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ISSN 1561-781-5



9 771561 781004

HK\$80
RMB80
US\$11



HSBC Private Bank

Geneva

Make

Photography by John MacLean and Vincent Jendly

To say that the Swiss know something about banking would be the epitome of an understatement. When HSBC decided it needed a front-office retail presence in Geneva, it sought a central location that would afford unparalleled views of the old town, Rhone River and Lake Geneva. A cluster of seven abandoned buildings on Quai des Bergues, some of the structures dating back to the 18th century, eventually became the site. The London office of Make won the competition to restore and consolidate the buildings into a singular volume consisting of 16,300 square metres. And it had to do it with a brief that stipulated confidentiality and seclusion for the bank's clients while, somewhat paradoxically, providing transparency and a friendly, cosy environment for HSBC's 650 employees at this branch.

Working with local Swiss architect Itten Brechbuhl SA, Make connected two courtyards between the north and south blocks with a single atrium. Forming

the heart of the composite structure, the six-storey stepped atrium links the main components of the building and is finished along its north and south lengths with light oak vertical fins, effectively transforming the space into an internal forest. At the western end of the atrium is a full-height green wall, while the central core consists of lifts and, to the east, a main staircase with cantilevered half landings that float like sculptural objects within the space. The atrium echoes Hong Kong's much-discussed HSBC headquarters, though it is a kinder, softer version of its glass-and-steel Chinese sister. Both serve similar functions: they allow natural light to filter down into the centre of the building while encouraging views into various levels through the open plan, thus fulfilling HSBC's requirement for transparency.

Discretion for private clients, on the other hand, was achieved through a separate entrance and dedicated lifts for those who wish to remain



anonymous. These clients can literally be whisked up to the sixth-floor private banking area without being seen by other bank customers, and shown into hushed meeting rooms to conduct their business securely. The private client reception area on the sixth floor is dramatically double-height underneath sloped roofs that curve downwards to meet walls, while tinted dormers let in the view. An asymmetrical reception desk consisting of strata of dark walnut sets the stage for meeting rooms that feature the horizontal bands, here crafted into shelving, and there into digital displays. Make devised two schemes for the two entities: the open staff areas are fitted out with light, natural oak, while the reception areas, meeting rooms and private dining rooms where clients are entertained are finished in dark American walnut.

A number of sustainability elements were incorporated into Make's design scheme, the most significant being the repurposing of the existing buildings. Lake water is used to cool the building, and a second basement was created to accommodate a plant for heat exchange and power. Natural materials locally sourced, such as oak and a light stone, were used in all of the main spaces; the stone element was also employed in creating the facade, flooring and internal walls. Seventy-five percent of the air within is recycled, while triple-glazed dormer units (a first for Switzerland) respect traditional rooflines of the area yet give them a contemporary touch. Plus, their electro-chromatic glass allows a mere 10% of ultraviolet rays to penetrate.

"The opportunity to revive the historical buildings rather than demolish them, and the need to integrate modern functions, required an architectural language of careful consideration and a balance of constraints with opportunities," notes Florian Frotscher, Make partner and project lead architect. With the firm's sensitive approach both inside and out, the solution proudly attests to a banking brief fulfilled – and then some. In Geneva, that's high praise, indeed.