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mix

INTERIORS





lake superior

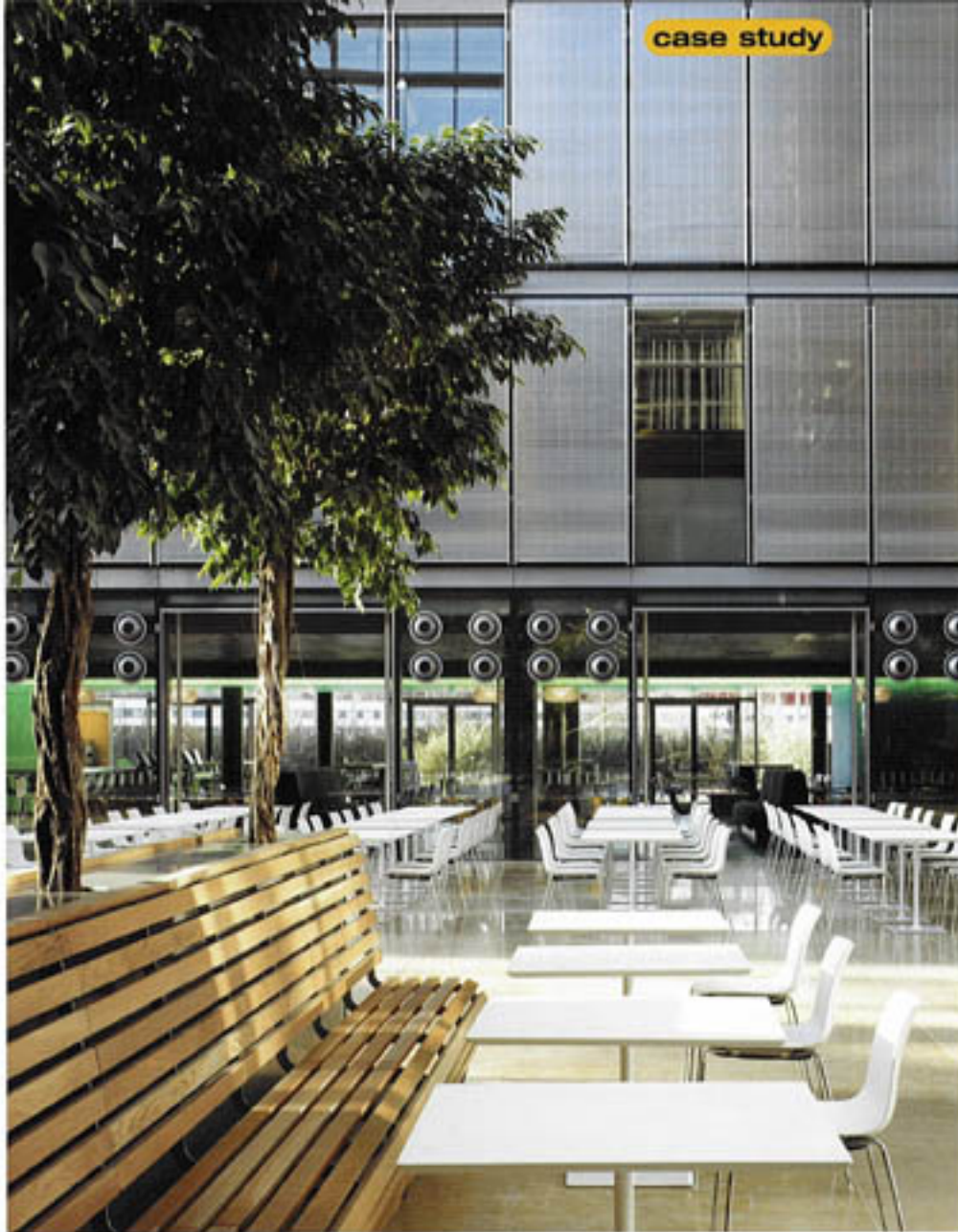
When organisations attempt to sell stories into our editorial department, we often encounter a note of apology as we are told that it is unlikely that we have ever heard of the end user and that the project itself is neither particularly sizable nor ground-breaking.

Where we feel this magazine differs from any other on the market is that we are not constantly searching for the gigantic, blue chip, super-advanced. We are, however, always striving to bring the best business stories to these pages. It is far too easy to simply pontificate over the form and simply overlook the function. Listen up people; we are featuring working spaces here, not art.

That said, every now and again, we find a project that ticks every single box; welcome to the new headquarters of Merck Serono in Geneva.



Photography courtesy of Tim Sear



»»»»» The new headquarters has become the focal location for the recently integrated Merck and Serono biotechnology business. In terms of scale, this site is on a par with a Canary Wharf tower, accommodating approximately 1,200 staff and consisting of six linked buildings, which offers 40,000 sq m of office and laboratory space, as well as conference, restaurant, crèche, café, 'speak easy', library and fitness facilities.

Mackay + Partners were employed by Serono to provide the interiors scheme (Cat B fit-out) for the headquarters, which completed construction in early January 2007 and is now tenanted by staff.

The brief was to relocate Serono's administrative, research, and development departments to a single campus styled location in Geneva. The site history dates back to 1892 and is linked to the emergence of electricity/turbines in the city.

We meet with Mackay + Partners' Ken Mackay and Gavin Harris, who begin by telling us about their introduction to the project, which was to dominate their working lives for over two years. 'Murphy Jahn Architects originally won the international competition,' Ken tells us. 'Serono as a business had four or five sites and leased numerous other offices in Geneva. Their existing headquarters were placed in two of the buildings close to the site. They acquired the rest of the industrial site, which lies south of the United Nations HQ and next door to the World Meteorological Organisation – a UN specialised agency.'

'The location and the ambition of what they wanted to do here, by being directly beside the lake, informed the sustainability issues of the campus brief.'

'Ernesto Bertorelli, the CEO of Serono, has interests in the Americas Cup, in which he runs the Alinghi team; therefore his brief was to pull everything together into a united team. He has a very clear business mind and wanted to produce a campus for the future, which would be very much about people working together, about openness, about moving forward. Historically they had worked out of several offices around Geneva, so this was also about transparency to them.'

'The brief was very, very clear – to create a modern campus that would work for the people. This wasn't one of those glib comments that we have dealt with here in the UK! This is not luxurious, but it is also not a tight fit for the business. This isn't about using terminology such as 'enhancing'»»»»»



»»» the people' when in reality it is often about getting as many people packed in as possible. I think the business will really grow into this facility.'

We ask whether Ken and Gavin found the Swiss experience radically different from projects they have undertaken in the UK. 'The brief to Murphy Jahn was hi-tech and involved technologies that are different from those used in the UK,' Ken confirms. 'Swiss law does not allow for air conditioned buildings, so the brief for the servicing consultants was about how they could have a naturally ventilated building that was individually controllable. This exceeds BCO standards by a long way. The strategy here to re-use the lake water to chill and heat the building during winter and summer is quite ingenious, and also rather obvious and simple.'

'A big difference for us was using concrete slabs as chilled or heated ceilings, we also have a standardised raised floor

which is used as an air plenum extracting through the building facade. The way the atria work is also very clever. At the entrance atrium there is a full height rain cloud, which is transposed into an art/media feature, and actually humidifies and changes the temperature in that area.'

Mackay + Partners were brought on board by the client following a second international competition. The client felt more variety and warmth was needed for the interior and, following a month of intense design and planning, Ken and Gavin returned to Geneva to present to Serono. 'We were asked to present four or five areas,' Gavin recalls. 'Everyone had the same brief for the office floors, the restaurant, the executive areas etc. We developed from these over the next month, going back and forth to hold meetings with the client, sub-presentations and also a number of internal meetings with staff to understand more of their thought and working processes.' »»»»»



»»»» If you parallel this with our experience with working with clients in the UK, there was a dramatically different approach,' Ken reveals. 'I think for that first month period they asked for an enormous amount of information. We had to assess, work with them and then propose these different areas – and if we'd got that wrong we'd have been out of the door.'

Following an hour-long presentation, Ken and Gavin were told not to get the five o'clock plane back to London and instead to go for a walk around Lake Geneva! They left that evening with the project.

Ken and Gavin describe their client as 'incredibly informed and educated', and clearly found the project a refreshing and challenging way of conducting business. 'It was a very Swiss way of approaching the programme,' Ken confirms. 'This actually made the process easier for us to manage.'

'We had very clear lines to work with,' Gavin continues 'everything was extremely well organised. Also, everyone else in the team knew exactly where the lines were and their part within the program of works.'

The Geneva campus consists of three new buildings and three renovated locally listed buildings which are connected through glazed atria. Further tying the enormous campus together is a series of glazed bridge links, which themselves incorporate 'speak easies' or breakout spaces at crossover points.

Mackay + Partners has created a series of overlapping schemes that combines Serono's corporate R&D advanced image with the contemporary openness of the building's glass and steel structure. The aim was to provide an environment that enabled the interaction of its people within and with the public and to promote the collective vision of the company.

In keeping with the Serono approach to the project, the Mackay + Partners team also appear to have had a very definite and exact view of what they wanted to achieve – right down to the provision of workstations and seating.

From the original design proposals, it was only the executive areas that were altered. The brief, and also the understanding and implementation of that brief by Mackay + Partners shaped much of this astonishing interior, as Gavin explains: 'Serono wanted their people to feel connected, where they weren't previously. They also have a relatively young staff in a dynamic company, so this was about retaining these people. The other thing was that they wanted to »»»»»



»»»» bring more of the environment into this ethos.

'We've created a variety of ways that people can meet and greet. They can be 'outside' in the atrium area, they can use the speak easies, they can use the restaurant.'

With a slightly more formal tone, there are also an astonishing 52 meeting rooms of varying size and layout spread around the Serono campus, together with a large auditorium/conference facility and a number of extremely smart and convivial dining rooms.

'All of this is glass,' Gavin tells us. 'You can see into each space. This really is about transparency – even if you are not involved directly, you are aware of what everyone around you is doing.'

This includes the advanced, hi-tech laboratories – which become a focal point rather than a place of closed doors and extreme privacy – the CFO's own working space and the open plan office floors.

Although security was a genuine concern, Serono was also extremely keen not to lose this sense of transparency and visibility; therefore even these facilities are low-key and minimal.

Other stand-out facilities and features here include an incredible media wall, which, Ken assures us, can be clearly seen lit up from the plane out of Geneva, and a large crèche which, in keeping with Serono's open approach, is available to the company's staff and also to the Geneva public at large.

The true scale of this project becomes all too apparent when we are handed the long, long list of furniture and interior contractors. Especially if you consider that much of the custom fit-out work was undertaken through the Swiss joinery firm Rothlisberger, developed from Mackay + Partners bespoke designs. But that's another story – and if ever there's a project that deserves more than one *Mix* feature... ●

essential ingredients

Client:	• Merck Serono
Architect:	• Murphy Jahn
Interior Design:	• Mackay + Partners
Structural, Electrical, Mechanical Engineer:	• EGS
General Contractor:	• Steiner
Lighting Designer:	• L-Plan
Bespoke Furniture:	• Rothlisberger
Furniture Contractors:	• Aper s.p.a. / Ahrend / B+B Italia / Bene / BPA International / Faram / M3 Design Development / Molteni & C / Unifor
Flooring:	• Bentley Carpets • Miliken Carpets