

The café in the courtyard

The Café in the Courtyard - a temporary café at St Martin-in-the-Fields by Platform 5 Architects (www.platform5architects.com) - opened for business this year, and enjoyed a highly successful first season.

Space filler

Situated between Trafalgar Square and The Strand, the East Courtyard at St Martin-in-the-Fields is a rare open space in central London. It had been largely under-utilised, however, despite the many thousands of tourists and workers who pass by every day.

St Martin-in-the-Fields saw the opportunities presented by the courtyard, and commissioned Platform 5 Architects to design a new temporary café to occupy part of it during the summer months.

The Café in the Courtyard expands St Martin-in-the-Fields' well-established catering operation, complementing the church's popular Café in the Crypt, which has been running for over 25 years.

The new building (constructed by Prestige Kiosks, www.prestigekiosks.com) acts as a useful street-side marker in a key location, drawing visitors into the courtyard to use the café and encouraging them to spend time at St Martins' itself. Whereas the Café in the Crypt is particularly well used during wet weather or the colder months, the Café in the Courtyard has proved to be a very popular outdoor catering facility during the summer, report its operators.

It is an extension of St Martin-in-the-Fields' ethos of welcome and hospitality to its diverse mix of communities including congregations, concert-goers, tourists, local residents and office workers. Both outlets generate important

income to support the work of St Martin-in-the-Fields and the long term preservation of its listed buildings.

Temporary but functional

The Café in the Courtyard is a small, self-contained temporary structure, positioned in a corner of the courtyard opposite St Martin's East Window. Its simple design is sympathetic to its historic surroundings, while contemporary materials are used to provide a pleasing visual contrast and a focus for the site.

Conceived as a simple portico structure, its recessed sides give a lightweight appearance while deep eaves provide shelter or shade during the day as well as a storage area for tables and chairs at night. Its peened stainless steel cladding offers a softer counterpoint to the courtyard's tall iron railings and a discreet presence alongside its Georgian neighbours. Inside, a contrasting bright brass mesh cladding catches varying light throughout the day, lending



visual interest to the open sides of the kiosk.

Lightweight yet stylish tables and chairs are used during the day to seat up to 40 people, and stored within the unit when the café is not in operation. Simple stainless steel roller shutters secure the unit when not in use.

The café was carefully designed to allow it to be fully set up every morning and put away each night in around 20 minutes. A key element of the brief was to design a kiosk that was comfortable and practical for two people to operate, while keeping everything as compact as possible.

"Our design successfully achieves this," says Peter Allen, partner at Platform 5 Architects. "When developing the internal layout we spent a great deal of time considering the practicalities and ergonomics of its day-to-day operation so that all equipment is within easy reach.

"Despite the very compact size (37.5 cubic metres), it is remarkable how much equipment is contained within



the unit. This includes a coffee machine and grinder, hot water boiler, two blenders, soup and stew kettle, panini grill, upright fridge, chiller display and under-counter fridge. Alongside this equipment there is still plenty of room to spare for tables and chairs to be stored within the unit every night."

Planning consent for the Café in the Courtyard was granted in July 2012, and followed a thorough consultation exercise with St Martin-in-the-Fields and its many different user groups, as well as other local and amenity organisations.

"As St Martin-in-the-Fields is Grade I listed, we worked carefully to address the heritage concerns of conservation officers and statutory consultees," adds Peter Allen. "The existing planning consent is temporary and will allow the café to operate until October 2015.

"Asteco, a leading producer of prefabricated metal structures, built the unit in Italy to our bespoke design. The café took three months to build, and included a number of unusual elements including the brass mesh, which was shipped to Rotterdam to be resin encased before returning to Rome.

"From there, the kiosk and all equipment (specified by us and

supplied by Asteco) was shipped to the UK by lorry. The kiosk arrived in two sections, and was craned onto the site during an operation that lasted around just one hour. Fit out and installation took one day, before the Café in the Courtyard was ready to welcome its first customers."

All day service

The café operates from 10.00am every day, and remains open until dusk. Hot and cold drinks are served throughout the day, with a range of high quality food to take away or eat in including cakes and pastries, soup, salads and sandwiches.

From 5.00pm, the menu changes, offering an eat-in selection of tapas, snacks and alcoholic drinks and making it a popular option for pre-theatre or post-work visitors (it is estimated that the café will have served up to 15,000 people at the end of the current season).

As the café only operates during the summer months, it can be easily removed from the site on the back of a truck and taken for storage during the winter. Once on site, it simply sits on the ground with no permanent fixtures. Although it is connected to water and power on site, everything else is completely self-contained including waste water tanks.

Heritage site

The Café in the Courtyard is not the first time St Martin-in-the-Fields has commissioned contemporary architecture to complement its Grade I listed buildings. In 2007 a major renewal project was undertaken by Eric Parry Architects to refurbish the original church, crypt and public realm, and introduce a new entrance pavilion.

In commissioning Platform 5 Architects soon after the completion of this refurbishment, St Martin-in-the-Fields is continuing a programme of using contemporary art and architecture to enhance the original building, designed by James Gibbs and completed in 1726.

"We are delighted at the success of the Café in the Courtyard, and pleased that our client is very happy with the end result too," reports Peter Allen.

Allyson Hargreaves, business operations director at St Martin-in-the-Fields adds: "After several years in the planning we were delighted to see the launch of the first season of the Café in the Courtyard. Platform 5's design has exceeded our requirements by creating a space that not only beautifully suits the environs but also provides a practical work area for our team. As for our customers - they love it - and we are pleased to see some of them returning several times during the week."

As all involved had hoped, the Café in the Courtyard has proved to be a stylish little building that has brought a fresh identity and new activity to an otherwise under-used pocket of London, as well as valuable additional income to St Martin-in-the-Fields.

While producing something temporary yet stylish for such a sensitive site was a challenge, all hope that the unit offers a contemporary and highly functional model for catering or retail outlets elsewhere, particularly in locations with high heritage value.

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