

# R & I

## RESTAURANTS & INSTITUTIONS

### R & I INSIDER

#### INTERFACE

## Richard Bloch

Restaurant designer and architect shares thoughts on creating a better dining experience.

By Kristina Buchthal, Senior Editor



Architect Richard Bloch's design credits include New York City's Le Bernardin, Masa and Sony Club, which received a 1995 honorable mention from the James Beard Foundation Awards. In December, his latest restaurant, Bread & Company, opened in Tokyo.

**Q. There's a lot of talk about consumers' tastes in foods changing. How should dining ambience be changing?**

**A.** I like to keep it simple. When one sits at a restaurant there should be a comfortable fit between design and food. When a guest pays a \$75 or \$125 check, the food always is the most important thing, and service is vital. But the environment is too. The diner has to feel like the experience was worth it.

**Q. When you dine out, what do you first notice about a restaurant's design?**

**A.** The front door. I had a very interesting experience last night with a new Japanese restaurant I had never been to. The design broadcast what the place would be like in terms of the food. It's a Japanese *izakaya*, which means it serves a variety of foods you eat with drinks, like a pub. And the design told me that as I entered.

**Q. I imagine that lighting plays a key role in that.**

**A.** Lighting is a vital part of the design package. If I had to list the most important design elements of a restaurant, lighting would be way up there. I don't know if it's number one or two or three, but it's a very important issue.

**Q. Do you ever find yourself thinking, 'Gosh, I'm eating in the dark'?**

**A.** All the time. I'm at an age where I sometimes can't read the menu. But the problem is not lighting design, the problem is restaurant concept. Those usually are the same restaurants where the music is so loud you can't talk to your neighbor or your wife right in front of you. I think that's a current restaurant style: Very dim, noisy operations seem to be a trend right now. There are restaurateurs who think that's what they need to make their concepts successful. All the lighting could be increased, but they don't want to.

**Q. Your newest restaurant, Bread & Company in Tokyo, has an open kitchen. Does it add to the dining experience?**

**A.** Bread & Company is a Western-style restaurant with a peek-a-boo kitchen. The bakery is absolutely open; it's right in the dining room. The main kitchen is behind that and guests get glimpses of it. They might see cooks moving around and sense some animation in the back of the house.

There are some restaurants like Houston's [owned by Phoenix-based Hillstone Restaurant Group] that have big open kitchens that are very nice. But by and large most display kitchens are just kitchens on display. And that's not good. Operations require a very high level of discipline to maintain a display kitchen; you have to keep them immaculate. In general, they are very difficult to do.

**Q. Are there design innovations that more food-service providers should adopt?**

**A.** I have a hard time selling restaurateurs on four-legged tables. You rarely see four-legged tables. They're hard to get a chair in, and there are two legs that take away from knee room. But I like them for a variety of reasons. With pedestal tables, you always kick the pedestals or your feet are on the spreader or the plate that supports the pedestal. It's never comfortable and the table often is uneven.

Four-legged tables could have similar problems but they're a bit more stable. And if they're wide enough your knees and your lap can pass through and it's a little more comfortable feeling. I like the way they look. They are a way of taking an institutional edge off a restaurant.

**Q. What else is important?**

**A.** [When starting a restaurant design], we take time to talk about the tabletops first, which means we need to know the size of the plates. If we look at the menu, we know how many plates are likely to be used for the food, so we can get the tabletop the right size. That's actually a very tiny detail that goes back to the overarching concept of 'What is this restaurant supposed to be?' You're on a path toward a well-designed restaurant because now you know the size of the tables and you can properly arrange them, and normally that will provide you with a more intelligent plan.

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Contact writer at [kristina.buchthal@reedbusiness.com](mailto:kristina.buchthal@reedbusiness.com)