



Take Away

If you've dined in Boston over the past two decades, you've likely seen Stephen Sousa's work. The star restaurant designer and architect opened his eponymous firm in the late '90s and now, 14 years later, has an enviable portfolio that includes the area's hottest restaurants: Blue Dragon and Alma Nove, plus the soon-to-open spots Stephi's in Southie and Alden & Harlow. We caught up with Sousa in his Fort Point studio to learn more about bringing great restaurant design into the home.

by MELISSA MALAMUT • 9/10/2013, 4:42 a.m.

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Photograph by Jared Leeds

Okay, so what's the secret to designing a hit?

Who knows? What we do know is that the Starbucks generation wants to hang out, so we try to create a comfortable guest experience from the moment people walk in, from sitting at the bar to wrapping up dessert. We manipulate that experience through lighting, paint, and flooring, using exciting colors, textures, and materials to engage the senses.

Speaking of materials, what are some new ones you're working with?



We found snow fence from Wyoming, which we used in Mija Cantina & Tequila Bar, in Faneuil Hall; we used African-tree-bark wallpaper and imported the palm wood from Mexico for the wainscoting, entry, and ceilings for Temazcal, in the Seaport District; and at Alden & Harlow, we are constructing a wall of plants.

How much crossover is there between residential and hospitality design?

Homeowners call us all the time to ask where we got a particular light fixture in this or that restaurant. Or they'll want to know the paint color we used. Some of our residential clients specifically ask for the intricate millwork, coconut panel-ing, grasscloth wall coverings, or flooring they'd seen in our commercial projects.

Do you ever worry about repeating concepts?

As a designer, one always struggles against recycling ideas. I'll admit that I have a few signature moves, but beyond that, every project has its own uniqueness because each client brings a different vision to the project.

So clients usually come with ideas?

All the time. For example, chef Michael Scelfo made several Pinterest boards to explain his vision for Alden & Harlow, which became our departure point. Others come with stacks of magazines.

What's one of the craziest ideas a client has had?

This may not be crazy, but we designed the Cottage in Wellesley to look like the house in the movie 'Something's Gotta Give'. It's a beautiful space.

Have you ever had to say no to someone's idea?

One client wanted a ceiling element—something like waves with neon lights—and I said, "I ain't doing it." She was clearly disappointed, but then we reinterpreted her idea to make it look like a giant tiger's claw had scraped through the ceiling, highlighted by white lights. She loved it.



In Mija, Sousa created a fun, eclectic vibe to match the authentic Mexican cuisine. (Photograph by Sousa Design Architects)

What's your favorite moment in the design process?

The best part is when the plywood framing has just gone up. You can see it—and you can see the vision becoming real. By the time it's all finished, you've seen it 50 times or so, and the novelty is gone. But that first time...it's a great feeling.

What are some of your pet peeves?

Recently, everyone wants that Machine Age vintage look with things like Edison bulbs. It's all the rage, but it's not really my aesthetic. And we don't do faux-dive bars. That said, years ago, we did a lot of the popular Southie bars—Playwright, Boston Beer Garden, and Shenanigans—and they're still packed with customers today.

You've designed about 160 restaurants in 14 years. Which is the fairest of them all?

I can't pick a favorite, but I have a fondness for the Gallows. I enjoyed collaborating with owner Rebecca Roth Gullo to create a comfortable place that looks like an old Vermont barn. Although it was on a limited budget, it turned out to be quite successful.

Boston's a small town. Do your clients ever get upset that you're working with their competition?

Not really. We will usually give them a courtesy call, but it's to be expected.

What's it like gutting and redoing a space that you've designed before?

A decade before we did Storyville, we'd designed Saint in that space. In fact, there are some restaurants we've redone three or four times. Reinventing a space gives us a chance to figure out what didn't work in terms of lighting and materials, and improve an idea.

Do you mourn any restaurants from the past?

One of my favorite places that closed was Noche, in the South End. It was a beautiful, beautiful, restaurant.

You designed your own Brookline home. Do you have a big chef's kitchen?

To be honest, I don't cook that much, so no. But some of my favorite pieces from restaurants do end up in my home. Our dining room chairs happen to be my favorite chairs from Noche; the chairs for our kitchen island are from Stephanie's on Newbury; and a table we used in Mija is my dining room table. We also have a restaurant booth in our kitchen.



Sousa paired handblown Italian ceiling pendants with sculptures of the moon to create the illusion of a night sky in the former late-night-dining establishment Noche. (Photograph by Sousa Design Architects)

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