



FMG Design creates identities with environmental graphics.

BY SANDRA COOK

Downtown's FMG Design sets the tone for the human experience.

The firm excels at environmental graphic design and visual communications. Environmental what? When a school, shopping center, residential development or corporate headquarters is built, architects and interior designers go to great lengths planning and perfecting the structures. Landscapers place the plantings. And it's the environmental graphic designers who add signs and other elements of way-finding – the things that help get people in and out of a venue.

“We add the final jewelry in layers to big architectural projects, including convention centers, medical centers, residential communities and retail centers,” says Ferdinand Meyer, principal at FMG Design. “We’re currently working on Wells Fargo Tower and recently completed the Georgia Aquarium.”

While many of FMG’s clients are out-of-state, local projects include Uptown Park, Market Street in the Woodlands and the soon-to-open West Ave on Kirby at Westheimer. Residential projects include Aliana, a residential community in Fort Bend County, and Pointe West on Galveston Island.

“Environmental graphics, to break it down, means place making – giving a project an identity, making it special and creating a wow factor,” says Meyer, who runs the

company with business partner Mary Grems. “We also create collateral, such as print, web and billboards.”

FMG employs graphic designers, architects and interior designers. Once a new building, hospital or shopping center is conceived and laid out by architects, environmental design firms like FMG develop ways to connect people to the space, to create the character and feeling of the experience.

“We consider the physical conditions of visitors and peoples’ mental states or stress levels as they are finding their way,” says Meyer. “For example, trying to park when you’re going to court or following an ambulance that’s transporting a relative.”

CREATIVE COLLABORATION

Meyer and Grems were both drawn to Houston before launching their careers. Baltimore-born Meyer received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Kansas City Art Institute and School of Design. He hitchhiked to Houston in 1981 to see a Cezanne exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.



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Grems grew up in Chattanooga, Tennessee and earned a Bachelor of Interior Design from Auburn University. She first came to Houston in 1979 to visit her brother who worked for McDonnell Douglas in the Clear Lake area. Less than a year later, she had moved to Houston.

Meyer and Grems first worked together at 3D International during the early 1980s. They brainstormed their business name and logo over drinks at Willie G's on Post Oak Boulevard back in 1983. Combining their initials, Ferdinand Meyer and Mary Grems teamed up to become FMG. Twenty-six years

later, they continue to enjoy working together, something Meyer attributes to their complementary skills and talents.

DEDICATED TO DOWNTOWN

Meyer and Grems agree that being downtown provides easy access to both airports – a must for FMG, considering approximately 75 percent of their business is out-of-state or international. FMG Design has always been located in downtown Houston – even during those tough years in the '80s when few companies stayed downtown.

In the early years of the firm, FMG occupied a floor of the Houston House Apartments and later moved to the Beaconsfield apartment building. When they outgrew the historic apartment building they never considered leaving

downtown, instead moving into their current location, the Eller Wagon Works building, in 1998. The quirky three-story warehouse building on Crawford was constructed in 1909 for the manufacture of horse-drawn wagons.

The entire FMG staff (numbering about 20) enjoys their arty, eclectic area of downtown, which is dotted with aesthetic elements from the recently completed Cotswold Project, such as sculptures, fountains and plantings along generous sidewalks. FMG's warehouse location also helps fuel the creative process. Large windows give plenty of “mental space” for creative thinking, while the wide-open quarters accommodate collaboration and the variety of computer equipment their work requires.

Hurricane Ike caused devastating damage to the Wagon Works building, ripping an air conditioning unit from the roof and causing significant water damage. FMG was forced to move out for several months and to work from their homes and later from borrowed office space scattered across the city.

“We had a decision to make after Ike,” says Meyer. “We could have gone somewhere else and said, ‘To heck with this place,’ but we liked it downtown so much – this area so much – we came back.”

Meyer and Grems keep their office well-protected. Their security team includes four dogs, including one German shepherd. The diligent canine crew is backed up by two cats and a few fish.

PROUD TO CALL HOUSTON HOME

After years of traveling to many U.S. and international cities, Meyer and Grems have a healthy appreciation of Houston.

“Houston is a very sophisticated city,” says Meyer. “I get amused at the people

who think that Houston is all concrete. You go up in any skyscraper more than five stories and you're amazed that you don't see any roads – it's all canopy. Houston is a green city. I am amazed that people still don't know that.”

Meyer also insists the general perception of Houston's traffic is overblown. “I travel to a lot of cities and the traffic is horrible everywhere from Austin to D.C. to Los Angeles,” says Meyer. “But in Houston, what they've done on 59 and I-10 West in particular, I believe, is a model for urban transportation. It's just amazing stuff.”

FMG AT A GLANCE

- ADDRESS:**
101 Crawford, Studio 1A, 77002
- EMPLOYEES:**
20 staffers and several four-legged freelancers
- PRINCIPALS:**
Ferdinand Meyer and Mary Grems
- BUSINESS:**
Environmental graphic design and visual communications
- WEB SITE:**
fmgdesign.com

