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good living



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In tasteful surroundings

Interior designer Mark Landini believes visual aesthetics define the spaces where we enjoy eating, writes Kahla Preston.

While visiting family in Italy as a boy, Mark Landini was baffled by his aunt's habit of visiting the local food market three times a day. When he asked why she didn't go just once and then stock up her fridge, he received a clip around the ear. "She said, 'Look, I don't go to the market to buy food, I go to the market to meet my friends and gossip,'" Landini says.

The relationship between food and life is one the interior designer has held in high regard ever since, particularly in his work. Since founding Landini Associates in Sydney 19 years ago, he has designed numerous restaurants, food halls and supermarkets locally and abroad, with clients including Harrods, David Jones and Thomas Dux. He is now keeping busy on projects with Jones the Grocer, T2 and a refurbishment of the Selfridges food hall in London.

Although the company's portfolio also includes fashion retailers and bank branches, food design has long been Landini's calling. The love affair was born when he was commissioned to revamp Harvey Nichols' food hall during his final months working in the British capital before moving to Australia in 1993. "Food is as important as sex - without it, you'd die," he says frankly. "At its best, food is part of everyday life. It's more than just a retailing or social experience, it's actually about life."

'We want you to feel the design but not to see it.' Mark Landini

Interior design can dramatically enhance the dining and food shopping experience, yet Landini insists it should never visually overpower the produce on show.

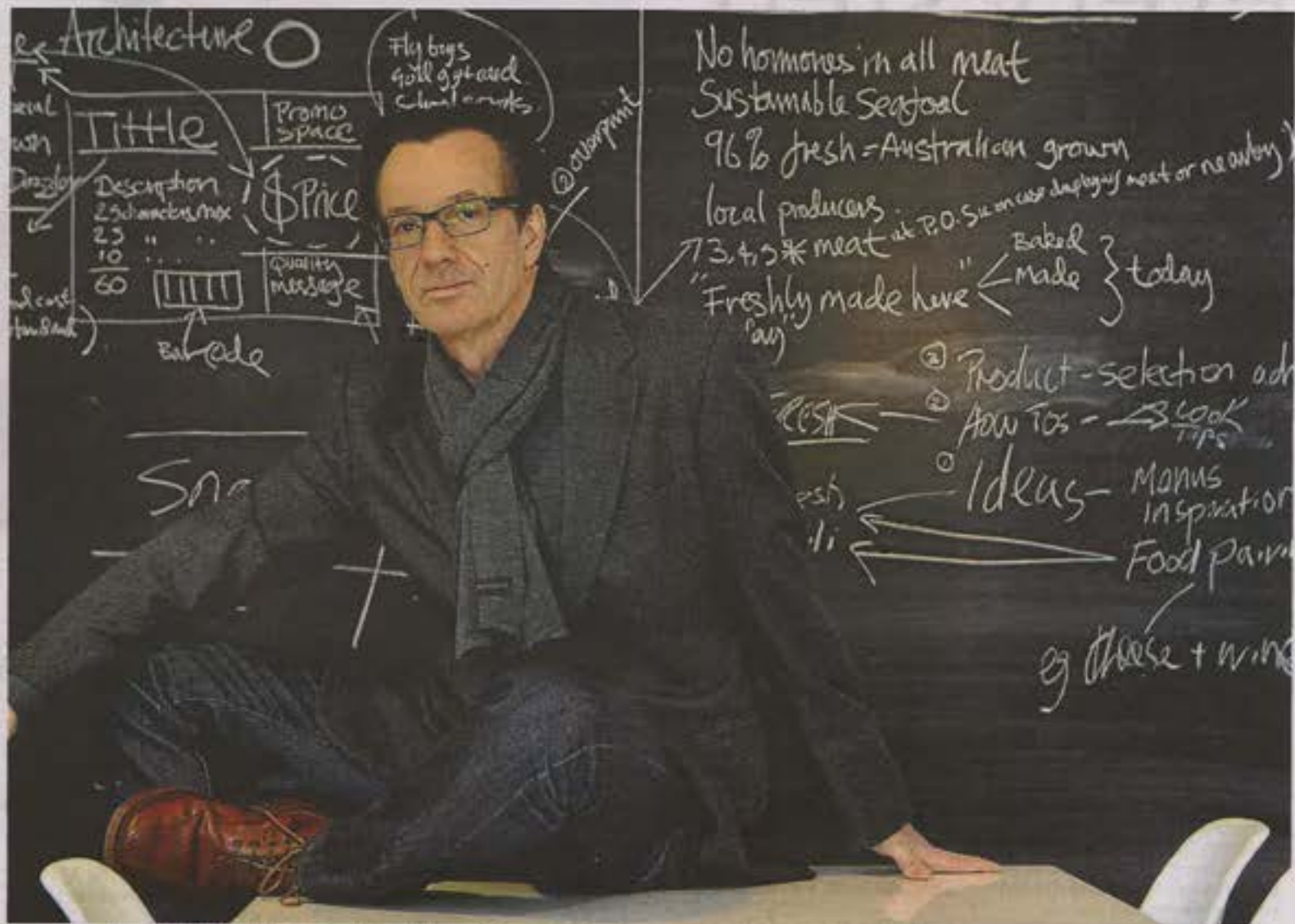
"Design is really something that you shouldn't see when it comes to food. It's about promoting the product and making sure it's abundant and tasty looking... We want you to feel the design but not to see it."

His work on the Loblaws Food Store in Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens seems to contradict this philosophy. The eye-catching design, which won an Australian Interior Design Award in April, features large-scale signage and bright red and orange floors.

Despite his reputation as an advocate of white, Landini defends this bold approach. "[The colour] actually doesn't fight the colour of the fresh food that's sitting on it, because apples are red, tomatoes are red, peppers are red... it actually takes your eye down to the food."

He says the rejuvenation of food courts and food stores reflects a growing appreciation of more modest dining options. Loblaws, for instance, is no typical supermarket. It boasts a "theatre of food", including a floating kitchen and sushi bar, while a concentration of chairs and tables in its centre creates a social dining space.

"Food has changed. By and large, particularly in Australia, fine dining has declined. So we've seen an increase in the quality, if you like, of cheaper, more economical, more affordable food," says Landini, admitting he, too, prefers eateries that aren't "fancy". He loves a good local cafe - Bourke Street Bakery is a



Consumer culture ... Mark Landini has forged a healthy reputation designing food-related establishments; (below) Loblaws Food Store in Toronto. Photo: Sahlan Hayes



favourite - and the humble backyard barbecue because "it's a real social leveller".

Fine-dining establishments have also received the Landini treatment. Six months ago he made over the restaurant in Brisbane's Harry Seidler-designed Hilton hotel. Tables are now frequently booked out as diners are drawn in by the modernist, "high '90s" aesthetic.

"People are actually staying there now because they see the restaurant and the bar as being something special. Normally hotels and restaurants, particularly the Hiltons, are only really used by the guests," he says.

Entertainment is the objective when it comes to restaurant design. Mirrors are important, as patrons enjoy going to restaurants "to look at

people". Open-plan kitchens, which Landini says have been revived in recent years, are sought because they add to the theatricality of dining out. "The restaurant's a factory - it's one of the few places where you get retail and production together... It's kind of rare and people make the most of that," he says.

Geography and climate also influence his aesthetic approach. "In Sydney, when you go out, you go out; when in Melbourne, when you go out, you go in," Landini says. "Most of the restaurants I've designed in Sydney have wonderful views or something external to engage with, and that then becomes the most important part of the restaurant design. Restaurants in colder parts of the world don't have those views necessarily, so you

AirLink
Scan Mark Landini's face to see a photo gallery of his designs.

actually have to think about how to entertain people in the restaurants."

Climatic differences are something Landini has experience with, having spent his youth between England and Italy. After a decade of working at London companies Fitch and Conran Design Group he moved to Sydney. He lives in Mosman with his wife Rikki and their young children.

Although his friends considered him "mad" for relocating at the time, Landini says he's now having the last laugh. "There's only a few things that motivate me in design, and one of them is actually pissing my design mates off in London, making them jealous."

Another driving force is his determination to avoid slavishly trendy design, a topic that gets him visibly fired up.

Right now, Landini says, the flavour in restaurant and cafe interiors is "grungy and deconstructed", following in the wake of the white and "glam" crazes of the past decade. "I think it's going to pass," he says, shrugging. Deliberately eschewing fads and inspiration from external sources such as design magazines, Landini has consistently favoured a classic, stripped-back approach.

"I really love simple things. [Landini Associates] don't design things that are very visible, they're just classic." The company's Surry Hills office space, all white walls, simple furnishings and uncluttered layout, is a testament to his ethos.

"Classic [design] is very difficult, but it does require you to strip back all excesses of silliness."

For Landini, this kind of frivolity is best illustrated by the use of chandeliers in fashion retail interiors; at one point he became so frustrated by their ubiquity he banned them from his own designs. He is equally irked by trendy items used in food design.

"If I see another f---ing Tom Dixon light hanging over a bar in a restaurant... if I were the client, I'd shoot someone," he says emphatically, quickly adding that Dixon is a close friend. "His work is so unique, it just becomes too easy. It's laziness, and I hate laziness."

While the importance of design is gaining appreciation in the food industry, Landini argues that image cannot guarantee an establishment's overall success.

"You can have the best-designed restaurant in the world, but it can be a failure because you don't have the right staff, the right food, the right systems; or you're spending too much on all or any of those things."

Mark Landini's Sydney projects include

- Awaba Cafe, Balmoral Beach.
- Centennial Parklands Kiosk, Cafe, Restaurant.
- Cruise Bar and Restaurant.
- Thomas Dux Grocer.
- Vintage Cellars.
- Sushi World.
- Jones the Grocer.
- Woolworths supermarkets.
- QVB Tea Room.