



ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

DESIGN VANGUARD
10 young firms reshaping the globe

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

**SPECIAL JURY SELECTIONS:
THE BEST PRODUCTS OF
2003**

PLUS **Digital Practice Section**

Lever House Restaurant New York City

3 MARC NEWSON INSERTS A STYLISH, FUTURISTIC FIFTIES RESTAURANT TO THE LANDMARK LEVER HOUSE.

By Cynthia Davidson

Interior Designer: Groupe Marc Newson, Paris—Marc Newson, principal; Sébastien Segers, consulting architect

Client: Joshua Pickard, John McDonald, Robert Nagle, Aby Rosen

Architect of record: CAN

Resources—Taavo Somer, Derek Sanders, Serge Becker, Judy Wong, project team

Associate architects: MGZ Architecture

Consultants: Vogel Taylor Engineers (mechanical engineering); L'Observatoire (lighting); Super Structures (structural)

Size: 6,500 square feet, 130 seats

Cost: \$5 million

Completion date: August 2003

Sources

Custom seating and furniture: Meritalia (Como) according to designs by Marc Newson

Bar counter and tunnel surface: Dupont Corian

Carpet: Durkan

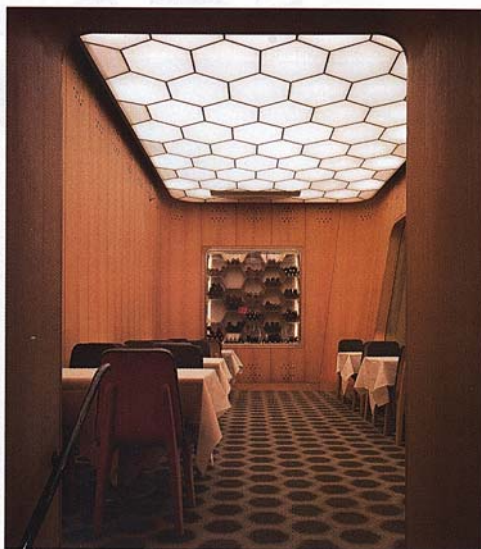
Granite: Cold Springs Granite

The value of the Lever House as a Modern icon on New York's Park Avenue was recognized when the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission designated the building a landmark in 1983, even though the Skidmore, Owings & Merrill design was only 31 years old (hardly an antique). Appropriately, by its 50th anniversary in 2002, the building was nearing complete restoration and rehabilitation [RECORD, March 2003, page 122], but bringing it back to life required more than new lobby furniture and curtain wall. A critical issue for lease-holder RFR was to animate the ground-floor space formerly occupied by a conference room and Lever Brothers company store.

Program

Enter New York restaurateurs John McDonald and Josh Pickard, who opened the Lever House Restaurant in August. The available 6,500-square-foot space is actually subterranean and windowless but accessible directly from 53rd Street on the south side of the building. The frontage available for establishing the restaurant's identity is minimal, and landmark laws prevent excessive signage on the building. Then designer Marc Newson came on board, an Australian (living in Paris) with a reputation for things curvilinear—bikes,

Cynthia Davidson is the editor of Log, a new publication of observations on architecture in the city.



chairs, airplane interiors, the "stuff that surrounds you"—with a retro Modern aesthetic that *Wallpaper* magazine has made so fashionable.

Solution

In less than three years, Newson concocted a pod of hexagons and curved surfaces that is both retro (fitting for a 1950s mothership) and very now. Working with in-house consulting architect Sébastien Segers, he created windows in the windowless space by lining one side of the

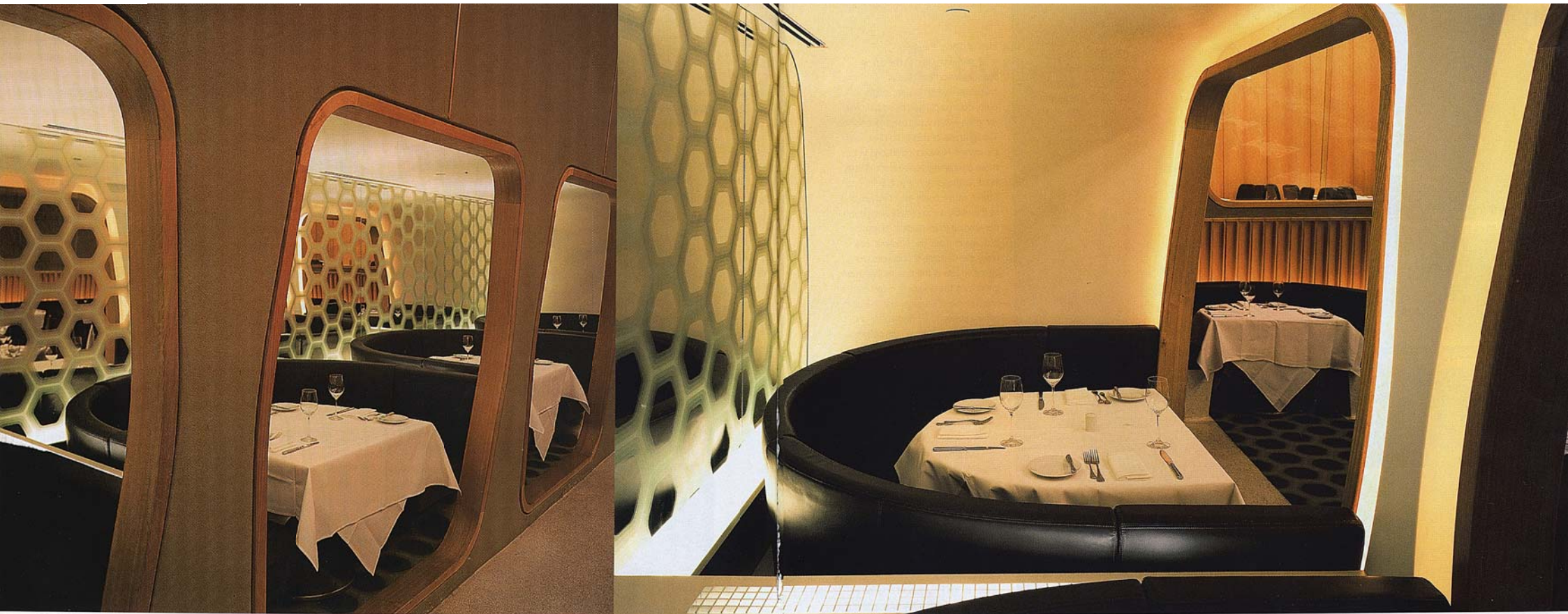
room with large curved openings that resemble the windows in passenger trains. Diners step through them to sit at curving banquettes and look back at the crowd on the floor 6 inches—but feeling much farther—below. A large opening in the wall at the far end spans nearly the width of the room, framing a private, 22-seat dining room. This window is fitted with sliding sheets of clear glass that when closed provide acoustic, but not visual, privacy; hence diners here are always onstage, a twist on the

Visitors enter the main dining room (this page) after passing through a 20-foot-long tunnel lined in Corian. At the rear, an elevated dining area overlooks the space.



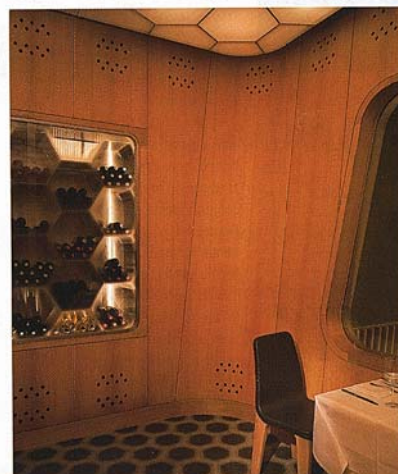
PHOTOGRAPHY: © FRANK OUDEMAN

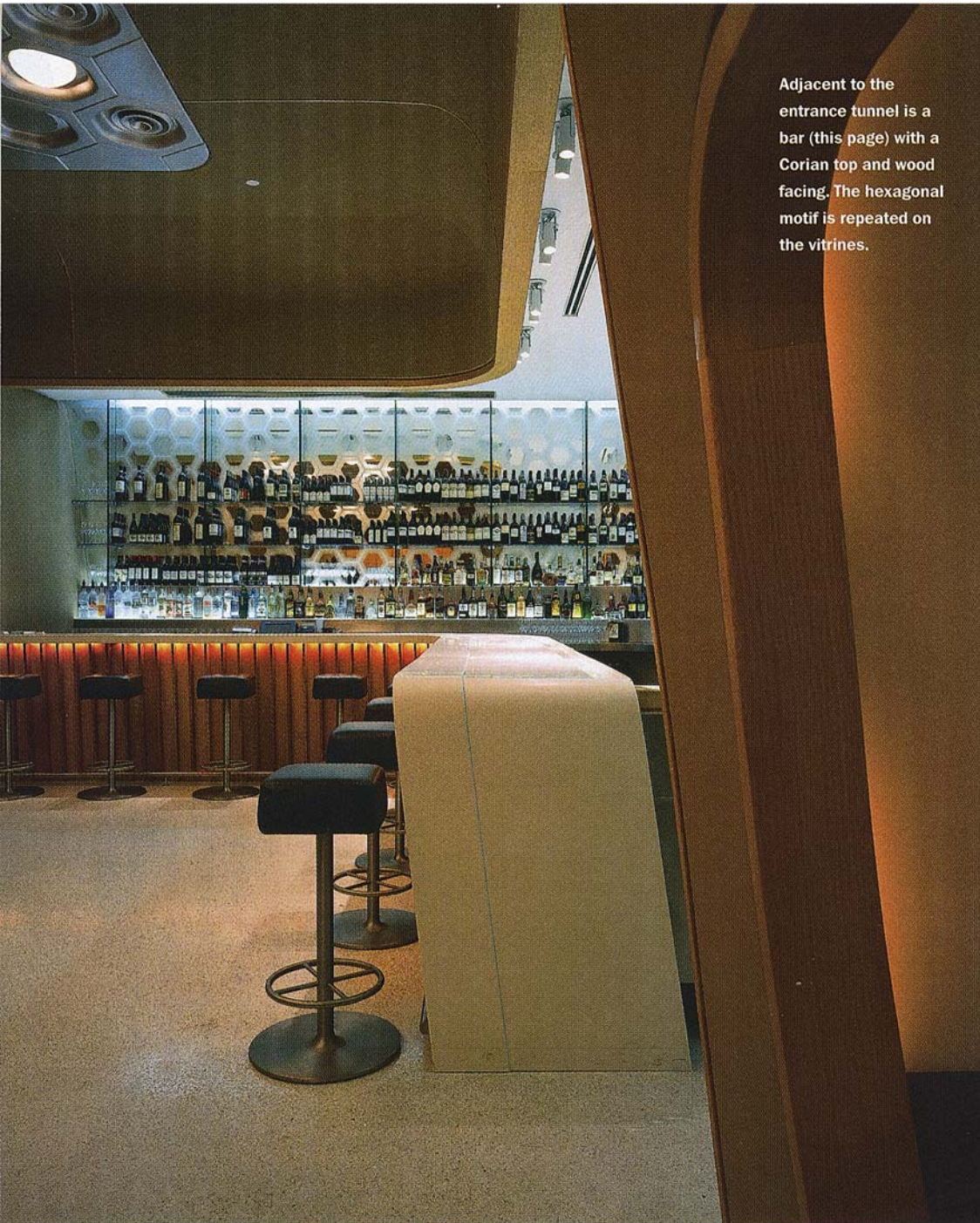
For more information on this project, go to Projects at www.architecturalrecord.com.



Rounded booths trimmed in blond oak line the west wall of the main dining room (above and opposite, top). Visitors enter from the street through a dark vestibule where

the wine is displayed (right), before entering the white tunnel. A glass wine cabinet and a view of the main room enliven the 22-seat dining room (opposite, bottom two).





Adjacent to the entrance tunnel is a bar (this page) with a Corian top and wood facing. The hexagonal motif is repeated on the vitrines.

idea of dinner theater.

At the bar and in the dining room, Newson uses banal materials—white Corian; rough, putty-colored plaster; blond oak; mirror glass—with a high-style sensibility. The lightness of these materials and the curves Newson introduces to the room are highlighted by a completely black, orthogonal entry off 53rd Street, where coats are checked, and at the back, a completely black corridor leading to all-black restrooms (fixtures and all). The blackout look hides the damage that occurs with intensive use of the spaces, but more important, the darkness heightens one's sense of passage into the light, central space. The honeycomb of hexagons underfoot on the carpet, overhead in the coffered ceiling and private dining room lighting, as well as behind the bar, simply add geometric amusement for the eye.

Newson sets the scene for the action with an illuminated curved tunnel of white Corian that descends from the street-level lobby to the below-grade main dining room. This passage transports diners—like astronauts—into another dimension, where, unaware of eating in what is nearly a basement, the diners offer themselves to chef Dan Silverman.

Commentary

Lever House Restaurant opened in August 2003. On a Tuesday evening in September, the room was humming with an overflow crowd; without a reservation, one must wait 2 hours for a table on what is reportedly the slow night of the week. Is it the food or the ambience that the throngs are seeking?

The lobster tempura and roasted wild salmon are delicious, but no more impressive than the food served at the historic, Philip Johnson–designed Four Seasons Restaurant only one block away. That center for the power lunch seems to be the logical Lever House precedent. The difference in the decor is notable. Where Johnson's rooms continue to ooze a certain elegance, Newson's are more pop. Their lack of subtlety seems to destine them for a much shorter lifespan. ■

1. Entry
2. Coat check
3. Tunnel
4. Bar
5. Main dining room
6. Private dining room
7. Entrance to kitchen
8. Passage to Lever House lobby
9. Lever House exterior courtyard

