

# Myriad of materials in a glass palace : an uncompromising company complex on Lake Geneva

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Hochparterre : Zeitschrift für Architektur und Design**

Band (Jahr): **22 (2009)**

Heft [4]: **The essence of architecture : Röthlisberger: swiss quality  
woodwork**

PDF erstellt am: **27.04.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-123776>

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# MYRIAD OF MATERIALS IN A GLASS PALACE

top-quality planning and workmanship.

## An uncompromising company complex on Lake Geneva demands

Author: Ariana Pradal, photos: Tim Soar

Major international pharmaceutical companies are not satisfied with just ordinary buildings. An American campus was the role model for the Serono headquarters on Lake Geneva. Ernesto Bertarelli, at that time director and controlling shareholder of the company, was the client. The building on the 75'000 square-metre piece of land had scarcely been completed before he sold Serono on to the German company Merck in 2007, and the new owners moved in. The building complex was designed by the Chicago architecture office, Murphy Jahn, who added three new buildings to three existing historical buildings. The buildings are united under a large vaulted roof and linked by walkways. The new, seven-storey office and laboratory buildings are sophisticated glass and steel constructions unified by two central courtyards. The technical appearance of the "campus" architecture is credible and the power supply, up to seventy per cent from sustainable sources, is cogent. The main energy source is the neighbouring lake: water is pumped underground from the lake to the complex and used to heat and cool the building. The system was a collaborative project between the engineers in charge and the canton authorities. Nearby buildings will soon benefit from the system too.

**INTERIORS IN MATERIAL MIX** Mackay + Partners – and primarily project leader, Gavin Harris – were responsible for the completion of the entire interior at the complex. The specialists from Röthlisberger, working from the London architects' plans and designs, carried out the work in the reception area, in part of the restaurant, in the kitchenettes and seating areas on various floor as well as in the CEO wing. "A big and important project", Peter Röthlisberger reminisces, "but also complex and challenging."

Steel, glass in a variety of surfaces, leather, oak, gunmetal finished brass, Corian or honeycomb core sandwich panels are only some of the materials that Röthlisberger worked with in this building, which offers workplaces for 1200 people. Peter Röthlisberger says this enormous project "often went to the boundaries of the feasible, nevertheless, everyone involved worked extremely well together." Collaboration was successful although the client, the interior designers and the carpentry specialists from Gümligen all come from different cultural groups and speak different languages.

But, once again, the rule proves true. A project is only as good as the client. The cooperation was so such a success partly due to Mark Underhill's professional background. Underhill, who represented the client, is an architect and does not – as is often the case – come from a commercial or marketing background. Peter Röthlisberger remembers being able to discuss details on the plans with him, for example how wide the shadow gaps in a wooden wall should be or the proportions of the glass doors. The seams in the leather upholstery or furniture edges and surfaces were treated with the same attention to detail. A necessity, because the client at that time, Ernesto Bertarelli, demanded careful planning and perfect craftsmanship for his rapidly growing property.

**FLEXIBLE WALLS** Röthlisberger specialists used state-of-the art technology for the completion of the interior in this project. They designed constructions and implemented solutions never used before. The fitting work carried out on the top floor in the CEO wing should be mentioned. Röthlisberger manufactured all the partition walls, doors, stairs as well as two sideboards and the table in the director's office. The development and

design of the walls was complicated because they had to meet rigorous acoustic criteria and respond to motion in the glass casing, which can bend 40 millimetres inwards or outwards, depending on temperature and weather conditions. The men from Gümligen had to develop flexible elements which could resist the changing pressure. Peter Röthlisberger emphasises that the design problem of how to connect the walls with the glass façade had never before been solved in this way. In addition, Röthlisberger wanted not only a credible technical solution but also a convincing optical one. The solution had to be unobtrusive and elegant in appearance – even taking the enormous pressure into account – and the technicians have accomplished exactly that. It goes without saying that the finish of all surfaces and furnishings must be of the highest quality in the executive suite.

Röthlisberger designed the serving counter as well as other furnishing elements for food and cash desks in the restaurant. They installed a white Corian wall with a milled décor into one of the elements. Lit from the rear, this wall shimmers in various shades. Large panes of glass with ink jet printing on them act as partitions. This project also makes it clear that Röthlisberger processes more than just wood and masters tasks which have nothing to do with our image of a carpenter who only stands at his workbench.

MERCK SERONO HEADQUARTERS, 2007

>Address: 9, Chemin des Mines, Geneva

>Architecture: Murphy Jahn, Chicago

>Interior design: Mackay & Partners, London;

>Project leader: Gavin Harris

>Façade/structure: Werner Sobek Ingenieure, Stuttgart

>Energy: Transsolar Energietechnik, Stuttgart

>General contractor: Steiner, Geneva

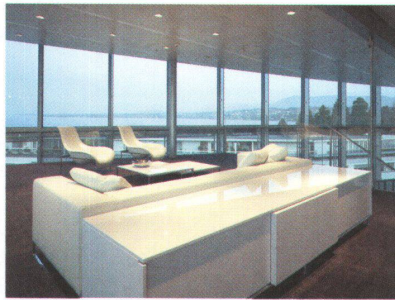
>Acoustics: AAB – J. Stryjenski & H. Monti, Geneva

>Partial development/completion of interior and interior design: Röthlisberger Schreinerei, Gümligen





>The view from the top floor of the CEO wing reaches far across Lake Geneva.



<Steel, glass, wood, Corian and honeycomb core sandwich panels were used.



<The back lit ornamental wall in the company restaurant conceals a serving element.

>Furniture like this desk was specially designed for Merck-Serono.



✓The executive board works in the CEO wing.

