



Back to basics

Taking the inspiration for your restaurant design from a refectory without making it look like, well, a refectory, is no mean feat. Canteen has pulled it off in style

Words Bethan Ryder



Good design is more often about the things that you don't notice, rather than attention-seeking grand gestures that you do. Restaurants with a wow factor are always a thrill, but sometimes the best-designed places are those where the surroundings are so well-considered and user-friendly that they enhance the dining experience without making a song and dance about it. Canteen, in the new Foster & Partners designed Spitalfields' development, is one such place.

You may have already read about this new shining star of British cooking since the broadsheet critics have been smothering it with praise. Jay Rayner imagined it would be "the kind of canteen a thrusting architectural practice" might build for itself, whereas AA Gill called it, "a plainly elegant room that harks back to collegiate catering and the catts of youth."

TOP OF THE CLASS
Canteen is already the star attraction in the redevelopment of Spitalfields market, which was redesigned by Foster & Partners

It's the perfect example of a restaurant where the design so brilliantly supports the food concept (an all-day menu serving high-quality British cuisine using nationally-sourced ingredients) that it rarely distracts the diner. Subtle, low lighting creates a sense of intimacy, even when you might be sharing the refectory tables and benches with strangers.

Such ergonomic detailing doesn't happen by chance. The trio behind Canteen, Patrick Malone, Cass Titcombe and Dominic Lake developed their 'democratic eating house' over 18 months before they appointed Universal Design

Studio. "We were very prescriptive in our creative brief, we had an 80-page document detailing our influences, colour palettes and materials," says Patrick Malone. "Ultimately we wanted an emphasis on simple, high-quality materials that reference the optimism of mid-20th-century design and classlessness of community spaces like the Royal Festival Hall, town halls and libraries. Longevity was important too, we wanted it to last and not really date."

Universal has worked on a couple of restaurants, but they're better known for their retail interiors for Stella



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McCartney and Juicy Couture. However, the Canteen team decided they shared a similar aesthetic. The multi-disciplinary practice is headed by architect Jonathan Clarke together with Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby, the successful furniture duo.

Several key elements enabled Universal to achieve the honest, straightforward, no frills look the clients desired. The palette of classic, durable materials – oak, linoleum, ceramic, cork and

Portoro Italian marble – lend that sense of longevity. Simple oak tables, larger scale versions of Barber Osgerby Home table (made by Windmill Joinery), are paired with BO's Portsmouth benches, whilst cosier window seats are upholstered in olive green fabric by Bute. It manages to feel utilitarian without being industrial or unwelcoming, democratic without being cheap. As Jonathan Clarke explains, "We wanted democratic efficiency but we didn't want to create a fast food restaurant with high-level seating or harsh lighting, it needed to reflect the quality of the food. We've made it far more luxurious and comfortable through quite subtle things, such as the lower seating levels, the depth of seating and the thickness of the tables."

Storage space

There's plenty of space to put your things; low coat racks slotted between seating areas and little trays on the side for keys, phones or designer handbags were made by Universal Design Studio



Hector table lamps

• "They add a warm glow to the window-side tables. The ceramic shade allows light to illuminate faces of diners, whilst still lighting the table surfaces and avoiding glare."

Mark Simpson,
Universal Design Studio

Pendant lighting

• Lighting was a major challenge, the site essentially being a glass box. All lighting elements were custom made and are deliberately understated: 3m linear pendants in a folded aluminium design hang low above the large communal tables.

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Malone says they were determined that the Canteen dining experience should feel informal. Universal looked to the past for inspiration, "We considered the materials and design of railway carriages, when train travel was a glamorous experience, and thought about how there were always places to put your things." The results include the handy coat-rails inserted between each seating 'compartment', the movable Corian trays and Hector table lamps.

Lighting was a major challenge, the site essentially being a glass box with three sides of glazing. "It was tricky because you're competing with God," says Clarke, "there's lots of natural light, so we dropped the lighting levels, creating warmth and intimacy.

Another major factor which is so often neglected in restaurant design and has been dealt with extremely effectively is the acoustics. "We treated several

areas to improve acoustics," explains Clarke. "The oak panel above the pass is articulated to soak up the sound, the seat fabric helps and we installed perforated ceiling panels, so the sound penetrates and is eaten up by an acoustic baffle inside at the back."

In fact, the only complaint to make about Canteen is its setting, as the Spitalfields development is not yet complete. But Malone is confident it will look good when unveiled in June.

"We were a bit worried at first, but eventually all the hoardings will come down and the beautiful original vaulting of the market will be exposed. It was a rigorous space and we wanted our design to fit in without being like a NatWest bank. We wanted it to add something to the development." It has certainly done that: so far it is the star attraction. We can only hope the rest of Spitalfields measures up - Canteen is a hard act to follow. **●**