

clients to think bigger and consider ways to leverage their concepts and facilities. Can they sell their own mustard or hot sauce or maybe their bread? They have all this equipment sitting there, and they put a lot of money into making their places look awesome — they should make them work as hard as they can.

Calder Smith: Everyone who's designing in this new fast-casual world is looking at full-service restaurants as competitive inspiration, not at other QSRs or fast casuals. We just did a redesign for fresh&co. They have 15 or so units around New York City and were beginning to see sales slipping to other brands that offer a more enhanced experience. They realized the fact that experience-driven design now really matters to consumers, whether they're in a full-service restaurant or a fast casual. We did a lot of research and analysis and ended up creating a design with elements such as residential-style finishes and varied seating, including tall community tables, regular tables with banquettes and lounge areas. We used a lot of brick and wood flooring — the same types of finishes you'd see in a nice full-service restaurant.

Vicens: We're definitely beginning to see restaurant chain directors looking for better building and restaurant designs. They're reaching out to studios that design experiences versus just buildings or traditional architecture because they no longer want to feel like a fast-food place or a large, corporate kind of restaurant.

Valverde: And that's great because ultimately the consumer wins. They get a better experience because they're at a restaurant that they actually enjoy versus just going there because it's quick and convenient. I'd also say that there are a lot of opportunities for concept innovation, especially to develop new ethnic chain options beyond Chinese and Mexican. We're working on some ethnic concepts, such as Indian, that are fun and inviting and offer cocktails and great ambience.

Plecha: We see chains picking up trends in independent restaurant design, too, but there's typically a lag time of about 12 to 24 months. Most corporate



An enclosed patio installed within surrounding treetops at Jalisco Norte in Dallas. Image courtesy of Kathy Tran

John Paul Valverde (l.) & Miguel Vicens, Co-Creative Directors Coeval Studio, Dallas



Advice to clients: Think strategically and keep development and design focused on the clientele you want to sell to. You hired an experienced team to help, so keep an open mind, listen and let them.

Top-of-mind materials: Wall coverings. We're seeing a lot of beautiful, durable wallpapers that can really change the look of a room. Also metals, which are economical, versatile and create unique looks.

Materials wish list: More products that are suitable for renovation projects, i.e., that can be used without having to first reface entire floors or walls. Better, more beautiful lighting options for commercial clients who don't have huge budgets.

If I opened my own restaurant: I'd do an airy, approachable sushi place with a good cocktail program. —Valverde

I'd just focus on something that appeals to the masses, nothing too niche. But I'd never do it because it takes all of your time. —Vicens

Who would you choose to design it? I'd hire a team from Ukraine. I follow several Ukrainian designers, and they do a lot with a little to create very raw spaces that are also warm and inviting. —Valverde
My background is architecture, so I'd probably pick someone like Zaha Hadid or Renzo Piano because of their attention to detail. —Vicens

chain structures aren't as nimble and can't move quickly to implement design changes due to multiple store locations, adaptability of branding and chain of command in decision making. But that's where they're heading. We also see chains using a lot more natural materials, such as stone and wood, in their designs and streamlining beverage and condiment areas for a more designed aesthetic. And we're moving toward more innovative solutions for displaying food along the front

line. In a project we did recently for Roti, a Mediterranean fast-casual brand, the food display is tilted up to give customers a better visual of the ingredients than in the standard fast-casual line, where they don't see the food until they get to the counter and then have to look down into the line to make their choices.

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