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# The New Scene

From beach debris to panoramic views, experts say 'environment' trumps design in today's restaurants, even in Milwaukee.

**RESTAURANT DESIGNERS NATURALLY APPROACH A SPACE** with a design point of view. They look at physical opportunities and constraints, build-out budgets and timelines, and eventually come up with design solutions they think will enable an owner to operate profitably.

The result is usually an attractively designed space. But from my experience, this basic, typical design approach often misses the mark on delivering an immersive, memorable environment for diners.

The difference between creating an environment vs. creating a design often is that intangible, added value to the dining experience. To ascertain how this immersive environment is achieved, I spoke with several restaurant designers and consultants whose restaurant projects resulted in transformational dining experiences.

## THE DESIGNERS

Bogdanow and Partners is an award-winning New York City-based design firm responsible for some of the greatest Big Apple success stories. One of them is Sueños, ("dreams" in Spanish), which is a redo of an existing restaurant.

To enhance and support the upscale Latin cuisine, Larry Bogdanow used Mexican tiles on the bar floor, wideboard pine floor in the main dining room and added a small platform to showcase the making of the tortillas. He also painted intense colors on the walls, and created "dream boxes" to house the art placed around the bar and dining areas. Cactus-like plants and river rock brought the theme to the outdoor courtyard for a complete Latino experience.

RTKL, a global architectural planning and design firm based in Baltimore, is best known for creating large retail environments for developers and municipalities. Thom McKay, the “idea” man for this firm, approaches design for restaurants much the same way he does for creating an entire village.

“Before I come up with any pre-conceived notions about layout, fabrics, lighting or color, I first like to deal with the emotional design elements,” he says. McKay and restaurant owners discuss how they want guests to feel in the space. Words such as romantic, aspirational, hip, edgy, nostalgic and energized are bantered about until the emotional DNA is captured. Then, and only then, the design process truly begins.

To discipline the design process, McKay often creates a storyline, including characters and personalities, to ensure that obstacles or incongruities to the design are eliminated. He then creates a design based on the intended cuisine, price points and the local market’s psychographics.

One of his greatest achievements was in the creation of Kitts Kitchen and Rum Mill restaurant. Kitt, the main character in the story, created a kitchen (the main dining room) and rum mill (the bar) and also included a branded retail shop. The use of real materials that would have been found on the beach of a Caribbean island were used to create weathered wood porches, a corrugated metal rooftop, trees with bench seating for the lounge areas and paper lanterns for lighting. The total effect immerses the guests in an island adventure.

Dale DeGroff is better known as King Cocktail for his creation of compelling bar environments enjoyed by guests in top hotels and independent restaurants. Dale knows how people want to feel and how they behave at bars. In addition to creating signature drinks, including their names and garnishes, he also creates signature bar environments to enhance the dining experience. His bar designs yield the ultimate in creature comfort.

DeGroff’s design philosophy is that first the bar must be functional for the number of guests, bartenders and servers that will be using it. The height of the seats, depth of the counter, foot rails and back bar storage and display are key issues in functionality and comfort. He is also a stickler for authenticity and is the ultimate source for locating landmark bars, artifacts and even glassware to recreate a period saloon.

At Beer Foodservice Consultants, Ira Beer is the ultimate designer of public dining rooms for *Fortune* 500 companies across the country. “Customers want diversity, even in workplace cafeterias and dining rooms,” he says.

Working with noted architect Frank Gehry, Beer designed an immersive space for the new Conde Nast headquarters in Manhattan. Conde Nast publishes *Bon Appetit* and *Gourmet* magazines, so the pressure was on to provide a knockout culinary showcase for employees and visitors.

The overall goal was to create a space that provided a respite and complete departure for the stressed-out employees. Since most offices are square cubbyholes, Beer’s design had no straight edges.

The service areas, which provide restaurant-quality food, are presented in a series of rounded islands, and the use of glass, titanium and strategic lighting together achieved the stated goals. The cafeteria is so popular that employees rarely leave the building to eat out at the hundreds of restaurants on the street.

The Zimmerman Design Group’s Jim Olsen, head of hospitality/recreational design, says that his clients, ranging from small dining establishments to large country clubs, are asking for “timeless” designs. “Even in Milwaukee, the days of the crystal chandeliers and the stuffy uncomfortable seating have given way to simple pendant lighting, comfort-driven seating and the warm feeling of one’s home,” he notes.

Olsen’s recent collaborative design project with Bogdanow Partners – Coast, an 11,000-square-foot restaurant on Lake Michigan – strived to bring the outdoor experience inside the space. “The panoramic view of the lake was a natural driver for our design decisions,” he says. “We chose natural materials, beach-inspired stones and water elements to reinforce the location’s natural attributes.” Even the bar, which does not face the lake, was treated with a water bubble wall to create continuity with the water theme.

Operators, owners and designers beware – it’s the environment and the total experience that guests will come back for. Creating a compelling environment is a collaborative effort and should result in a seamless, unobstructed experience for the guest.

#### **MORE FROM THE EXPERTS**

Larry Bogdanow: “Reality is the new value for the future. Diners are tired of being hyped and told how to feel. They want reality in their food and in the restaurants they frequent.”

Thom McKay: “Sophisticated diners seem to understand that less is indeed more when it comes to the environments in which they consume their food. Strategic design cues let guests know just enough to let their own imagination create customized memories.”

Ira Beer: “Cookie-cutter design is out. Diners want diversity, even in quick-service [outlets]. McDonald’s and Starbucks tailor their designs to fit the locations.”

Dale DeGroff: “The bar is often the first impression a guest receives when entering a restaurant. It sets the tone, the style and the expectation for the rest of the evening. The bar is not a stand-alone entity from a design standpoint. It must reinforce the design theme.” 🍷

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