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BY MARC BERNSALI/BUSINESS JOURNAL

Boston's Downtown Crossing is a hotbed for new restaurants.

The Main course

Restaurants take center stage in urban renewal projects throughout Boston; city planners count more than 40 new eateries in Downtown Crossing

By Mary K. Pratt | Special to the Journal

When Brad Fredericks first started in Downtown Crossing, with the opening of his Fajitas & Ritas in 1989, the area was far from its prime.

Stores, hotels and restaurants were closed or failing. The streetscape was walled-off and inward-facing. That was, after all, before the Ritz Carlton entered and Suffolk University expanded into the downtown area.

But Fredericks saw potential: "It was an up-and-coming area," he said.

And this summer he opened a second restaurant in the neighborhood, Back Deck, to evoke the feeling of outdoor cooking with friends, and with it, he helped create a new openness in the area.

The design of Back Deck, with large windows that open

onto West Street and its façade topped by a giant spatula, is dramatically different from anything in the area when Fredericks first arrived, and its design helps mark a new vibrancy in Downtown Crossing.

"Restaurants have a significant impact on the neighborhood, whether it's Downtown Crossing or Allston. They can raise the level of the excitement, the energy in a neighborhood. They can elevate the neighborhood," said Jerome CooperKing, design director at CKI Design Studio and Back Deck's architect.

This year, Americans are expected to spend about half of their food dollars at the country's nearly 1 million restaurants, according to the National Restaurant Association. So it's not surprising that restaurants are becoming more common, and more prominent, in the city and the surrounding area. In fact, the Boston Redevelopment

Authority counted more than 40 new eateries in Downtown Crossing since 2010.

As such, some said the physical space occupied by restaurants has been elevated, helping to shape and define the neighborhoods in which they're located.

"Restaurants are the new anchors of our main streets and the downtown. People used to stroll and window shop. We window shop now by looking at restaurants," said Andrew Grace, senior urban designer at the BRA, noting that the city is encouraging restaurants to add outdoor seating and accordion or sliding windows to enhance street-level activity. "It just reinforces that there's something interesting and fun there. You can see the vitality of it."

Of course, Grace said, how any establishment presents itself on the street level is important in establishing a neighborhood's identity. But Grace said restaurants often anchor an area, so their designs can have an impact on a neighborhood in a way that other storefronts don't.

Garrett Harker, who opened Eastern Standard in 2005 in Kenmore Square, said he saw that potential for impact, which is why he favors a street-level design to help shape what Kenmore Square was becoming.

"We put a lot of thought into it, with the big iconic red awnings and ample outdoor seating, so it can serve as an illustration of the positive activity in Kenmore Square,

which had seen this urban deterioration over the years," said Harker, who also opened Island Creek Oyster Bar in Kenmore Square in 2010.

Although many of the new urban restaurants are quite visible and distinct, the idea that a restaurant can define and distinguish a district is a stretch, said Michael Krupp, co-founder of Area Four in Kendall Square.

Krupp said most restaurant owners are designing on tight budgets and on whatever tenant improvement terms offered by landlords, and they must work with what exists in the buildings they occupy.

So while Krupp said he consciously decided to have a minimalist design for his restaurant, it also worked with what existed in his leased space and the high-tech-focused neighborhood overall.

"You have buildings that were designed for biotech. They're new buildings, they're glass and steel, and that plays into the restaurants that we have here," he said.

Nonetheless, larger restaurants do have the opportunity to aesthetically shape their environs, said Carol Burns, an associate professor at Wentworth Institute of Technology and a principal at Taylor & Burns Architects in Boston.

She said non-aesthetic factors can determine how a restaurant — or really any business — influences the vibrancy of a neighborhood, citing variables such as hours

of operation and valet parking as playing a role.

Others also see design opportunities even with constraints in place. Nick Zappia, owner of The Blue Room and the soon-to-open Belly Wine Bar in Kendall Square, and his architect David Rubino said they, too, had limits on what they could add to the exterior.

And some of the exterior features that helped define their space have had to change during the 21 years that The Blue Room has been open. A large lightning strike that they had put on the front had to come down a decade ago, while another landlord took out trees that once created a shaded patio.

Rubino said they found ways to work within the building's limits, adding awnings, fountains and later trees to create an exterior that reflected The Blue Room's interior.

"This is a very austere building, a lot of brick and regular rhythm to the windows, and it empties out at night because it's office. So what we do at streetscape, it's vitally important to drawing people in," he added.

That mentality carried over as Zappia readies to open The Belly Bar. He and Rubino weren't able to do much to the façade so they said they considered interior design elements and how they could be seen by pedestrians.

"That was probably one of the first things in our discussion: If someone was approaching this, how do you make this different?" Rubino said.