

HOTEL & RESTAURANT TIMES

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ALL CHANGED 21 SPACES GOES WITH THE FLOW



A WEEK IN THE LIFE OF...
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All Changed

It's been nearly two years since we last caught up with 21 Spaces, a multi-disciplinary interior architecture and design consultancy, run by John Henry Boyle and his wife Sinead. Since then, the hospitality market has changed quite considerably and we spoke to John Henry about how the company has been faring and what's next for his team.

21 Spaces is a Dublin and Donegal based company which creates brands within premises for companies like Milano and Bewleys. Specialising in retail and food outlets, they have built up a strong reputation as being the best in class and despite the downturn in the market, combined with the fact people have less disposable income to eat out as much, John Henry says they are in surprisingly good shape.

"Things have held their own over the past 12 months. Over the last 2 years we have won new business and new clients. A lot of our pre- 2007 and 2008 clients bought at the height of the market and have stepped out, so we are lucky to have obtained a new client base."

John Henry has certainly noticed a change in the type of client he is now approached by.

"We're dealing with 50% Irish and 50% newcomers into the country, including Europeans, ex-pats from America, and British brands. But we're also developing new

relationships with old clients, people who we were dealing with when we began in 2002, so that's a welcome development."

With new leases coming onto the market there are lots of new opportunities for brands to get premises at a quarter of the price than they were and a large number of these are being taken up by the fast casual food market.

"The biggest development recently has been the halting of the hotel market, for obvious reasons," explains John Henry. "A lot of people are consolidating as there is no money available and also there was an oversupply in the market, whereas the fast casual food market tends to reinvent itself every five years at least."

One of 21 Spaces' main clients is Milano, also known as Pizza Express in the UK, and the company is aggressively pursuing sites in Ireland. 21 Spaces is currently working with them on fitting out new branches in Ranelagh and Sligo and the company is also looking at three other sites across Ireland.

Although the Milano brand does have certain ambient brand guidelines that have to be adhered to, there is room for creativity too, and John Henry enjoys the process from start to finish.

"They reinvest heavily in their sites, it's not just a refurbishment. They strip out the shell and start from scratch in order to get





the look they are going for. They don't have a cookie cutter effect for every site, so you can be creative. There is fundamental DNA that you have to have in each site, for example an open kitchen, a spotlight over each table etc - but they're just what you called ambient branded guidelines. The only real criteria are that their kitchen suppliers are retained."

An expanding company like Milano is great for 21 Spaces' business as they have been throwing plenty of work their way.

"Since the work on the Dun Laoghaire branch finished, we've done Ennis, commenced work in Ranelagh in the last week and will start in Sligo over the next couple of months."

The company is also undertaking work for them in England and Scotland too and John Henry is grateful to be working with such good clients. A lot of people think that a large English company coming over to Ireland and opening branches all over the place is bad for the economy because they bring their own people with them and don't generate business over here, but this is definitely not the case here, as John Henry explains.

"In Ranelagh there's half a million pounds worth of business generated in this country and something similar in Sligo. There's an Irish contractor, an Irish electrician, Irish plumber and Irish joiner etc. so to assume that is wrong".

As well as Milano, 21 Spaces have lots of other projects on the go, one being Tolteca, a chain of Mexican inspired fast casual outlets.

It is run by some ex-pats from Colorado whose ambition is to open up seven Tolteca restaurants. They are already funded for these projects and are actively pursuing sites at the moment, including one planned for Upper Baggot Street.

The concept behind it is Mexican street food, such as burritos, with an emphasis on transparency, which means an open kitchen in each with full traceability on the meats and cheese.

The plan is to open the Baggot Street branch first, which will be 150 square metres, probably the smallest site they will do. Then they will move out into the suburbs before eventually opening in London too. It will be akin to Chipotle in America, selling healthy fast food, which according to John Henry is where the market is going.

John Henry and his team are also 

working on a project in the IFSC called Bortotte.

"It's very much like a Leon or Ottolenghi in London, based on a concept of whole foods, with natural, good quality ingredients and good price points."

In order to make all these projects a success, the interior has to be well designed so potential customers trust the brands as soon as they walk into the door. "In Toltuca, for example, we have really good quality materials. We use reclaimed oak on the walls and counter and have used spotlighting on the tables and food. It's an industrial type design too, with polished concrete, subway tiles and glass screens."

Milano, on the other hand, is a different design altogether.

"People regard it as a luxury to go out for a sit down meal so you have to give them a really smart environment to go out and eat in. Good air conditioning and spotlights for example, but it has to be non-intimidating though which is why there are no tablecloths."

21 Spaces have also just finished compiling a branded manual for Hillbilly's; the Irish-owned fried chicken franchise. Essentially it is a bible of how something should look, and is a must for any franchise chain.

"There are plans for up to ten more Hillbilly's this year. Owner Michael Grace and Dermot Carberry, the franchise director, came to us in the early 2000's to develop their first site in Fairview and then we worked on six more of them. They are being rolled out more aggressively now and the brand needs to be looked at in order to be more professional."

It's a carefully considered look they are going for; to attract the fast casual market the product is aimed at.

"Unlike Milano, it is not cutting edge, but a more traditional design with references to America. It includes wood panels, cream colours and industrial lights. The work we do on a brand is important in order to create brand awareness. When you walk into one Hillbilly's, you'll recognise it the next time you walk into another."

21 Spaces are certainly securing some big names and lots of projects, and John Henry is well aware of the secret to success in this industry.

"A lot of our clients are repeat business or we have been recommended by people, because they know we have a proven track record. We're not green and people like that. They don't want learners on the job with so much money at stake. We're very fortunate to have good projects and the fact we're able to retain clients is a good testament to the team. People come back to us because we give value for money and are competitive."

As well as having a great reputation and team, he also attributes the company's success to the contractors they work with, for example Eamon Groomer, the man behind Parson Building Services Ltd., along with Claran Keely of Bearfoot Flooring and Tino Fuscuardi of Itallies.

"He's familiar with the hospitality sector and has a proven track record delivering on time, which in this business is vital."

And with such a good team and contact book full of reliable contractors, it is not surprising that there is no rest period on the horizon for John Henry and his team.

"I'm quietly confident things are beginning to move out there in the market" he says.

"We're talking to other companies too at the moment, and there are projects on the table that can't be discussed for a couple of months. Even during the really bad period two or three years ago, there was always work there, it's just a matter of finding it and proving you are the right person for that job." ○

