

Clerkenwell Design Week London - 2016

A Review

John Sacks



Photography by John Sacks

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Published by:

JSA Consultancy Services Limited

4th Floor, Gray's Inn Chambers, Gray's Inn, London, WC1R 5JA, England Tel: +44 20 7242 8556

E: info@jsacs.com

W: www.jsacs.com

CDW 2016

The sun shone on Clerkenwell this week and the office furniture and interiors world forgot Brexit and Trump and the anarchy of sales targets. The aroma of street food filled the area as visitors to Clerkenwell Design Week (24 – 26 May) devoured everything from fish and chips and hamburgers to Belgian waffles. When tired legs started to give up, tiny Renault Twizys whizzed contorted passengers, one by one, from venue to venue. The four-storey Victorian Farmiloe Building which in past years had housed dozens of random, design-oriented exhibitors, was unavailable for 2016, which deprived the show of its main focal point, and visitors often seemed like lost sheep without it, as if they didn't quite know where to congregate.

Despite organisers' claims to the contrary, visitor numbers were clearly down, but there were more than enough seriously interested buyers and specifiers to keep almost all of the exhibitors very happy. This hybrid show is loosely located in semi-conventional exhibition space – no exhibition which uses a church crypt and a former gaol 'The House of Correction' as venues can be wholly conventional – and more than 80 showrooms in the area. Clerkenwell, a small, historically important neighbourhood area in the heart of London, is a delight to wander around, strewn as it is with tiny alleyways and mainly 19th century buildings whose use has been recycled again and again. Unlike so much of modern cities, it eschews big brand retailers and eateries in favour of independent, often quirky, shops, street markets, bars and restaurants, many of which are originals, and often very good.

There is a greater concentration of office furniture showrooms in Clerkenwell than anywhere else in the world and the manufacturers whose products are on display come from as far afield as Australia, Brazil and Turkey. Many of the showrooms lay on special events, offer hospitality and host parties that go on until late.

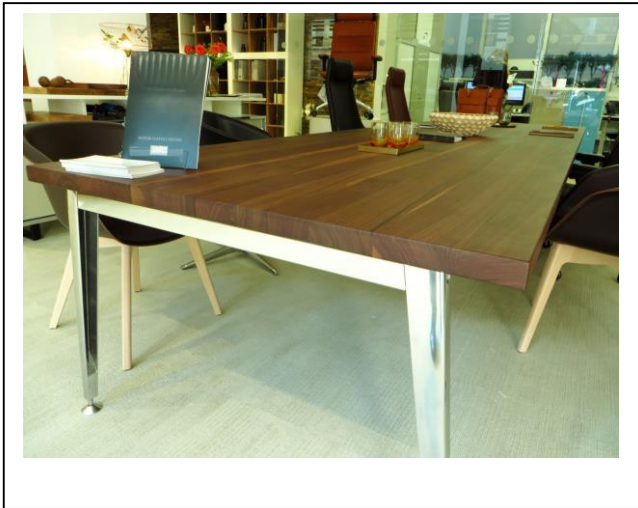
Trends

There were some new product launches but with major international shows this year in Milan, Chicago and Cologne all vying for budgets, manufacturers can't launch new products everywhere, and need to make choices depending on their market focus. It wasn't surprising then that much of the attention was on refining and improving existing models.

The general emphasis was on seating of all shapes and sizes, soft furniture to encourage collaboration and small impromptu meetings, agile working and breakout areas. Although there were workstations on display, which were invariably sit-stand or otherwise height adjustable, even the traditional desk manufacturers such as [Gresham](#) and [Elite](#) had generally relegated these in favour of products from other sectors.

Wood was everywhere, as if designers had suddenly discovered that it was suitable for furniture manufacturing. It's amazing how little improvement can be achieved by just adding wood legs to a boring chair or desk. There were however some lovely examples of creative use of timber including a

beautiful solid walnut *Attention* boardroom table from [Sedus](#). By way of contrast, this company also showed a new wood-effect melamine and MDF commercial table system, *Temptation*, with very lifelike finishes.



'Attention' by Sedus



'Temptation'

Colours were either earthy shades of browns, greens and greys or brightly coloured, wild, abstract patterns. There were also examples of companies with sufficient buying power, such as OCee Design, commissioning ranges of fabrics with exclusive designs.

Manufacturers spend far more time and effort now courting end-user customers than in the days when their attention was solely on dealers. These end users often like the idea of a one-stop-shop which has led to many companies expanding the breadth of their product portfolio, rather than concentrating solely on, for example, office chairs. As a consequence, many showrooms present a wide range of types of products, much of which they source from other manufacturers, in the nature of dealers.

Companies and Products

Poltrona Frau, now a sister company and sharing a showroom building in St John Street with Haworth, showed *Tangle*, a nest of three intertwined tables designed by Nendo from Tokyo and the *Drum* chair and table from Mac Stopa from Poland.



Tangle from Poltrona Frau.



Drum

[Wagstaff](#)'s eye-catching showroom in Brewhouse Yard had a large seaside beach complete with sand sculptures. The attractive furniture displayed included an innovative circular table designed and manufactured by [Hotcakes](#) in the UK which claimed to be able to accommodate more people per sq. m. of floor space than an equivalent bench. Another UK company, [Davison Highley](#) from High Wycombe, the traditional centre of UK furniture making showed the soft seating range, *EI*.

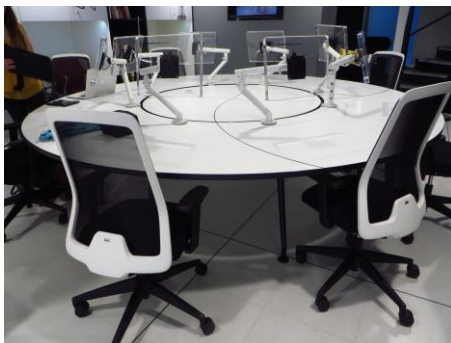


Table by Hotcakes

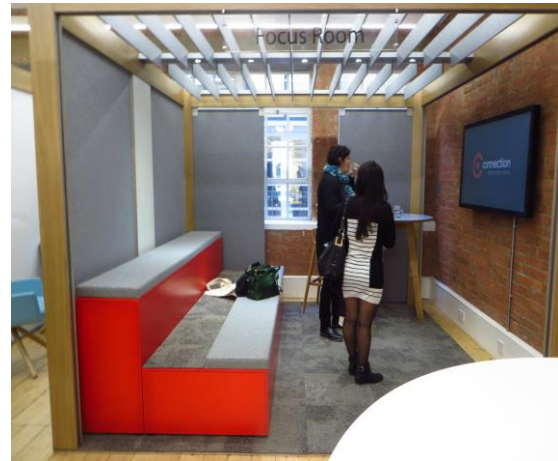


EI from Davison Highley

[Tangent](#) from Oxfordshire shared the Gallery show space in the busy Great Sutton Street with seven other non-competing companies. They were showing simply designed, electrically operated, sit-stand workstations which were modular alongside their fixed height units. [Connection](#)'s large two-floor showroom was also in Great Sutton St which is fast becoming the centre of the area's action. They featured a series of architectural reconfigurable rooms designed by Roger Webb with different themes, and names such as Store, War Room and Focus Room.



Tangent sit-stand desks



Focus Room from Connection

The products on show from another British manufacturer, the highly successful [Elite Office](#) from the North East of England, demonstrated how that company's focus is veering away from workstations. The *Sequester* Bluetooth-enabled enclosures, designed by Carsten Buhl, were an unusual variation on the themes of some of the more common styles of breakout furniture. Much of [Vitra](#)'s new products were focused on the residential market but they also showed the further developed *Hack* system by Konstantin Grcic for dynamic spaces where, for example, when needs call for it, a height adjustable workstation can be easily reconfigured to become a soft seating unit.



Sequester from Elite



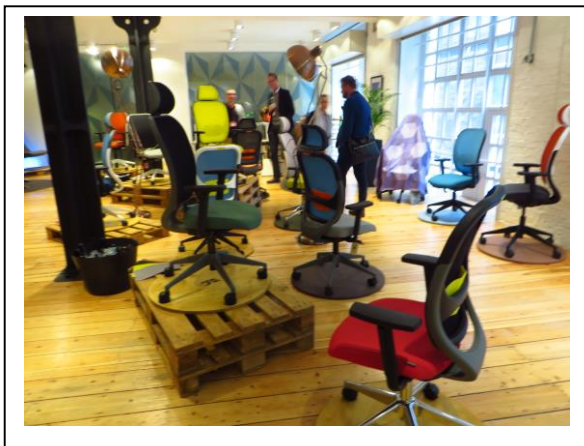
Hack by Vitra

Quite a few companies took advantage of the fine weather and the pavement area outside their showrooms to extend their displays.



Fritz Hansen's pavement space

[Gresham](#)'s highly colourful showspace was another which signalled the emphasis on seating from traditionally, desk-focused, manufacturers. [Spacestor](#), a member of the Hemel Hempstead based Trieste Group, celebrated their new Farringdon Road showroom with a wide display of well-designed furniture for modern office environments, including enclosures, pods, workstations, tables and soft seating.



Gresham



Railway Carriage by Spacestor

The large [Steelcase](#) showroom nearby was professionally laid out by application and designer, and featured a reworked version of the *Brody* workplace inspired by airline business-class enclosures. The company also showed “*Less than Five*”, a carbon fibre chair weighing less than five pounds and a reassuringly expensive list price of well over £1,000. This collaboration between the Steelcase Group company, Coalesse, and designer Michael Young has produced a stunning product.



Brody from Steelcase



Less than Five

[Screen Solutions](#) showroom in Gee Street displayed Q2, a reworked and improved version of their *Quadro* aluminium and glazed pod which includes lighting and powered ventilation.



Q2 from Screen Solutions

There were several important new product launches from [Boss Design](#), notably a new task chair, *Trinetic*, and a cleverly designed soft benching range, *Myriad*, which included some attractively shaped units.



Trinetic from Boss Design



Myriad

Yorkshire-based [Naughtone](#) had an attractive showroom displaying a wide range of soft seating including *rhyme*. Visitors to [Orangebox](#)' very large, three storey, building were spoiled for choice, with so many soft seating and enclosures ranges on offer. As you would

expect from this market leader, the designs were well-conceived and executed.

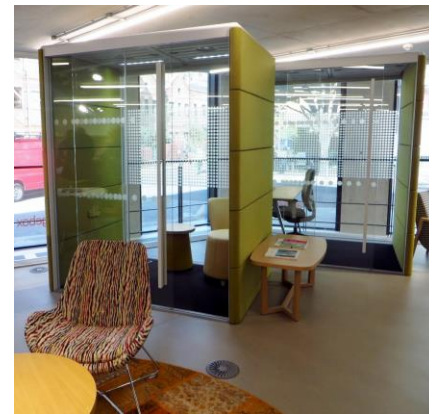


Because [Herman Miller](#)'s Aldwych showroom is a little way from Clerkenwell, they decided to take a local pop-up showroom for the launch of their new *Keyn* chair. This plastic shelled meeting room and side chair, designed in the UK by forpeople, has an interesting, Piretti-esque, mechanism which reclines up to 10 degrees as you lean back into it.

Keyn by Herman Miller



Orangbox



John Sacks

London, 30 May 2015

There may not have been as many visitors at this year's CDW but the atmosphere was lively and visitors and exhibitors alike seemed to enjoy the show. The effort and costs were probably well worthwhile. A good show.