

Architecture | Domestic settings

are increasingly being used to

exhibit art in a more intimate,

engaging way. By Edwin Heathcote

The idea of the gallery begins in the house. And it is nothing new. Archaeologists were astonished to find the remains of a domestic museum in the palace at Ur, a building in modern-day Iraq dating from the neo-Babylonian empire, about 530BC. Its curator was Princess Ennigaldi, daughter of the last ruler of the empire, Nabonidus. He is known to have been an antiquarian and a keen restorer of antiques, instilling a love of archaeology in his daughter.

The objects archaeologists found, in a curious reflection of their own industry, were labelled with descriptive texts in three languages inscribed on to clay cylinders. Some of the artefacts seem to have been collected earlier by Nebuchadnezzar, the alleged creator of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

Despite this long legacy, our museums and galleries emerged from the "cabinet of curiosities" - the *wunderkammer* - and the corridors of Europe's great, late-Renaissance houses. Here occult objects nestled beside natural history specimens from exotic expeditions, narwhal tusks (masquerading as unicorn horns), fossils, old weapons, antiques and art.

As collections began to be bequeathed to institutions and the public museum arrived in the late-18th and early-19th centuries, paintings and sculptures were left behind to the domestic realm.

The family portraits, landscapes, Dutch interiors and so on created the vertical landscape of the wealthy interior. Subsequently, art galleries began to emulate the domestic interiors for which the works on the walls would have been intended. Yet by the mid-20th century, artists were making works that could be displayed only in industrial-scale lofts or public galleries.



Martin Creed's 'Everything is Going to be Alright' displayed at Hauser & Wirth gallery in Bruton, Somerset — Jamie Woodley

Artists in residence



Roth Bar & Grill restaurant at Hauser & Wirth — Aaron Schuman



Interior of Eleven Spitalfields

Domestic walls were out. Then, over the past two decades or so, came another change. The commercial galleries moved from their genteel shops and downtown retail galleries to industrial lofts and the shows they put on began to compete in architectural scale with the big museum shows.

In New York's Chelsea or London's Bethnal Green and Bermondsey you could see a show almost to equal those at MoMA or Tate Modern. Now things are changing again. Houses are back. But this time the art gallery house is not the vessel for some occult collection or hobbyist's obsession, but rather for the kind of museum-quality shows that we have become familiar with, part-commercial, part-not. Artists have rediscovered the pleasure in displaying their work in the more human context of the domestic interior, on a scale that we can relate to more easily and in an environment less

cool and disengaged than the white painted loft or the raw concrete of the pseudo-industrial.

Over the past couple of months two galleries in particular have brought this trend into the spotlight. The first was Michael Hue-Williams's Albion Barn, on the edge of the picturesque Cotswold village of Little Milton, Oxfordshire, while the second was the new Hauser & Wirth gallery in Bruton, Somerset.

Albion Barn is set in a series of restored and new buildings in a kind of agricultural grouping. Designed by architect Christina Seilern, it is a delight. The grounds announce the art, scattered with extraordinary works from a rusted gothic-traceried cement-mixer by Wim Delvoye to a pavilion built to house a work by James Turrell.

The interiors, contained in those timber-clad, rural structures are understated and cool, perfect for contemporary art. Hue-Williams delights in informal lunches with clients in a lofty dining room - adorned with "The Last Supper" by Hiroshi Sugimoto and warmed by a rustic fireplace. Beyond is a stunning library, an intimate, galleried space in which you feel encased by books rather than walls.

The galleries themselves are almost impossibly lightweight, sticks cantilevered from the shelf walls and secret bookshelf doors intensify the impression that this is the contemporary successor to a cabinet of curiosities - with the works contained behind spines rather than in vitrines.

The gallery spaces are restrained and very fine. When I visited I saw a stunning Turrell show for which the architecture served as a frame for the art, reconstructed and reconfigured as necessary.

Hauser & Wirth's new gallery at Durslade Farm, designed by Luis Laplace and Michael Levy, is something rather different. Although it too is distributed in a series of low-lying vernacular, agricultural structures, this is bigger in scale and much less domestic than Albion Barn.

As at Albion Barn, the landscape is used as a kind of sculpture park with large-scale works by Subodh Gupta and Paul McCarthy and a restaurant made reusing materials found by artist Dieter Roth. The landscape was designed by Dutchman Piet Oudolf (who worked on



the landscaping for New York's High Line) as a wild English meadow.

Hauser & Wirth's new gallery is less a house and more a farmyard - this was a model farm when it was built in 1760, though it was derelict when the gallery started work on it. Unusually, the gallery has not abandoned the site's agricultural heritage but set up its own restaurant using homegrown produce. An educational programme involving schools helps to avoid the accusations of gentrification that have plagued so-called downtown galleries in emerging districts such as Shoreditch in east London. The architecture is a blend of Scandinavian cemetery and English roast-beef rustic but it is considered; the self-effacing details that slowly reveal themselves to the visitor are exquisite. Artists are invited for residences - Swiss video artist Pipilotti Rist has been on-site for months and Mark Wallinger will be coming too, so this remains as much a place of residence as of display.

That there is nothing new in this style is demonstrated by the venerable Plas Glyn y Weddw, a private house gallery that is, apparently, the oldest art gallery in Wales. This Victorian house with an extravagant timber roof has been a fine setting for art for more than 150 years.

Although these galleries appear peculiar because their rural setting is in such contrast to the industrial urbanity of the contemporary art scene, they are not a purely rural phenomenon. Recently opened is Arthouse1 in Bermondsey, London, a stone's throw from the huge White Cube gallery, yet also a world away. On the top floor of a Georgian

▲ The home/gallery in Deptford, created by Dow Jones Architects
David Grandorge

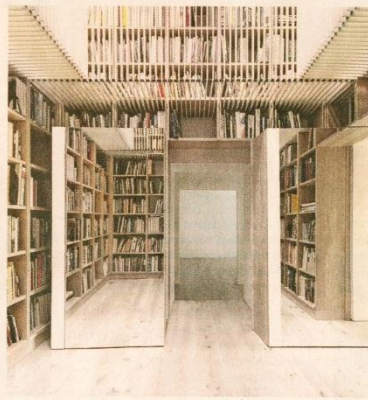
► The farmhouse interior at Hauser & Wirth Somerset
Aaron Schuman



town house the gallery has a domestic scale that artists like - but in other ways it is as close to the generic white cube as it is possible to get in a historic building. Walls, floors, window frames, ceiling, the whiteness of the surfaces make for a midway space between gallery and room. Eleven Spitalfields inhabits a similar place on the London scene, an early-Georgian house on the one-time Huguenot stronghold of Prinzel Street, quietly and beautifully redesigned by architect Chris Dyson.

Dow Jones Architects, meanwhile, converted a former shop and house in Deptford, south London, into a home-cum-gallery for curator Peter von Kant. The Georgian building was subtly remade and stripped back to reveal layers of history and material, the interior revolving around a chimney stack.

The nature of these spaces has the advantage of showing art in a domestic



setting so it can be imagined in the client's own home. In moving away from the retail environment of the purpose-built gallery these places are a softer sell, akin to the carpet seller in a bazaar inviting you in for tea. Yet that intimacy also changes the art. Context is everything and the accoutrements of life as it is lived add to the meaning in the work. A gallery is a place almost deliberately stripped of meaning, made as bright as possible to reduce distraction. These domestic galleries do the opposite. A house is the richest repository of architectural and personal meaning, where the art can be more fully revealed.

Under communism in the former USSR, artists would open up their



▲ Arthouse1 in Bermondsey
Rebecca Fairman

◀ The library space at Albion Barn in Little Milton, Oxfordshire
Studio Sellen Architects

apartments to friends and other artists, and occasionally to foreigners. It was the only way to show subversive - or even abstract and non-political work. However, the intimacy of these gatherings made them electric and triggers for discussion. Few really miss those encounters, but some artists miss their intensity. Britain's new wave of domestic galleries bears none of the risk of such underground events, but perhaps, in bringing art back from the white cube into the rooms of the home, they are revealing a desire for an increasing engagement with the art, a sense that they grow richer through involvement, through juxtaposition with everyday objects and the idea that art should be part of life and not exiled in its own sterile bubble.

Edwin Heathcote is the FT's architecture critic