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Trends: The Real Social Network

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When it comes to communication proficiency, today's younger generations inarguably take the crown. Advancing in the blink of a few years time from basic e-mailing to social networking prowess, techie savants have paved the path for a 24/7 flood of digital information to satiate their hunger for constant connection. It is this new craving for increased casual interaction that is pushing designers to incorporate a particular social catalyst into their restaurant designs—the communal table.

“The whole mood right now is toward an increased level of casualness,” says Andre Kikoski, owner and principal of New York-based firm Andre Kikoski Architect, who says that eating at a communal table with a group of six to eight people is no longer uncommon at a restaurant but fun. “Communal tables are very social, very approachable, and make dining very memorable. They present a way to be one person and openly be able to socialize with the other people around.”

While communal tables are somewhat of an infant trend in the United States (many designers attribute their rise to the talents of starchitect Philippe Starck and his projects in the late 1990s, such as New York's Asia de Cuba and Miami's Delano Hotel), they historically are established in Europe, where family-oriented cultures commonly gather at long tables in taverns, tapas places, and bistros, according to Glenn Rasmussen, director of hospitality interiors at Gensler.

Rasmussen explains that communal tables provide an evolving solution to the typical restaurant format, where booths lining the perimeter with table tops at windows and the center of the restaurant the least desirable location. “Communal tables have morphed into an impromptu meeting space, game table, and party space for birthday celebrations, etc., and can be found from restaurants to hotels, even to airport lounges,” he says, adding that more clients are beginning to shift their views on the current

definition of dining.

Kikoski adds, “Going out to eat is no longer just for special occasions. Communal tables have a way of making the act more informal and at the same time a little more special and a little more convivial—going out is less of a big deal and more of a big deal at the same time.”

However, Randa Tukan, leader for commercial interiors at HOK Canada, argues that there are more social factors at play than a shift in dining preference. He credits communal tables’ popularity to advances in technology, such as social networking, that has caused society—especially the younger generations—to better value human interaction, as opposed to being electronically connected. “For every action there is an equal and opposing reaction,” she says. “There’s this kind of impersonal lifestyle associated with mobility—both in technology and physical travel. Communal tables then become an opportunity to reconnect, even if you’ve never met [the other guests] before. It’s a method of making human connection.”

But for all the practical benefits of communal tables—such as increased seating capacity, an alternative dining/drinking experiences for guests, and a more welcoming atmosphere to single and young diners—these elements can pose some challenges for designers looking to incorporate the trend into their projects. Due to the nature of its sheer size, a communal table instantly becomes a focal point and the cornerstone of a space’s design. “You need a strong heart to commit and say, ‘I’m putting it here and going to work everything else around it,’” Tukan advises.

Anthony Eckelberry, owner of Anthony Eckelberry and designer of multiple, express-style Wolfgang Puck locations agrees, finding that the “difficulty with communal tables is in designing them to make sense in relation to the room and in relation to the rest of the space and restaurant story. I can’t just throw them in.”

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