutti Frutti terrace in Manchester's New Islington, it was stream-of-consciousness sketches and photos of piles of Quality Street chocolates, all jotted down in a Moleskine notebook. Though projects evolve, the books form a reference point that keeps everyone focused.

"People talk about the 'wow factor' of an interior and it drives me nuts," says Soane. "You can't use the same ideals about form and func-

'You have to understand personality and create something that will make people feel a particular way'



Conference room at Eynsham Hall.

tion for interiors as you do for architecture. You have to understand personality and create something that will make people feel and respond in a particular way."

Although it is only in the past four or five years that Project Orange has begun to make its mark, the practice has been going as a loose collective since the early nineties, beginning when Ash and Soane — long-term partners in life as well as practice — were sharing a house in London (after meeting at Cambridge and taking part IIs at Cambridge and UCL respectively) and wanted to try their luck at competitions — the pair surprised themselves by coming fourth for Copenhagen Royal Library in 1993.

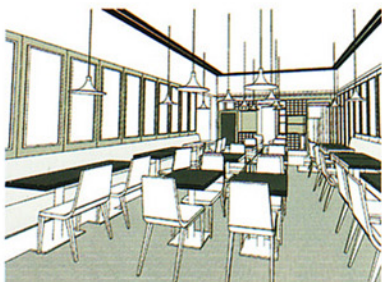
The name, predating the mobile phone company, has no deep significance. Soane says: "It seemed like fun to reclaim what was then an unfashionable colour." Project Orange continued as a back bedroom project while Ash worked for Squire & Partners and Soane at Conran & Partners. In 1997, a critical mass of work allowed Ash to concentrate on the practice full-time, while Soane continued to provide a regular income as a director at Conran. In 2002 Soane was finally able to commit, since when it has grown to a healthy 14.

Their own office in Old Street's Morelands building shows restrained use of the brand colour — a shiny meeting table, low partitions between desks, hand towels in the bathrooms. There's also a shelf of "witty" presents from friends, who've donated Penguin paperback mugs and a pair of orange baseballs.

The open-plan room of long communal tables is a ploy to break down hierarchies and facilitate discussion and communication. "Everyone's been saying: you're going to get really big," says Soane, "but we'd like to stay ►



James Soane (left)
and Christopher Ash.



The members dining room at the restored Whitechapel Gallery, opening Spring 2009.

◀ about the same size where we can still get involved in all levels of the project."

"But it's not a control thing," insists Ash, not for the only time in our conversation. "We aren't afraid of letting our designers design — we hired them to be creative — we just want to be able to answer any question on any aspect of the project."

Jobs are divided up between the pair so that there is a clear chain of command. While Ash runs the business side and frets about overheads, Soane is the public relations interface and writes articles, books and a practice monograph.

So how does their relationship influence their work? "James is very much the big ideas man and the big picture man," says Ash. "I'm more focused, tunnel-visualised and obsessive."

"Yes, I'm a collagist and you're a compositionist," agrees Soane. "You are very musical [Ash has a baby grand in their Orange Cottage weekend home which they built in the Suffolk village of Lavenham in 2006] and bring things together in a symphonic way. I like collecting things, layering them and making patchworks."

For architects, the pair have a refreshing attitude to what is commonly regarded as the "soft" option of interiors. "A lot of architects think interiors work is superficial frippery: carpets, curtain, soft furnishings," says Ash. "But we are often presented with just a shell from which we have to devise everything from integration of

services through to what pen is sitting by the notepad on the reception desk. For us it's all about taking control. Why bemoan the fact that someone has come along and ruined your creation? Why not take control of all of the details?"

Soane takes up the theme: "Sometimes a client may even ask our opinion about how we think the food should be presented or on the menu graphics. There isn't a point at which we say, 'We don't do that bit.' I think that's one of the reasons we have such an interesting international portfolio — we are involved as much as we can be."

An entrée with Indian hotel chain Park Hotels, for which Project Orange has now designed the Navi hotel in Mumbai and the i-Bar in Bangalore, came through contacts Soane made while working for Conran. This is leading to more work on the subcontinent, including the interiors for i-talia, an Italian restaurant in Delhi. For these projects, the practice liaises with local architects who realise the project on site.

The job book, split 50:50 between interiors and architecture, now ranges from the private individuals the practice cut its teeth on to big corporate clients. It is working on a £2.5 million copper-clad, mixed-use project in King's Cross, and a £13 million five-star hotel in Belfast, both to be completed later this year, while a £25 million new-build extension block at the Chiswick Moran Hotel will be delivered in 2009. Going forward, the practice is so committed to maintaining the diversity of its output that it recently turned down a contract for three hotels because it would have tied up the whole office.

With their interiors, they show no desire to be "fashionable" but want to achieve a look that will prove more solid and long-lasting. "Good design is not just the icing on the cake, it's about the way people live, and it's good to remember that sometimes," says Soane. "You do see ideas that are extreme but only last three or four years. In a world where there is increasing pressure for things to last and not to keep ripping interiors out, there is a need for designs to have greater longevity." And Project Orange, it would seem, is playing the long game.

BEHIND THE SCENES AT PROJECT ORANGE

1 Rear window

From the windows of their office in the Morelands building, Project Orange have views into AHMM's base next door.

2 Before and after

Project illustrations matched with photographs of the finished design.

3 The present's bright

Orange is the theme for friends' gifts.

4 Orange glow

A light bulb moment in the practice's library.

5 See no evil...

A monkey mascot perches on the magazine rack.



2



Five up

We asked five staff at Project Orange to nominate their favourite interior project. Tell us your favourites at bdonline.co.uk/fiveup

Helen Woodcraft

Associate



The Sheats-Goldstein House by John Lautner in Beverley Hills, because the interior design is in the architecture — the control of light, space and material is all achieved through the form itself, and any furnishings are part of the whole. Architecturally it's very cleverly resolved, it exploits and enhances the amazing site with its relationship to the garden and to the views over the city. The materials are quite modest, but the composition generates the luxury.



Rachel Coll

Project architect



Luis Barragán's house in Mexico City, built in 1948. The street facade is very ordinary, but once you pass through the front door into the carefully composed lobby, with its waiting bench basking in yellow light through the painted glass, it is obvious you are entering a very considered piece of design. Incoming light is controlled to create contrasting planes of light and shadow, and different wall heights manipulate views onto other spaces and the garden.





'You'd never be bored'

Natalia Boguslawska, office assistant

How did you join Project Orange?

I came over from Gdansk last year to start a foundation course in architecture at London South Bank University and needed a part-time job. I thought it would be a good idea to get some experience in an architects' office so I looked on the RIBA website and sent out a lot of letters to London practices asking if they needed anyone to do administrative work.

What does your job entail?

I work two days a week and do various jobs. If anyone needs help with filing, scanning or logo design, they ask me. I also help with the press and marketing, prepare submissions for competitions and awards, keep the shelves and materials library tidy — they can get really messy — and I manage the website.

Christopher Ash is keen to keep overheads down and says small practices don't need full-time assistants. Do you think this is true?

I manage to fit all of the admin into my two days a week and I don't think I ever get really behind with anything. Christopher and James are quite flexible about which days I come in. But there is also a bookkeeper who comes in twice a month to do the accounts.

What have you got out of the experience?

Even though I'm not qualified to work on the projects, I get to see



Boguslawska: "A lot of architecture students should do this."

all of the stages and how the projects evolve. At university it's just theory, but here I get to see how it actually works. I think a lot of architecture students should do this.

Is working in an architects' office how you imagined it would be?

I was really surprised by how varied the work is. Every project brings its own challenges. I think working as an architect you could never get bored. I'm going to start my part I at Westminster in September, and I know now that I love architecture and that this is something I could do for the rest of my life.



Jonathan Ashmore

Project architect

The Querini Stampalia Foundation in Venice, Carlo Scarpa's conversion of a historic palazzo. From the first step on the entrance bridge, the architecture is of true craft and detail. You

engage with scale and a desire to touch material junctions, and even to push the door and expose the hinge mechanics! Yet for all the obsessive detail and beauty in each component, the space remains calm.



Ruth Silver

Project architect

The Picture Room at 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, now Sir John Soane's Museum, is just 4m square, but Soane squeezed in more than 100 pictures. Works by Piranesi, Canaletto and Hogarth are hung

ingeniously on hinged walls, opened out to reveal the raunchiest Hogarths. Originally Soane only allowed his male visitors to look behind the first layer — outrageous! It's eccentric, quirky and ever so slightly naughty... perfect.



Michael Veal

Interior designer

The central London alleyway where the entrance of Alan Yau's Hakkasan is located does not prepare you for the world that you encounter.

Christian Liaigre's interior is a masterpiece of restaurant design.

The subtle Asian detailing on the dividing screens, the embroidery on the lounge chairs and the aroma from the burning incense are some of my favourite elements.

