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The Zentia Restaurant Challenge

Finlay Swain of Whittaker Parsons has won an open competition to design a creative discontinuous acoustic ceiling for a restaurant using Zentia's 3D Studio configurator.

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Good ceiling design is central to most commercial projects – not least restaurants where high-quality servicing, including, acoustics, lighting and ventilation, as well as excellent aesthetics, are prerequisites for success. For many architects and interior designers, discontinuous ceiling systems made up of individual elements are the preferred solution. However, until recently, this has tended to involve the use of baffles, canopies or rafts fitted around the services above, or a completely bespoke solution, which can be time consuming to design and expensive to install.

Launched in Autumn 2022 and based on a 'kit-of-parts' concept, Zentia's **Sonify** discontinuous ceiling system provides an alternative to these approaches. An innovative grid system facilitates easy and accurate setting out, while panel shape and spacing along with a palette of 35 different colours are among the design parameters available to specifiers. So how can architects make best use of the system to design, for example, a creative and visually-striking acoustic ceiling for a restaurant?



Zentia Restaurant Challenge judges (from left to right): Catherine van der Heide (Hassell), Meredith Hull (Conran and Partners), Michael Anderson (Zentia), Isabel Allen (AT, Chair), John Soicer (Zentia), and Maria Cheung (Souire & Partners).

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Ask the expert



Architecture Today's technical editor John Ramshaw discusses new high-performance discontinuous ceiling system Sonify in a series of three interviews with experts from Zentia.

Setting the challenge

The Zentia Restaurant Challenge, organised by Zentia, in association with Architecture Today, set out to answer this question through an open competition. Entrants were invited to design a restaurant ceiling that would enhance the acoustics and aesthetics of the dining experience, as well as bring the restaurant to life using the Sonify 3D Studio configurator. Launched at the same time as Sonify, 3D Studio is a powerful, multifaceted online tool that allows specifiers to explore the ceiling range's virtually limitless design possibilities quickly, simply and visually. The full 3D environment enables users to move around the space and interact with model solutions. Most important of all perhaps, is that anything designed using the configurator can be manufactured and realised on site.

The brief

The Zentia Restaurant Challenge brief was intentionally simple: use the Sonify 3D Studio configurator to design a restaurant ceiling that will enhance the dining experience. Entrants were encouraged to consider variable ceiling heights, different shaped panels, individual colour selection, and coloured grids. The online process could not have been simpler: click 'start creating' and select the 'restaurant' scene; choose a product type and click start to load the configurator; use the configurator to bring the restaurant to life. The prize: £1,000 to be spent at the winner's restaurant of choice.



Decision time

The jury – chaired by AT Editor Isabel Allen and comprising Catherine van der Heide, Principal at Hassell; Meredith Hull, Associate at Conran and Partners; Maria Cheung, Director of Interior Design at Squire & Partners; and Zentia's technical specialists: John Spicer, Head of New Product Development, and Michael Anderson, Head of Architectural and Design Consultancy – selected a shortlist comprising schemes by Caterina Mucignat (BDP), Finlay Swain (Whittaker Parsons), Tobias Weaver (Tobias Weaver Architect), and Pollyanna Beasley (pHp Architects). After a close-fought battle, Finlay Swain was declared the winner.

Winning project



Author: Finlay Swain

Practice: Whittaker Parsons

"A well-executed design that makes excellent use of the configurator. Different elements of the software have been used to create a convincing ceiling that fits the space, while providing acoustic control." – Michael Anderson

"The design feels sophisticated and celebratory. It really sings with the restaurant interior."
– Maria Cheung

"The colour balance is great; it really works with the interior." – Catherine van der Heide

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Find out more about Zentia's Sonify range.



Q&A with Finlay Swain:

Congratulations on winning the Zentia Restaurant Challenge! Where is your practice based and what kind of work do you normally do?

Thank you very much! I am currently working at Whittaker Parsons, an architecture practice based in Shoreditch, alongside studying for my Part II at the London School of Architecture (LSA). The LSA takes a slightly different approach to the Part II course, whereby I attend university for two days, and the remaining three days of the week I am in practice. We work on a range of projects at Whittaker Parsons, focusing on sustainable design and retrofit, predominantly within residential buildings. I've been working at the practice for about a year and a half now, and have had the opportunity to contribute to many different projects. I entered the Zentia Restaurant Challenge competition as an individual rather than through Whittaker Parsons.

Were you familiar with discontinuous ceilings before you entered the competition? And if so where had you used them before?

I was partially familiar with discontinuous ceilings before this challenge, having worked briefly on a baffle system for an office project at a previous London architecture studio. This included researching different options and their efficacy as acoustic systems, as well as how they could be incorporated as an exciting aesthetic component. Beyond this, I hadn't had any hands-on experience of designing them, so the Zentia Restaurant Challenge was a fun opportunity to experiment with doing so.

What is design concept behind your entry?

The initial idea behind my entry was to create an organic, 'soft' ceiling design, that wouldn't overwhelm the space but sit harmoniously within the context. This led me to choose a curved form, and from that point I was able to make variations based on this system. The scale and separation of the baffles are a result of experimentation, and allow for glimpses of the exposed services above. The colour scheme was selected from a series of iterations, where I chose the three tones that I felt best complemented the existing interior within the configurator. I wanted variation within the ceiling, so I opted for a non-patterned/uniform approach, which I was able to alter using the configurator.



What are your impressions of the Sonify discontinuous ceiling system and the Sonify 3D Studio configurator?

Having not come across the Sonify discontinuous ceiling system before, I was particularly impressed by the range of ceiling baffles that are available, and the design variations that can be applied within the system. The configurator is a really helpful tool for visualising multiple options within a realistic 3D context. It also allows design changes to be made with ease.

I found it particularly useful to be able to see the design from a range of viewpoints, thereby enabling me to interrogate whether the ceiling system was working from all angles. This was also true of the timing setting, which allows a design to be seen at different points throughout the day in

different lighting situations. The parameters of the configurator allow for a range of tests to be conducted, which is really useful for exploring ideas that might not have originally been intended or thought of within the initial design concept.

What would you say are the main benefits of using the configurator?

The configurator has many benefits – not least aiding with the quick visualisation of a design idea or intent. It is simple and straightforward to use, allowing users to make instant changes to their designs, while also seeing the effect of these in a contextual render form. This is not only beneficial within the specification process, but could also be a useful for showing clients and facilitating quick changes while a discussion ensues.

What insights on discontinuous ceiling design have you gained from taking part in the competition?

The main insight I have gained from taking part in the competition is the range of design possibilities that discontinuous ceiling systems can offer. They are an important design consideration for many spaces, especially retrofit projects where acoustics and aesthetics are often key considerations. It is interesting and heartening to see how Zentia is incorporating discontinuous ceiling design into the early design and specification processes with its easy to use and intuitive configurator tool.

Where are you intending to dine with the prize money and with whom?

I haven't figured this out just yet, but I've been wanting to try Brat in Shoreditch for a while now. I'll invite a few close friends to share the experience – hopefully they'll like it!

Shortlisted project



Author: Tobias Weaver

Practice: Tobias Weaver Architect

Design concept: An uncomplicated yet opulent piece of ceiling 'art' befitting a high-end restaurant. The scheme makes use of emphasised grids and concealed acoustic panels.

Configurator feedback: It enables users to immediately explore and visualise a multitude of different ceiling configurations in terms of colour, panel shape and size, and grid type/expression.

"The scheme's cool industrial aesthetic really complements the restaurant's material palette, stylistic references and spare use of colour." – Michael Anderson

"A highly refined ceiling solution that does a lot with a little." – Catherine van der Heide

"The expressive yet elegant ceiling grid stands out, helping to articulate the surrounding dining space."
– John Spicer

Shortlisted project



Author: Pollyanna Beasley
Practice: pHp Architects
Design concept: Making a feature of the acoustic baffles while complementing the restaurant's mature aesthetic and subtle tones.
Configurator feedback: Quick and easy to use with lots of different options.

"This scheme expertly blends performance with aesthetics." – **Meredith Hull**

"The subtle colour choices are particularly successful." – **Catherine van der Heide**

"The ceiling design really fits the space and the edge condition is well resolved from all angles."
– **John Spicer**

Shortlisted project



Author: Caterina Mucignat
Practice: BDP
Design concept: A Mondrian-inspired ceiling design, intended to create a bright and lively dining experience.
Configurator feedback: Easy to pick up and very intuitive to use.

"A highly distinctive scheme that clearly evokes the work of Piet Mondrian. The subtle manipulation of the ceiling grid is equally impressive." – **Meredith Hull**

"The shapes and proportions of the ceiling tiles are very pleasing, resulting in a convincing Mondrian-like composition." – **Maria Cheung**

"Several ceiling entries sought to contrast with the surrounding space, but this one has managed it best with a compelling composition of colour and form." – **Michael Anderson**

Seeing is believing

The principal aims behind the competition were two-fold: showcase Zentia's creative reworking of the discontinuous acoustic ceiling concept through its Sonify system, and highlight the benefits of using the 3D Studio configurator to maximise the design potential of the Sonify product.

Designed to create unique, personalised acoustic ceiling solutions in a wide range of interior sectors, Sonify incorporates an innovative grid system enabling acoustic baffles and panels to be hung quickly and accurately with minimal 'sway' post-installation. The baffles can be used to create Zentia's Nexus configuration, as well as waved and angled patterns. A huge range of standard colours (35 in all) can be applied to the acoustic panels, baffles and grid capping, providing even further customisation. Added to this, the company's UK-based, in-house paint facility, means that its coloured baffles and canopies can be delivered with unrivalled lead times.

Conceived as a seamless specification experience, Sonify 3D Studio combines parametric design and creativity with simple integration into digital workflows. It is simple and intuitive to use enabling users to manipulate shapes, colours and different environments with ease. Designed to be highly photorealistic, the system also understands materials, light and how ceilings look at different times of the day. Project files are given traceable IDs, which support the Golden Thread, and can also be exported into Revit environments.

Contact Details

For more information about [Sonify](#) and the [Sonify 3D Studio](#) configurator, please visit the [Zentia website](#).

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