

Outré SPACE Man

★ ★ ★ ★ WITH A STYLE THAT MIXES PRIMITIVE AND POSTMODERN, BOHEMIAN AND BEDROCK, DODD MITCHELL IS L.A.'S
CROWN PRINCE OF RESTAURANT DESIGN by MARGOT DOUGHERTY ★ ★ ★ ★

AN INTRICATE BUT CRUDELY DRAWN PENCIL SKETCH OF an opulent cavern is tacked, slightly askew, on a bulletin board in Dodd Mitchell's West Hollywood office. The picture, ripped from a notebook, shows a space walled in stone, lit by candles, and punctuated by medieval arches. In the center is a giant cauldron. "I was listening to opera and watching a documentary on churches one night," says Mitchell, "and I just started sketching." Like a detail of the catacombs, the picture seems entirely too fanciful, too esoteric, to be made three-dimensional, but now, six months and \$1.8 million later, radically redesigned to meet budgetary limits and the realities of structural engineering, it's assuming shape in brick and mortar—and hammered copper, concrete, and redwood—in a historic landmark on the Sunset Strip.

The 1923 building, called the Piazza del Sol, is home to Miramax Films. It's also the newly wrought residence of Katana, a bar and restaurant due to open this month. "If Tom Ford and Gianni Versace had to have a living room together, it would look like this," says Philip Cummins, a partner in the Sushi Roku empire that owns Katana. "It's going to be the sexiest room in L.A. But still a room that means you're going to go home with the person you walked in with—and have a good time." And you thought a restaurant was just a place to eat and drink.

Dodd Mitchell, the 35-year-old designer behind the trinity of Sushi Rokus as well as Lounge 217 and Voda in Santa Monica, China One in Hollywood, and Linq, the

West Hollywood restaurant that's become an architectural hieroglyph for "beautiful people dining," has made a name for himself with spaces that magnetize the buzz-buzz crowd—that roving band of trendsetters who, if they aren't bona fide celebrities themselves, slink often and easily enough into the orbit of those who are.

Mitchell, a high school dropout who never received any formal design training, builds extravagantly conceived clubhouses, complete and stylish entities in their own right. Even empty of patrons they feel alive; filled, they're electric hives of social pollination. They reflect Mitchell's own transcendental milieu—one moment he's high-fiving and catching up with the homeless man pushing a shopping cart outside his office, the next he's sipping sake with a prime-time actress. He worries a palette of elemental materials—river rocks, sand, bamboo, rain-forest woods, iron—into contemporary temples of subtle romance and easy sophistication. Virtually anything is fodder for his designs. The Aztec-shaped metal inlards of a water heater become decorative elements, the gaskets from a space shuttle are repurposed as room dividers, and the inspiration for a nightclub ceiling comes from a tea strainer that reminded him of "an upside-down party hat." The Sushi Rokus, which established Mitchell's reputation, look like overblown versions of Fred and Wilma's living room, contemporized by accents of Asian moderne. Cement dividing walls have large rectangular cutouts inset with



SPACE SAVIOR:
River rocks and rolls at Sushi Roku

water sculptures; a floating wooden piece above a bar looks like a rack of whale ribs. "I've been told I do Japan better than the Japanese," says Mitchell with more surprise than cockiness. He has never been to Asia.

All Mitchell projects come with a signature showstopper: China One's 20-foot iron dragon, the initial Sushi Roku's 2,800-pound carved rock filled with water and set with forged-metal prongs like a prehistoric diamond ring, and Linq's intricately chiseled and re-assembled black marble wall with its infinity waterfall. Katana makes its debut with a multi-height cement-and-redwood bar with retractable segments—push on one and it's absorbed by another. Voda—more standing room. "It has no more than two or three feet of level space, and it pulses up and down and sideways," says Mitchell. "It's very sexual."

But the design elements destined for the social history books may be in the rest rooms. Fiber optics will bounce off gold-leaf tiles and illuminate water trickling from an automated "rain bar." A giant hammered-copper sink will catch the overflow, and wok-sized pots will be filled with aromatic Pkaki flowers and candles. The scene will come to life upon entry. "If I designed it right," says Mitchell, shuffling through the construction site in his black DKNY T-shirt, black jeans, and open-toed black slides, "you'll step on a pressure plate in the floor that will trigger the water, and as it starts flowing, the lights will come up along with music that [producer] Chris Fogel, who's worked with Alanis Morissette and Nine Inch Nails, is doing. It will be like the coming of... like the coming of God."

Mitchell talks about his projects the way a six-year-old might talk about the configuration of his model train set. So many ideas seem to vie for urgent attention, so many details beg for explanation, that there's sometimes a pileup as they approach verbal expression. Thoughts spill from his mouth like concertgoers through a fire exit, odd pairings of bright notions bonded only by enthusiasm. The sense of time expands and collapses. "Remember that thing you did as a kid"—he interlocks his fingers and flips his hands over—"Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors, and see all the people? Well, that's what this is from." He is talking about the way two walls will join.

Right now Mitchell has more than his fair share of places to mix metaphors. His current slate of projects includes the bar at the Grafton Hotel's new restaurant, Balboa (another team Sushi Roku splash); a multi-story Santa Monica nightclub-cum-restaurant called Zebu; and Tarra-One, a new project in Silver Lake from the India's Oven team (look for a 20-foot Ganesh). He's reconfiguring the Maui Beach Café in Westwood and developing its fast-food satellite, MBC. He's working on an upscale Chinese restaurant in Pasadena called Nonyu, owned by the same investors who have hired him to design everything down to the cups and straws (which will glow), for a string of 30 juice bars in Shanghai. Gaucho Grill owner Adolfo Suaya is buying a building so Mitchell can cook up a Mexican restaurant. And he's got a clothing-store project in Sunset Plaza and a dim sum emporium on La Brea called Jade.

Linq is thus far the slickest and sleekest in the dMId (dodd Mitchell design) line: It's got a herringbone-cut ebony marble wall, a dramatic series of giant framed mirrors, a manicured waterfall, and an elevated private dining room with a fireplace, set off by fine strands

of chain-link stainless steel. "It's the party room," says Mitchell on an early-evening tour of the restaurant.

Heads turn as he floats through Linq quietly addressing everyone, from the bartender to the owner, by name. Not in the least intimidating, Mitchell draws attention simply because he's intriguing, this 35-year-old with a child's mien unceremoniously wearing designer clothes. "In our first meeting, Mario [Oliver, the owner] was talking a lot with his hands, and it reminded me of fire," he says. "So while he was talking I sketched the whole room." In an Escher-like way that echoes the wall of mirrors, the room itself mimics the fireplace. "You know how they say the world's a stage?" asks Mitchell. "I made it an exaggerated fireplace, so the people become the fire." He walks off muttering to himself, "I don't think anybody gets it but me."

Like his restaurants Mitchell is a seamless blend of opposites. He's a Hollywood player and a naïf, an operator with a Saint Bernard's soul. He is, above all, thoughtful, not only in the sense that he thinks about how other people feel but in the sense that he's always thinking. All this infuses his designs—unlike look-at-me interiors that forbid human interaction, Mitchell's spaces are gracious, stages that beckon social interplay. His double entendre details don't have to be understood to be appreciated. "I had this girlfriend that always went to the bathroom with her friend," he says, heading down a hallway flanked by a triangulated black walnut wall with a zigzag cut invisible door leading to Linq's kitchen. "So I built these"—he opens the rest room to reveal twin toilets set side by side. "You can even hold hands," he says, demonstrating the comfy wingspan. One throne is positioned on a barely noticeable oblique angle. "It's for the awkward one," he says, making a quick little gesture, one knee crooked just in front of the other—physical Esperanto for "shy."

Down the block at Sushi Roku, Mitchell straightens a napkin, picks a candy wrapper off the black carpet, and shakes his head as he spies a filmy window. He is offended, a gardener let down by the groundskeepers. He points out the miniature sandboxes he thought would make good spots to hide a surprise engagement ring. "And then she would be raking through and find it," he explains. "But everyone stole the little rakes."

EVEN BY THE LOOSE RULES OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, Dodd Mitchell grew up in an unorthodox household. "It was never 'Oh, I love you, Son.' 'I love you, too, Mommy.'" he says dryly. "It's more my mother saying to my brother, in front of his new boyfriend, 'Remember that time you came home with crabs?'" Mitchell chuckles. "You have to have a sense of humor to keep up with us."

Even as a teenager dressing up in overblown Ton Sur Ton outfits with hoop boots, extravagant eyeliner, and spiked hair, even when getting arrested for drinking champagne—on the hood of a car—"Dodd always seemed older than he was," his mother says. "And he always had his own thing going on. He got real intense into anything—in how things worked and how they could be put together—but not if it had to do with book work."

Severely dyslexic, Mitchell "didn't get school," he says. "It was very frustrating. Everything went too slowly for me. Why read a

chapter when you can read the whole book?" He was routinely suspended and finally dropped out for good as a junior in high school. "I shouldn't say this, but I think it was the best thing I ever did."

After a stint living in a van (his mother kicked him out of the house for being "unproductive") and another living on a boat (which sank shortly after he finished refurbishing the interior), Mitchell got work at Jet Sets, an outfit that builds sets for films and TV commercials. "I started on the other end of a broom at \$8 an hour, and by the end of the day I had a \$2 raise," he says. "Three weeks later he was elevated to the set-decoration ('basically moving furniture') area and making \$20 an hour. He moved on to another house, Tribal Scenery, and designed sets for AT&T, Lexus, and 7-Up commercials. "I loved the creative part, but I didn't love that I was throwing everything away," he says. "My beautiful sets wound up in a landfill."

In 1995 Philip Cummins gave Mitchell, whom he met through a mutual friend, a chance at something more permanent, bringing him on board for Lounge 217. That led to the first Sushi Roku, which led to Voda. Mitchell was off and running. In 1998 he opened his design firm, dMId, which now has a staff of six. The atmosphere is busy but laid-back. Think "Wine Tuesdays" and "Margarita Fridays." Think people valet-parking at Linq of an evening and ducking instead into Mitchell's work space next door. Just because it looks like fun.

Recently Mitchell has been using his office as his home—he sleeps on a blowup mattress, which an associate insists he deflate daily. The setup does little to advance romantic prospects but suits him for now. "If I had a house, I'd be at my office thinking, 'Oh, I have to get home,'" he figures. "This way I don't have any guilt. Wherever I fall is where I stay."

Relationships, which inevitably infringe on design time, are sources of frustration. "I've gone through a lot of girlfriends," he says. "I tell people I get involved with... This is how I live, so if you can take a backseat to design... Because I've yet to find anything that gives the feelings that this gives: You're laughing and crying, drawing and drinking, and you just get like, 'Wow. It's almost like that feeling when you're falling in love.'" One of the rare times he actually made plans for a vacation, Mitchell missed the plane. "I guess I got caught up sketching or something," he says. "My girlfriend wound up in Bali by herself for two weeks."

Food is another annoying distraction. "I can't wait for the day when I can just take a pill and be done," he says. "Eating gets in the way of what I'm doing." It makes a sort of twisted sense that Mitchell designs restaurants that distract from the food. Who's better equipped to create a sumptuous dining atmosphere than someone who can't be entertained by what's on the plate?

DODD MITCHELL HAS YET TO DESIGN A FAILURE. "HE DID ONE OF THE GAUCHO GRILLS, IN BRENTWOOD," says owner Suaya, "and my bottom line went up \$500,000."

"I don't think any one of us would ever say we don't owe a reasonable percent of our success to Dodd Mitchell," says Cummins. "Year after year Mitsuha was consistently rated the top sushi restaurant in Zagat's. We thought, 'Let's go for that market.'" The resulting too-soon-for-school Sushi Rokus, with their stone walls, legless, can-

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tilivered bamboo tables ("I hate hitting my knees," says Mitchell), candles, and fluttering backlighting, earn upwards of \$4 million annually. They create a lucrative common ground for the previously segregated sushi and body-shot sets.

"I'm so sick of making other people rich," Mitchell says, trying to sound arrogant but coming off more like a kid who's been had. Again. "My clients pull up in a brand-new convertible Mercedes and I think, 'What's up with this—weren't you the ones trying to cut my fee last week?'" While clients turn to Mitchell to stock their coffers, his own financial affairs are as lopsided as the Katana bar top. A recent call to dMId was answered by a recorded announcement that telephone service had been cut. "Oh, someone forgot to pay the bill," he explains. He also discovered that a former employee seemed to have made off with \$147,000. Mitchell is unfazed. "What goes around comes around," he says with a smile.

"I know for a fact that there's not a job Dodd's gone into that he hasn't ended up spending his own money on," says Jeff Knight, founder of Maui Beach Café and a friend. "He's kind of like a classic bipolar, self-destructive human being. 'Whatever it takes, I'm going to do it.' He gets one of those manic changes and forget it. But it's all coming directly from his heart."

Mitchell paid for the front wall of the first Sushi Roku because the clients didn't want it—until they saw it. "I don't make as much as other designers because I spend so much time fighting to get my way," he says. "I lent 75 grand to Linq to get it exactly the way I wanted it. I put that whole thing together for under \$500,000, and there's not one person who's gone there who doesn't think we spent over a million."

The unconventional ideas come with unconventional work habits. Mitchell is known to disappear for several days at some point during a project. "You have to quit a lot," he says. "Okay, I'll just take my stuff and go home. Good luck." His sketching is rudimentary and must be translated by an architect—dMId now has one working in-house—before it can be turned into construction drawings. "Working with him is a nightmare and a blessing," says Cummins. "I was looking for more of the blessing and less of the nightmare, but obviously I keep coming back to Dodd. I've been lucky enough to find Philippe Starck in the rough—and I'm not paying Philippe Starck fees." Mitchell doesn't allow the name of the überdesigner, whose work includes everything from museum-level toothbrushes to

lan Schrager hotels, to be uttered in his offices. "We have to say 'PS,'" says Leslie Kale, a long-time friend and design associate.

When he's not sleeping in his office, Mitchell may be found spending the night at a construction site. Foremen, emotionally glazed by the tedium of sameness in job after job after job often respond enthusiastically to the challenges of Mitchell's designs—and the passion he brings with them. "The biggest problems I have are with people who are overeducated," he says. "The more educated, the more they think they know what they're doing. If the Wright brothers can get a piece of balsa wood off the ground, you can penetrate that wall and put my air conditioner through to the other room, right? What are you telling me, no?"

"Dodd would be a bargain at double his rate," says Knight. "People still think of him as the guy who was struggling to build his first restaurant five years ago. They assume they can keep on writing him low-end checks. What he needs is a new set of clients."

He may be getting them. The folks behind Just B, the Shanghai juice bars, are sending Mitchell to China to soak up inspiration. A new 2,400-acre theme park in Oahu is on the drawing board, and Linq investor Mads Ulrich, president and CEO at First Fidelity Capital, has hired him to do a 4,000-square-foot home in Copenhagen.

Back in his office on 3rd Street, where the door is always open and the ambient noise of traffic mixes with the soft burbling of a hot pond, Mitchell pulls down a small picnic basket he has designated as the take-out container for the upcoming MBC. "This is the biggie," he says of the project. "I've designed everything from their logos down to this take-out container. It will be fully sustainable and recyclable." He calls the basket "romance in a box." He envisions flower petals sprinkled over the entries, which will be served on plates manufactured to his specifications. Waters at Maui Beach will wear dMId-designed logos on their cuffs instead of their backs, "because if you're looking at a waiter's back it's because he forgot to bring you something."

Knight, impressed by Mitchell's ideas and enthusiasm, has made him a partner in MBC and seems concerned for his welfare. Understandably: "I forget to pay bills," says Mitchell with a half smile. "I didn't know when you signed a contract that you were supposed to make payments in a row. Oh, you want this every month? You guys are greedy. My office always tells me, 'Dodd, the whole world works in 30-day increments and you have to, too.' Well, who made that rule?"

— THE MASTER DINERS —
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pouring are listed on the left. Dessert is relegated to the bottom if there is room; on Manny's memento of the six-course Water Grill dinner that bears my name as guest, a strawberry granita is falling off the plate.

Manny's menus have taken over the Klausners' Los Feliz home. They are stuffed away in cabinets, piled high on desks, crammed into drawers. No one knows how many there are, or exactly what they mean, but there are chefs that have learned things from Manny's menus. Unlike master diners, master chefs don't eat out much. They have vague ideas of what their contemporaries are doing. Often they learn about other kitchens from the Klausners. Mark Peel, who has perused Manny's menus for years, says, "Although it's hard to say how, because things percolate in different ways, I'm sure I've been influenced by his menus over the years."

It struck me almost immediately after meeting the Klausners that if everyone acted like them, American food would get better and better. They do what most of us never consider: After a good meal in a nice restaurant they go out of their way to thank the chef or tell him what they thought needs improvement. "Think about it," Willette said to me at the Water Grill. "For all the people eating here tonight, how many will say, 'Will you please tell the chef this is the most wonderful meal.' For all the effort that guy is putting in, almost no one here will give him any feedback." This was an easy recipe for culinary improvement, I thought. Everyone should just tell the chef what they thought.

Then, near the end of our meal, the Water Grill's executive chef, Mark Ciminusti, approached our table. Ciminusti is a large man with an imposing presence that includes a formidable belly, but when Manny—after saying thanks—informed him that the John Dory might have been left warming in the salamander a shade too long, Ciminusti looked slightly stricken, suddenly uncomfortable in public, brused by the comment.

I thought suddenly that I was wrong about sharing with the kitchen, but there was no time to ponder that because three more desserts had arrived at the table, and then Manny fell into a long story about a soft-shell lobster he had discovered that no one in America knew about yet, and there was a half bottle of Ridge to finish, and before long restaurant employees outnumbered Water Grill patrons six to one because the master diners were now the last ones lingering in an empty room.