

A new horizon

How would you make the vast headquarters for a global biotechnology firm feel homely? **Michael Willoughby** visits the Horizon Serono HQ to find out how London-based practice Mackay + Partners fared

Mackay + Partners prides itself on its ability to create welcoming spaces within corporate schemes. The London-based practice feels a great deal of its influence comes from work on hotels, such as London's the Sanderson, St Martins Lane Hotel and The Trafalgar. "Our office projects relate more to people and they have a more hotel and leisure kind of twist," says senior partner Ken Mackay. "We are not the typical commercial-space-planning office." On the day I spoke to him and partner Gavin Harris they were preparing to zip over to Kenya to work on a five-star hotel in the region and there's another hotel project underway.

So consider for a moment the Horizon Serono project in Geneva, where Mackay + Partners has created the interior for Chicago-based architect Murphy/Jahn's colossal office building. This new "campus" for what has, following a merger, become Europe's largest biotechnology firm Merck Serono, is a 40,000sq m, glass and steel beast. The six buildings in Helmut Jahn's signature new-modernist style are arranged around a seven-floor-high atrium, which encloses a slice of avenue and several trees.

Grids of super-clear, low-iron glass and sparkling steel form the walls, screens and roof of the building. There is nothing between the viewer and the open sky except glass. In a corner of this cathedral-like space hover sharp-edged bridges, criss-crossing in mid air, linking separate parts of the building like the city in Fritz Lang's Metropolis. Elegant stairways with large balconies descend from these walkways.

Murphy/Jahn has said it was inspired by the challenge that the client – specialising in multiple sclerosis, reproductive health, dermatology and growth deficiencies – had set itself, to be "the biggest and the best biotech company in the world". As such, "in terms of construction and performance, the building is more informed by principles of science and technology, rather than design and style," says the practice.

The feeling upon entering the Merck Serono's headquarters is indeed one of incredible cleanness and efficiency. It's like a scientific experiment in which several infinite planes are made to intersect with each other in the shape of a building.

But for all its merits, Horizon Serono HQ is less than welcoming, and Mackay + Partners had its work cut out if it wanted to put the ghost in the machine. The firm worked hard to bring warmth, colour, organic life and cohesion to the project. Place-making was important in bringing a human scale to the building interior. Both the reception area and the cafe are structures within structures. The cafe is double height, with cast-iron pillars linking the two floors. The reception of bright blue glass welcomes visitors with a

Photography by Tim Soar

HORIZON SERONO

INTERIOR ARCHITECT:	MACKAY + PARTNERS
CLIENT:	MERCK SERONO
COST:	UNDISCLOSED
START DATE:	APRIL 2004
COMPLETION:	JANUARY 2007
TOTAL FLOOR SPACE:	40,000SQ M

Previous page: The reception desk leading onto the atrium.
Below: The breakfast cafe.
Bottom: The main entrance.



splash of colour, with bench seating by B&B Italia. The cafe is banded with LED lights at the top and bottom and the footprints of all structures are kept as minimal as possible; these may be large intrusions into the "infinite" space, but they float appropriately.

The most striking colour element within the building is the "wax wall" – the first thing that visitors are likely to see. Coloured LEDs project ever-changing content – including stylised DNA, images of babies and chemical strands – through thin yellow wax. This wall hovers in front of a "rain cloud" or misting device, like a steel rain forest, with a tank at the bottom. Elsewhere, trailing plants – including orchids and ferns – hang down in front of the external skin. These elements point to the "natural" roots of biotechnology.

Nature and colour are also combined in a glass wall that starts in the restaurant and runs out into the atrium. The panel features orchids and other flowers in the hanging plant wall. The shade of the wall is just the start of the colour riot taking place in the restaurant. It is here that Mackay + Partners' experience at designing high-end leisure spaces shines through. It has created three different dining environments, two self serve and one waiter serviced. In the self-serve zone, large tables are surrounded by clear plastic chairs, both by Arper, so that people can take their time, sited next to a more casual set up where employees in a hurry can grab lunch. The glass surfaces are yellow, with a cell-bond material beneath. As well as a mesh ceiling pierced with spot lighting, the back of the self-service restaurant is flooded with blue light. "We were careful to choose the type of light," says Harris. "You would think that food on a yellow table top with a blue light might be a bit 'yuk' but it's actually fine."

Mackay + Partners has converted the end of a large self-service fridge into a screen with a projection of flowers, taking a functional element and allowing it to welcome diners rather than having to hide it. The waiter service area strikes a different note of contemporary luxury more suited to lingering. With its shaggy, glass lampshades and crisp white tablecloths, you could be in the hottest new restaurant in town rather than a staff canteen. The third dining space, a cafe serving breakfast and coffee, is visible through the line of trees.

A notion of transparency, aided by the low iron glass, carries throughout the building. People can be spotted from almost any point overlooking or within the atrium. "It's not Big Brother-like or negative," says Harris. "You can look across from all six buildings into one building and go, 'Where's John? Oh, John's there.' So, I think that's good." Mackay + Partners' design celebrates this type of random interaction at all points. On the walkways and landings are what the firm calls "speakeasies", informal points with B&B Italia tables and chairs where people can grab a coffee and sit down. The red chairs are an extremely striking element in the midst of the white and steel, but one can't help but feel it would take a large ego to be prepared to have a meeting sitting, exposed, hanging in space. It could be that this is just what Merck Serono's people possess, but 900 of the firm's 1,200 employees were present in the building when I was there, and few were hanging out in these spots – it was lunchtime though. [E]

Another stunning area that was under populated on the day of the visit was the library, where Corian shelves by Molteni – the edges lit by LEDs – snake around and hold periodicals. In the other part of the section, curved oak shelves house research books. The library is abutted by a separate seating area above the cafe overlooking the atrium, providing another visual and practical linkage of space.

The workspaces, including laboratories (not designed by Mackay), work desks and administrative and marketing areas, have a subtler quality. Harris and Mackay speak of these areas as "warm", but they also feel a little bland and soulless. The only colour here is the yellow of the worktops and some of the tables, which can appear sunny and warm or pale and insipid depending on the setting. The screens on the bench desking by Ergonom seem like they might be too high. The private offices are, however, airy and inspiring, with a wall serving as a whiteboard. The shared areas outside the laboratory overlook the atrium and the yellow is repeated in the top of some of the storage areas.

While there is no suggestion that quality was sacrificed in the common areas, it is the private CEO's office that is the stand out space in this building. Definitely not in the line of sight of all, the sheer quality of the chairman's quarters – three times the specification of the rest of the build according to a supplier – makes architect and client uncomfortable even discussing it.

I'm not supposed to mention the 280 cows that went into surfacing the white kid leather walls by Fritz Hansen and chairs by B+B Italia, the en suite bathroom, kitchen and bedroom with views of Lake Geneva. The words "luxury" and "softness" are ones that Harris uses and then retracts, instead saying: "It was designed to the quality of a hotel, but it was for business. It's really a personal suite for the CEO or someone. It's not something we can really talk about and they are concerned about how they are representing it to their front people. It's very unusual."

It certainly is: the air is early Frank Lloyd Wright by way of Stanley Kubrick. The dark leather and wood, traditional signifiers of the powerful boardroom, are white and light here. Is it a hangover from former owner Ernesto Bertarelli's style and taste? The Italian sold the company to Merck last year for \$13.3 billion. The change of leadership might explain the somewhat ambivalent attitude of the PR machine to the suite (including no pictures being released to us).

Other aspects of the building are more modest in aim. Being next to Lake Geneva allows for all heating and cooling between plus and minus five degrees to be provided by water, cooling in the summer and heating in the winter. There are three layers of shades on the skin of the building, all of which are controlled by computer. Flaps in the glass can be opened and closed. And, most spectacularly, the whole roof of one side can open up in summer. Mackay's "rain cloud" feature adds to this natural cooling and humidity.

So has Mackay + Partners made a home in this quartz crystal of a building? Comments from users were not forthcoming, but it's fair to say that the reception, restaurant, cafe and CEO suite areas are incredibly successful: high quality, innovative and very stylish.

Horizon Serono is a polarising space. "It was important to specify an equal quality to the original building," Harris says, and the building's precision, efficiently clean aesthetic and beauty cannot be doubted. But the coldness of the Lake, the Alps and, perhaps, the scientific enterprise itself, makes this a hard space for a human to feel entirely comfortable in. [E]

039 040



Top: Casual dining area in the restaurant.
Above: The journal library.