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## Mall Owners Are Giving Food Courts and Common Areas a Facelift.

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Designers of today's food courts and other common areas at regional malls draw inspiration from other spheres such as spas, hotels and lively cityscapes—and notably not the food courts of yesteryear. That's because owners, developers and architects see former food-court norms as textbook examples of design turnoffs for modern consumers. What passed muster in old-school food courts—uniform lighting, sterile surfaces, standardized tables and chairs—provokes disdain from designers today.

“The food court is dead, in my mind,” says Marios Savopoulos, a principal at Perkowitz + Ruth Architects in Long Beach, Calif. “There's no such thing as a food court—it's a ‘people space’ that just so happens to serve food and other things.”

Until recent years, most food courts looked like they might have taken style pointers from their counterparts at schools, prisons or military barracks. As one architect puts it, they were designed for the “janitocracy”—easy to clean and maintain, but arranged without regard for the customer's experience. And that was just fine, as owners wanted customers only to eat and then be on their way.

As a result, food courts now have “a stigma of cheap furniture and tile and the same old tenants,”

Savopolous says. "And that's not what people want."

What's changing now is not the tenant base. You'll find the same standbys in many retail properties today as before. What is different is that owners aiming to emphasize dining are adding higher-end, destination restaurants to complement traditional fast food and food court offerings. It's a market worth pursuing despite the weak economy—Americans continue to patronize restaurants an average of 5.8 times per week, according to the National Restaurant Association, and spend 48 percent of their food budget away from home. The frequency today, even amid the economic carnage, is actually higher than it was in 2006, when it was 5.0 times per week.

Few shoppers go to a mall just to eat. Overall, just 7 percent of shoppers in an ICSC study said they want to the mall specifically for food. It is more often just one component of their visit.

Consumers today tend to visit restaurants with lower price points and pay more attention to deals and specials than they did before the recession. But they still like the occasional meal at a nice cafe. In all, it makes sense to have a diversified strategy.

Overall, food service tenants generate a healthy bang for the buck—\$512 per square foot according to ICSC's December *U.S. Mall Report*. That's down from \$541 per square foot in 2007 and \$535 per square foot in 2008, but greater than the average for all mall tenants of \$373 per square foot. In fact, food service is the second most lucrative segment of non-anchor tenants, according to ICSC's numbers. By category type it works out to \$777 per square foot for food court tenants, \$497 per square foot for other fast-food vendors and \$446 per square foot for restaurants.

So shoppers shouldn't be surprised to find both speedier food-court meals and fine-dining experiences with permanent china and white tablecloths under the same roof. And it makes sense to make those areas as comfortable and pleasant as possible for consumers.

Whatever is being sold, a food court or common area "should feel like a public space," says Richard Foy, a founding partner of architectural firm Communications Arts Inc. in Boulder, Colo. "It shouldn't feel like it's owned by the mall owners."



Designers cite several factors behind these trends. Mall owners want shoppers to stay at the mall longer and spend more. According to data from ICSC, shoppers that visit a mall for less than 30 minutes spent an average of \$54.20, or 44 percent less than the overall average mall spend of \$98.40. Shoppers whose mall visits lasted 180 minutes or longer spent \$205.20 per visit or 52 percent more than the average.

In addition, owners also want to broaden their centers' appeal beyond the usual demographics. Some malls boast several different food zones, each designed to appeal to a different demographic. Gaming areas, "entertainment zones" connected to movie theaters and the like are all part of their efforts to make the mall environment more hip and vibrant.

## Getting intimate

□As in most of retail, the movement has been to create a much more personalized experience, □ says Kevin Zak, a partner at Dorsky Hodgson Parrish Yue in Cleveland. This is reflected not just in the more intimate spaces designers have carved out in newer food courts but also in how the food is served. Alex Espinosa, also of Dorsky Hodgson, cites the example of sushi bars that allow diners to customize their orders and watch as chefs prepare them.

What shoppers want □or at least what owners are betting they want □are food courts and common areas that feel cozier and more welcoming, where they wouldn't mind lingering with a cup of coffee. Walls, furniture and strategically chosen lighting work together to divide larger spaces into smaller zones.

Hard and shiny synthetic surfaces are out; designers instead favor softer or more natural textures such as stone and wood. These materials feel homier and also enable conversation. It □s easier to hear another person □s voice when the surrounding space isn't echoing with the din of dozens of other conversations.

Designers cite lighting as a significant factor in creating an intimate feeling in a large space. Undifferentiated lighting from skylights or fluorescent fixtures was once the norm, but no longer. When revamping the food courts at Fashion Place Mall in Salt Lake City and Montclair Plaza in Montclair, Calif., Mulvanny G2 used pendant fixtures to give the space a □bistro feel, □ says Justin Hill, senior principal.

For maximum contrast, the firm wanted light levels even lower than what owners eventually approved. But □I don't know that that □s achievable in a shopping center, □ Hill says.

In today □s economy, one challenge with lighting is to make spaces more hospitable on a smaller budget, says Helen Diemer, president of Philadelphia □s The Lighting Practice. The lighting design firm consults architects, owners and developers. Over the past year, Diemer says, owners have ...  
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