

Whether taking a demure approach or a wildly imaginative one, pioneering restaurants across the globe—and the visionary architecture firms behind their designs—are serving up sustainability in the form of cutting-edge ideas that whet the appetite for healthier menus and more eco-conscious environments

story

Suchi Rudra

Feast for the Eyes

The 33-foot-high Yellow Treehouse Restaurant in New Zealand blends in organically with its redwood forest surroundings during the day, but emits an alluring glow at night to beckon guests. Photos: Lucy Gaunlett.

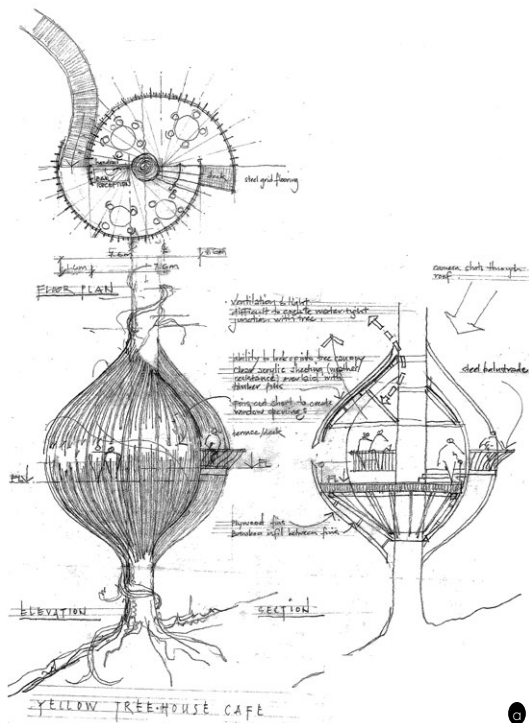
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AS THE HUNGER FOR ALL THINGS EARTH-FRIENDLY CONTINUES to grow across the world stage, bold and visionary restaurants are responding by thinking beyond their menus to the entire dining environment and experience. These days, the hottest restaurants are those that are finding ways to bring together cutting-edge sustainable design and pioneering practices to the dinner table—and in some cases, the customers are none the wiser.

Waugh Thistleton Architects' Waterhouse Restaurant, for example, left London's newspaper critics astounded by the restaurant's simplicity, which pushed its groundbreaking green design into the background. On the other end of the sustainability spectrum, however, exist fantastical upscale eateries such as Serie Architects' The Tote, in Mumbai, an experience akin to walking into an IMAX film about rain trees.

But it seems that bringing diners closer to nature is the essence behind the diversity of green design in restaurants, helping gently nudge diners toward a more sustainable and conscientious consumer experience, whether it's high up in Pacific Environments Architects' Yellow Treehouse Restaurant that overlooks the New Zealand landscape, or out on the waters of the Pacific aboard the School of Fish Foundation's Plastic Dining Room. Chefs and architects continue to goad each other to achieve a more perfect sustainable dining experience, and the resulting menus are leaving customers with a healthier attitude—and body.

Staying close to the source remains key to the issue of sustainability, and rooftop gardens are becoming a highly feasible and popular response to the challenge faced by restaurants in urban areas. Restaurateurs like Helena and Michael Cameron of Chicago's Uncommon Ground are finding that going hyperlocal has already served to strengthen community ties and has opened the door to an endless wave of innovation in gardening techniques.



'Inspired by a cocoon or a hanging clove of garlic'

Yellow Treehouse Restaurant

Maybe you had a treehouse when you were a kid, a place to get away from all the grown ups. But nowadays, even the grown ups are taking over the treetops to construct a truly unique and sustainable dining experience. Pacific Environments Architects of Auckland, New Zealand, designed the 474- square-foot, 33-foot-high Yellow Treehouse Restaurant in a redwood forest (usually zoned for rural use) in Warkworth, integrating vertical fins that allow the structure to blend in organically with its surroundings during the day. Glue-laminated timbers give the treehouse its organic form, which is inspired by a cocoon or a hanging clove of garlic, as well as support the internal handrails and facilitate ease of prefab construction, Lead Architect Peter Eising explains.

In operation from December 2008 through February 2009, this off-the-ground eatery for 25 diners was part of a Yellow Pages Group advertising campaign. Eising says the current owners' intentions are to reopen the treehouse as a private boutique venue. But Eising and his firm have seen the potential of such a project and have developed the concept to work independently of a tree, "using man-made trunks, where it can be used anywhere. I've also developed a concept for studio accommodation in treehouses, again on man-made trunks. These will be very romantic hideaways, a small footprint on the land and a unique experience," he explains. He adds that the treehouses can even be used as lookout vantage stations in conservation parks, safari parks, or as surf watchtowers.





a/ Sketches for Yellow Treehouse Restaurant
b/ Interior view of dining area
c,d/ View of bridge
e,f,g/ Construction process

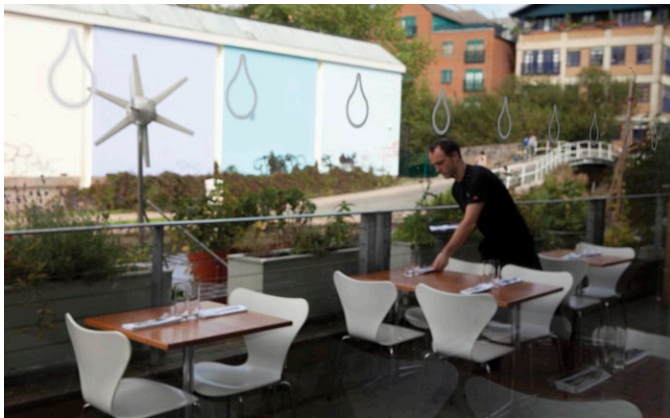
'It's about pushing the boundaries, breaking the red tape'

Waterhouse Restaurant

Dining at this elegant London restaurant is a truly inimitable experience. Why? Waterhouse has achieved what no other restaurant has: connecting its heating ventilation system to the adjacent Regent's Canal that runs through the local Shoreditch neighborhood. As Lead Architect Anthony Thistleton, of Waugh Thistleton Architects explains, the restaurateur had requested an AC system for the space, but the architects were reluctant to add on an element that consumed an enormous amount of electricity. Instead, the firm decided to discharge the heat from the ventilation system into the conveniently located canal. "It's about pushing the boundaries, breaking the red tape. We didn't invent anything new, but this hadn't been done before," Thistleton says.

Another surprising element of Waterhouse is the use of electricity for cooking instead of gas, usually the obvious choice of professional chefs worldwide. Thistleton believes that using electricity "makes you feel much freer, because using gas has sociopolitical implications." Waterhouse's chef was able to modify his menu to fit electric-based cooking, cooking in a way that makes electricity more relevant, Thistleton explains.

"It's a mistake to constantly be looking for innovation, when you can tweak what others are creating. What are you going to do now, once you've invented the wheel? We don't need to constantly be trying to invent brand new things, but instead build on older technologies," Thistleton says. Constructed with the backing of the Shoreditch Trust, a local, community-service organization, both Waterhouse, and another sustainably designed restaurant, Acornhouse, which opened in 2004 and is billed as London's first truly eco-friendly training restaurant, provide job opportunities for individuals in the community.



The seamless view through window of London's Waterhouse restaurant highlights its connection to the local community.



Uncommon Ground's roof boasts the country's first organic urban farm.

high dining

As chefs and restaurateurs across the nation embrace the rooftop-garden concept, foodies can rejoice about meals that couldn't be more fresh, more nutritious, or more eco-friendly.

NOBLE ROT: NURTURING 'KOOKY GREENS'

One such place is Noble Rot, a restaurant and wine bar in Portland, Oregon, where the garden consists of six steel-raised beds with legs that fit into sleeves on the roof. Owner Leather Storrs says the garden, watered by an aquifer beneath the building, produces "some kooky greens" including komatsuna, ruby streaks mustard, deer tongue lettuce, and purple shiso, which distinguish the restaurant's food and have become signature items. What Storrs never expected and finds to be a most important dividend of the garden is the "increase in respect and care for vegetables by my cooks. They know two things: it takes a lot of work and time to grow our vegetables, and I will freak out if they ruin our produce."

UNCOMMON GROUND: ORGANIC EXPERIMENT

As if a rooftop garden wasn't hyperlocal enough, Uncommon Ground has opened a second location in Chicago that boasts the first certified-organic urban farm in the United States. In its third season, this 650-square-foot farm has yielded 400 pounds of food and honey, according to Co-owner Helena Cameron, inspiring a new menu each week. The farm is certainly an ongoing experiment, and problems are always being resolved, such as using bamboo screens to shield young plants from the intense winds the city is known for and reinforcing the building from the ground up to support the 6 tons of soil (plants are grown in 12 inches of organic soil). But Cameron points to fertility as the biggest challenge, requiring much attention be paid to the various soil deficiencies that can occur in each planter bed. She hopes that the farm will soon become a model for other like-minded businesses, adding that "...business is thriving. Our quality of life has improved immeasurably. We have developed a deeper connection to our community."



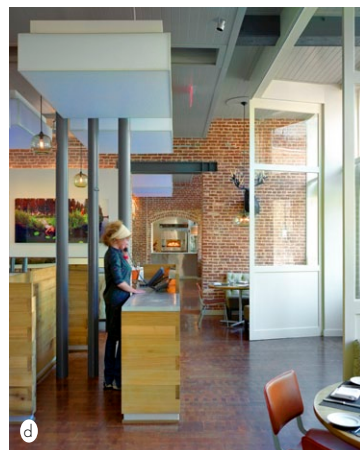
The hope was to imitate the change of light you'd see in nature

Proof On Main

Proof on Main may be serious about its commitment to being green, but the popular downtown Louisville, Kentucky, eatery likes to play with various colors of light. Designed by Deborah Burke Architects out of New York City and part of Louisville's 21c Museum Hotel, the restaurant treats guests to a subtle, constant transition of LED lighting, moving through five different ambient colors from 7 a.m., when the restaurant opens for breakfast, through 2 a.m., when the bar finally closes for the night. The idea was to "imitate or approximate the change of light you'd see in nature," explains Stephen Brockman, a lead architect on the project. The colors transition from an initial bright yellow to sky blue at lunch time, orange at dusk, red at night, then lavender. "It's very subtle, and the hope is that you'd never understand that the light changes," Brockman adds.

Completed in 2002, Proof on Main is an adaptive reuse of a 19th-century building, and some of the old-growth poplar beams were harvested for use throughout the space. After the milling process, what was old became new, revealing a fresh surface of the highly photosensitive poplar wood, which has already started to deepen and change to a richer, coffee brown from its original pea-green color. "The wood itself is telling us two stories: about being more than 100 years in the building and about adapting to the elements over time when exposed," Brockman points out.

Arising both from the desires of owners Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson and from the ethos of her firm, Deborah Burke says that Proof on Main was essentially about the careful selection and use of materials. "It's how we think about architecture," she says, "and it's been a part of our philosophy for a long time before sustainability was chic or LEED even existed."



a/ Exterior of Proof on Main
b/ Interior view of bar area
c/ Waiter station
d/ Entrance

TOP: The pop-up café in Manhattan aims to brighten up public spaces. Photo: Michael Drury.

CENTER, BOTTOM: The ultimate symbol of repurposing, all materials for the Studio East Dining structure were borrowed and returned upon the restaurant's dismantling. Photos: Luke Hayes.



temporary treats

Pop-up eateries are the latest trend in sustainable restaurant design

In a shaky economic climate, taking a chance on opening up a new restaurant, sustainable or not, is rather risky—which is why a handful of up-and-coming chefs are playing it safe and breaking onto the food scene with so-called “pop-up” restaurants—eateries that are either very temporary or very mobile (and often very quirky) and usually take advantage of their fleeting status to incorporate elements of sustainable design and practices while making a powerful eco-statement. Below are some examples of mobile, green, edgy eateries on a mission: delivering visual drama in a green package—and good food, too.

LOBSTER BOX

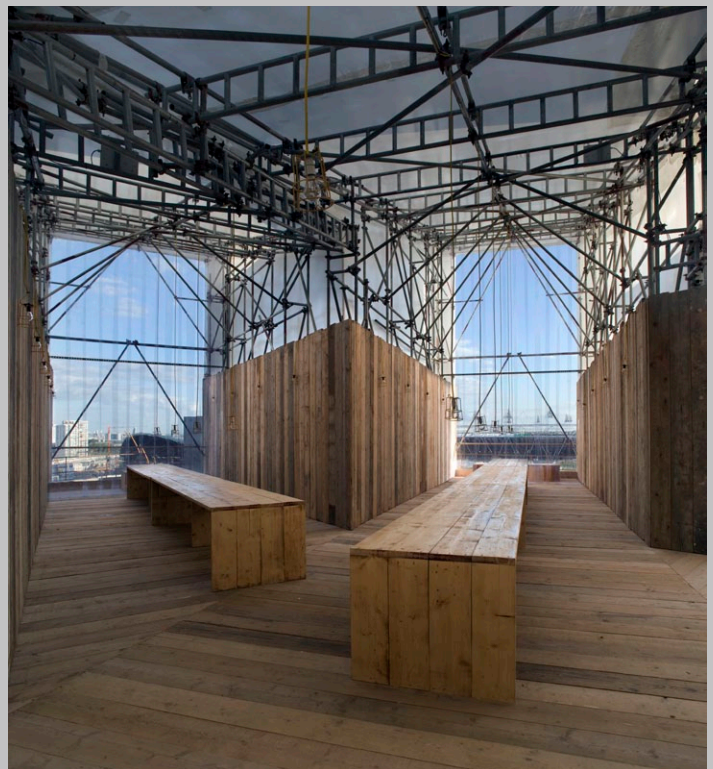
Although this pop-up restaurant hails from Montréal, the Lobster Box is quite the jet-setter, recently returning home from popping-up all over Europe. Hiding within a recycled shipping container by night and unfolding in 15 minutes to seat up to 42 customers, Lobster Box serves up pizza from a wood-burning pizza oven, boasts a floor made entirely of recycled tires, and uses two solar panels to create up to 40 percent of the eatery's energy.

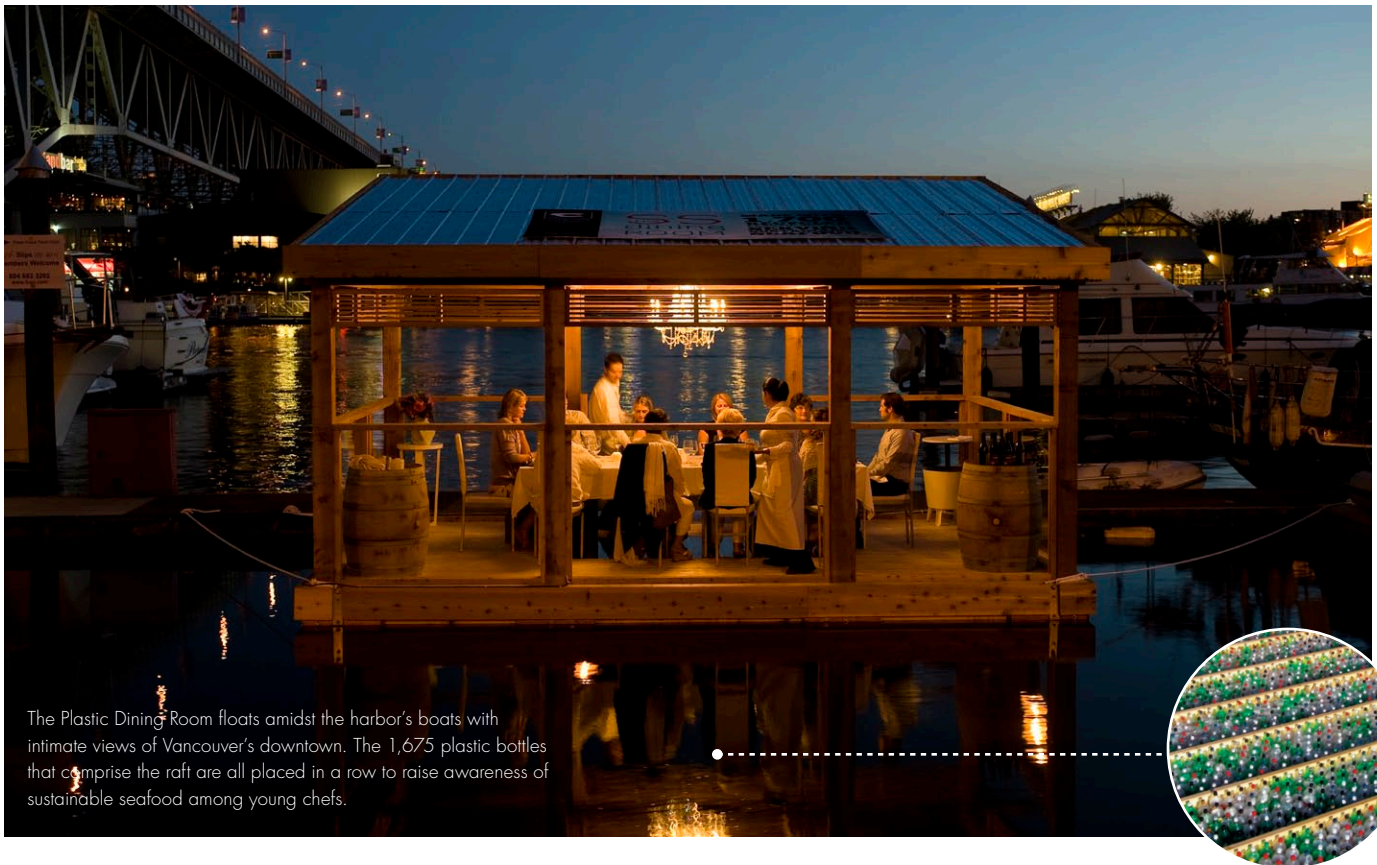
POP-UP CAFÉ

Taking a step to alleviate the problem of crowded sidewalks, a new pop-up café in Manhattan—sponsored by the adjacent Bombay restaurant and Fika coffee shop and in cooperation with the New York City Department of Transportation (NYDOT)—also offers a way to brighten up public space. The café's 14 tables and 50 chairs are spread out over four parking spaces, and will shut down later this year, but the NYDOT hopes that this temporary café's success will inspire more pop-up eateries to open elsewhere in the city to further improve public spaces.

STUDIO EAST DINING

London-based architecture studio Carmody Groarke has found a way to make the pop-up restaurant even less costly. Studio East Dining, which was dismantled after just three weeks of operation—as planned—was put together on the rooftop of the Westfield Stratford City building while it underwent construction. Conveniently, all materials for the structure of the 8,611-square-foot restaurant were only borrowed—scaffolding poles and boards and reclaimed timber for the walls and floors—and are to be returned to the site for waste-free recycling. The eatery, boasting panoramic city views, was encased in a semi-translucent membrane made of 100-percent recycled, industrial-grade, heat-retractable polyethylene, which allowed the building to glow at night.





The Plastic Dining Room floats amidst the harbor's boats with intimate views of Vancouver's downtown. The 1,675 plastic bottles that comprise the raft are all placed in a row to raise awareness of sustainable seafood among young chefs.

You can't get much closer [to the source] than dining on the ocean



Plastic Dining Room

This is not your ordinary cruise-ship dinner. Seated aboard School of Fish Foundation's (SFF) Plastic Dining Room in Vancouver, British Columbia, you'll still be treated to a luxurious meal, including fine china, biodynamic wines, and a gourmet four-course menu by Chef Robert Clark of Seattle's well-known C Restaurant. But if you take a look down, you'll see that you are on a raft created of 1,675 two-liter plastic bottles. The SFF was established in Vancouver by Clark and Shannon Ronalds to promote awareness of sustainable seafood among young chefs.

"This idea's time has come because we're at a point of either getting it right or getting it wrong," Shannon says. "With over 70 percent of seafood being consumed in food service (restaurants, hotels, etc.) in North America, we realized that with the commitment of tomorrow's leading chefs, their decisions can translate into making sustainable seafood available to the masses. If one chef will create over a million seafood dishes in his or her career, it is better to target this one chef

as opposed to the one million individuals." She notes the factors that must be considered when working with sustainable seafood: over-fishing, unintended by-catch, harvesting methods, and spawning cycles. "It was important to bring them as close to the source as possible, and you can't get much closer than dining on the ocean," she points out.

In keeping with its sustainability mission, this raft's flooring and framing were created from reclaimed pine from the Pine Beetle-damaged forests from northern British Columbia. In addition, the bottled water sponsor, Vivreau, uses filtered city water and pre-fillable glass bottles, eliminating the need to import heavy glass and water from overseas.

SFF is out to encourage culinary schools around the globe to integrate a sustainable seafood course into their curriculum, and all profits from the Plastic Dining Room go to the design and development of this course. SFF hopes to continue docking this educational eatery at other port cities around the world.





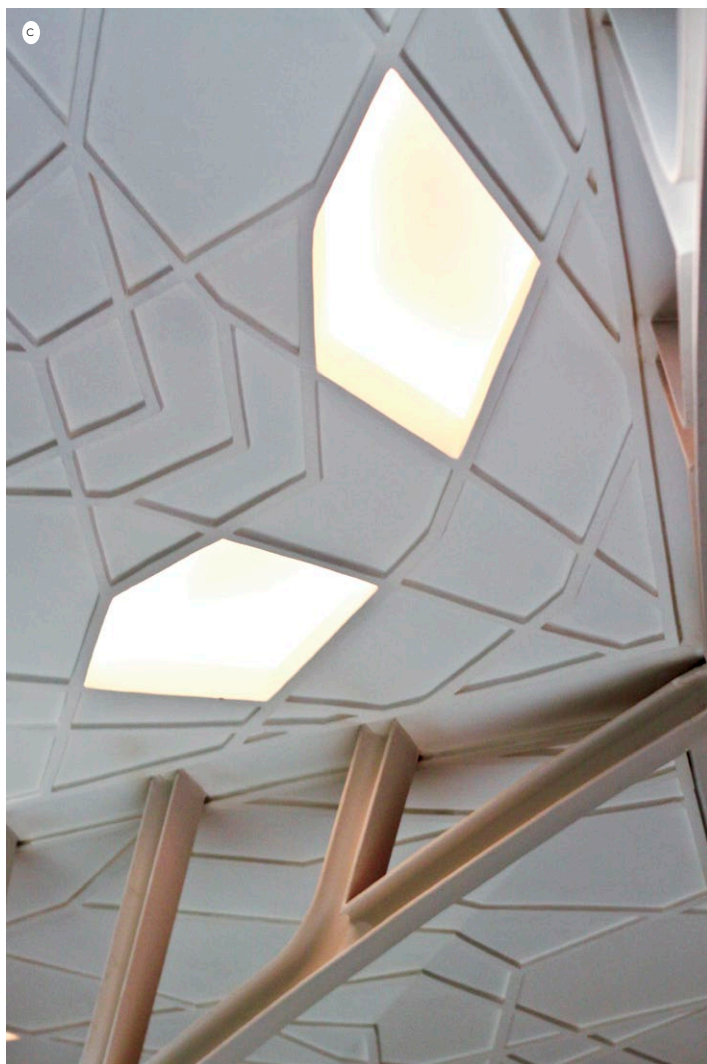
'Harmonious synergy with the other spaces around it'

The Tote

Blending the indoors seamlessly with the outdoors, a magnificent widespread canopy of rain trees—both real and artificially constructed—hangs above those who enter into the 10,000-square-foot restaurant and bar complex of The Tote, in Mumbai, India. Located in a series of formerly disused colonial buildings on the grounds of the Mumbai Race Course, half of the space was completely conserved, while only one wing was rebuilt. The 22 artificial trees, crafted from steel columns, are integral to the design of the multifunctional space (which includes a wine bar, restaurant, pre-function and banquet facilities) and are described by Serie Architects Cofounder Kapil Gupta as “emotive as well as functional as well as structural.” He explains that the trees’ natural shade, combined with the shade from an almost 4-foot overhang of the building’s gable-end roof, dramatically reduces energy consumption. Other green features in the restaurant design include a water-harvesting system, acoustically and therefore thermally insulated walls, and an insulated roof design. An open kitchen on the ground floor of the restaurant allows for a “harmonious synergy with the other spaces around it,” Gupta adds.

Gupta points out that his firm tries to push its clients to find unique spots in the city, “especially in the context of India, especially places like Bombay, where a lot of older, industrial colonial architecture is being razed to the ground to make way for new buildings. These projects become a case in point of thinking about conservation and sustainability not just in terms of resources, but also in terms of cultural conservation.”

Serie Architects’ next restaurant project will be the conversion of an old *haveli* (meaning “private mansion” in Hindi), located in a very historical part of New Delhi, into a second Blue Frog restaurant; the firm completed the first Blue Frog in Mumbai three years ago. **gb&d**



a/ Host area of entrance
b/ Interior view of dining area
c/ Detail of skylight
d/ Exploded diagram

