

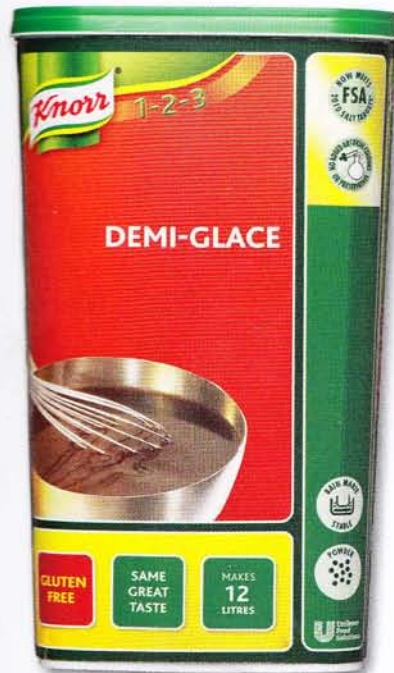
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21 Spaces



Founded in 2002, design company 21 Spaces is behind some of the most innovative fit-outs on the Irish market, including Cortina's in Dundrum and several Milano outlets. As managing director John Henry Boyle explains to *Hospitality Ireland*, good design can be simple, as long as you keep the target market in mind at all times.

It's around a three-hour drive from Donegal to Dublin without traffic, but it's a journey that 21 Spaces' managing director John Henry Boyle knows well, commuting from his home in

Gweedore to his offices in the capital – and indeed, many other sites around Ireland – several times a month. Founded in 2002, 21 Spaces is fast becoming one of the most talked-about design firms operating in Ireland, going from strength to strength at a time when many other design firms are closing. There are signs, in the restaurant industry at least, that the grey clouds are beginning to part – “there's more confidence

in the market nowadays, particularly in the fast casual market,” says Boyle – but the fundamentals of good design remain the same, regardless of the external economic situation: being able to read the needs of the potential customer.

“Without a shadow of a doubt, design appropriateness is one of the key factors that you need to implement these days,” Boyle explains. “You have to understand the client's core objectives, what market they are going for, and then design specifically for that market. If you design with your own ego in mind, it will fail, and your business will fail with it. Everything has to have the

target customer in mind.”

A look at one of its most recent projects confirms this: 21 Spaces was employed to design Cortina's restaurant in Dundrum Town Centre, Co. Dublin, which opened in March. The brief set by owner Terry McVeigh was to create a Mexican restaurant without the need for cacti or sombreros – a contemporary approach that suited 21 Spaces. “Terry gave us very much a blank canvas, and we knew we had to work off a contemporary mindset,” says Boyle. “We thought about it, and tried to bring out some aspects that were unique about Mexico: vivid colours [represented by brightly coloured seating areas] and the rawness of raw concrete [the breeze-block back wall behind the bar area], and then combining that with the warmth of the teak panelling and eclectic art and lights. The restaurant has different identities depending on what you use it for. It can be a family restaurant, somewhere for a date, or for a night of cocktails.



Above: Terry McVeigh, proprietor of Cortina's, Dundrum, in the stylish bar area of the restaurant, designed by 21 Spaces

"A place like Cortina's would have a lot of competition [Nando's, The Counter and Ruairi Maguire's bar flank the Mexican restaurant on either side]," he adds, "but it's a healthy competition, and the design plays a huge part in people deciding to come in here for the night. That's one of the main things that we try to do with projects

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like this: give them a bit of an edge, something a bit different to the stereotypical architecture solution, something fresh and new."

It's a system that works well for Boyle and his wife, Sinéad, who head up the six-man 21 Spaces operation. As the company has evolved, so the design spend of many of its main clients has diminished, and while there's a definite trend towards refurbishments rather than new builds – doing "more with less" – it's far from a stumbling block towards creating good design. "Our



Above: Each Milano's design is different, bar one or two aspects that form the 'DNA' of the brand. Left: Exterior of Cortina's in Dundrum Town Centre



principle is, and always has been, to deliver quality design, even on the smallest budget," he explains. "I tend to focus very much at eye level, what people can see. One of the main things is to surprise people with the design, rather than hiding it away in the corners, where people might not see it.

"It's a bit like fashion. Interiors follow fashion very strongly, and people expect to see something a little bit different when they go out and spend their money in a restaurant. It's all about atmosphere and dramatics. There's nothing wrong with not having a limited budget. At the end of the day, you're going to have to put in a floor, and you're going to have to put in lighting, or a bar counter, so it's about being as creative as you can be with that sort of budget. You can spend the same amount of money on bad design as on good design.

"It's also about giving a place a sense of identity – not just picking things out of a magazine or from your travels – and trying to put them into an Irish context. That can be a dangerous game. You wouldn't buy the same car in America as you would buy here, and it's the same with design. It's very important to do things in an Irish context. You can't just adopt a cookie-cutter approach. We've just started working with an American chain [Poblano's, a chain of burrito bars that will be opening in Ireland shortly], which has a design concept that works well in America, but the design approach would struggle this side of the water. We're a bit more sophisticated in our design palette. We tend to see things differently."

It's this approach, coupled with the numerous award nominations that the company earned for its design of the Seafield Hotel and Oceo Spa, in Gorey, Co. Wexford [including covered Sleeper European Hotel Awards and FX award nominations], which attracted the Gondola Group, operators of PizzaExpress and Milano

restaurants, to 21 Spaces in 2007, a relationship on which both have built and which is now a key element of Boyle's business. 21 Spaces recently designed new Milano outlets in Ennis, Co. Clare, and Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin, and were also called upon for a PizzaExpress fit-out in Birmingham and Belfast. "Hopefully, the start of many in the UK," says Boyle.

The Milano concept is simple: mid-market family food, in comfortable yet contemporary surroundings, but while other popular chains of its ilk rely on cookie-cutter layouts in different

"[Good design] is also about giving a place a sense of identity – not just picking things out of a magazine or from your travels – and trying to put them into an Irish context."

outlets to convey the 'identity' of the group, each Milano is different, bar one or two aspects that form the 'DNA' of the brand. "People understand what they're going to get when they visit a Milano's," Boyle explains. "Each restaurant has to have a visible pizza oven and open kitchen (called *pizzaiola*), strong emphasis on art, contemporary design, natural materials, and there are other things, such as the menu and background jazz music, which remain the same, the subliminal aspects. But aside from that, we have *carte blanche* to create a new design each time. Of course, it has to measure up to the brand standards – the directors need to review it, management needs to review it – so we need to be right on the money in terms of meeting their requirements. That's good from a professional point of view, because you know the design is being

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KEY SUPPLIERS

No matter how inventive the concept, every restaurant needs 'bricks and mortar' to make it work, and 21 Spaces has worked with several innovative suppliers on making the projects at Cortina's and Milano a success.

- **Academy Signs:** "We worked with Academy Signs on numerous 21 Spaces projects, including Milano's, Cortina's, Real Gourmet Burger and the Seafield Hotel," says John Henry Boyle. "They responded to challenging design requests and deadlines with a positive and helpful approach, producing high-quality custom-made products that captured the essence of the individual properties."
- **John O'Connell Furniture:** "Supplied all fitted-furniture elements to Cortina's, including external fitted and loose furniture."
- **Kellett Catering:** "Catering contractors for Cortina's. They supplied and fitted all kitchen equipment. We were very happy with their service, quality and programming."
- **Stone Solutions:** "Produced marble bar tops for Milano's and constructed an entire limestone shopfront. We have worked with Stone Solutions on all Milano projects, due to their stone expertise and quality. Milano's always use stone tops for pizza counters and back-bar areas."
- **Parson Construction:** "Main contractors to Cortina's. We have worked extensively with them over the past number of years on Milano's, Real Gourmet Burger, Cortina's and a number of other projects. They are experts in the fit-out field and provide an excellent service through their site management, tradesmen and subcontractors."
- **Tom Doyle Supplies:** "Supplied specialist cut-slate work to bars and walls in Milano's Ennis, which were designed to replicate Co. Clare's rural stone walls, as well as limestone floors."
- **Wink:** "Specialist lighting suppliers that supplied wall lights and feature pendants to Cortina's. They also supplied all lights for Milano's Ennis and provided expert consultancy. Recognised as one of the best suppliers of lighting solutions in Ireland."

thought about the whole way through the process, from form to function." This also means creating aspects unique for each area. Diners at the Ennis Milano get a sense of the nearby Burren through the use of cut-slate work (supplied by Tom Doyle Supplies) throughout the restaurant, while in Dun Laoghaire, fine detailing is visible on the countertops.

More so, however, working with businesses like Milano gives 21 Spaces an insight into what is one of the most dynamic sectors in the restaurant sector – fast casual – and what aspects are so important when conceiving a new design. "You can't be all things to all people. You need to pick a market and hone in on that with your menu, your atmosphere, and your design," he explains. "Fast-casual restaurants are a very important medium at the moment, but you would be surprised how many people might design a restaurant around that set criteria and leave out some of the key elements – things like family tables, party tables and that sort of thing, or having no baby-changing facilities in a family-orientated restaurant. That's unacceptable in this day and age."

Going forward, Boyle would like to see more business develop in the UK, and while expansion is not yet on the cards, he's content with the enviable portfolio of work that the company has built up over the past eight years or so. "The hardest thing is often to get a good portfolio behind you, and I think we've done that. I'm very critical in terms of what we do. You need to remember: you're only as good as your last project."

And with plenty of exciting projects on the horizon, he's not going to give up the weekly commute from Donegal anytime soon. ■