

Food for thought

A lack of diversity is having an unavoidable impact on restaurant design in the Middle East. But things are changing, gradually. Four industry experts gather to discuss the intricacies of the region's highly unique F&B sector

The Middle East's F&B industry lacks breadth, a fact that is adversely affecting restaurant design in the region, a group of industry experts agreed during a recent roundtable interview with *CID* sister publication *Caterer Middle East*.

"Our feeling is it that the overall standard and quality of restaurant design in the region is pretty good, but if we had to criticise it I guess we would say it was a little bit monotonous," suggested Ben Corrigan, partner at Dubai-based interior design firm, Bluehaus.

While there is no shortage of food types to choose from in this part of the world – with everything from Cambodian to Mongolian readily on offer – the industry is heavily weighted towards the 'fine-dining' end of the scale. The tendency for restaurants to be located within luxurious five-star hotels dictates that they are often situated at the top end of the spectrum.

"We're so restricted with food and beverage; you've got your 'grill' kind of quick-service restaurant, then your casual dining, which is a bit rough around the edges over here.

"And then you jump from that right through to fine-dining, because everything is in a hotel, and they assume that everyone wants a five-star experience," noted Helen Beardsley, client service manager, Keane.

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"If you look at chains that do well over here, like Wagamama, which is very basic in terms of a design theme, they prove very popular because you don't always want chandeliers and everything draped in velvet," she continued.

"Fine dining will always be popular with an elite group but everyone's looking for something different and concepts need to be more innovative," Bahrain-based founding partner and regional director, Middle East, dwp (Design Worldwide Partnership), Kristina Zanic maintained. "Everyone is looking for more of a relaxed atmosphere in terms of design, particularly in Bahrain."

The Bahraini market is only slowly maturing, Zanic noted, although it does have the luxury of independent, stand-alone restaurants, so there is arguably greater scope to develop a more rounded, representative F&B industry.

"In Bahrain, things are just starting, really. We're lucky to have quite a lot of stand-alone restaurants; there is a

little community of restaurants coming up, which is really great. They're only just starting to build up new, innovative designs, but there's room to move and lots of scope in Bahrain, I believe," Zanic maintained.

The Qatari market, meanwhile, is very similar to that in Dubai, explained Chuck Wood, managing director, Rockwell Group Middle East, which was responsible for Nobu at The Atlantis, Palm Jumeirah and is currently working on a Nobu restaurant in Qatar.

"Licensed restaurants are restricted to hotels and there's a certain level of monotony. One design firm is generally responsible for an entire hotel and, therefore, a lot of the F&B venues are designed by the same team and are not necessarily coupled with really strong concepts," he detailed.

"There are hotels in Dubai where you could go in and move the Italian over to where the Indian is, or move the Indian over to where the seafood is, and



reopen the very next day. That's where we're heading right now," he explained.

According to Beardsley, hotels often treat the design of their F&B facilities as an afterthought, and do not allocate the necessary amount of imagination or money in coming up with innovative, original solutions.

"I think a lot of hotel operators just think, 'we've got a hotel that needs opening with six, seven or eight F&B outlets. They end up being a bit of an afterthought and it is often the case of just having one as an Indian and another one as an Italian, and the budget is not really what it should be," she said.

However, there is change on the horizon, as hotels are starting to look at leasing their outlets out to independent third parties. "One of the things that we find interesting is that hotels are now looking for outside operators.

"They're not looking to keep the money in their pockets, they're looking to lease the space, in order to create something a bit more unique; they are looking for a chef or a restaurateur that wants to do something different with the space. That has to be something positive," Corrigan insisted.

A prevalence of international franchises has also taken its toll on the diversity of the region's F&B industry. "If you go to London, New York or Paris, and you

walk along the high street, which is fundamentally missing from here, you will see a Starbucks and a Costa and some of the other famous brands that you have, but you will also see an absolute pepper of independent outlets along the way, which makes for a more exciting food and beverage scene than we have here," Beardsley pointed out.

"What's happened here is in every single mall you have all the same brands, from the US and a few from South Africa or the UK, and everyone's a bit bored of it really. There's no kind of exploration and nothing new to stumble upon here," she added.

But this may also be changing – slowly. If anything, the current slowdown may be having a positive impact on restaurant design, as it demands that designers take a far more creative approach. "I wonder whether a slowdown in capital expenditure budgets on F&B outlets may actually promote a little bit of creativity," Corrigan suggested.

Already, a few select companies are breaking with tradition and exploring new and original concepts, rather than relying on tried and tested formulas shipped in from other parts of the world. There seems to be growing awareness locally that simply licensing or buying a brand is no longer a guaranteed formula for certain success.

"A positive development is that local clients want new brands and new concepts; they don't want to buy franchises anymore and they are actually designing new concepts in the Middle East," said Corrigan. "Rather than just following the brands that are tried and tested in other markets, we're finding one or two of our clients are actually looking to take on new ideas rather than taking on franchises," he added.

This could also represent a backlash against paying a significant portion of profits in franchise fees – at a time when restaurateurs will be eager to keep hold of any profit they might be making. "More and more, they are quite fed up with paying franchise fees that are between 5% and 7% of their profit. It's much more about trying to create something that they can own and that's exciting," said Beardsley.

But it is also the responsibility of designers to guide and educate the industry, particularly when it comes to inexperienced clients. "Here the client is generally not very experienced, so we have to guide them along a little bit more. You can give them examples of places in Europe and the US that have been successful. After all, you have to be given the opportunity to be more creative if you're doing a one-off type of restaurant," said Zanic. 

1. Ben Corrigan.

2. Helen Beardsley.

3. Chuck Wood

4. Kristina Zanic.