

FRAME



DÉJÀ

TIME TRAVELS
IN DESIGN

VIEW



YESTERDAY ONCE MORE

In today's globalized, rootless world, design needs history more than ever.

WORDS JANE SZITA

COQUINE, A BAR IN LONDON BY LEE BROOM.
PHOTO MARCUS PEEL





GRIFFINS' STEAKHOUSE EXTRAORDINAIRE,
A RESTAURANT IN STOCKHOLM BY STYLT.
PHOTO ERIK NISSEN JOHANSEN

'When we opened Le Rouge in Stockholm a couple of years back, we made headlines,' says Erik Nissen Johansen of Gothenburg-based design and creative agency Stylt. 'The papers all reported that minimalism was finally dead.' Although the fact that the death of minimalism is announced with such regularity as 'to be the surest testimony to its staying power', as Edward Strickland famously said, the press coverage indicates the extent of Le Rouge's impact on Stockholm in the noughties. Its scarlet, velvety, *fin-de-siècle* expressionism is wildly at odds with the expected measured Swedish aesthetic – gilt, plush upholstery and an abundance of detail rather than the more familiar natural wood and sleek lines. 'Stockholm is usually known for its less-is-more interiors,' agrees Johansen. 'A few years ago we might have done a minimalist interior, too, but increasingly that doesn't feel right. Historical interiors are looking more and more modern.'

Stylt, a 30-strong multidisciplinary agency also active in branding and marketing, is a typical exponent of the historically referenced approach currently flourishing in restaurants, bars, hotels and other hospitality venues. Minimalism may not be dead, but it does seem to be taking an extended holiday away from those places most associated with indulgence and escapism. Even during the current downturn, Stylt is working on no fewer than eight hotels and a number of restaurant projects, each one grounded (if that's the right word) in a narrative fantasy. 'Our work is based on storytelling,' says Johansen. 'We see what we do as part of the entertainment industry: going to a restaurant today is like taking a mental vacation for a couple of hours, on a par with going to the cinema. It's therefore smart to do the script before you do the film. We always start off with a good story, with all the ingredients of a gripping drama.'

Using this strategy, Stylt has created a hotel (Sonya) in St Petersburg based on Dostoevsky's novel, *Crime and Punishment*; and another (Klaus K) in Helsinki, based on the Finnish epic,

the *Kalevala*. Last year it unveiled Griffins' Steakhouse in Stockholm, where the challenge was to create a successful eatery inside a new steel-and-concrete office building. 'We realized that to make a space for an intimate act like eating, we had to contrast it with the modernity of the building,' says Johansen. 'So we came up with the fictional idea of a couple of strange hosts: a mad scientist and an eccentric dancer who met in Paris, 100 years ago, and who entertain all sorts of odd Fortean theories. We wanted guests to feel that they were visiting these two at home.' The design layers modern takes on the kind of memorabilia that the fictional couple might have collected: sepia-tinted photographs, butterflies in glass cases, scientific drawings, globes, heaps of manuscripts and curious machines. Even the wine is served in

lab glasses. Despite being slightly off the beaten track, the restaurant has a two-week waiting list.

'People have taken it to their hearts,' says Johansen. 'But a fondness for the past is nothing new. We have always felt comfortable with the styles of our grandparents' time. Antiques from the 18th century were sometimes copies of 17th-century ones.' Now, as then, the past offers familiarity and reassurance. In place of the fear and uncertainty of post-credit crunch daily life, history provides certainties – we know exactly how things turned out a few decades ago, even if we don't know what will happen tomorrow – as well as the consolation of continuity. Modernism – with its claim to be post-history, its obsession with newness and its language of starting from scratch – suggests its own moment but not multiple ones.

'If you created a super-minimalist restaurant now, you'd most likely fail,' says Johansen. 'The whole reason for the historical trend we're seeing is that it's so hard to make a commercial success of modernism now. If you do something minimalist, people will enjoy going there once, but they'll quickly get the idea that they've experienced the whole.' The complexity, layering and sheer detail of historically inspired designs encourage return, by suggesting that there is always more to explore. 'And this kind of interior is more open,' Johansen adds. 'You get more than one type of person. People think: I could bring my grandfather here, or my kids.'

London-based designer Lee Broom, whose 1999 nightclub Nylon was an early incarnation of today's historically derived interiors, agrees with Johansen that success is driving our re-remembering of the past. 'People look at things that are successful and replicate them,' he says. 'Although it's very pluralistic now, and lots of styles are relevant, there is something about the familiarity of the past that gives comfort and that works in commercial interiors. I'm designing bars and clubs that are not just spaces for people to drop in, but places where they feel welcome and want to linger. I want it to feel like being at home or somewhere comfortable like an old pub. But another reason for the historical revival is, >>>

'I ASK MYSELF ALL THE TIME: IS THIS TOO THEME PARK?'



HOME FROM HOME, AN INSTALLATION BY JAMESPLUMB, AT THE SPAZIO ROSSANA ORLANDI IN MILAN. PHOTO TATIANA UZLOVA

to be frank, that it's really easy to do in a diluted kind of way. You just go to a warehouse, pick out some battered, second-hand leather sofas, mushroom chairs and a few sputnik lights,' he laughs.

The downturn in the economy naturally makes the diluted, warehouse-combing approach appealing to cash-strapped owners, and recycling the old is a form of sustainable design gaining increasing currency, even with large hotel and entertainment groups faced with the growing emphasis on corporate responsibility. Typically, recessionary eras look to the past, often to earlier recessionary eras, as was the case with the revival of the 1930s that we saw in the 1970s. 'There's a radical style change every now and then,' says Broom, whose first career – in theatre – predicted the drama and illusionism of his interiors. 'People are doing prohibition-speakeasy looks again, and that directly reflects our current economic climate. Drinking magnums of champagne is not cool any more. Sipping cocktails from teacups in a basement is.'

Broom's interiors are carefully constructed in response to the particular history of whatever space he designs. 'The building gives me the starting point,' he says. 'I look for something in the architecture that really speaks to me. With Nylon, I was presented with an old 1960s' building with interior wooden panelling, and instead of ripping it out I decided to work with it. While preparing the space for Coquine, which opened recently, we took out the suspended ceiling and found an amazing Victorian ceiling underneath. We weren't allowed to keep it because of fire regulations. But I kept the idea and used architraving in an exaggerated way throughout the space.' Coquine's basement area uses architraving as frames for booths that Broom calls 'coves'. Stepping inside is like walking through the frame and into a painting: a giant rococo canvas has been printed in high resolution on the wallpaper. The vocabulary of the past is transformed, retaining its familiarity but becoming an enigma rather than a cliché: at

first, guests tend to think that the architraving frames a mirror rather than a space.

The history-informed interior often has to walk the line between inspiration and Disneyfication, as Broom readily agrees. To avoid pastiche, designers can't lose sight of chronological currency. 'I have to ask myself all the time: is this too theme park?' he says.



GROTE KOPPEL, A SPACE NOW USED AS A RESTAURANT, IN AMERSFOORT, THE NETHERLANDS, BY FAT. PHOTO COURTESY OF FAT

'Whenever I think of an idea, I question it. Although I love to reference things from the past, the result has to be contemporary. There always has to be a modern element, a new spin. I would never do painted marble. It's a tricky balance.'

It's perhaps telling that Broom works from detailed hand drawings subsequently translated into 3ds Max – 'a great tool', he says. Often he

uses a vibrant modern palette or lighting – strip or neon – to contemporize historical elements, as he did at Valmont, a club featuring a wall of neon strips that silhouettes the classic furniture in front of it. But does Broom's own home look like this? 'I stay faithful to what a space says to me,' he says. 'I live in an old fire station, so parts of my home are quite modernist. My instinct is to throw in a touch of character, do something cheeky. But I don't like clutter.'

For Hannah Plumb and James Russell, who together form the London-based design partnership Jamesplumb, clutter is a lifestyle choice. Their home – an 1840s' cottage packed with pieces picked up at antiques fairs and flea markets – even includes an old gravestone. 'We keep tripping over it, and at times it seems a bit macabre, but we love it,' says Hannah Plumb. 'It's so beautiful with its lichen growth. We acquire lots of things – we just bought a wrecked 18th-century sofa frame at an antiques fair the other day – but it takes time for us to decide what we'll do with them.' If Lee Broom takes his lead from the history of the space itself, the Jamesplumb approach is led by found objects. 'They don't have to be particularly old,' explains James Russell. 'But they do have to have traces of use – that's the quality that interests us. We like things that show their age, that have scars, a patina, and we embrace their imperfections. Our favourite trick is to turn up late at an antiques fair, after all the restored, polished stuff has gone. What's left is our kind of history.

We take those objects and interpret them, weave a story around them. They become characters.'

For Hostem, the Shoreditch men's clothing store that the couple recently completed (see *Frame 77*, p. 59), the key piece was the old pew that the duo found in a church reclamation yard. 'My dad tipped me off about the place,' recounts Russell. 'So we went and had a look, and this pew was just standing outside. It had been abandoned because it was damaged, and it was soaking wet and covered with dead leaves. Yet it had this wonderful quality – it was sun-bleached to a beautiful grey colour.' The pew was later combined with 'hard, masculine concrete' to make a counter for the store, where it presides under a cluster chandelier with reclaimed shades in warm pinks and reds.

Jamesplumb worked meticulously on the site, determining the position of every floorboard to create a tonal effect, mixing paints and viewing the results *in situ* at different times of day, and establishing the layout through a process of role play – an experimental way of working that has roots in the duo's art-school training. 'We both studied sculpture,' says Plumb. 'We're not trained as designers. So we feel like cowboys in the design world and artists at other times. We approach things unconventionally because we're free of design dogmas. There must be plenty of famous designers we've never even heard of.'

Mass-production has 'never quite seemed right' for Jamesplumb, whose work is rooted partly in the aesthetics of decay and partly in facilitating the experience of emotional intimacy through what they call 'the beauty of everyday' – hardly the usual mission of a product designer. Rather than making new things, they focus more on exploring the memory of objects, their secret histories. Sustainable it might be, but sustainability isn't the point. 'Early on, people on eco blogs tried to pigeonhole us as recycling champions,' says Russell. 'To be absolutely

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honest, that's not the starting point of our work at all. If a solution wasn't ethical but was otherwise perfect, we'd use it.' Jamesplumb's installation for Rossana Orlandi in Milan last year (a second version follows at this year's fair) drew on the fashion designer's extensive hoard of items: like Russell and Plumb, she's known for not throwing anything away. Orlandi told them that the result, a curiously timeless domestic landscape, was the first show she'd ever staged that garnered an emotional response. 'She said people thanked her for it.'

At the other end of the scale from a two-person office like Jamesplumb is AvroKO, a New York agency with offices in the Big Apple and Bangkok – a company that bases its interiors on 'the emotional and physical content of a space'. AvroKO's Lily and Bloom – a recently

completed bar and restaurant in Hong Kong – evokes New York streetlife of the 1900s, while another nightclub in New York, Beauty & Essex, took its cues from the era of grande dames like Diana Vreeland and Elsa Schiaparelli. 'In spite of our admittedly obsessive search through historical architecture and design genres, we're still basically modernists,' says Adam Farmerie, one of the firm's four principals. 'As we go faster, become more globally interconnected and are surrounded by more technology, it's only natural that our sense of history could ground lives that have become ungrounded. As our connections to people, places and things become more electronic, impersonal and fleeting, it makes sense that repurposing the meaning instilled within now-antiquated low-tech objects, lifestyles and cultures could snap us back into feeling

again. Design needs history now more than ever.'

For designers like Farmerie, using elements of history as active components in a design – rather than as pastiche – can be subversive rather than conservative. Reusing the past can be what architect Sam Jacob calls 'a form of resistance to lack of meaning'. Jacob, who together with Sean Griffiths and Charles Holland forms London architecture office Fashion Architecture Taste (Fat), derives much inspiration from the postmodern movement, which used historical elements to critique modernism's social failure and lapse into pure style before eventually lapsing into failure and pastiche itself. Nevertheless, the point for Jacob is that 'we are a part of history, and history is a tool for understanding where we are now. We can use it to rewrite the narrative of where we are and where we're going.' He argues that modern design has become preoccupied with style over substance, form rather than function. Connecting with the past can be a way for designers to rediscover design's roots in culture, to rescue it from consumerism.

'History is a way of introducing legibility into design,' he says. 'It talks about culture using a recognizable language.' Jacob tells the story of Fat's New Islington social-housing development in Manchester, where the office found itself 'negotiating between the traditional idea of a house – which is what the residents wanted – and the idea of a contemporary loft lifestyle, which is what the developers wanted'. The project used traditional elements – brick, ornament, even a traditional floor plan – spliced with a contemporary vocabulary in a kind of mashup. Outside, the façade veers between centuries, while the layout of the apartments merges a modern open floor plan with a more traditional arrangement of small rooms and connecting spaces. 'It's both modern and pre-modern,' says Jacob, 'and that creates an interesting spatiality. It's combining two ideologies to create a third condition – one that becomes much more authentic, closer to contemporary culture.'

Seen from such a perspective, the use of the past and the local, above the abstraction and formalism of modernism, is a reaction to globalization and the rootlessness of the contemporary condition. As Erik Nissen Johansen puts it: 'People don't believe in the market. They believe in other people.' And 'other people' invariably have a past. Even though design's take on history may sometimes end in pastiche, used intelligently the past revives the idea that design is something more than just another part of consumer culture. And there's nothing old-fashioned about that.



BEAUTY & ESSEX, A BAR AND CLUB IN NEW YORK BY AVROKO. PHOTOS MICHAEL WEBER (LEFT) AND MELISSA HORN