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HOUSTON | OCTOBER 2019





# LIFE ON MARS

Inside the irreverent architecture and design firm Mayfield and Ragni Studio, MaRS

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**K**elie Mayfield and Erick Ragni like to have a little fun with the name of their interior architecture firm, Mayfield and Ragni Studio — MaRS. “My personal favorite is calling a courier and asking them to send the package to MaRS,” Mayfield says. And Ragni gets a kick out of introducing himself as “Erick from MaRS.” Such playfulness is encouraged at the company, where the hold music is “Kung Fu Fighting” and where hip-hop, Sinatra, and podcasts stream through the offices via Sonos wireless speakers.

Mayfield and Ragni, who worked together at Rottet Studio before founding MaRS in 2010, love upending the status quo. “Architecture has earned the reputation of being a serious and sober undertaking,” Ragni says. “We enjoy challenging this view in the way we bring the unexpected into our projects — and MaRS is a reflection of that.” Rebellion was on the agenda from the beginning. For the 2012 Texas Contemporary Art Fair, MaRS created a wildly innovative VIP lounge with

shipping pallets, red balls for seating, red umbrellas hanging from the ceiling, and cable spools for tables. The VIP lounge generated as much buzz at the fair as the art, and the design world took note.

Since then, MaRS’s creative reach has expanded to include corporate offices, hotels, restaurants, retail spaces, and

for Hines, including The Preston in Houston, The Victor in Dallas, and The Adeline in Phoenix. In collaboration with Gensler, MaRS is designing the new East Downtown Houston campus for The Center for Pursuit, which treats adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

## OUT OF THIS WORLD

Kelie Mayfield and Erick Ragni sound off on visual memory making, the importance of doodling, and how a hangover changed the course of ice cream history.

### Visual storytelling.

**Mayfield:** We often start a project by spending several days scouting and searching the city and site for the unexpected that nobody else may notice and that may only be found in that particular location. Then we reinterpret the mundane local context and turn it into something special. While we were scouting the Brazos Valley for The George hotel in College Station, we noticed the Texas flag was painted on many barn roofs — a sign of Texas pride within the region. We collaborated with artist Thedra Culler-Ledford on a reinterpreted Texas flag that consisted of almost 10,000 red, white, and blue

MaRS renovated a mid-century building for Gulf Coast Pavers in Houston.



residential and visionary master plans in 11 countries. In Houston, MaRS recently completed chic new offices for Dancie Perugini Ware Public Relations; a stylish renovation of a mid-century building for Gulf Coast Pavers; and sleek mid-rise and high-rise residential buildings in the Museum District and Upper Kirby, including The Southmore and Avenue Grove. Currently MaRS is working on several high-profile projects

The George hotel in College Station features a wall by artist Thedra Culler-Ledford made from 10,000 red, white, and blue books recreating the Texas flag.





books stacked side by side, which transformed the flag into a waving wall of information about the great state.

#### Future shock.

**Ragni:** Office is home, home is hospitality, hospitality is office ... It's all about convergence. Hofficepality?

#### Strategy.

**Mayfield:** Our studio mentality thrives on talented individuals and shared creative ideas. We often have critiques and pin-ups of projects where the studio offers opinions and sometimes even debates what is relevant and timeless.

#### Ragni's roots.

**Ragni:** I started in a tidy New England college, studying the many joys that is Business Administration. But when I told my Broadway theater parents [his father, Gerome Ragni, co-wrote the musical *Hair*] what my major was, they said, "Business? You mean show business?" From this shattering disapproval, I found myself in an Art History survey class, and the fog of practicality lifted to reveal the magic that is the making of art and culture. Ultimately I ended up beginning my



Kelie Mayfield



Erick Ragni

architectural education in the graduate program at SCI-Arc, a somewhat avant-garde architecture school in Los Angeles. I had a short stint in L.A. with Frank Gehry; his office managed to successfully capture the joy, essence, and energy one finds in a thriving architecture classroom. While he is rightfully known for crafting with scissors and paper, he was on the forefront of many things we now take for granted in the industry.

#### Mayfield and Miralles.

**Mayfield:** I worked on a large-scale master-plan project during my early time at Enric Miralles' office in Barcelona. I was only with Enric for a year but luckily worked on a small house project with him, so I was able to collaborate on a very personal level with one of architecture's geniuses. After he caught me being silly one time while I was working, he told me to "always keep architecture fun." I think this has resonated through my work over the years in various ways.

#### Making memories.

**Mayfield:** We try to make a memorable object for every project. We have designed carpets, furniture, wallpapers, fabrics, and art installations. Every aspect is thoughtfully crafted and detailed, from a large Instagram art piece to the stitching on a pillow.

#### Doodles.

**Mayfield:** Erick creates the most beautiful doodles during meetings and phone calls. We turned them into stickers, so several of his most coveted doodles were placed around town. There is scientific proof that doodlers have a better memory recall than non-doodlers, according to the Harvard Medical School (and my

neuropsychologist husband).

#### One thing.

**Mayfield:** Every space needs natural daylight and great lighting. One of my favorite spaces is the Cy Twombly building at the Menil. It's inspiring because it is so simple, but very complex to achieve such perfection of filtered light.

#### Influences.

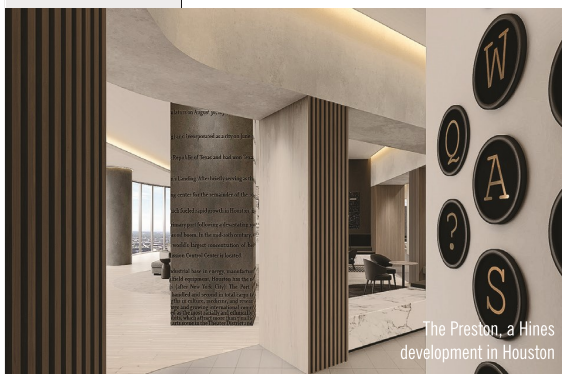
**Ragni:** I'm a fan of the maniacs. Those to whom there is no compromise and perhaps less investment in "normality." The Scarpas, Schindlers and Gaudís of the world.

#### We never knew.

**Ragni:** People think I'm joking about this. It began one hungover morning when I was a sophomore at The University of Vermont in Burlington (home of Ben & Jerry's ice cream). I had that annoying half-hungry, half-nauseous feeling, and all we had in the fridge was a log of half-eaten raw cookie dough. Later in the day, I went with a group of friends to the main outpost of B&J's for a snack. My roommate from freshman year worked there and was in charge of making odd one-off creations. Fresh from my hangover, I recommended cookie dough flavor, and within a week, it was a sample flavor. B&J's sent me a letter saying they could not confirm I was the originator, but I know I invented it. It's my singular great contribution to modern society.



Avenue Grove in Houston



The Preston, a Hines development in Houston