

Keyyes Insiders: Sean Dix, Designer of Hong Kong's Hippest Restaurants

"Decorate" as little as possible, he says

by Meryl Koh



Not all passions start from young. For Sean Dix, his interest in furniture design was sparked when he first moved from Kansas to southern California. Faced with an empty apartment but no cash in his pockets, Dix trawled through thrift shops where he found “pretty cool things”.

Since then, the well-travelled designer has called places like Fiji, the Philippines, and Europe, his home. The Kansas native moved to Hong Kong in 2008.

“I’ve always loved this side of the world, and after 15 years in Milan I was ready for a change,” says Dix. “Working in Milan felt like swimming through honey, and Hong Kong is vibrant and always sprinting.”

His career in Hong Kong started with high-end retail work, designing furniture pieces for clients like local fashion brand I.T. But a message from chef-turned-restaurateur Matt Abergel (of popular modern yakitori joint Yardbird) looking to buy a Sean Dix chair sparked off his segue into restaurant design.



Today, Dix is known as the creative go-to for Hong Kong’s leading restaurateurs like Abergel, Max Levy of Okra, and [Chris Mark of Black Sheep restaurant group](#).

The 50-year-old designer tells Keyes his top tips for design innovation.

What is it about Hong Kong that’s kept you here so long?

The level of energy in Hong Kong is great. It is compact and dense and everything moves very fast here. It is very difficult to imagine ever having the time to be bored.

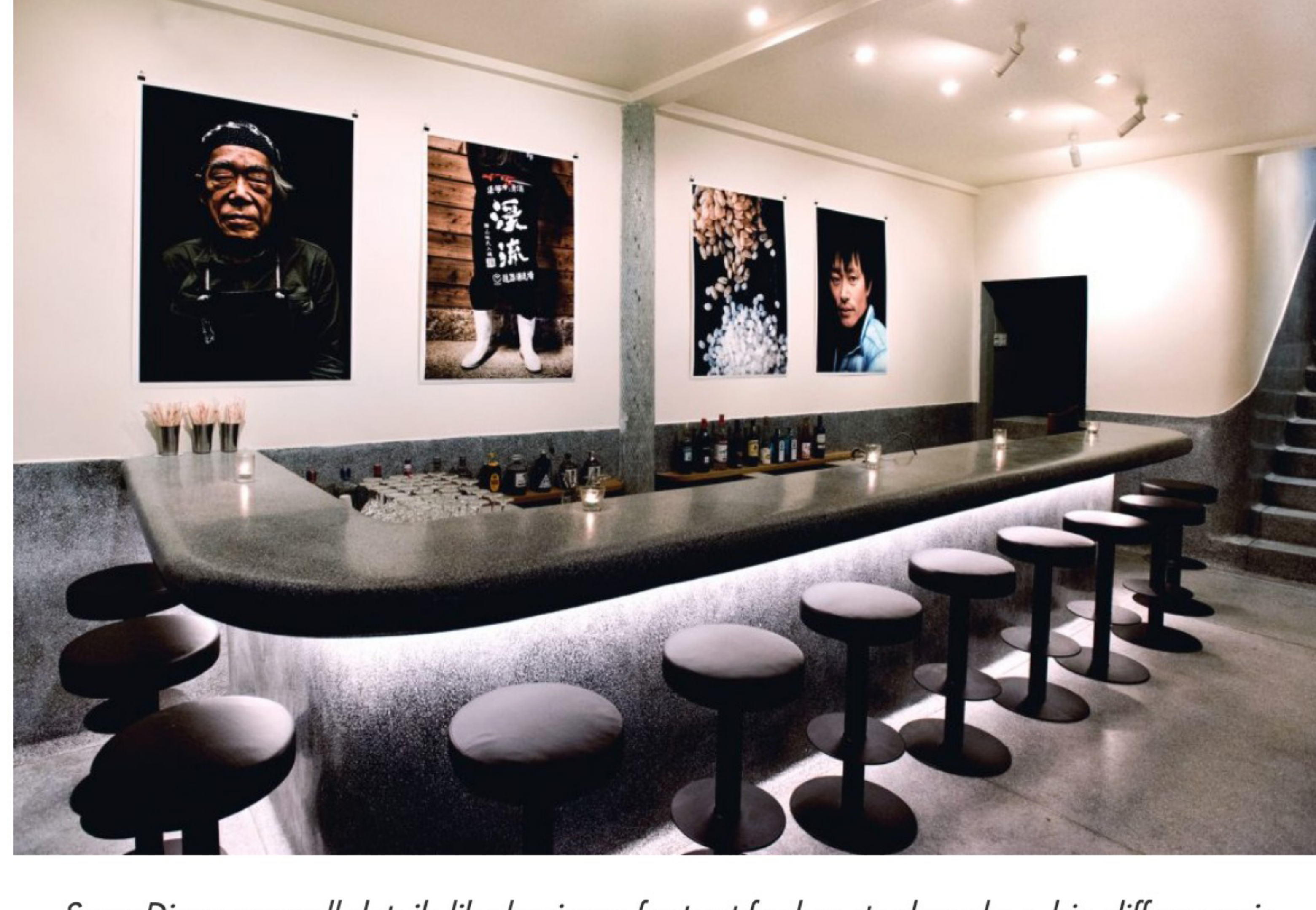
Where is your favourite hideout spot?

My kitchen. I spend a lot of my time in restaurants, and I love to cook but rarely have the opportunity.

Where do you start, when doing interior design for restaurants?

Design is like a carburettor. It has to be there to make the space work, but should not be noticeable. Like having proper footrests at the right height for bar stools; tables with adjustable legs so they don’t wobble; discreet bag hooks under the table.

For some reason, a lot of restaurant designers seem to forget that they are also responsible for the acoustics and illumination. Think about it. How many restaurants have you stepped into, only to have the spotlights shining directly into your eyes? Or the music turned up shockingly loud?



Sean Dix says small details like having a footrest for bar stools make a big difference in restaurants like Jua (Bangkok). Photo by Jason Lang

You’ve designed some of Hong Kong’s trendiest places, like New Punjab Club, Ho Lee Fook and Yardbird. Tell me more about your creative process.

For me good design is a process: Design something, find the flaws, throw most of it away, take what wasn’t stupid and start again. Improve on that, throw away the stuff that doesn’t make sense, start again... This goes on until I’ve been able to strip away the extraneous and can start the final refinements.

I get nervous around flashy design. The gold cats for [Ho Lee Fook](#), for instance, are wacky and funny, but I toned it down by putting them all on one wall. For Ho Lee Fook, I also designed the space as an open kitchen to show off all the steaming, braising, sautéing, and plating going on.

How would you design for a chic, upscale restaurant?

When we are designing for a more upscale project, we tend to use more generously-proportioned seating. Generally, higher-end places have slower turns but higher spends – this usually means that we can spread things out a bit and give the guest a bit more space.

I’ll also use more upholstery rather than hard-backed seats. Where possible, I’ll include comfortable chairs with armrests. The guests are going to linger in such places, so they should be as comfortable as possible.



The generous plush leather seats at New Punjab Club are perfect for guests to linger and savour their meals.

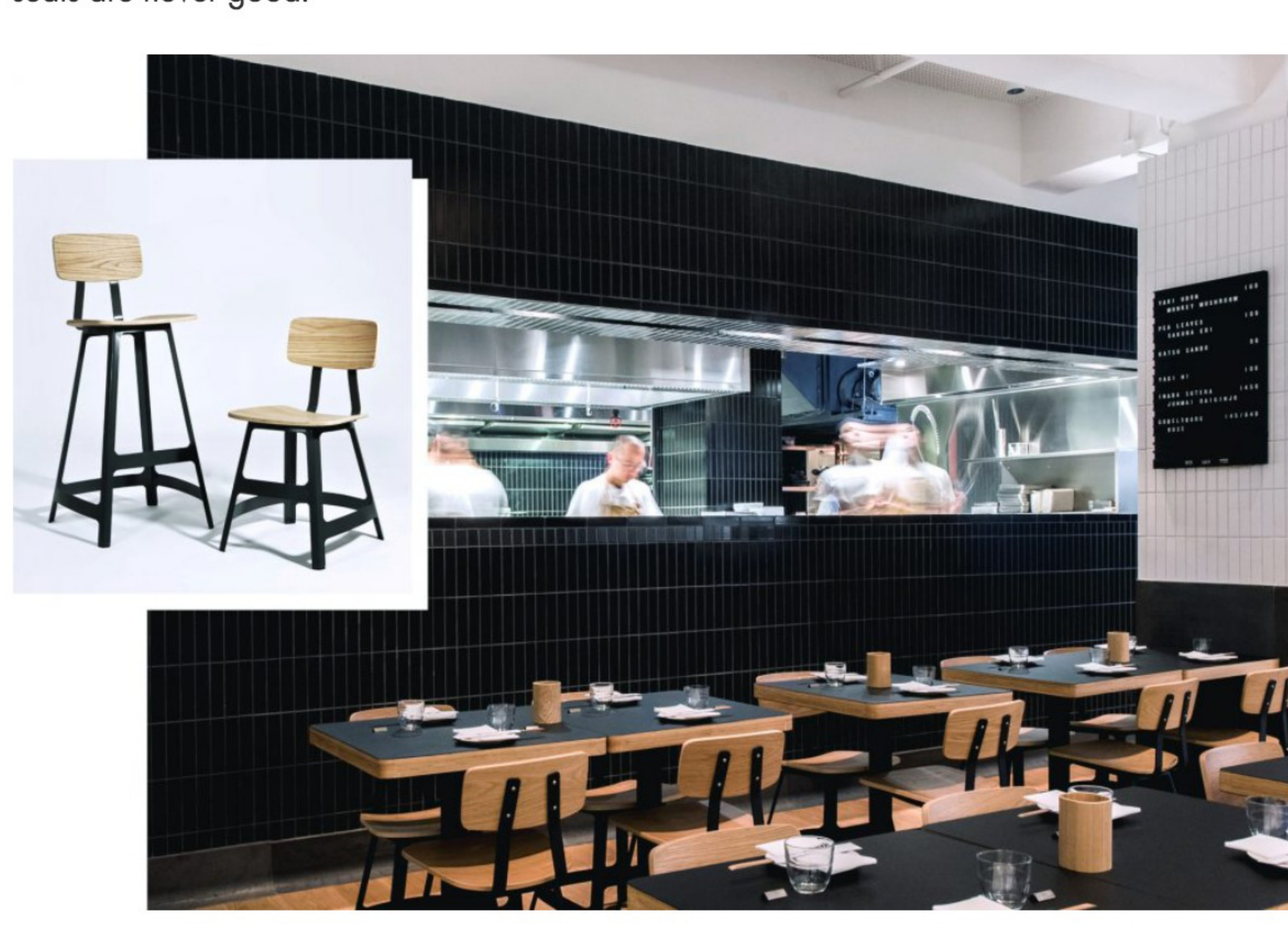
How do you break up the monotony in a restaurant?

I try to combine different types of seating in the restaurants I design – some loose tables, banquettes, some booths. This helps me create rhythms within the space. Of course, restaurants need flexibility – they often need to combine tables for larger parties, for example – so we need to design for that flexibility as well.

Let’s talk table manners. Round vs. communal tables – which would you use?

I love round tables but can rarely use them because they are not terribly flexible – they cannot be joined together for large parties. I use them occasionally for impact and appreciate the fact that everyone sits facing each other.

I dislike long, sharing tables and very rarely use them. I believe that most people do not enjoy sharing a big table with a bunch of strangers. Usually what happens is that a bunch of seats gets left empty between groups – a very inefficient use of space in restaurants where empty seats are never good.



The Yardbird chair from the first production run is one of Sean Dix’s favourite pieces in his home.

When on a date: Side by side, or across the table?

Definitely across the table – I want to look into your eyes. Side-by-side dining always makes me feel like I’m sitting in economy class...

Social gatherings: Counter seating or booth seats?

Booths are always the most popular seats in the restaurants I design. People like the sense of enclosure and protection that a booth provides.

Tips on how to design for a small space?

Don’t put too much stuff in it, don’t be afraid to keep things simple, stripped-down. “Decorate” as little as possible.

What’s your favourite piece of furniture in your home?

It will have to be a Yardbird chair from the first production run, sitting together with a couple of vintage factory worker chairs and stools that inspired the design. It is cool to see the continuity and the evolution of ideas from a 1930’s Bauhaus stool to the chair I designed originally for one of the hippest restaurants in Hong Kong.

