

# Building BLOCKS



John Klakamp

## What's the Plan, Stan?

by John Klakamp

Each month, *Building Blocks* brings you a Q&A session with an industry expert to cover the latest news, advice and tips you can use when leasing, opening, renovating or building a restaurant.

As the old saying goes, "He who fails to plan, plans to fail." Fortunately, Gene Weissman, AIA, my featured guest this month, knows a thing or two about planning. A graduate of Virginia Tech with a bachelor's degree in architecture, for the past 15 years, Gene has worked for Reston, Virginia-based architecture and interior design firm Architecture Incorporated, where he currently heads the hospitality studio, working closely with clients from concept through construction.

As a result of his initial work with hotel restaurants, today Gene is experienced with all styles of restaurants ranging from 1,000 square-foot one-offs to 5,000 square-foot and larger, high-end locations. Clients include metropolitan D.C. area restaurants such as Big Buns Gourmet Grill, Zentan, and the new Fire Works Pizza.

In this column, Gene shares his architect perspective on ideal planning for restaurant projects as well as common pitfalls and mistakes to avoid.



Gene Weissman

### Surround Yourself with the Right People

**Q: What is the first step an owner should take before embarking on a restaurant construction project?**

**Weissman:** One of the most important things an owner can do is assemble the right team, including an architect who can help you figure out the best way to get your project done cost-effectively and to assemble the appropriate team of design disciplines to advise you.

**Q: What unique qualities make Architecture Incorporated a good partner?**

**Weissman:** We rarely do "cookie-cutter" designs. Instead we can take you from your first napkin sketch all the way through to execution of your unique brand experience. Also, we offer support at every step of the way, including site planning and conceptualization, construction drawings and specifications, in-house interior design and construction administration services, with principal-level involvement throughout. Finally, because we've seen so many different projects and types, we have a good perspective on what does and doesn't work.

**Q: Why is it important to have a contractor on the team early on?**

**Weissman:** Restaurant work is unique because it is so fast-paced and budgets are typically tight. Ideally, the contractor is there from the beginning so they can see pencil and paper sketches and then inform on budget, schedule and constructability. Those things are more critical at the onset because they drive the whole project. We've seen projects go awry because a client wants a custom light fixture that has a 20 week lead time.

### Blueprint for Success

**Q: We all know the importance of smart planning in restaurant construction. From your experience, what is the ideal planning process?**

**Weissman:** It varies. For instance, a tenant space may follow a different process than a restaurant being built from the ground up. However, all projects should start with establishing a budget and schedule. We need to build in time and costs to get approval and permitting for things like awnings, rezoning and outdoor patios—which may have ABC requirements for fencing and plantings. Drawings may have to go through historic or neighborhood committees or architectural review boards.

**Q: What are the repercussions of not following this process?**

**Weissman:** Frequently, a landlord allots a certain amount of time for each step, and if you are behind schedule you could wind up in a "dead rent" situation where you're paying rent before you're generating income. The good news is a lot of these processes can be done concurrently, but it all comes back to early planning. You certainly don't want to have to go back to historic commission to get something re-approved.

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**Q: What should an owner have together before he or she meets with you?**

**Weissman:** The most important thing an owner can bring to the table is vision. Whether it's a logo, menu concept or even a CD of music they want playing, we want to get as much information as possible to get a good sense of that vision. We had a client recently that rented a bus and drove around to look at other restaurants to help solidify their vision. From there it's our job to take that idea and put it down on paper so it's a buildable concept.

**Q: What happens next?**

**Weissman:** The next step is for the design team to figure out exactly what they're trying to do: how many people they want to serve, whether they want a white tablecloth environment or fast casual where people are ordering from a counter, etc. Then we can develop a program and start to assign sizes to the various elements of the space.

**Trouble Times Two**

**Q: What is the biggest mistake you see clients make?**

**Weissman:** Indecision. Some owners think they have all the time in the world to make decisions, but the reality is every time you change your mind or don't respond in a timely manner there's a cost impact. Making a change after materials have been selected, the project has been priced by the contractor and drawings have been developed or sent to the landlord for approval or county for permitting can send you back to the drawing board, adding to your cost and putting your project behind schedule.

**Q: Any other mistakes you see frequently?**

**Weissman:** In an effort to save money, restaurateurs sometimes take work into their own hands that is better left with the design team. Ordering branding materials such as signage can lead to mixed messages, while attempting to purchase your own fixtures may result in not getting all the parts you need or getting wrong parts. We've even seen restaurateurs getting kitchen equipment without telling us that may not work in the space we designed.

**Trends and Parting Thought**

**Q: What are some trends you're seeing in new restaurant construction?**

**Weissman:** Sustainability is obviously the biggest trend. While it's almost expected at this point and shortly the building code is going to require it, we're seeing sustainability carried through to the food side in approaches such as farm to table or recycling unused foods. LED lighting is an important trend of which owners should be aware. While it can be costly to install upfront, over time it uses significantly less energy and lasts much longer, saving money in the long run.

**Q: Any final thoughts you'd like to share?**

**Weissman:** The most important part is to realize that the restaurateur needs to establish relationships and not be afraid of the designer and contractor. Frequently owners don't want to bring in a contractor until they're ready to bid the job but this is not a strong process. With restaurant construction there are lots of pieces that have to come together very quickly and the best way to make that happen is by assembling a strong team from the start.



John Klakamp has more than 30 years experience in restaurant construction and is owner of Annapolis, MD-based Encore Construction ([www.encoreconstruction.net](http://www.encoreconstruction.net)), a firm that specializes in providing pre-construction, construction and project management services to the restaurant industry.



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