

The benefits of a well-designed restaurant pleasing to the pocketbook as well as the eye

By Bruce Russo

Form follows function. That old adage advises us to pay attention to the way something works — or doesn't work — before considering how it looks. All too often, however, restaurateurs concern themselves with the aesthetics of their dining concepts with no regard to how spaces work for — and sometimes against — them.

Just as restaurateurs need strong business plans to woo investors, they also need to develop comprehensive design plans for their restaurants before a single brick is laid or a door is hung.

A solid design plan is one of the most important investments that can be made in the foodservice industry. The returns can be significant: Not only does it simplify the construction process on the front end, but a good design plan also allows a restaurant to operate more efficiently and be more enjoyable for both patrons and staff.

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The central element of a restaurant's design is function and flow for the staff and the customers. Each space in the restaurant must be assigned a specific purpose, and the plan must outline how each of those spaces interacts with the others. It is particularly important to pay attention to key work areas for staff, such as wait stations and dish drops. Those often are treated as afterthoughts and end up crammed into a restaurant's odd, distant corners — or worse, in plain sight of patrons.

The placement of wait stations must be considered carefully and located strategically to allow for easy access and maximized use. They must be well-hidden and out of sight of the dining room, yet they must still be able to connect with the staff workflow.

Another strong consideration is the size of the space. Too often owners take more

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space than is needed, just because they negotiated a "good lease deal." A restaurant that has the feeling of being large when you walk through the main entry can be a negative. It becomes difficult to fill the space and create the proper energy required to make the restaurant comfortable. Over the past five years, many concept sizes have been reduced from 6,000 square feet on average to closer to 3,500 square feet. The size reduction helps considerably when searching for restaurant locations, and it also reduces the operational demands on the owner.

Often, smaller-sized concepts generate (See **WELL-DESIGNED** on page 24)

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OPINION

A well-designed restaurant both functional and attractive

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better numbers and experience better profit margins than larger ones. In a restaurant with a smaller dining room and a bar or lounge as part of the design, customers are offered cocktails while waiting for their tables to become available. These waits,

which can exceed an hour, can help increase sales of appetizers and cocktails before the dining experience.

While the locations of bus stations and restrooms are important, the kitchen design and the flow of the back-of-the-house operations are the most vital parts of

any restaurant's comprehensive design. Simply put, the kitchen is the heartbeat of the entire operation. Like a manufacturing plant, the kitchen is where the raw goods and products are received at the rear door and prepared into the final product that is delivered to the customer.

A strong comprehensive design plan also recognizes that restaurants have more than one point of revenue — such as bars, patios, private dining rooms and takeout areas. Just as a sensible financial plan includes a well-diversified portfolio, a good design plan incorporates multiple areas

that serve complementary purposes and take into account changing weather conditions and customer preferences.

For example, in the heat of a Texas summer when temperatures frequently exceed the century mark at dusk, patio dining isn't an option for most people. This issue has become a touchy subject, as a patio ultimately can comprise as much as 40 percent of a restaurant's overall seating capacity. To offset the weather-related loss of seating, separate heating and cooling systems can be installed to control temperatures both inside and outside independently of each other.

A smart design plan also can offer innovative ways to compensate for potentially lost space by closing in the patio with retractable doors and extending some sort of air conditioning to

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the previously open area. In contrast to the Texas heat or a frigid Chicago day, in Miami's tropical climate, where cafe-style patio seating is the norm, restaurants go to great lengths to make even their innermost tables feel like they are outdoors.

Once the functional needs of the restaurant are met, only then should design elements be introduced for the overall look, feel and positive energy of the space. Every well-traveled person has been to a restaurant where it was obvious that an interior designer created the "look" more to pad his own portfolio and be published in the latest design journal than to serve the functional needs of the restaurant. Those establishments, while visually stunning, often are crippled by the lack of attention that was placed on making them workable spaces. In other words, they look great in the pages of *Architectural Digest*, but aren't enjoyable to the patrons or staff. ■