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Intelligent Design

By Leslie Wu, editor

Years ago, the Kobe Club restaurant in New York kept critics and diners on knife's edge, literally, by suspending 2,000 sharpened samurai swords, blade down, from the ceiling.

Although adding a frisson of excitement to your dining room is a good thing, you don't need to go to such extremes. A simple refreshing of elements can be enough to bring new life to your restaurant and build excitement for diners.

This month, ORN talked to seven interior designers to get the best design tips to make your operation run smoothly, whether it's potential pitfalls of an open kitchen, how to reduce noise levels, and often neglected areas of the restaurant (for example, when was the last time you seriously considered your bathroom?)

And because budgets are tight in these economic conditions, we checked out where you should save or splurge, as well as things to consider when repurposing space or materials.

It's a design mad world

"The public is so design savvy now, far more than they ever were," says Lindsey Anacleto, managing partner/director of possibilities at Lindsey Anacleto Designs.

Whether on television, online in blogs or sites like Pinterest, in print or in retail stores, your clients are being exposed to design on a whole new level.

"With television shows that broadcast design in its every form and the web offering instant and ease of access to reviews of the newest, our design clients that live in the spaces we design for them at work or at home are the same foodies that frequent the restaurants we design," says Johnson Chou, owner of Johnson Chou Inc., who has worked on projects such as Toronto's Blowfish restaurant.

"We are currently experiencing the rise of these highly well-travelled, critical and informed design aesthetes that expect restaurants to provide an emotional experience with the cuisine and decor at a level no less than that they had a week previously in New York or Barcelona."

With such an onslaught of design concepts, the savvy operator will use design to lure customers into an establishment. "Make sure that it's always changing so that there's always something new with the customer," says Anacleto.

"Because it's such a saturated market – are you going to be the hottest guy on the block in a year? Design has been proven to increase your bottom line. People are going to spend more money if they're getting that level of entertainment that they can't get elsewhere."

Back to reality

Although design trends, much like those in food, tend to be cyclical, interior designers are seeing a "renaissance of the real" that is carrying through restaurants' décor, food, and overall philosophy.



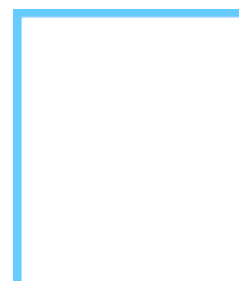
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"With the financial crisis of 2008, people have come back down to earth," says Montana Burnett, designer host on Restaurant Takeover, a rebirth of the classic makeover show on Food Network Canada. "Sustainability, open concept kitchens, organic ingredients and family dining have made the restaurant experience more realistic and less fanciful."

Food first

"After living through the "eatertainment" era, there's a shift to much simpler, more authentic, more food focused restaurants," says Gordon Mackay, creative partner at Mackay Wong, which has designed restaurants internationally for 20 years such as Toronto's Modus restaurant and Goose and Firkin pub. "We're seeing this shift in every marketplace – a strong desire to build restaurants around food concepts and differentiators. Even in the casual segment, we're starting our design discussions around the menu first, and its differentiators from the restaurant's competitors. It's a maturing in the industry, where the food experience is number one, and the space and environment needs to be in support of that."

Being green

Another trend is the greening of spaces showcasing sustainability and environmentally friendly materials, but with the ability to withstand the rigors of a restaurant environment, says Mackay. "Customers aren't coming in asking for green restaurants, but some of them are located in LEED buildings, which is an opportunity to educate the client," he says.

Urszula Tokarska of SRP Architect Inc. sees a resurgence in reused or recycled materials for a sense of rusticity, which correlates to dining trends of simpler, more honest food. She sees green design in fabrics that use recycled materials, quartz, materials made of rubber such as recycled rubber tire flooring, things made with acrylic and recycled wood.

The use of reclaimed wood in particular is a trend that runs the gamut from small local restaurants to the world's biggest McDonald's constructed for the London Olympics.

These materials can be used in contrast to other materials to create a striking aesthetic. Burnett sees a trend toward rustic applications like raw wood wall treatments and tabletops juxtaposed with very luxurious design elements such as light fixtures or exotic stone countertops.

"This odd coupling makes patrons feel relaxed while still enjoying a special dining experience," says Burnett.

Think about noise

"Many of the current approaches to design are creating very hollow, social spaces," says Mackay. "For concepts that target a younger group, there's more tolerance for noise, but for the baby boomer, you need to control that audial experience."

Paying attention to some of your restaurant's hard surfaces is a start.

"One surface that is often forgotten is the ceiling," says Mackay.

A quick, no frills method of dampening sound can be the use of acoustic foam sprayed on the surface. For those with a higher budget and more time, it's possible to break up the ceiling surface with creative treatments. "It's a matter of designers understanding that a flat pane of drywall creates an echo chamber. You need to add scale and texture," says Mackay.

The sound properties of hard surfaces on walls can be altered with softer surfaces, such as drapery or textured art, says Mackay.

Carpet has definitely changed from the broadloom era, says Mackay. Carpet tile product is out there now that is eco-friendly, can deal with stain and, from the wear standpoint, can easily be slipped out or replaced.

Tokarska has used a variety of tricks to deal with noise, including a sculpture with sound insulation at Toronto's Aria, which had 30 foot ceilings and hard surfaces.

After consulting with sound engineers, the team tried to dissipate rather than absorb the sound without having the space for material that would be sound absorbing or prohibitively expensive. The sculpture, made of flexible walnut strips pinned together in a fluid design, represented strings of music, but also functioned as a divider of space and broke up the sound.

Other less expensive ways to break up sound could include a full upholstery wall with insulation material behind the upholstery, suggests Tokarska. "Set a loose table or booth against it and it can be very attractive without necessarily costing a lot, while providing a softer finish." She also recommends creative use of fabric suspended on ceilings. "You can create



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an amazing design with stretched fabric," she says.

To do or not to do: The open kitchen conundrum

An open kitchen can be a great boon to an operator, adding excitement to the dining room and a view into the back of house to attract the foodie diner...if done correctly. "Acoustically, an open kitchen can be a dangerous thing to do, and can dominate the guest experience in a negative way," says Mackay. "You don't want it to feel like the back of house is extending into the dining room. It takes a great deal of training to put a team on display for the dining room – it's not for everyone. Think about how the team communicates. If it's not chef driven, don't do it."

People definitely need to work in an open kitchen before opening one up, says Renato Iamonaco, design director and partner at Sector Designs, who has designed restaurants in Kleinburg and Woodbridge, such as Enoteca Motorino. "The chef or restaurateur has to have been in that environment to fully understand it."

The transition from the dining room is especially crucial for the idea of open kitchen, says Tokarska. "When designing, I like to see more integration with the kitchen and dining experience. This often gets overlooked a bit, then the operators have to make it work later."

By incorporating the kitchen, the dining experience would be enhanced by the production of food – the diner has more understanding of how the food is made, says Tokarska.

Also consider how lighting affects the back of the house. "What's good for the chef may not be good for the diner 10 feet away," says Mackay.

Be careful about what you're putting on display. "The dish pit has to get dealt with properly," says Mackay. "Select strategic portions of the kitchen that are exposed to the dining room – you want to convey the kitchen experience, but the guest doesn't have to stare at walk in coolers, dish pits, etc. Don't give it all away."

Lighting is essential when considering an open kitchen, says Chris Hannah, principal at Cricket Design. Using focused task lighting rather than washing the whole area with light can prevent the harsh fluorescents from washing into the dining area. Be sure to give the kitchen staff what they need to work with: good lighting along the expo line, and under the hood in the kitchen.

It's also important to pay attention to sight lines, says Hannah. "Think of the kitchen as part of the dining room. Usually, when looking at the kitchen, you can see the main cooking line and prep area," he says.

Elements that are used in dishes, such as fresh vegetables, can be stored on the wall so that customers can see that the kitchen is making use of such produce. "Rather than hiding your ingredients, take the opportunity to tell a story," says Hannah.

Can't decide? Consider a compromise. At Modus, Mackay enclosed the kitchen in glass in a corner, with clear sightlines from the street and the dining room.

Waiting game

As an operator, it's important to think about people at your entranceway who are waiting. "There's an overlap of operations – let it generate income for you while people are waiting," says Anacleto. "At the same time, let's not make it so big that you're giving up that square footage for an area that's not generating money."

Think about the comfort of waiting and hosting, says Iamonaco. "When you're brought into the space, what's the first thing you see, smell, feel or hear? How much of the environment do you see when you're waiting?"

"It's great if they can see the food walking by as it's being delivered. It makes it feel like it's worth the wait," says Iamonaco. "Don't hide the food and just show the alcohol to the customer."

Anacleto is currently designing the newest Stephanie Izard restaurant in Chicago, where lineups can be hours long even on weekday nights.

"Serving food can be a way to get people interested in what you're offering, and that way, they won't get agitated and leave", says Anacleto. "But you have to be mindful of what they're eating on. If you have tiny little ledges for the drink rail, you need to consider that lack of space for what will be offered in terms of dish size."

Although it can be tempting to maximize this space with more seating, some designers advise against this idea. "The front of house, or the hostess area, like bathrooms, are unfortunately often cramped and ill-considered," says

Chou. "As the introduction to the restaurant, the hostess area should be alluring, suggesting to the patron the experience to expect within. Operators should refrain from situating tables near the front of house at all costs."

The bar is the first thing you see when you enter a restaurant, so it should be interesting and have some good features, such as the use of fireplace or the creation of a social space in the lounge or outer area. "People love fire and water – it creates a nice atmosphere," says Tokarska.

As Canada has a relatively short summer, sometimes restaurateurs are reluctant to spend money on a space that is seasonal. The outdoor patio, however, can serve a greater purpose than seating, adding elements and scale to a space.

At Aria, Tokarska was faced with a concrete plaza in front of the Air Canada Centre. "It was a stark, crazy wind tunnel that needed a lot to make it a more inviting space," she recalls. Tokarska added large umbrellas with LED lighting and wind screens, as well as a fireplace that could be seen from the restaurant. Adding to the challenge was the fact that nothing could be affixed permanently outside the restaurant.

In terms of patio seating, it can be a real revenue generator for the restaurant, as long as people are encouraged to linger long enough. People do spend more money on patios...you just have to make sure that the landscaping is good, put lounge rather than patio furniture out, and make it really comfortable, says Tokarska.

And while you're working on the exterior of the restaurant, remember that first impressions to the guest can be important.

"If you've got the money, maybe put in a new front door, something ornate in wood," says Hannah. "It's the first touch point, and something that people really remember."

Splurge versus save

Although fine dining restaurants with equally luxurious budgets seem to be reappearing on the Canadian landscape, many smaller operators have limited time, manpower and budgets to work with. So what are the areas where a restaurateur should save, or spend, when it comes to design?

"The challenge of working with a limited budget is, paradoxically, to convey its absence," says Chou. "If a restaurant patron senses a limited, or indeed a stretched budget - then the design has failed. What is built must be built well with durable, appropriate materials and must be completed in its entirety. Phasing will not work, as a design savvy patron will always sense that something is incomplete or in transition."

"It's important to be selective but very focused in terms of design," says Mackay. "You need to have the bang for buck factor. If it's diluted, the operator will quickly find that it's money badly spent."

It's important find a site that has good bones and something to save, says Hannah. "If the layout is dysfunctional, and the kitchen is in the wrong place, it's not going to work," he says. "Analyze the site: are the locations for plumbing and exhaust ducts logical? It's not just about interiors: plumbing, exhaust and air conditioning are a huge part of budget that often gets overlooked by the customer for paint colour and the sign outside the door. And guess who's left with no budget? Design."

"In a lot of places, people do look up and down, but not always," says Hannah. "Often, people are looking straight ahead – they may look down at the floor, may gaze at the ceiling, but I've seen many restaurants where so much of the budget is spent on those two planes."

If there is a dropped ceiling with a T-Bar, don't tear it out and redo all of the electrical, advises Burnett. "This will cost an arm and a leg. Instead, simply replace or paint the existing tile inserts to work with your décor," she says.

Flooring can be repurposed just by taking the existing floor up and exposing the concrete, then putting a coat of epoxy on it, says Hannah. "Older concrete is a much warmer colour, and durable," he says.

It's more important to think about what the customer sees and touches, says Hannah. "They'll respond more to the comfort of the chairs more so than whether tile on the floor is \$2 or \$15 each," he says.

When choosing the custom chairs at Canoe, Anacleto and the team did a blind testing by feel to establish the best choice. Buy durable chairs, advises Anacleto. "Spend the money where it needs to be spent and save where it's not as crucial," she says. "Would I spend money on chairs rather than wall coverings? Absolutely."

And if you don't have the budget for custom chairs, or even new furniture,

consider spray-painting your existing chairs to breathe new life into the place, says Burnett.

Don't forget other things that customers may sit on during their stay.

"Bathrooms are often overlooked by operators as some fail to realize that it is often the area many patrons decide not to return - but is also the one space that patrons can be most impressed - as it reveals the depth of the operator's concern for their level of experience and comfort," says Chou.

"People are spending so much more on bathrooms these days," says Iamonaco, who has seen televisions, fireplaces, floor to ceiling tile and custom sinks in use in restaurants. He advises that operators think carefully about the placement, and how to limit someone coming out of the bathroom at same time as fresh dishes coming out of kitchen. "They shouldn't be anywhere near each other," he says.

Ensure the materials that you're purchasing will stand the test of time. "Don't get all crafty with your bar top. Be realistic about what's going to take the most abuse and put your money there," says Anacleto. "You don't want to be spending on upkeep, you want to focus on growing the business, not spending money on what you've already done."

Focus on design features that show off the strong points of your restaurant, says Mackay. If your specialty is wine, pour money into doing something unique to show that off, such as creative design features displaying wine in the dining room. If you want to focus on your chef driven cuisine, showcase your food in unique ways.

Remember to spend money on the unseen things that add to customer comfort. "Often, I have clients tell me that they don't want to spend money on things like their HVAC," says Anacleto. "But your customers will be unhappy because they're too hot or cold."

"And absolutely remember to pick the gum off the bottom of your tables - people stick gum everywhere," laughs Anacleto.

Go with the flow

In terms of flow, there are several things that an operator should consider from a design standpoint.

First, it's important to step outside your immediate area of work and look at the restaurant as a whole. "A chef may have a great idea of how the line operates, but not the flow between front of house or back of house and how that may work," says Anacleto.

Consider things like how tables are serviced. "Circulation paths must be conceived not simply as paths for movement but also as gathering spaces - one must conceive the duality of circulation from the initial design," says Chou.

Poorly considered service stations, both in terms of quantity and locations will often lead to placing stations in circulation paths resulting in congestion in flow.

Grouping the bar and food pickup areas can be an efficient way to maximize staff and output. "From an operations standpoint, if your labour model changes from day to night, a grouped section can allow you to have a floater staff member that works the bar but can also expedite," says Mackay.

"When you get all your equipment in the same general area, it's more effective. It's a real benefit that showcases the food and beverage delivery and makes for a strong visual."

When considering what the right number of service stations on the floor should be for your restaurant, measure the convenience of staff and perception of the station on the customer.

"If the staff is inconvenienced, they can't spend that time on the customer," says Anacleto, who has experience as a server in a restaurant and night club. At Beer Town in Cambridge, ON, Hannah envisioned a Kelsey's into a whole new upscale casual concept with the client that included a 5,000 square foot open concept space. Part of the redesign included turning the existing U-shaped bar so that the back of the bar divided the kitchen from the dining room. This allowed pickup for both the kitchen and bar to happen from the same aisle, says Hannah. The design team took that concept to heart when designing the second location in Waterloo.

Scale is also an important element of flow. "Keep in mind that as much as liquor sales generate lots of revenue, the flow of the restaurant should not suffer as a result of a large bar," says Burnett.

"Restaurateurs need to keep their dining area and bar in proportion to their

space. Typically the bar area should take up a quarter of the dining room.”

Light of day

Lighting is an art form, says Mackay. And natural light can be both a benefit and a challenge.

“Everyone thinks natural light is great – people think they can just turn the overhead lights off and it’ll be fine. However, it’s quite the opposite,” says Hannah.

Natural light often washes the interior with cool blue light, especially in winter when there’s reflected light off the snow, he says.

Light, like every other component in a restaurant, has to be carefully managed.

“If you put in blinds, staff and customers play with them,” says Hannah, who prefers mesh blinds to reduce light but also allow some view out. “The risk is that you’re not letting the view in,” he says.

“But you can’t see into a restaurant from outside if it’s bright out anyways. Just be sure to raise the blinds at night.”

“At the Goose and Firkin pub in Toronto, the building has floor to ceiling windows with very heavy backlighting,” says Mackay. “Strong daylight can sabotage the design, so we had to introduce a lot of options in blinds and drop shades.”

Lighting is a huge component of the restaurant, whether it’s a light fixture where you’ve spent more money as a focus, or indirect lighting, says Anacleto.

“Customers expect a level of design when they go out now, even if it’s a raw space – there needs to be an element of entertainment, and lighting creates that ambiance.”

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