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Spotlight on Chicago The Environments Group

by Lauren Weinberg

I have been living in Chicago for three months now, and although I am a bit homesick for my native New York, I am having a great time exploring the city, which seems to boast an architectural landmark by **Daniel Burnham; Frank Lloyd Wright; Mies van der Rohe; Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill;** and other international icons on every other block, including contemporary superstars like **Rem Koolhaas** and **Tadao Ando**. This week, we will publish the first installment of our "Spotlight on Chicago," a series based on my conversations with A&D firms in the Windy City.

When I visited Chicago this past spring to search for an apartment, I sat down with **Cary D. Johnson, FIIDA**, principal; and **Sarah Busch**, associate; of **The Environments Group** (303 East Wacker Drive, Ste. 800), which was founded in 1991 by five employees of PHH Environments, which had been around in various incarnations – it had previously been known as Avenue Group and RMM Inc. – since 1968. To-

day, it has more than 60 employees.

The firm's long-term relationships with many clients demonstrate that it lives up to its motto, "**Design in service to business.**" Its sole office is in Chicago and much of its work is in or near the city. Ms. Busch explained that local clients appreciate its knowledge of and consistent performance in the market. Mr. Johnson noted that over the last seven years, however, The Environments Group has had more and more work in other parts of the country.

The Environments Group prides itself on *not* having giant egos or a signature look. "It's really about the team," Mr. Johnson told me. The firm is currently led by managing principal **Frederick J. Schmidt, IIDA**; and principals **Gina Berndt, ASID**, and **Joseph T. Connell, IIDA**, and Mr. Johnson, a past president of IIDA. Mr. Schmidt and Ms. Berndt were part of the original team that founded The Environments Group. In March 2005, when the firm was the



(l-r) Frederick J. Schmidt, Gina Berndt, Cary Johnson, and Joe Connell
Photograph by Marc Harris

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subject of a lead story in *Interiors and Sources*, the four principals even debated whether they should appear on the cover. Mr. Schmidt told writer Robert Nieminen, "Part of what I think is wrong with our profession is this 'cult of the individual' thing we have going." The Environments Group's leaders seem to possess complementary strengths: for example, Mr. Schmidt, according to Ms. Busch, is "a pioneer" in workplace strategy and programming, having founded the firm's facility consulting practice; while Mr. Connell – who cites **Interface** founder **Ray Anderson** as one of his primary influences – is the resident expert on green design.

In addition to emphasizing the needs of the client, The Environments Group strongly believes in documenting projects and benchmarking. Since it has so many long-term relationships – Chubb Insurance has been a "really important client" for twelve years, for example – "We see what it's like to live with [our] decisions," said Mr. Johnson. The firm has also worked with high-profile companies such as Ernst & Young, UBS, and Accenture. It has completed numerous projects for law firms, including a 215,000-sq.-ft. Chicago office for Milwaukee-based

Foley & Lardner. Since the design services were commissioned after a merger at the law firm, The Environments Group had to find "a palette, details, and materials" that would be accepted by two disparate cultures, and ideally, bring them together. Artwork was an important component of the project; Ms. Busch explained that the firm tries to use it "wherever they can, especially in public areas."

Our readers may have seen The Environments Group's work in the Merchandise Mart, where it designed **Allsteel** and **Gunlocke's** showroom in 2003. Just as it did for Foley & Lardner, the firm found a sensitive way to unite two distinct entities; in this case, each company can also still express its own identity. The Environments Group also created **izzydesign's** Chicago showroom, which I consider to be one of the coziest spaces at the Mart. In addition, the firm has designed spaces for **Herman Miller** and **Interface**.

Like many of its competitors, The Environments Group is seeking commissions outside the office market. Since it has designed so many training spaces, Mr. Johnson suggests, "Higher education is a natural fit." The firm has



The Chubb Group of Insurance Companies,
Whitehouse Station, NJ
Photograph by Craig Dugan

done work for Northern Illinois University for several years.

Although it may not have an instantly recognizable style à la Frank Gehry, many of the firm's projects do share a certain elegant aesthetic that is appropriate for clients in conservative industries, while retaining a fresh and contemporary feel. These spaces also have a warmth that reflects the philosophy of The Environments Group, which believes in creating great places to work for both its clients and its employees.

For more information, visit www.env-group.com or call 312.644.5080. ▲



Allsteel/Gunlocke Chicago Resource Center, Merchandise Mart
Photograph by Christopher Barrett © Hedrich Blessing



Beecken Petty O'Keefe & Company, Chicago
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