



ABOVE: Featuring a canopy of chairs from Massey Hall and a Tragically Hip lyric in red neon, The Academy sets a momentous scene in Universal Music Canada's new flagship.

WORK / CULTURE

# A UNIVERSAL MINDSET

FOSTERING COMMUNITY AMONG NEIGHBOURS AND  
EMPLOYEES ALIKE, UNIVERSAL MUSIC CANADA'S HQ WAS DESIGNED  
AS THE ULTIMATE PLACE TO CONNECT

Story by David McPherson Photography by Andrew Rowat

When 80 Atlantic Avenue, designed by BDP Quadrangle, first went up in Toronto's trendy Liberty Village, it was noteworthy for being one of the city's inaugural examples of mass-timber architecture. Today, however, it's the main tenant that defines the building, and quite literally: A Universal Music sign adorns the facade. But, more importantly, an ethos of geniality went into creating the conglomerate's new Canadian headquarters within the five-storey building. "Our goal was to create a sense of place — from what we've built inside the stunning, timber-framed walls to what's around us in the heart of Toronto, a city that drives music and culture," says Jeffrey Remedios, UMC's chairman and CEO.

Remedios, already well-regarded as a co-founder of influential indie label Arts & Crafts, presented this vision for a head office relocation during his very first job interviews with Universal Music Group's global chairman. But he wasn't suggesting a simple change of address: He put forward a bolder concept to create a unique space in an evolving neighbourhood that could become the locus for the broader music industry. Remedios shared his idea with industry colleague Erik Hoffman, the president of Live Nation Canada, who enthusiastically responded by moving his offices from Budweiser Stage into Liberty Village. Completing this ecosystem.

Music Canada and the Canadian Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (which administer the Juno Awards) also now hang their hats in the neighbourhood.

It was a major gambit. The music industry — specifically the way artists make, produce and release their music — is more diffuse than ever. "We're living in an era where music is being made in suburban bedrooms and garages all over the world — and that music is regularly hitting the Billboard Hot 100," Remedios says. Yet he believes people yearn to compose in established venues. "Artists still want to be rooted in some sense of place. At Universal Music Group, that shows up in different markets in different ways. They want to record with a symphony in Abbey Road Studios in London or use Frank Sinatra's microphone at Capitol Studios in L.A. The question becomes: How do you have this sense of place around creation when so much of it, theoretically, is now ephemeral?"

At UMC's new home, the answer lies in welcoming people in and making them feel like they are an intrinsic part of Universal Music — and that inviting quality is not aimed exclusively at industry insiders. It's immediately apparent to anyone at street level: The Canadian division is the only Universal Music office in North America with a welcoming footprint. In the ground-floor lobby, you can pop in for

a cortado at the sun-splashed Arvo Coffee & Wine (which leases the space from UMC) and watch a curated loop of the latest videos from UMC's roster of artists on ultrawide 21-foot screens.

Remedios's central challenge to the architecture firms vying to work on the interiors project was also focused on expansiveness: Design a space centred on music and culture, "with our office as a creative campus that ties and brings all these communities together." Enter Superkül. The irony? The Toronto firm was not brought in for an interview until after UMC had already narrowed an exhaustive list to three candidates. But once UMC's leaders met with Superkül principal Meg Graham, they felt an immediate connection. "They speak like artists," Remedios says. "From our initial conversations, I felt this care, attention to detail and focus on excellence in craft that was a real guiding principle for us. We see that in the artists we want to work with, and we felt that with the Superkül team."

UMC tasked the firm with designing a headquarters unlike any other in the music industry. "They were seeking a multi-faceted space," explains Graham, "one that would spark imagination, collaboration and innovation, and offer a variety of industry-related functions in-house: state-of-the-art recording studios, an intimate performance venue and a listening lounge."

That intimate performance venue — also on the capacious ground floor, right next to Arvo — is The Academy, a 100-person event space wrapped in warm walnut fins with bronze detailing. "Both its organic form and materiality recall those of musical instruments, and they are reflected in the tone, warmth and forms of the second- and third-floor architecture," says Graham. Inside, its piece de résistance is the ceiling installation above the mid-century-style bar (which, echoing the feel of the exterior envelope, features wooden fins painted dark charcoal grey with bronze trim): a collection of vintage wooden chair-backs reclaimed from Massey Hall, Canada's most revered music venue.

To match the hometown feel and tone, a red neon sign reads "No dress

rehearsal, this is our life" — a lyric from the Tragically Hip's "Ahead by a Century," captured in Gord Downie's handwriting. (Rehearsals, as it were, are just one of the many uses of this versatile space: Last fall, Dave Grohl stopped in — and was joined by Omar Hakim and the surviving members of Rush, Alex Lifeson and Geddy Lee — to prepare for their performance at the Taylor Hawkins tribute concerts in Los Angeles and London. Universal Music artist Shawn Mendes also filmed part of his music video for "When You're Gone" in this room.)

If the lobby sets the building-as-community-hub scene, the remainder of the 3,715-square-metre space (namely, its mostly open-plan offices on the second and third floors) is dedicated to getting down to work, and to encouraging "collaboration and serendipitous encounters between colleagues, artists and visitors," Graham says. Both she and UMC wanted to conjure a curated sense of quality down to the details. "It was important to use natural materials like felt, leather and wood to engender a sense of warmth and well-being so that staff and artists would feel both inspired and at home."

Working within the framework of those warm wood walls and the hefty statement they make throughout the interiors, Superkül tailored intimate moments throughout the scheme that speak of more human-scaled craft. The firm placed the meeting rooms and private offices along the prevailing east-west axis of the second and third floors and commissioned artist Kathryn Walter to collaborate on the wool felt wallcovering (a customization of her FELT ripple wall panels) that wraps the exterior of these enclosed spaces. In the areas between the felt-wrapped walls, Superkül nestled leather banquettes, creating breakout nooks for intimate conversations with views between the corridor and the work zones.

A durable finish, felt also provides acoustic dampening, making it a good strategic fit for the open-plan office. Walter folded the heather grey material in non-repeating pleats to amp up its sense of bundled coziness. "It's a kind of abstraction of sound waves," Walter explains. "Surrounding the meeting pods,

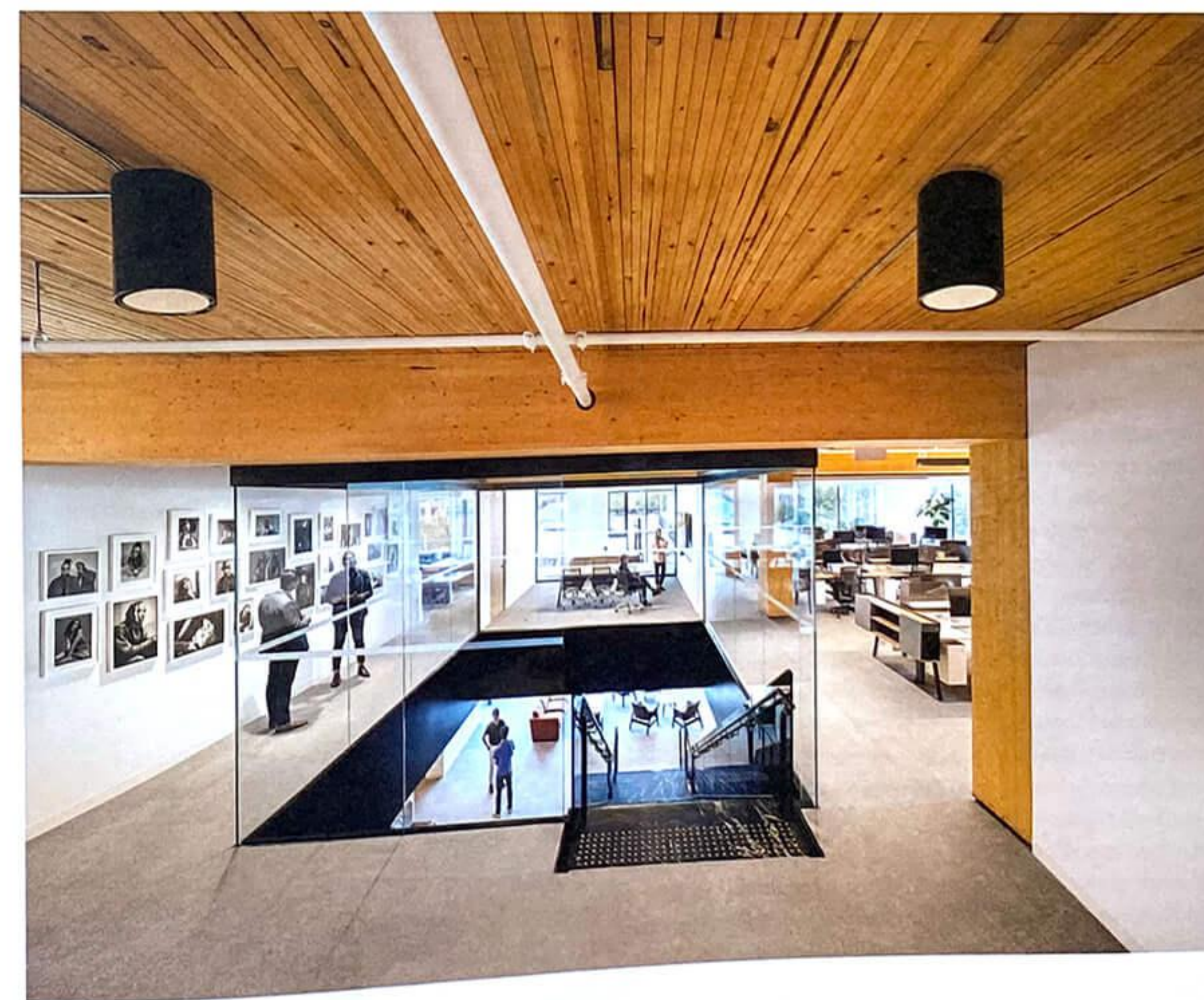


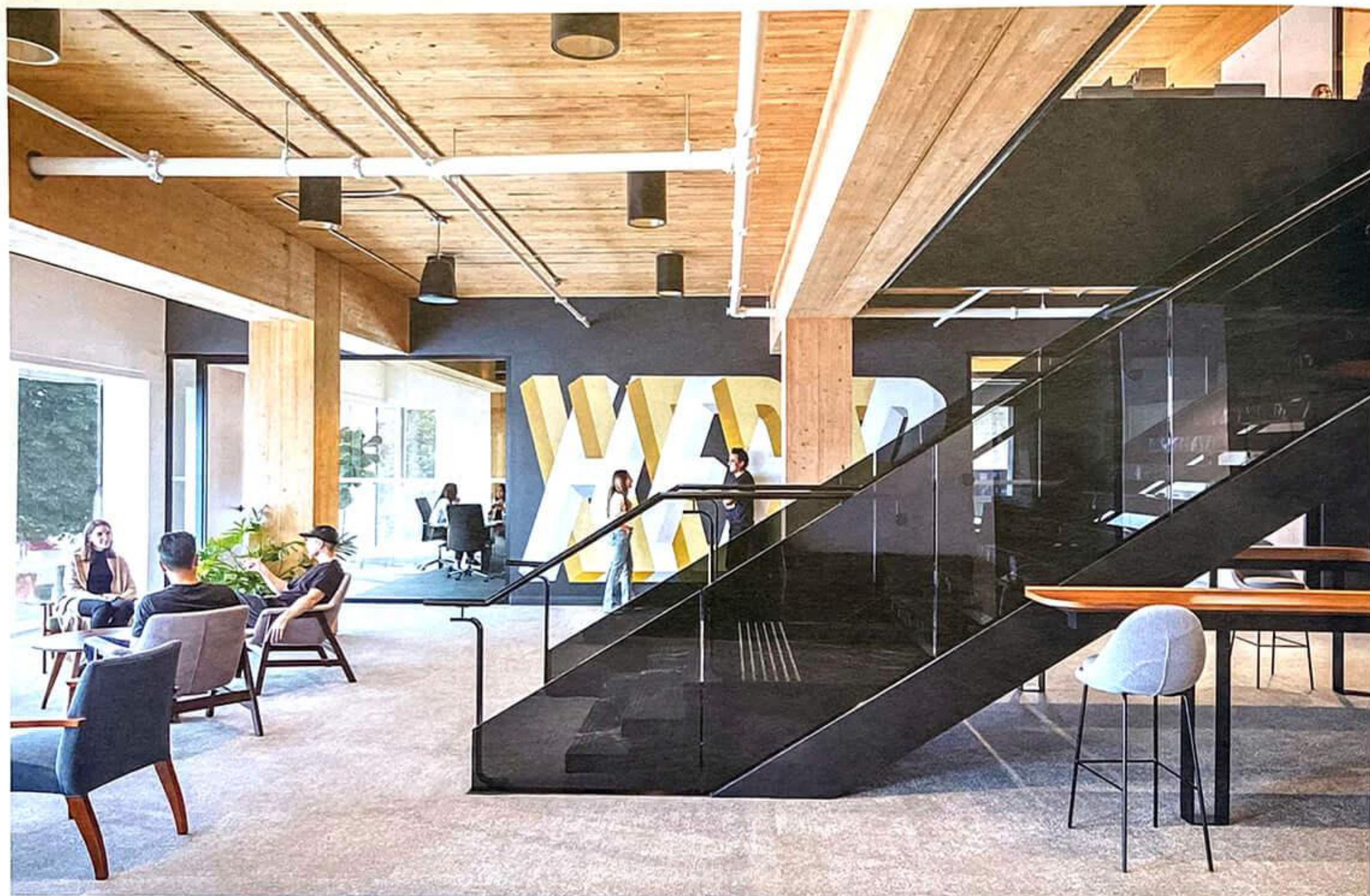
RIGHT: The HQ has a commanding street presence in Toronto's Liberty Village neighbourhood, with a ground-floor café (designed by Solid Design Creative) open to the public.



RIGHT: Open to outsider bookings, the recording spaces inside 80A Studios are equipped with cutting-edge technology.

BELOW: Connecting employees on the second and third floors, a glass-enclosed staircase creates a dramatic interior moment.





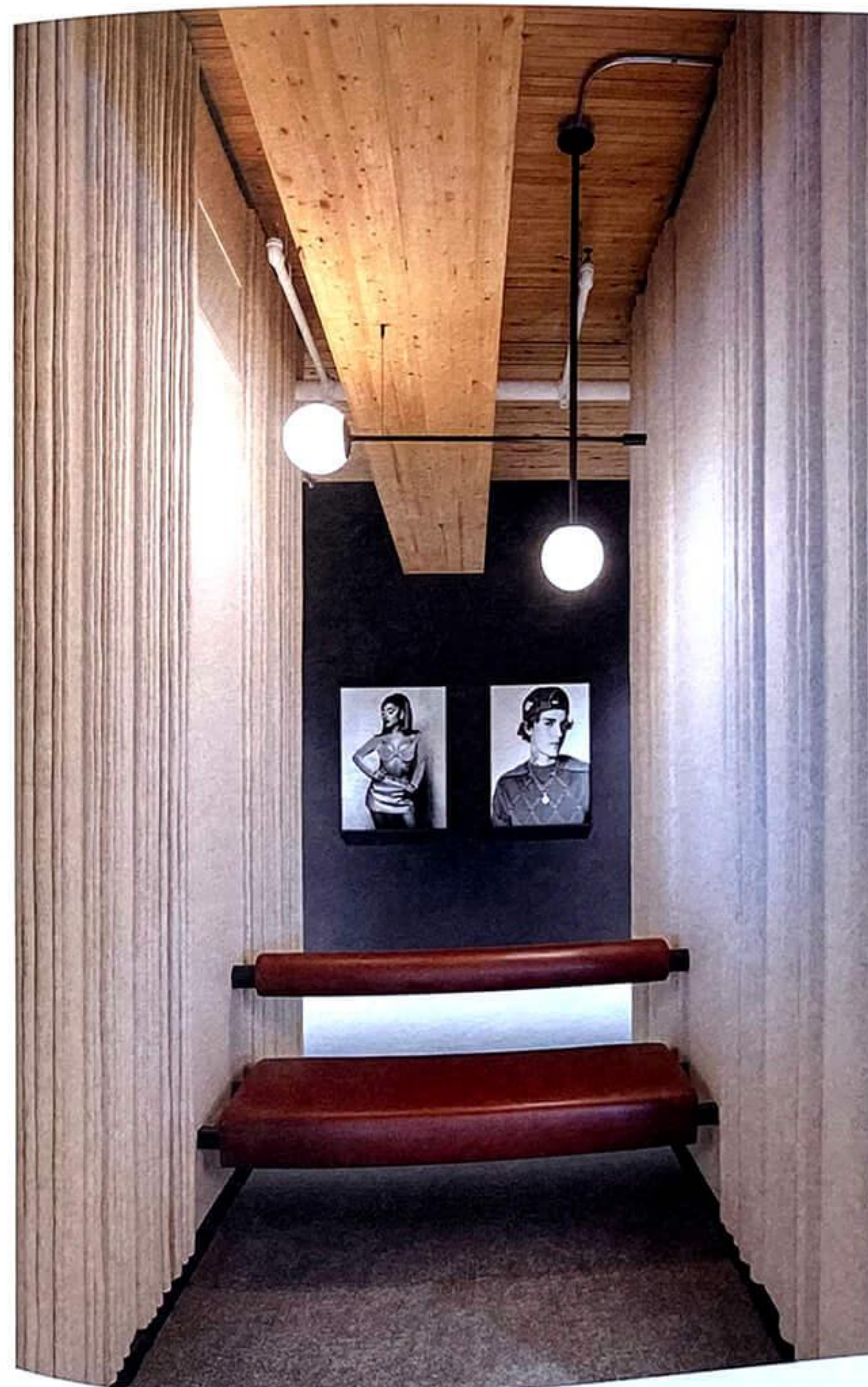
BELOW: A leather banquette straddles the space between two felt-wrapped offices. Publicity shots of Justin Bieber and Ariana Grande hang in the background.

the clusters of ripples separated by areas of flat felt are like modulations in sound being carried across the wall. These rhythmic folds vary in patterns that never repeat." Along the sunlit perimeter of the second and third floors, the intimate, well-appointed open bays, each its own small "neighbourhood," feature individual and collaborative desking systems with warm walnut laminate millwork and tables for peer consultation and impromptu conversation.

Hermetically sealed from all this workplace interaction is 80A Studios, the burgundy felt-lined trio of studios (with access to a kitchen and a lounge) on the second floor. From behind its reception desk, visitors are greeted by *Best of Luck*, an entrancing mixed-media installation in mirrored glass created by Canadian artist Trevor Wheatley and his partner, Cosmo Dean — part of a fulsome series of works curated for UMC by Ashley McKenzie-Barnes. Resembling coins, the circular pieces that make up the wall-mounted artwork were designed to literally reflect the artists coming into the studio, who are, as Graham says, "sharing what they're about with the world. It's also a small nod to the coin toss and the unpredictability of where one's art might go." Remedios takes the metaphor a step further: "You are betting on yourself!"

Fine-tuned in collaboration with performance and recording studio designer Martin Pilchner of Pilchner Schoustal International, the 80A Studios feature the country's only commercial-sized studio certified for Dolby Atmos music mixing that is open to booking by third-party mix engineers. It delivers a 3D immersive sound experience that will blow you away — as it did me, when two sound engineers blasted "Believer" by Imagine Dragons for my listening pleasure. Already in the short time since its opening late last spring, the space has hosted writing camps for UMC artists and been booked for countless recordings by the broader music community. (The Who even stopped by following their concert at Scotiabank Arena last fall to listen to and work on their audio files.)

ABOVE: The staircase leads down to the second-floor lounge, where the mural *Hear Here* and a wraparound counter complete the experience.



Besides the provision of bleeding-edge sound quality, it was crucial to both the client and the architecture firm to nurture a robust sense of connection between the teams on the second and third floors. The solution? A heroic staircase of Nero Marquina marble on the west end of the building that invites employees to check out what their colleagues are working on without opting for the elevator. Floating in the middle of the space — and framed in black-tinted glass and powder-coated steel — this key architectural element has a threefold *raison d'être*, explains Graham: "To create strong visibility and transparency between the floors, to serve as a central gathering location and to encourage spontaneous interaction between colleagues."

To descend from the third floor is to enjoy a continuous view into that level's meeting room, the skyline of Liberty Village's west edge and the second floor's lounge beneath them — all at once. Comprising a coffee bar, informal work areas and comfy seating, the lounge grabs your attention right away with the supersize

typographic mural *Hear Here* by Canadian artist and creative director Ben Johnston. And then there's another signature move, a sort of coda to the well-crafted ensemble performance that is 80 Atlantic: a solid walnut drink bar that elegantly wraps around the bottom of the staircase. Hear hear, indeed.

In his warm third-floor office — which resembles a comfortable living room complete with a Superkül-designed desk and wall system, a turntable, a state-of-the-art sound system and floor-to-ceiling windows — Remedios seems more than pleased with the results and how they respond to his original intentions. "It's pretty fun," he says. "I'm having *Field of Dreams* moments daily just thinking about how different folks are using this space." **AZ** [superkul.ca](http://superkul.ca)