







# profile

►►► couple of years, but the opportunity to join a young dynamic team at Armstrong couldn't be ignored.

'Armstrong World Industries is a business with a very strong brand. Headquartered in Pennsylvania, the company is the market leader in ceilings in the UK, Europe and, indeed, globally. What I love is the diversity. The challenges are different right across my EMEA area of responsibility. For example, I've just got back from Russia: we do very good business there, but the market is still maturing. It's a market where you have to sell the basic benefits of having a ceiling at all – the acoustics, light reflectancy and so on. Whereas in mature markets like the UK, architects are interested in linking ceiling design to many more sophisticated ideas. For example, they often want a ceiling to reflect an integrated space, a plane that's a technology zone of integrated services – but delivered in a highly aesthetic way. In some cases, the ceiling is linked strongly to an organisation's brand as well – how an organisation wants to present themselves to customers is increasingly reflected in their choice of interior design and finishes.

'A lot of what we've done traditionally is to provide flat white ceilings. Architects have wanted the ceiling to disappear so that they can express themselves in other areas. The fact is though that we offer many, many other types of solutions too. Many of these are on a grand scale such as at Dubai Airport, which involves 60,000 different items in a design not unlike a giant, three-dimensional banana jigsaw. It's a huge complex project in terms of design, product, logistics and supply-chain issues.

'So, although we're known as the leading supplier for those white ceilings, we're now increasing our focus on customised ceiling designs and solutions. Demand is increasingly there for innovative, tailored work, and we're doing much more to get into it. We're launching Armstrong Atelier right now – rolling it out across various markets, with the big launch at 100% Design. It's about a new more consultative approach. It's going beyond our standard portfolio. It's about bringing together different materials. Ultimately it's an interface between ideas and engineering – and stepping out of the box.

'It really excites me. I'm very passionate about the Atelier concept and I'm really excited about how we got here. I joined Armstrong at the beginning of 2010 – Atelier is our new baby.

'My job is to be part of a team that re-energises this brand...and there's huge potential. We did an exercise – 'Describe Armstrong as an animal'. Typically we're thought of as an elephant – big, reliable, doesn't let you down. We want to be thought of as a leopard – agile and dynamic. To add to the research we gathered architect and designer feedback from online workshops. What emerged from this phase was our role in leading the process of creativity – the designers need a partner to engineer the solution. How do we make it happen? What do you want to achieve? These are the questions we're asking in a rapidly changing construction industry. And, of course, there's a consultative role for us too, in achieving a balance between vision and cost. We can provide value engineering to achieve the look at the right price.'

The whole Atelier concept – that blend of workshop and studio, craft and engineering – is a big deal for Neil. He's putting in place a solution to reflect the changes happening in architecture and construction as more focus is placed on customer-driven needs. He offered, as an example, PizzaExpress – who are working with

Armstrong to creating a customer experience led re-design to enhance their brand. This blends the architectural purity of the exposed soffit with the need for sensory improvement and atmosphere. 'Islands' of services are increasingly tailored by Armstrong to provide all the acoustic and light benefits without strangling an interior's design.

We'd been chatting for so long that there was hardly time to talk about things that Neil enjoys away from work. Good friends, good food and good music pretty well sums it up. With us being us we had a bit of a chat about rock'n'roll. It turns out that Neil has enjoyed many, many gigs since student days, with highlights including Spear of Destiny, Shed 7 and The Chameleons.

'Like the headline', smiled Neil, noting one of Mick's Indie references in a recent Mix. We get the impression that despite that top CV, despite all the work that's being going on with Atelier for the past 18 months, what Neil would really enjoy right now is a proper Mix rock'n'roll headline! ●

