

# THE REVITALIZATION OF RESTAURANT RESTROOMS

BY CHRIS KOUROUNIOTIS

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I HAVE BEEN designing restaurant space and, in turn, “designer washrooms” for more than 10 years. I have always believed restaurant washroom design should share the same level of elegance and energy as the rest of the establishment but I have had many clients tell me not to “throw away money” on this “back of house” area. Thankfully, the trend today is to treat washrooms as “front of house” spaces. “Designer washrooms” in restaurants are finally receiving the treatment and attention they deserve.

Previously the neglected spaces within a restaurant, hospitality washrooms are now fresh, luxurious, state-of-the-art retreats from the busy dining area. Today, restaurant clients expect more than just clean lavatories — guests look for bright rooms with large mirrors, sensor faucets, branded amenities and an overall spa-like experience. Restaurant washrooms are not just a place where guests go to wash their hands. Instead, they are an extension of the atmosphere and theatrics established within the dining room. In some cases the restaurant washroom design may rival the design of the dining room and may even receive more favourable reviews than that of the dinner menu!

Our clients want their washrooms to look clean and opulent, yet smart and innovative. Old school restaurant washrooms with orange metal toilet partitions and unflattering fluorescent lighting have little in common with the current “designer washroom” look and feel. Clunky, ceiling-mounted fluorescent fixtures and cove-lighting bulkheads have given way to wall lights

and recessed incandescent fixtures that are sleek and compact. Rectangular dark red floor tiles or small, offensively colourful mosaics that used to be the norm have given way to imported porcelain and polished concrete. Partitions are often now full-height walls with custom wooden doors or, in some cases, even glazed aluminum doors. Yellow plastic laminate counter tops with typical cast iron sinks can’t compare to metallic solid surface tops and vessel sinks.

Common washroom design elements today include natural stone floor finishes, elegant wash basins, automated elements, custom lighting, detailed accessories and electronic gizmos. Vanity tops and adjacent areas have seen the biggest design advances. Quartz counter tops, custom stainless steel troughs and glossy porcelain basins are leading this change. Finishing touches in these areas include hands-free faucets, auto soap guns and touch-free paper towel dispensers. Many water closets are now standardized with touch-free sensors and self cleaning seats.

Beyond this norm we see finer dining establishments offering single-use, imported-cotton hand cloths and hotel-like laundry baskets for a more luxurious feel. Fine dining establishments have extended their pampering by offering guests complimentary grooming aids. Although these are not technically interior design elements, items including hand creams, mouthwashes and deodorants are making a unique spa like presentation. These ultra-elegant features and amenities make a big impact; the end



goal of these elements is to make guests feel clean, comfortable and pampered.

In the end, while I may “know” what is in fashion, what the end user wants is all that matters. So, today’s washrooms are not just about design trends, they also need to meet the changing needs and demands of the customers who visit them. There are many washroom standards that must be observed to meet local codes and demographic demands. A good designer always addresses universal accessibility, which means making special concessions so that all guests can make use of this space regardless of any mobility limitations. To properly meet these needs, building codes dictate details like size of doors, toilet compartment sizes, water closet placement, vanity height, faucet types and other accessory mounting heights. As far as demographic trends go, designers need to pay special attention to our country’s current economic boom and subsequent baby boom. The hot economy has brought many more young families into these popular “new” eating establishments and as designers we need to meet the needs of these young families within these washrooms.

Restaurant washroom design still must overcome the same challenges designers come across in all types of design: budget, space and client expectations. Often time constraints and size can interfere with creating the ideal washroom. Every dining concept will dictate the type and amount of design needed in the washrooms, and often this is a deciding factor. Taking a space that’s not

larger than 200 square feet to a higher level of finish that meets the physical and demographic needs of all our clients’ customers is a restaurant designer’s most challenging task. Successfully meeting this goal will positively influence the end user’s dining experience and it will also leave a lasting impression. An inviting atmosphere combined with an excellent culinary experience will lead to a happy guest who will tell others of their excellent restaurant experience (both in and outside of the restaurant bathroom). So, as an interior designer or architect, the next time you go out to a new dining establishment, take a minute to visit the washroom — look deeper into the design concept, see how it meets your needs as a guest, let it trigger your senses, calm and refresh you. If the designer has done an excellent job, you should be returning to your table relaxed, inspired and ready to enjoy the culinary journey that awaits you. **□**

*Chris Kourouniotis is currently a senior designer for Kasian Architecture Interior Design and Planning Ltd. He has 10 years of experience on a variety of projects ranging from hospitality and retail to workplace and special projects. His designs have received many Edmonton Restaurant of the Year awards. His more signature hospitality projects include Blink Supperclub Calgary, Delux Burger Bar Edmonton, Chicago Chophouse Calgary, LUX Steakhouse Edmonton, Lazia Edmonton and Century Grill Edmonton. Chris’ current focus is on design direction, new business development and project/team management.*