

Streamlining

ROI

Your 10-day guide to restaurant renovation

By Joshua Zinder, AIA

We should start by clarifying: the “10-day restaurant renovation” is a bit of a misnomer, since the name implies a 10-day project timeline from start to finish. Realistically, 10 days is the length of the on-site construction period. A drastically reduced construction schedule means the restaurant will have very little downtime, which reduces income loss, and helps maximize and accelerate return on the investment.

Whittling the construction period down to a mere 10 days requires extensive planning and coordination among stakeholders. The owner must make quick decisions, the contractor must be prepared and the design team must create solutions that carry high impact, yet are easy to implement. Simple, cost-effective solutions can offer high visual impacts, such as reupholstering existing furniture or painting the walls.

COMMERCIAL
Construction & Renovation

La Mezzaluna after being renovated.

November/December 2014 • www.ccr-mag.com

Design elements that don't offer as much of an aesthetic impact, but boost the overall ambiance of the restaurant, should also be considered. Most important, preparation, cooperation and collaboration among team members are the keys to a successful, expedited renovation process.

We recently implemented this process with La Mezzaluna, an Italian restaurant located in downtown Princeton, N.J., whose owners, Michael and Teresa Moriello, came to us in November 2012 with their ideas to renovate the restaurant. The existing space enjoys a prime storefront location along one of Princeton's major streets. But it was not taking advantage of the location to attract

for construction. With careful planning, we were able to transform the entire front-of-house in the given time frame.

Getting a head start

Because the owners had clear objectives and a firm timeline we were able to set a schedule, acquire approvals in advance and prepare for any unforeseen construction issues in the process by hiring a contractor early on in the process.

For example, we knew a partition wall was hiding a duct, but we were unable to verify its location. With the contractor's help, we were able to avert the potential disaster by cutting a small hole in the wall to investigate before any major work had been started. Reviewing the project early on with the contractor also allows time to begin stockpiling materials. With only 10 days for construction, materials needed to be ready and on-hand.

As part of the planning, we sat down with the Moriellos to assemble a list of La Mezzaluna's assets, both major and minor. A full accounting can help the renovation team find creative solutions that reuse and rework existing resources. Not only is this a basic tenet of sustainable design, it also helps to reduce costs. Additionally, these familiar elements will reassure returning customers, allowing them to reconcile the new design with the old one to which they already were accustomed. This reaffirms the brand identity, and suggests that the same quality and service can be expected.

We also aimed to retain, yet re-invent, the existing furniture wherever possible. Much of it was still in good shape, requiring only modest updates. We reupholstered the booths and eliminated a portion of the wood structure around them, which reduced costs while opening up the restaurant into a seemingly larger space. We also painted the walls a lighter color – another simple, cost-effective solution to brighten the space.

Small changes, big impact

Knocking down the partition wall that separated the front dining area from the main dining area created one of the biggest impacts for the restaurant overall. This "minor" change is responsible for dramatically increasing the penetration of natural light into the main dining area, as well as establishing a connection between the two dining areas. This allowed for better circulation, and more efficient service from the wait staff, which now are able to oversee the entire restaurant at a glance.

Eliminating the wall also functioned as a marketing strategy, exposing the main dining room through the storefront for passersbys to see. A hungry couple wandering along downtown Princeton can look into the bright, welcoming space and see diners enjoying their meals, making them much more inclined to opt for dinner at La Mezzaluna.



passersbys. Just past the entrance of the restaurant was a partition that separated the front dining area from the main dining area. From the outside, the main dining area was completely hidden from view. The existing interior design consisted of dark colors paired with woodwork that made the narrow, rectilinear space seem even smaller.

While La Mezzaluna's menu is held in high regard around town, the interior was lackluster, failing to support the customers' enjoyment of the elegant cuisine. The Moriellos explained what they wished to accomplish with the renovation: to open up, brighten, and modernize the space. Next, they gave us a 10-day window in late August of the next year that they were able to close the restaurant

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But once we increased the street exposure, we were left with the task of devising a focal point to help draw the attention of potential customers, from a design perspective. Through collaboration with a local artist, photographer Wendy Vroom, we installed a mural of a rose that spans the length of the main dining room. The unique artwork sets the restaurant apart from others along the street, along with the added bonus of connecting the space and the dining experience to the local art scene.

The addition of an acoustical ceiling was not aesthetically driven, but the design choice has had a critical impact on the overall ambiance of the restaurant. While not quite as glamorous as a beautiful mural, the acoustical ceiling tiles have a high NRC (noise reduction coefficient) rating,

which helps foster a more comfortable environment for dine-in guests – one of the Moriellos' main goals.

Businesses do not need to spend huge amounts of money and time to transform their spaces. Major renovations are possible even on a limited budget and accelerated schedule. Because closed doors mean lost revenue, the solution is to plan and prepare as much as possible ahead of time in order to minimize the construction period – when the restaurant absolutely must be shut down.

The ROI significantly outweighs the project costs and the minimized loss of business during that period. Though the “10-day restaurant renovation” requires much more work than the name implies, if done correctly, the benefits can transform the entire business. **CCR**

Joshua Zinder, AIA, founded Princeton, N.J.-based JZA+D in 2006 to pursue contemporary and sustainably responsible design. With partner and director of interior design Marlyn Zucosky, he oversees a growing staff delivering multidisciplinary services for buildings, interiors and product designs. For more information, visit www.joshuazinder.com.