

## *Gold Bar*

**Y**OU don't need to have one too many to feel discombobulated in the Gold Bar. Hidden behind the façade of an old liquor store on East Ninth Street, the Gold Bar is a small, dark room with an unpainted concrete ceiling, walls that are askew, a tilted steel-plate floor, and a gold-leafed bar that comes out of a fifteen-foot-long hole in the floor and slants both outward and down toward the street. The bathroom doors are made of raw steel that is developing rust spots. There are no wall decorations.

On a Saturday night recently, we went down to the Gold Bar and met Thomas Leeser, its architect and co-owner. Mr. Leeser is tall and easygoing, with swept-back blond hair, and he was wearing a black double-breasted suit. He told us that he is the son of an architect, and that he was raised in Frankfurt and came to New York in 1980. He's now a senior associate in the firm of Eisenman Architects.

We asked Mr. Leeser to tell us something about the Gold Bar.

"It's a weird place," he said, in a soft, gently accented voice. "Actually, the Gold Bar is probably the most uncomfortable place in New York. And the most scary place. And the most unsettling place. Once, somebody walked in and after a while he just got sick. Not from too much alcohol—I think he just got dizzy. He

was sitting there, and the floor was tilted, and he just got this vertigo effect.”

We asked why people come to such a place.

“I don’t know,” Mr. Leeser said, with a laugh. “I mean, why do people go to discothèques, which are *really* uncomfortable? Maybe people like that dissonance. Basically, New York is not a comfortable place, and New Yorkers are people who like the challenge of being uncomfortable. The work I’m doing always has to do with this aspect of being uncomfortable—with questioning people’s expectations and behavior. You know the term ‘pushing the envelope’? That’s what I try to do.”

We discovered that you can’t belly up to the bar at the Gold Bar, because of a steel railing that protects customers from falling through the floor. “Usually, the bar is the thing you hold on to—the thing you’re most comfortable with,” Mr. Leeser explained. “Here it’s the thing that is most alienating. The architecture keeps you away from certain things, and being kept away causes a moment of frustration and disturbance. That moment is also contaminated with a certain aggressiveness and a certain questioning of your desires.”

We noticed that the bar stools were all of different heights. “All the furniture—I would like to throw it out immediately,” Mr. Leeser said, glowering at a table and some folding chairs by a window. “The Gold Bar was designed as a place where people couldn’t sit down, because I didn’t want them to be comfortable. But people complained. The bar stools are five-minute designs I drew on a napkin. This welder cut up scrap and made them cheaply. I wanted to make it clear that the stools don’t really belong here. I like ambiguity—a thing has one reading, but it also has another. Out of this fluctuation can grow, maybe, a new meaning.”



“Someday, son, all this will belong to your wife!”

“Why is it called the Gold Bar?” we asked.

“The idea was this gold *thing* emerging out of the roughness of the East Village—the clashing of two totally different elements,” Mr. Leeser said. “When I moved to New York, the East Village was really a dump. It was too dangerous to walk around First Avenue. Now you see Rolls-Royces in front of the clubs and galleries on Avenue A. In a way, the bar is an analogue of New York. The Japanese were the first to understand it. The Europeans like it because it’s in New York and they expect something weird. And Americans don’t know what to think. They took longer to accept it—especially people from the neighborhood.”

We ordered a beer, and Mr. Leeser had a gin-and-tonic. We noticed that all drinks—from Martinis to Cokes—are served in a generic glass, much like that used for orange juice at a greasy spoon. “I didn’t really want to deal with glasses,” Mr. Leeser confided to us. “I tried to abstract all that stuff. I would hate this place to have very expressive glasses and a beautiful mirror, and all the strictly cliché bar elements. I mean, I didn’t want it to be a *bar*—that was the last thing I was interested in.” Mr. Leeser waved a hand.

“Maybe it’s architecture. Maybe it’s a fairy tale. I don’t care whether they start selling sausages tomorrow or baking bread in this place. It doesn’t matter.”

Mr. Leeser told us that he had been labelled a Deconstructivist architect but that the term was inaccurate. “I can’t even tell you what Deconstructivism is,” he said. “Deconstructivism is made by the media. People call us Deconstructivist architects because we never design in the traditional sense. We don’t design for symmetry and proportion and, you know, all that kind of stuff, but not everything that is crooked is Deconstructivist. Our work is always theoretical. I like to disturb, to challenge.” Mr. Leeser paused, and then said he was greatly amused recently when the magazine *Taxi* ran a photograph of the Gold Bar which was cropped at an angle that seemed to reduce the bar’s slope. “It shows a subconscious desire to straighten things out,” he said. “Here they have this big article about Deconstructivism. Then they manipulate the photograph to make this thing look like it’s straight. I was very happy to see that, because it showed me how people subconsciously get this uneasy feeling. They can’t let it happen. They’d rather have the photograph crooked than the architecture.”