Mod Pod

At Philadelphia's Pod restaurant, Rockwell Group finds groove is in the heart of new materials.

SO WHAT ARE THEY talking about in Philadelphia? Rumor has it that among discriminating devotees of fine dining in hospitable surrounds, the topic *de jour et soir* is Pod, a restaurant designed by New York-based Rockwell Group. What sparks the chatter most particularly are the atypical materials used in inventive ways. Also noted are the prevailing atmosphere that manages to be both modern and romantic, and the choice of furnishings, described as fresh and different and young. Some see signs of David Rockwell's fascination with robotic animation as found in Japan; others comment that artificial lights seem to "paint" the place with graphics and variegated hues. And in a more pedestrian vein, people rave about the food. This wondrously inviting tableau—it's named after the pod that cradles peas, here interpreted as independent space entities related to dining—is owned and operated by restaurateur Stephen Starr. The 7,800-sq.-ft. venue is located in a new hotel on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania, whose business school owns the relevant site.

While Rockwell and Starr had not worked together before, the architect notes, this particular job was one of those just-right, meant-to-be collaborative endeavors. Both principals had the same viewpoint about the desired aesthetics of commerce generally, and were intrigued by the challenge of exploring a new territory, specifically the heretofore untapped market of students and faculty, followed by relatives, friends, colleagues, etc. How the de-facto partners' plans were turned into →

Left: View from entry to rear catches sight of bar with counter of back-lit amber resin at left, lounge seating unit of bright red urethane foam opposite, and step-down strip with rubberized escalator handrails leading to varied dining areas. Sound-absorbent ceiling is of acoustical foam tiles.

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL WARCHOL

have a place for "lounging and playing." Along the window wall behind the lounge is a row of two-seater pods, each containing a cantilevered tabletop and pair of chairs.

Transition to the next zone is via four steps flanked with rubber-wrapped handrails more commonly used for escalators. Occupying half of the space are vari-sized dining pods collectively accommodating 120 guests; two small enclosures form bookends for the 34 stools at the sushi bar. Total seating capacity amounts to 244. Some dining chairs incorporate hollow spaces for stashing backpacks and shopping totes, a long-overdue touch of brilliant thinking and doing. Still, were an overall winner to be chosen, the majority vote no doubt would elect the sushi bar as Rockwell's pièce de résistance. It is bordered with a 55-ft.-long conveyer belt surfaced with a Japanese plastic material. The counter is of Corian, and the bar's lining is of stainless steel. Walls and ceilings throughout are painted with white high-gloss epoxy paint.

That leaves the rear portion, dedicated to private dining. Here one finds three panels, each with nine big cast-resin buttons programmed to drench (upon human contact) a particular area in the chosen color. Wall cutouts allow guests to compare different chromatics.
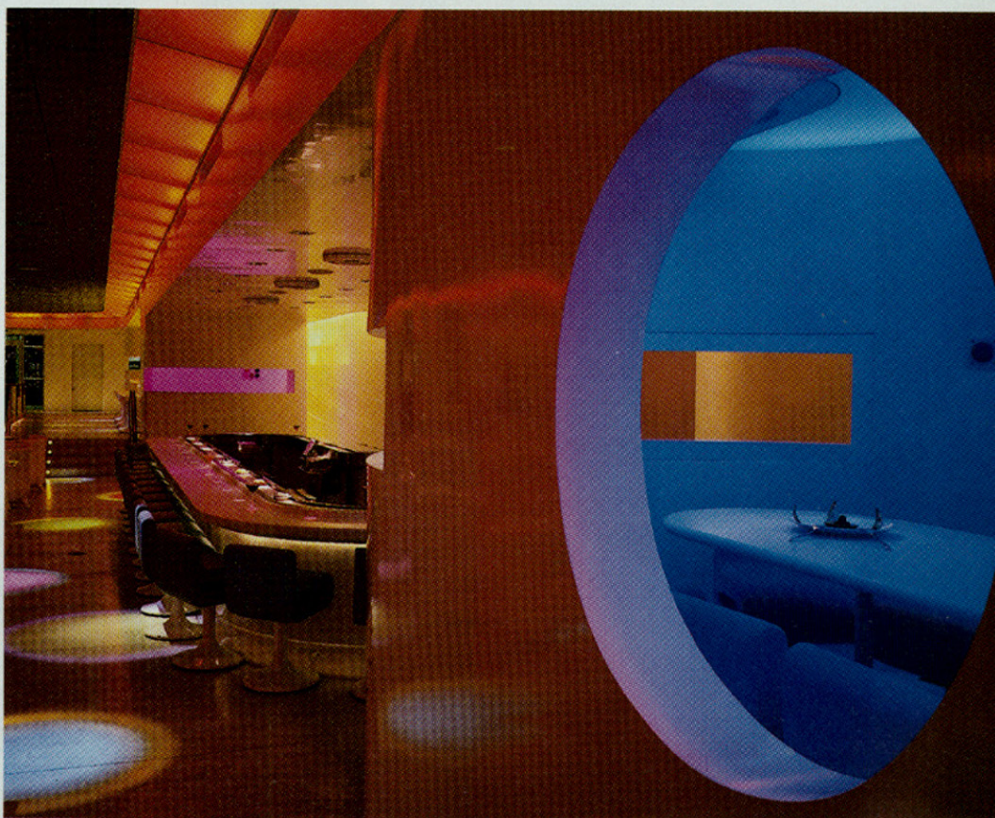
Collaborating were senior associate-in-charge Sam Trimble, project manager Jun Aizaki, senior interior designer Kimberly Silvia Hall, and staff members Yael Bahar with Jennifer Morris. DAS Architects were the architects of record. —*Monica Geran*

Opposite: Slowly moving conveyor belt at sushi bar previews dishes of the day; counter of Corian forms 55-ft.-long loop. Lights projected from ceiling cast colorful patterns on concrete floor.

Above: View into one of two circular two dining pods that flank the sushi bar.

Right: Color can be manipulated by activating cast-resin buttons affixed to the wall.

Left: Lineup of elevated units for dining à deux runs parallel to windowed perimeter. Gel cushions provide soft seating; tables are cantilevered from wall.

Opposite: Segment of main dining area, looking past silicon tube curtain to private seating terminus. Acrylic-coated tabletops bear silk-screened circle patterns; hollow space under chair seat is for parking of backpacks and other portable baggage.

reality emerges from a synopsis of sights and reactions experienced by visitors going from Pod's entry to its terminus.
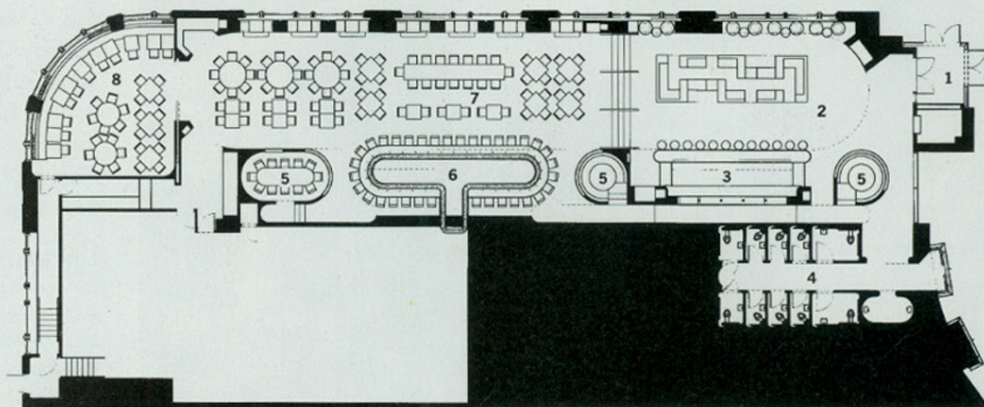
Stepping from the street into a small vestibule set aglow by a translucent honeycombed panel with red-film-lettered Pod logo, one turns slightly right to face the whole interior stretch. Eyes, suggests Rockwell, are apt to go upward first, attracted by the oval "race course" ceiling with center field of color-cued, acoustical foam-rubber tiles; ringing the interior roof are back-lit coving and Sheetrock soffits. Three four-ft.-diameter ceiling cutouts topped with neon appear to hover over the lounge configuration; colored lights projected through smaller overhead apertures cast brightening/fading color graphics onto the concrete floor. The bar's lozenge-shaped counter is of translucent amber resin embedded with white neon lights; glazed bottle displays look clear or frosted, depending on the viewer's position, due to a lenticular glass treatment.

The aforementioned lounge configuration merits elaboration. It goes by the name of "barge," "sculpture," or "platform;" to an airborne bird, it would look like a Greek-key composition or a garden maze. Rockwell refers to its material genesis as a big wad of urethane foam colored bright fireman's red, subsequently sculptured into seating and serving supports. The idea, he adds, is to →

1 ENTRY
2 LOUNGE
3 BAR
4 RESTROOMS
5 POD DINING AREA
6 SUSHI BAR
7 MAIN DINING
8 PRIVATE DINING
9 KITCHEN

0 10 20 40