

Local firm designing to complement dinner plates.

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A New York Times food review once referred to Richard Bloch Architect's design for a three-star restaurant as perhaps "too plain."

For some, that may have been considered an insult. But Richard Bloch knows it only means he did his job.

"When you're dealing with serious food ... (the design) needs to tell you they're serious," he said, contrasting high-end places to an "entertainment" eatery at Disney World that would include lots of sights and sounds. "A place needs a sense of intent."

Bloch should know. An architect for some 40 years, Bloch specializes in the food and beverage and hospitality industries. He has worked around the world and has been commissioned hundreds of times.

"I love that kind of work," he said of restaurant design. "Every project is different."

Bloch's portfolio includes the acclaimed, four-star Masa and adjoining Bar Masa at the Time Warner Center. The former includes a sushi bar fashioned from a massive and single piece of hinoki wood.

"It's always raw--scraped and scrubbed every day," Bloch said. "It feels like velvet."

Bloch collaborated with chef Masa Takayama on the design, same as most other projects.

"Restaurant design starts with a primal idea, and the owner of that idea is the owner of the restaurant," he said. "From that primal concept ... flows food, service and design. Those are the three legs (of a restaurant)."

"We don't design by fiat," he continued. "They're not hiring me to be God. They're hiring me to do a job ... that requires a bit of listening."

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Bloch, who graduated with an architecture degree from Pratt in 1966 and served as a Fulbright scholar in Turkey, took a circuitous route to restaurant design. Among his previous posts were serving as a city planner in Iran and as a design consultant for U.S. government cultural centers in Europe, Japan and Mexico. He traveled extensively and worked in various settings before eventually hooking up with the restaurant designer Phil George in New York City. In 1986, Bloch started his own firm.

Bloch has designed Dutchstyled bakeries in Asia, waterfront crab houses in Florida, airport bar and grills in Oklahoma and public spaces for hotels all over.

Here in New York City, Bloch was involved in the Plaza Hotel restoration and did three restaurants at Arthur Ashe Stadium.

"Give me a menu and an hour and I can tell you what your budget will be," said the design veteran.

The industry is constantly evolving. "It's always moving and changing because restaurants are affected by styles, tastes and trends," Bloch said.

While restaurant reviewers may dissect an eatery's design, Bloch himself doesn't think so much about it when he is a customer.

"I go to restaurants for the food," he said. "If the food is good, I'll go back no matter the design."

Just don't tell his clients that.