

A review of Neocon 2011

– an international perspective



The Merchandise Mart, Chicago

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Neocon and Chicago

Visitors to Neocon in Chicago this June were welcomed by pleasantly cool and mainly sunny weather, interspersed with some drizzle - and sent away from the city with torrential downpours, just as everyone was leaving on the Wednesday. It was just as unpredictable as the weather seen in many parts of the world at the moment.

Neocon is a very different show to Cologne's Orgatec or Milan's Salone due in part to the style of products historically preferred by the US market, but also due to the fact that the main event is held in permanent showrooms on floors 3, 10 and 11, with a temporary exhibition space on floors 7 and 8. This creates a very distinct divide, largely between companies with an established US presence and those trying to break in.

Neocon is staged at the 4m sq ft (372,000 sq m) Merchandise Mart building, opened in 1930 by the retail magnate Marshall Field and once owned by the Kennedy family. Although it is a fabulous example of Art Deco commercial architecture, circulation is very inefficient, relying on over-crowded and elusive elevators. Compared to the new Fiera in Milan or the redeveloped Messe in Cologne, the Mart is in need of a major overhaul to improve circulation and resolve the logjams. It can't be denied however that seasoned attendees do take almost masochistic pleasure in its idiosyncrasies and the Mart and Neocon are so inexorably linked, it is unthinkable that Neocon would, or should relocate.

This year, just as at every Neocon, one of the first items of conversation was whether the show was busier, the same as or quieter than previous years. Well it was probably a little quieter; but not by much. 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. Quite why the Merchandise Mart allowed this is not clear; the danger must be that the 10th and 11th floors could become merely outposts for smaller companies.

The prevailing atmosphere 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, which was launched in Milan in April, was designed by Todd Bracher. Its name hints at the fact that it has just three main components. In addition it is made of 30% recycled materials and is 99% recyclable.



Trea chair from Humanscale

Additionally, in line with Humanscale's commitment to ergonomics, *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.

Another trend is Europe's strong influence in terms of design – we'd never previously come across the term "euro-beautiful"! 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.

Pengelly's contribution was a multi purpose chair – *Confer* - which is based on a banquette chair adapted for use in training, education and general conference settings.



Confer chair from Allermuir

Gabbertas showed his *Haven* range of sofas, screens and tables that create the kind of ‘permeable privacy’ started by Vitra’s innovative *Alcove* sofa. This was evident as a trend that has been copied by many seating companies in Europe and the US.



Haven by Gabbertas from Allermuir

The offering from Pearce and Lloyd was the *Insight* seating range - very intelligent and smart - in the English sense of the word!



Insight

It has a single moulded frame and offers a range of bases to provide a complete family of seating from legged stacking chairs to task chairs. It also comes with or without upholstered backs and a new TP flexible membrane option.

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. As a result, the complex, panel based systems that used to dominate Neocon in years gone by were conspicuous by their absence, with several European-style benches taking their place. But the need to provide a *range* of workplace settings – a trend which to our recollection started in the US - 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. Away from the show, this trend could be seen with two major furniture retailers: Crate and Barrel, who now retail seating from Haworth and Steelcase and Room and Board, who sell not only the Nelson and Eames classics from Herman Miller, but also their task seating products such as *Aeron* and *Setu*.

Geiger, a member of the Herman Miller group, showed a collection previewed last year, including two good examples of new 'state of the art, wood shaping technology'.

The *Fulltwist* chair from Mark Goetz and the *Loophole* table from Jay Chapman, showed how computer- controlled manufacturing has led to an ‘engineered’ quality of hardwood furniture. The shapes are very graceful and precise and would be very labour intensive and less commercial if made by hand.



Fulltwist from Geiger

Returning to the idea of benching, the Steelcase company Turnstone, showed *Bivi*.



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.



Bivi from Turnstone

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.



Bivi with bike

Bivi - the name is derived from bivouac as an extension of the ‘campfire’ analogy - was probably the most interesting and thought provoking product at the show.

One interesting aspect of Steelcase’s approach is that unlike the other majors, they keep their group companies quite separate. It is as if they are backing several horses in the same race – as though they are saying that the future of the workplace is uncertain and we are currently experiencing a huge amount of change. Who’s to know whether conventional workstations will continue to dominate or be replaced by more casual and convivial workplace settings?

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"

Looking like the shuttle used in ice hockey, the ‘puck’ is essentially a smart switch that allows a group of people to link simultaneously to a large monitor, projector or screen. In the past this has been a built-in device but this year they have launched *MS Mobile* and *MS Mini*. Both offer the same facilities of visual presentation and teleconferencing but one is set on a mobile stand and the other in a tabletop version.

As well as displaying some products in the KI showroom as part of the new KI Design Collection, Itoki from Japan had their own stand. This 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 and uncompressed and compressed cedar wood

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.



Halcon *Motus*

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



Eleven from Daniel Korb, for OFS

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.



Zart from Okamura

Strategies

One aspect of Neocon that has always been compelling has been the way US companies are very good at articulating the strategy or narrative behind the product. Sometimes this has been used to hype an otherwise simple, generic, product by giving it an implied level of intelligence. At other times, this skilful communication has been used to demonstrate a deep level of understanding and research that has led to a new product. You may recall the work by Steelcase into the ‘personal harbours’ concept of the early 1990’s that led to a programme called *Pathways*.

This year, there were some very clever words being used to position products and companies. It is clear that the workplace has become a very diverse place. But it is also clear that new products often need a strategic ‘wrapping’

to help position them in the highly competitive market. These narratives might be about commitment to the environment or comfort and wellbeing or about the latest ‘new way of working’. As an example, Hon used the strap line ‘Desking that gets you’ to describe their new programme ‘*Vo!*’ (Italian for you). In a similar vein, Vitra asked four central questions linked to agile working;

- Why do you share information?
- How do you transfer knowledge?
- Where are you most efficient?
- Where are you most creative?

Behind these questions is a great deal of understanding and insight.

By way of contrast, Haworth had a visual presentation about the total workplace and how the need for collaborative space and the need for satisfaction are causing a shift from measuring the *cost* per square foot to the *value* per square foot. Steelcase focused on the user by describing a ‘Palette of Spaces’ talking about ‘I’ and ‘We’, and ‘Shared’ and ‘Owned’ spaces.

There is of course a section of the market where price is by far the most influential aspect of a product proposition. For those who simply cannot, or should not, compete on these terms, there has to be another dimension. Responsible R&D, environmental sustainability or a value proposition for the customer that hits all the right spots can help offset the price issue by emphasising ‘value’, as presented by Haworth.

However, 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 *Say!* 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.

Finally

Somewhat predictably, there wasn't a lot of whimsy in evidence at this year's Neocon. Versteel's male dance troop, who shimmied round their chairs to the sounds of some old musical standards, did receive considerable acclaim but perhaps more confusingly and less successful were the Lion King models being shunted along the corridors as if they were polishing the floors.



Versteel's dancers



The 'Lion King' in the Merchandise Mart corridors.

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