

EMBRACE DESIGN DRIVERS

As I sat down to survey the architectural drawings for an employee dining facility that we were going to be designing, I noticed what appeared to be a column in the middle of the space. But this was no ordinary column – this was a circular column, forty-two inches in diameter located smack dab in the middle of my servery. The location of this column was most certainly going to impact my design. I had two options. I could have developed a design that tried to hide this *obstruction*, loitering in the middle of my space. Instead, I decided to use this column as inspiration. The result ... a circular shaped servery with this huge column as the centerpiece.

When you look at the design solution we were able to develop, it almost looks as though the column was supposed to be there to anchor the layout of the space. The layout is functional. It flows well. It has a personality of its own. And without a 42” column in the middle of the space, I would have never thought about proposing a circular servery. This column is what I call a *Design Driver*.

What is a Design Driver

I don't mean to offer an elementary definition, but a design driver is truly anything that drives the design of the space. Design drivers influence the design solution in one way or another. These design drivers come in a number of different formats. Physical design drivers can include column locations, door locations, existing utility locations (especially in existing facilities), stairway locations, egress requirements, etc. Each design driver must be considered and evaluated to determine its impact on the proposed design solution – either positive or negative. If the impact is negative, then the costs associated with overcoming this design driver must be evaluated and considered. A column, for instance, in some cases can be moved. It is typically not an inexpensive effort; however, in certain situations it may be justifiable. In one project that I was working on, there was only one location that the exhaust hood could go based on the routing of the chase through a three story building. This requirement drove the rest of the design, impacting both the front-of-house and back-of-house configurations.

Operational needs can also significantly impact the design of a facility. The desire for an open display kitchen, for instance, will influence the layout of both front-of-house and back-of-house components. When dealing with display kitchens, which are becoming more and more popular, significant attention is required to make sure that the desirable activities are in view, while other activities are concealed from the guest. There is not much demand, for instance, for display ware washing areas. For those of you who have spent time in a commercial ware washing area – you can attest that it is not the prettiest part of the foodservice operation. As a result, even in a display kitchen the ware washing area must be hidden from the view of the guest. Sight lines, containment of noise, and containment of the fluorescent lights that typically illuminate our kitchens must all be addressed while maintaining easy access by the servers so that their distance of travel is minimized. There is a lot to consider ... these are all *Design Drivers*.

I had the opportunity to work with a group of operators who really knew their business (my favorite kind of client). We spent countless hours reviewing every potential movement of each individual position on the cooking line, even considering the differences during slow and peak periods as well as the anticipated number of cooks that would be on the line. The end result of this exercise was a custom designed, twenty-two foot long chef's counter that met the specific needs of the operator. These specific operational requirements drove the design of the counter and the surrounding areas in the kitchen.

There are countless other design drivers that could impact the design of your facility. Sun exposure at different times of the day. The local climate. Code requirements or ordinances. The desire for future flexibility, modifications, or growth. Owner preferences. Staff input. Limitations of the building in which you are located. And on, and on ...

Challenges Breed Creativity

Some design drivers are often referred to as obstacles. I would suggest that instead of obstacles, these seemingly troublesome conditions should be viewed

as opportunities. Some of the most creative solutions that I have seen in design have come as a result of challenging design drivers with which the design team was forced to contend. I was working with a new restaurant concept that wanted to produce 400 sandwiches an hour within a predefined space. For this particular application, we came up with a double-sided line that was able to meet the needs of the operator, as opposed to the single-sided line as was originally discussed.

Knowing When These Design Drivers Are Controlling You

In certain situations, you must be able to recognize when the design drivers are too limiting, and they are preventing the development of an acceptable design solution. On yet another project, I was working on the conversion of an existing restaurant to a new restaurant concept. There were existing rest rooms, a separate handicapped rest room on the other side of the restaurant (obviously the result of a code requirement during one of the earlier renovations), as well as existing walk-ins, hoods, and a ware washing area. Sure, it would have been great to utilize all of these existing elements and save money on the renovation costs ... that is actually where I started. However, in the end the sheer number of *Design Drivers* was too limiting and prevented me from being able to develop a design solution that would meet the operator's needs. Ultimately, we kept some things, modified others, and came up with a solution that worked. The real trick is knowing when to view these *Design Drivers* as opportunities or inspiration, and when to recognize that they are limiting the effectiveness of your design.