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## **A TASTE FOR HAUTE DESIGN SPECIAL ROOMS | We're a world-class city for dining but our restaurant interiors serve bland fare. Finally, that's changing**



*BY TREVOR BODDY SPECIAL TO THE SUN*

Our city is becoming one of the great restaurant cities of the world: Vancouver has a huge range of cuisines on offer; our seas and shores supply superb ingredients; and just as important, we lead in bang-for-buck fine dining, compared to other metropolises. Local chefs and suppliers outdo themselves with the freshest and the tastiest, but up till now, the interior designs of our restaurants have been strictly grey mystery meat and over-boiled potatoes.

This is changing.

Three restaurants opened in Vancouver over the past 18 months have sprinkled some much-appreciated garam masala into our heretofore-bland rooms for dining. Before mini-reviews of new eateries that nourish the eyes as well as the stomach — Lift on Coal Harbour, Watermark on Kitsilano Beach, and Rangoli's on West 11th—a little history and economics about why the design of Vancouver's dining rooms is so much more conservative than their cooking.

The last time Vancouver restaurants got conscious about their looks was in the late 1960s. It was then that locally invented restaurant chains The Olde Spaghetti House and what was then known as The Keg and Cleaver devised a simple formula: Go to south Main Street with a truck, load up on bottom-end antiques from the shops there, hang a few spider plants and fake Tiffany lamps, then call the result West Coast informal: "Hi, my name is Cindy/Bruce, and I'll be your waitress/designer for tonight."

Since that time, all the cyclic fads and fancies of restaurant design in Toronto, California, Hong Kong and even Montreal have passed through Vancouver, but we remained followers, not innovators. More recently, the brutal realities of our extreme real estate prices have held back restaurateurs who would wish to make an increased investment in the look of their dining parlours.

Restaurant owners are not able to invest in fine materials and quality designers for the same reason downtown condo tower developers erect concrete boxes by nameless low-fee architects: a brutal cost squeeze.

Vancouver's high rents and resistance to high menu prices in a competitive dining scene leaves restaurateurs with a tough equation: improving the look of their premises has to be "financed" by a reduction in the quality of ingredients or portion sizes they put on the table. Our menu price resistance is because Vancouverites pay Canada's highest housing prices on less than Canada's highest wages — on average, we spend almost half our net income on shelter these days.

For similar reasons, Vancouver's top restaurants have migrated out of the downtown peninsula over the past decade, a drift identical to our loss of high-end offices in our core. Hands down, Broadway has become our leading eating street, as there is hardly a top local dining room that is not within six blocks of it.

Two of the three restaurants reviewed below have traded glamorous looks for barely-okay food, and their cooking is to the 2000s what Keg and Cleaver fare was to the disco era — though the present-day dishes may well taste better because of splendid surroundings and views.

In part because West Broadway's more reasonable rents, and in part because his investors are patient while their star chef perfects his three plus different restaurant brands, Rob Feenie is almost the only restaurateur in town to combine innovative design with consistently high quality food.

Design-wise, my favourite Feenie-managed restaurant is the upscale Goth esthetic of his Lumiere Tasting Bar. Some think of the Tasting Bar as one long corridor — which it is, connecting front door to the haute cuisine main dining room — but the real delight here is checking out the sartorial flourishes and dining partner choices of customers, as they parade by.

My least favourite is the poutine-serving, smokie-munching Feenie's, the design of which I find too damn hip for its own good. This room is so 2003 it hurts, with its Kill Bill colours of dried blood-coloured wrapped walls, plus fake-blond-wig fuzzy light fixtures. But then a link with boy wonder movie director Quentin Tarantino is a natural for owner Feenie and his designer, David Hepworth, as both Vancouverites have a flare for the dramatic and saw similar early career success.

### **Rangoli's, Granville and West 11th**

If Feenie's interior looks like Kill Bill, the new take-out cafe Vikram Vij has opened next to his wildly successful eponymous restaurant is a high-tech Bollywood production, a Bangaloreshot, all-singing, all-dancing playback remake of Stanley Kubrick's 2001.

Rangoli means "painted prayer" in Hindi, and the prayers of many of us have been answered, as this is the best-designed new restaurant and tastiest takeout joint to open in

this city in years. On a tour, ever gracious host Vikram Vij points out that everything but the walls and skylights were removed from what was once Max's Delicatessen to shape his reconceived new deli, which he corrects to "New Delhi" after tactfully glancing at my interview notes.

This room is as bright and metallic as the stainless steel Tiffin sets that are used to deliver hot lunches all over the sub-continent. Indeed, designer Marc Bricault has even conceived Rangoli's food packaging and custom rack display systems. Both of these are inspired by kitchenware from India, the racks shaped into a highly abstracted elephant, carrying a load of Rangoli-branded spices for sale.

The elephant motif pops up on the tops of the custom-designed tables, the give-away being the over-sized pachyderm "eyes" and squint-and-you-can-see-it "trunks" on each. Ceramic tile the colour of a Rajasthan dust storm — or a sari sale in that same red-obsessed northern Indian state — lines the floors and walls of Rangoli's.

An Acadian who is largely self-taught as an industrial, graphic and interior designer, Bricault's thoroughness and attention to detail for everything Rangoli (he is responsible for the menu typography, the PVC plastic food takeaway pouches printed in Korea, the checkerboard steel and acrylic porous wall between prep kitchen and dining area, and much more) is a stunning demonstration of the business value of investment in design.

As his career progressed, Richard Wagner designed opera sets, costumes, theatres, concert program graphics as well as opera music and librettos, leading him to coin the neologism in German *gesamtkunstwerk*. This idea was interpreted as total design by 1920s Modernists as meaning one continuous, visually integrated work of art — "from teaspoons to cities," in the words of Bauhaus founding director Walter Gropius.

In celebration of their achievement at Rangoli, Bombay-born Vikram Vij and New Brunswick-born Marc Bricault may have to craft neologisms of their own — translations of *gesamtkunstwerk* into French, Hindi and Gujarati.

### **Lift, Coal Harbour**

When the Vancouver and Calgary-based Monk McQueen restaurant group bought the rights to develop a rare on-the-water restaurant site from a previous group of investors, they hired Smart Design to come up with a concept and name. They produced the name Lift, inspired by the boat lifts that raise up yachts at high-end marinas, like the ones in Coal Harbour where they hoped to draw some well-heeled customers.

But grousing Vancouver designers have since taken to calling this marina-side flashy new eatery "the well-named lift restaurant." This is because so many of its architectural details seem to be "lifted" from previous creations.

For example, Lift's standout night-time design feature is a backlit honey-coloured onyx-stone bar, but in an interview Marc Bricault confirmed designing the backlit honey-coloured onyx-stone wall feature behind the bar of the original Vij four years ago, about the same time David Hepworth produced a green version at Lumiere's Tasting Bar, both designed long before Lift.

Then there is the maritime-inspired exterior architecture of this highly visible restaurant next to the Westin Bayshore. The boat-inspired sweep of its cable-supported forms and metallic surfaces seem — to my eyes — clear homage to some previous buildings around

False Creek — these include Peter Cardew’s boaty townhouses on the south shore, and the north shore’s False Creek Yacht Club by Bing Thom, new home to NU, Harry Kambolis’s latest restaurant.

Project designer Al Johnson of Downs Archambault Architects counters that his design attempts to reconcile the corporate architecture around it—including the adjacent Westin’s hulking convention wing, which he designed — with the yachty floating fortunes that obscure views of the actual waters between Lift and Stanley Park. Polished aluminium panels tastily contrast horizontal slats of rare tropical woods.

The choice of tropical woods is appropriate, given the identity of one of the new neighbours who has moved into an adjacent condo. When in power through the 1990s, former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad was noted for his campaigns against the Internet, and for rumbling about restrictive dress codes for women in his Muslim-majority nation.

Now, when spending part of the year in Vancouver, Dr. Mahathir will look down upon the bare shoulders of babinskis supping cosmos on Lift’s rooftop bar, capacity 58. This dockside diorama says everything about Vancouver, circa 2005: moneyed Asian real estate investor meets West Coast lifestyle; puritanism sets its permanent gaze upon exhibitionism.

There is less to look at inside the 500-square-metre restaurant — more of those rare tropical woods, an aquarium for kids of all ages, plus sliding glass walls that disappear in good weather to link the 140 seats inside with the 50 on the outside decks. Johnson was obliged to set his design over an existing pad, making interior spaces tight, a set of intimate rooms around a winder stair to the rooftop drinking zone, washrooms and a second service bar. This second bar makes it easier for regular guy patrons much in evidence to send over drinks to the babinskis, with “may I offer you a Lift” being the most popular line to both open — and close — an evening up there.

## **Watermark, Kitsilano Beach**

The boldest and most refined architecture of the three comes from Tony Robbins’s long-gestating Watermark, rising up from the footprint of the former Kitsilano beach fish ‘n’ chips stand. No, not THAT Tony Robbins, the one with the two B’s, but rather the British-born and educated architect, who is one of the most brilliant but unknown designers in this town. If Canada were not one of the most talent-averse, innovation-inhibiting countries going, Robbins would be as famous as Daniel Libeskind, and he would have building commissions like that other architect with a deep interest in films and filmmaking, Rem Koolhaas.

Instead, it has been a decade since Robbins has completed a building — a series of Japanese restaurants in Kitsilano, Whistler and Japan. Instead, he has been writing screenplays, and has had several optioned by Hollywood, including the fanciful tale of the secret re-building of a second Eiffel Tower.

Taking seven years to secure approvals and complete construction, the resulting architecture is worth every minute. Owner Peter Barnett stuck with low-profile Robbins through years of controversy, unusual when many Vancouver developers pick architects for stickhandling planning approvals over their design skills.

The NIMBYism against Watermark by Kits Point residents and their lawyer friends was appalling, and for the greater good of parks use by citizens other than the over-aerobicized, we all should be thankful that Barnett won. Of course, those who fought hardest against the new restaurant can now be seen dining there almost any night.

Let's hope that other brave-hearted souls win restaurant or lounge permissions at Sunset, Third and Locarno Beaches flanking English Bay, in the reconfigured Riley/Olympic Curling Park, and somewhere along that dim and under-used greensward lining False Creek's east end.

The real test of Tony Robins's design skill at Watermark is its simplicity — lesser hands would have futzed it up, distracting from the brilliant views and verdant park setting. The proportions of columns, window mullions, even the width of the exterior deck are profoundly right, making natural beauty even more beautiful in its framing by a sympathetic intelligence. Much of Watermark's finesse is invisible, as every inch of it was shaped to diminish negative impacts to views and heritage trees all around it.

Robins concedes he "had a bit of fun" with the all-glass, sentinel-like elevated lifeguard's meeting room north of the main restaurant. I hope this room can occasionally be used for dining, or even better, let's convene sessions in that glorious space where future architects can show their designs to dug-in residents objecting to anything other than trees, sand and jogging trails in our urban parks.

**Vancouver Sun architecture critic Trevor Boddy's writing on buildings and cities has been named winner of the Western Magazine Award, The Jack Webster Journalism Prize, and the Alberta Book of the Year Award. He welcomes reader feedback and story suggestions at [trevboddy@hotmail.com](mailto:trevboddy@hotmail.com)**



Kits Beach's long and low Watermark restaurant by architect Tony Robins is bold and refined, says writer Trevor Boddy.



Matte-finished metal panels and a fir ceiling frame the downstairs fast food operation's outdoor cafe at Kits Beach's Watermark. Cables hold up the glass canopy at the yacht-inspired Lift's front door. The building features a curving roof, raised exterior deck.



Horizontal-banded rare tropical woods contrast with corporate aluminum panels at the Lift Restaurant at Coal Harbour..

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