

WORKS: DAVID KOHN ARCHITECTS

Seeing the whole picture

In a former London fashion showroom, Stuart Shave's new gallery by David Kohn Architects demonstrates close attention to detail, says **Ellis Woodman**

Pictures by Ioanna Marinescu

For the past decade, the unlikely focus of London's primary art market has been Vyner Street, a shabby parade of former industrial buildings in Bethnal Green. There are currently eight galleries ranged along its length, and another half dozen in the immediate area. Most days, there is little to indicate to passers-by that they might find anything out of the ordinary behind the roller shutters and security gates. However, come to one of the late openings on the first Thursday of each month and you will find the street jammed with visitors lured by a slate of new exhibitions and a copious supply of free booze.

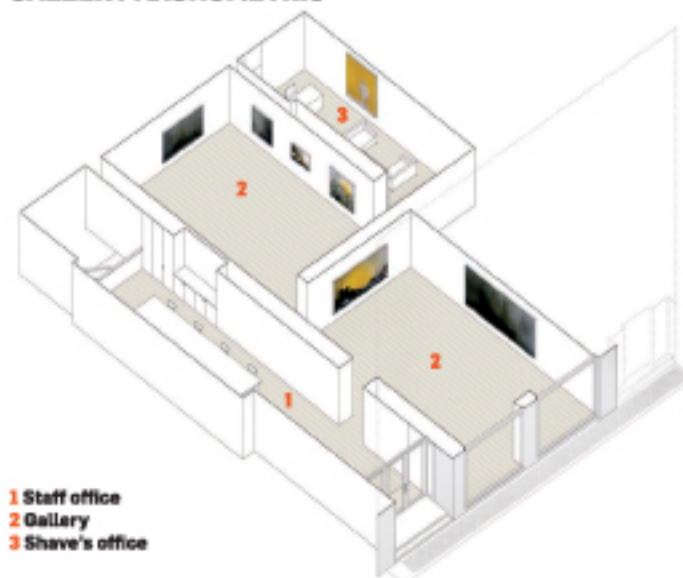
Five years ago, Stuart Shave was one of the first gallery owners to set up here when he converted a garage into Stuart Shave/Modern Art. Today, the gallery has 25 artists on its books, a number of whom have established international reputations over the time Shave has represented them and have seen their market value increase significantly. In response to these improved fortunes, two years ago Shave began looking for larger premises in a more central location. He soon identified Fitzrovia, the area north of Oxford Street as an ideal base. This part of town has been reduced to something of a backwater in recent years as a consequence of a well intentioned but increasingly anachronistic planning policy designed to protect its long held role as the centre of London's garment industry. With the advent of globalisation, the need for fashion retailers to maintain city centre showrooms and production facilities has reduced, leading to many moving out of the capital.

Westminster City Council has only responded to this changed climate very recently. Shave's new space occupies a 604sq m former fashion showroom on Eastcastle Street, and it took two applications before the planners were ready to countenance its conversion. Now



Brick piers align with those of the elevation above.

GALLERY AXONOMETRIC

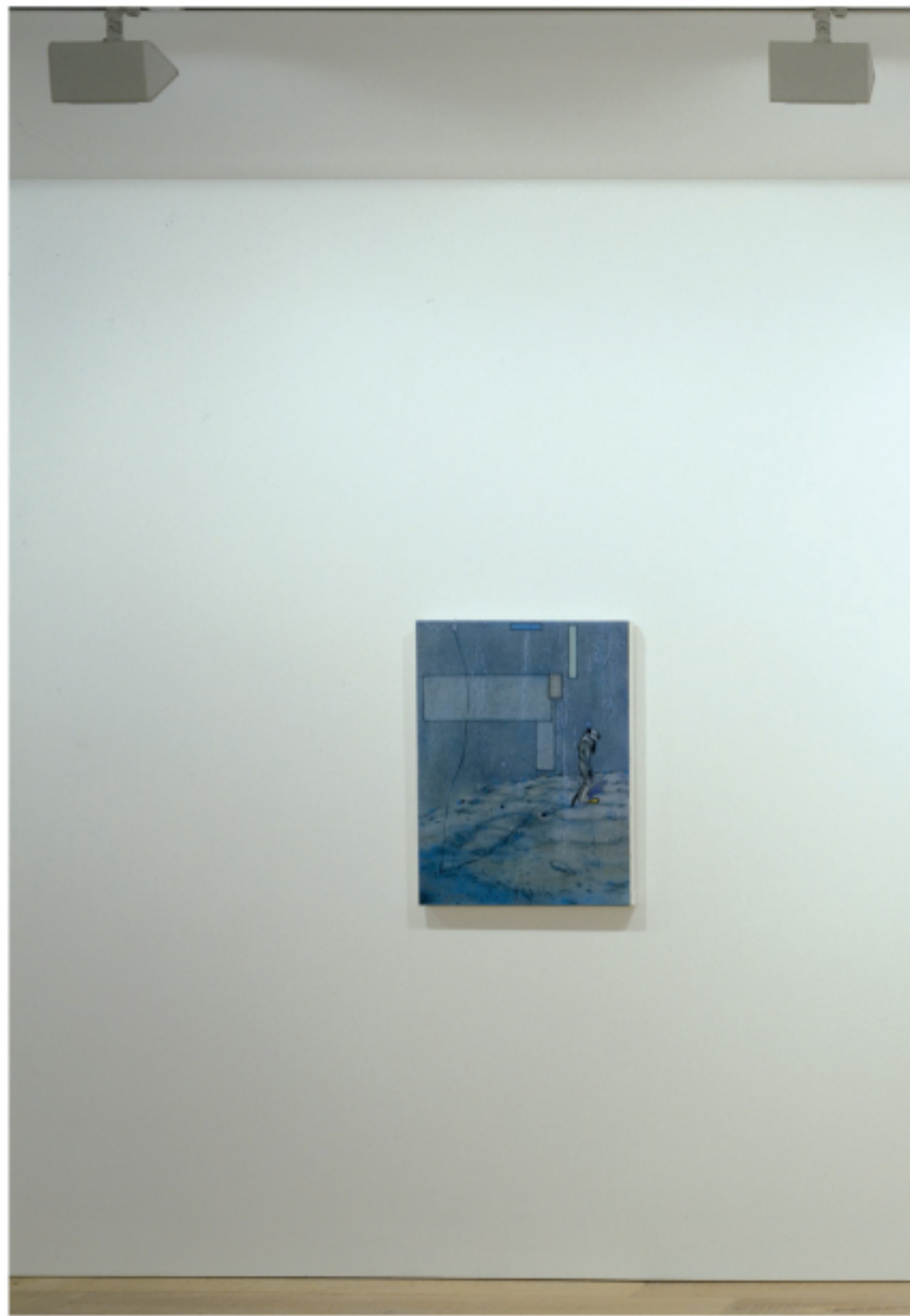


- 1 Staff office
- 2 Gallery
- 3 Shave's office

that the policy has been revised, the art world has moved in en masse. Alison Jacques, Alexandre Pollazon, Matthew Bown, the Approach, and Mummy & Schnelle have all established premises in the area over the past 12 months, with a number of them, like Shave, transferring from the East End. Soon to arrive is Pilar Corrias, who has commissioned Rem Koolhaas

to design a two-storey space opposite Shave's premises.

Shave's gallery has been designed by David Kohn, and is the first built work the architect has completed under his own name. However, Kohn has a particularly strong pedigree in this sector, having been the project architect on the epically scaled space that Caruso St John designed for Larry



View towards Stuart Shave's office. The vertical air extract vent extends up the jamb of the door.

Gagosian in King's Cross. While it was in the nature of Shave's brief that much about the space is generic, Kohn obviously understands the type intimately and has introduced a very high level of refinement. Talking to him and his client, it is clear there is not a single detail that the two haven't discussed at length — a conversation no doubt facilitated by the many months it took to get planning permission.

In choosing a property on which to take a lease, Shave was keen to find a space that would allow Kohn to establish a suite of well proportioned rooms. This was a judgment not only about the available square footage but also about the floor-to-ceiling height. Architect and client are agreed that too tall a space can be as problematic as one that is too low, potentially pushing the viewer and the artwork into an overly confrontational relationship. Shave was also keen to avoid columns in the gallery, the presence of which is considered particularly limiting in a space used to display sculpture.

Of the many properties Shave and Kohn considered, the Eastcastle Street building met these requirements most readily. Kohn has duly configured a plan of four

rooms, in part governed by the desire to conceal the existing columns within the partition walls. Accordingly, the walls are a fantastically thick 740mm, wide enough to recess a computer monitor or to hide additional structural supports if a work of art requires it. Over the past decade, thinking about the ideal build-up for gallery walls has shifted repeatedly in response to a series of failures. The walls of Tate Modern and the New Art Gallery at Walsall are in MDF, but this strategy produced hairline cracking between panels that has required frequent overskimming and repainting. At the Gagosian, a ply backing was employed with a top surface of plasterboard, but the difficulty of sourcing structurally

stable sheets of plywood initially resulted in a significant degree of warping. Kohn has tried a new, and hopefully more stable, solution — a backing sheet of oriented strand board, again topped with a layer of plasterboard. Fingers crossed.

Two lines of columns running perpendicular to the facade divide the space into three structural bays. The column-to-column distance of the central bay is 7.3m, allowing for the creation of a pair of galleries of an equivalent and decent dimension. Two office spaces — one for Shave and one for his staff — have been sited within the much narrower bays to either side. While that diagram suggests a strong hierarchical distinction between galleries and administrative spaces, the distinctive quality of Kohn's scheme derives from his resisting the temptation to make an emphatic distinction between front and back of house. Instead, all four rooms are drawn into a common treatment through the use of some finely gauged planning decisions and a consistent material treatment.

Kohn's new street facade takes its cue from that of the existing building, respecting its tripartite structure with the introduction of

Kohn had hoped to reduce the glass on the street but the local authority was keen to maintain a fully glazed shopfront



PROJECT TEAM Architect David Kohn Architects, Client Stuart Shave/Modern Art, Structural engineer Alan Baxter & Associates, M&E engineer Mendick Waring, Planning supervisor PFB Construction Management Services, Main contractor REM Projects, Electrical contractor Spark Force, Mechanical contractor Branoc Engineering



Looking out towards Eastcastle Street.



Shave's office with original Jeanneret furniture from Chandigarh.



piers in a light grey engineering brick, sited in line with those which extend up the height of the elevation. Originally Kohn had hoped to reduce the amount of glass on the street but the local authority was keen to maintain a fully glazed shop front. Accordingly the two right hand bays, which correspond with the width of the first gallery, are entirely closed with glass. A low iron content has been specified to avoid the usual green hue.

The bay to the left is occupied by full-height glass entrance doors, set back from the street and elevated by a couple of steps. Entering, we discover the narrow first room extends for 15m – the full depth of the plot. Its far end is occupied by a long refectory table, the largest element of a suite of metal elements Kohn has designed for the space, which includes cupboard door handles and catalogue display stands. The design of these elements was prompted by Shave's desire to install Dieter Rams' Vitsoe shelving along one wall of the office. In the elements he contributed, Kohn has slyly channelled the spirit of Rams, emulating the radiused edges of his shelves. Through this strategy a space that risked looking like a

furniture showroom has been cultivated into something far more cohesive.

The rooms are arranged enfilade but the placement of the openings sets up a very particular means of progressing between them. We advance rather in the manner of a knight jumping around a chessboard, making a 90-degree turn at each threshold. The first opening places us on axis with the middle of the long wall in the principal gallery. While having such a quantity of glazing to the street may not be ideal, the arrangement configured here is rather happier than that of, say, the ground floor gallery of David Adjaye's Iniva building. There, visitors are brought in at the back of the space so that the huge, framed view of the street is presented with such force that any exhibition struggles to compete for attention. With Shave's gallery, the means of approaching the space, its reduced height, and the presence of one of the brick piers midway across the width of the glazing all help to mitigate the potentially pictorial nature of the view out.

Conventionally, the options available to a gallery designer in locating the air vents are to site them either in the floor or ceiling,

It's clear there's not a detail that architect and client haven't discussed at length

or in horizontal strips at the foot or head of a wall. Shave stipulated that he didn't want any vents visible at all. Kohn has come up with a very ingenious solution that all but meets this impossible brief: he has sited them vertically. The intake vent is located hard against the window frame of the street glazing, where it can draw in air through a grille mounted externally within the entrance recess. The outtake runs up the side of the door that allows Shave's office to be closed off from the second gallery.

This is the only threshold that can be closed off, but the door is a full-height glass slider – minimally present in its closed position and effectively invisible when open. A sense of spatial continuity is further enforced by continuing the galleries' composite oak floor

into the office; indeed the room has been conceived as offering the potential to provide overflow display space. A desk, chairs and settee are all gathered at the far end – original Pierre Jeanneret pieces, designed for Chandigarh, which are drawn from Shave's collection of 20th century French furniture. Meeting him in this exotic setting feels rather like an encounter with a foreign ambassador in a Graham Greene novel. And yet this tableau is not altogether incongruous – the splayed legs of the long office table Kohn designed in the first room offer a strong premonition of the stylistic concerns of the pieces gathered here.

Kohn and Shave are now plotting the transformation of the large basement into further gallery space. This is likely to involve the reorientation of the stair that occupies the back of the first room so that visitors will be able to access it from the rear gallery. As client and architect are well aware, the challenge is to find a way of extending the spatial sensibility of the ground floor without the sequence taking on a labyrinthine quality. Given the sensitivity with which they have carried out the work to date, I don't doubt they will find a way.

Above: Kohn has designed a suite of pressed metal furniture for the staff office. **Left:** Cupboard door handles echo Dieter Rams' Vitsoe shelving.

