

■ Story by Robert Bevan

Projects include a spin-off from the Costa cafe chain (below); Hampstead House (right) and Portobello Dock (bottom).

## London calling

Stiff & Trevillion's eclectic client list runs from Adele's country retreat to the Costa coffee chain and a Sydney art fair.



Michael Stiff runs a studio with big name clients but close working relationships.



**F**or an architect known for his artsy clients and swlegant interiors – think central London restaurant Villandry and homes for singers Adele and Blur/Gorillaz frontman Albarn – Michael Stiff doesn't build castles in the sky.

Stiff & Trevillion, the London studio he and Andrew Trevillion set up 25 years ago, also serves less glamorous, more mainstream businesses such as Britain's Costa coffee shop chain. Stiff's work for Costa began when the owners of the four-decades-old coffee house realised that, while doing well, they were missing out on prestige retail sites – and customers – due to the look of their cafes.

"The existing Costa brand was a success, but the design was not attractive to the smarter landlords in London and other key cities," says Stiff. "Costa could not get units in the better developments."

Stiff worked with the owners on a spin-off brand, the two-and-a-half-year-old Metropolitan. The brief was to make the cafes "cooler, stylish and attractive to a younger, design-aware audience". With exposed brick, rough wood, mongrel chairs and pendant lighting, the aesthetic of the new venues combines the easygoing feel of a typical English pub with the look of hipster bars which have sprung up everywhere from Berlin to Brooklyn.

Trained at the Polytechnic of Central London, Stiff worked at commercial practices Rock Townsend and Chapman Taylor, where he and fellow graduate Trevillion did competitions and small domestic projects on the side before striking out on their own. In

the 1990s the practice ventured overseas, opening a Berlin office, but it has since contracted back to the UK. "At the time the UK economy was counter-cyclical with the German economy," Stiff says. "In 1990 the UK was in the depth of a recession and Germany had reunited, which created a lot of investment," he says. "By the time the big Berlin projects completed, both markets had turned, and London was beginning to move again."

The studio deliberately does not have a signature style. "I suppose we are modernists who are interested in light, space and something fairly timeless," Stiff says. The duo's former college tutor Eric Parry remains an influence. Parry is not a household name, but his polished restraint is widely admired in UK architectural circles. "Our work uses scale, proportion, reference and materiality in a similar way to Eric," says Stiff. "There is a modesty and craft within his work that we aspire to."

The 57-year-old has recently turned his focus to Australia, where he is designing the look and layout of the inaugural Sydney Contemporary art fair, which will run from September 20 to 22 at Carriageworks in Redfern. Some 70 galleries will showcase the work of living artists, about a third of them from overseas. It is one of a roster of such events masterminded by Brit Tim Etchells, who has used Stiff for other fairs including London's inaugural Art 13 in March.

In Sydney, Stiff has designed the venue's entrance, ticketing booth, VIP and dining areas as well as the gallery stalls, which will be configured along indoor streets leading off a main spine. There will be no architectural

acrobatics on show; galleries do not like anything to compete with the art within. "What you mustn't do is make it look like an attempt at art or anything sculptural."

It's a far cry from Stiff's work for pop stars, about which he is predictably discreet. He says little about the country retreat designed for Adele other than to confirm the view of Richard Russell of XL Recordings, who says he has never met anyone as efficient in the studio as the singer. "She was the same with us – decisive, great taste, knew exactly what she wanted," says Stiff.

Despite being typecast as specialists in interiors, the studio has won commissions to design new buildings, including a £35 million (\$58 million) red sandstone retail and office building on London's pricey Sloane Street, and a silver brick office building near the Angel tube station for design-led developers Derwent. "When you set out, your ambition is to leave your mark on London, and finally we will have half a dozen finished buildings."

With four directors and some 35 staff, Stiff is mindful that business growth doesn't undermine the collegiate nature of the practice. "It is a studio in the old-fashioned sense of the word. I want to be able to walk past somebody's desk and see what they are doing, not just have a meeting with them for 10 minutes every Monday morning." ■



Expanding from interiors ... the planned Sloane Street building.