

Fast Casual Architecture

It is essential that architects position their design research—not design services—at the core of what we practice. Architecture in this case must become fast—it needs to respond to the speed of conversations about multiple components of an environment. But it also must maintain its flexibility—allowing for client interests to enter the design agreement. While the work of design is serious and thoughtful, its ability to be agile, friendly, fast and casual, gives us agency and value.

REDESIGNING BOB EVANS RESTAURANTS

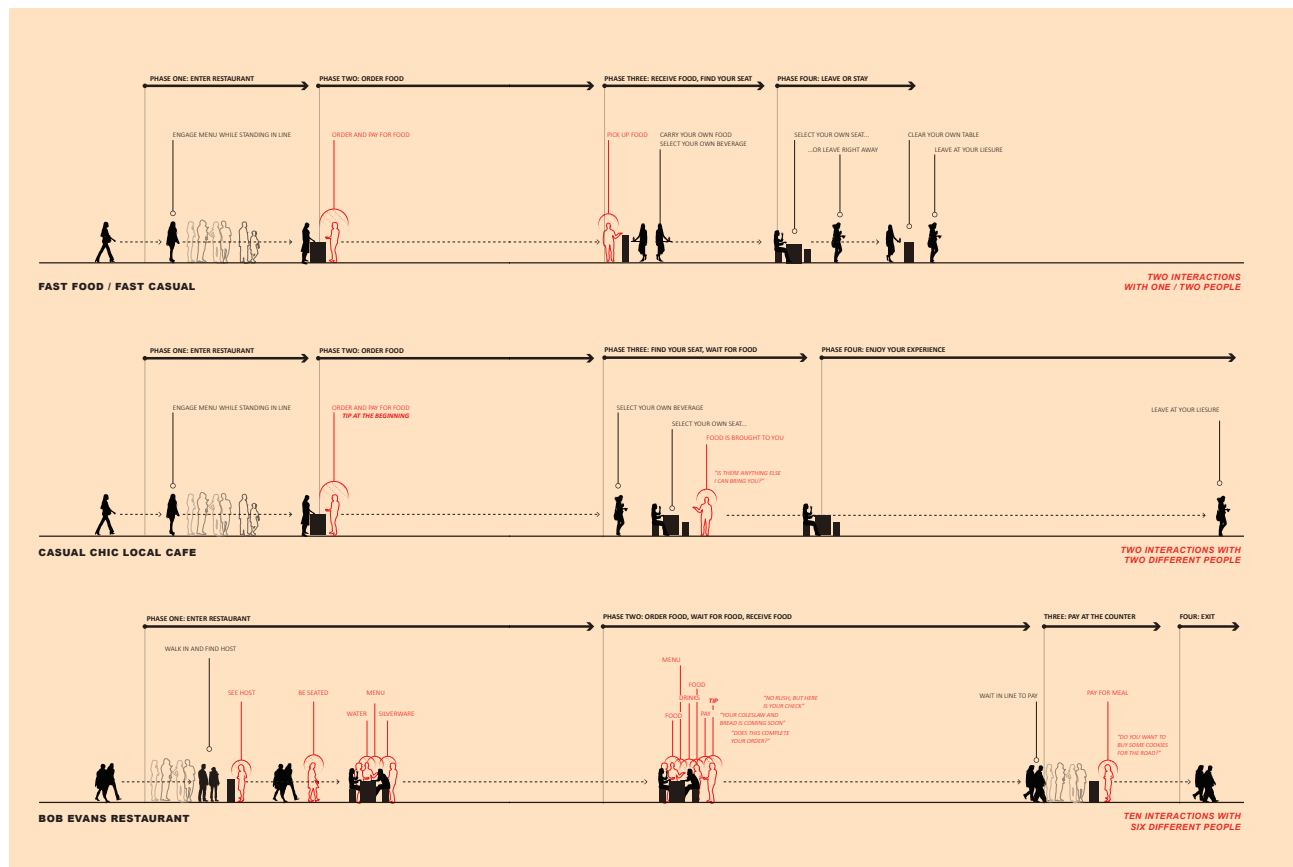
Designing a burrito at Chipotle is a highly organized yet flexible process. Step one: Select your site: burrito, bowl, taco or salad? Step two: what about program? Chicken, beef or vegetables? Brown or white rice? Next, on to design development: Mild or hot salsa? Corn? Cheese? A change order: Would you like guacamole? It will cost you more—is that okay? (The question about paying extra always comes at the end of the design process). After crafting the burrito, Chipotle guests seat themselves in the dining area, a casual environment similar to those found in fast food dining – easily wipe-able surfaces, plastic booths and tables – but with the addition of upscale elements such as polished concrete floors, metal chairs, soft lighting, and accents of corrugated aluminum.

Similar to fast food dining, Fast Casual restaurants (such as Chipotle, Panera, or Baja Fresh) provide quick, cost-effective meals in a casual yet upscale dining environment. There are no waiters or staff on the dining floor, customers carry their own food to their self-selected seats and, at the end of the meal, clear their own tables. However, unlike familiar quick serve restaurants (such as McDonalds or Wendy's), Fast Casual restaurants provide made-to-order food, prepared on-site from high quality and (often) fresh ingredients. Customers assemble their own meals, selecting endless options for customized burritos, soup and sandwich combinations, or salad options, spending nearly twice as much at a Fast Casual establishment than at a typical quick service restaurant. Fast Casual straddles the line between fast food and casual dining—somewhere between McDonalds and Appleby's—it offers fresh food in an upscale environment without the fuss of wait staff (*figure one*). It is also the fastest growing segment of the restaurant industry and is the most popular restaurant type for college age students. When it comes to food, atmosphere and design, Fast Casual is the future.

In the fall of 2013, Ohio State University partnered with the Bob Evans Corporation to develop a research studio around the question of how to redesign

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Bob Evans Restaurants. Originally a farm in southeast Ohio, the Bob Evans Sausage Company grew from a roadside sausage stand into its first commercial restaurant in 1952. Bob Evans originally distributed its sausage to local truckers by leaving products in the farm mailbox (a company icon today, each restaurant boasts a symbolic mailbox at the front door of each location). Currently Bob Evans Restaurants comprise close to 300 stores across the mid-west, and their sausages, mashed potatoes and other prepared foods are distributed in grocery stores nationally. Picking up on the theme of the Ohio farm, Bob Evans presents “farm fresh goodness” in a Family Dining environment, competing with restaurants such as Cracker Barrel, Golden Corral and Denny’s. Family Dining serves casual food, focused on crowd-pleasing, large portions served by a wait staff and, most significantly, does not serve alcohol. The dining room is bright and acoustically sound, the booths and tables are large, the atmosphere is homey and comfortable (*figure 2*). The Bob Evans slogan “We treat strangers like friends and friends like family” extends to the restaurant décor, which resembles a farmhouse kitchen.

The comfortable food and friendly atmosphere attract and retain a senior demographic (*figure 3*). As Bob Evans Restaurants have expanded, their original client base has stayed loyal to the restaurant; however, new customers haven't come along. As the Bob Evans Corporation has identified, their current client base is "dying off."¹ The company is looking to expand into new markets, and would like to engage younger generations who can grow with the company. When OSU approached Bob Evans, our aspiration was to link Midwestern networks and resources to develop not just a new restaurant typology, but new systems of distribution, food production, and cultural identities. In discussing the potential for

Restaurant Comparisons

BOB EVANS



PANERA BREAD



NORTHSTAR CAFE



2

University partnership, however, the conversation shifted from the potential of design research to an opportunity for Bob Evans to engage with the University's most powerful resource: its 18-24 year old students.

Bob Evans recognized the potential of working with an imaginative and enthusiastic group of young, talented designers; but they also recognized the opportunity to engage directly with a desirable, as yet unexplored user-group. Initial client and university meetings involved flushing out potential directions for the design studio: how can students connect to existing Bob Evans? Could the company's new prototype, Bob Evans Express, find its way into the campus environment? At one point the Vice President for Innovation imagined Ohio State students might design and build their own Bob Evans Restaurant on Ohio State's campus, taking the model of the Rural Studio into an expanded direction. Collaboratively, OSU and Bob Evans cultivated the direction of "Fast Casual." How does Bob Evans engage a Fast Casual market? What might new forms of Bob Evans look like if transferring from stand-alone stores by the side of the highway, into an urban infill site.

Fast Casual emerged as a way to engage design process, one that easily connects physical space to experience. The atmosphere of the Fast Casual restaurant is not just about the interior finishes or the lighting. It's a calibration between the food and its presentation, the customer service and corporate tone, the restaurant location and the designed space (*figure 4*). Fast Casual is flexible. The restaurant provides a framework of high-quality pieces and a comfortable, well-designed environment; the customer assembles their meal. Fast Casual is clear. The distinction between served and servant space is highly articulate. Where the customer orders food, how the menu is presented, what spaces customers

Figure 2: *Fast Casual Mise-en-Place*. Comparing the design of Panera, a local restaurant and Bob Evans, the attention too all aspects of the dining experience is pulled apart. The presentation of food on the table, straw wrappers, selection of flatware and presence of additional advertisements contribute to the overall restaurant design.

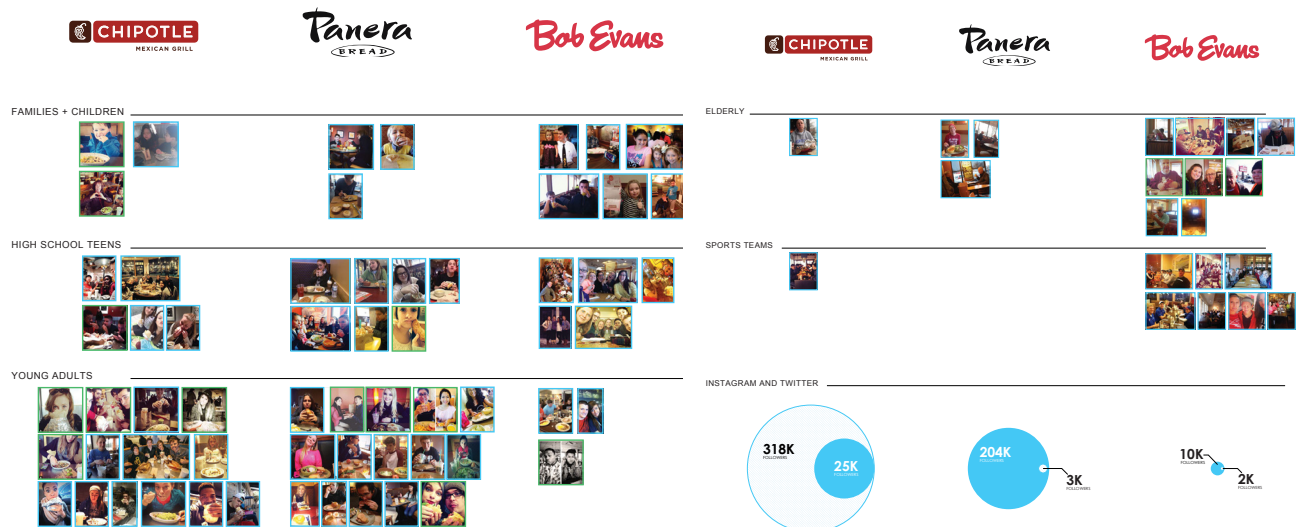


Figure 3: *Senior Moments*. Panera and Chipotle's Instagram and Twitter images are dominated by young adults and food photographs; at Bob Evans, the majority of images show elderly customers.

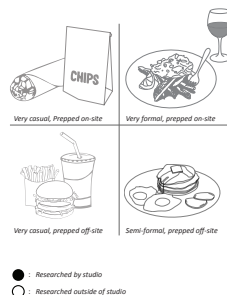
occupy to wait for their orders, the type of physical divisions between food ordering and dining space, are tightly controlled and calibrated. Fast Casual is also free. After the customer has picked up their food, they are free to craft their dining experience. They select their own seats, and then can stay for hours or leave quickly. Different sized tables invite different sized groups to congregate, allowing customers to eat, work on their computers, read, or meet with others without time constraint or interruption. The restaurant staff never step foot on the dining room floor. The space belongs to the customer, and they are welcome to occupy it for as long as they would like. Fast Casual suggests flexibility in restaurants, a type of “free planning” approach to food. It proposes dining not as a highly customized, specific fit, well defined and controlled by the restaurant—but rather one that is looser, faster, more casual. It suggests an experience built around several components of what Denise Scott Brown might identify as having more “wiggle room.”² A loosening of architectural, programmatic and food constraints to allow for growth, change, flexibility and freedom.

Moving away from a highly specific project, into one that allows for transformation, is a way for the architecture studio to approach the design research project in conjunction with corporate engagement. Within the studio, Fast Casual was not just a restaurant typology, but also a way to design environment. It was not possible for students or client to speak about a restaurant design without also recognizing the design of the food, service or user experience through the space. Students worked in teams to develop several design prototypes that navigated the relationship between food, site, architecture and demographics. In transitioning Bob Evans to an urban infill-site, for example, questions about the type of breakfast go-er emerged. Who would need breakfast in a city? Where were they going? Would they have time for a sit-down meal, or would grab-and-go sandwiches be a better fit? If the customer is popping in and out of the restaurant on their way to work, how does the service diagram change to accommodate new user groups? Similarly, if Bob Evans were to become a gourmet sausage restaurant, how might the wait staff roles transform? Would one now need a personal food curator, rather than a waitress? How would sausages become the identifying brand? And would this type of restaurant experience require a corner site?

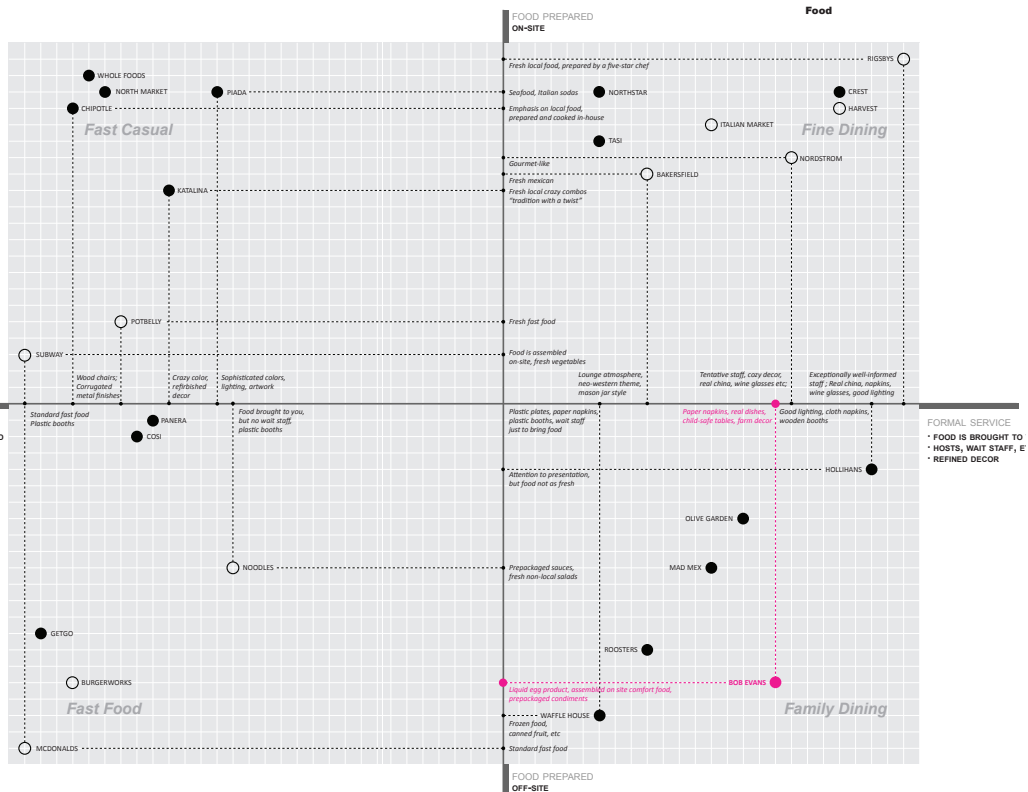
While the questions of architecture, site and service were apparent, so, too, were

Scales of Engagement

Not all chain restaurants are created equal. To understand the context of Bob Evans dining, we situated our restaurant experiences against several scales and tones of "Farm Fresh" dining. We compared dining at Bob Evans to other Family Dining establishments; we looked at how Bob Evans was different from Fast Casual or Fast Food; we considered how Bob Evans compares to other local organic restaurants. How does the farm, fresh food and tastes of home translate into our everyday landscape of dining options?



62 BE2: BOB EVANS RESEARCH STUDIO



63 SPRING 14

4

discussions of how the food transforms the restaurant environment. At the final presentation to the CEO and other Vice Presidents, Ohio State Students commented upon the restaurant's pre-packaged butter. The Bob Evans mise-en-place has many authentic elements: the china is real, the silverware is real, the glasses are real, but the food is processed. The butter is pre-packed butter spread, and stands out as a plastic anomaly against the dinner plates and glasses. At the end of the presentation, the Vice President of Innovation commented, "we will never serve packaged butter again." While not the direct charge of the architecture studio, butter became a way to symbolize anomalies between design and process. As a continuation of this inquiry, students developed renderings of potential breakfasts that would match the proposed restaurant typologies. In designing the environment of the restaurant, considering how scrambled eggs might look in the space, is part of the restaurant design. Quite quickly, the lines between food, site, service, demographics and architecture became very casual.

Unlike an architecture-service studio, which focuses on how design can address issues of social justice and access, the Fast Casual model reinforces design expertise in conjunction with how design redefines problems. Fast Casual studios don't provide design for well-documented disasters, they mobilize futures before they exist. Working quickly and loosely between architecture and environment, identity and specifics, the fast casual mode of design suggests a loosening of boundaries akin to RE Somol's essay "Green Dots." "Less concerned with means... than ends, the focus of graphic expediency is on audience and reception, and what might now be characterized as custom massification, the specific fashioning of unlikely collectives and synthetic communities. Rather than offering parametric flexibility for the world as it exists, the graphic enacts a cultural-political world of

Figure 4: *Scales of Engagement*. The matrix recognizes the relationships of formality between food preparation and presentation. Formal food (made on site) presented in an informal way (customer helps themselves) is preferable to informal food (food prepared off-site and ahead of time) presented formally (with many wait staff).

plastic relationships.”³ Somol’s essay promotes “graphic expediency,” a type of fast, casual approach to establishing identity. Rather than identify a figural / logo green dot shape, Fast Casual demands a way to organize between experience and environment, building and system, urban typology and breakfast sandwich.

To this end, the potential of engaging industry within architecture inquiry is to use our spatial expertise as a tool to expand the definition of “environment.” Fast Casual architecture is a tool for branding—a physical embodiment of other economic and cultural imperatives. Our expertise in designing physical space productively reifies economic discussions. How architects visualize information, transfer this data into a sequence of events, and organize these interactions spatially, is essential to the value of our discipline. It is essential that architects position their design research—not design services—at the core of what we practice. Architecture in this case must become fast—it needs to respond to the speed of conversations about multiple components of an environment. But it also must maintain its flexibility—allowing for the client’s interests to enter the design agreement, and ultimately be open to changing their own practice. While the work of design is serious and thoughtful, its ability to be agile, friendly, fast and casual, gives us agency and value.

ENDNOTES

1. Presentation and discussion between students and executives at the Bob Evans Corporation, New Albany, Ohio, January 13, 2014
2. The idea of “wiggle room” was articulated by Denise Scott Brown in *Architecture as Signs and Systems* (Belknap Press, 2005) and visualized with the sketch of a hand in a glove compared to one in a mitten.
3. Somol, RE. “Green Dots 101” Hunch 11 (2007): 28-37.