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VOLUME SEVEN • ISSUE ONE

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2017 • ₹100 India Edition

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Designing Restaurants for an immersive experience

by Amit Aurora and Rahul Bansal

The experience of restaurants isn't just about food and what's on the plate. Your experience that is also guided by good service and increasingly, good atmosphere. This atmosphere is delivered by how multiple factors, including interior decor, lighting and services all combine to deliver an immersive experience.



We may need to eat to survive, but dining out is not about the need for nourishment, rather it is food for the soul. As affluence and professional pressures overtake daily life, the experience of restaurants are about so much more than just what's on the plate - it is guided by good service and increasingly, good atmosphere. This atmosphere is delivered by how multiple factors, including interior decor, lighting and services all combine to deliver an immersive experience.

The restaurant's overall theme is the starting point for achieving a quality space. Along with the spatial context and constraints, this forms the basis of every decision that contributes to the design language. Every level of design is informed by and contributes to the layering of the theme.

Starting with the entrance and percolating down to the tiniest detail, a restaurant must reflect the unique character of the owners. This becomes even more important when designing for a specific cuisine or for a target customer. Certain cuisines evoke associated imagery and very specific details must be correct to complete the fantasy setting of the food. In the case of a target audience, it becomes relevant to anticipate exactly what will appeal to them and how that can be achieved.

Set in the heart of New Delhi, Amour bistro is crafted with an intent of creating a native, effortless ambience that is unaffected by the surrounding urban chaos. The restaurant's look is manifested through a wild mix of urban pulse and human warmth, while preserving the cozy character of a European street cafe. With

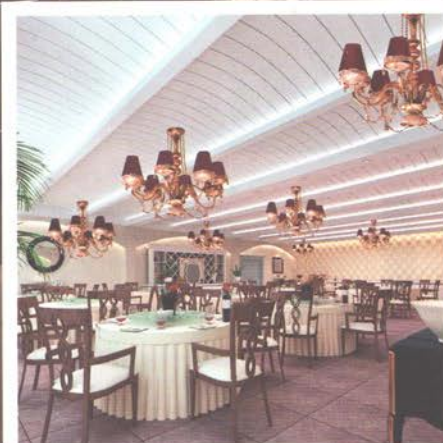
the design intent of a combination of simplistic, minimal elements and earthy tones that endow the space with an elegant dining environ, Amour is representative of purity and integrity and an amalgam of tradition and modernity. The maximized glazing acts as a layer to let the restaurant function seamlessly through all seasons, allowing visitors to enjoy each space in year-round weather conditions. An open space philosophy is adopted for the space planning for the interiors, to enable space efficiency and the creation of an orderly seating plan.

In the case of Town Hall, the location of the restaurant helped create the theme of the restaurant. Located in the middle of the central wing of the gentrified Khan Market, the shell of the building was distinctly colonial, built as part of the rebuilding of New Delhi by Edwin Lutyens. This heritage was carried through to the interiors, with the various elements like the furniture, flooring and wall detailing all contributing towards imparting a period ambience. Even small details, like the ability for diners to control the lighting at their table is a nod to the colonial heritage of the era.

Backyard, as the name suggests, is meant to convey the ambience of a casual gathering in a domestic setting. Set in lots of open area underlaid with loose gravel, the principal design element is the connection of the indoors and outdoors, underscoring the sensation of walking through a house to discover your friends having a good time in the back.

As standards of safety and fire protection are becoming more stringent, the increasingly complex web of services and amenities must be designed to work hand in hand. Kitchens need detailed design for clearing air through exhausts,





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maintaining hygiene through ease of cleanliness and ensuring quality of food held in storage. Audio and projection technology has become both simple and complex, requiring fewer components to produce great quality sound, but needing more intelligent coordination with other interior services. Speed of evacuation is another important factor to be considered and all these systems need to work in conjunction with the overall design of the spaces, affording adequate movement in both the served and service areas.

Unlike restaurants of the past that focussed only on fixed meal times, modern restaurants tend to be frequented by customers during any part of the day. It is not uncommon to plan for breakfast meetings, brunches, or the ever ubiquitous coffee breaks that stretch to include a meal. Occasionally, professionals will use restaurants as work spaces to meet clients, brainstorm with teams or simply to get concentrated work done. Thus, it becomes critical to introduce natural lighting into the space. Sunlight imbues restaurants with a fresh lightness that is essential to daytime entertaining, with lighting used only to attenuate the natural movement of light through the space. As the day

progresses, warmer lighting can work with the setting sun to create the ambience best suited for the coffee or the sundowner, as the case may be.

Lighting also forms a crucial part to creating the overall ambience of a restaurant. Warmer tones create mellow, casual spaces while white fluorescent lighting creates a bright, clean feeling. The environmental impact of choosing the correct light fixtures and fittings cannot be undermined, with modern LED luminaires consuming a small percentage of the electricity that halogens or incandescent bulbs consume.

Conclusively, the experience of a customer is the ultimate test for the design of a restaurant. Just as the use of a panoply of contrived surface textures and materials, like imitation wallpaper cannot create a believable setting, a truly immersive experience can only be created by using authentic materials with real detailing. Simply serving up the perfect plate every time is no guarantee of success, as the actual food is now only part of the overall experience delivered. It is essential to create an atmosphere around the theme that allows the diner a temporary suspension of disbelief - a short journey of fantasy into the perfection of a good meal in a great place. ♦♦



Aurora (left) and Bansal are Partners, DCA Architects, an integrated design solutions firm that provides services in Architecture, Interior Design and Design Coordination across a wide range of building types including Offices, Residential, Retail/ Luxury retail, Hospitality.