

Who Says You Can't Eat Atmosphere?

Will restaurant designers supplant chefs as our next culture heroes? Maybe not—but the way a restaurant looks and feels can be just as important as the food it serves

BY COLMAN ANDREWS

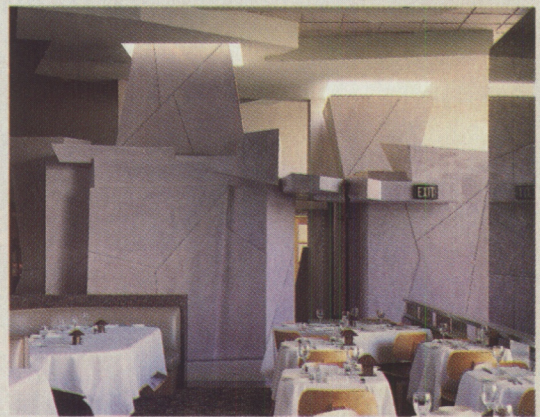
I WENT TO DINNER WITH A FRIEND ONE SNOWY winter night in New York City a couple of years back. We had made reservations at a new place we'd heard about, a restaurant named for a village on the Côte d'Azur, serving what was reportedly very good food in a sort of modern-day American-Provençal style. It sounded like just the thing for overcoat-and-snow-boot weather. We got as far as the front door. The restaurant was coldly lit and bluish, with old-fashioned high-backed French restaurant chairs and washed-out walls. It looked almost funereal. It would have seemed depressing on a sunny summer afternoon, much less a night like this. We turned back into the snow, and headed for a place nearby—a restaurant where the food, we knew, wouldn't be particularly good, but where the walls were warm and the chairs were casually comfortable and the light, even after sundown, always seemed a bit like sunlight diffused. We had a delicious time—even though we had chosen our restaurant on the basis of design, not gastronomy. Well, of course we had. So sue us. You would have, too.

The important thing to remember about restaurants is that they aren't just places where you go to eat. They're *places*, where you go to eat. The place part is vital. If a great chef makes a great dish and then sells it to you out a window so that you can eat it walking down the sidewalk, you have not gone to a restaurant. (If you buy a Wolfgang Puck frozen pizza and heat it up at home, you haven't been to Spago.)

I don't think there's much point in arguing about what draws people to restaurants

D C 3

Late-Eighties Eclectic: Artist Charles Arnoldi's interior for DC3 in Santa Monica utilizes an unlikely mix of materials and a dramatic interplay between architectural vastness and bistro intimacy. Typical of his design are the monolithic mini-temple restrooms, pictured here.



TIM STREET-PORTER



Uses of the Past: California's Michael McCarty installed his latest restaurant in the old Presidential Suite at Washington, D.C.'s spectacularly renovated Union Station, bringing warmth and high style to Daniel Burnham's 1903-vintage interior with carpets, Cranbrook chairs and other furnishings designed by Eero Saarinen, and with art by Hockney and de Kooning in the adjacent bar.



HARRY CONNOLLY

ADIRONDACKS

Contributing editor Colman Andrews has seen more restaurant interiors than you've had hot dinners.

in the first place—gastronomic adventure, simple nourishment, social interaction, coddling, “restoration”—because of course people go to restaurants for all of these reasons and more, usually in combination. But it does seem pretty plain to me that once somebody steps into a restaurant, something about the way that restaurant looks and feels takes over, sets a mood, creates expectations—and that, in turn, suggests to me that the people who design restaurant interiors are pretty darned important to the restaurant experience

It has always been somebody’s job to decide how restaurants should look, to be sure. The idea of

FOUR SEASONS
 Corporate Chic: Rich finishes and a refreshing absence of froufrou help make the Grill Room at this New York City landmark (recently refurbished by original designer Philip Johnson with the help of John Burgee) the ultimate Power Lunch spot.



TRIA GIOVANNI

SCOOZI
 The New American Trattoria: Scoози in Chicago (created by restaurant mogul Richard Melman’s own design team), with its broken-tile floor, its Umbrian-artist’s-studio feel and its Italian comic book accents, probably shouldn’t work—but it does work, beautifully, as theater, as playground with food.



ANTOINETTE BOOTZ

COYOTE CAFE
 The Hip Southwest: With its adobe (or faux-dobe) walls, fine tinwork, cowhide chairs and whimsical New Mexican folk art, the Coyote Cafe in Santa Fe is a classic of the surprisingly durable (now widespread) Southwestern idiom.

restaurant design is not (some recent studies of the subject notwithstanding) a new one. Somebody quite clearly and authentically *designed* the famous Caffè Florian in Venice (Italy), for instance, back in the early 19th century, with its pure, minimalist-baroque fittings and its exquisitely positioned mirrors; somebody designed Maxim’s in Paris, too, around 1900—an opulent, sensuous, racy, walk-in art nouveau landscape in the style of Gallé and Guimard. There are literally thousands of examples of such design from earlier times, around the world—restaurants and cafés that, from top to bottom, broad stroke to tiny detail, are absolutely consistent and coherent visually.

What is new, to our own country at least, is an all-consuming passion for good design in restaurants on virtually every level. Serious design in restaurants used to be a sometime thing. While *Text continued on page 203*



JOHN VAUGHAN