

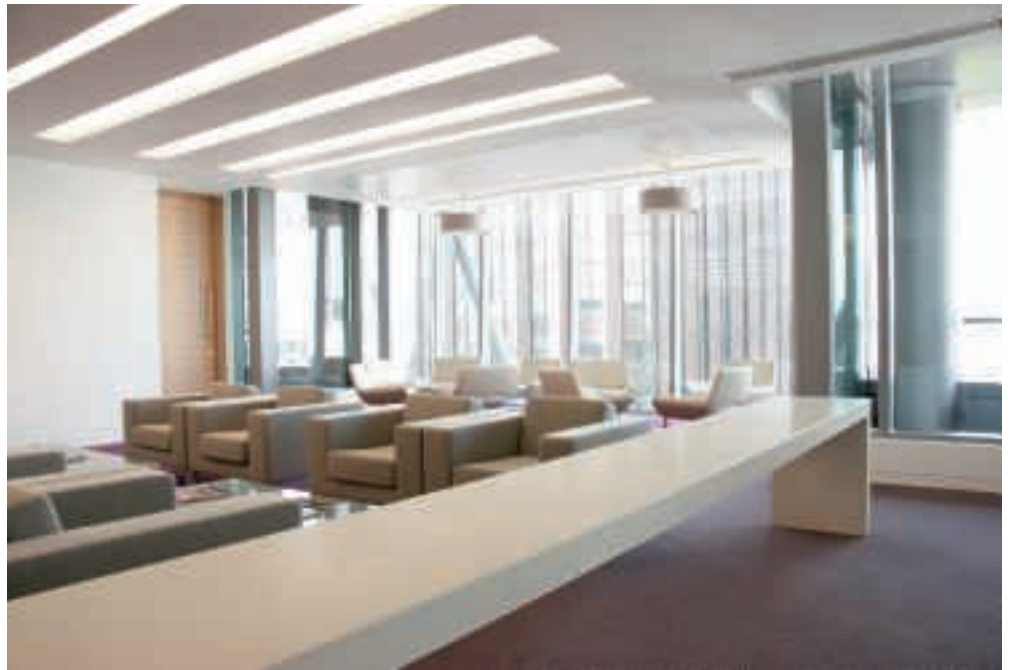


scouse and home

If there's one city that has to compete with far too many false stereotypes, then it's Liverpool. You can leave them all at the door though as we visit the offices of one the UK's fastest growing law firms, in the heart of Liverpool. George Bailey reports.

We know you love *Mix* for its devotion to culture. So following last issue's sojourn to Edinburgh in the build-up to the festival, you now find us making another trip to Liverpool in its year as the European Capital of Culture. Personally we reckon that Liverpool's a bit more than a one year wonder when it comes to culture, but then again the whole concept has drawn a lot of attention to the city and helped to overcome many of the preconceptions that have dogged the place for many years. Isn't that right, Boris Johnson?

Enough of that. We are here today to visit the newly opened offices of commercial law firm Hill Dickinson, situated in the heart of Liverpool's St Paul's business district, opposite the Passport Office and the Liverpool Echo building and rubbing shoulders with the city's thriving firms of accountants, banks and financial services companies. Few of them however will have offices as impressive as those of Hill Dickinson. When the firm signed the deal for the new building in 2005 the rent of £18 per square foot represented a ▶▶▶





Nethercoats adopt the same palette of neutral autumnal colours and sedate lines to help create a feel that is both businesslike and relaxed.

According to Keith, the hard work is going on under this laid-back surface. 'People now take wireless networks and video conferencing and AV systems for granted,' he says. 'Clients expect to be able to use our premises as if they were their own, and we respect that. The nature of our work means that we must have genuine partnerships with clients and so we must open our doors to them. What that means from our perspective is providing seamless services to them. We can keep the appearance of the office cool, but the underlying infrastructure must be both invisible and flawless.'

Ann Clarke of Claremont believes the business lounge is central to how contemporary law firms function. 'It's easy to make the big statements about corporate identity,' she says. 'The more difficult aspect is bringing everything together into a coherent whole. Technology allows you to do amazing things with the way people work, but can only truly give you what you need when it's working in sync with culture, design and organisational structure. I don't often use the term, but you have to look at things holistically.'

Keith Feeny agrees. 'Property decisions are incredibly complex now that we can see buildings as tools of organisational culture, identity, IT and human resources. Once you've started to look at the office in that way, it opens up some incredible

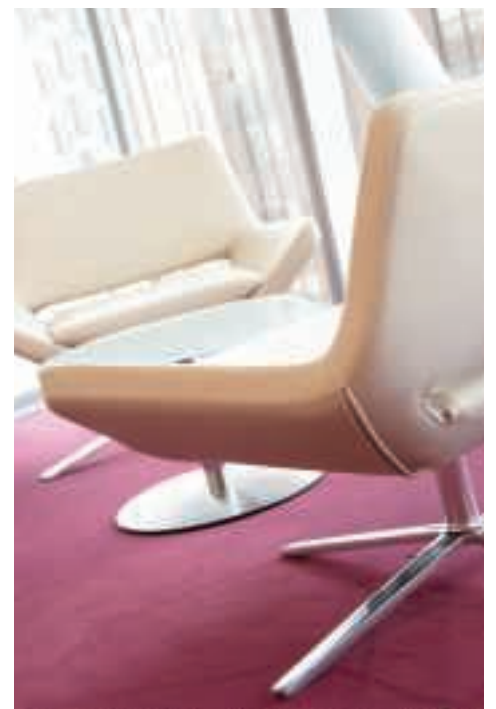


record for the city at the time. It is now home to 576 people, gathered together for the first time following the amalgamation of four previous offices into the new space. They will occupy around 125,000 sq ft in the building, over seven floors, with the potential to extend the capacity of the office to around 700 people.

Meeting *Mix* in the appropriately cavernous reception area is IT and Operations Director Keith Feeny, who has been the man driving the project. 'It's been designed to make a statement,' he says. 'Obvious to say that really when you look around I suppose, but it's incredibly important for us as a business to display the right identity for our clients, many of them with offices located within a stone's throw of us now. We've been the fastest growing firm in our field in the UK over the past three years so we deserved to swagger when

it came to the new offices. The practical need to locate everybody together was the key organisational issue, but there were many other factors that were important in developing the ideas that went into the building.'

It's certainly impressive. The £24 million development has been designed by architects RHWL with interior elements by Claremont Group Interiors. Look beyond the initial impact of the ground floor atrium and the focus on impressing and providing services to clients is reflected in the hospitality suite on the fourth floor. Cool and contemporary and reminiscent of a first class business lounge, it offers an understated counterpoint to the corporate oomph of the main reception. The furniture is as high-spec as you'd expect with pieces from Bene, Wiesner Hager and Vitra. Sensational bespoke elements by





►►► opportunities as well as offering some challenges.'

One of the specific challenges faced by law firms according to Keith is the way they deal with storage. 'We have to strike the right balance,' he says. 'We're all aware that digital information is increasingly important but we still have to keep and manage a large amount of paper. It's inherent in the legal business. The trick is to manage it in a way that means we are not storing paper unnecessarily, not duplicating where we can avoid it and also meeting our environmental objectives as part of our wider CSR programme. This is one of the most sophisticated aspects of what we are doing because it is tied up with the way we manage knowledge. We have to retain the knowledge that is in people's heads by making sure we offer them exceptional working conditions. We have to ensure

confidentiality for much of what we know. We have to allow people to share knowledge as much as possible. And we must ensure that we have an environment that encourages communication.'

The solution at Hill Dickinson is a layered system with clear guidelines for employees, often based around job function. Fee earners for example are entitled to seven linear metres of storage space, a seemingly substantial amount for anybody except a lawyer. Shared storage, much of it built-in, is provided for many items and managed with a file tracking system and as much paper as possible is taken off site and archived. A library is located on the third floor; this is the room in which everybody whispers without being asked. We all do it.

The understatedly neutral colour palette evident in the client suite is matched by a monochrome scheme in the main open

plan which is home to the overwhelming majority of employees. Standard benches supplied by Ofquest are currently specified for six people but with the option of taking up to eight. Task chairs from Orangebox are finished in black to complement the desktop screens. The open plan is typical in the way that it manages noise, by letting people establish their own volume. There is a low hum of background noise even in the busiest areas, but nothing distracting.

Similarly quiet but for different reasons is the restaurant area, which Keith claims is proving to be a success even when so much of the city centre is right out of the front door. The reason it's quiet right now is that it's not lunchtime. 'It's an essential part of the new building,' explains Keith. 'It doubles up as an events suite and offers people the chance to take a break from work, possibly to bump into their colleagues or people from other departments. We feel it's important that people feel very much at home in the new building and that is all tied in with what we were discussing earlier about the role of property as a tool of human resources. But equally we're part of this city. We have the city centre location that is important for us as a business in terms of our image and proximity to clients but it's also important for the people who work for us. It's like we're sponsors of the City of Culture because it's good business but also because we're proud of our links with Liverpool. It all adds up.'●

essential ingredients

Client:	• Hill Dickinson
Design & Planning:	• RHWL 020 7480 1500
Furniture & Interiors Group:	• Claremont Interiors 01925 284000
Fit-out:	• Wates 01372 861000
Project Management:	• PWP 02392 482494
Bespoke:	• Nethercoates 01422 367604
Desking:	• Ofquest 01865 893620
Storage:	• Komfort 01293 529500
Seating:	• Orangebox 020 7837 9922 Bene 020 7689 1234 Vitra 020 7608 6200