

Inside the new headquarters  
of Universal Music Canada—  
a multi-purpose homage  
to the creative mind

# THE CAMPUS OF COOL

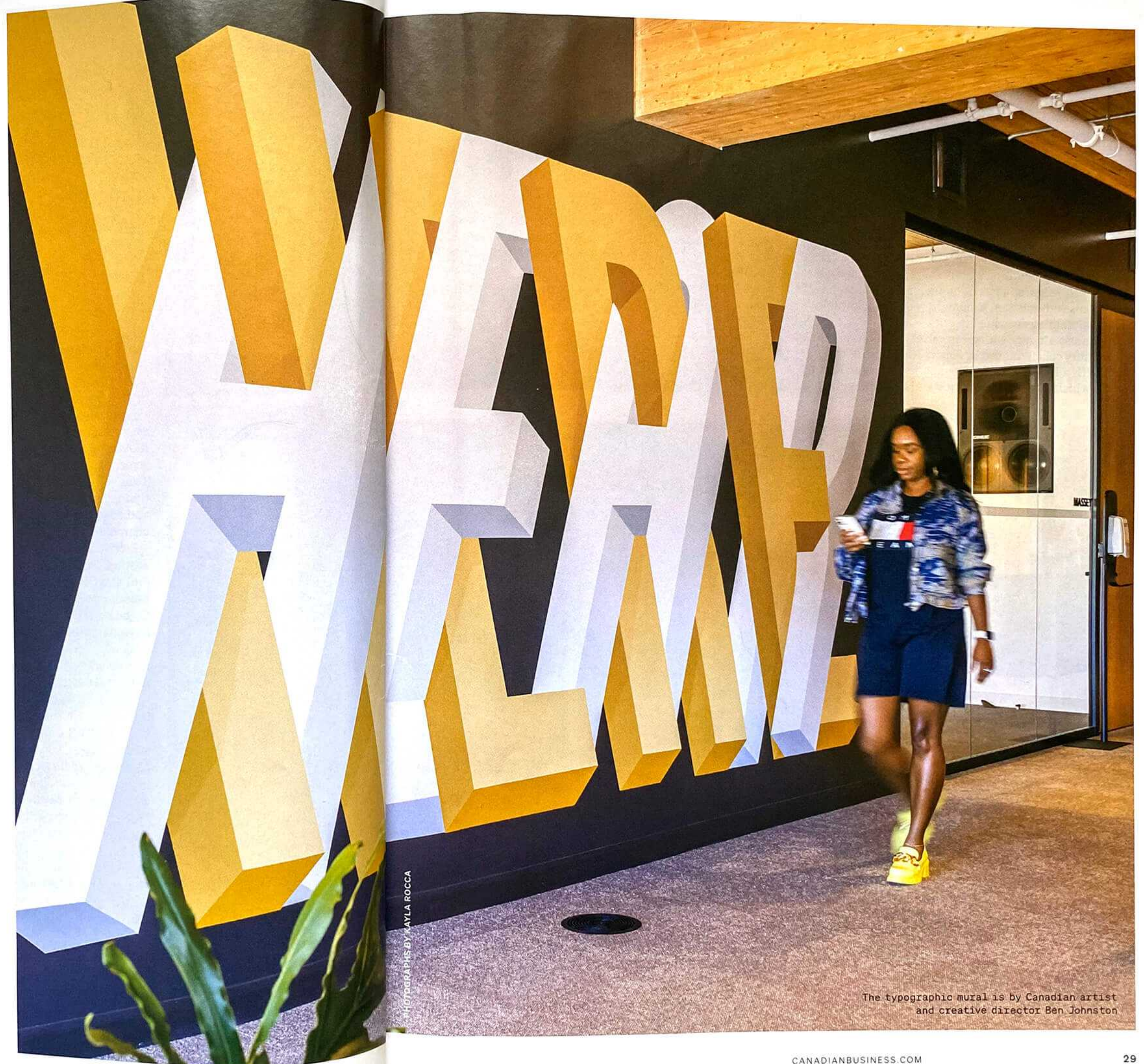
by Isabel B. Slone

**J**effrey Remedios, CEO and chairman of Universal Music Canada, knows all about impermanence. “Now that music is so ephemeral—songs recorded on a laptop in someone’s bedroom regularly make it on the Billboard Top 100—there is a real desire to create a sense of place,” he says.

Remedios is the indie darling who brought Broken Social Scene to the mainstream as co-founder of the Arts & Crafts label. When he took on the top job at Universal in 2015, the company’s offices occupied a desolate stretch off the highway in a Toronto suburb and functioned primarily as a shipping warehouse for CDs and merch. Artists only came to visit if they had a formal meeting scheduled. Remedios began to conceive of a relocated creative campus with state-of-the-art recording studios, listening rooms, a small, intimate concert venue and a hybrid workspace where artists could jam alongside marketing teams, A&R people and even the accounting department.

The new office, in downtown Toronto’s Liberty Village, welcomed Universal’s full team of roughly 160 employees in April. It’s an expansive loftlike space punctuated by black-spruce beams and filled with natural light coming in through floor-to-ceiling windows. The vibe is converted factory, but the building is actually brand new. It’s a collaboration between Universal and development company Hullmark, and it’s the first commercial building in Ontario in a century to use timber construction. It contains more than 7,000 square metres of workspace and 789 square metres of retail, with Universal occupying half of the former and all of the latter. Hullmark brought in architecture firm Quadrangle, and Universal hired sustainable-design firm Superkül to outfit the space.

There’s an Arvo artisanal café and wine bar on the ground floor that’s open to the public. The building



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAYLA ROCCA

The typographic mural is by Canadian artist and creative director Ben Johnston

also houses the Academy at Universal Music Canada, a 100-seat concert venue. Shawn Mendes used it as a rehearsal space for two months leading up to his performance at the 2022 MTV Video Music Awards. The Academy contains an art-deco bar and a bandshell made of wooden chair backs sourced from Massey Hall. A neon sign that says “No dress rehearsal, this is our life,” a lyric from The Tragically Hip’s “Ahead by a Century,” was crafted in Gord Downie’s own handwriting.

Upstairs are three recording studios that were designed by renowned acoustic engineer Martin Pilchner—the aesthetic is boho living room with Persian carpets. Unlike a typical dark, cavernous recording studio, these spaces have natural light, which required feats of engineering: The architects built rooms within larger, windowed rooms to allow light in while maintaining acoustic integrity.

There’s also a lounge with green velvet armchairs and a teal mid-century couch sourced by Superkül. The office walls are lined with a fuzzy wool-felt installation by artist Kathryn Walter, which has a natural acoustic-dampening effect on

the space. The company commissioned original artwork from contemporary Canadian talent, including typographer and muralist Ben Johnston and mixed-media artist Tahsine Al Hassane. There’s also a fully insulated listening room where Universal artists like Jamie Fine and Johnny Orlando can blast their latest tracks without disturbing employees working nearby.

The staff, a wide-ranging team that includes executives, marketers, accountants and recording engineers, work at banks of desks grouped together. Employees are required to be in the physical workspace three days a week. Creatively, the campus is abuzz. “Being back in the office after the pandemic is so rejuvenating,” says Remedios. “Art and music are about human connection.”

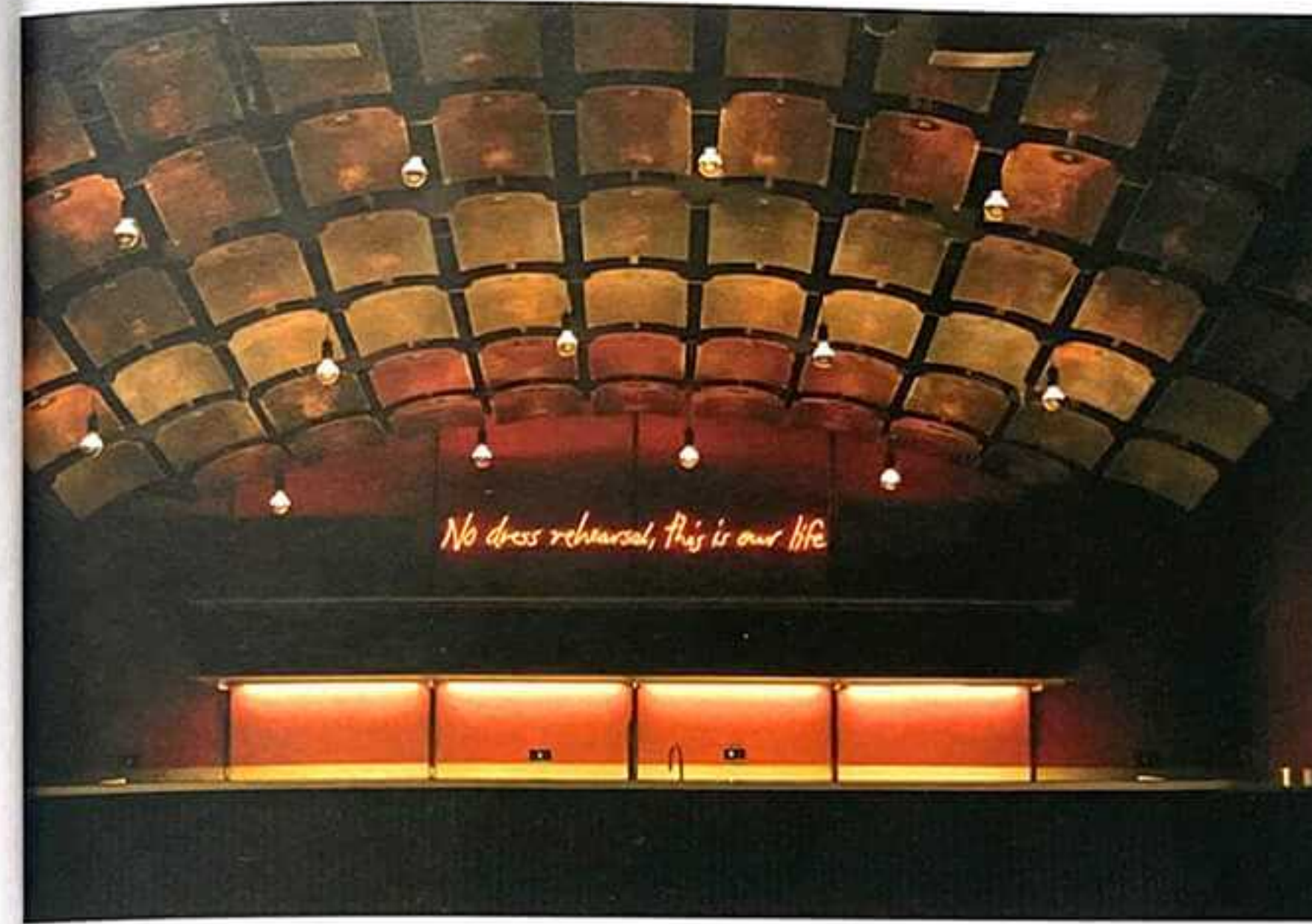


→ The open-concept workspace accommodates hybrid meetings

← CEO and chairman Remedios in his office



→ There are three recording studios on the new campus



← The bar in the performance space features a neon sign of a Tragically Hip lyric in late singer Gord Downie’s handwriting as well as a canopy of chair backs from Massey Hall

