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DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

# BRAND CENTRAL

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

By Carlene Hempel  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

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 scraps — of landscapes and city scenes 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 chic South End eatery Rocca, the recently opened Liberty Hotel, and Rialto, the award-winning restaurant whose look

and feel Korn helped reimagine.

"I read everything," Korn says. "I believe a lot in intuition, and I also use these 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 strategy, that is, creating a project's look and feel and identity.

That can encompass everything from a website's design to the choice of art hanging in a lobby to the color of a matchbook. In an increasingly crowded marketplace, companies like Korn's play a pivotal role, positioning their clients to connect with just the right audience.

"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

**KORN DESIGN, Page D10**



**Identity, born** When Korn Design helped Jody Adams rethink the look of her restaurant, Rialto, inspiration came from many sources. Left: Tuscan hues of terra cotta and rosemary made their way into the color palette. Right: In the new logotype the connection between the "r" and "i" is "like an open hand," says Korn (in her office, above).



# Armed with a vivid imagination, they craft identities

► **KORN DESIGN**  
Continued from Page D1

institution determined to cast off its commuter-school past to embrace a more academically selective future. But how best to distinguish the school in a city crammed with big name universities?

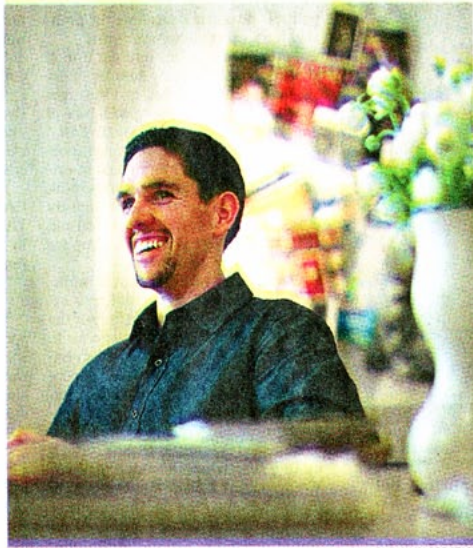
"I think that what President [Joseph] Aoun is looking to do is really expose and properly share the incredible energy and forward-thinking nature that the institution has," Korn says. "He really believes that branding and the way Northeastern is packaged is an important part of his journey, his vision."

## Crackle of creativity

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 purrs to her young assistant to bring her coffee, then worries aloud that the muffin she's about to eat will end up on her hips.

Korn Design takes up two floors in what used to be home to the Stained Glass Society of New England. Her office, neat and appointed with an enormous bouquet of white ranunculuses, 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's where the crackle of creativity translates to identifiable form.

A recent Thursday: Melissa Wehrman is finishing her brand work for Mercat a la Planxa, a Cat-



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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.

Whitla is working on a look for Eau 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 work table to discuss.

"It's a great job in a great town."

and her crew were approached by the Sage Restaurant Group (owners of the swank Corner Office restaurant and martini bar in Denver) 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, gutsy region," she says. "It has this incredible undercurrent of energy."

With that, she and Cortés hired



like you're having a lunar 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 fine.' Because we go at it. But she's always good natured. And she has a point of view. And she's usually more right than wrong."

## Altering Boston's image

Korn carries a notebook when she works, so she can take copious notes. She's erudite, funny 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 colonial roots and it has really become a great contemporary city," says Winton. "A lot of that is the evolution of the creative workforce. Whether that'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-