

A Tale of Two Restaurants: disposable versus recyclable architecture



The Uptown Chipotle (above)
and Café Ibiza (below)

“Branded architecture is disposable architecture... The answer, of course, is to build buildings that are easier to recycle.”

Robert Gerloff
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Chipotle and Pasqual's are both Mexican restaurants. Both are located on Hennepin Avenue, a mere block apart. Both are (or have recently been) under construction -- Chipotle was built this summer, while Pasqual's is currently remodeling to become Cafe Ibiza, a high-end European-style espresso bar.

Environmentally, though, their buildings could not be more different. The Chipotle building is as disposable as a fast-food wrapper, while the Pasqual's building is easily recyclable.

A disposable building such as Chipotle's is one tied to a corporate identity by a unique roof shape or distinctive materials or colors. At Chipotle, for example, every detail furthers its corporate identity: the soft brown concrete bricks reference Southwestern adobe construction; the galvanized and exposed lighting fixtures reference hip urban lofts; the rusted steel signage says this isn't your father's Taco Bell. A motorist tooling down Hennepin Avenue doesn't need to read a sign -- the building is a visual billboard for Chipotle's corporate brand.

And Chipotle isn't unique. A growing percentage of buildings going up today are similarly "branded." The environmental dilemma is obvious: branded architecture is almost impossible to recycle. To see an example of a new business struggling to create a new identity within a branded building, just look across 26th Street: the sign may say Uptown Diner, but the distinctive mansard roof screams Burger King.

Branded architecture is disposable architecture. When Chipotle begins losing market share, or its profit margins sag, its building will be torn down and carted off to a landfill in Carver County, to be buried next to the Embers it replaced. How to avoid such waste? The answer, of course, is to build buildings that are easier to recycle.

Pasqual's spent years in the storefront of a 1920s mixed-use brick building. A storefront is a street-level retail space within a larger structure; mixed-use means that several different uses co-exist within one building. In this case, shops and restaurants face Hennepin, while apartments are located above.

A storefront in a mixed-use building is the ultimate in recyclable architecture. It is generic, flexible and adaptable. It doesn't have a unique form that identifies it with a particular corporation. Any store or restaurant -- or church or office or campaign headquarters -- can occupy a storefront space. When one business goes belly-up, another one can easily move in and remodel. And any remodeling, however extravagant, is far more resource-efficient than tearing down a building and throwing it away.

We're used to discussing architecture in aesthetic terms and asking whether a building is beautiful; we're not used to discussing architecture in environmental terms and asking whether a building is sustainable. Yet to consider architecture only in aesthetic terms is short-sighted, for the construction industry makes a huge impact on the environment.

According to the Worldwatch Institute, "as much as a tenth of the global economy is dedicated to buildings: to constructing, operating and/or equipping our built environment. This economic activity uses ever larger shares, one-sixth to one-half, of the world's wood, minerals, water and energy. Blame for much of the environmental damage occurring today, from destruction of forests and rivers to air and water pollution and climate destabilization, must be placed squarely at the doorsteps of modern buildings."

In other words, for our economy to become more sustainable, we need to build more recyclable and fewer disposable buildings, more mixed-use and fewer branded buildings. Sustainability is the biggest global challenge facing architecture today, and we can see the dilemma playing out right here in Southwest Minneapolis.

Chipotle Counter-Proposal Fails



A before and after rendering of The Lander Group's counter proposal for the Chipotle at 26th and Hennepin. (Peter Musty)

A proposal to change the design of the new Chipotle at the corner 26th St. and Hennepin Av. has failed. Minneapolis developer, The Lander Group, offered the proposal to the company after seeing the design for a one-story, aluminum clad building on the former Embers restaurant site. An oversight in the city's Plan Review is blamed for the approval of a building that does not meet a neighborhood directive.

The Lander Group design meshed with a neighborhood directive to intensify development along Hennepin Av. in the Uptown area of south Minneapolis through the vertical mixed-use of buildings, and added a second residential building on the site.

The Lander Group took their design to the neighborhood and the city, which both approved it, then went to Chipotle corporate headquarters in Chicago to offer the design to the company. The company declined, saying that since they had already gotten city approval to build the one-story design, they were going to move forward with that plan.

The new one-story Chipotle recently receive "the Worst Eyesore" award from *The Pulse of the Twin Cities* newspaper.

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