Behind the scenes

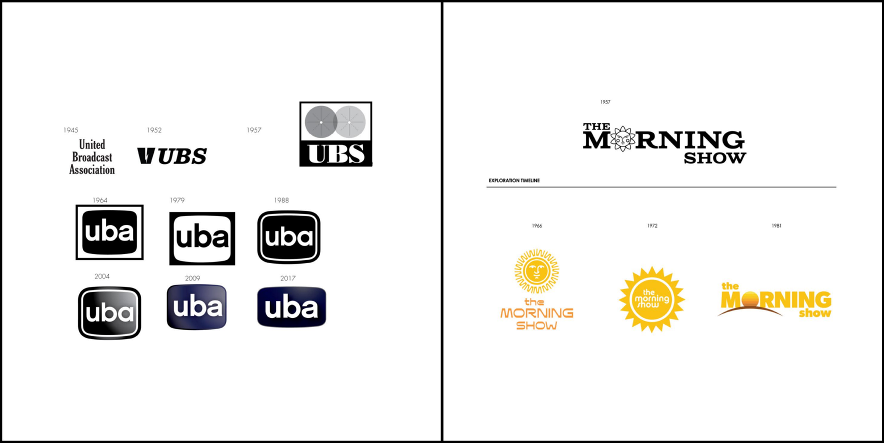
Jane Fitts

SEAMLESS 02
LED WALL
UBA - NY
UBA - DC
UBA NY - Mobile 1
THE MORNING SHOW

“No ideas but in things.”

For graphic designer Jane Fitts, this is not a philosophy. It’s a job. It is Fitts’ job to craft facsimiles of reality for film and television sets. For historical movies, she fabricates a fictional reality. For a futuristic film, she fabricates a realistic fiction. These spaces must be both invisible and believable at the same time. We don’t notice them, but they influence us.

For more than 20 years, since studying graphic design at Art Center College of Design, Fitts has been fabricating objects and artifacts that, like the actors, are protagonists — ideas and stories as much as objects. She has made signage, maps, champagne bottles and product packaging for directors that include Michael Mann, Spike Jonze and David Fincher. She’s worked on The Morning Show, Big Little Lies and American Horror Story. She’s created album covers, fly posters and airplane liveries for Magic City. City seals, IDs and badges for characters in 24 were not allowed to replicate the real thing, but they had to look just as convincing.

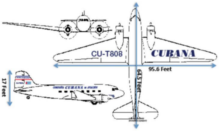

1945
United Broadcast Association
1952
UBS
1957
UBS
1964
uba
1979
uba
1988
uba
2004
uba
2009
uba
2017
uba
1957
THE MORNING SHOW
EXPLORATION TIMELINE
1966
the MORNING SHOW
1972
the morning show
1981
the MORNING show

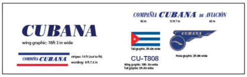
The Morning Show: Chronological brand design of network logo and Morning Show logo, for display in lobby of news network.

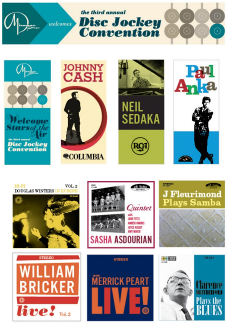
Not only does she need to know what she's making, but why. How it will be used, what it means, may determine how she makes it. Fitts was asked to make a turn-of-the-19th-century map for the film Master & Commander as a background prop or set dressing, so she ink-jet printed a base layer on period-appropriate paper and then hand-painted map features over that. If she had been asked instead to make the map a "hero" prop, which becomes the focus of a character in a macro-shot on camera, she would have hand-letterpressed the bottom layer before painting it, or inked it, with old fountain pens and nibs, entirely by hand. Not understanding or being aware of this distinction, someone involved in production allowed it to be used as an insert shot, resulting in a goof call-out on the film database site, IMDB.

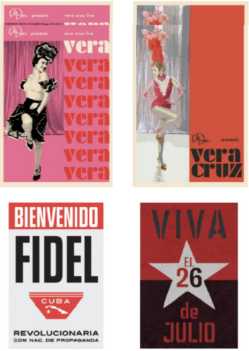
Consultants can be good resources: a policeman, a rabbi, a school teacher. "I search them out," she admits, "because I can't be an expert in everything. I have to lean in and use the village." But much of the time she's doing her own research and, in a sense, working around the clock. She has tapped friends in law enforcement and the law, for example, to tour a DEA office, a SWAT office and the Pentagon. She takes snapshots of diplomas in her doctor's office, nurses' badges at the hospital and her daughters' kindergarten classrooms. "It's about being aware of all the stuff around us. Any time I'm anywhere, I'm taking photographs," she says. Before shooting starts in LA for a show set in Baltimore, she boots up Google Earth. "What do street signs look like in Baltimore? Are they blue or green? Am I going to offset my sign or kern it off on purpose? What material were signs made on in 1925?" she asks. "How do I speak the language of Baltimore?"

COMPAÑIA CUBANA DE AVIACION
CU-T808
COMPAÑIA CUBANA


CU-T808
CUBANA
95.6 Feet
64.5 Feet
17 Feet
COMPAÑIA CUBANA DE AVIACION

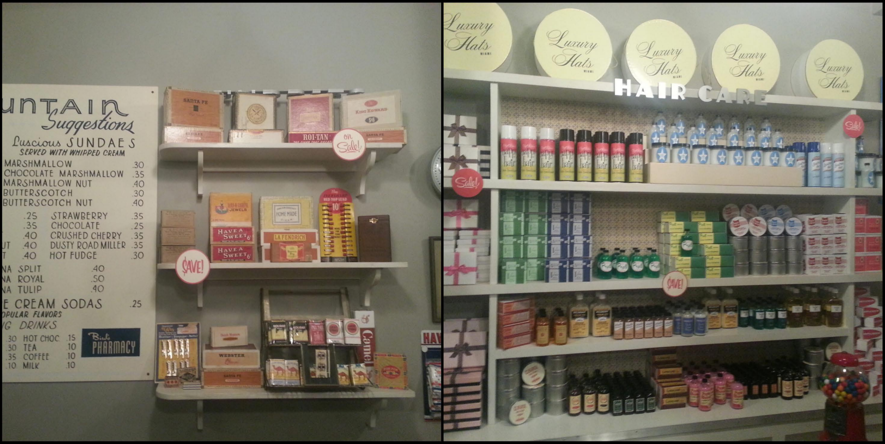

CUBANA
wing graphic: 18ft 3 in wide
COMPAÑIA CUBANA
stripes: 10 ft (cut to fit)
wording: 8 ft 7.5 in
COMPAÑIA CUBANA DE AVIACIÓN
42 in
12 ft 7 in
65 in
Tail graphic: 3ft-6in wide
CUBANA
Nose graphic: 2ft-0in wide
CU-T808
Wing graphic: 18ft- 3in wide
Tail graphic: 3ft-2in wide


welcomes
the third annual
Disc Jockey Convention
Welcome Stars of the Air
the third annual Disc Jockey Convention
JOHNNY CASH
COLUMBIA
NEIL SEDAKA
RCA
Paul Anka
HI-FI
VOL. 2
DOUGLAS WINTERS IN EUROPE
Quintet
SASHA ASDOURIAN
J Fleurimond Plays Samba
STEREO
WILLIAM BRICKER
live! Vol. 2
STEREO
MERRICK PEART
LIVE!
Clarence Weatherford
Plays the BLUES


presents
vera cruz live
vera
vera
vera
vera
vera
vera
vera
vera
presents
vera cruz
BIENVENIDO
FIDEL
CUBA
REVOLUCIONARIA
COM NAC. DE PROPAGANDA
VIVA
EL
26
de
JULIO

Magic City: 1960s period graphics, airline branding, various music and show posters, Fidel propaganda.

For years, Fitts has been building a library of brimming binders, a flat file filled with items like water-stained price tags or yellowing newspapers bought at flea markets, estate sales or antiquarian shows, and a digital database of photos, size currently unknown. These are important tools that allow her to work at the pace required by the industry: five to seven days of prep for a TV episode and three to four months for feature films.


Suggestions
Luscious SUNDAES
SERVED WITH WHIPPED CREAM
MARSHMALLOW .30
CHOCOLATE MARSHMALLOW .35
MARSHMALLOW NUT .40
BUTTERSCOTCH .30
BUTTERSCOTCH NUT .40
STRAWBERRY .35
CHOCOLATE .25
CRUSHED CHERRY .35
DUSTY ROAD MILLER .35
HOT FUDGE .30
PHARMACY
ROI-TAN
on Sale!
SAVE!
Have a Sweet
LA FENDRICH
Camel
Luxury Hats
HAIR CARE
Sale!
SAVE!

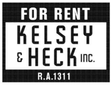
American Horror Story, Freak Show: Period packaging design and signage for pharmacy.

Technology "allows me to stay at my desk," she says. Google image searches catalog objects across hundreds of years. Travels via Google Earth give a sense of locations. But, to check facts and get a sense of scale and texture, she still does gumshoe investigation, going to places like the Smithsonian or The Huntington Library. Technology also, for better and worse, allows anyone to access almost any information, making accuracy more important than ever for those who don't want to star on an IMDB goof call-out. It also quickens the pace of production. "I can send the artwork digitally without leaving my desk," she says, "but the people who have to make these objects physically have to make them faster."

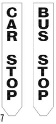
As does she, and her library helps. Fitts generated binders and binders of research for The Curious Case of Benjamin Button, about a man who aged backward, requiring the creation of ephemera across multiple eras. "But I never cull it down," she says of her library. "Everything comes back again."

The databases help in another way: "It's really hard to make the crappy stuff, to do the 'bad' work, so I want to reference it, to make it authentic. When I see something really 'bad', I take a photo. I have photos of rusty old signs and I can tell the person making a replica: 'Age the sign down like this.'" At other times, she has to create "shabby"-looking background vehicles in order to hide things on the street that the camera shouldn't see: plumbing vans, delivery vehicles, graffitied box trucks and so on.

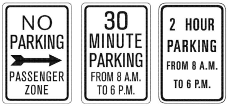
ADDITIONAL STREET SIGNS


FOR RENT
KELSEY
& HECK INC.
R.A.1311

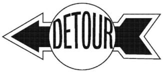
1950'S WILD SIGN


CAR STOP
BUS STOP

1947

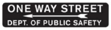

NO PARKING
PASSENGER ZONE
30 MINUTE PARKING
FROM 8 A.M.
TO 6 P.M.
2 HOUR PARKING
FROM 8 A.M.
TO 6 P.M.

1965

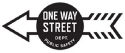


1941

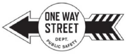
1910s & 20's


ONE WAY STREET
DEPT. OF PUBLIC SAFETY

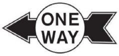
1920's & 30's


ONE WAY
STREET
DEPT.
PUBLIC SAFETY

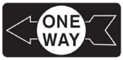
1930's & 40's

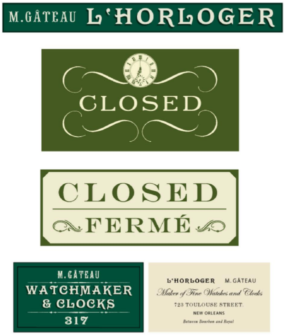

ONE WAY
STREET
DEPT.
PUBLIC SAFETY

1940's & 50's

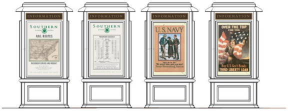


1960's

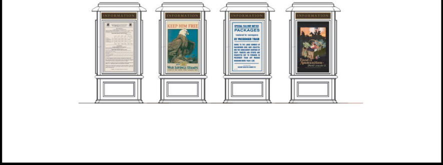


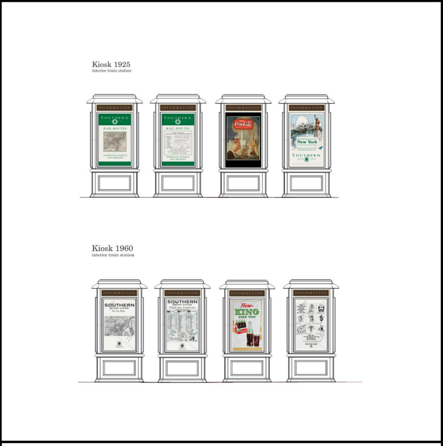

M.GÂTEAU L'HORLOGER
CLOSED
CLOSED
FERMÉ
M.GÂTEAU
WATCHMAKER
& CLOCKS
317
L'HORLOGER
M.GÂTEAU
Maker of Fine Watches and Clocks
723 TOULOUSE STREET.
NEW ORLEANS
Between Bourbon and Royal

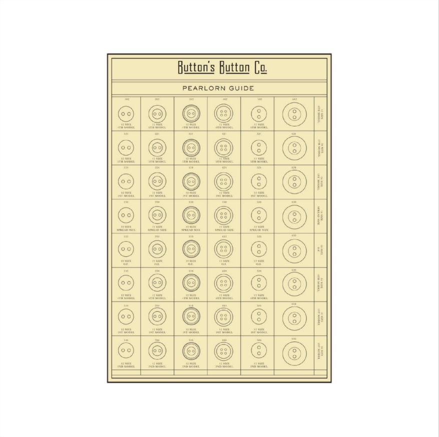
Kiosk 1918
interior train station


INFORMATION
SOUTHERN
RAIL ROUTES
INFORMATION
SOUTHERN
INFORMATION
U.S.NAVY
INFORMATION
OVER THE TOP
THIRD LIBERTY LOAN

Kiosk (2) 1918
interior train station


INFORMATION
KEEP HIM FREE
WAR SAVINGS STAMPS
PACKAGES
BY PASSENGER TRAIN


Kiosk 1925
interior train station
INFORMATION
SOUTHERN
RAIL ROUTES
Coca-Cola
New York
SOUTHERN
Kiosk 1960
interior train station
INFORMATION
SOUTHERN
SOUTHERN
Now
KING SIZE TOO


Button's Button Co.
PEARLORN GUIDE

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button: Various period signage and packaging, showing progression over time.

Fitts tends to work from a typography-oriented graphic design perspective. She did a month of research on typography, period signage and graphic design for Benjamin Button, making a huge spreadsheet noting, for example, when each typeface was created and when it was most popular. “The typeface is your character. Who’s going to speak the language of the film? Is it going to be Bodoni? Kepler? What does a newspaper look like? Because I studied art history, I gather a lot of information, but the typeface is the lead actor. It’s a personal thing for me. It’s very important to get that right.”

More: Fancygraphics.net

Story: Shonquis Moreno