



A taste for art

Architect M.J. Long has redesigned the famed Ivy restaurant and provided the setting for a rare display of commissioned art. **Callum Murray** reports. Photographs by Martin Charles.

*The Ivy deserved to become famous for its atmosphere but, of course, talented and attractive young people mingling with famous artists of all kinds always bring their own atmosphere into a restaurant, in fact they make the atmosphere themselves. The Ivy was lucky from the start.**

Throughout most of the 1920s, '30s and '40s, before he became Mario of the Caprice, Mario Gallati was Mario of the Ivy (the restaurant on the corner of West Street and Litchfield Street in London's West End). Fortunately for posterity, in Mario, the Ivy had a manager who could have name-dropped for his country, as Mario's inexhaustibly starstruck autobiography reveals. So when the restaurateurs Jeremy King and Chris Corbin, and their architect M.J. Long were considering how to revive the Ivy a couple of years ago, they were well aware of its history — even though the restaurant had undergone a sad decline in recent years.

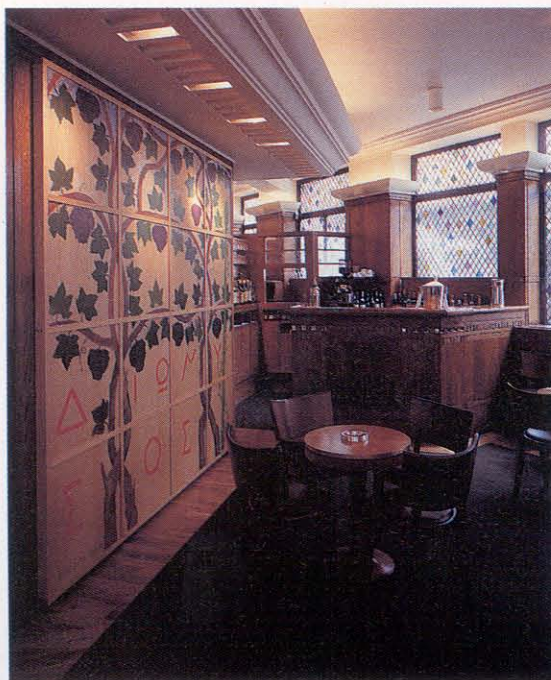
A clubby interior

In a reverse tribute to Mario's progress from the Ivy to Le Caprice, King and Corbin had recently bought and made a success of Le Caprice. But there would have been no point in simply repeating the retro, transatlantic style of Le Caprice at the Ivy — so the owners decided they wanted a clubby, English interior that was all new, but was nevertheless supposed to make old Ivy regulars feel that nothing had really changed.

The Ivy stands on a sharp corner site directly opposite the Ambassadors Theatre. The one-room café that Mario first knew was extended in 1921, and in 1928 most of the structure was rebuilt, forming two triangular restaurant floors that were more or less identical in plan, with a kitchen below ground. The exterior has been little changed by architect Long. The diamond-pattern windows, with their randomly placed panes of coloured glass have been retained and restored, as has the grille-work beneath, which originally ventilated the kitchen.

Inside, the kitchen has been extensively renovated and updated in association with kitchen consultant Parsley in Time, and the private dining room upstairs has also been restored. But it was in the main restaurant that Long, in association with architect David Gibson, made most of her architectural interventions: in particular, the American light oak wall panelling, and the heavily modelled fibrous plaster ceiling.

The panelling that was in place when Long first saw the Ivy was, in her own words 'shabby veneer with mouldings stuck on'. The clients wanted her to 'do details that felt like real details'. She responded by designing new panelling



1 (opposite) The main entrance lobby of the Ivy restaurant on a tight corner site in London's West End. The moon window is by Patrick Caulfield and the brass, strapwork screen by Eduardo Paolozzi.

2 The bar in the main restaurant. The ivy panel on the left is by Joe Tilson. The distinctive, diamond-patterned glazing, which runs along two sides of the restaurant, is original.

3 The south-east corner of the restaurant is dominated by a painting by Allen Jones.

4 A view along the restaurant towards the lobby doors. Departing diners see Tom Phillips' picture 'The Professionals' and his etched glass panel, one on either side of the doors. Also seen (from left to right) are pieces by Patrick Caulfield, Barry Flanagan and Peter Blake.



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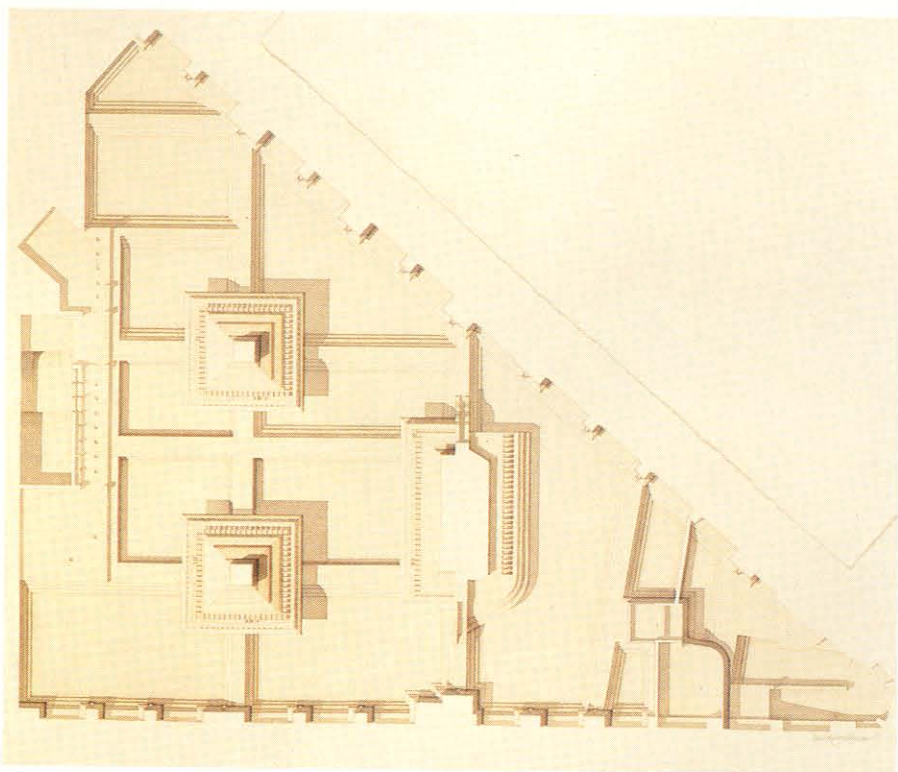
* From *Mario of the Caprice* by Mario Gallati. Hutchinson, 1960.

Credits

architect M.J. Long in association with David Gibson
 quantity surveyor Sawyer & Fisher
 structural engineer Hockley & Dawson
 kitchen consultant Parsley in Time
 stained glass Creative Glass
 builder Carlton Firmin Ltd
 clients Jeremy King and Christopher Corbin



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with central panels that are still veneer, but with solid, angular wooden framing inlaid with occasional strips or beads of mirrored glass, so as to 'sharpen it up in places'. These mirrored details ('M.J's rhinestones,' as King calls them) are instances of a slightly surprising touch of Broadway that recurs about the place: in the entrance and in the giant 'capitals', leaking light through ranks of square holes, that crown the two internal structural columns.

Yet the overall effect remains one of tradition and of 'Englishness' — even though Long maintains that: 'the panelling is a sort of homage of Louis Kahn and is firmly modern'; and that: 'the ceiling is pure invention — a sculptural resolution of the problem of lighting and

scale'. This is what makes the restaurant's most important visual gamut — a collection of specially commissioned, often site-specific artworks — seems a little surprising.

Both the clients and Long herself are friendly with a generation of British artists, some of whom were associated with the Royal College of Art, and subsequently with the Pop Art movement, towards the end of the 1950s. These include some very big names, like Patrick Caulfield, Eduardo Paolozzi, Howard Hodgkin, Allen Jones, Tom Phillips, Peter Blake and Joe Tilson. Somehow, along with other, younger artists, each of these 'names' has been persuaded to contribute to the visual effect.

The art starts in the lobby with a stained glass window by Caulfield (at night, it ought to start even earlier, with the window shining out like a beacon as you approach the building; but interior lighting that competes successfully with the bright-as-day sodium glare of the street has yet to be installed). Caulfield had never designed stained glass before, but his characteristic black outlines suggested the medium to Long and her clients. The moon and stars design, bordered by theatrical dressing room mirror bulbs, is the playfully evocative result.

Daring commission

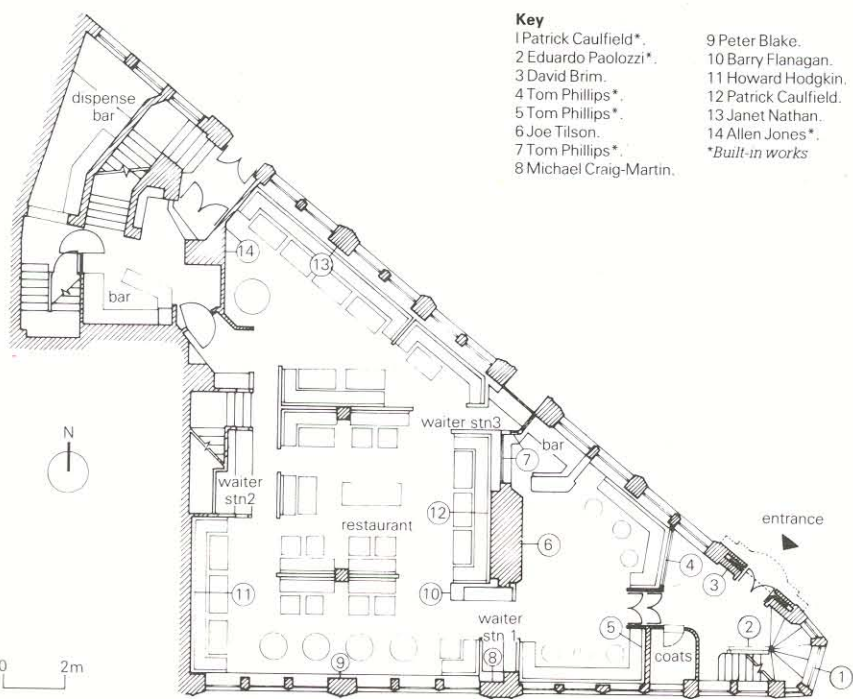
Between the lobby and stair leading down to the men's lavatories, is a strap brass screen by Paolozzi, which manages simultaneously to recall his preoccupation with mechanistic forms and, as he puts it, 'to refer to a form of luxury connected with the grand hotel or transatlantic liner of bygone days'. Long was closely involved in the design of the screen, helping to ensure that it would meet the requirements of Building Regulations without becoming over-patterned.

Between the lobby and the restaurant itself is a glass screen by Phillips, made up of 225 individually etched and engraved pieces of Pilkington's 6mm clear glass. Once again this was a daring commission — Phillips had never worked in this way before — but his graphic variations on the diamond pattern theme of the windows are an appropriate response.

At first sight it would seem that the same cannot be said of the two largest site-specific commissions inside the restaurant, by Jones and Tilson. Brightly, painted, some would say crudely, these two pieces recall the Pop Art origins of their artists. In daylight, a discord is struck between the dark restaurant panelling and Tilson's design of ivy leaves and bunches of grapes, painted directly onto panels of a much lighter ash and oak. The panelling also appears to provide a somewhat archaic frame for Jones' lurid scene of Bacchic dancers. But under the diffused lighting conditions of the evening, with the pictures' surfaces partially patterned with the silhouettes of diners' heads harmony is, after all, achieved.

The one piece which definitely does not work is Hodgkin's darkly coloured, oval, ivy print, whose shiny protective acrylic cover merely renders it reflective. Unfortunately, it has a prominent position on the wall facing diners as they enter.

The most successful piece, by contrast, is only likely to be seen by most diners as they leave the restaurant. This is Phillips' *The Professionals*, a typically witty and erudite composition occupying the space on the wall beside the inner doors. In a pastiche of cigarette cards of



Key

- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 Patrick Caulfield*. | 9 Peter Blake. |
| 2 Eduardo Paolozzi*. | 10 Barry Flanagan. |
| 3 David Brim. | 11 Howard Hodgkin. |
| 4 Tom Phillips*. | 12 Patrick Caulfield. |
| 5 Tom Phillips*. | 13 Janet Nathan. |
| 6 Joe Tilson. | 14 Allen Jones*. |
| 7 Tom Phillips*. | *Built-in works |
| 8 Michael Craig-Martin. | |

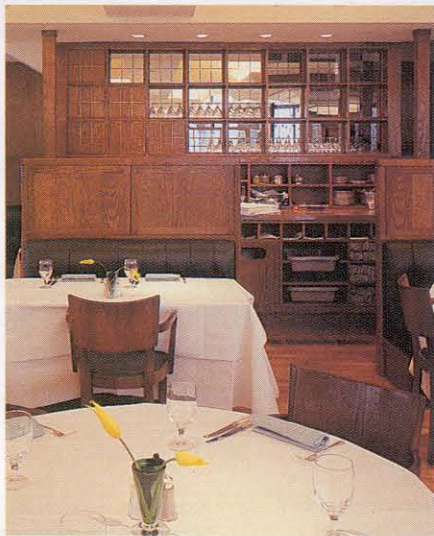
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film stars or cricketers pasted in an album, Phillips has painted portraits of 10 great modernists, linking them up in two ranks of five. Beside each he lists the professions that each originally (or in some cases, simultaneously) pursued: T.S. Eliot (banking); Joseph Conrad (Merchant Navy); Charles Ives (insurance); Anton Chekhov (medicine). This is an ironical, artistic equivalent to Mario's autobiography, whose theme might be summarised as: 'Noel Coward? I knew him before he was famous.'

The attitude of the current owners to famous people is summed up by the brief for the main entrance which stated, paradoxically, that it shouldn't be too inviting. (Unfortunately, customers now tend to walk straight past it so Long has drawn up a scheme to replace it — when the money is available — with 'something in cut-out steel, responding to the grille beneath the windows'.) King and Corbin were mindful of the restaurant's potentially exposed position in the West End, so they were keen that it should be reticent.

This attitude extends to the inside too. The art, King admits, is bit of an indulgence. His attitude to restaurant design generally is that it shouldn't dominate the room. For those that are interested, though, the Ivy's history is discreetly summarised in Peter Blake's artistic contribution — his 'shrine', as King calls it. This is made up of snapshots of some of the stars that used



to frequent the Ivy, an empty bottle of the Chateau Olivier wine that was always provided for Sir Laurence Olivier, a silk rose and a book.

Long has clearly been lucky in her clients. Like her, they knew, and were prepared to commission some of the country's best-known artists. The question is, how could they afford it? 'Let's just say they're all good friends, and have been very good to us,' King explains. I take this to mean that some, at least, of their payment will be in kind — ensuring that at any given time an artist or two will generally be found dining at the Ivy. This is an arrangement of which Mario would have approved. □

5 Reflected ceiling plan of the main restaurant.

6 Ground-floor plan of the Ivy, showing seating arrangement and position of artworks.

7 A view of the main restaurant, looking towards Howard Hodgkins' oval print on the west-facing wall. The strikingly modelled ceiling, of fibrous plaster alters the restaurant's scale and lighting. The new panelling has veneer set in solid American light oak frames.

8 A waiters station.

9 The stained glass windows designed by architect M.J. Long are modestly located in the ladies lavatory on the first floor.

