

Empathy lies behind creation of inviting spaces

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Interior designer Dyonne Fashina created the Clay cafe at Toronto's Gardiner Museum, above, and has now completed the design for the new cafe at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection.

The psychology behind space planning can be fascinating: the installation of dairy fridges at the very back of supermarkets to draw shoppers past the potato chips, or the placement of impulse buys at checkout; the hard plastic of fast food furniture to ensure patrons don't linger; the casino's mazelike, windowless environment to keep gamblers focused on feeding the one-armed bandits.

But just as often as this subconscious manipulation of human behaviour can be used against us, it can also be used to create warm, inviting spaces where we linger, laugh and feel good.

But the minds behind those must employ empathy.

“It is beyond aesthetics,” interior designer Dyonne Fashina of Denizens of Design Inc., says. “It’s also about being empathetic to the space itself.”



Furniture and objects help 'tell the story in a subtle way while still being functional.'

That’s why, at Ms. Fashina’s first meeting at the Gardiner Museum a few years back, she placed a jar of raw clay in the middle of the boardroom table. Or, more recently at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, she brought along paintings by her great-grandfather – who studied under A.J. Casson – and a few of his brushes. And, in both cases, she and partners The Food Dudes were awarded the contract to redesign the café/restaurant space.

Sitting on Canadian-made, wide-backed Keilhauer chairs in the high-ceilinged, yet-to-be-named café at the McMichael, Ms. Fashina continues: “My parents live on five acres and we have a creek of the Nottawasaga River running through it, and there was clay there and I used to play with it, so when we got the project I went to my parent’s house – where they still live – and dug up some clay with my mom.”

After the meeting, she kept that jar at her desk to remind her of the root of the concept for Clay Restaurant at the Gardiner (where ceramic art is the focus). At the McMichael,

where the Group of Seven reign, it was important to remind herself of her great-grandfather, and that she chose to study fine art before becoming an interior designer.

Of course Ms. Fashina didn't sell each gallery using only artistic ether, she also made the business case that more inviting dining spaces would attract more customers, and, in off-peak hours, a different "kit of parts" would mean more opportunities to host wedding receptions, lectures or cocktail parties.



Using a standardized colour system ensured all legs, frames and bases would match.

“Often the café spaces are underutilized,” she says after tucking into her colourful salad. “This one had some really awful flip tables – and these are flip tables but they look a lot nicer – they had stacking chairs that were from China.”

The new kit, she promised, would contain furniture that was both flexible enough to move around within the space but look permanent (and luxurious) enough that renters wouldn't need to call an event furniture company; it would contain both lounge and spectator seating; it would offer screens to create semi-private areas; and, in the case of the McMichael, the pieces would be all-Canadian.

“So not only does it raise the venue fees [and] the gallery makes more money, but it lowers the patron’s fees because they no longer have to pay a venue fee and a furniture rental fee, so everybody wins.”

A look around the McMichael bears this out. In between the rough-hewn logs and fieldstone walls, there is a riot of warm Canadian walnut and white oak. Denizens-designed, curving slat screens are softened by felt inserts by Diana Watters Handmade, the Brothers Dressler tweaked their “Heartfelt Cage” bench to create banquettes, there are handsome dining tables by Bread & Butter Design, a gaggle of Windsor lounge chairs by Coolican & Company, and in front of Keilhauer sofas are inventive basin tables by Hollis + Morris so staff can tuck unwanted cushions away. On tabletops are minimalist ceramics by Toronto’s Talia Silva and wood objects by Peterborough, Ont.’s Bethany Kaye (interestingly, two of the larger pieces on the host stand were created by Ms. Kaye using a felled tree near the McMichael).



Ms. Fashina wanted furniture that was both flexible enough to move around within the space but look permanent enough that renters wouldn’t need to call an event furniture company.

Using a standardized colour system (RAL) ensured all legs, frames and bases would match.

“Everyone that made something, they didn’t send a delivery company, they came themselves,” Ms. Fashina says with a smile.

At Clay, where floor-to-ceiling windows let in ample light, more colour could be employed, so a dark terracotta shade was used on millwork behind the bar, with lighter terracotta on banquettes and planter-boxes, and dining chairs in soft green or yellow. And, of course, earthenware pieces abound.

In both spaces, furniture and objects help “tell the story in a subtle way while still being functional.”

And, at the risk of engaging in even more artistic ether – or more likely blather – it’s worth noting that in places where beautiful things such as paintings or pottery are on display, it’s important that the interstitial spaces, the spaces where we pause, be beautiful and fulfilling as well. For, as psychologist Abraham Maslow pointed out with his Hierarchy of Needs, once our bellies are full, our minds turn to abstract things that fill the soul.