



BUILDING ■ Stable condition: tea in the park at Wakehurst Place

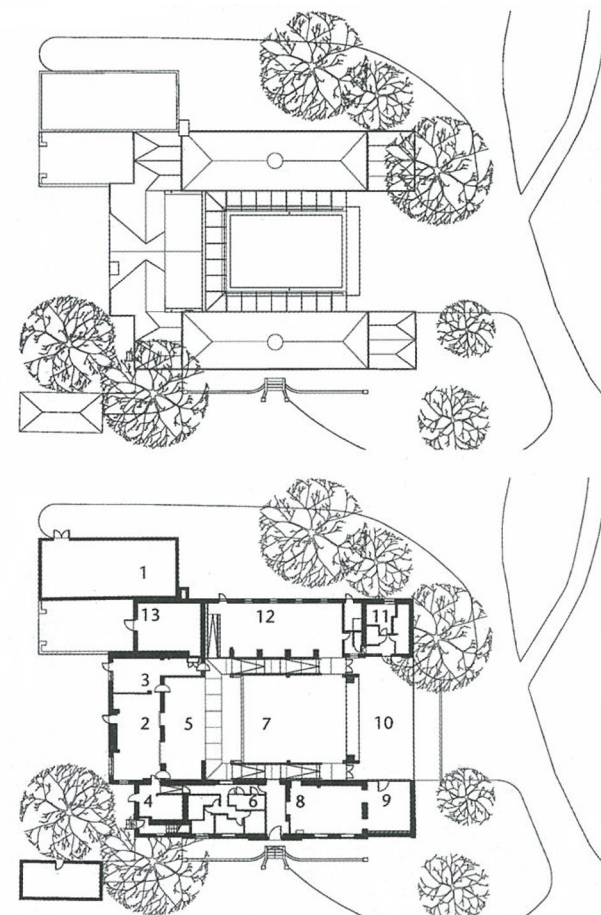
Walters & Cohen's contemporary addition to a former stable block is subtle and successful, says Jonathan Hale. Photos: Dennis Gilbert.

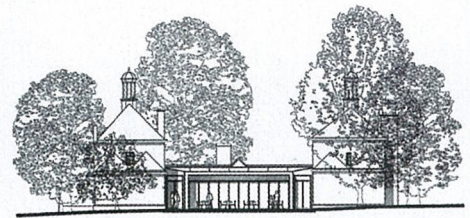
Above East elevation, with fully retractable sliding-folding doors.
Above, right An acoustic ceiling compensates for the use of hard, reflective materials elsewhere in the building.
Opposite Ground floor and roof plans: 1 plant, 2 kitchen, 3 wash-up area, 4 cold store, 5 existing servery, 6 store rooms, staff rooms and offices, 7 new central infill area, 8 existing seating area, 9 new servery area, 10, courtyard seating area, 11 wcs, 12 existing seating area, 13 boiler room; frameless glazing runs between the new 'table' roof and the three interior faces of the existing stable block; view east from the ramp flanking the central eating area.

Arriving at the entrance to Wakehurst Place in Sussex – run as an outpost of Kew Gardens but owned by the National Trust – two things become apparent: the first is the size of the car park which confirms the popularity of the place; around 400,000 visitors per year make it the most visited garden in the country. The second is the bold and stylish profile of Walters & Cohen's earlier visitor centre, a pristine steel and timber box that makes a dramatic contrast with its natural setting. As a client, Wakehurst is clearly not afraid to juxtapose historic context with hard-edged contemporary design, and it should be commended again for taking a similar approach to the refurbishment of the Stables restaurant.

With a budget of just £600,000, this would appear to be a simpler project than the visitor centre, but the problems of dealing with a grade II listed building made it even more of a challenge for the designers. The new restaurant slots neatly into the courtyard of a U-shaped stable block, replacing a glazed lean-to circulation space erected in the late 1980s. This structure previously linked the

servery in the westerly block with the seating areas in the north and south wings, and the traces of its connection to the historic fabric have been carefully retained in the finished interior. A frieze of bolt-holes and chased grooves runs like a musical score around the perimeter walls, reminding the more keen-eyed observers of the ongoing process by which – as Stewart Brand described it – buildings 'learn'. The former seating areas have been retained as overspill around what is now the central focal space, separated by a slot of frameless roof glazing which runs around the three internal faces of the stable block and cleverly highlights the textures of the existing stonework. The seventeenth century south wing is built in hand-cut blocks of local Ardingly sandstone, and the new construction is kept deliberately 'neutral', avoiding competition with the richness of the stone. The only exception to this is the rear (west) wall which is painted a vivid terracotta colour. This forms a kind of proscenium above the servery area which helps to draw visitors in from the full-width entrance with its warm and welcoming glow.





The new roof of the main space could be described as a six-legged 'table', originally designed as a system of precast concrete portal frames spanning ten metres across the dining area. In the end, the limited budget meant that the two inner frames had to be built in steel, but these were boxed in and painted white, maintaining the crisp geometry of the initial concept. Only the exposed outer frame remained in white concrete, which has meant losing some of the integrity of the table idea, although the east elevation still makes a dramatic impression, particularly when the glazed doors are fully retracted. As a one-off, this precast element had to be shuttered in timber rather than steel, resulting in a slight compromise on the standard of finish, not helped by the poor pointing to the column-beam junctions.

Internally, the neutral quality of the new finishes creates a remarkably comfortable and relaxing atmosphere – partly due to the acoustically absorbent ceiling panels which offset the effects of the other mainly hard interior surfaces. The granite floor is also exploited for architectural effect, running out from the main space onto the forecourt which is used for outdoor seating in summer. The granite also runs down two ramps that lead down from the entrance to the servery at the western end, subtly separating

Top left Granite flooring is used both internally and externally.
Above East elevation showing the new insertion between the north and south wings of the former stable block.
Left The central seating area is the restaurant's focal point.
Below Section through kitchen, servery and seating area.

