

NEOCON 2011. AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE



by **John Sacks**, JSA (photo) and **Barry Jenkins**

Neocon is staged at the 372,000 sq m Merchandise Mart building, opened in 1930 by the retail magnate Marshall Field as a fabulous example of Art Deco commercial architecture and once owned by the Kennedy family. The show is very different to Cologne's Orgatec or Milan's Salone Ufficio, due in part to the style of products historically preferred by the US market, but also because the main event is held in permanent showrooms on floors 3, 10 and 11, with a temporary exhibition space on floors 7 and 8.



The Merchandise Mart, Chicago

This June, exhibitors were generally happy, especially those with showrooms on the 3rd floor. **Steelcase** had moved here from the 10th floor, adding their presence to that of **Herman Miller**, **HNI Group**, **Haworth** and several of the other larger companies. The prevailing atmos-

phere was of cautious uncertainty rather than exuberant enthusiasm. Most reported demand to be erratic and unpredictable, with the optimism that had been generated by a rather good start to this year having been let down by a poor spring.

TRENDS AND PRODUCTS

The most important issues influencing the workplace right now are the economy, the environment, information technology and the ageing workforce. Consequently, it is no surprise that sustainability, agile working, plus health and wellbeing, all figured prominently in the directions manufacturers were going to develop new products, or enhance old ones.

With LEED certification having become an important requirement for any tender in the US, manufacturers are keen to emphasise their environmental credentials. It appears that the need to make green, lean products is being taken seriously by many of the more established companies. To that end, it is no wonder that, with **Humanscale's** longstanding emphasis on wellbeing and ergonomics, they would be amongst those most wholeheartedly embracing 'responsible' product development. Their Trea guest chair, launched in Milan in April, was designed by Todd Bracher. It is made of 30% recycled materials and is 99% recyclable. Trea adapts to suit the user automatically. This is achieved by a 'solid state' ergonomic mechanism that allows the backrest to pivot whilst still giving full support to the user.



Trea chair from Humanscale

Another trend is Europe's strong influence in terms of design. **Davis** led the way several years ago with a distribution license from **Renz**. Since then other European companies such as **Boss** and **Interstuhl** have set up distribution through US firms, whilst others, including **Dauphin** and **Senator**, have established their own, first-hand, presence. Senator International, known locally as **Allermuir**, showed the work of three British designers - Simon Pengelly, Mark Gabbertas and Pearson Lloyd. Mark Gabbertas showed his Haven range of sofas, screens and tables that create the kind of 'permeable privacy' started by Vitra's innovative Alcove sofa.



Haven by Gabbertas from Allermuir

It is hard to pinpoint precisely when the term 'break-out' entered the workplace lexicon, but now, with the focus on 'agile' working, it is clear that the idea of a fixed workstation is no longer the only requirement in the workplace. The need to provide a range of workplace settings has not only given rise to a plethora of high backed 'Alcove inspired' sofas like Haven, but has also generated a much greater general interest in loose furnishings.

Combining the need for loose furnishings and European heritage, **Haworth** promoted their 'Collection'. Having acquired Castelli in the 1990s, Haworth has strengthened their portfolio through their collaboration with the Cassina group of companies including

Poltrona Frau and Cappellini. In the same way that Knoll and Herman Miller have their classics, there is a clear appetite for not only classic modernist designs like Eames and Knoll, but also their more recent compatriots such as Cappellini and Magis.

The highly eclectic and innovative loose furnishings ranges from **Magis** are now being distributed in the US by Herman Miller. This is a further interesting example of the 'crossover' movements from domestic to commercial and retail to contract.

In terms of benching, the Steelcase company **Turnstone**, showed Bivi - the name is derived from bivouac as an extension of the 'campfire' analogy.



Bivi

This was an interesting approach consisting of a single side-frame and one size worktop. It requires few tools to assemble and can be used to configure a range of applications from single and multiple linear plans, integrating storage, high shelves, and even a sofa for adjacent break out spaces. The concept is to offer considerable diversity from a small inventory of parts. It represented a less conventional approach aimed at smaller groups of workers. The display showed how the side frame builds upwards by stacking second and third layer frames, extending the tapered geometry of the leg frame. This enables high-level storage to be integrated and takes account of the need to manage work life and private life. To that end, the Bivi display included a bicycle hanging at one end of a bench, plus a semi-enclosed seating area and other diverse situations suitable for 'agile' and collaborative work.

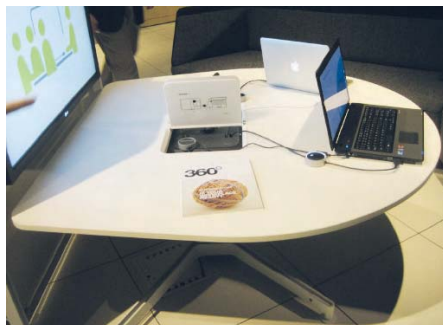
Within the **Steelcase** showroom, they showed their desk range Frame One augmented by Answers - a range of

personal storage and territory elements with the function of defining workplaces and avoiding the use of the conventional mobile pedestals.



Steelcase Frame One + Answers

Steelcase also showed their Mediascape range again, which integrates technology and the ability to use different social locations for group work. Whilst the furniture elements are quite simple forming enclosed seating areas or high benches, the technology allows for a series of laptops to be hooked up and switched by using what is called a 'puck'.



Steelcase Mediascape with a "Puck"

Itoki from Japan displayed pieces from their *Hida* collection which featured the use of stained cedar wood - which would otherwise be waste material - in both compressed form for chair frames, and uncompressed for divider screens.



Itoki's Hida collection



Uncompressed and compressed cedar wood for Itoki's Hida collection

Halcon showed *Motus*, a new award-winning Gensler designed table with a heavily engineered mechanism which allowed the top to be stowed and the table to be rolled into position.

OFS showed *Eleven*, a new system from Daniel Korb which featured formed extrusions and die cast aluminium to create a simple and elegant product.

Okamura launched their new mesh seat and back multi-purpose stacking chair, *Zart*, available with a black or white frame and in seven mesh colours.

STRATEGIES

Walking around and seeing how research-led ideas were being used as marketing tools, it was hard to see in many cases how this research had translated into product development or innovation.

Where technology could be used such as **Humanscale's** LED proximity sensing task lamps, or **Herman Miller's** Sayl chair programme, there is a genuine opportunity to express the innovation through the design of the product.

The user benefits are clearly defined and understood. But for desks, storage and any other furnishings, the challenge to develop something that is distinctive enough to ward off the competition is much greater. Even though there are signs of this sector recovering, unless the nettle is grasped and some risks are taken, the changes being faced in the workplace and the dominance of technology will continue to relegate furniture to play a support role, largely locked into old manufacturing technology.