



Time to reflect: art imitates life at Taxi Dining Room.

Living by design

These days, the design of your restaurant is almost as important as the food you serve. **Kerryn Ramsey** finds that image really is everything.

Once overlooked in Australia, design has become a critical factor when creating or remodelling a restaurant.

High-end restaurants—showcasing dramatic lighting, open kitchens and whimsical tableware—look more like modern art museums than dining facilities. Meanwhile, smaller restaurants focus on signature sculptural pieces and striking colour palettes.

“Until the mid-’90s, most restaurants were designed by the owners from their own experiences,” says Peter Maddison, whose Melbourne firm has been involved with hundreds of hospitality projects, including Taxi Dining Room and Mecca Bah.

“The importance of getting an interior designer or architect to help set

up a business has now been embraced,” he says. “Many owners realise it’s an important part of a successful business. Patrons are looking for architecture that reflects the operation.”

Even Victoria’s *The Age Good Food Guide* has acknowledged the importance of design, with the inaugural award for best new restaurant interior being announced in August. Meanwhile, the recent Hospitality Interior Design awards, part of the national Interior Design Awards, also showcase some of Australia’s most tasty restaurant designs.

“The design of the interior is the stage for a piece of theatre,” says Jeffrey Copolov, interior design director of Bates Smart and chairman of the Interior Design Awards’ judging committee. “When

you see a play, the set brings it to life. Dining out is as much about entertainment, which involves having a theatrical experience.”

Whether a venue has been erected, revamped or refurbished, the key element in design is atmosphere. While restaurants in the ’90s introduced a stark, minimalist look of stainless steel and polished concrete, modern spaces embrace ornate neo-classical designs featuring elegant wallpaper, upholstered furniture and over-blown chandeliers.

“Unfortunately many designers jump on the bandwagon when it comes to trends, but they don’t last,” says Sydney-based restaurant designer Michael McCann of Dreamtime Australia. “Wallpaper is a perfect example. Designers

are papering everything but the family poodle at the moment. If the client stays in one spot too long, they are likely to get papered over.”

The second half of this decade has seen more warmth and texture emerge in restaurant designs, invoking subtle lighting and neutral colour palettes.

“Neutral tones, particularly chocolate and cream, create dark, moody environments,” explains Copolov.

Neutral tones lurk in the background, letting new materials—mainly fabric and texture—make the statement. Statement pieces could include striking tabletops, such as Tomita Kazuhiko’s T-Ukiyo tables with resin-impregnated kimonos, or textural walls like Massimo Iosa Ghini’s modular wall panelling.

While it's true that mid-century chairs by Arne Jacobsen, Verner Panton, Hans Wegner and Charles & Ray Eames never date, future classics by the likes of Philippe Starck, Jasper Morrison and Ron Arad are now appearing in style-sensitive venues. Signature pieces, such as quirky tapware, exquisite lamps and multi-legged sideboards by design darlings Marcel Wanders, Tord Boontje and Jaime Hayon, can convert a dated restaurant into a sophisticated establishment.

"You need a high-budget job for these classic, designer furniture pieces," says Maddison. However, many restaurants cut costs by choosing quality local furniture ranges. "Companies such as Ke-Zu, De De Ce and Stylecraft provide great contemporary furniture collections," he suggests.

Awareness of sustainability also affects design aspects. "Environmentally sustainable design (ESD) is a fundamental part of all architecture and interior design work," explains Copolov. "Most of our clients demand responsible design."

That's why recycled timber, full of knot lines, stains and glue marks, are more desirable than pristine timber. "There's a shift in people's perception about what is an acceptable finish and what is not," says Maddison. "We mainly use recycled or reclaimed timber."

While many designers also source recycled furniture, it might not represent long-term savings. "Finding durable second-hand items is the problem," he explains. "They wear out after about four years. Even solid furniture takes a beating when you're using it 24/7."

Renowned Sydney-based



Raising the bar: Space, light and texture collide at Victoria's top noshery, Mecca Bah.

architect Luigi Rosselli, who has designed more than 30 restaurants including Bel Mondo and Trellini's, tries to employ the "three Rs" when designing a restaurant—reuse, recycle and reinvent. He refers to refurbishing older buildings, recycling materials and reinventing various design elements.

"Fashion is short-lived," says this 'starchitect'. "Look at the bigger picture that will last."

"Environmentally sustainable design is a fundamental part of all modern interior design work. Most of our clients these days demand a more ecologically responsible design."

Jeffrey Copolov, interior design director, Bates Smart, Melbourne.

One of the buzz words in the design industry is 'bespoke', which refers to handcrafted furniture and objects. A restaurant in the Brisbane inner-city suburb of Albion has gone one step further—the winner of the 2006 Qld Restaurant and Catering Best New Restaurant and Best European Restaurant is actually called Bespoke!

According to Luigi, designers are "twisting the

original use of an object and reinventing it so you can have a bit of irony and poetry. The twist is what makes the object and the space special."

One of his favourite examples is the set of quirky Campari lamps, made of 10 original Campari soda bottles, by German designer Ingo Maurer, available from Space Furniture for \$685.

High-tech and glamorous,

lighting options can make or break a restaurant ambience, whether they range from intricate suspension lamps to dramatically oversized shades. Australian designers such as Bernabei Freeman and Mance Design hold stage with the likes of international hotshots Ross Lovegrove, Tom Dixon and Patricia Urquiola.

"If I was forced to choose one area to invest in, it would be lighting," says Mc

Cann, designer of Sydney's Flying Fish, 360 Bar & Dining and Pony Lounge and Dining. "Moody, sexy lighting makes even the dingiest dive look a wonderful."

Thanks to technology advances and environmental codes, LED lighting has become a hot topic. It's partly due to the new Australian building code 'Section J', requiring all fit-outs to conform to a basic energy efficiency. "The idea of spraying the ceiling with low-voltage downlights is dead in the water," says Maddison. "Now we are looking for more efficient solutions, such as LED which use virtually life-long globes."

Rosselli appreciates these advances, but is aware of various issues. "There are a lot of gimmicks that I'm not a great fan of, like changing colours. LED is developing well but I don't like my clients to be guinea pigs of technology," says Rosselli.

Taking a new look at the configuration of restaurant zones has also become crucial, due to popular options such as communal tables, generous bars and open kitchens.

"The communal table is a means of breaking up the endless sea of regular tables,"

says Copolov. "Banquettes give you the opportunity to create wandering lines, which in turn enables you to create contours and more interesting space planning."

While bars in restaurants were once compact and tucked away into corners, they have now become star attractions. Long bars are often designated as a finger food area, light snack zone, mixologist's mini-theatre, and mingling area. So the size and shape of a bar needs to be considered. According to Maddison, a bar top needs to be wide enough—60 to 70 centimetres across the top—to accommodate a selection of bar food.

The popularity of 'share food' around a bar has now proliferated in Australia. "It's

While bars in restaurants were once compact and tucked away in corners, they are now the star attractions.

picking up on that European influence, where different sorts of share food are lined up on the bar," he says.

The phenomenon of running a restaurant with an open kitchen, often with a celebrity chef, will continue, according to Maddison, who designed Taxi Dining Room in Melbourne's Federation Square. "When you have a big-name chef, like Mike Lambie, you want him to have a presence. The staff wear uniforms and the kitchen is carefully organised. It's a big part of the theatre

and ambience of the place."

While architects and interior designers convey originality and eclecticism, functionality and fearlessness, few professionals find inspiration from global design forecasts.

"I'm not interested in trends," says Callum Fraser, of Elenberg Fraser architect firm in Melbourne. "I can't stand the way something happens overseas, then begins to drag out in local variations."

After designing several big names like Vue de monde and Gingerboy, many bars,

cafes and restaurants in Melbourne still manage to impress Fraser. "They are all incredibly and ridiculously inventive around various tiny specific themes, so it's the spirit of invention and desire for specificity that seems to be defining current projects."

McCann recommends finding a designer who has a proven track record of "delivering unique, not lemming, concepts that both fit the venue, location and target markets sought by the clients". Overall, a restaurant needs to deliver a warm, comfortable "let's-stay-and-have-another-bottle" environment. "This is the client's best insurance," says McCann. "The 'wow' factor has to be balanced with 'warm' if it's going to last." □