

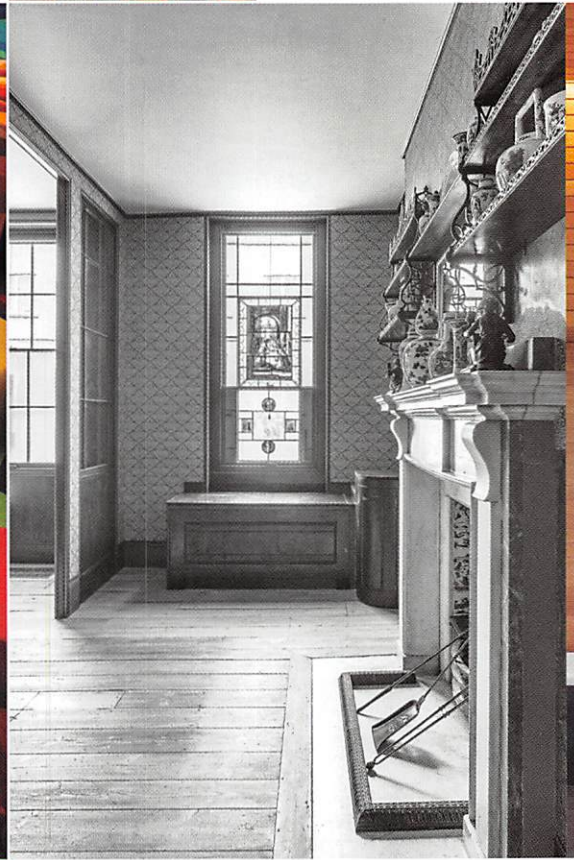
# DESIGNinsider

## influence is immortality

Sir John Soane lives on through contemporary interiors

**A fully stocked bar** descends from inside a wall, at the touch of a button, in the living area of a Chicago house by architects Min/Day. It's all very James

Bond, but the real influence was an earlier British hero. That would be Sir John Soane, who in the late 18th and early 19th centuries designed buildings with ingenious and exhilarating details. They included storage concealed in walls, mirrors that alter how spaces are perceived, and light that emanates from unexpected, sometimes invisible sources. Nowhere was that more true than in Soane's own London home,



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: COURTESY OF SIR JOHN SOANE'S MUSEUM; GARETH GARDNER (2); NATHAN BOLSTER

which could best be described as a cabinet of architectural curiosities.

Soane died in 1837, leaving his house not to his wayward son, George, but to the British people. Since then, Sir John Soane's Museum has been a must-see for designers. And though many share Soane's love of neoclassicism, others such as Slade Architecture's Hayes and James Slade have a thoroughly contemporary outlook. "Soane's experiments

in his own home have influenced every architect today, directly or indirectly," James Slade says.

That influence is only growing with the museum's raised profile, following the restoration and reopening of six private rooms that had been closed to the public for 160 years. Julian Harrap Architects, known for the extraordinary restoration of the Neues Museum in Berlin, was in charge of the project,

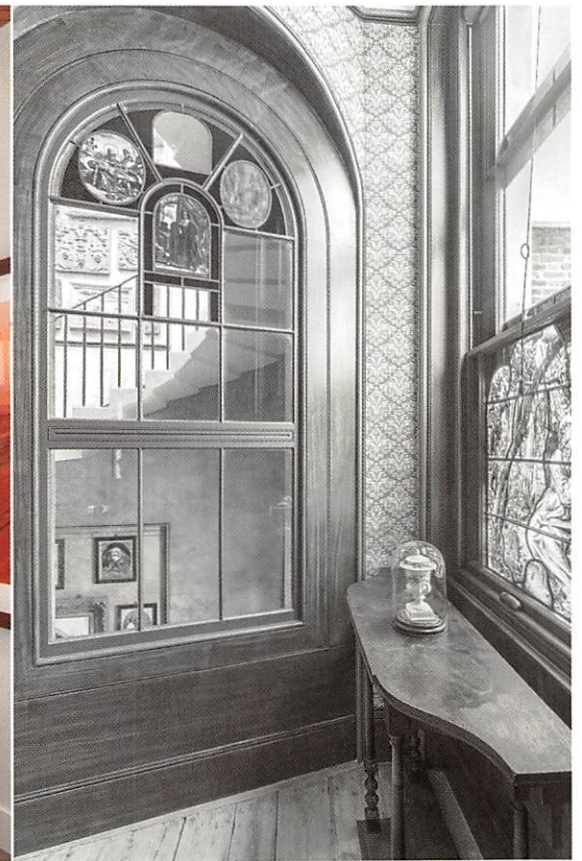
which required intensive research and international sourcing. To reconstruct a doorway with 12 stained-glass depictions of saints, restorers studied early black-and-white photos of the panels. As for the yellow-on-cinnamon wallpaper that Soane ordered for his bathroom, the pattern has been reproduced by Adelphi Paper Hangings, a tiny company in Sharon Springs, New York, using handmade paper from Ireland—an effort

that will also benefit interior designers who are interested in ordering Soane's preferred wallpaper from Adelphi. A number of other manufacturers were already offering licensed products from mantelpieces to chairs, all derived from Soane originals.

But the museum yields surprises that are much more than wallpaper-deep. In the picture gallery, layers of hinged panels made it possible for Soane to hang far more art

than than the size of the room would suggest. That approach was adapted by nArchitects's husband-wife principals, Eric Bunge and Mimi Hoang, for the Joan Mitchell Foundation in New York as a way to add display surface while maximizing functionality.

"As with Soane, we have pairs of panels that rotate, but we located them on columns in a central area that we refer to as an active void. The rotating panels allow it to transform



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: PAUL CROSBY; GABRIEL GARDNER; COURTESY OF CHESNEYS

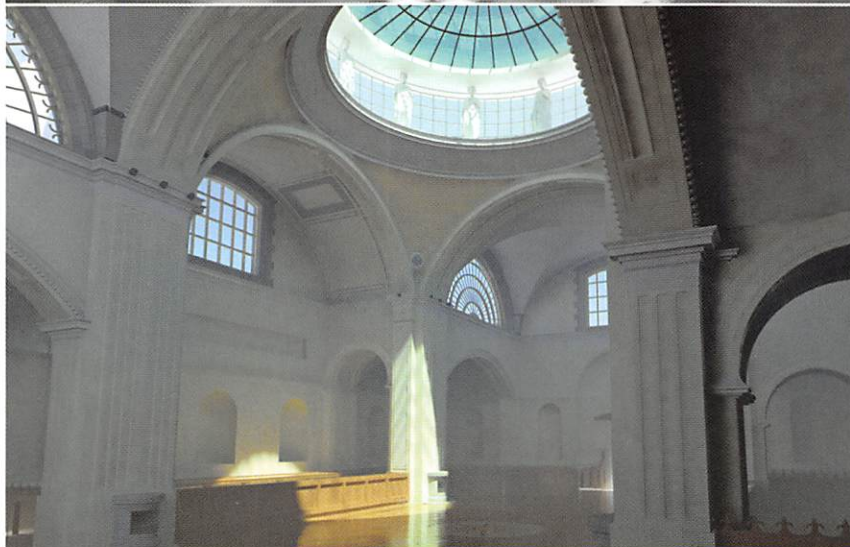
**Top:** The architect in 1829, as he appears in Sir Thomas Lawrence's oil portrait displayed at Sir John Soane's Museum in London. **Center, from left:** A Soane-influenced use of mirror in Slade Architecture's carpet installation for InterfaceFlor. Soane's own bathroom, recently made public at the museum. A Min/Day-designed Chicago bedroom where an oak-slatted wall conceals a home office complete with a seat. Soane's "oratory," a narrow gallery designed to be viewed from the adjacent staircase. **Bottom, from left:** His wife's former bedroom, which he filled with architectural models after her death. Soane Pattern IV, a Chesney's reproduction in statuary marble of an 1803 mantelpiece.

## DESIGNinsider

from a classroom into a gallery or an events space," Bunge explains. "Our work is clearly updated in terms of form, material, and detail—we aren't trying to replicate anything. However, some of the themes are from Soane."

The reopening of the private rooms has given designers a reason to visit the entire museum anew. Jeffrey Day of Min/Day, who often brings students from home in Nebraska, returned to find that the restored apartments "added depth to the overall experience," he says. "The sequence of movement is unexpected and has an effect of mystery." He was particularly enamored of a small library's chimneylike light well lined with paintings. Don't be surprised if versions begin turning up in contemporary houses.

At the same time that the private rooms were being restored, another restoration—of sorts—got under way. Soane's masterpiece, the Bank of England, thoughtlessly demolished in the 1920's, is being reconstructed in cyberspace as Project Soane. Volunteers enlisted in a global crowdsourcing effort are using original plans to rebuild the bank virtually, ultimately resulting in a BIM digital model. The effort is being supported by *Interior Design* Hall of Fame member Robert A.M. Stern, who calls Soane "the first modern architect." Robert A.M. Stern Architects has referenced Soane in many projects, most recently a New York apartment building where



the lobby is topped by a version of the "handkerchief ceiling" in Soane's famous breakfast room.

That breakfast room is among the reasons that Richard Murphy Architects's namesake managing director says he considers the museum "the most modern building in London, certainly the most complex and undoubtedly the most fertile in architectural ideas, available to all who care to look." He adds that he is particularly impressed by the central atrium, "a layered

space so complex that it is virtually impossible to sketch." He traces several effects in his own house in Edinburgh back to Soane: "I like his idea of making moving parts to connect and transform spaces in ambiguous ways. I like using mirrors to entice the viewer. Above all, I love creating a sense of magic—that all might not be as per the first impression."

When there is magic in contemporary design, the reason, quite often, is Soane.

—Fred A. Bernstein

**From top:** The Soane-influenced lobby ceiling for a New York apartment building by Robert A.M. Stern Architects. Project Soane's Bank of England, digitally reconstructed using Revit software donated by Autodesk. Panels pivoting on aluminum posts to add over 1,000 square feet of display surface at nArchitects's Joan Mitchell Foundation in New York.

# INTERIOR DESIGN<sup>®</sup>

OCTOBER  
2015

all shapes and sizes