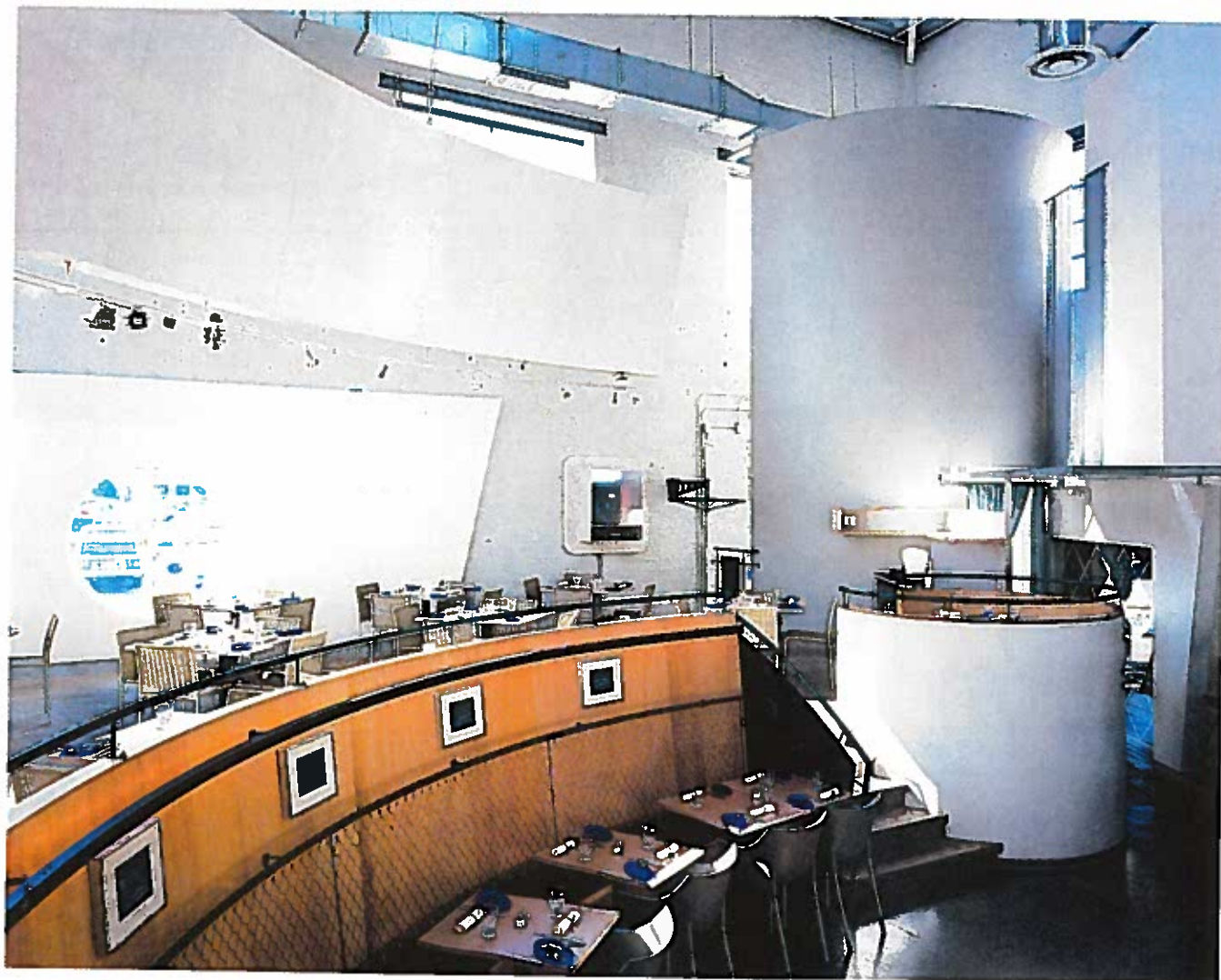


Love Among the Ruins

Not quite. Actually, it's about a handsome new Baltimore

restaurant set among time-worn relics of the city's history. Brian Swanson was the designer.



THE PROJECT ILLUSTRATED HERE is located in one of five turn-of-the-century buildings comprising the American Can Factory in downtown Baltimore. It was abandoned and, as holds true for the whole compound, allowed to deteriorate for going on 40 years; in 1997, it was restored, as part of the now-gentrified Canton area's revitalization program, by developers Struever Brothers, Eccles and Rouse. In '99 it was converted by designer Brian Swanson into a dining establishment considered the centerpiece of a modern retail/office complex—wrapping up, in brief, the background story of the

Atlantic Restaurant. Also a key figure in the plot was Spike Gjerde, owner (with his brother Charlie, who concentrates on business matters) of the hospitality center and collaborator in the evolution of the design process. Their give-and-take idea exchanges ping-ponged over uncounted cups of coffee, Swanson recalls, and then coalesced into a broad visual target picture subsequently refined and translated into construction terms by the designer.

Gjerde, once a philosophy major who strayed into cookery and graduated to chefdom par excellence, wanted this, his third

Baltimore restaurant, to specialize in seafood. Hence the newest property's aqueous name, which, in turn, alludes to the Atlantic Ocean's dynamism faintly reflected in the overall scheme. (There are no obvious, literal →

Opposite: Looking across banquette to mezzanine. Smoke stack dates back to the building's early boiler-room days.

Above: Three-ft.-up dining plateau is topped by a bulkhead used for projection screening of water images. Street corner entry with metal mesh drapery is visible at right.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ERIK KVALSVIK



expressions of thematic totems anywhere. It's all done by inference.) More earthy considerations, however, had prime priority. Since, for instance, the proprietor wanted a 175-person seating capacity, the almost-2,500-sq.-ft. kitchen he needed could not be installed inside the 3,500-sq.-ft. (including mezzanine) building. Along with all other back-of-house facilities, accordingly, the kitchen was consolidated in an adjoining boiler house whose ground floor is three ft. above the entry level in the main building. No one

quite knows why there is a discrepancy in height, but Swanson speculates that there may have been equipment underneath the boiler house. Thus, too, it was the existing architecture that gave, one might say, rise to the rest of the space plan: Within the 42-ft.-tall volume, two dining platforms, a raw bar, and toilets are 36 in. above street level, i.e., aligned with the kitchen; the mezzanine is at 11-ft. height. Overall, the spatial composition brings to mind curved forms within a box accessible via extant corner doors—land-

mark status forbade any change of the exterior, mandating also retention of 16 worn windows facing charmless sights—and scored with a series of intersecting white walls. From entry to two 3-ft.-up plateaus, guests walk along a curving ramp; to reach the mezzanine, they proceed by way of steel-and-glass stairs. Yes, the restaurant is ADA-compliant. →

Above: Steel-and-glass stairway connects elevated dining sector with 11-ft.-high mezzanine level. Double-tier of old industrial windows is valued more for light inflow than exposure to views.

No doubt most striking of all is the preserved infrastructure of raw pockmarked brickwork, smokestacks, exposed ductworks, and other age-ravaged components. Though scrubbed down, rid of nesting pigeons, and given a light cosmetic coating so as visually to sanitize the worst blemishes, the envelope emphasizes, Swanson implies, the historic integrity of the place. Natural light flowing through the aged industrial windows creates an interplay of bright airiness dappled with shadow-play. At dinner time the restaurant is, one might say, as different as night from day: the mood is more intimate, and the interior's looming bulkhead, paralleling the curving sweep of banquette seating, turns into a projection screen showing, says the narrator, "watery images." Seen in the washrooms are slightly canted panel support poles, their $12\frac{1}{2}$ -degree angles repeated in the floor pattern and other areas throughout. Why this scant slant? No particular reason. It looks good. The insertion of new HVAC equipment, needless to say, was not seen as a slight to authenticity.

The budget was tight. From design to completion, the work lasted seven and a half months.

—Monica Geran

Right: Aluminum-framed glass divider and panels of oriented strandboard are found in washrooms. Pipe-and-junction pole and flooring insert are slanted at precisely $12\frac{1}{2}$ -degree angles.

CABINETRY: POPLAR CABINETRY. METALWORK, TABLE TOPS, STEEL/GLASS STAIRS: JOHN GUTIERREZ STUDIOS. LIGHTING: FLOS; DESIGNLITE; DERKSEN USA. FLOORING: AMTICO (EMBOSSSED VINYL TILES); DURKAN (CARPETING); ARMSTRONG (VINYL COMPOSITION TILES); WIDE PLANK FLOORING. METAL MESH: CASCADE COIL DRAPERY, INC. WHITE/ALUMINUM-LEGS DINING CHAIRS: PHILIPPE STARCK THROUGH MOBILI. ROPE/SISAL-BACK CHAIRS BY HENRICO FRANZOLINI, AND EBONIZED WOOD BARSTOOLS BY GROUP ITALIA: THROUGH DOMUS DESIGN CENTER. PIPE-AND-JUNCTION SYSTEM: HOLLAENDER. BATHROOM SINK: PHILIPPE STARCK FOR DURAVIT. GRAPHICS DESIGNER: JENNIFER PHILIPS. MECHANICAL/ELECTRICAL ENGINEERS: GR ENGINEERING. STRUCTURAL ENGINEERS: SKARDA & ASSOC. CONTRACTOR, DEVELOPERS: STRUEVER BROTHERS, ECCLES AND ROUSE.

