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LAUREN DELGADO/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Plant St. Market in Winter Garden was designed to allow visitors to see the entirety of the market on either end.

Experts: Design details help drive a restaurant's success

BY LAUREN DELGADO
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A well-lit restroom sign. Paths to wait stations. Custom door pulls with a restaurant's brand etched on the handle.

No detail is too small for designers and architects creating dining experiences for Central Florida diners. A restaurant's look and design can affect not only a diner's experience but also the business itself.

"We are setting a stage for that guest experience," said Anna Schmidt, principal interior designer and president of Anna Schmidt Interior Design based in Jupiter, Fla. "That's really what it is about for me is that [in a] restaurant, that food can be

front and center. It basically highlights what they have to offer."

Schmidt, whose local work includes The Polite Pig in Disney Springs, said a restaurant's design often speaks to the type of food served or the atmosphere offered. The first step in taking on a restaurant is gathering as much information as the owners can provide about their vision — the menu, expected ambiance, name, etc.

"It's not just about making something look pretty," Schmidt said. "There's so much to this to make sure that a restaurant is successful."

The designer is part of the process in deciding the amount of construction work that a

space will need, the number of seats it will hold, and other considerations in forecasting the amount of money it will make, Schmidt said.

Ensuring efficient design is important because "time is money," Schmidt said. An inefficiently designed bar may require three bartenders instead of two. A poorly designed dining room may mean lost time and revenue as staff struggles to service patio tables that don't have a clear route to the kitchen. The lack of an outside canopy may mean fewer customers willing to stay during long wait times during a storm.

The look of a restaurant tells a story about the space, said Juliana Kerschen, senior associate

and project interior designer of The Johnson Studio at Cooper Carry.

Lighting is key because it can do everything from set the eatery's mood to inform diners about the nearest restroom. It can also highlight the aspects of a restaurant the designers find important such as artwork and textural details.

Kerschen, whose local projects include Prato in Winter Park and Slate in Orlando, said design often tries to make things functional as well as beautiful such as adding a backlit bar showcasing glassware and liquor bottles.

At Prato, incorporating out-

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catching she has become a brand, said co-owner Jared Czachorowski.

Transforming the site of Plant St. Market was necessary to it fitting in with the surrounding community. The mustard yellow, blighted apartment complex formerly on the site was razed. The brick market built in its stead was made to appear as if it had been there for years. The appearance got a little extra help from oak trees on the property and real gas lanterns along the entrances.

"When people are looking to going out to eat or

looking to hang out they want to go somewhere different from their home environment, [and] you really have to put them in an environment where they want to be in," Czachorowski said.

With 20 vendors in the space, function and flow were important considerations at Plant St., Czachorowski said. Different access points attached to outdoor seating surround the building. Inside, visitors have clear sight lines to either end of the rectangular space.

"It kind of becomes one visual, but each [vendor] individually has their own brands," Czachorowski said.

Adding branding to the design of a restaurant shouldn't be done in the "orderly, predictable and standard way, as in most shops," said Juli Capella, the architect of Jaleo — a soon-to-open restaurant in Disney Springs.

"We find it more interesting to do it irreverently, deformed or artistic," Capella said. "Whenever we can, we manipulate it, although sometimes the client does not like it, it seems a sacrilege to change it."

"But we do it for your own benefit, a restaurant is not a bank or a clothing store, but a place of pleasure and [permits more fun] with your logo, your corporate colors. You can play with them more freely."

At Jaleo, Capella has been playing with putting giant 8-foot letters spelling

out Jaleo on each portion of the building's facade, but in reality the letters will circle the building making it impossible for the word to be read as a whole by passers-by.

"We are more interested in attracting the stroller's attention and be surprised, than that it identifies our brand, that comes later," Capella said.

"Contrived, cookie-cutter restaurants" aren't appealing to younger generations, said Lisa McGee, vice president of construction and design with Tavistock Restaurant Collection, which operates a number of Lake Nona restaurants.

Tavistock's new Park Pizza & Brewing Co. incorporated an "Instagrammable" moment through a commissioned art installation in the restaurant, while establishing communal and social dining spaces in Boxi Park's shipping container-themed entertainment concept.

Authenticity is one trend that's here to stay, McGee said. Real, social and relatable spaces are desired.

"Another area to keep an eye on is incorporating technology into restaurant design; everything from how guests interact with restaurant staff and pay for meals, to interactive art; the possibilities are really exciting and seemingly endless," McGee said.

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