

Swiss on a roll

FX BRINGS YOU EXCLUSIVE PICTURES OF PHARMACEUTICALS GIANT MERCK SERONO'S NEW GENEVA HQ EXECUTIVE SUITE, DESIGNED BY MACKAY + PARTNERS

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Not many regeneration projects start with the surrounding assets that Merck Serono's new Geneva HQ enjoys. The 70,000 sq m campus-style development in the city centre houses 1,200 staff and incorporates three existing industrial buildings and three new buildings, united by an overarching glazed roof. The views from the low iron glass walls are of mature parkland, the iconic United Nations building and Lake Geneva itself, visible from the executive floors on the right-hand flank of the building.

Working with Chicago architect Murphy Jahn, London-based Mackay + Partners expended considerable effort on ensuring

that its interiors scheme complemented the rigorous architecture of the envelope while rendering warmth and personality to the interior spaces.

The client, a pharmaceuticals giant that leads the field in treatments for multiple sclerosis, infertility and HIV, wanted to assimilate its five Geneva sites into one.

The research labs, offices, IT centre, archives, restaurant, library/cafe and executive facilities, along with creche, auditorium and recreational provision, have been arranged in such a way that the diverse communities are brought together, much as a village would congregate, in the central spaces.

A grid-like street plan operates between buildings, with open views into and from raised walkways, cafes and restaurants. 'The idea is that it's a whole new community, in what was a disused industrial area,' says Ken Mackay.

But it is in the executive areas that Mackay and his partner Gavin Harris clearly had the most fun, turning this sixth-floor and mezzanine wing into a workspace so drop-dead gorgeous it should have even the neighbouring Swiss bankers drooling.

There is little, visually, to interfere with the surrounding structural grid, but much is done to soften it, with a clever combination of materials and finishes.



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#1 Stitched white leather on wall panels gives a seamless look to corridors
#2 Oak is a highly featured furnishing throughout the executive offices, as in the partition wall and desk here
#3 A mezzanine floor rises into the building's arched roof



A BRIEF HISTORY – MACKAY & PARTNERS

The Merck Serono building is the culmination of three years' hard work. The practice has also completed the following:

Ken Mackay and Gavin Harris set up Mackay + Partners four years ago to get back in touch with the hands-on creative process, and work on more than high-class office projects.

They've just signed a deal to create a five-star hotel in Nairobi, having recently completed two luxurious but budget-driven apartments in London's Barbican complex, and launched their own range of door hardware and wall furniture through

Allgood. This follows collaborations with the likes of B&B Italia, Unifor and Molteni & C, with whom, says Mackay, they share the same ethos: 'We're all creative firms that only take on projects we're interested in, so we can deliver consistently high quality.'

Working with a dedicated staff of 10, Mackay says Mackay + Partners now enjoys 'employing the right team for the projects, allowing them to be efficient and a responsive studio.'



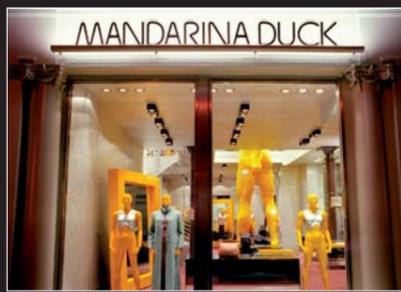
▼ Clerkenwell Workshops. Mackay + Partners created a flexible range of office and studio units, installed a glazed lift and stair shaft in this collection of studio spaces bought by Workspace Group to turn into a thriving hub of offices. Completed 2006.



▼ CBS News UK headquarters in Chiswick Park is about as far removed from a big, bland US corporate HQ as Mackay + Partners was allowed to take it. 'That was the challenge: to enliven an American corporate brand,' says Harris. Completed 2005.



► Mandarin Duck boutique, Conduit Street, London. While Dutch design guru Marcel Wanders provided the bonkers concept, comprising 'breathing' yellow mannequins and a giant naked 'Gulliver' statue protruding through the double-height space, Mackay + Partners brought in the necessary architectural and interiors detail to make it work. Completed 2004.



► Deloitte Consulting's London office required little in the way of desk space as the consultants are usually off-site. So Mackay + Partners arrived at a system of elegant reception space, with a concierge area so people can be checked in and out of the building as they arrive and depart. Alongside this is a large pool of meeting rooms, and a floor of 'touchdown' desks. Completed 2003.



► St Martins Lane Hotel, London. The Schrager Group brought in Harper Mackay (the present firm's predecessor) to complete the Philippe Starck scheme that saw the New York hotel group make its all-white, minimalist mark on London. Little has been changed since the hotel opened in 2000 – despite the five-year turnaround of most hotel interiors.



PRACTICE PROFILE

Beautifully detailed and stitched white leather appears in furniture, and in panel form on walls and partitions as well as – along one apparently seamless corridor – on doors. Polished chrome detailing slims down the super thick wall ends (the walls are on average 400mm thick, to provide the correct scale to the rooms). Oak is used throughout, on furniture, floors and walls, with a clean detailed, banded wood panel indicating the upper margins of room partitions. Brass features in detailing such as recessed door handles, door frame edge inlays and, as a thick band, to secure the smoked glass panels surrounding the interior, cantilevered executive staircase.

At the front of this wing, a mezzanine floor rises into the highest point of the building's arched roof. An adjacent executive bathroom features Corian-lined walls, epoxy floor and custom-built sinks.

There were plenty of challenges in the interior design. The buildings are naturally ventilated, which means that the glazed exterior panels are designed to lift and close, to control air flow (no air conditioning units are allowed to sully the purity of Geneva's air), all operated by a centralised building maintenance system. An alarming amount of movement is thus built into the structure, requiring ceilings to float and staircases to be cantilevered out from the

few concrete walls. An additional energy-saving measure was the installation of a pumping station in Lake Geneva to pipe water into the building for the cooling/heating system that operates active slabs in metal ceiling panels.

Both Mackay and Harris are particularly proud of the high quality of the joinery and detailing by the Swiss-German joiner Röhlsberger, praising the company's ethos and workmanship. It is for this kind of project and degree of involvement, says Mackay, that he and Harris set up Mackay + Partners.

'There are greater opportunities for high-quality work outside the UK,' he says.

- #4 Cleanly detailed banded wood panels, as in this executive area, indicate the upper margins of room partitions
- #5 The bespoke oak boardroom table can be split into a V-shape to seat up to 20 people
- #6 The executive lounge, with views across Lake Geneva, is furnished with seating in white leather by B&B Italia

