

# AN APPETITE FOR DESIGN

In the restaurant game, the architect is as vital as the chef.

Throughout the gastronomic history of Los Angeles, as elsewhere, tradition has dictated that the better restaurants be done up in "good taste" as a lure to those who can afford a costlier tab. Restful tones, padded chairs, the string quartet in the corner, black-suited waiters who did not introduce themselves by their first names—all of this accompanied equally sedate servings of meat and potatoes, vegetables cooked to the texture of purée, or the Continental option of croquettes stuffed, sauced and vaguely French.

Chaya Brasserie



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Throughout the '50s and '60s, it was at the lower end of the scale that architectural innovations were taking place, typified by the daring "Googie's" coffee shops designed by the eminent John Lautner (whose work will be featured in *L.A. Style's* October issue).

Since the late '70s, however, L.A. has had a makeover; she's now considered at the frontier of culinary experimentation, and her architecture is keeping up. The most progressive firms are being turned loose to build restaurants that will capture the diner's imagination, not to mention the wayward buck.

City Restaurant

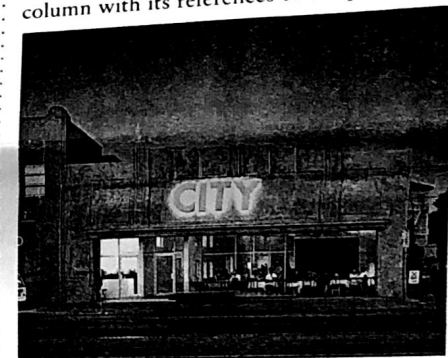
In 1984, Angelenos spent more than \$5 billion in restaurants, so competition for attention is increasingly fierce. A new proliferation of eateries takes chances with what is acceptable to the dining public in both food and style. Restaurateurs of upscale establishments seeking the young and affluent figure that anyone who spends the afternoon buying unconstructed jackets and leopard-skin oxfords at Maxfield isn't likely to finish the day at the staid L'Orangerie. So, the landscape is changing rapidly.

It was just three years ago that La Petite Chaya began attracting adventuresome customers by serving Franco-Japanese cuisine in a pleasant, if relatively nondescript, spot on Hillhurst Avenue in Hollywood. When owner Yuji Tsunoda opened his less-formal Chaya Brasserie in 1984, he sought a more distinctive architectural statement to draw customers from the interior design and art communities in the Robertson Boulevard neighborhood.

Architects Elyse Grinstein and Jeff Daniels turned an old Packard showroom into a dining environment where the twain of East and West meld happily.

"There were three elements," Daniels points out: "the self-conscious brasserie tradition that the owners wanted to incorporate with the steel façade and the tilted mirrors; the Oriental touch they wanted without having it look like an Oriental restaurant—the raw pine, the painted, decorative birds and trees, and the bamboo. The third element was the L.A. warehouse environment intended to lend a contemporary feeling to those other elements."

This was the first restaurant project for Daniels and Grinstein, and they employed the trademarks of their architectural vocabulary: durable, natural surfaces and the creative play of light and form. The columns, cast in steel on the façade, are echoed in pine in the center of the restaurant. Each column is an elegant hexagon—"which, to us, was more interesting than using an Ionic or Doric column with its references to the past," says



Daniels. The black concrete floors, the waxed concrete bar, the steel surfaces treated with a coloring agent called "gun-blueing," the rose stucco exterior, will all develop soft patinas and age gracefully.

Chaya Brasserie cost some \$800,000, but Tsunoda believes it was a sound investment. Grinstein adds, "You get more for the same amount of money when you use an architect." But Daniels explains an even more salient reason to hire an architect: "If you want to appeal to a certain group of people these days, you don't have much choice but to come up with something more designed. People expect more than excellent food and good service; they want ambience. Restaurants are extensions of their fantasies, like their cars or wardrobes. It is part of a need to express their individuality. You find it in every area now. People will buy designer alarm clocks..."

Architects Josh Schweitzer and David Kellen are responsible for the distinctive looks of Röckenwagner, Rondo, the Border Grill and City restaurant. Kellen insists that restaurateurs are now choosing their architects with the same sense of purpose they devote to finding the right chef. "More and more, when people go to these restaurants, they want a



City Restaurant

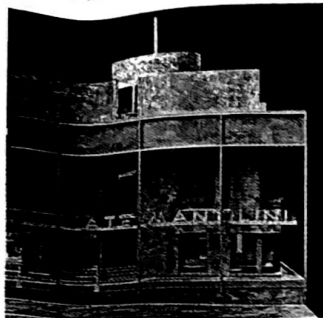




party atmosphere, not just a place to relax and be subdued. They want a place that has a lot of energy." In the past, owners might have done it themselves—picked out the paint for the walls and the upholstery fabric. Kellen says that has changed, permanently. "They realize the look is as important as the food, down to the waiters' uniforms and the graphics on the matchbooks." Instead of doing it themselves, they go to professionals.



City owners Barbara McReynolds, and Susan Feniger and Mary Sue Milliken who are also the chefs, had assembled a menu influenced by Indian, Thai and Mexican cuisine, and they wanted an ethnically neutral space. Schweitzer/Kellen work with minimal elements, jarring geometries and, often (though not in this case), bold colors. At City, the ceilings are exceptionally high, forming the room into a white cube punctuated by a black granite bar and chrome pastry case. "We are not fans of restaurants with art on the walls," says Kellen. "The table and food should be the focus. Also, we believe that the architecture exists as sculpture, so you shouldn't add art to art." The firm accommodates financial limitations on any scale. The budget for Röckenwagner, for instance, was \$17,000, while the 6,000-square-foot City, their most ambitious venture, cost \$400,000.



At Max au Triangle in Beverly Hills, French owner Alexandre Athias hired architect Stanley Felderman to transform an old Lane Bryant clothing store into an atmosphere of nouvelle elegance to match the gourmet offerings of L.A.'s famed chef, Joachim Splichal. (Max closed on June 30 after Splichal had resigned. At this writing, it is uncertain whether or not it will reopen under the same or new management, but its design significance is not diminished by the fortunes of business.)

"My client wanted something that would represent a grand, classical dining environment," explained Felderman. "In the restaurant industry, there are benchmarks. In this city, the level of architecture had been mediocre until Michael's [Michael McCarty's Santa Monica restaurant], which I think was one of the early benchmarks. People started realizing that architecture and design can be part of the eating experience. Of all the cities in the country, in L.A. there is a willingness to take risks, more so than in New York."

But Felderman believes the new architectural restaurants represent more than a trend among restaurateurs. "Architects have allowed themselves the liberty to design restaurants. During the modernist period, interiors were considered beneath architects. Since just six years ago, architects have changed back to the historical role of orchestrating a space. Now, art, decoration and embellishment are part of their vocabulary.

With a \$1.5 million budget, Felderman not only transformed a warehouse into a space reminiscent of a luxury liner, he designed the furniture, menus, carpets, refrigerated wine racks and the frosted-glass screen at the entrance. Even the signature of "Max" is a Felderman creation. "Everything but the grand piano," is the way he puts it. "It was quite a gift for me."

Felderman believes that "dining is theater, with the diners as the participants. People want to be with their peers, where they can see and be seen." The dining room at Max conveys a measured excitement. Walls are lacquered; terrazzo floors and carpets are flecked in gold to match the sparkling mesh grid covering the vaulted ceiling. The grid is reflected, as well, in the pattern of gold leaf atop the pyramid-shaped elevator. Every surface is painted, detailed and refined. Looking up at the exposed, steel construction girders and the lights above the grid, one gets the sense of being on stage. The feeling is enhanced by walls of white lattice backed with mirrors to reflect diners and their space. Interspersed among the tables are lavender proscenium arches with white drapery, openings for dramatic entrances and exits. Felder-



man says, "I'm playing games to make you conscious of where you are."

Morphosis, the architectural team of Thom Mayne and Michael Rotondi, deny any special affinity for restaurants, though they are responsible for the landmark designs of L.A. Nicola, Verdi, Angeli, 72 Market Street and the soon-to-open Kate Mantilini. Mayne protests, "We're not restaurant designers, we're architects. We're only interested if we can do something new." Fortunately, they've had clients who wanted exactly that.

Still, Morphosis had to adopt special considerations for its restaurant clients. "Restaurants are public buildings, so you have to be hyperaware of the social aspect," explains Mayne. "We live in a world that doesn't have public spaces, so restaurants are where you go to meet people."

That architectural solutions need not be outrageously expensive is evidenced by the \$150,000 spent by Angeli for an Italian café that grabs attention, even on the crowded strand of Melrose Avenue. Owners Evan Kleiman and John Strobel had a simple prescription: 40 chairs and something to do with Italian antiquity. Kleiman elaborates:





"Since going out to eat is a major entertainment in this town, the way the place looked was of major importance. I was not interested in being in a restaurant that looked like my mother could own it. But I would hate to see carbon copies of this restaurant all over town; this is a personal expression of who we are."

"The goal was to allow us to do what we do best," says Mayne, "and that meant, leave us alone." As a result, this modest building has an aggressive presence, a tension built into its design. "Tension is a manifestation of our world," says Mayne, "and there is an overt sexuality from the beams piercing the front of the building and phallic images such as candlelight fixtures." The façade of Angeli is literally a fragment of decay aspiring to ruins. The materials are straightforward. Explains Mayne, "We're interested in authenticity versus two-dimensional, graphic, plastic stuff. It's about construction, about coming apart and coming together—the beams, glass, steel, slate floor. Some of our architecture is self-referential, some is about the inner world, some is about architecture as a cultural artifact—instilling it with sensibilities that have to do with our time."

Mayne argues that it is not new for architects to design restaurants, wryly recalling that Daniel Dworsky designed Nibblers in Beverly Hills. "It was a calmer, safer kind of architecture, but the issues have changed. Hopefully, this new architecture represents innovation, asks new questions, manifests a new style. But you are going to look at it only if it has some qualitative level, if it deals with something."

Hamburger Hamlet owners Harry and Marilyn Lewis have been opening new restaurants with a more stylish presence lately, including the Downtown Grill in Encino and Hamlet Gardens in Westwood. Soon, they'll be opening Kate Mantilini, a 24-hour steakhouse on Wilshire and Doheny. Marilyn Lewis usually does the interiors herself and makes the architectural decisions about her restaurants, but she felt the space of this former bank was too vast to lend itself to her home-away-from-home ambience. She hired Morphosis for the new venture at an estimated cost of \$2 million. As a restaurateur for the past 36 years, she tried to explain the new burst of dining in style: "I think that everything we do today is such show business. We are a kind of celebrity society. Harry and I are celebrities; plastic surgeons and architects are celebrities. It's just the kind of society we live in, probably because of the media." Lewis believes this contributes to our "tremendous awareness of style that is touching people's senses."

But Kate Mantilini—named after a female boxing promoter who was famous in the '40s—will eschew the stylish trends in food. "The pasta will be spaghetti and meatballs," says Lewis. "We'll have steaks, brains in black butter, sweetbreads and fresh fish—hearty fare, like a cross between the old Ollie Hamond's and Musso and Frank's. I leave all that frenzied trendy stuff to the others."

Kate Mantilini may have old-fashioned food, but the architecture is one of Morphosis's most dynamic, theatrical projects. It has been designed like a small cathedral, long and narrow with high ceilings, indirect lighting from skylights, and a curved mural of boxers by John Wehrle. At one end of the room is a skylight-topped sculpture composed of pseudotechnological forms suggesting, among other things, a sundial and the geometrical lines of a Mercator projection.

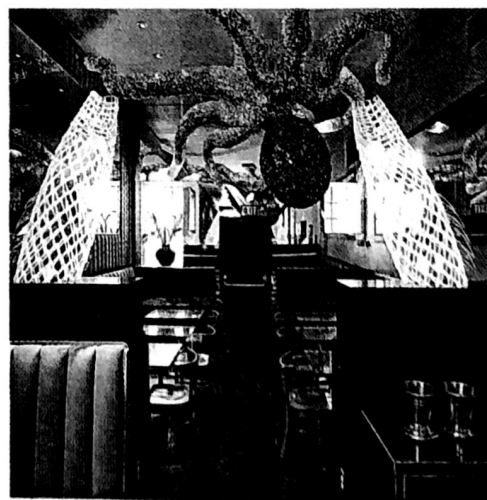
Lewis doesn't believe that the architectural mania in restaurants is necessarily positive. "I'm exhausted watching this frenzy; it's not good for business because too many fall out a year or two after they open. It makes the public fickle and creates a hostile environment among us. I'd like to see something stable come along. If the new tax bill that disallows the investment tax credit is passed, we're going to see an end to this. It costs money to go crazy and restore old buildings. I don't think this will continue without the investment tax credit. At the Hamlet Gardens we spent \$3 million, but at least we got some of it back. Without that, it wouldn't be so alluring."

The most outrageous new statement in town is Rebecca's, the \$1.5 million Mexican restaurant designed by Frank Gehry for West Beach Café owners Bruce and Rebecca Marder. It represents Gehry's new interest in more luxurious materials, such as onyx and granite, and it is as abstract as any of his buildings. A chaotic Latin atmosphere is enhanced by his Formica-chip lamps in the shapes of fish (and one enormous beaded octopus) that hang from the ceiling like so many *piñatas*. Bruce Marder says, "I didn't want to create any clichés in terms of design-



ing the restaurant. I thought Frank could translate a Mexican style rather than copy it. It was important to me to get off to a real good start, and Frank could create a knockout."

With overstuffed booths in pastels of chartreuse and fuchsia, a stainless-steel *ceviche* bar and the exaggerated rusticity of thick, wooden support pillars, Gehry is playing with visual metaphors. The architecture is



about becoming a restaurant, more than about the luxury of dining. Marder agrees: *Continued on page 99*



## Pesta's Side

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brain of a French intellectual and the guts of a U.S. Marine (please, Lord, not the other way around), because that's about what it will take to live up to his parents' expectations. When we were in college, Mike had a little trouble living up to his old man's expectations; he dropped out and spent a couple years smoking and dealing dope. This sort of thing runs in a lot of families.

Denise once told me that her parents were always reminding her of how much it cost to feed her, dress her in nice clothes, send her through USC. I'm sure it cost a lot, but I'll bet her child is going to cost ever so much more. This is going to be like sending someone through USC for 18 years or so. Fortunately, Mike is doing right nicely in the hard-money business. If your credit is so shaky that uniformed guards glower behind you in the check-cashing line at the bank, Mike will try to put together a mortgage for you. The interest he charges would make a Mafia loan shark queasy. He gets stuck with the number of defaults you'd expect: lots. His margin is the down payment on the sale, plus the down payment on the subsequent forced sale, plus the stray points he gets from lenders for bringing them the business. He earns every dime. And Denise is one of those women in their 20s whom women in their 30s and 40s find so intimidating. She is already a name in this decade's spin-off of the '70s home computer industry—the fingernail business. In a decade, she'll be one of the Valley's largest employers. So, they will be able to afford their child. Just.

Once upon a time you had to be born into B.F. Skinner's family to get the kind of upbringing Mike and Denise have in mind for their offspring. Today, the Programmed Child is perhaps not the rule but is hardly the exception. Some child-improvement schemes sound more like the work of Dr. Mengele than Dr. Spock. That's why I'm not sorry I waited 'til Denise left the room, then slipped Pachelbel's *Canon* out of her Walkman, and that's why I'm not sorry I slipped in the Van Halen tapes. I don't think I did any serious harm. The boy is two months old now, and I'm sure if I had, I would long since have seen a copy of *Dare to Discipline* around the house. When little Eric's verbal skills and hand-eye coordination are up to it, I think I'll teach him how to goof off. □

## Architecture

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"Restaurants are social fantasies. People go out to get away from their own home, and, more times than not, the restaurant is nicer than their home. But Rebecca's is more a statement of art than architecture."

In L.A., restaurants have become hot clients for hot architects, and (barring the death of the investment tax credit) the trend is not likely to slow any time soon. Los Angeles may be at the forefront, but Des Moines can hardly be far behind: A Sizzler in the Valley sports red, white and blue neon running horizontally around its old mansard roof; the new McDonald's in New York's Rockefeller Center is outfitted with a post-modern entry tiled in peach and pale blue, with gray carpets, glass bricks, mirrors and bands of glowing neon.

Yet, with all the concern for high style, no one forgets that customers can't eat architecture and will only come back for first-class food and service. Bruce Marder of Rebecca's cautions, "Architecture is going to get people in, but if it's just another pretty face, they are going to get bored with it in a hurry." □

## Restaurants

Continued from page 100

crested her *pupik*. Her hair appeared to have been colored with Kiwi-brand boot-black.

With a floor show like that, food should be irrelevant. Oddly, it wasn't. The *carpaccio* appetizer (\$9.95) was thin, delicate—as good as raw beef can be. The small yuppie pizzas (\$8.95-\$9.95) were a fair match for the duck-sausage and goat-cheese pizzas served at Spago, the California Pizza Kitchen and Prego. Linguini with smoked chicken and pesto (\$8.95) was just faboo, and the swordfish with basil and butter (\$6.95) was fine and dandy.

The guys next to me—who were also getting a charge out of the young lady in the fox skins—said they came here all the time. Turned out one was designer Jimmy Wachtel, brother of rock guitarist Waddy Wachtel; the other was Jackson Browne's bass player, Bob Glaub. They liked the food at Prezzo. They liked the vibe. They didn't mind the fact that it was in the Valley at all. □

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