

## PROFILE in CONSTRUCTION & DESIGN

# Architect cooks up recipe for restaurant success

BY ELAINE MISONZHNIK

According to restaurant architect Richard Bloch, it's impossible to figure out what a restaurant should look like without first trying the food.

Bloch, who has designed such high-profile New York landmarks as La Bernadine, Masa at Time Warner Center and the Aces Grill at Arthur Ash Stadium, believes that there is a special creativity that goes into food that an architect has a responsibility to honor.

"Professional chefs have an impossibly difficult job – people just don't do that for the

money," he explains. "Take Masa, for example. I love sushi, but I needed to see what was special about Masa's sushi [one meal at the restaurant costs an average of \$500]. So I took a flight to Los Angeles and ate dinner at Masa's restaurant there. It was only after that I understood his food."

Therefore, when Bloch is about to embark on a new project he asks for two things – the restaurant's menu and its check average. His personal style preferences or those of the restaurant owner's shouldn't really play a role, he explains.

"If am designing for myself, you'll

see very astringent, minimalist, modern pieces," he says. "My homes are all very, very simple. But the character of the restaurant and the type of design I should create for it are buried in the menu and the check. When I ask for those things, I can

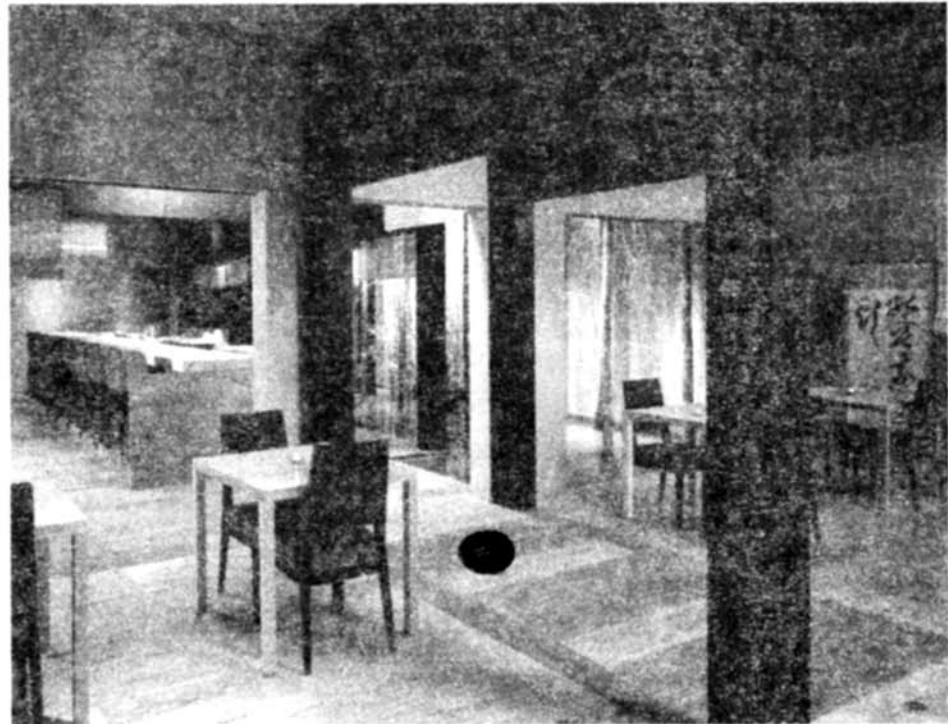
see the truth of what the restaurant owner really needs."

Bloch believes that he might be particularly well-suited for his niche since his father was a meat purveyor who sometimes ended up running restaurants. When he was younger, his father's dream involved a family business, with him operating and his son designing the restaurants. But it wasn't

until he was well into his career that Bloch actually went into restaurant work. For most of his childhood, he dreamt of being an architect.

"When I was little, adults found me building whole cities in the sand," he recalls. "So my mother sent me to an art school when I was in kindergarten."

For more than a decade after finishing Pratt Institute, Bloch traveled the world, designing cultural centers in Iran, Germany and Japan. At one point, he was the only English-speaking architect at an Iranian architectural engineering firm and was forced to communicate exclu-



Inside Masa at Time Warner Center

sively in Farsi.

"They are very kind with their language and it's not complicated," Bloch says of his former Iranian colleagues. "I loved Iran and working with them."

But when his wife wanted to settle in New York City, he had to find a job fast – and that's how he ended up working with Phil George, of George Design Studio, a well-known restaurant designer.

"He did mostly restaurant work and the first year I said that I'd just do it for a year and that's it," he

laughs. "I ended up opening my own office in 1986."

Bloch admits he's not much of a chef – "My wife does the cooking and she's better at it," he notes – but says he enjoys the collaborative spirit that goes into creating a truly great restaurant. He also feels that he has a lot in common with the men behind the menu.

"There is a great deal of creativity in food," he notes. "Owner chefs start out wanting to be great chefs and [that's where they are similar to architects.]"