

The Restless Emperor of Laid-Back Lounge Design

By JULIA CHAPLIN

LOS ANGELES

CHANCES are if you are driving around Los Angeles and pass a slick concrete facade with bamboo fronds, polished pebbles and expensive cars out front, Dodd Mitchell designed it.

Mr. Mitchell is the human machine churning out nightclubby restaurants that have popped up around Hollywood with sleek, one-word names, cutthroat waiting lists and a celebrity clientele. In the last few years, he has designed more than 20 hotels, bars and restaurants here, including Linq, Katana, Aston Kutcher's Dolce and Chi, an Asian-style restaurant-lounge owned by Justin Timberlake, Jennifer Tilly (Mr. Mitchell's former girlfriend) and the hip-hop impresario Damon Dash.

"Having Mr. Mitchell as a designer is like having a celebrity onboard," said Adolfo Suaya, an owner of Dolce, who also hired him to design the Gaucho Grill in Brentwood, three Sushi Roku restaurants and the soon-to-be hipsterized Bristol Hotel in downtown Los Angeles. "The lighting and materials he uses somehow make people look prettier, skinnier and younger. When his places open, suddenly there are beautiful people, press and lots of money."

But the benign character of many of Mr. Mitchell's interiors has brought him detractors in the fiercely competitive world of Los Angeles interior design. Critics say he does



Photographs by Stephanie Diani for The New York Times



ON SUNSET BOULEVARD A gong at Chi, a Dodd Mitchell design; left, the interior; below, the fire pit. Right, a Mitchell restaurant at the Hotel Roosevelt in Hollywood; in the Elvis get-up is Frankie D.

hip design by the numbers — a little Philippe Starck here, a little Christian Liaigre there, mixing in nightclub clichés like flaming fire pits, Buddhist artifacts and an abundance of leather, fake alligator and suede surfaces. At Chi, for example, the fortress-like wooden entry doors are inspired by the floors at the Starck-designed Royalton Hotel in New York, said Christian Schultz, who works for Mr. Mitchell.

"He's not taking any chances," said Paul Young, a senior editor at V Life, a magazine published by the trade paper Variety. "He's just rehashing greatest hits. I mean, Los Angeles has been doing leather couches, rectilinear lines and Zen minimalism for so long now. To me, that's so conservative, outdated and boring."

One thing that is indisputable about Mr. Mitchell's places is that they are invariably crowded. On weekends, favors are necessary to get reservations before 10 p.m. The other night at Chi, in the Hyatt hotel on Sunset Boulevard, Melissa Krems, 23, an assistant at a talent agency, sipped tantrix martinis with two friends. "It's elegant but relaxing," Ms. Krems said, running her hands across the ostrich-pattern suede of the banquettes. "It looks like a place celebrities would hang out."

Nearby at Dolce, in West Hollywood, Prince was installed with a squad of bodyguards at his usual table in a private room

secluded behind a mint-green silk curtain. Denzel Washington sat in the main dining room near the captain of the Sacramento Kings, Vlade Divac. Mr. Mitchell was at the choice corner table with his girlfriend, Thuy Tran, 22, who was cuddled next to him in a cleavage-baring top while he fielded calls on his cellphone.

"I just got a hotel in Vegas," Mr. Mitchell announced. "That meeting I had with W Hotels this afternoon about one in Scottsdale? Well, they just hired me."

Mr. Mitchell, who points out that he is a high school dropout who learned his trade while working as a set designer, said he has so many ideas that the only way he can relax is to watch "Law & Order" or "Forensic Files" or go jogging in the Hollywood Hills while listening to Howard Stern on his headphones. He says that he can evoke Mexican, Italian, Moroccan or Chinese décor within 20 minutes.

"Clients come to me and ask for my version of things," Mr. Mitchell said, while racing in his Aston Martin Vanquish between the Hyatt, where he has been living for a year, and his job sites. "I don't have a formal education in this, so I don't have any rules. It's not like I should be doing this or that. It's like, I don't know any better, so I'm free to do anything."

He has made a pilot for a television reality show called "Dodd Mitchell Makes Over



IN WEST HOLLYWOOD Dolce, the popular restaurant designed by Dodd Mitchell, left, seated there with his friend Thuy Tran. Prince and Denzel Washington are patrons.

America," which he describes as a cross between "Trading Spaces" and "Charlie's Angels." In the show, he and three sexy assistants go to small towns and make over their nightclubs. Mr. Mitchell said he is also starting a lingerie line, which he designed, called Sleep. "It was going to be called Sleep With Dodd Mitchell, but my girlfriends didn't like that."

"The money people fall in love with Dodd," said Mr. Young, the V Life editor. "He doesn't talk down to them like some holier-than-thou architect might. He speaks their language. He is the market he designs for."

Will Regan, an owner of the New York City nightclub Lotus, has hired Mr. Mitchell to design a lounge in the meatpacking district. "In New York, restaurants and

lounges tend to feel so contrived and forced," Mr. Regan said, "but Dodd was able to come up with a design that was more laid-back and fun."

For the lounge, Mr. Regan said, Mr. Mitchell proposed an Asian-influenced design, which includes a long, thin water trough down the center of the room fed by a fountain, and crystal chandeliers flowing down from the ceiling like icicles.

Many promoters and designers in Los Angeles are twitching to see what Mr. Mitchell will do with the Hotel Roosevelt, a landmark on Hollywood Boulevard across from the Kodak Theater (where the Academy Awards ceremony takes place). He was hired to transform the Roosevelt from a bland place frequented by package tour groups into a chic boutique hotel to draw an entertainment industry crowd.

The area around the swimming pool is especially in line for the Dodd Mitchell treatment. The hotel's co-owner, David Chang, has asked him to design two bars and a few cabanas (to be run by Amanda Demme, the widow of the director Ted Demme, who organizes insider Hollywood events like an Oscar party whose hosts were the agents Patrick Whitesell and Rick Yorn).

The knock on Mr. Mitchell — which ultimately may be a knock on the tastes of those who patronize his places — is that everything is a pastiche. None of the club-world

rivals who criticize his aesthetic would allow their names to be used for this article, for fear of fueling a mudslinging match.

Mr. Mitchell views his critics as jealous. "The reason I'm getting so much work is because I'm always doing new things and reinventing," he said. "I don't even know what other designers like Starck are doing. As far as I'm concerned the only people that influenced me are ones that are dead like Carlo Scarpa and John Lautner. It's like Nelly or one of those rappers said: 'Don't hate the player. Hate the game.'"

Mr. Mitchell was pacing back and forth in his office. (He does not have a desk, because he can't sit still, he said.) Tacked to the bulletin board were inspirations for a rock lounge he is working on in Miami Beach — a magazine tear-out of Sid Vicious, a Fendi ad for a sleek, alligator-covered chair and a picture of Jimi Hendrix.

Another board had timetables for future projects, including a yoga retreat in Malibu, a hotel-casino in Las Vegas and the Roosevelt. While three young employees worked at their computers, Mr. Mitchell popped a bottle of merlot and poured a glass.

"Did I tell you I'm designing a fleet of private airplanes?" he said. "The whole idea is that one day people will be able to go to my casinos in Vegas, fly to another city on my planes, check into my hotels and eat at my restaurants. Soon it will be possible never to leave my design style."