BRAND CENTRAL

What's a corporate identity? And how should it look?
Denise Korn helps clients figure that out.

By Carlene Hempel

Denise Korn is standing in her bright South End office over a collection of wicker boxes, each piled high with colorful magazine and newspaper clippings. The stacks — of landscapes and cityscapes and models — get Korn thinking. If you were to sift carefully, you'd see colors, textures, and patterns central to some of her recent projects, including the South End entry Roca, the recently opened Liberty Hotel, and Rialto, the award-winning restaurant whose look and feel Korn helped create.

"I read everything," Korn says. "I believe a lot in intuition, and I also use those to learn about styles, trends, and designers." In recent years, Korn has overseen an expanding client list that includes some of the city's most high-profile projects (she does virtually all of hotelier Dick Friedman's ventures) as well as hot spots across the country, such as the London NYC hotel in Manhattan and the soon-to-open London West Hollywood. Her company, Korn Design, focuses on brand strategies that, in creating a project's look and feel and identity, can encompass everything from a website's design to the choice of art hanging in a lobby to the order of a menu.

"Whether it's a restaurant, a hotel, or a hospital," Korn says, "I think the power of design can really drive business."

It isn't easy. Her firm's latest project, announced last week, is to rebrand Northeastern University, an AEDAR DESIGN, Page 010
Armed with a vivid imagination, they craft identities

At her office one afternoon, Korn is stylish yet understated in a gray belted sweater, black pants, and chunky silver bangles. With her shiny black hair and bright smile, she's at once charming and unassuming. She pouts to her young assistant to bring her coffee, then worries aloud that the muffin she's about to eat will end up on her lap.

Korn Design takes up two floors in what used to be home to the Stained Glass Society of New England. Her office, man and appointed with an enormous bouquet of white ranunculus, is on the first floor, along with a conference room. Her 11 designers, as well as business partner Javier Cortés, work in an open, airy basement. Here, the cradle of creativity translates to identifiable form.

Above: Javier Cortés, Denise Korn's business partner. Right: Images from magazines and elsewhere find a place on the "inspiration wall" in the offices of Korn Design.

Whitley is working on a look for Essa Spa at the Ritz Carlton Palm Beach. And Bryant Ross is creating a brochure for the Liberty Hotel. Korn and the Mexico City-born Cortés, who's been working with Korn since he graduated Boston University in 1996, are in the midst of all this, peering over the designers' shoulders, studying the "pin-up wall" where early designs are posted, pulling people over to the worktable to discuss.

And her crew were approached by the Sage Restaurant Group (owners of the swank Cask & Larder restaurant and marina bar in Dan- pet) to brand a new Spanish tapas bar in downtown Chicago. While Madrid might be the traditional inspiration for such a project, Korn pushed Barcelona as the catalyst. "I love Barcelona. It's a very young, edgy, gritty region," she says. "It has this incredible undercurrent of energy."

With that, she and Cortés hired like you're having aJune landing. It all comes together."

Launching from home

End in 1991, where they still live with their two children, 11 and 13. She launched Korn Design a year later from her home, and moved with how the hotel was presented to the public. She's been on just about all his projects since.

"I respect her," he says of Korn. "It's not like she comes back with something and I always say, 'Oh, that's nice. Because we go at it. But she's always good natured. And she has a point of view. And she's usually right than wrong.'"

Altering Boston's image

Korn carries a notebook when she works, so she can take copious notes. She's critical, pensive and focused, people say, whether the project is a glamorous hotel, or the pro bono venture she developed to place city children in summer jobs at creative firms around Boston.

Cambridge architect Nick Winton, a board member at the Institute of Contemporary Art as well as a long-time friend and recent collaborator of Korn's, says her work has become well-known in Boston. She's emerged, he says, as a key figure among a new wave of cultural voices that's altering the city's image from starchy and conservative to creative and enterprising.

"Boston has grown out of its essential roots and it has really become a great contemporary city," says Winton. "And that's the evolution of the creative work force. Whether it's architects or designers or technicians in the digital world, Denise is very much a part of that."

Korn likes to think she's contributing to the broader landscape, but she can't dwell on it. There's simply too much work to do, and she never knows when inspiration will strike. Recently, pag