

Implications

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Strategies for Designing Effective Restaurants

Boiled down to its very essence, the business of restaurants is the offering of an experience with the goal of generating a profit. The experience is both fabricated and delivered in the same place; the environment is part of the product as well as part of the delivery system. So it comes as no surprise that the design of a restaurant directly affects the guest's experience as well as the restaurant's ability to offer service.

In designing restaurant environments, professionals have traditionally considered the same kinds of issues that apply to other kinds of public settings: does the design flow well? Will the design appeal to guests? Do the selected materials and furnishings stand up to the rigors of use? Can this all be done within the project budget? But few designers consider that the design of the restaurant can measurably contribute to the effectiveness of the space as a business. Recent empirical research as well as informal observation is beginning to reveal that design may be able to contribute to happier guests, higher spending, and faster table turns, all of which are measurable on a restaurant's bottom line.

Dining Out: What Do Guests Really Want?

People don't **need** to eat out in restaurants. They can cook at home, bring a bag lunch to work, order in food, or even assemble a meal from ready-to-eat offerings in supermarkets and convenience stores. So it's not really the motivation of hunger that drives people to dine out in a restaurant so much as a desire for something else: to relax, to experiment, or to socialize. In their fascinating book, *Trading Up: The New American Luxury*, Silverstein and Fiske (2003) identify the psychological needs behind consumer behavior as the need for self-reward, the need for social connection, the need for intellectual stimulation, and the need for self-expression.

An effective restaurant design translates these needs to programmatic requirements. For example, the need for social connection is particularly strong in restaurant settings—no one likes eating in a virtually empty dining room. Therefore designs that encourage eye contact—lots of diagonal seating or a bar in a U shape might be well received in restaurants that target a young, single market. For an older crowd, breaking up the dining space with partitions or other visual barriers makes the restaurant appear pleasantly busy even during



IN THIS ISSUE

Strategies for Designing Effective Restaurants
Related Research Summaries



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slower periods, and allows guests to feel connected to but not necessarily part of a larger group.

The emotional connection we have with a restaurant also contributes to our desire to eat there and to our purchasing behavior. Zaltman (2003) suggests that as much as 95% of a purchasing decision is based on emotional response rather than rational consideration. Also, a positive emotional reaction is the strongest indicator of loyalty to a business. Good restaurant designers start the creative process by asking the restaurant owner what kind of emotional experience is intended for the space, and how he or she wants guests to feel as they leave. If an owner indicates that the intention is for an exciting, transporting evening of exotic tastes, the design might include stimulating elements such as high contrast in colors and textures, dramatic lighting, and tighter seating placement. Conversely, if the restaurateur intends the guest to feel nurtured and refreshed, a very different approach to materials, seating type and placement, and atmospheric effects might be selected. Care needs to be taken, however, to ensure that the design doesn't become too chaotic or conflict with the other elements of the experience, namely the food and the personal service.

You Are Where You Sit

Dissimilar from most settings, full-service restaurants rarely offer their guests the opportunity to choose their own seats. This is because restaurant managers strive to match the party size to available tables. That way, as many seats as possible are occupied at any one time and the workload of servers and the kitchen is balanced. Based on these factors, service runs smoothly. Thus the hostess does more than just “greet and seat;” she plays a very important role in the ongoing success of the business.

But given a choice of where to sit in a restaurant, a substantial majority of people prefer sitting at a table

next to some kind of permanent architectural feature: a window, a wall, or even a low partition. This “anchoring” behavior is most likely related to psychological needs: we need personal space around us to feel comfortable. We try to define and defend our personal space by using elements of the environment as well as body position and eye contact to limit opportunities for encroachment. While research has shown that different cultural groups have different definitions of how much personal space is desirable, we have found that restaurant seating preferences are relatively consistent across multiple cultural groups.



Food court seating behavior: “anchoring” of patrons to architectural features.

An interesting, recent study suggests that a more important indicator of where guests prefer to sit is the type of dining occasion and the relationship to a diner's companions. Those surveyed, identified seats in the window as being most desirable for status occasions: romantic dinners or intimate meals with friends. However, when the dining occasion involved a significant difference in status or power between the participants—such as a job interview over a meal, seat preferences changed to heavily anchored, corner tables. And on occasions where diners ate alone, the strong preference was for an anchored

table in a low-status part of the dining room, near the front door. It was the rare individual who expressed any interest in a table that “floated” in the middle of the room with no anchoring features. While some published research suggests that females prefer more heavily anchored locations than men, these findings are not consistent.

In foodservice operations where guests can seat themselves, this preference for anchored seats is very apparent to any observer. Diners will select an empty anchored table first, but if no anchored table is available will choose an unanchored one that positions the diner well away from strangers.



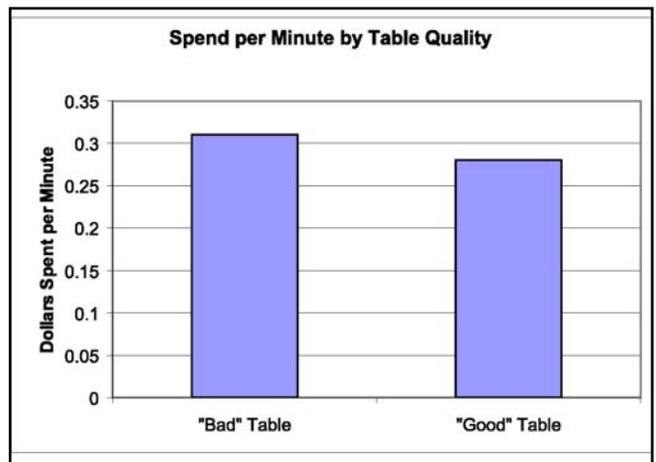
Cafeteria seating behavior: selection of preferred seating location.

Only under conditions of extreme crowding—such as a mall food court at lunch hour, will patrons share a table, and even then, careful arrangement of parcels and body language restricts interaction with others. In light of this, the trend toward “communal tables” in some fashionable restaurants has fizzled; guest discomfort prevents the restaurant management from being able to fill all the seats around the table, defeating one purpose of these communal tables, which was to put more paying customers in the same square footage.

Managing Duration By Design

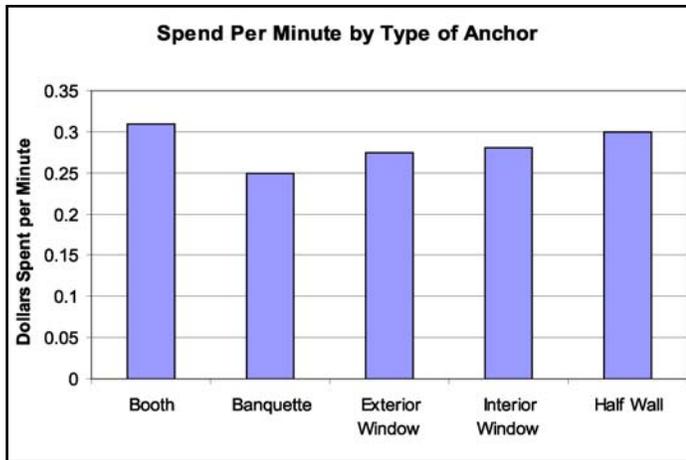
Restaurants don’t really sell food so much as they sell time; guests are “renting” a dining seat for a limited period, and the rent charged is the money paid for what is consumed. On average, the longer guests stay at a table, the more they need to be spending for the restaurant to maximize its revenues. So it is in the business’ interest to either encourage a long stay and try to generate higher revenues at each table, or to emphasize volume through streamlining the dining experience. However, noticeably rushing the guest can backfire, resulting in an unhappy customer and bad word-of-mouth. Effective restaurant designers work with owners to build in design approaches that support whichever duration strategy is selected.

A recent study examined the relationships among seat features, meal duration, and spending, and found that guests spent less time at tables that were less desirable (near the kitchen or in high traffic areas) but spent just as much money per person as they did at the average table. Interestingly, anchored tables in the group studied didn’t perform much differently from unanchored tables in terms of meal duration or spending.



Duration and location: time and expenditure as influenced by table quality.

But when anchored tables were broken down by type, it was clear that booth seats generated higher spending on average than did other kinds of anchored tables, while guests seated at banquettes stayed longer but didn't spend as much.



Duration and location: time and dollars expended as determined by seated location as related to an "anchor."

Of course, these results were from a single restaurant and it's premature to generalize these findings to all types of foodservice operations. However, designers might take note of the subtle effects that seat location may have on restaurant performance and plan their seating layouts accordingly.

Other design elements that may affect length of stay include music and lighting. Work with supermarkets has shown that up-tempo music at about 120 beats per minute encourages shorter shopping times, and one restaurant study saw that faster music can contribute to faster service. Dramatic sound-and-light elements built into the restaurant experience were popular additions to heavily themed restaurants in the 1980s and 1990s, but observations seem to indicate that patrons tired quickly of these overly stimulating features. Whether they contributed to faster meal duration is open to debate.

Conclusion

There is much more work to be done to measure how guests respond to specific restaurant design decisions. However, what is known can be applied with positive outcomes in terms of supporting the restaurateur's mission of creating a viable business and giving customers a reason to come back. By starting with a frank discussion with the restaurateur about the intended guest experience and the profile of the target market, designers can focus on the customer and then apply what is known about guest behaviors to the seating layout and other furnishings, fixtures, and equipment (F, F, & E) decisions to craft an effective dining environment that corresponds to the restaurateur's goals.

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Stephani Robson holds a Master of Science degree (1999) in Human-Environment Relations from the Department of Design and Environmental Analysis at Cornell. Ms. Robson is currently on the faculty at the Hotel School teaching hotel and restaurant development and design courses. Her academic interests center on how environments affect behavior, with a particular focus on hospitality settings. Ms. Robson is actively researching restaurant design psychology, and has been published in a variety of academic and industry publications. A native of Vancouver, Canada, she also has extensive experience as a food service designer.



Related Research Summaries

InformeDesign has many Research Summaries about restaurant and hospitality design and related, pertinent topics. This knowledge will be valuable to you as you consider your next design solution and worth sharing with your clients and collaborators.

“Increasing Table Turnover in Restaurants”—*Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*

“Restaurant Design and Globalization”
—*Journal of Architectural Education*

“Restaurant Service Time Preferences”
—*International Journal of Hospitality Management*

“Increase Diners’ Spending by Adding Features”
—*Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*

“Selection of Restaurant Location”
—*International Journal of Hospitality Management*

“Planning Restaurant Seating”—*Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*

“Creating Customer Loyalty in Restaurants”—*Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*

“Designing Hotel Restaurants for Profitability”—*Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*

“Consumer Satisfaction With Restaurant Service”
—*Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*

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