

INTERIORS

Eateries as design incubators

The dramatic decorating flourishes in urban restaurants often set the pace for home stylings



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These mornings when I awake, I'm sad to report, it's totally dark. With autumn approaching, the light failing, and people muttering their valedictions to summer, it is perhaps the wrong season to trumpet Vancouver's emergence from its long and dorky design adolescence.

Regardless, Western Living magazine has just announced the winners of its "interior designer of the year" award. (Full disclosure: I was a judge in the competition.) The award is shared by David Nicolay and Robert Edmonds of Evoke International Design, and Juli Hodgson of Design/Build. All three have formidable portfolios in both restaurants and homes but, at the moment, their commercial properties are incubators for their residential designs.

This trend is true of the broader industry. For example, features such as backlit onyx wall panels and oversized lights, once the preserve of lounges and hotels, have become commonplace in high-end homes.

The progress in commercial properties is good news for Vancouver. While it has never been hard to find a great meal in the city, until seven or eight years ago, it was hard to find a great room. Thanks to designers such as these three, our restaurant interiors are now catching up to our food.

Delilah's is a good example of the old Vancouver. The popular West End restaurant is located just off the hum of busy Denman Street. From the mid-1980s to early '90s, the place seemed a dark New York secret everyone wanted to be let in on. Delilah's low ceilings, fresco cherubs, crystal chande-

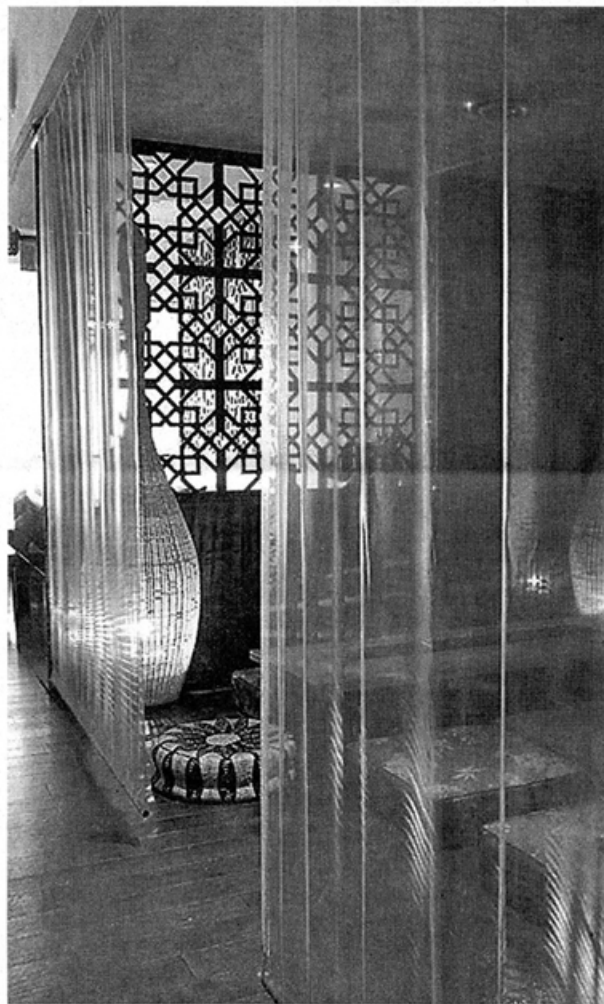
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liers and velvet curtains were straight out of the final scene of a gangster movie — one that ends in blood, gunfire and spilt red wine. Twenty years ago, that may have felt exciting; today it feels dated. Delilah's is one of many successful restaurants that, design-wise, is losing step with the times.

For my money, Sanafir is the best room in Vancouver these days, and we have the team of Mr. Nicolay and Mr. Edmonds to thank for it. (Ms. Hodgson has done excellent work — notably on Goldfish Pacific Kitchen in Yaletown — but her hospitality portfolio doesn't have the breadth of the one built up by the two men.) Their design for the Granville Street restaurant, which opened in 2006, plays on a Middle Eastern theme, with soaring ceilings, textured walls and cascading displays of lanterns. Seating vignettes are separated by panels of gauzy fabric that operate like veils, offering privacy and, at the same time, flirtatious glimpses of your neighbours.

The duo's innovations on the Vancouver scene have come not a moment too soon. With the arrival (at West Broadway's Lumière) of New York celebrity chef Daniel Boulud and murmurings about possible local projects involving Gordon Ramsay and Jamie Oliver, Vancouver cuisine is set to make a gigantic leap forward. And we need quality design to match the food.

The architects and designers of Vancouver's next generation of top-flight restaurants would do well to follow the blueprint



Sanafir, above, treats diners to a sophisticated Middle Eastern theme while the bohemian Cascade Room, right, offers leather booths and beamed ceilings. PHOTOS BY JANICE NICOLAY

for success laid down by Mr. Nicolay and Mr. Edmonds, who are adept at intuiting the personality of a neighbourhood and designing a restaurant to suit it. Apart from Sanafir, they have wrought this success at two other neighbourhood-oriented restaurants in Vancouver.

Tangerine, the first, was born in Kitsilano in the mid-1990s, when Mr. Nicolay and some members of his family decided that the beachside neighbourhood lacked a cool hangout.

Their remedy was to buy a shop front on Yew Street and make it over as a cozy, stylish place in which to enjoy a Saturday-night cocktail or Sunday-morning brunch. Before Tangerine, the street was a pastiche of greasy spoons and neglected ice cream parlours, with one good sushi joint and a bar where hard-drinking types partied the night away.

Tangerine refreshed the neighbourhood. Its interior was smart and playful, with an ivory bench along one wall,



thick lacquered-wood tables, modern chairs, and whimsical drum lights wrapped in patterned browns and lime-greens. When the restaurant opened, it was an instant hit with the young families and professionals that populate Kitsilano.

On the other side of town, the two designers have set another blazing example: the Cascade Room. Opened in 2007, the lounge fast became central to the mood of Lower Main Street, an eclectic neighbourhood where upscale boutiques have sprouted up beside sticky-bun bakeries, vintage clothing stores and indie coffee houses.

Unlike Sanafir, whose downtown crowd prefers polish and poise, Cascade had to be a spot that would attract bohemians and professionals alike. For Evoke, effecting this artful mix of heritage and modern simplicity meant using familiar materials. In the restaurant, the textures that assert themselves are the dark leather of the booths and rough-hewn wood of the ceiling beams. The effect is one of general rustici-

ty pleasantly contradicted by modern touches such as egg-shaped bar chairs. Other retro references give a nostalgic flair to the room and relate beautifully to the 1950s-style typeface used in the restaurant's menus and signage.

The design team has used graphics to infuse the room with the funk and whimsy of the streets beyond it. Above each booth hangs a large drum light screened with a silhouette of Queen Victoria. And near the entrance, the crowning touch: a smoky-glass sign that urges patrons to "Keep calm and carry on." It's an existential reminder, no doubt, and perhaps also a suggestion to happy drunks on their way out into the neighbourhood.

Those of us excited by Evoke's strides forward might offer the same wish to Mr. Nicolay and Mr. Edmonds (as well as to Ms. Hodgson), as the future of restaurant design in the city glows ever brighter: Keep calm and carry on.

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