

US BUILDERS REVIEW

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GRUSKIN GROUP

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Building blocks include creativity, collaboration and pink foam



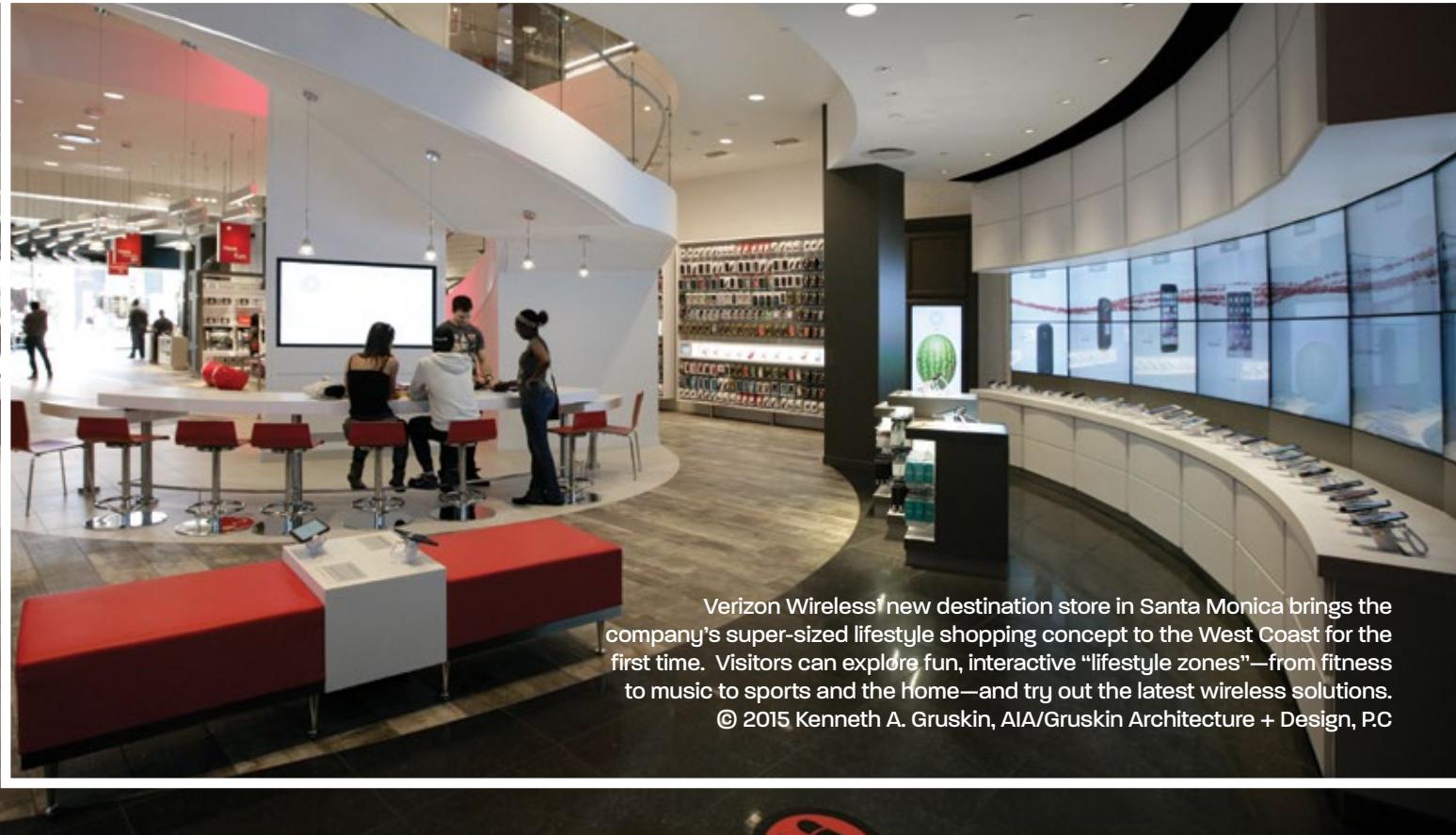
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Kenneth A. Gruskin AIA

In today's architectural and design professions, creating extraordinary places and experiences requires computer models and cutting-edge technology. But complex ideas may have to be depicted in simpler "analog" terms, even if it means using the pink, full-size foam models that Gruskin Group often utilizes when collaborating with clients in pursuit of communicating that all-important vision.

Produced by Brandon Bagley and Written by Neil Cote



Verizon Wireless' new destination store in Santa Monica brings the company's super-sized lifestyle shopping concept to the West Coast for the first time. Visitors can explore fun, interactive "lifestyle zones"—from fitness to music to sports and the home—and try out the latest wireless solutions.
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When Verizon was opening a concept store in Virginia a number of years ago, it appealed to the architectural and designing expertise of Gruskin Group.

An integrated design firm in Springfield, New Jersey, Gruskin Group used pink foam to mock up a 5,000-square-foot concept that enabled Verizon's departments to field-test what would be their new retail store concept—all on a rapid timeline. With foam being easier to manipulate than bricks and mortar, changes were less costly and less time consuming.

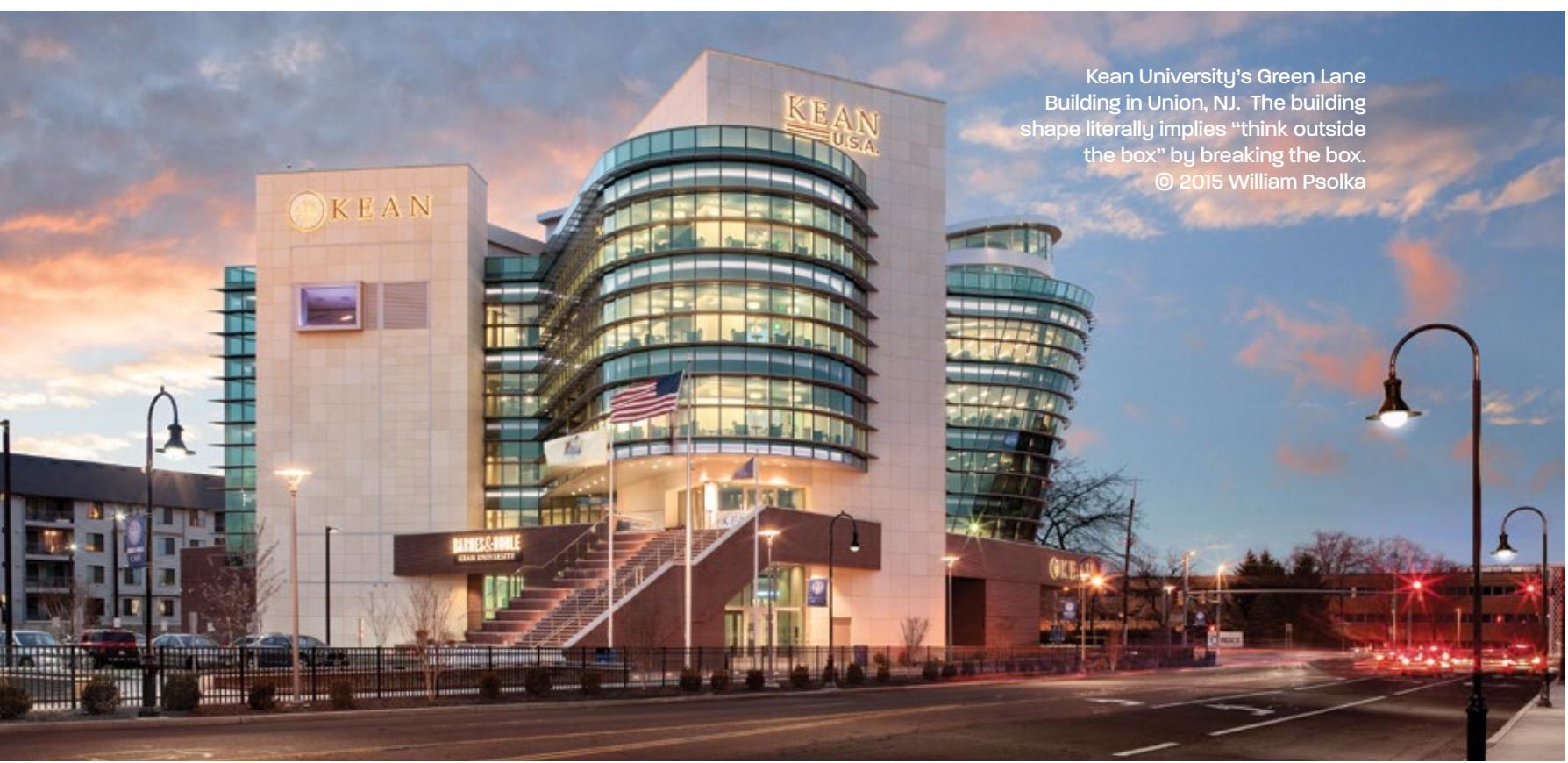
"The client's leadership, HQ sales team, IT and marketing groups were able to test and experience the design firsthand, then quickly and confidently suggest changes while obtaining consensus across a wide range of teams and stakeholders," remembers Kenneth A. Gruskin, the 58-year-old company founder and president who holds an undergraduate architectural degree from Cornell and a master's from Harvard.

"We were able to make changes quickly, often right then with clients in the room, and the proof was in the pudding: when the store opened, there were few changes that had to be made."

In addition, the client was able to ship foam "templates" to fabricators to speed up the manufacturing process.

To be sure, as a firm offering integrated and architectural design as well as creative branding, graphic design and interactive services in support of new and renovated facilities, Gruskin Group is well-versed at using high-tech digital tools and computer modeling.

But when it comes to helping the client visualize, Gruskin Group's "pinking process" may be the way to go.



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Colgate-Palmolive's research facility in Piscataway, NJ. Gruskin Group™ refreshed the lobby with environmental graphics and paint.

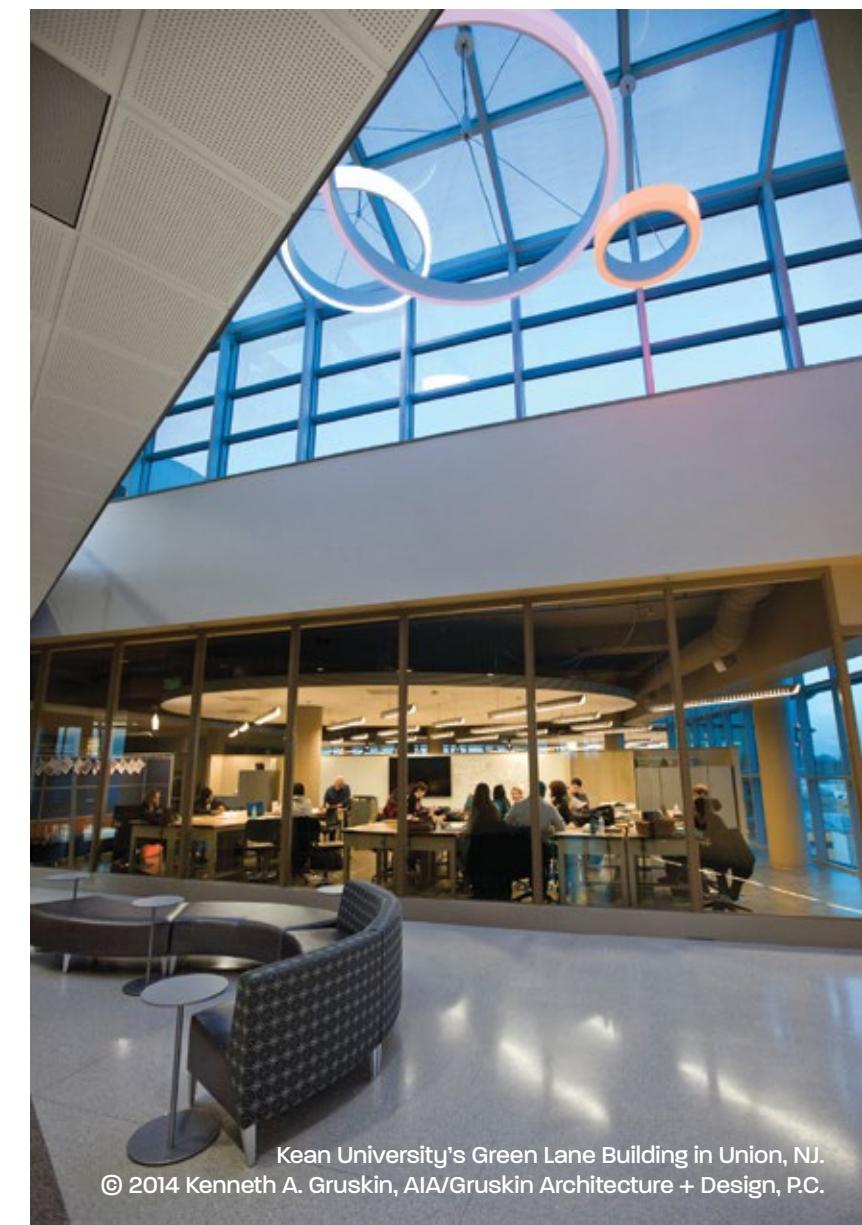
Color them collaborative

A licensed architect in every state as well as the nation's capital and Puerto Rico, Gruskin calls his approach basic.

"We place the client at the center of our collaborative process," says Gruskin. "Because it's not what's important to us; it's how our design team's expertise can be applied to a solution that delivers what's important to our client, the end user, and the desired experience, outcome."

Nowadays, to create integrated architectural and design solutions, the client may rely on the architect for more than just exterior and interior looks. LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), info-tech, Americans with Disabilities Act compliance, brand development and marketing, graphic design, and web and video capabilities—all are essential to create a unified end-user experience that is authentic, meaningful, contextual and cost-effective.

With a staff of 50, Gruskin Group says it meets those needs for a client base that includes telecommunications, specialty retail, hospitality, entertainment, corporate, cultural, multi-family and mixed-use residential, nonprofit, financial and academia.





On the boards now: Study render of Benchmark Development's Powerhouse Square in Great Barrington, MA – a multi-use project with food co-op, retail and condos. Gruskin Group™ also created the logo and marketing website. © 2016 Kenneth A. Gruskin, AIA/Gruskin Architecture + Design, P.C.



SPEEDVEGAS in Las Vegas. From an observation deck overlooking the racetrack and nearby mountains, visitors experience the course as exotic cars zip past. Gruskin Group™ also created the logo and branding.
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SPEEDVEGAS in Las Vegas. Interior view of display/sponsor area and stairway that leads to multi-purpose rooms and outdoor terrace.
© 2016 SPEEDVEGAS

Appearance counts

Gruskin remembers how a Fortune 500 company sought his services in redoing its two-story lobby. The company wasn't impressed with the architects it initially interviewed; their options required numerous structural changes and a large budget.

"Instead of utilizing traditional architecture and construction to solve their problem, we were able to reimagine the space using environmental graphics, paint and furniture," says Gruskin. "For a couple hundred thousand dollars, we were able to completely change the space and its perception, and to better align it with the client's updated brand expression."

A similar challenge, but on a wider scale, came from Kean University in Union County, New Jersey, which turned to Gruskin to design one of its flagship buildings.

Situated along a public street, rather than in the middle of the campus, the iconic Green Lane Building opened in 2014 as a 102,275-square-foot glass, stone and brick structure that's perceived as part of the greater community rather than just a secluded ivory tower.

The mixed-use, six-story building has won numerous awards, and Gruskin calls it a "visual metaphor," saying it is meant to inspire anyone to expand their horizons. Appropriately enough, it's home to the university's new Michael Graves College, comprised of the Robert Busch School of Design and the School of Public Architecture.

To Gruskin, the Green Lane Building also represents a "student-centric" trend with its mixed uses that include a bookstore, classrooms and administrative spaces, halls that serve as social gathering and study spaces, a street-level café, multipurpose areas and terraces—all with inspiring views of New York City. Students created a book of images of the building and sent it to Gruskin with the inscription: "We love our new building!"

Other horizons have taken Gruskin Group's services to the Nevada desert. The firm helped to create the overall vision and branding and then designed SPEEDVEGAS, a venue with a 100-acre, 1.5-mile Formula One-inspired course with 60 feet of rising elevation, 12 banked corners and a half-mile straightaway just minutes from the Sin City strip.

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Double Wide Grill in Pennsylvania. Themed concept restaurant designed to look like 50's gas station, complete with trailers, a tow truck and petroliana throughout. Gruskin Group™ also created the logo and branding.



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Double Wide Grill in Pennsylvania.

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Ambition realized

Thinking back to his student days, Gruskin recalls how he had to write an essay before being admitted to Harvard's prestigious architectural program. He wrote that he wanted to run a general firm that employed designers of different specialties who could meld together engaging solutions.

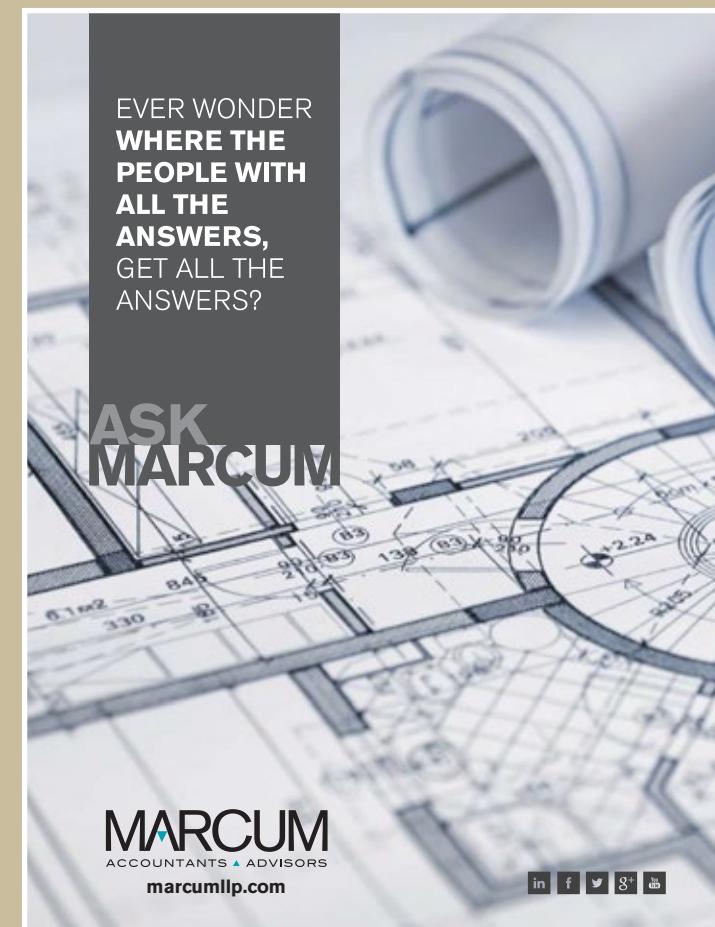
"A specialist often sees the world in narrow slices or silos. But to create strong, cohesive design, one needs to think wide and not lose sight of the big picture or idea," Gruskin says. "In addition to seeing the forest and not losing sight of the trees, you cannot be blinded by a tree and lose sight of the forest."

Post-Harvard, Gruskin stayed in the Boston area, working for Cambridge Seven Associates Inc., an architectural powerhouse with a multi-disciplinary model that the young architect found inspiring. But Gruskin wanted to strike out on his own and, with a couple of partners, co-founded AGM Architecture and Design in 1984 when he was pre-wife and pre-family and “could still live like a student and didn’t have too far to fall if I failed.”

It was no misstep; a New York advertising company, Barking Lion Inc., joined AGM in 2001. One year later, the firm—whose portfolio included projects for the entertainment and real estate sectors—rebranded as Gruskin Group. The firm is an “Inc. 5000” honoree and has appeared in Architectural Record’s Top 300 Architecture Firms and Display and Design Ideas (DDI) magazine’s Top 20 Retail Design Firms.

So, a few decades after Gruskin wrote that Harvard essay, he's accomplishing much of what he set out to do: collaborating with clients for a big-picture vision, then working with his crew to make it a reality.

"We don't work in style, we work in a philosophy," Gruskin says. "And that's taking a client's visions and goals and translating them through our various design disciplines into an integrated, successful result. Our goal is to collaborate closely with the client, creating a unique solution that is the result of our journey and adventure together." •





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