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Delicious eateries are about more than just what's on the plate. Stephen Todd speaks to the designers of some of his favourite haunts to assess what gives a dining space real bite.

In Peter Greenaway's 1989 masterpiece The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover, the postmodern British film director very explicitly explores the notion of restaurant as theatre. All the pomp and circumstance up front in the dining room, all the skulduggery out back in the scullery.

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Restaurant as theatre is not a new concept, and it doesn't mean that a room need look as if lifted from a Rembrandt canvas, nor decked out like a stage set from the Old Vic. Some are as reductive and glaring as a Beckett play – and sometimes no matter how good the surroundings, you're kept waiting for your mains just as long as Vladimir and Estragon waited for Godot. That can turn the nicest of patrons against the best of surrounds. Other spaces just look like a theatre of the absurd.

It's a tricky thing, getting the look and feel of a restaurant right, and often diners – and indeed, designers – only notice when it goes wrong. It takes a judicious hand to create a subtle sense of drama and insouciance.

Sydney-based interior architect Grant Cheyne knows a lot about stagecraft. Cheyne has worked with restaurateur Neil Perry for the past eight years, helping make the Rockpool fleet into the award-winning flotilla it is today. Cheyne is a master of his craft, a trained architect with a predilection for intimate, sensual spaces. Like his fitout for Perry's newest iteration of the Rockpool franchise, on Sydney's Bridge Street.

Entered via an august sandstone portico in the 1900 façade of the former Burns Philp shipping **company** headquarters, the first impression is of a turn-of-last-century cabaret – all dark charcoal walls, pearlescent black tiles and stoic, fluted columns. From the mezzanine, through the original wrought iron balustrade, one gets a bird's-eye view of the show as it unfolds below. Cheyne's genius is in evoking an era, nodding to a mood, but stealthily sidestepping pastiche.

"I like the space to slowly unveil, as the diner moves from sidewalk, up the stairs and to their table," he says. "But you have to be careful to not let the design outweigh the overall ambience, to not make 'iconic' or 'wow' an objective."Expert restraint

This restaurant is well resolved precisely because of its restraint, a trait Cheyne has honed over 35 years in the trade. In the hands of a less experienced or more flamboyant designer the heritage-listed interior could have easily crossed the style Rubicon into kitsch. Instead, the grey ironbark parquet has been stained an elegant walnut shade that throws the starched linen tablecloths into relief and reflects a plethora of light sources: from the Gino Sarfatti-like brass chandelier, designed by Cheyne and handmade by Melbourne's Adam Hoss Ayres, from the long, tubular pendants, from the directional lights focused on each plate setting and, finally, from the cabaret-style table lamps. Yet for all that lighting, the place remains resolutely moody, dark.

A lot of the visual impact of Rockpool is thanks to Andrew Jaques of The Flaming Beacon, a Melbourne-based lighting **company** with a client list that includes a **hotel** in the Sultanate of Oman, a villa development in Bali, and a **hotel** and golf club in Guangzhou on mainland **China**, as well as a couple of dozen projects around Australia. A design and planning (arch) graduate of the University of Melbourne with a postgraduate degree in lighting design, Jaques has a **firm** take on the role of lighting in the dining experience. "The way we light food can influence, even trick, the brain into how the food will taste and to this end we try to maximise the visual impact of the dishes."

The Sydney Morning Herald food critic Jill Dupleix has long observed the role good design can play in determining the success or otherwise of a restaurant, bar or cafe. "People think design means the décor, but that's like believing cookery is all about the plating of food – it's too superficial," she says. "Like the art and craft of cooking, it's about applying the sort of thinking that will make something a better version of itself."

In much of Europe, some of Asia and the better part of North America, retail design is forward-thinking in conception and ground-breaking in delivery. Think Rem Koolhaas for Prada in downtown New York; David Adjaye for Roksanda Ilincic in London; Architecture & Associés for Viktor & Rolf in Paris; Herzog & de Meuron for Prada in Tokyo and so forth. By contrast, the moribund retail sector in much of Australia means that the major interface between the general public and grand – or just plain clever – design is via restaurants. In few other places can the average punter engage with well-thought-out, beautifully articulated spaces kitted out with design classics, new and old.

"The global thirst for great experiences is insatiable and increasingly sophisticated, and this makes design all the more powerful in the very competitive business of hospitality," says Cameron Bruhn, editorial director of Architecture Media and the man behind Artichoke magazine's Eat Drink Design awards. In their third year, the awards have played a valuable role in focusing attention on restaurant design.

"They have brought the design and hospitality communities together in recognition of this," Bruhn says. "Truly memorable experiences occur at the nexus of these two creative industries, and the process of identifying innovation and excellence calls on expertise from both."Strong sense of theatre

One of the short-listed eateries in this year's awards is Prix Fixe in Alfred Place in Melbourne's CBD. A new project for restaurateur Jason Jones and chef Philippa Sibley, the idea, as its name suggests, is fixed menus at a fixed price, changing monthly and thematically. A Midsummer's Night Dream, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, etc. Yes, it sounds gimmicky. But what stops it from dropping down the rabbit hole is an interior that is both fantastical and robust. "We wanted to create a space that would give the sense of having a dinner party at home," interior designer Fiona Lynch says. "You sit down, the food's been organised, so you're free to chat and kick back with your friends."

From the dramatic metallic glazed Boyac linen curtain shielding the entry of the intimate, 60-seater space, then the "performance kitchen" where Sibley plays her starring role (the main kitchen is concealed), one swiftly gets the message that this restaurant is giving, as Lynch puts it, "a nod to notions of theatre and stage".

Perhaps even a deep bow. And then a curtsy to the high glamour of the 1980s with its palette of rose and grey marble, mirrored glass panels and beaten brass vellum wall lights by American **company** Brabbu. Hovering above all this apparent opulence, the exhaust ducts, plumbing and lighting rig are left exposed and painted a rather perky shade of pink. Not too surprisingly, Lynch has degrees from RMIT in both fine art (painting) and interior design.

Melissa Collison, the designer behind Swine & Co, is self-taught and credits an extremely creative mother as her mentor. She is also of the high drama school. "I love Peter Greenaway's films, especially The Cook, The Thief...,"she says. It shows in the taxidermied wild boar, photos of dead pigs and beautifully mounted installations of cleavers and other instruments of potential torture that decorate the basement space.Glowing jewel box

At the opposite end of the sliding scale of style is one of Sydney's hippest new restaurants, Cho Cho San, designed by interior architect George Livissianis. No dramatic curtains, no moody downlighting, not an evocative photograph – in fact, no art at all – in sight. A long, narrow space on Macleay Street, Potts Point, this is the former **site** of Christine Manfield's Paramount restaurant, a must-go eatery that ran from 1993 to 2000, designed by David Katon and Iain Halliday. A difficult room, at the time it felt slightly claustrophobic, the eye drawn to the rear which featured an illuminated, translucent slab of honey-coloured marble.

Livissianis tackled the problem of proportional representation head-on. By stripping the render back to bare brick walls, pouring a cement floor and creating a dining bar in off-formed concrete almost as long

as the room, he has effectively extended the sight lines and created a new sense of space. At the same time, perforated white birch ply panels and generous recessed in-ceiling light boxes add levity to the room.

"Whereas Paramount was directed inwards, the room is now directed out, to the street," Livissianis says. Passing by at night, the place appears to glow, light softly bouncing off the cement floor, white walls and a massive slab of highly buffed brass that is now the sliding front door. It's something of a jewel box, and Alvar Aalto's elegant, low-backed K65 birch chairs and stools – so visionary, designed in 1935 – are the jewels. (They are imported by Anibou, Sydney.)

Across the road is another Livissianis project, Greek restaurant The Apollo. Unveiled to design industry and diner acclaim in 2012, it is also an essay in raw concrete, exposed structural work and elemental table settings. Two "ethnic" eateries and neither displaying any outward sign of foreignness. Livissianis will complete the hat trick when his fitout for Kylie Kwong's relocated Billy Kwong is unveiled only a few doors down from The Apollo later this year.

Interior designer Tina Engelen, who sat on the jury of this year's Eat Drink Design awards, has a simple ethos when it comes to restaurant design: "If it's old, respect it. If it's new, make it fabulous." In 2007, Engelen designed another Christine Manfield restaurant, the now defunct Universal. That Darlinghurst restaurant was a striking riot of intense citrus colours and luminous surfaces with a distinct 1970s edge. Engelen's new partnership with architect Will Fung has her exploring a vivid palette and a looser line.

The nuance of restaurant design means it needs to reflect the ethos of the place, its food and its owners, to really sing. A great design won't save bad food, and vice versa. "I would sit on a milk crate if the food is good," Engelen concedes.

SWINE & CO, SYDNEY

Designed by Melissa Collison

Melissa Collison Interior Design

Melissa Collison loves "big gesture, strong, powerful" interiors with "a bit of a twist, a quirk". It shows in her fitout of top-to-tail eatery Swine & Co. Housed in a 1930s Commonwealth Bank building in Sydney's CBD, the ground floor bar is grand enough, with its cream ceramic-tiled walls, lavish art deco window work and suspension light fittings. But it's downstairs, in the low-ceiling basement restaurant, that Collison really hits her stride. "I wanted to instil a sense of drama," she says. "Like, 'what's going to happen at the bottom of the stairs?'"

What happens is a very chic palette of black and cream – hand-printed charcoal and cream wallpaper, banquettes in cream leather. One immediately gets the sense that this is serious luxe; think a pair of Chanel shoes, handmade by Raymond Massaro in the Rue de la Paix. Is it modern? Possibly not. But that's precisely the point. By pitching her tent in the field of timelessness, Collison has come up with an interior that seems just right for now. As for tomorrow, who knows?

BREAD IN COMMON, FREMANTLE

Designed by Michael Patroni and Dimmity Walker

spaceagency

Fremantle's Bread in Common is the poster child for industrial repurposing. Set in a lacklustre ex-industrial zone a few blocks back from Fishing Boat Harbour, the 1890 warehouse has been stripped to its very barest bones, comatosed, then skilfully coaxed back to life by Michael Patroni, Dimmity Walker and the rest of the team at spaceagency.

The double-height, pitch-roofed room is cavernous but has been made to feel comfortable by the distribution of smaller, apparently haphazard – though carefully considered – zones.

I usually hate communal tables, a silly conceit of faux conviviality, however these ones are not only dramatically expansive but truly handsome. The on eco-trend benches, made from reclaimed oak once used in brandy distillery vats, are a collaboration between the studio and Paul Morris of carpentry workshop Join. The floor is in-situ concrete, the open kitchen counter made of rammed cement, the walls exposed 19th century brick.

We have seen this kind of set up before, conveying a message of authenticity, integrity and sustainability, but rarely has it been so well executed. My only gripe is the Edison filament light bulbs: their time has been and gone, although I concede their warm glow makes everyone look rather pretty.

LITTLE COLLINS ST KITCHEN, MELBOURNE

Designed by Paul Hecker & Hamish Guthrie

Hecker Guthrie

Little Collins St Kitchen is a rarity – a **hotel** dining room that looks and feels like a chef-operated independent bistro, a destination for locals more than for **hotel** guests. The space is located on the first floor of Melbourne's Sheraton **Hotel**. Its airy, cream-and-white palette and the subtle use of pale Gustavian on the banquettes means one could just as easily be in Sweden. To avoid snow blindness and add texture, the white walls and structural columns are covered in handmade rectangular tiles which run horizontally on the walls and vertically on the columns. Brass wall and pendant lights by London designer Michael Anastassiades are at first glance the stuff of a classic French bistro fitout. But on closer inspection they're savvy updates of the genre.

"We like to give a heightened sense of a dining experience, to elevate it to the point where it's challenging the audience," says designer Hamish Guthrie, left. His **firm** works across the hospitality, retail, **residential** and **commercial** sectors. "We love doing restaurants," he says. "We take a domestic approach to developing a restaurant concept and experience. We employ aspects of the familiar to give a space the feeling of home, as opposed to the look of a home." On occasion they integrate some of their clients' own objects.

"It's not so much about being thematic as overlaying signs of a narrative."

ALFREDO'S PIZZERIA, BRISBANE

Designed by Alexander Lotersztain Derlot

Alfredo's Pizzeria looks like a filmset for the kind of indie production Michel Gondry, of Björk videos fame, might have dreamt up. Disingenuously nonchalant, it has in fact been designed to within an inch of its life. Housed in a disused, majestic double-height garage on a banal inner-Brisbane street, the canary yellow scripted neon "Alfredo's" on glossy white brickwork is the first sign that something special is going on. Inside it's hipster heaven, all unfinished surfaces and mismatched finishes. Top marks for the rusting corrugated iron ceiling and monolithic bar made from different types, grades and widths of wood. Floor tiles are charcoal coloured, a nod to the main activity which is wood-fired pizza cooking.

"I don't consider myself an interior designer but, more broadly, a creative," says Alex Lotersztain of Brisbane's Derlot studio. Indeed, he burrowed so far back into the concept that he effectively created its brand. "I was down in Sydney and saw this old Italian guy cruising down King Street, Newtown. And I was like, it's Alfredo!" So an unsuspecting septuagenarian became the poster boy for a Brisbane eatery. It's "Alfredo's" crazed face – he looks like a spaghetti-eating Albert Einstein – blown up to movie poster size, that greets diners as they enter the space.

Nordburger, Adelaide

Designed by Ryan Genesin Genesin Studio

Ryan Genesin is the design saint to whom restaurateurs and retailers in the City of Churches pray. He's done nightclubs, shops, bakeries and even the rethink of Myers's rather tawdry food court.

His design for Adelaide's second Aesop shop is a sure sign of his ascendance, since from the **company**'s nascence, founder Dennis Paphitis instilled a corporate practice of selecting only the best indie collaborators for his brand.

Anyone who thinks good design is about breaking the bank and brashly gilding the lily should consider Genesin's work on Nordburger, in Norwood.

The designer has turned a small, narrow shopfront with, frankly, not a lot going for it, into a destination eatery by a process of rational thinking and proactive response to the client brief. "Designers can be quite arrogant, trying to shove their ideas down a client's throat," he says. "I try to create a bespoke experience for clients, as well as for their diners."

It works. Genesin has used poured cement, timber veneer and toilet-grade tiling, with shelf brackets and coat racks that look ready-made, direct from the hardware store. His real genius is in installing a cement, two-tap wash trough as a prominent feature of the dining room – "hey, it's finger-licking food!" – and a series of cement-based bar stools that cannot be moved. In a space this narrow, it was essential.

"The day some fat dude walks in and sits his ass down, if we can't keep him in place, he'll bottleneck the whole business. It's a new skool Hungry Jack's," he says, laughing. A great concept that should be rolled out nationally.

Nomad, Sydney

Designed by Rebecca Littlemore and Annie Snell Snell

Located in Sydney's uber-trendy inner-city restaurant district of Surry Hills, Nomad at first sight registers as yet another pared-back, raw-brick-exposed-beam-and-duct space, with a wall of firewood to reinforce the sense of rusticity. A closer inspection brings the realisation that you are dining in what is effectively a showroom for top-notch Australian design.

Industrial designer Henry Wilson's very clever A-Joint – in both its double and tripod versions – is used to construct the tables. It is especially visible since entry to the restaurant is via a small set of stairs, looking up under the circular, square and rectangular configurations. The chairs are made of silky, blond American oak by Melbourne designer Ross Didier, the back legs tapering to form the rest struts, the back rail slightly curved. They have an airy, slightly Asian feel and sit lightly in the space. The bar stools are an elongated version.

"I was seeking to feature as much Australian design as possible," says Rebecca Littlemore, who, along with interior designer Annie Snell, oversaw the design of the room. Littlemore co-owns the restaurant with husband-chef Al Yazbek. The support for local talent extends to the tableware, with the pebble-like dinner, side and serving plates made by master potter Malcolm Greenwood. "They're based on pebbles we picked up on Bondi and Bronte beaches," she says.

Littlemore plans to expand the Nomad brand by offering the plates and other produce for **sale** online. She and Yazbek very cleverly further enhance the brand by opening the kitchen to guest chefs, including Christine Manfield, Damien Pignolet and Janni Kyritsis, all of whom have decided not to own or operate restaurants of their own for now, maintaining instead a nomadic existence. Trend alert.

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