




A horizontal banner with a dark background and a thin white border. The text "MEET THE ADVISORS" is written in a bold, yellow, sans-serif font. The background of the banner shows a close-up of hands working on a wooden surface, possibly a table or a piece of furniture.

Glen Coben - April 2010



Coben graduated from Cornell in 1985 after exciting stints as a teaching assistant in the College of Hotel Management, surveying architectural ruins in Rome, working as a field architect in Sardis, Turkey, and then discovering the realities of on-site building construction in New York.

What inspired you to go into Restaurant Design?

It was a natural progression. I opened my design firm Glen & Company 10 years ago after being a Principal at Rockwell Group, where just through osmosis, we all participated in designing restaurants. Prior to my time at Rockwell group, I was the Director of Store Design for Nike, where I lead a group of architects and designers in the creation and roll-out of Niketowns around the world. That experience allowed me to understand the concept of a "guest experience" which is one of the critical aspects in designing restaurants. Shortly after opening my practice, I was introduced to Jonathan Waxman and ultimately ended up designing Washington Park for him. That first restaurant project launched me into a position as a "restaurant designer." In hindsight, my time spent as a teaching assistant in Cornell's College of Hotel Administration teaching a restaurant and hotel design class prepared me for what I am doing today!

What are the first things you consider when you are hired to design a restaurant?

The menu, the location, price point, the chef's vision, budget. These are the starting points. Once clarified, we get into the fun stuff, like: how long will the meal be (to determine how comfortable the chairs are)!

What designs have inspired you?

I love the work that Santiago Calatrava is doing. I've always been a huge fan of Frank Gehry's work. David

Rockwell continues to amaze me with what he does. My office is around the corner from the Pierpont Morgan Library. I love going into the "courtyard" to get away from things. The Renzo Piano design is so elegant and simple in how he turned the original McKim Mead & White buildings around and created space from the negative space of the backyards. Old and new. Just wonderful!

What are common mistakes you find restaurant owners making when they have a "concept" for their restaurant?

Usually their budgets are not realistic. I always hear stories about "so and so paid so much less for this floor" or "there's no way it will cost that much!" I always recommend to owners that they keep contingency money off to the side, but never tell anyone that they have done so. If the project comes in on budget, they have extra pre-opening money.

The other "mistake" I see is owners not hiring a publicist early enough. Getting word out about the restaurant is the work of professionals. Owners need to have someone steer the audience towards the concept, and tell the owner the truth.

What are trends you see this year in design?

Smaller, simpler, less fancy, more accessible.

Where do you see yourself in the next 5 years?

The star of a Food Network series about restaurant design! I gave up on my goal to become the next New York Times Food critic when they didn't accept my offer! Seriously, I see my practice growing and becoming more international. We completed a project in Tokyo two years ago and are currently working on a restaurant in Bangkok. We are expanding into university dining services projects, where we are bringing a "ala carte" sensibility to university dining halls. Just this month The Fashion 26 – A Wyndham Hotel opened. My team designed everything in the hotel, from the lobby to the guest rooms and the restaurant (rare)...we actually worked on creating the overall branding of the hotel, taking cues from the hotel's location in the Fashion District.

How is Culintro helpful to the restaurant design/architecture community?

I have seen firsthand how helpful and fantastic culintro' can be when I attend the events. From the restaurant design panel discussions to networking cocktail parties, culintro' puts key decision-makers into a setting that promotes discussion and introductions. Being on the Board of Advisors has allowed me to give back to the community that has been instrumental in my own professional development.