



Salford Keys

‘The key element of the brief was about collaboration. This is a University of Salford building, not an art and design building. It’s not a departmentalised building – it’s about collaboration.’

We’re in Salford Quays in the heart of MediaCityUK. The BBC’s next door, ITV’s above us – not to mention the hundreds of independent creative organisations that are setting up all around us. And right in the middle of it all is the University of Salford’s new digital learning, teaching and research centre. These are really high calibre premises which will provide students with a unique opportunity to access state of the art technologies. The bigger picture, of course, is that they’re immersing themselves in the country’s leading digital and media community.

Mark Adey and Rachel Withey of The Fairhursts Design Group – who designed the subtly impressive interiors – guided us around the facility, and explained that collaboration driver in more detail.

‘The concept was to design a facility that would attract students to the University, but also attract the surrounding businesses for collaboration. The University wanted professionals from the likes of the BBC and ITV to feel as at home within the space as the



►►►► students and academics. This ultimately creates a university environment that's positioned somewhere between a contemporary commercial and an overtly technical media facility.

'It was absolutely critical that we avoided an institutional feel to the fit-out. What we wanted to achieve were informal collaboration spaces with multiple routes to destinations. Ultimately, the university wanted a space which would foster

teaching, learning and research and become a significant contributor to the vibrancy of the MediaCity community and beyond.'

We mentioned earlier in this piece that Fairhursts' scheme is subtly impressive. Indeed, the footnote to the need to avoid an 'institutional feel' is that the building itself offered some challenges. For starters, it's a building that was originally intended to house offices – the antithesis of what the University wants or needs. Fairhursts pretty well started again, overcame niggly details like height restrictions – and created a silk purse. Furthermore, it's a quirkily split building, a 'cracked plan', to use Rachel's pithily accurate description.

Not ideal. But, as we all know, tricky challenges can stimulate the best responses. And so it is with this interior design scheme. Even better, it's not showy or flashy; it's simple and highly effective. As Rachel said on our tour: 'Simple design is the hardest because you're not covering it all up.'

She's right, and we all know it.

The space itself boasts a mix of both public and private environments, all of which are designed to contribute to the collaborative ethos. More specifically, this wide ranging variety of spaces includes TV studios, radio production studios, edit suites,

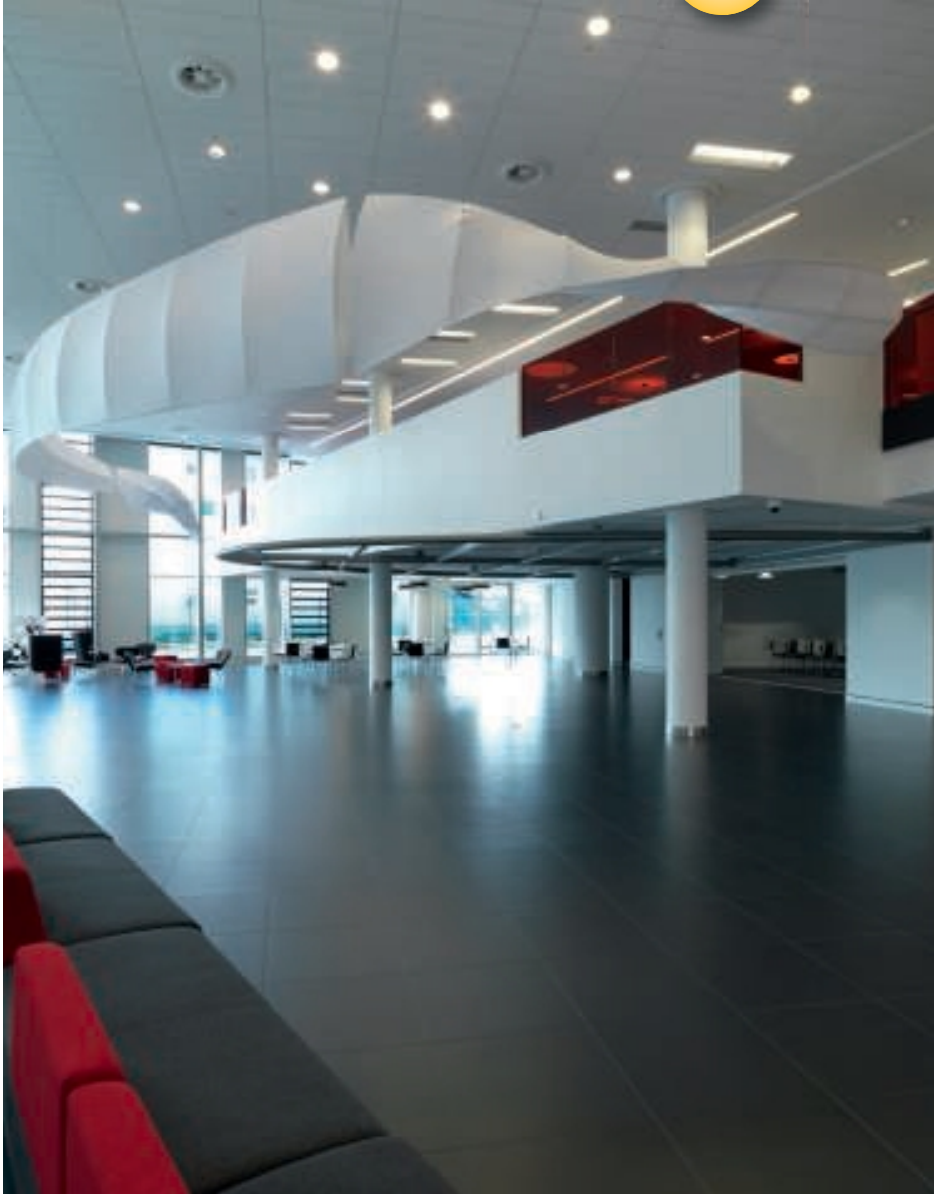
numerous lecture theatre spaces, a digital cafe open to members of the public and a statement coloured glass staircase in the centre of the main atrium. By using bespoke digitally printed wallpaper graphics and allocating a colour to each floor, the interior scheme guides the user smoothly through the building.

On the ground floor the open plan entrance area is a visually stimulating space with a variety of uses. Its feature digital wall – a Christy tiles screen – can be relocated; its 90 screens can be stacked in a variety of formations to create interactive environments. The feature wall also interacts with 10 touch screen tables in the cafe area, as well as the purpose built lighting rig suspended under the mezzanine.

'The key is flexibility,' explains Mark. 'We can take the wall apart, split it – it's totally moveable. We can then create different arrangements that suit a range of functions; interactive exhibitions, performances, research spaces or whatever the students can dream up.'

The ground floor also houses two bespoke TV studios – fitted out to reflect digital standards – and a digital media performance studio. 'It's a very technical area,' comments Mark. 'It's designed to mirror the facilities at the BBC. We worked ►►►►





clapper board inspired graphics and an ‘opened out at an angle’ reception desk – a simple idea that promotes a sense of arrival. A cool montage of furniture from Connection, Boss, Allermuir, Naughtone, Tangent and Space Oasis, and some well sourced lighting from Tre Ci Luce blend well in a stimulating space.

Those little design touches can be found throughout the scheme. Too many to mention them all, but there are some which are well worth highlighting. The staggered floating ceiling panels that offer glimpses of the services; the Tetris-like glass partitioning; the angled corridor walls – there’s a subtle, asymmetric undercurrent throughout. These are design details that add real material value. It’s also worth noting that Overbury maintained the project’s design criteria sympathetically throughout the construction.

Floors two and three are not public spaces but are mixed usage as the collaborative academic/student theme is continued. A modern professional open plan working area for the University’s academics overlooks the plaza outside, with high specification teaching spaces, edit suites and an 80 seat lecture theatre positioned centrally. The open plan offices for the academics are not closed off, and with good acoustic provision avoid the pitfalls that can beset such areas. Simon Elder of Southern, who furnished the facility, comments on the particular care taken to ensure the success of the space. ‘We provided bench system workstations well ahead of the move to allow the academics to get used to the open plan approach. It really helped overcome the potential ‘culture shock’ and helped gain acceptance of the design.’

This is thought through design in all its glory. Considered detail abounds throughout in ways that really enhances the space. The functionality of the design is striking; attention to multi-use areas, acoustics and lighting are all impressively handled. There are splashes of ‘wow factor’ – the feature staircase comes to mind – but these are subtly applied. Collaboration, the key element of the brief, is achieved with stylish élan ●

with specialists TSL on every detail – the TV cameras, the lighting rigs, the special floor, the acoustics and so on...’

Linking the floors is a beautiful understated staircase. ‘The devil is in the detail,’ explains Rachel. ‘We wanted to make it look as though the coloured glass has just been slotted in, with no visible fixings. We wanted a feature going through the atrium. The background is simple, monochrome mostly, so we wanted the staircase to stand

out, to be a central feature. Of course, the functional purpose of the staircase is to take traffic – but it’s been designed to encourage collaboration through chance meetings.’

The first floor/mezzanine is home to a fully equipped professional radio suite and the control rooms for the TV studio. There’s also a vibrant student collaboration area overlooking the ground floor exhibition space. There are plenty of little design touches to appreciate here, such as the

essential ingredients |

Client • **University of Salford** | Design • **The Fairhurst Design Group** www.fairhursts.com
 Main Contractor • **Overbury** www.overbury.com | Project Manager • **Buro Four** www.burofour.co.uk | Studio Fit-Out • **TSL** www.tsl.co.uk
 Furniture Supply • **Southern Office Interiors** www.soi-ltd.com | Floating & General Ceilings • **Ecophon** www.ecophon.com

Bespoke Joinery • **Chilfen Joinery** www.chilfenjoinery.co.uk
 Carpets • **Milliken** www.millikencarpet.com
 Digital Print Wallpaper • **Tektura** www.tektura.com

Partitions • **Komfort** www.komfort.com
 Ceramic Tiles • **Porcelanosa** www.porcelanosa.com
 Feature Lighting • **Tre Ci Luce** www.treciluce.com