

Points of reference

Mackay + Partners have successfully created an interior design that allows employees to stay connected with each other. Tanya Weaver finds out how



Interior design of new Merck Serono world headquarters	Merck Serono	Mackay + Partners	Relocate Merck Serono's administrative, research and development departments to a single campus styled location in Geneva.
Product	Client	Designers	Brief

The new headquarters of global biotechnology firm Merck Serono is a 40,000m² glass and steel beast sitting next to Lake Geneva, Switzerland. Inspired by the challenge that the client - who specialise in multiple sclerosis, reproductive health, dermatology and growth deficiencies - had set itself, to be the biggest and the best biotech company in the world, Chicago-based architects Murphy Jahn has created this colossal structure by merging six sites (three new and three large-scale industrial buildings dating back to 1892) together to form a campus. Grids of glass and steel form the walls, screens and roof of the buildings which are arranged around a seven floor high atrium and an enclosed street space. The site accommodates approximately 1,200 staff and consists of a combination of office and laboratory space, as well as, conference, dining and fitness facilities.

In 2004 Mackay + Partners, a multi-disciplinary London-based practice, were invited to enter a competition to create the interior design for the headquarters' administrative, research and development departments (not the laboratories). "The architecture is a glass sealed grid with

a very regimented format," explains partner, Gavin Harris. "We were asked to soften that effect and make it more comfortable." The practice was subsequently awarded the project and it aimed to not only promote the technically advanced image of Merck Serono, but also encourage interaction between employees. "One of the big philosophy points of the whole project," says Harris, "was connection." The designers wanted to create an environment that would bring employees together at different locations around the campus.

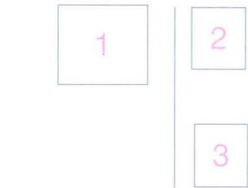
Although Mackay + Partners have done everything from the reception to the luxurious CEO's office and boardroom on the top floor, the areas that have made a real difference to the client is the linkage across the street space, library, café/kiosk, restaurant and 'speak easies'. "These spaces have created a real synergy in the company," comments Harris.

The street space has become the central organising element as it links all the buildings together. Mackay + Partners have further emphasised this linkage by spilling the library and restaurant seating into the space which stretch out like fingers. Harris admits that it is a great space



where there is nothing between a person standing in the space and the sky above accept for a glass roof, which can be lifted in warm weather. The trees which Mackay + Partners have strategically placed in this space help with the scale and also create an interesting effect by playing with the light that floods through the transparent roof and walls.

In Marck Serono's previous location, each section had its own library but in this building Mackay + Partners decided to bring all the libraries together on the fourth floor. "The library came to be visually seen rather than lost in the back of areas," says Harris. "We wanted to show the company's knowledge base." In the periodical section, the custom made Corrian shelves with edges lit by LEDs wind their way through the space. In other parts of the library curved oak shelves house research books. In its previous incarnation this section of the library was once a large machinery room where crane tracks still exist. The use of oak brings warmth and texture and also creates an interesting contrast



Hanging around | 1. The speak easies are located on the bridges and landings 2. The library with its oak shelves 3. The atrium is a big and open space.

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tions," explains Harris.

The different dining areas (a café/kiosk, two self serve and one waiter serviced) have all been designed to bring people together differently. Corrian was also used in the café and restaurant predominantly for its wearability. As over a 1000 employees will be using these facilities up to three times a day they will take a lot of wear and tear. "We wanted to soften the shape but still have mass. Corrian lets us do that," explains Harris. They also brought light into the space by having a base light underneath the Corrian structures. "The base light helps float the structure off the floor," he explains.

Throughout the building there is a notion of transparency and people can be spotted from almost any point overlooking or within the street space. Visually connecting all the spaces together was quite a challenge for the designers. One way of allowing people to interact on the bridges and walkways, which tie the buildings together, is to include 'meeting points'. Mackay + Partners have designed what they call 'speak easies'. "Speak easies are essentially meeting points or random collision points on the bridges and landings," says Harris. These informal points with red B&B Italia tables and chairs allows employees the opportunity to grab a quick coffee with a colleague, catch up with the morning papers or leisurely browse through a report. "As people meet here there are now plenty of meeting rooms in the building which all provide different ways of interacting," says Harris. "As a result, there has been a lot more talk and interaction amongst employees which I think has been a major shift in the company's thought process and how they work."

Overall, despite the precise and efficiently clean aesthetic of the building, by using innovative features and a strategic use of furniture Mackay + Partners have successfully created an interior that allows for employees to easily connect with each other in a comfortable and 'homely' environment. ■