

OLE

LET'S EAT OUT

YOUR CITY
YOUR
FOOD

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INSIDE

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CELEBRITIES and
KEEPING it LOCAL

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RETURN

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DESIGNER
TELLS ALL

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BLUEPRINT FOR DINING

A restaurant's look is one of the subtle ways owners encourage your attitude towards – and behaviour in – their restaurant. While most of us pay close attention to the service and food, many of us may be unaware just how much the décor and design are affecting our experience.

Glen Peloso (from the popular Food Network Canada/HGTV show "Restaurant Makeover") took us behind the scenes and shared insightful trade secrets. Like why some restaurants choose table colours to actually show crumbs, how design has been used to encourage people to eat out post-2008 recession, and what trends we can expect to see in 2014. All good to know before that important next meal out – maybe your restaurant choice, and its design, will influence the behaviour (and outcomes) at your table.



To put restaurant design in perspective – with other commercial projects – Glen points out that restaurants are unique. "Usually, commercial projects focus on one type of user over another – retail or office. But a restaurant runs the gamut from a workspace to a party space. It has to work efficiently, for both the client and staff, while maintaining a theme. For example, a solution to alleviate traffic issues has to also consider the comfort of all people involved."

LEO: Ambience is important to a great meal out, but what design elements contribute to it? It goes well beyond the actual décor, doesn't it?

GLEN: Absolutely. Sure, a well-designed restaurant makes a great first impression and pleases the eye but just as importantly, it creates an environment that is conducive to the type of establishment the proprietors envision and the patrons will embrace.

Let me explain.

If you look at a fast food establishment you will often find that the colours are bright and the lighting levels are quite high. The furniture is generally hard seated



The Kennedy Public House, design: Glen Peloso Interiors

(unpadded) and the tables tend to be brighter lighter colours as well – you may also experience this in a food court if you look carefully at the atmosphere. These design choices reflect the business model of those establishments: the profit margins are based on volume. The average price per person may only be ten to twelve dollars including a drink and tax and the proprietors need a table turn four to six times an hour to be profitable. Generally this kind of dining is self-serve and patrons don't add to the order once the order has been placed. There is no opportunity for the server to offer an additional bottle of wine or add a dessert to the table price. Bright colours coupled with high levels of noise create a hectic atmosphere and cause patrons to eat quickly. Bright table colour means that crumbs will be visible and make it seem like a less appealing place to sit. The chair grows uncomfortable more quickly. The bright lighting is intended to have all the function of a cafeteria but none of the warmth of a dining room, even at home.

Enter full-service restaurants. Most want their patrons to stay longer and enjoy a complete meal. To do that they need to ensure they create feelings of comfort, safety and happiness. And so the colours of the table and surroundings will often become more earth toned and warm. Generally designers will select padded larger furniture so that patrons are able to comfortably sit for extended periods of time. The tabletops may be darker wood where crumbs are harder to see and the lighting is much lower intensity and focused. Warm candle-like lighting is also favoured as it makes everyone at the table look more appealing. Patrons are feeling comfortable, relaxed and content – very much in line with what they had expected from a meal out. In this environment, the staff have the opportunity to offer additional wine, desserts, maybe even after-dinner drinks. The patron has a wonderful leisurely meal out and the restaurant remains a viable business.

A family-styled restaurant will often have a combination of both where the furniture is more comfortable but more durable in materials (arborite tops, krypton fabric seats, metal chairs) while the lighting is kept at a maximum brightness. The combination suits the server and the family (parents) to facilitate a meal easily and the server can “add value” to the per person ticket price. The duration of stay falls between the two concepts and

functions well as the younger members of the family generally shorten the stay simply because they are incapable of sitting for longer periods and don't get involved in adult conversation. Here the tables tend to turn once an hour and the establishments generally cater to a more frugal diner.

Sound and music also play an important role. In a space where the offering may be a higher price per person but the space is intended to appeal to a younger crowd, the fabric elements of the design will often be less apparent, the music more upbeat and the volume higher. The noise level rises without the fabrics to deaden the sound but that all serves to make the place seem energetic, fun and alive. This set wants to feel like they are a vibrant part of the community enjoying better foods and wines. The more fabric and/or sound baffles you add, the quieter the space becomes. It loses a sense of “high energy” but gains a feeling of intimacy appropriate for business dinners and date nights, while adding a sense of elegance.

“Post market crash, things needed to become simpler from a design perspective in order for people to continue to dine out. The fashion became “back to basics” where local sustainable became the desired fare for the patrons.”

LEO: Toronto diners are treated to a vast amount of choice, thanks in part to being an ethnically diverse city. What culture-specific design influences have you found particularly interesting?

GLEN: There is a big Moroccan influence in design and you see some incredible lighting that is Moroccan inspired and terrific looking. I love the Japanese pub concepts (Izakaya) with the less formal details but with the same beautiful precision characterized by Japanese design. Also, Italian modern details that are often seen in more modern minimalist spaces. I have found of late that many spaces are embracing the “reclaimed” feel so being able to see historically significant elements that are part of the culture of the restaurant owner is exciting. Some-time they are images or cooking utensils common to the ethnicity, but they are always visually interesting.

For me the spaces that work the best are detailed with cultural reference but don't attempt to be appropriate to the geography of that place. For example, a very hot climate design just doesn't work here very well from either a practical perspective or from an aesthetic perspective where the light quality isn't the same here as it is in Greece, for instance.

LEO: Our lifestyles have changed since the recession of 2008. People have both had to, and chosen to, move away from conspicuous consumption – and are trying to live simpler, more fulfilling lives. Yoga has become a mainstream practice; sustainability is on everyone's minds. How has this shift been reflected in the way restaurants are being designed?

GLEN: In advance of the 2008 recession, markets indicated that home values would continue to rise and that the middle class was growing rapidly as many people were able to purchase homes. Money seemed to be abundant and patrons wanted to feel as though they were the upper class dining with the one percent.

Post market crash, things needed to become simpler from a design perspective in order for people to continue to dine out. The fashion became “back to basics” where local sustainable became the desired fare for the patrons. This is around the same time the term “staycation” became popular, where people vacationed at home to save funds. The feelings of home, cozy comfortable familiar surroundings sociologically served to focus on what was achievable and not what was lost. Design moved to make a “simpler way of life” feel appealing again. The home cooked meals in a simple “harvest table” design where people mingle side by side surrounded by found and reclaimed materials, and items and images of a happier time, eating “back to basics” food selections. From a practical point of view, the more basic the design, the less expensive it is to execute. Barn board has wonderful texture but doesn't require a

great deal of finishing to achieve the desired look. Rustic, reclaimed items, while they may be difficult to find, add depth to the design. Even the Edison bulb requires nothing more than a wire and socket to achieve the desired look. As restaurants become more “boutique”, the cost of mounting a new establishment becomes more contained and while the restaurant failure rate may not have changed significantly, the losses sustained as a result of failure are more contained. The focus moves to the sustainability of both the food and the environment.

LEO: What major restaurant design trends did you see in 2013 and what do expect to see in 2014?

GLEN: The restaurant industry has moved toward a more boutique experience and the smaller 40-to-60-seat space. As people move away from the large mall experience towards a more personal experience restaurants are reflecting that. There are far more “corner” or “neighbourhood” places serving smaller menus of better quality foods.

I think the trend toward reclaimed and recycled elements will continue into 2014 as a holdover from last year, however, I think this year will find the introduction of more multimedia elements with projected walls and altering spaces.

A number of establishments around the world have been experimenting with this concept of a continually changing environment. The avant-garde restaurant Ultraviolet in Shanghai takes it quite far. It includes a secret room that radically shifts moods with each course: 360-degree high-def projectors, swings in air temperature, smell diffusers. At the Casino de Madrid building, star chef Paco Roncero built a 9-seat techno-dining room. He experiments with relationships between food and perception. There are diffusers to control temperature and humidity, a ceramic table that heats or cools plates and vibrates on cue and a tightly scripted audio-visual environment.

What was the biggest surprise to you – the conscious effort certain restaurants make to get you out the door, or the concept of a continually changing environment? How will this insider's look affect your next restaurant choice? Or, if you're an owner, your next restaurant or renovation? Share your thoughts and experiences at www.facebook.com/LEOmagToronto.



The Artisan Bakery, design: Glen Peloso Interiors