

Case Study:  
The M Group  
Architects &  
Interior Architects



# IMPROVING OFFICE ENVIRONMENTS THROUGH CREATIVE COLLABORATION





(L-R): The M Group's Ben Marder, Amy Hopper, and Mike Timcheck collaborate to deliver purposeful design and fulfilled clients.

Mitchell Freedman, AIA, was a new father in 1987 when he formed The M Group in Vienna, Virginia. While he initially worked as a sole practitioner, he wanted to create a collaborative team environment like the one he enjoyed early in his career when he worked for the global design, architecture, engineering, and planning firm HOK in San Francisco. So he began hiring people who shared his creative vision and his commitment to hard work and collaboration.

The shift paid off. Today, Freedman leads a 17-person firm, now called The M Group Architects & Interior Architects, that is sought after by building owners and corporate and industrial clients for office building architecture and interiors, as well as by government contractors and agencies for mission-critical and secure design. His staff includes 10 architects, five interior designers, and a handful of administrators. Their work varies from 5,000-square-foot tenant spaces to building complexes totaling one million square feet.

## Collaboration and Communication

"We offer the peace of mind that comes from working with experienced professionals in an atmosphere of honest collaboration and timely communication," says Freedman. "Our clients know we offer more than just design excellence."

Interior Designer and Director of Operations Karen Lewis adds that several conference rooms often house concentrated collaboration among small teams, as well as learning sessions with experts on topics ranging from new materials to building codes. "We aren't pigeonholed into endless CAD entry or survey work, and there are vast opportunities to take less-experienced designers into the field to learn how site conditions can prompt drawing changes. The ability to troubleshoot and learn from such experiences creates a dynamic environment."

The firm also takes a "Zero Ego" approach to business. "We're professional designers, but we're in a service industry, so we focus on what each client desires and check our egos at the door," says Freedman. Architect Michael Timcheck agrees, noting, "One of the worst things I can do is try to force a design on my client. So when we initiate a project, we learn about the client's design aesthetic and what they want their building to communicate. We capture the client's desires and create spaces that work for them."





Shown here and below, the new KPMG office incorporates colors local to Pittsburgh, such as the yellows on bridges, the grays of the steel city, and the rusts and reds of aging steel, not to mention the yellow and black from their Steelers football team.

## Enhancing City Views for KPMG

As an example, Lewis applies this approach to client KPMG LLP, an audit, tax, and advisory firm for which M Group has designed numerous offices over the past 25 years. Recently, Lewis and colleague Amy Hopper spent a year designing and furnishing a full-floor suite for KPMG in Pittsburgh's BNY Mellon Bank Building. The office staff moved from the 25th to the 34th floor of the same building. In the newly designed space, more than 90% of office seats enjoy views of the Monongahela, Allegheny, or Ohio Rivers; PNC Park; Heinz Field; or Highmark Stadium.

Working with Vectorworks® Architect software, M Group implemented into their design KPMG's nationwide space and site standards, which were communicated through a series of visioning sessions with a cross-functional team of KPMG personnel. M Group also integrated a shared workspace management system, advanced phone technology, and audio/visual upgrades. The program incorporates colors local to Pittsburgh, such as the yellows on bridges, the grays of the steel city, and the rusts and reds of aging steel, not to mention the yellow and black from their Steelers football team. Stainless and Corten rusted steel make up the millwork elements, and etched vinyl bridge imagery appears on glass fronts. In addition, a wavy, blue-tile backsplash and a metal-sculpted school of fish light up the lunchroom, which overlooks the Monongahela River.

"We plan to KPMG's corporate standards, and then we stay in the trenches to make sure our program elevates how KPMG does business while supporting and enhancing their culture," says Lewis. "It's rewarding work."

She adds that KPMG moved into the space, which is expected to achieve LEED® Silver accreditation, in November 2013. Some of the project's LEED features include occupancy sensors to optimize energy and lighting performance, ENERGY STAR-rated equipment and appliances, and the purchase of wind power to offset all power consumption for the first two years of a 10-year lease. In addition, more than 20% of project materials were recycled, and more than 20% were extracted or harvested within 500 miles of the building. Project components also include low-emitting adhesives, sealants, paints, and coatings. In addition, all flooring was FloorScore®- or Green Label Plus-rated, and all furniture was GREENGUARD®- or BIFMA-certified.





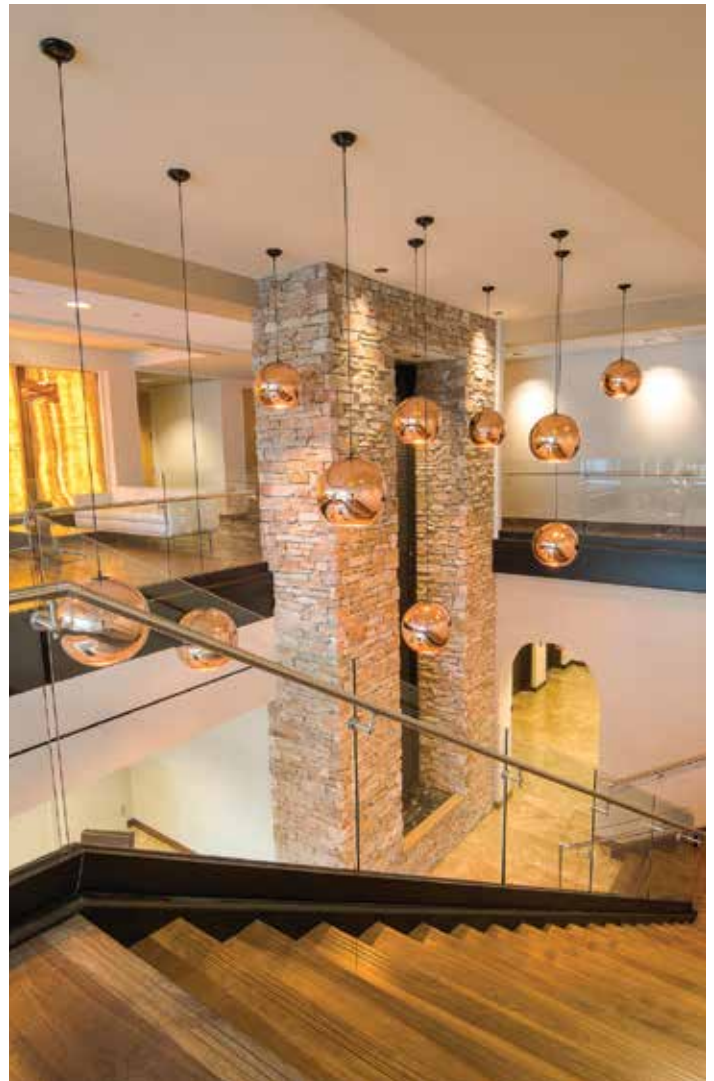
## A Grand Entry for Thompson Hospitality

Timcheck's most recent project is also an office space. Thompson Hospitality, a food service provider and one of the largest retail food and facilities management companies in the United States, purchased a two-story, 40,000-square-foot office in northern Virginia. An existing tenant occupied the first floor. Thompson retained them and occupied the functional second floor but sought a grand entrance to reinforce its corporate identity and create an exciting first impression.

Following many meetings listening to Thompson's needs, M Group conceived a new entry façade. The design removed part of the second floor to create a 23-foot-tall atrium complete with a two-story waterfall. Blowing out the second-floor slab required careful collaboration with structural and mechanical engineering partners. Although those companies used a different CAD tool than Vectorworks, cooperation between them and M Group was not a problem; M Group successfully shared its Vectorworks files due to the software's strong interoperability and import/export capabilities.

Other features of the space include a large boardroom with an enhanced A/V system, extensive custom millwork, and glass-front offices. Large photographs of employees from restaurants Thompson owns and operates adorn the walls, a treatment that complements its credo: "It isn't simply what you do in your life that matters; it's who you are." People matter most to Thompson, and these values are now clearly communicated at its headquarters.

M Group also utilized smart, cost-effective, and sustainable products. "Where possible, we specify green materials and design with an awareness and use of green building principles because it's an essential part of quality design," says Timcheck.



*M Group conceived a new entry façade for Thompson Hospitality that includes removal of part of the second floor to create a 23-foot-tall atrium complete with a two-story waterfall.*







M Group relies on the Vectorworks program's add-on rendering application, *Renderworks*®, to produce photorealistic renderings that artfully convey ideas to clients.

M Group also relied on Vectorworks software's workgroup referencing capabilities, which provide a flexible way to split tasks into manageable pieces and enable team collaboration. "We had two working files – one for the office portion of the project, and one for the exterior, lobby, and stair work," Timcheck explains. "These two files were then referenced by a third file where we set up our sheets. This allowed us to get multiple people working on the project and meet our deadline." He adds that while M Group leaves the files separated for some projects, they later combined the working files into a single file for one project manager to navigate during construction. Timcheck also used workgroup referencing earlier in the Thompson project when he created a separate file for multiple 3D sketches for the exterior work. He later referenced the final design in his exterior working file.

### Designing for the "Starbucks Generation"

Looking to the future, M Group foresees catering to new generations and technologies, creating visually enticing backdrops that support mobile connectivity with smart finishes. Lewis anticipates seeing how technology impacts the built environment to address the needs of younger generations who are constantly on the move, connected, and networking with others. "We will need to revolutionize our interior designs to create spaces that attract and retain younger employees – the Starbucks generation – who may want to sit in a café setting to work."

M Group designed one such space for E Group, Inc., a company dedicated to helping clients improve their engagement with employees and customers. The firm did not need a dedicated receptionist for its Reston, Virginia office, so M Group transformed the entryway into a coffee bar with informal seating. The space serves as a waiting area



A coffee bar with informal seating replaces the traditional reception area at E Group, Inc.'s office in Virginia.

for visitors and a casual meeting area for staff. During the day, staff can unplug from their desks and sit with a cup of coffee and a coworker and have a productive conversation. "Areas like this are what excite younger hires, thereby helping with both recruitment and retention of young talent," says Timcheck.

Integrating strong wireless connections and collaborative A/V sessions using advanced shared screens, all while making it look seamless, is another goal that Lewis is tasked with more frequently, and she's up to the challenge. "Bringing these types of desires into the corporate environment is an interesting puzzle that keeps me excited about the future," says Lewis.

In addition, the M Group, and the industry as a whole, has seen project footprints decrease. Companies are reducing their leased area in an effort to become as efficient as possible. Along with an increase in telecommuting, this means fewer people are working in a traditional office space. Timcheck sees this as a compelling challenge, stating, "These evolutions require us to think more creatively about how we can make the most of limited space." Given M Group's steady record of creating thoughtful, functional spaces, the innovative projects that will fill their portfolio in the future are sure to impress.

## Acknowledgements

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