

# heart of glass

Global biotechnology giant Merck-Serono promotes cross-collaboration in style with a Geneva campus designed by Murphy Jahn Architects and Mackay + Partners

By Katie Weeks  
Photography by Timothy Soar

Among the twinkling city lights on the ground, airline passengers descending to Geneva over the Swiss city's namesake lake may notice a new glow out their windows. A softer interpretation of visual showcases like New York's Times Square, the eye-catching display is an animated media wall adorning the new headquarters of Merck-Serono, a biotechnology division of Merck KGaA that specializes in the research and development of prescription pharmaceuticals.

An illuminated wall—crafted out of beeswax blocks and embedded LEDs by German manufacturer Gebr. Kufferath Ag—is a vertical welcome mat to the company's stunning new campus. Featuring architecture by Chicago-based Murphy Jahn Architects and interiors by London-based Mackay + Partners, the campus, officially called the Horizon Serono World Research Centre and Administrative Headquarters, comprises six interlinking buildings that house 1,200 employees.

Prior to moving into the new facilities in early 2007, Merck-Serono's Geneva employees were disconnected and spread across the city. In relocating all divisions—from finance, HR, and marketing to clinical trials management and research and development—the company hoped to foster collaboration and spontaneous interaction. "The company's management requested that we move from a very cellular environment to an 80-20 ratio of open-to-closed offices," recalls Mark Underhill, Horizon Serono project manager. However, even the closed offices are bright and airy thanks to abundant glass throughout the

Merck-Serono's headquarters carries a sense of openness not usually associated with a pharmaceutical company. Abundant glass opens up interiors and is complemented by a neutral palette (left). Small seating arrangements—climbed "speakers"—encourage informal interaction (opposite).

www.contractmagazine.com



www.contractmagazine.com

contract mag. 2007

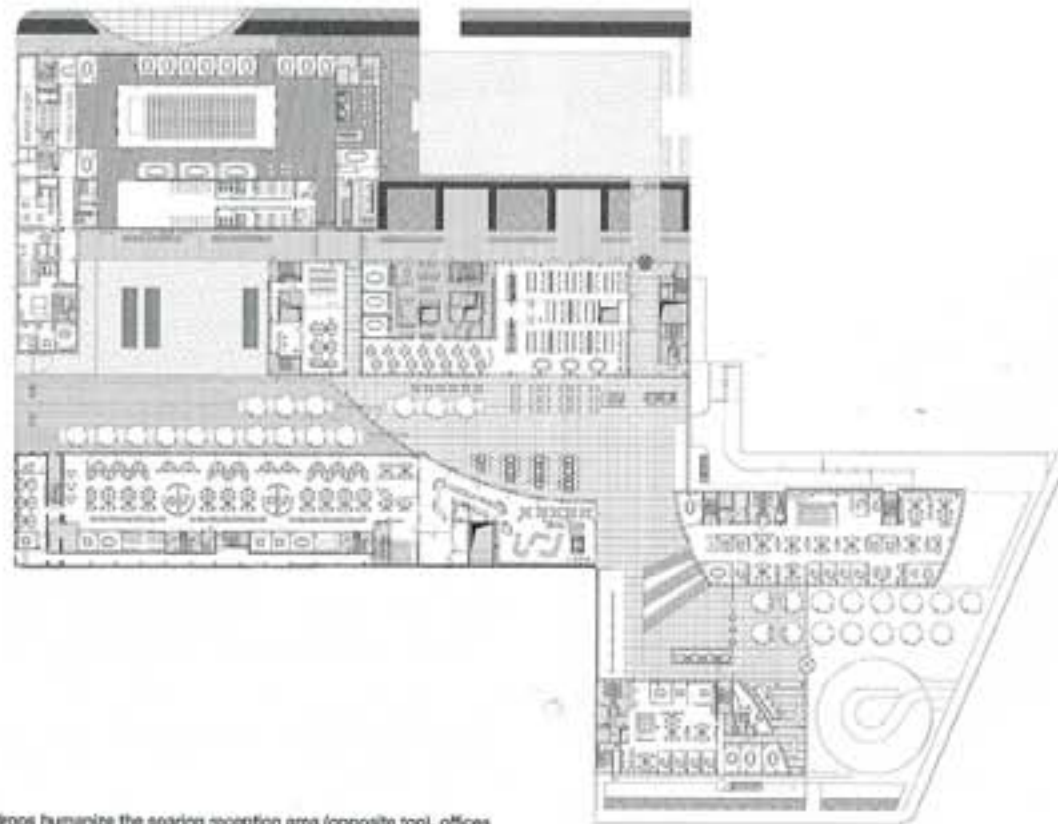
107



campus. "There is visual communication across the new buildings. You can see who is in, who isn't, and what meeting rooms are free just by looking out the window," Underhill says.

This visual permeability was essential in integrating the campus structures. The industrial site, which dates back to the 1800s, included several existing buildings with strong, block-like characteristics. During the design phase, local authorities mandated that two buildings (officially named G6 and H8) be maintained along with a third building of Merck-Serono's choice as a legacy to the site's past. Working around these restrictions, the team embraced the older structures and opened them up to interact with the newer ones. The design brief charged the team with crafting spaces filled with daylight and fresh air. As such, glass bridges connect the structures at every level.

Recognizing the scale of the campus (where some spaces soar 35 m. high), Mackay + Partners sought to bring down the interiors to a more human scale through use of color, materials, texture, light, and graphics. "The strong feel of the exterior building is about transparency and visibility—slightly unusual for a Swiss company," notes Ken Mackay, senior partner at Mackay + Partners. The team placed design elements at various points to break up the vistas—from glass pods not quite in line with each other to clustered public seating at the ground level.



While large-scale backdrops humanize the soaring reception area (opposite top), offices and executive lounges (below and opposite, bottom left) blur the indoor-outdoor line. Work areas that are usually hidden are at the forefront of design in the labs (opposite, bottom right).





Amenities on the six-building campus include a casual café space (above right), a library (above left), a larger restaurant (opposite), and fitness facilities.

In terms of workspace, the new campus offers 40,000 sq. m. of offices and laboratories, where the mechanicals are hidden to maintain the clean palette. To encourage movement among the private and public spaces, the team developed casual interaction areas, dubbed "speakeasies," that are located at diagonal and horizontal pivot points among floors and buildings. The spaces are designed with various seating options and amenities to encourage traveling. Larger group spaces include an employee café, a large restaurant, a library, and fitness facilities. "Creating spaces that teased people to come out and mingle was important because we were bringing people back together who were used to meeting maybe once a year," says Mackay.

While Swiss building codes mandate a certain level of sustainability, the building team thought ahead by using high technology to produce low-energy consumption. "This is a new campus, a new way of working, and a new environment," says Mackay. "The emphasis was to think 50 years ahead." Ventilated façades bring in fresh air, while external and internal

blinds break down the large sheets of glass and control glare. Skewing the placement of glass pods in larger areas also helped break down direct light. The building is free of air conditioning—come the warmer summer months, water from Lake Geneva will be used to chill spaces, a manufactured rain cloud in the atrium humidifies the large space, and the roof of the forum opens to release heat.

When Merck-Serono crafted its initial design brief around the concept of local and global interaction, it may not have envisioned this perspective expanding to the building team itself. But Mackay says the project's horizon's expanded far beyond Geneva. Contractual business was in English," he recalls of the project development meetings, but most of the meetings were in Norwegian, French, Swiss, German, Italian, Scottish, or Australian. Thinking globally, however, paid off. The result, Mackay notes, is "a true sense of being in a new, dynamic Switzerland." ■



#### who

*Project/client:* Merck Serono. *Architect:* Murphy Jahn. *Interior designer:* Mackay + Partners. *Structural/mechanical/electrical engineer:* EGS. *General contractor:* Steiner. *Lighting designer:* L-Plan. *Acoustician:* AAB; |Stryjenski & H. Monti. *Furniture specification:* Mackay + Partners. *Landscape architect:* Olaxis Architects Paysagistes. *Photographer:* Timothy Soar.

#### what

*Paint:* Dulux. *Laminate:* Formica. *Carpet/carpet tile, carpet backing:* Milliken Carpet, Bentley Prince Street. *Glass:* Permasteelisa. *Window frames/wall systems:* Faram Spa. *Workstations:* Unifor. *Workstation seating:* Wilkhahn. *Lounge seating, accessories:* B+B Italia. *Cafeteria, dining, auditorium seating:* Arper Spa, EPA International. *Other seating:* Walter Knoll, Fritz Hansen, Interstuhl. *Upholstery:* Kradrat. *Executive furniture:* Roethlisberger, B+B Italia. *Other tables:* Unifor, Molteni & C, B+B Italia. *Storage:* Ahrend. *Architectural joinery:* Roethlisberger, Molteni & C. *Planters:* Molteni & C. *Signage:* Client Supply.

#### where

*Location:* Geneva. *Total floor area:* 75,000 sq. m. *No. of floors:* 7 in the new buildings; 3 in the historic buildings. *Average floor size:* 640 sq. m. *Total staff size:* 1,200.

