Nigel Coates’ Metropole Restaurant is the latest thing in Tokyo. The street onto which it faces is called Television ASAHI Street (so named after the television broadcasting station nearby) and is in Tokyo’s Roppongi district. Roppongi is the area for foreign ambassadorial residences and, compared with other equally busy areas of Tokyo such as Ginza, say, or Shinjuku, it has a very exotic atmosphere. It is also very fashionable and, having the highest concentration of foreigners anywhere in Tokyo, acts as a barometer of the latest trends in fashion and foreign culture.

There are, moreover, two television stations in the locality, which also contribute to its special atmosphere; you could quite easily encounter television stars in the street. These stars have two faces, one for television, and one for real life. This conjunction of the real and the virtual image characterises the area. You may (or may not) be aware that the beautiful girl you just passed in the street is in fact a transvestite, hurrying to one of Roppongi’s many gay clubs. It is a district thronging with virtual images. Nearby, housewives do the shopping for dinner.

The Metropole was Coates’ first project in Tokyo. It involved the conversion of an existing garage in a typical, low-cost Tokyo building into a restaurant.

For those who had become tired of the so-called ‘cafe/bar’ type restaurants, recently popular in Tokyo for their fashionable interiors, here was something different. The Metropole, and its London designer, quickly became the talk of the town.

You enter through a colonnade—whose capitals consist of steel reinforcing bars, tangled and welded together, beneath an ambassadorial flagpole—into a space which is very European, and very un-Tokyo. To the right there is a bar counter, and above it a small library, where one may sit at leisure and browse through old European novels and poetry. To the left, under a huge chandelier and an antique gilded mirror, two large black armchairs sit beside a marble fireplace. As you proceed through, under the proscenium arch, you enter the restaurant proper, where diners are surrounded by antique plaster casts, and multiple mirrors in which the space is reflected and re-reflected infinitely. To the right there is another, smaller dining room, with mosaic paving and frescoed walls.

The colours and the selection of objects in these two rooms give one the strange sense of inhabiting a delicate balance between good taste and bad taste. But what makes the Metropole so distinctive in the Roppongi district, is its intelligent use of an intentional fiction; the proscenium arch, dividing the inner dining areas from the outer bar, clearly proclaims ‘fiction’. The wall looks old, but it is an intentional oldness, painted on by the artist. The marble, and the tarnished copper, are also fictions; fragments of old Europe brought from London to provide a setting for whatever personal dramas may be enacted here.

The objects from which the space is constructed have been carefully selected to give it a sort of quiet elegance. For those who come in from the busy street it holds more than just the charm of nostalgia; there is something new, as well. People are drawn easily, almost imperceptibly, into becoming the actors on the stage. Through the windows of the smaller dining room, itself so thoroughly ‘European’, the ordinary timber-framed houses of Tokyo are visible, but the interior is a set so skilfully constructed for the fictionality of modern city life that words, once spoken, become part of the script.

Mitsugu Okagawa (an architect who has worked for Tschumi in Paris and is now studying under Shinohara in Tokyo)