

geneva convention





Regular readers will recall our comprehensive coverage of the Merck Serono headquarters in Geneva back in November. Now, despite such comprehension, we always knew this amazing project had a second story in it.

First, we'll give you a quick recap of the project itself: the new headquarters has become the focal location for the recently integrated Merck and Serono biotechnology business. The vast site accommodates approximately 1,200 staff and consists of six linked buildings, offering 40,000 sq m of office and laboratory space, as well as conference, restaurant, creche, café, 'speak-easy', library and fitness facilities.

Mackay + Partners were employed by Serono to provide the interiors scheme for the headquarters, which completed construction in early January 2007.

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

Mackay + Partners' Ken Mackay and Gavin Harris explained the challenges they faced throughout this incredible project. One major challenge, of course, was the small

matter of furniture provision throughout what amounted to a myriad of different facilities.

The Geneva campus consists of three new buildings and three renovated buildings which are connected through a glazed atrium. 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 technically advanced image, with the contemporary openness of the building's glass and steel structure.

An astonishing 60 meeting rooms of varying size and layout have been created around the campus, together with a large auditorium/conference facility and a number of smart dining rooms.

The true scale of this project became all too apparent to us when we were handed the long, long list of furniture and interior contractors. Principle suppliers were Molteni & C for custom design tables and seating for

the restaurant and forum area and the provision for library shelving and reading desks, Unifor for workstations and built office furniture, B&B Italia for custom design executive boardroom tables and soft furniture and Roethlisberger for areas including the restaurant, speak-easies, and executive offices, including desking developed from Mackay + Partners bespoke designs.

Ken and Gavin are more than happy to give us even more of their time to tell us about this specific area of the development. 'Everything we did was set out very, very clearly to begin with,' Ken recalls. 'We set out what we were trying to do with the office space, then what we were trying to do with the pods, with the workstations...' Ken recalls. 'We said that we weren't interested in other types, we had a benchmark of quality that we were after. We were quite clear about all of this – more so than we can be in London quite often. The client wanted us to run that side of things.

'I think that, from the formulation of the brief itself, the client had spent some



considerable time looking at other workplaces and had been to a couple of trade shows – Orgatec for example – in order to have an understanding of what the changing trends and practices are. They came to us with parity. There was always enough time left between each deadline to get everything done.

'We had a big presentation of all those packages in a warehouse on site, which the client then assessed for themselves. We presented mock ups of all areas to them. The executive areas became the most concentrated really – they were almost a project within itself. We worked with a very good shopfitter – Peter Roethlisberger.'

'That was interesting in itself,' Gavin explains. 'Most of the specification process did not change – once we had started it went through the process and was ultimately delivered.'

'The executive specification did go through a couple of fundamental changes, and these changes did come quite late in the project. I think, like Ken said a little earlier, it was due to the clarity we had with the client throughout and also the sub-

contractor, Roethlisberger, that we were able to work that through.'

'The furniture list is pretty exhaustive, but the tender did go out to the normal furniture suppliers.'

Of course, the idea of a leading UK practice leading a specification package of such scale must have pricked more than a few furniture manufacturers' ears. Bearing in mind the bespoke nature of a good percentage of the furniture provision in Geneva, we ask about the budget levels. 'It might look like a very high end, unlimited budget, but it's not actually,' Ken reveals. 'It's equivalent to anything we do in central London in terms of price per square foot. There were also elements we couldn't fit in because they weren't within budget. We had some beautiful curved dining tables, that we were prototyping in Italy, for example, that were just working out to be too expensive.'

We ask about the collaboration with Roethlisberger. 'We came across Peter through a local contact,' Gavin recalls. 'His methodology during the tendering process we immediately recognised. We liked his own involvement, the way he managed things.'



»»»»» 'They dealt with the project in exactly the same way as we dealt with it,' Ken takes over. 'He (Peter) managed it, he had a very good team behind him and was very honest in design – 'I'm not going to take on too much, I want to do this, I will deliver this perfectly, I'd love to do this but I don't have the skill-base'. It's very rare that you find people who are that clear. It was very much a joint venture, a single team if you like – and it's been a while since we've worked with anyone that good.'

'He was successful as well!' Gavin continues. 'He delivered the reception desk, the restaurant, the speak-easies and the executive areas – which was quite a challenge. We knew he had a very good track record, so were not concerned – and he understood where we were coming from with the design.'

'We could have specified standard product for the whole job, but there was a wish from both the client and from us that we wouldn't do that. This was generated from the client's brief, which drove a lot of things, for example the acoustic properties

of the storage, the desk screens and even the shape of the desks themselves – which was done because of the client's request to soften the shapes, to humanise the space in some way.'

'If there is a story to tell here, it was that each of the businesses who became involved with us on this project gave very high personal attention, and at every level – we worked alongside the owners/managers of these businesses who I think became involved because it was such an interesting project. We set our stall out here, we said straight away that we were looking for something slightly different, something that had a little bit of personality about it. Also, I think it's important to say that none of this was radically expensive, we were quite clever in how we approached the designs and the manufacture.'

Ken says that he thinks the Serono headquarters was an interesting project. Well, it's certainly made history; the first project ever to be granted two major *Mix* features. Is there a higher accolade than that? Well, maybe one or two! ●

