

DESIGN WITH A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

During the last several years I have had the privilege of working on an increased number of international foodservice design projects. With projects throughout North America, Central America, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, regular exposure to different cultures, customs, health requirements, and operational preferences has allowed us to maintain a truly global perspective. A wide variety of geographical conditions that must always be considered also forces us to maintain an open mind and remain flexible with our approach. As a result, we often become the catalyst for cross-pollinating ideas from one region to another. In this installment, I wanted to take the opportunity to share a few of the more interesting design requirements to which we have been exposed. You may find them intriguing – no matter where your operation is located.

No Boxing Allowed

While working on a project in the Middle East, we learned of a local regulation that required all food products to be removed from their original packaging, washed where applicable, and stored in approved food transportation containers before entering the facility. The original packaging must be discarded and was not permitted into the main building under any circumstances. I must admit that I had never considered such an operational requirement, but it made complete sense from the moment I learned of it.

If you think about how food is typically transported, the food is protected by the outside packaging – perhaps a cardboard box or a plastic bag. But doesn't the outside packing often get wet, attract dirt, or in some other fashion become exposed to "undesirable elements?" And since this is often the case, why would we then volunteer to store the food, in contaminated packaging, inside the walk-in cooler, freezer, or dry storage room? With an ever increasing focus on food safety, wouldn't a ban on outside packaging within a food storage room make sense? After all, cross contamination is the leading cause of foodborne illness. By regulating a ban on outside packaging in the food storage areas, the integrity of the facility's food safety program is significantly enhanced.

Where this is not a requirement, the operator always has the option to implement the standard as an operating procedure. In fact, a well respected and world renowned operator that we work with has done just that. They have implemented breakdown stations for cleaning and re-packaging directly adjacent to the receiving dock, regardless of whether the local authority has such a requirement. This offers a valuable lesson. Operators need not wait for the local authorities to impose regulations. Through the sharing of local mandates and operational procedures, hospitality operators all over the world have the unique opportunity to learn from one another and proactively improve upon their own way of doing things.

A Step Above the Rest

While reviewing pictures from an existing hotel in a region where we had begun working, I noticed that the chef and management offices within the kitchen footprint were raised approximately one foot above the main floor. The light bulb light up over my head. Of course! The first thing I considered was the fact that this level change would help keep food waste and water out of the offices and make the adjacent area easier to clean. The second thing I realized was the office, when properly placed within the main kitchen, would have improved visibility for security and general observation. I had never considered raising the office before primarily because most jurisdictions in the United States would oppose such a design. Still, there is a great deal of validity to the design technique.

Separate Spaces, Separate Places

Some cultures require the strict separation of food types, which is based largely in religious custom. But even if religious practice is not the underlying driver, doesn't complete separation make a whole lot of sense? In the United States, food safety regulations either suggest or require the use of separate cutting boards, utensils, and specific storage arrangements to promote separation and safe food handling. But wouldn't physical separation be even better? And not just from a food safety standpoint, but from a food quality standpoint. Some

regions, where separation by food type is mandated, require separate rooms and refrigeration units for vegetables, meat, poultry, seafood, and pork. These rooms are completely separated, each with their own entrances, and in no way come in contact with one another. Again, there seems to be validity to this practice, whether on a small scale or larger scale, even where separation is not a regulated requirement.

Don't Drink the Water

On one project in Africa, I had made the mistake of showing a standard soda system, which mixes local water with carbon dioxide and soda syrup to produce the beverages that we are all familiar. Quickly, I was directed to remove the soda systems by the hotel's food and beverage director. The water in the local area simply was not safe enough to drink. Sodas and other beverages were all served from a bottle or can which allowed for better control and ensured a safe product for the consumer. This was an instance that underlines the importance of exploring local conditions in a region, and then considering the impact results from such an exploration might have.

So Much in Common

Despite all of the regional differences, the one thing that has amazed me most when working on projects internationally is the fact that design of food and beverage facilities truly is a universal language. I find it astounding that a design team comprised of members from Europe, Asia, North America, and the Middle East all share a common language. We look at a particular design and can see similar things. The objectives of designing a commercial hospitality facility are surprisingly consistent from one culture to another. Our collaboration and experience from working in different regions produces remarkable results. Shortly after I began working with project teams that featured a greater international composition, I was reassured when I presented a design concept to an architect based half way around the world. Immediately following my review of a proposed layout, he replied by stating "well, that makes total sense. Let's make the necessary changes to incorporate your design."

In parting, I would encourage you to seek out operators from other regions and other cultures to see what they do differently. Perhaps they will be able to offer you an idea or two that will significantly improve your operation. But trust me on this – the differences you find will be minimal in scope, because all of us in the hospitality industry have developed a unique and universal language.