

Designers Dish 2024

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What's in? What's out? What's promising to shape or reshape how designers think about restaurant projects in an environment in which providing good value and great experiences are mission critical for restaurant brands? For insights on trends and strategies, we turned to four veteran designers and architects leading studios large and small, from the Pacific Northwest to the Southeast, Midwest and Northeast. Each is well-versed in the art and science of transforming empty spaces and nascent concepts into alluring and vibrant restaurants.

What big trends are influencing your restaurant work right now?

Fortis: On a macro level, it's the need for experiential design, which is tightly connected to social media. Restaurants have to check more boxes today than great food, service and atmosphere. I call it the two-minute moment, and we have to design for it. We get about 120 seconds for a guest to walk in, check out a space and have that sort of wow moment. And then it has to last for 90 to 120 minutes, which involves front-to-backdoor experiential design - facade, uniforms, plating, service, restrooms, decor, lighting, acoustics, all the details. Even chefs and menu developers now carefully consider the colors of the food, the colors and styles of the plates, etc., in terms of how they'll photograph. When people take pictures of their food to share on social media, those images need to reflect the right *je ne sais quoi* of the restaurant.

Mukoyama: If you look at Google data, searches for solo dining in 2023 were up something like 350%. People are out and about again, but they're also more open to eating out on their own, and that's impacting how we're planning restaurants. We've been mixing up our seating, increasing bar sizes, creating more nooks that are comfortable for solo diners without isolating them or having them just staring at a TV. Even if dining alone, people want great experiences and to be in the mix.

Another ongoing trend is wellness, which impacts everything from the menu to the space. We're thinking about wellness, seasonality and authenticity very holistically now and that's become a strong area of focus.

Haley: Design wise, we're seeing a shift toward maximalist styles and finishes and substantial, comfortable furnishings. But another trend impacting many of our projects is operational. More clients are leveraging their real estate by creating multiple concepts or sub-concepts under one roof. They're using the same liquor license, kitchen and staff and operating from morning coffee and pastries through nighttime dinner and cocktails. In some cases, a client with a lot of space might

retrofit to include a second, more intimate concept within it — a little speakeasy bar with a different menu, for example. Or they might rethink their space to provide more intimate private dining opportunities, which are in big demand post-pandemic. We need to be able to create flexible spaces that transition from day to night and make each of those experiences unique.

Mora: In our market, we're still seeing restaurants working to figure out viable business models coming out of the pandemic. Sidewalk seating is staying, for instance, but there's pressure to make those elements better designed and more integrated. We're also seeing a lot of smaller, more intimate restaurant spaces and using more booths and banquettes versus loose tables and chairs in big, open dining rooms. Smaller spaces work well from an economic standpoint but also from an experience standpoint because they can feel more energetic and vibrant. We're also really focused on helping to create spaces that feel very personal and comfortable, not overly designed and staged - almost residential.

Are there restaurant design elements you feel are overdone today?

Mora: I go back to over-decorated and over-designed. Our general sensibility is don't have it if you don't need it. Test, double-check, edit, then edit some more and pare it down to what matters most. It's a fine line, but design should support what makes a great restaurant great - food, service, genuine conviviality - and not overshadow that by being too slick and 'designy.'

Fortis: Cliche culture. If I see one more pink neon sign with a cute saying or angel wings without a head on the wall as a backdrop for selfies, I'll scream. Those sorts of pop, throwaway moments have been done to death, but we still have clients who just want to know where that Instagram moment is. It makes it challenging, and even more important for designers to get clients to understand the importance of brand mission, which connects to brand and design narrative. The tighter that is, the easier and more authentic the so-called Instagram moments can and should be.

Mukoyama: I hope we're all a little tired of that kitschy Instagram moment, the focal wall with a cute neon sign. We need to shift back to focusing on a more authentic sense of place, on genuine culture and hospitality, and the stories behind venues and spaces. Everyone's still taking photos, but let's have it be of elements of a restaurant experience that are more interesting and authentic than a contrived focal wall.

Haley: I also think there's been a tendency to overdo local-artist murals. We love working with local artists and do so a lot but only when it's integral to the bigger concept and to creating an experiential design. What we see over and over, however, is places putting all of their eggs in one basket, saying, 'Ok, we're going to put a great mural there,' and leave it at that. They've got exposed ceilings, some generic

lighting and think that's enough to create an interesting space. And, at least locally, we're still seeing the modern industrial aesthetic being overused and overdone. Even in new builds, clients often try to go for this look, which by now seems very knee-jerk and generic. Let's push toward making every environment and every concept more distinctive, comfortable and memorable.

What role, if any, does AI play in your design process?

Mora: We don't have the bandwidth to test it yet, but I think AI absolutely can and will have a big impact in design and architecture. Some of it may be good and some bad. But we have so many tools that we now use every day to help us solve design challenges. It's just yet to be determined what kind of tool AI is and how we can best use it.

Willmott's Ghost, a 50-seat restaurant in The Spheres at Amazon headquarters in Seattle, illustrates Heliotrope Architects' clean, uncluttered approach to design, paring all elements down to what matters most. »

Mukoyama: We are using AI, primarily to create visuals at the beginning of the design process with clients. What used to happen is we'd all use Pinterest and inevitably as we'd be working up ideas for a pitch, we and another designer bidding on project might pull the same chair or other inspiration imagery. With AI, we're now creating our own Pinterest images. We can plug in the parameters - style, color, detail - and AI produces unique visuals for our mood boards or branding boards. We can create a very customized library of images for each client instead of just finding things online.

Haley: I can't say I'm comfortable with it as a designer, but I see benefits on the operational side of our business - for example, budgeting, cost estimating and marketing. And there's little doubt that it eventually will begin to infiltrate our process as designers, particularly for things like space planning and materials research. I'm interested to learn more about its potential.

Fortis: Initially, a lot of creative people, me included, were scared of it. But we're using it and learning to see it as another tool, and one that's very cool. On a recent project, we used AI to help us create a muse on which the whole brand and design narrative are based. We plugged in every detail we could about this person we dreamed up, along with a very tight brand strategic framework, and the character that the system generated was spot on. It was better and faster than what we'd been able to come up on our own and the buy-in we got on it helped drive every decision. But there's also a lot it can't do, like specify and create construction documents, at least not yet.

Jessica Haley at RODE Architecture sees an increase in operators creating multiple concepts under one roof. At The Lexington in Cambridge, Mass., RODE designed a cafe, upscale restaurant, and rooftop lounge, all served by a single kitchen but each offering a distinct experience. »

In what ways have your priorities around and approach to sourcing materials evolved?

Haley: In the architecture industry, we've been striving for sustainability for decades but buy-in is increasing downstream. A lot of our established clients are coming out with guidelines driven by both sustainability and health. They want to be sure that materials support both, and we partner with them on that mission. For us, it means choosing products made from recycled, nontoxic materials, and we're heavily focused on giving new life to existing materials and architectural elements.

Durability is also always a big focus. We try to help clients understand that it can be better to invest more in higher quality materials and furnishings. Cheap chairs or fabrics that look nice now are not going to save money or be sustainable choices when they need to replace them in two years. We also follow up to make sure that materials that we thought were durable actually are. If not, we communicate that back to the manufacturer.

Mukoyama: During the pandemic, everyone wanted hard, cold, white, bleachable surfaces. Thankfully, we've now moved on from that. We've swung back to more beautiful, organic materials with character — textured leathers, natural stone, warm woods. People are less worried now if they can see coffee rings on a tabletop. They're embracing that type of character.

We've also created product sustainability standards. We looked at the 12 most-sourced products firmwide, from ceiling and carpet tiles to chairs to paint, and created standards to ensure that they're more sustainable. It's a library of the highest impact products and categories for architecture and interiors, hitting sustainability from the inside out and the outside in.

Fortis: We're seeing huge growth in our ability to source custom products, often from outside the U.S., that are equal to or better than what we could traditionally specify. It has become a complete industry in and of itself and the impact on what we can design is huge. We used to be limited to some degree by our database of resources; you couldn't go to them for just one of anything. Now, you can do almost a whole restaurant custom. And it's affordable and deliverable.

Gensler uses AI in early design stages to create visuals for custom design features, such as the abstract wall covering at MDRD restaurant in Grand Rapids, Mich., created from diamondshape tiles. »

Mora: So much depends on the client and budget, but one thing we're increasingly sensitive to in every restaurant project is durability. A mistake that's often made by designers early on is simply not respecting the beating that restaurants have to take, especially areas used by staff. Trying to get away with cheaper materials might seem like a good VE solution at first, but they'll fall apart in a year or two. Durable, commercial quality is critical.

As for sustainable materials, most of our clients aren't prioritizing that. Many are smaller independents with tight budgets who just need to open as quickly and inexpensively as possible. A bigger sustainability dilemma has to do with turnover: An operator leases a space, does an extensive buildout, closes after five years, another operator comes in, tears everything out and throws it in the landfill.

Complete this thought: "Clients could save themselves money and headaches on projects if they would™"

Haley: Do their homework to understand financial implications upfront, set realistic budgets, be clear with their designer about their budget, and engage a contractor early to help track costs and avoid lengthy value engineering later.

Mukoyama: Have a singular vision and voice, and provide the designer with a singular budget. We can design a great space with a \$1 sign or a \$5 sign, but knowing what the budget is from the start really helps us be a better partner.

Fortis: Invest time in development. Everyone's in a big rush to get to construction documents. They're paying rent and want to get open, but when they rush into construction they inevitably start asking for changes and that's expensive and a headache. A saying I like to use is, 'If you had the money to do it twice, you had the money to do it right the first time.'

Mora: Realize that those two goals are usually at cross-purposes. They might save money on a project, but in doing so risk more headaches. If spending a bit more, they're paying to make the process easier, faster, smoother. They're likely working with a more experienced team doing more comprehensive, thorough work. They're buying better equipment and more durable materials. All of which leads to fewer headaches.

Bigtime Design included a reflective ceiling over the bar at Runway 84 in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., creating a unique experiential moment. It supports the brand narrative and is often photographed and posted on social media without being a cliched Instagram hook. »

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