



**MACH ARCHITEKTUR GMBH**

GEMEINDESTRASSE 26 8032 ZÜRICH SWITZERLAND  
TEL. +41 1 252 84 44 FAX. +41 1 252 8447  
WWW.MACHARCH.CH MACH@MACHARCH.CH

POWERFUL PROPORTIONS

## Ping Pong Design and Architecture

Ping-Pong is a rare example of a rigorous holistic design in which specialists from different disciplines gathered together at the outset of the project to work out a rational system that would not only express Ping-Pong's brand identity and values but also – in the most efficient, economic and cost-effective manner possible – meet the practical needs of the business and anticipate its future growth. When restaurateur Kurt Zdesar took his concept for a group of dim sum restaurants to creative management company Redgreenzebra, they pulled together an international team capable of turning an inspirational idea into reality. In a series of workshops, led by brand consultant Jane Stringfellow, Kurt's vision was then developed into a detailed plan for 'modern dim sum' – a new style of restaurant that would update this traditional cuisine for the contemporary Western consumer.

Ping-Pong's first restaurant in Great Marlborough Street has been built as a flagship site for the group, but also as a versatile prototype that can be rapidly expanded both in the UK and overseas. The driving force behind the physical look of this prototype is the creative partnership between architect David Marquardt of the Zurich firm MACH Architektur and Stockholm-based art director and brand designer Niclas Sellebråten.

David Marquardt's previous work has included creating a global store concept for Bally and devising the corporate design for the relaunched Swiss International Airlines. A notable feature of his approach has been the design of purpose-made furniture to be an integral part of the interior architecture. With Ping-Pong's first restaurant in London's Soho, he has developed an interior architecture that is contemporary yet respectful of the traditions of dim sum cuisine. Combining a sense of relaxed order with warmth and comfort, the restaurant possesses its own distinctive atmosphere, yet at the same time – in keeping with the long-term strategy of Ping-Pong to extend its business throughout the UK – defines the ideal of the modern dim sum restaurant everywhere. David has devised a clean, open look that allows the nature of the restaurant to be appreciated instantly from the street. With most food being brought in from an external kitchen, only minimal facilities are required on the premises itself, which has made it possible to design a more spacious dining area than is to be found in other more conventional restaurants.

Large round tables and benches, made from old oak taken from sustainable forests in Switzerland, embody the Ping-Pong values of community, authenticity and respect for nature. Constructed from unveneered, end grain wood in the manner of a butcher's block or chopping board, they offer strength and durability, but also have, in the natural ring pattern of their surface, an appealing ornamental quality. As practical as they are eye-catching, they are also easily and quickly cleaned – a critical requirement for a restaurant that demands the highest standards of hygiene.

The benches feature milled, rounded edges for comfort and incorporate a boxed section where diners can stow their coats and bags. At the heart of every table – directly beneath corresponding round lamps suspended from the ceiling – are rotating cores of recessed and backlit onyx glass. The soft glow at this focal point of activity – where dishes are exchanged and shared – highlights the social nature of dining at Ping-Pong.



Although the round tables and benches provide a defining feature in the restaurant's interior, a parallel range of smaller, rectangular tables, with corresponding benches, facilitates more private dining. Bar stools provide another variation within the range. Observing a design principle that aims to rework a Chinese tradition of hand-carved furniture in a contemporary, Western style, all the items of furniture have been built together to inter-relate and to form a coherent family. In keeping with the nature of dim sum itself, the keynote of the interior architecture is that a few simple elements should fit together into a larger overall unity.

Brand designer Niclas Sellebråten has been responsible for developing the corporate identity of several well-known companies, winning international renown for his work re-designing Swiss International Airlines and as head of the design team at the legendary pioneer of ecommerce, boo.com.

Seeking a brand identity that would capture simultaneously both the traditional origin and modern reincarnation of Ping-Pong's cuisine, Niclas came up with the idea of a spiralling cloud of vapour, which New York-based photographer Frederik Lieberath then brilliantly realised under Niclas's art direction. One of the world's outstanding specialists in still life photography, Lieberath has a reputation for being able to make anything he puts in front of his camera desirable, from cars to wineglasses. A feature of his work has been his stylish photographs of fashion accessories and jewellery. With 'dim sum' often translated into English as 'little gems', Ping-Pong has offered an apt variation on a theme. In its innovative new menu system, which supports clear, simple explanations of the cuisine with pictures of each dish, Niclas has used Lieberath's stunning photographs in a way that demonstrates the intrinsic beauty of these little gems.

Steam is the key element at the very heart of the Ping-Pong business, the chief means by which dim sum is prepared, but also it evokes – with its dynamic form – the twists and turns of Chinese calligraphy. In addition to providing a versatile brand image for packaging and general communication, it works as a powerful decorative feature in the restaurant's interior, on select walls billowing out serenely against a black background. On the ceiling, Niclas has devised a repeating pattern of haikus in Chinese script to provide a harmonious complement. The average diner may be little concerned to look up from his or her table to decipher these ancient sayings, but none the less they contribute discreetly to the ambience of authenticity, and have been carefully chosen to express the Ping-Pong values of community, friendship and sharing. Geometric lattice-work screens provide a seamless visual link between this ceiling pattern and the decorative device of steam on the walls. A highly versatile element, they can serve as wall dividers, or – easily customized – help to pull such disparate features as cash desks, bar fronts or storage areas into an overall visual coherence.

Niclas's logotype is yet another example of a conceptual approach that creates a total look in which nothing has been left to chance. In a visual representation of the fusion of east and west that Ping-Pong has achieved, the Chinese symbols for 'dim sum' stand side by side with the company name, whose two simple words are picked out in a correspondingly simple font. The pronounced circular and semi-circular elements of the letters – the last G inverted to complete the circle begun by the first – evoke the notion of community but also the physical shape of dim sum as well as the bamboo baskets in which it is served.

David and Niclas's work for Ping-Pong is perhaps the more remarkable for the seamless way in which their skills have merged to give a unified expression of the Ping-Pong brand. Every detail bears out the interdisciplinary nature of the project, so that to speak of architecture or graphic design in isolation is not to do full justice to the spirit of the venture. The central image of steam is just one of many examples. In a nod to the Chinese tradition of displaying text on buildings, David has pulled Niclas's striking graphic into the fabric of the architecture, using a technique that allows an image to be printed on customized wallpaper across a broad expanse of wall. The contrast of this single image with the repeating pattern of haikus on the ceiling then offers another feature that is simultaneously graphic and architectural. Their partnership has resulted in one of the more complete examples of form expressing function. In Ping-Pong, they have together achieved the rational ideal of a restaurant perfectly equipped to provide modern dim sum.