

REVIEW

The Blueprints Behind the Bistros

CREATING:
GLEN COBEN,
RESTAURANT DESIGNER

BY KATY MCLAUGHLIN

TO PREPARE for a new job, Glen Coben spends night after late night eating, drinking and talking with clients. Last Monday, he ate a three-course tasting menu at an up-and-coming chef's New York restaurant; on Tuesday he and the chef dined on an 11-course dinner at another.

Mr. Coben sees such forays as a critical part of identifying the narrative that underpins a new project. "I need to spend a lot of time with these people to get their story," he said. He doesn't carry a briefcase. Instead, he brings along either a pocket-size Moleskine notebook or, if the project is already under way, several printed floor plans stuffed into his jeans or jacket pockets. Throughout the evening, he whips out the plans and sketches ideas in the margins.

Since opening his own firm in 2000, the 48-year-old architect has built 59 eateries, 47 of them in New York. He built Mario Batali's Del Posto, which is often cited as much for its opulent, luxurious design as its food, as well as Riingo, which displays Japanese and Scandinavian influences, reflecting the Swedish background of its original chef, Marcus Samuelsson.

Mr. Coben learned the importance of narrative with his first restaurant, Washington Park, which opened in 2002. The chef, Jonathan Waxman, had achieved fame in the 1980s for bringing California cuisine to New York, but by the early 2000s his impact was fading from memory.

In the fall of 2001, the two men and the restaurant's financier went on a week-long eating tour of Paris and London. Mr. Coben said he gradually perceived Mr. Waxman's role as an elder statesman of the culinary scene, noting the reverential tone with which other chefs approached him, and the magnanimous way Mr. Waxman picked out a bottle of 1949 Château Latour at a meal. Soon, the theme of the restaurant began to coalesce in Mr. Coben's mind. "The story was Jonathan's comeback," he said.

Mr. Coben designed a restaurant in which patrons stepped down into the dining area, "like a movie theatre," then looked up toward the open kitchen, which was framed by a proscenium arch, making it look like Mr. Waxman was "on stage," Mr. Coben said.

The cinematic comeback theme resonated: A positive review began, "Washington Park is one restaurant that almost needs a screenplay rather than a review." The restaurant closed in 2003, but Mr. Waxman's star was burnished. Today, he is a staple of food television.

By itself, design can be a collection of random choices. By using pieces of someone's life as the guide, even paint colors can feel like an essential piece of the story, said Mr. Coben, who has chosen colors to match a chef's sauce or a kind of butter he or she likes.

When describing restaurants, Mr. Coben is an inveterate sketcher, seemingly incapable of glossing over details like the location of the bathrooms or a tree. "Here's where his little red car was parked when I walked in," Mr. Coben said as he drew his recollections of his first visit to a restaurant outside



GLEN COBEN at Romera New York; the two orange dots are based on the color of one of the chef's sauces.



GLEN COBEN'S NOTES of ideas he got for Romera New York while visiting chef Miguel Sanchez Romera in Spain in 2007, above left; the completed restaurant, which opened in late September, above right.



Barcelona run by chef and doctor Miguel Sanchez Romera. His ability to create a complete mental picture on paper makes it easy for others to see what he sees. Though his visual memory is amazingly accurate—"a blessing and a curse," he said—he annoys his wife by forgetting things like the dates of the Jewish holidays. His drawing skills, honed from a young age, are also specific and limited.

"It was always spatial. I could never draw a person," he said.

Sometimes the vision for a restaurant comes together quickly. Flipping through a graph-paper notebook from his 2007 visit to Dr. Romera's restaurant in Spain, Mr. Coben pointed to notes and sketches of museum-style art cases, curtains and a layout that is nearly identical to what he went on to build at Romera New York, which opened in late September.

But some projects demand many drafts and much discussion. One chef in New York (who asked that he not be identified because he has not yet signed the lease for his new restaurant space) is currently working with Mr. Coben on an informal restaurant and bar in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. A few weeks ago, Mr. Coben began a series of outings with the 35-year-old chef,

He uses pieces of a restaurateur's life journey to guide his design choices, down to paint colors.

sometimes after he completed his shift at his current restaurant, an upscale place in Manhattan. Hunched over late-night drinks, the two discussed integrating a foosball table into the design. "What if we connected it to the wall? That way you can pull it down when you play it, and put it away for space." Mr. Coben suggested.

"I dummo," said the chef, scrutinizing the drawing. "Foosball tables get a lot of wear and tear."

Though the foosball dialectic may appear to border on the sophomoric, Mr. Coben said it's a key element of the project. That's because he views the chef's story as one of a young man currently cooking "grown-up" food in a serious atmosphere, while the new place will let him have fun with his own generation, in an edgy, gentrifying area of Brooklyn. He encourages the chef to share nutty ideas and sketches them out to see if they'll work.

"That stuff may not make it in, but it gives me a sense of whom I am working with," Mr. Coben said.

A STORY TO TELL

◆ One of the first questions that Glen Coben asks a restaurateur is, "How long will a diner be sitting at the table?" He then supplies half-hour chairs (like stools and benches), hour chairs (unupholstered and low-backed) or pricier two-to-three-hour chairs, which are well-cushioned and have armrests.

◆ Presentation boards, which architects use to introduce design concepts to clients, are "B.S.," Mr. Coben said. A bunch of textures and colors on a board are a mere collection of random notions; the narrative that ties it all together is far more important. Mr. Coben said he has turned down requests to make presentation boards for projects where he doesn't know the story.

MOVING TARGETS: JOE QUEENAN



Serving Humble Pie on the Jumbotron



WHEN FANS ATTEND a professional sporting event, as I did last Sunday (Cardinals-Phillies) and the previous Sunday (Giants-Eagles), the moment inevitably arrives when the inspirational clip from the movie "Miracle" appears on the jumbotron. This is the scene where the U.S. Olympic hockey coach (Kurt Russell) tells his over-matched squad to go out and whip the hated Soviets. "This is your time," Mr. Russell says. "Their time is done. It's over." The clip is meant to get the restive fans revved up and to intimidate the visiting team.

If the visiting players give no indication that their time is done or over, and if the fans start to get even more antsy, the jumbotron will then air the clip from "Animal House" where John Belushi tells his frat brothers: "Over? Did you say 'over'? Nothing is over until we decide it is." If that doesn't get the job done, the jumbotron will then display invigorating material

from "Rocky," "The Empire Strikes Back" and "Hoosiers."

But if the visitors really start putting the wood to the hometown favorites, and the situation looks really dire, the geniuses from the Stadium Ambience Development Unit will pull out all the stops and play the scene from "Rudy," where the smoldering Notre Dame football coach tells his players: "No one, and I mean no one, comes into our house and pushes us around."

Every sports fan has seen these clips a thousand times, just as everyone who frequents American stadiums has been listening to Queen sneering, "You've got mud on your face, you big disgrace" since they were two years old.

The strange thing about these hokey clips is that they usually don't work. I can't tell you the number of times I've seen visiting teams come into a stadium and smack the home

team all around the ball yard. Out in South Bend, Ind., it happens all the time: In the past three seasons, the Fighting Irish have lost at home to Tulsa, South Florida, Connecticut and Navy. That's right: Tulsa.

When defeat is inevitable, stadium screens could show the shark in 'Jaws' gobbling up Robert Shaw.

And I've lost track of the number of times it was the visiting team, not the home team—cheered on by their jeering, contemptuous fans—that decided when the game was over and when it wasn't over. I wish I had a nickel for every time it was the home team that ended up with mud on their faces—the big disgraces—having their

cans kicked all over the place.

When you've won one Stanley Cup in the last 71 years, or when you've never won a Super Bowl, or when your last World Series victory was during the Truman administration, you're in no position to call anyone else a big disgrace.

Attention, sports fans: Players who are not scared of Ray Lewis and Brian Urlacher and Brian Dawkins are not going to be intimidated by John Belushi, Kurt Russell and Carrie Fisher. And they are certainly not going to be intimidated by Freddie Mercury. It just doesn't work that way.

I think that these hackneyed, self-defeating clips—you see them in stadiums everywhere—should be trash-canned and replaced by something more appropriate. Maybe once it becomes obvious that the home team is going to lose, the league should require the stadium to eat humble pie and play apologetic, self-flagellating

clips on the jumbotron, meekly conceding that the visiting team is not in fact a big disgrace with mud on its face.

One obvious choice for a humble-pie clip is the climactic scene in "Jaws," where Robert Shaw gets swallowed whole by the great white shark, the way the Eagles got swallowed whole by the Giants two weeks ago. Another is the scene in "Troy" where Achilles deep-sixes Hector, the feisty but outclassed hometown hero.

And then, of course, there's "Glad-iator," where Russell Crowe strolls right into Joaquin Phoenix's house (the Coliseum of Rome) and polishes him off with his own knife. Best of all, teams that self-destruct before their fans' very eyes should be required to show the final scene in "Thelma and Louise," where the girls go straight off that cliff—just the way the Eagles did last Sunday against the Niners.