





the secret garden

For a new Philadelphia restaurant, Rockwell Group created a modern souk fantasy

text: jorge s. arango photography: eric laignel





How do you create a cohesive design for a restaurant serving Vietnamese brisket sandwiches, lamb chops with peanut sauce, and papadum? Without wandering all over the map, David Rockwell proposed an "oasis in the city" for the global-tapas concept Stephen Starr initially had in mind for his Philadelphia restaurant Washington Square. When the menu shifted to American-brasserie, Rockwell's design remained relevant. "We had proposed a series of rooms within a room that together can be as free and multilayered as the city itself," he says.

Having previously collaborated with Starr on interiors for dining venues El Vez, the dramatically moody Alma de Cuba, and the futuristic Pod, Rockwell decided this one needed a subtler treatment than diners have come to expect from the restaurateur.

The architect transformed a 2,400-square-foot courtyard along the building's north side into an Arabian palace-style garden. The main entrance moved from the street front to the new outdoor lounge—it rests between the restaurant (formerly art deco offices) and an apartment building. He sheltered it with canvas panels stretched on steel cables connected to both buildings, then clustered teak benches and chairs in front of a white concrete bar whose acrylic feature wall, pierced to emulate North African fretwork, glows with backlighting.

Taking cues from the made-over courtyard, the narrow 4,200-square-foot interior is divided into "a series of extravagant garden follies," as Rockwell puts it. Three contiguous garden-facing dining rooms run from the front of the building to the rear.

A Moroccan-inspired décor allowed for the fritted details and repetitive patterns of an exotic street bazaar. Just as in these marketplaces, soft barriers abound. Instead of opaque partitions, furniture, screens, and drapes delineate areas.

In the front dining room, only airy screens of woven abaca stretched over bent steel

Previous spread, left: Rockwell Group's interior for Washington Square in Philadelphia is pure Arabian palace. Silk chiffon surrounds these 12-foot-long sofas. *Previous spread, right:* Moroccan fretwork inspired screens and lanterns throughout.

Opposite: The first of three contiguous dining rooms offers a view of the other two. *Above:* Woven abaca on bent-steel screens frames the first dining room. *Below:* The 13-foot-high screens are anchored to bases on the horsehair banquettes.





separate the cream-colored backs of banquettes from the rest of the space. These frame a view through a casbah-inspired dining area in the center to another cream-colored vignette in the rear.

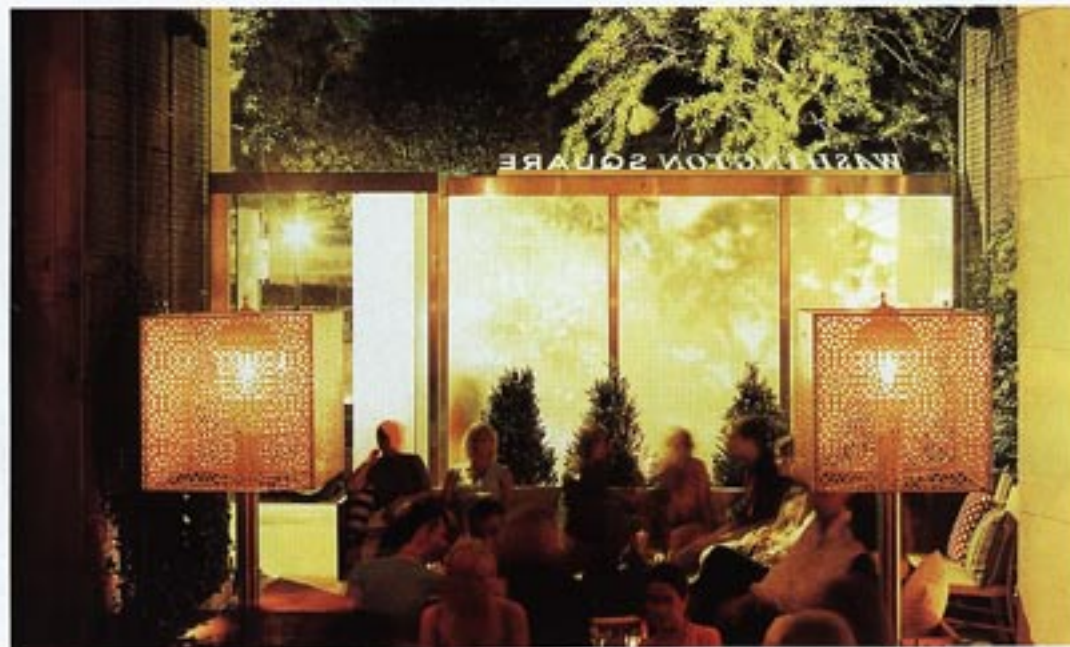
The central blue dining room elevates the aesthetic to royal proportions. It features two 12-foot-long gilt-edged baroque sofas and a gold-leaf-on-steel chandelier with blue Austrian crystal droplets. Blue silk chiffon drapes envelop it. "I may have been in my Saudi-palace phase," Rockwell admits. An oversize gilt picture frame further embellishes a view of this area for diners in the front. And in the third area, designated for private dining, the front room's décor repeats, except for one detail: An enormous backlit photograph of Washington Square stands in for a real view enjoyed by the front tables.

Having given these areas the garden views, the architect placed a bar-lounge along the right wall. What was once half the building's grand lobby now holds the black concrete bar, ottomans covered in black-and-white zebra-print horsehair, and original deco escutcheons. The look is a note of lively cosmopolitanism next to the draped dining areas. But this is as civilized as Rockwell's garden grows. The rest is dreamy contemporary souk. *—*

PROJECT TEAM: ETIENNE FANG; TED GALPERIN; JOOST LANGEVELD; GREGORY STANFORD.

DRAPES (BLUE ROOM): FORTUNY; **SOFA FABRICATION:** ASTORIA IMPORTS; **SOFA FABRIC:** VALLEY FORGE FABRICS; **CHANDELIER:** MURRAY'S IRON WORKS; **CUT-VINYL LANTERNS (GARDEN):** APPLIED IMAGE; **BANQUETTE FABRICATION (CREAM ROOMS):** WOOD, SPRING & DOWN; **BANQUETTE UPHOLSTERY (BACKS):** CORTINA LEATHERS; **SEATS:** BLANT TEXTILES CORPORATION; **TABLE TOPS:** ATTA; **SCREENS:** KENNETH COBONPUE; **TABLE BASES, DINING CHAIRS:** ISA INTERNATIONAL; **BENCHES (GARDEN):** WALTERS WICKER; **SIGNAGE:** CITY SIGN SERVICE; **BOX SHADE (BAR-LOUNGE):** MOSS; **ZUZKA (FIBER-OPTIC FABRIC):** OTTOMAN UPHOLSTERY: EDELMAN LEATHER; **STOOLS:** BLU DOT DESIGN & MANUFACTURING; **CONSULTANTS:** ISOMETRIX LIGHTING + DESIGN (LIGHTING); HOFFMAN DESIGN GROUP (LANDSCAPE); MUCCA DESIGN (GRAPHICS); **MEP ENGINEER:** EDWARD B. O'REILLY & ASSOCIATES; **PROJECT ARCHITECT:** WYANT ARCHITECTURE; **GENERAL CONTRACTOR:** DOMUS.

Above: Rockwell transformed the former courtyard into a palace garden, stretching canvas canopies from the restaurant to an adjacent apartment building. Teak benches feature cushions covered by sun- and stain-resistant acrylic. *Below:* To create the impression of an exotic oasis in the middle of a city, the street-front entrance was moved to the garden. Acrylic signage tops the wall of steel-framed acid-etched glass. Green LEDs illuminate it at night. *Opposite:* The box shade floating over the bar is fabric embedded with thousands of fiber optics.



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