



The bar at Linq

WELCOME TO HIS CREATION

A step into the interior world of Dodd Mitchell

A STEEL STATUE, GRASPING A FLASHLIGHT, TOWERS ABOVE YOU AT THE DOOR. It's the image of a man, sculpted with a tad more weight than its intended Giacometti-inspired conception. Oblivious to the fact that the statue has the middle finger of its right hand pointed ever so slightly in your direction, you walk past the spotlight and through the entrance. You have arrived at Linq. Welcome to the world of Dodd Mitchell. Sit down and stay awhile. But be warned: lingering too long can have some seductive side effects. You may never want to leave.

Why does it feel like home, and at the same time, so glamorous? There are beautiful people, sure — one only has to glance into the giant slanted mirror to see that's really supermodel Rachel Hunter sipping a cocktail at the bar. But there's something more, something so many of the chi-chi Los Angeles places lack. Maybe it's the fireplace crackling away behind the massive teak bar, or the way the multitude of candles, twinkling like a thousand stars, emanate warmth from every table.

I take a seat at the bar, entranced by the waterfall cascading down one entire section of wall. Before I know it, a glass of wine has been poured, and I'm clinking glasses with Dodd Mitchell, the mind behind all these sensual yet streamlined surroundings.

Having heard this is a guy who will walk into a place and immediately want to redesign everything, what, I ask him, does he hate to see in interior design?

"People who phoned in the design," says Mitchell. "Things that are soulless. Formula."

Gazing around Linq, it's obvious there is no Formula in sight. And Mitchell has kept his hands off the phone at his other Los Angeles creations as well — places such as Avenue, Falcon, Katana, Sushi Roku, and the just-opened Dolce. He likes to work with natural — oftentimes exotic — materials and elements: stone, wood, water, fire. This is what draws people, he says.

"People come to my places expecting to feel something. The



Lounge area at Katana



Dodd Mitchell

happiest points in your life — when you get married, when you get engaged, when you fall in love — where do you go? You go to the oceans, you go to the mountains, you go to Mother Nature. The reasons you're driven to those places is the feel of the materials: the feel of the trees, and the air, and the colors. So I try to bring all that into my work...bring it all inside." And behind every design, there is a story.

"I was watching *Snogged*, you know that movie? Where they're pushing (Bill Murray's character) into the fire and it has all this marble and fire? I get inspiration from everything." We are now in the "boardroom" — a private room in the back of the restaurant, which features an elegantly-set table, backed by a roaring fire that's book-ended by two stacks of logs. Before Mitchell gutted out the former restaurant, remodeling it into what is now Linq, "Nobody wanted to sit back here." By the time Linq opened, the intimate space was in such high demand, it cost \$200 just to reserve the room.

He gestures to the liquor bottles on the upper wall above the bar, shown only in silhouette within translucent cabinets. "I'm 36 now, and by the time you get to be my age, you know what drinks you like. So I tried to make kind of a 'lingerie' effect. Instead of seeing the actual labels that get shoved in your face all the time, it

designed. "I find it's not much different. It's the same thing. Everyone loves nature. It's sexy. At the end of the day, what everyone's after is sex — and then we just build stages for that." He looks over at actress Jennifer Tilly, who lounges at the end of the bar, writing in her journal and drinking a glass of wine. "Show her the bathroom!" she urges.

Mitchell smiles and, since the women's restroom is occupied at the moment, leads me into the men's room, where a large metal "M" marks the door. Swinging open the door, he gestures to a swirling, abstract image framed on the wall. He tells me he needed some art for the restrooms so he just decided to set up a camera in front of a porno channel — a scrambled porno channel — snapping

just gives you the hint of it." He tells me the bar itself was designed from childhood memories of his mother scolding him and his two younger siblings behind the kitchen counter. Elevated and stretching out at 35 feet, however, it's definitely a more modern, upscale version than mom's dining area.

Taking me around the restaurant, Mitchell points out every design, shape, and texture in detail, talking fast, abandoning each sentence before lighting on the next, constantly caught in the throes of a newer idea, a fresher thought. His boyish enthusiasm is catching; his words spill out at lightning speed, as if competing in a race with his mind. He says he's "extremely shy," and I tell him I find that hard to believe. "But you're in my surroundings. Throw me into something else, I'm an entirely different person."

Mitchell tells me he designs his spaces to be comfortable, operating under the concept that if he's comfortable, other people will be, too. And what makes him comfortable? "Stuff in-between me and everybody else." One look around the restaurant and you see the open, window-like partitions, almost like enormous picture frames, linking the sections together. Mitchell laughs. "I told you. It's designed all off my insecurities." He likes his places to be romantic, sexy. "It's all about lights and shadows. I'm one of the rare designers that actually does all of his own lighting design."

He doesn't find the LA crowd any different in what they want out of a nightspot than people in any of the other cities where he's

the photo that's now sealed in the frame. "You can see...he's there, and then she's coming in — there's her hair, there's her ear. She's actually kissing his..."

I squint, trying to make out the image. Try as I might, I can't find anything resembling a face or an ear, let alone some other vital body part. Mitchell, impatient with my lack of imagination, beckons me to follow him into the now-vacant women's restroom. "Next door you can see it perfectly!"

"It makes me laugh, you know?" Mitchell says, beaming at the photo hanging over the toilet, as if seeing the image for the first time. "It looks so funny because I had this little camera right in front of [the TV screen]. And I go, 'that's some crazy colors!' You can see her mouth...you can totally tell. But no one ever knows."

It's apparent that Mitchell gets a kick out of his own work. He has an easy sense of humor, with a flair for the ironic. He designed a wall at Katana with protruding heads of railroad spikes; another in the style of church arches, with rows of bricks jutting out of the wall. And when he's caught in the throes of designing, he's impossible to slow down. Being the workaholic that he is, according to Mitchell, he ends up spending more time creating romance in his designs than he has time for in his own life. He tells me about one of his newest projects, a complete renovation of the Radisson Huntley Hotel in Santa Monica. The story behind this design?

"I tried to make it masculine and feminine. [As if it were] a girlfriend's house, and the guy moved in with her. I don't want hotel rooms to ever feel like hotel rooms. I made it like a Greek villa, but I mix all this crazy stuff in there." The room contains a double-sided flat-screen TV, which swivels around, posted near the king-sized bed. One side is a TV, the other's a mirror. You can leave the rest to your imagination. A deep bathtub, lined with soft, suede-textured tile, shares the same room with the bed. Has Mitchell ever taken a dip in the bath himself? He shakes his head. "I can't sit still that long."

Neither, it seems, can his mind — or his imagination. He creates

atmosphere as if painting from a palette of the senses, having a hand in not only the visual design of each restaurant, lounge, and hotel, but in other sensory aspects as well. In San Antonio's Hotel Valencia, for example, the aroma of oranges wafts through the air.

He is also inspired by music. "Like crazy. I can't have silence ever in my life." He listened to opera the entire time he was working on Katana, designing the restaurant in three days. He worked on a CD entitled "The Sounds of Katana" and is planning other compilations for future hotels.

He doesn't, however, want to use music that people know the lyrics to and can sing along with. There is the feeling that Mitchell wants every place he designs to be a complete sensory experience, without distraction from the outside world. He talks about the texture of the floor in the rooms of the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, which he's renovating using exotic pebbles and thick sheepskin mats. He likes the idea of the contrast between the textures and temperatures on bare feet.

Mitchell pulls down his sleeve, and there's a flash of color near his shoulder, images of bamboo encircling the Asian symbol for "om." He designed the logo for Chi, an upcoming dim sum restaurant (which he describes as "whorehouse-sexy"), based on his tattoo. The stenciled-on version of this logo will be worn on the skin of Chi's future waitstaff: on the forearms of the men, and on the women, the small of their backs.

He's even pulling on the threads of fashion. "Sleep" — a lingerie line you can wear in as well as out of the house, will soon be available at the Crescent Lounge & Sleep in Beverly Hills. His touch extends to almost every last detail of the projects he designs. He came up with the names for restaurants Chi and Dolce himself. At the Hotel Valencia, he "designed everything down to the toothbrush." Literally.

Having reached a place in his career where he has, as he puts it, "100 percent" design control, he'll decline any project that refuses to give him anything less. And people trust him. "Because I try to take them to some new levels above where they want to be...you name one person that's ever worked with me who's not

nade shitloads of money off me. I want to be the best. It's just constantly reinventing myself and constantly trying to come up with something that people haven't seen before. And taking materials that you see every day and using them in such an abstract, weird way that you just go, 'Wow.'"

With all this ambition and hours spent working overtime, what does a hot young interior designer do for fun? We're standing outside his West Hollywood office on 3rd Street, right next door to Linq.

"We're doing it. This is it," he laughs, lighting my cigarette and pouring me another glass of wine. "This is my fun. This is basically it."

But Mitchell does get to experience the Los Angeles social whirl. When night falls, it's just a few steps from his office to Linq, or a short drive to one of the other restaurants he's designed. Then he can have the comfort of being able to be in his own space, his own element, even as he rubs shoulders with the celebrities who take up nighttime residency in his creations.

The places Mitchell creates are like something out of a movie set, which is fitting for a former set designer — his profession before entering the world of interior design. And it's an appropriate atmosphere for Mitchell, who constantly refers to his works as "a stage." Who says there's no dynamic theater in LA? Mitchell sets the scene, then hangs out in the back of the bar and watches his creation come to life. He is essentially directing people. All that's missing is the camera.

As passionate as Mitchell is about his work, and as driven as he is to be "the best," he's more in awe of the skyrocket success of his career than anyone else. With air-conditioned rides lingering outside for him in San Antonio (He can't stand the heat, and Texas was hot) and private jets earthing him from location to location, he's been given the treatment usually reserved for Hollywood's rock and movie-star elite. Not bad for a kid from Fresno — a guy who, when asked what he was like back in school, says, "I was constantly worried about not being a loser." He ended up dropping out of high school in his junior year, then

moved around a bit, never taking a series of odd jobs before settling back in LA. So maybe Mitchell never had that shot at prom king, but the self-taught designer (who designed his first interior, Santa Monica's Lounge 217, at the age of 24) has graduated to the status of, as one reviewer put it, "LA's crown prince of restaurant design."

"I just keep laughing when people start telling me that. I tell my mom, 'People said this about me today!' It's so weird to me."

He is incredibly happy, but never satisfied. "If I'm satisfied, I might as well be dead." And there are so many walls out there waiting to be redesigned, so many spaces needing to be built from the ground up, so many ideas to turn into realities — so many stages yet to set. DMD Associates, the company he founded in 1995, already has projects slated far into the future, and they've just landed their biggest project yet — In Las Vegas, designing what Mitchell calls "the first non-Vegas hotel" on the strip. As mentioned, Mitchell is also taking part in a renovation of the historic Hollywood Roosevelt, some of which he hopes will be open by his birthday on June 12. International projects in Amsterdam, Brussels, and Copenhagen are in the works.

"One of my biggest problems now is knowing I can't do all this stuff by myself anymore," says Mitchell, as we walk into his office. "But I've surrounded myself with the best people. I mean, look, it's 9:30, and they're still drawing. The passion rubs off." And he's right: Talking to Mitchell, you become excited about the projects yourself. But has he ever doubted this passion?

"Never," he answers, his voice serious and deep. "This is in my blood. I'm having the time of my life. I am where I'm supposed to be."

Mitchell smiles, and disappears into Linq — back to his nature, his separations and his spaces, enclosing himself into his comfort zone. There is work to be done, but tonight he will take his place near the back of the bar, watching the play of nightlife unfold. So be sure to book your reservations now: Dodd Mitchell is very likely to be staging his latest scene at a restaurant or hotel near you. **D**

— Jennifer Hayden



Dining area at Katana



Suite at the Huntley Hotel



A suite at Santa Monica's Huntley Hotel



The boardroom at Linq