ALONE, TOGETHER

The promise of the booth

BY JOHN T. EDGE

ALONG THE FAR RIGHT WALL AT Snackbar here in Oxford stretches a row of six-person high-back booths. Constructed from plywood and foam cushion, illuminated by demure fixtures that cast flattering light, those five booths are where my wife, Blair, and I convene Saturday-night birthday parties, perch for Tuesday date nights, and retreat for private moments that gain resonance in public. We love those booths so much that, fearful of being relegated to a table downstairs, I sometimes lie when I make a reservation, claiming we will show with an acceptable-sized party of four.

In 2021, SFA explores natural, built, and imagined environments. Writing here in *Gravy*, I aim to ask questions about how we make and respond to built environments. I've been asking those questions since I was a boy who wanted to be an architect, designing second-floor additions to our old farmhouse. In my thirties, I proposed a public sculpture to commemorate the struggle for equal access to education in the state of Mississippi. More recently, I've gathered for lunches with our town planner to talk about public spaces and building codes.

I fell for booths as a young man. At the Mayflower in Athens, across from the University of Georgia campus, I slid into vinyl booths to waylay hangovers with sausage biscuits and cheese grits. After college in Atlanta, I dated a woman who craved club sandwiches at Houston's, the small chain that began in Nashville and earned a national reputation for well-executed American standards and well-conceived dining rooms, dominated by high-back booths wrapped in leather.

Ed Seiber, an Atlanta architect, helped me understand my attraction to those restaurants. When he started out, Ed worked for a firm that worked with Houston's. "They liked Pullman booths,"

Jackson Joyce

Booths appeal to our animal selves.
They protect our front and back and
offer us a way to see out and see others.

he told me when I called, referring to the luxe Pullman sleeper cabins on which train passengers once traveled long routes. "Two facing two, or three facing three, we put booths in places with high traffic flow," where they served as bulwarks. "Those booths gave diners a sense of control over their territory."

In the 1972 book Defensible Space, architect Oscar Newman argued that humans are drawn to environments where we can ensure our security. He was thinking about how multiunit housing design can drive perceptions of neighborhood safety and deter crime. Those same tenets apply to restaurant design: Booths appeal to our animal selves. They protect our front and back and offer us a way to see out and see others.

Patric Kuh, author of The Last Days of Haute Cuisine, recently made a midcareer transition from writing about restaurants to working the front of the house in a Los Angeles restaurant. On a recent phone call, we discovered a shared fascination with cabinets particulier, a fixture of Parisian dining for most of the nineteenth century. Referred to by critics of the day as public boudoirs, these wooden cabinets were designed for more privacy than we now associate with booths. That intimacy earned some restaurants unwelcome reputations. By the early part of the twentieth century, some cities had passed laws that forbade curtains or doors on the fronts of booths.

Though that style of booths is now less common, intimacy has remained a promise of booth seating, Patric told me: "People want semi-privacy in a dining room; they want to seclude while still participating in the energy of the room." That's what Blair and I want in a Snackbar booth—a night alone in public, among carousing friends and strangers.

Patric also told me that our relationship to booths has begun to change again. Until this year, he said, restaurant trends pointed toward communal tables and long banquettes. Now, because of the ongoing pandemic, booths are popular because the physical separation they promise is believed to offer some protection from viral spread.

This page and opposite: John Vachon/Library of Congress

WHEN I MOVED from Atlanta to Mississippi in 1995, Snackbar and its voluminous booths were still fifteen years away. I tucked in at Lusco's, the 1933 vintage restaurant in the Delta town of Greenwood. Famous for small, curtain-fronted rooms and debauchery, Lusco's seemed just the sort of anachronism I expected to find in this strange and new place called Mississippi.

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: Diners in booths at the Busy Bee Restaurant, Radford, VA, 1940

As I began to travel more, in search of restaurant experiences, I carried the perceived singularity of Lusco's in my head. But that idea soon fell apart on trips to San Francisco, where century-old restaurants like Tadich Grill, Sam's Grill, and Far East Café feature vintage curtained booths that gesture back to those particular cabinets and forward to those Snackbar booths that are worth lying for.

Months have now passed since Blair and I last dined in a Snackbar booth. As I write these words, we're due in thirty for dinner outside, underneath the heat lamps, on a concrete porch that faces a blacktop parking lot. I have booked the corner table, against the side wall of the yoga studio. Looking out over the cars in the parking lot, Blair calls this view Detroit Beach. Though it's no booth, the location does offer some privacy, and there's no sand to worry about.

John T. Edge, founding director of the SFA, also teaches in the low-residency MFA program in narrative nonfiction at the University of Georgia.

What restaurants hold your favorite booths? What stories do you want to share from your time in booths? What Fall Symposium speaker would you like to hear talk about booths and broader issues of restaurant design and built environments? Write johnt@southernfoodways.org and we'll publish the most compelling ideas via the weekly SFA Digest.