

ANAGRAMA

REARRANGING THE SYMBOLS OF BUSINESS SUCCESS

by Ellen Shapiro

Anagrama, one of the world's hottest new design firms, is located in what might be one of the design world's least-known cities: Monterrey, Mexico. It's a stunningly beautiful metropolis of four million people where skyscrapers, manufacturing centers, colonial architecture and parks are surrounded by mountains so dramatic, they are almost surreal. In a converted warehouse in the upscale San Pedro area, Anagrama's young designers, strategists, programmers and architects create work so extraordinary that in just 4 years the firm has grown from a 3-person shop to a team of 35. They've opened a second office in Mexico City and will soon be expanding to Asia, and then New York City. "We are a totally Mexican company," says founding partner Sebastian Padilla, "but one with clients all around the world."

Padilla, 29, is Anagrama's senior creative director, a graduate of Universidad de Monterrey who developed his own recognizable design style and client base as a freelancer before starting the firm. Managing partner Gustavo Muñoz, 31, who attended Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, is a systems engineer whose previous job was

Caroga Photographer captured all the project images shown.

Right: "Maderista offers custom-made furniture using only the finest wood and needed to consolidate its brand with a stronger and more sophisticated design. We created a logo with a typographical palette to portray timelessness, a coalescence of modern and traditional, and two iconic symbols: a bear and a nail. The bear embodies the strength and robustness of wood, while the nail exemplifies the skilled craftsmanship and thoughtful attention put into each custom-made piece." Lucila Zamora, Maderista, client.





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developing efficiencies for the PepsiCo supply chain serving Latin America and the Caribbean. Creative director Mike Herrera, 31, had worked his way up from junior designer to branding director at a local agency after graduating from Centro de Estudios Superiores de Diseño de Monterrey.

When they met, Muñoz had just left PepsiCo to found a technology start-up and interviewed Padilla to do the branding. “When I looked at Sebastian’s portfolio, I was amazed,” Muñoz recalls. “These were the projects I most admired and remembered from the street. We had many long talks over coffee about building a firm together.” They set up shop in 2009. “The name was Sebastian’s idea,” Muñoz adds. “An anagram, letters rearranged to make a new word, is something static made dynamic. When we started, we didn’t know where we wanted to end up. We wanted a name that could give us the freedom to offer many different creative services.” To make that happen, two more partners were recruited: Roberto Treviño, who manages the firm’s architectural and interior design projects, and software and hardware director Chuy Hernández. Anagrama’s work is now so much in demand that two employees work full-time to answer all the e-mail and phone inquiries that pour in from potential clients.

“Monterrey is near the Texas border,” Padilla explains. “Businesses here now want to be first-world, to look like United States companies and do business internationally.” This turnaround in client thinking explains why Anagrama’s work can be devoid of the clichés associated with Latin American advertising and commercial art: no photos of families enjoying a meal or couples sharing a beer, no folk-art-inspired design. Instead, more and more clients in Mexico—and around the world—realize that to succeed they have to speak a global visual language for a generation that’s connected and informed via mobile devices. “Mexican companies need to modernize, to communicate with more sophistication,” Muñoz says. “This creates opportunities for us. We can captivate their audiences through brand experiences that not only have an interesting look and feel, but function in a superior way.”

To find clients and establish their firm, the partners used three “secret weapons” they aren’t shy about describing. First, they turned down work that didn’t fit the ideal client profile. “It’s easy to say yes to everything and hard to say no, especially when you are just starting out and have no

This page: Anagrama’s founders, from left to right: managing partner Gustavo Muñoz, senior creative director Sebastian Padilla and creative director Mike Herrera.

Right: “Sofia is a building designed by architect Cesar Pelli located in San Pedro Garza García, Mexico. To communicate sophistication and exclusiveness to potential buyers, we created an unexpected identity: a logotype of keys, a coat of arms based on the city of San Pedro’s and a custom typeface inspired by British sans serifs.” Marco+Chuy, photographer; One Development Group, client.

right kind of work, they developed proprietary project management software and protocols. “At PepsiCo, I analyzed inventories and production to bring down costs and eliminate losses. I transferred that knowledge to making a creative business more efficient,” says Muñoz. “Engineers and creatives often distrust each other. But here, people who work efficiently are recognized and find it a great place to work,” though he admits achieving that was a challenge. “How do you quantify creative work?” he asks. “Designing something could take an hour, or it could take two weeks.” He was ultimately able to break the design process into definable, measurable segments and to develop ways to reward efficiencies. For example, when people finish a project a day early, they get an extra day off.

The third not-so-secret weapon is Anagrama’s portfolio. Two designers work exclusively on creating memorable images to post on anagrama.com and on portfolio websites. The partners claim they spend more money on portfolio production—photographers, location scouting, prop styling and post-production—than on office overhead. That strategy has paid off. Anagrama is one of the “most appreciated” firms on Behance, with 140,000 views, 85,000 appreciations and 65,000 followers—and more than a hundred active clients.

It all started with one client, Theurel & Thomas, a patisserie. “We did a total brand experience for almost no money,” says Padilla. Anagrama created an all-white identity—a white shop interior punctuated by colorful confections arranged in geometric patterns—that was widely covered by European and Asian magazines and blogs. Then they sought out other clients: entrepreneurs, people who don’t believe in predictable patterns and who appreciate a similarly bold approach to design. They found the right mindset at Maderista, a small custom furniture store in a local mall, for which they created a store interior like a museum installation, lined with successive waves of sculptural wooden panels. Everything is different than what might be expected for a business in this category; richer, bolder. The stationery set features envelopes made from foil-stamped kraft paper with a button-and-string clasp. “We like to go crazy with finishes and experiment with materials,” says 23-year-old production manager Karla León, who is responsible for mastering all the tricky processes and delivering exactly what the designers envision.

income,” says Padilla. “We made sacrifices in the beginning, waiting for opportunities where we could express our creativity.”

Secondly, after getting the



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For Anagrama's portfolio for example, the Maderista business cards had to be photographed free-floating in a still life with a hammer, saw and nail.

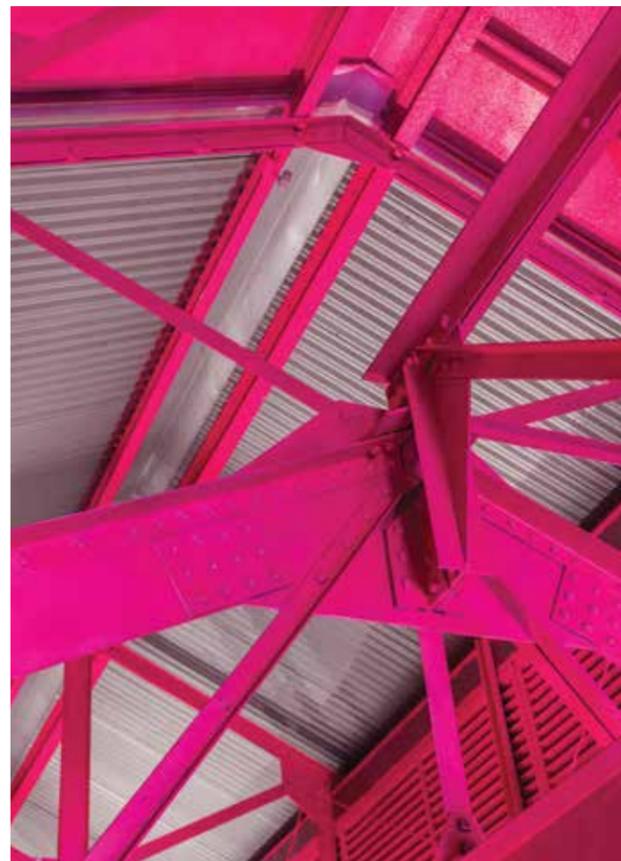
The partners give younger designers like León, many of whom began there as students and interns, opportunities to make major contributions. Daniela Garza, also 23, recalls executing the brand applications for Sofia, an apartment tower designed by architect Cesar Pelli, as one of her best experiences—a job on which she rose to the role of project manager. The work included designing a custom typeface and an antique-inspired coat-of-arms logo, art directing lush still life photography and combining the elements in an eclectic program that includes amenities from umbrellas to wine labels.

Another notable project is Niños Conarte, a children's library in a landmark space that was previously a steelworks. Led by staff architect Andrea Benavides, the designers created a colorful environment for reading, learning and play that echoes Monterrey's mountainous topography. Getting the commission from the State of Nueva León's Council of Culture and Arts shows just how prescient the partners were in positioning Anagrama to serve a region that's undergoing a dual transformation: there is modernization, booming industry and traffic, but also a return to Mexican roots that is getting people out of their cars and into green spaces, back to enjoying nature and each other's company. "The city was built around the automobile, but the local government is developing alternative transportation modes and encouraging more use of parks and sidewalks as a way for people to feel more integrated with the city—allowing them to meet, collaborate and be friendlier," Muñoz says. "There are projects like closing a main street on Sundays so

This page: "Monterrey is best known for its beautiful mountains and strong industrial backbone. For this library and cultural center in a state heritage site, our mission was to create a space that would foster a love of reading in children. The result is a multi-purpose reading platform meant to simulate Monterrey's mountainous topography. The installation's colorful and geometric aesthetic contrasts directly with the antique building, elevating both elements in a cheerful, unique way." Conarte (Council for the Culture and Arts of Nuevo León), client.

Right: "Theurel & Thomas is the first patisserie in Mexico to specialize in macarons, the popular French cookies. For this project it was very important to create an imposing brand that would emphasize the unique value, elegance and detail of this delicate dessert. By using white, we ensured that the attention was fully oriented to the colorful macarons. The design includes two lines in cyan and magenta that inject a modern look to the identity while referencing the French flag. We selected Didot, a French typeface that presents the brand with sophistication." Denise Theurel, Theurel & Thomas, client.

"Mexico is recognized worldwide for its spicy culinary culture. Those who know little about our country are amazed to find that our candy is also infused with spicy flavors. Bermellón is a Mexican hot candy confectionery shop that elevates these traditional candies through packaging, excellent raw materials and handcrafted cooking techniques. Our elegant typographic palette reflects sophistication and the vivid colors are a reminder of the candy's acid and spicy flavors." Camila Mercado, Bermellón, client.





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citizens can walk, do yoga and other activities, or meet in a park to watch a movie they selected on Facebook.”

Anagrama’s office—almost everyone works together in a long room with glossy concrete floors and green-painted ductwork—is in a neighborhood that’s a mix of new and older Mexico, where the designers buy snacks at a little *abarrotes* (grocery store) tucked between modern apartment houses and office buildings, single-family homes and small factories. To the designers, though, the neighborhood’s most



Left: “Doce Cielos is a brand specializing in traditional hand-crafted honey-based products. Its mission is to encourage the recognition and consumption of native Mexican apiculture by emphasizing the product’s health benefits and richness in flavor, texture and color. Our solution achieves a sophisticated link between the heritage of Mexican craft and the honey’s sweet essence. The package design praises the great variety of Mexican honey using a category-based visual system and nomenclature. The typography is meant to convey cleanliness and elegance.” Doce Cielos, client.

“Valentto is a virgin olive oil brand for use in professional restaurant kitchens. The brand’s packaging, reminiscent of an old automobile oil canister, is inspired by its industrial use, but the look is balanced by backgrounds of Italian landscapes. The country scenery gives a natural warmth, an air of family and tradition. The logotype fits snugly in a diamond, giving it a tight and symmetrical feeling. Hot-pressed gold foil and uncoated, unbleached paper speaks for the brand’s high quality.” Olivarera Italo-Mexicana, client.



This page: “Grauforz, an expanding Mexican company that specializes in buying, selling and distributing steel byproducts on a global level, wanted to formalize its brand communication and experience. We kept the original colors and concept and focused on the contact points between the company and its clients, rebranding its logotype, stationery, corporate communications, website and interior architecture for the offices. For the interiors, we used steel for consistency with the company’s product and to communicate strength, and wood to add a warm touch.” Grauforz Mexico, client.



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outstanding feature is the dance studio next door. “Moms drop off and pick up their kids all day long, and a crazy mom-honking frenzy happens at 6:00 p.m.,” reports Muñoz. “When we first moved here, I hated that. But now I think of it as an indicator that it’s almost time to go home to be with my own family.”

For all the modernizing going on, family is still very important here. When asked what they do on weekends, the designers’ answers include everything from Formula One racing to playing guitar and bass. But family comes first. “I spend most weekends with my son Julian and my wife Monica,” says Muñoz. “We go out to dinner or the movies, or we just hang out at home, talking, cooking and having fun.”

And then comes travel: travel in the United States, Europe and throughout Mexico, visiting the “many Mexicos,” from the big cities to the Caribbean and Baja beaches. “Mexico is like 200 Mexicos,” Muñoz says. “If you visit a tourist-centered city like Cancún, you only get that point of view and lose everything cultural,” he points out. “If you visit Mexico City, you’ll get a balance of things—from Aztec ruins to Colonial churches to state-of-the-art skyscrapers—that give a bigger sense of the country. If you visit Monterrey, you’ll get an idea of Mexico as an industrial country, full of factories and businesses, very similar to many United States cities, with a lot of competitiveness and people looking to make money in every possible way.”

Monterrey is where almost all the Anagrama designers grew up and went to school, and they chose to live here and make their mark with design that is extending far beyond the craggy mountains that surround the city. When asked what makes their work so distinctive it attracts clients worldwide, the partners take a philosophical approach: “There is a finite number of colors and shapes and symbols,” says Padilla. “We take those elements and their meanings and rearrange them through a deep creative process. The concepts we develop may be new, but they must become iconic and offer the customer memorable and unique experiences, which in turn help businesses—our clients’ and our own—to develop and grow.” [ca](#)

This page and right: “Montero is a restaurant located in Saltillo, a city very close to the Mexico-United States border, inside an old colonial building that is considered a national heritage site. Its kitchen represents the restaurant’s desert surroundings and its menu is inspired by regional cuisine mixed with contemporary elements. Our job as brand developers was to create a personality that glorifies traditional kitchen values and regional raw materials. Inside, antique elements combine with modern objects to communicate the restaurant’s gastronomical concept.” Fernanda Arrillaga, client.

