

Architect Ira Keer sets scene at Guthrie's Cue, other eateries

BY JENNY WOODS
STAFF WRITER

Less than a year into his position at Durrant's Minneapolis office, Ira Keer landed a leading role: designing the restaurant at the new Guthrie Theater.

An interior architect, Keer had been brought on to establish the architecture and engineering firm's Twin Cities foodservice practice in 2004. The Guthrie project gave him an opportunity to put the Minneapolis office on the map as well as leave his mark on one of the city's cultural hot spots.

PROFILE

Ira Keer

Interior project design architect and associate, Durrant in Minneapolis, since 2004

The Guthrie had decided to bring in a foodservice management company to operate and invest in building out the restaurant, and Bon Appétit Management Co. was invited to submit a proposal. The firm's Twin Cities regional office sought out Keer and Durrant, and the team won the design competition.

While a choice assignment, the high-profile project didn't come without its challenges. After creating the blueprints, Keer and his team had to start from scratch after presenting the design to Jean Nouvel, the architect of the new Guthrie. And the opening date — June 24, 2006 — never changed.

Problem solving is part of what excites Keer about foodservice design, however.

"The more complex, the more I get into it," he said.

One aspect of the design to work out was integrating the Guthrie's cobalt hue into its restaurant, Cue.

"Blue is not a good food color," Keer explained. "You always present food under warm light instead of cool light."

Thus, the Guthrie's signature color became an accent color at its restaurant, on hand-cut glass tiles above a show kitchen



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Architect Ira Keer designed Cue, the Guthrie Theater's main-floor restaurant, with the show kitchen at its focal point.

and crushed-velvet curtains at the northeast and northwest ends of Cue.

Keer and his team captured the character of the theater in other ways, as well.

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Age: 52

Education: **Master of architecture, University of Minnesota; bachelor of science in architectural studies, University of Illinois; American Academy of Art in Chicago; Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Versailles, France**

Family: **Wife, Maryam Ysefzadeh; dog, Bebe**

Hobbies: **Furniture design, biking, downhill skiing, listening to music**

"The restaurant design takes its cue from the building architecture in terms of its scale, its color, its materials, but it also takes its theming from what the Guthrie does," Keer said.

Spotlights shine on guests as they enter Cue, as well as illuminate their tables. Center stage is the Waldorf cooking island (named after the Waldorf Astoria hotel), which features chefs in a show kitchen.

Dining out is a social event, and people enjoy going places that are not like their homes, Keer said, so hospitality is key to foodservice design. He targets inclusivity in his projects, and with Cue he wanted to

appeal to the Guthrie's wide demographic.

"The design of Cue impacts the guest experience from several perspectives," said David Toay, regional vice president of Bon Appétit, Midwest Region. "Careful thought went into each element to reduce steps and motion, and to maximize space where our patrons could be energized with simplistic design, while our staff could perform efficiently and with grace."

Toay said the lighting and acoustics of the space, both sound quality and the ability to carry on a conversation, help create a positive dining atmosphere as well.

Beyond Cue, Keer's foodservice design work in the Twin Cities includes marketplace services at Target headquarters and the Carlson School of Management. He also recently wrapped up the design of Cafe Minnesota at the Minnesota History Center. Up next is a return to his home turf,

Chicago, for Durrant's design of the new cafe at the AT&T Center in Chicago.

While stunning architecture was something Keer grew up with in Chicago (he counts the Museum of Science and Industry among his favorites), he actually happened into the field.

"When I went to [undergraduate] college, architecture was not even on the radar screen," Keer said.

A public-health major at the University of Illinois, Keer went into physiology before deciding to pursue the liberal arts. The school then required him to declare another major and he chose architecture simply because he liked to draw doodles when he was young.

In his senior year at college, Keer was an exchange student at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Versailles, France. When he returned to Chicago, he worked and went to

school part time at the American Academy of Art. He came to Minnesota to get his master's in architecture at the University of Minnesota, and never left.

Twenty-six years later, architecture has become his life.

"My wife says I'm obsessed," he said, laughing.

Outside of the office, Keer channels his conceptual abilities into the design of furniture. He has a pop-culture affinity, shown in the titles of some of his portrait mirrors: Lucy and Ricky (from *I Love Lucy*). Most of the furniture in his house is not self-designed, however. There would be too much temptation for constant revision.

"As a designer, it's a challenge to find design that I can live with that I've created, because I can always see how I can make it better," Keer said.

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