

Neocon 2009 – A British View



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Review

An enormous sense of relief pervaded the showrooms, corridors and elevators of the Merchandise Mart in Chicago last week. Yes, attendance, normally around 50,000 for the three-day show, was down, probably by 30% to 40%, but the show went on and there were more than enough qualified buyers and their dealers and influencers to justify the effort and investment. There was enthusiasm for new products from the majors and tiddlers alike and although there were signs of cutbacks from exhibitors, sponsors and the organisers, there was more than enough in the way of marketing initiatives and promotions to remind everyone that we were in the land of hype.



Chicago's soon-to-be-completed Trump Tower – the world's tallest residential-only building

There was also plenty of weather to keep visitors on their toes. Hot and sunny as it should be one moment, turning in an instant to fog, drizzle and torrential downpours. The restaurants were all busy, with the perennially popular destinations seeing long lines and well tipped Maitre D's. Hotel room rates were scaled down from the usual outrageously expensive to just extremely pricy and many visitors had only made their travel arrangements a week or so before the show - something that wouldn't be possible in a normal year. And as visitors, it was pleasant to be able to walk the corridors and travel from floor to floor without the usual stressful battles for personal space. Finding a taxi when it rained was, however, as challenging as ever.



Testosterone fuelled trucks outside the Merchandise Mart, Chicago

The configuration of the Merchandise Mart and the Neocon show lends itself to more than just viewing products and being pounced on by over-eager salespeople. Second showrooms allow the larger companies to hold private viewings of prototypes and product concepts. Private suites accommodate sales and management meetings for groups which are conveniently gathered in the same place at the same time. Inter-corporate intrigues are everywhere. For the first two days of the show, there are just not enough hours. It's as if the entire office furniture industry in a frenetic whirl of speed dating.

There was little if any evidence of major showroom relocations or reconstruction but that was a benefit for the visitor giving him a sense of confidence that companies were where they were expected to be.

Neocon is really several shows in one. There are the largest companies, especially on the 3rd floor, with their football pitch sized showrooms, seemingly large enough to need

orienteeing maps. Visitors can remain anonymous which many of them prefer. Friends old and new gather to meet and greet, to observe, comment, criticise and predict.

Then there are the smaller showrooms, mostly on floors 10 and 11, much like corner stores where there's no room for everything. Visitors tend to be known and greeted as old friends and they tarry awhile. By contrast, on the 7th and 8th floors, there are the exhibition stands or "booths", much like any conventional show, which vary from impressive and expensive structures to tiny box spaces too small to swing a cat. Like a street market, you dip in and out visually because only very few tend to have anything of interest to any particular visitor. After all, no one person is likely to be interested in all chair gas actions, floor tiles, space planning programmes and desk accessories.

Office Furniture Trends – the European invasion or the inevitable consequences of globalisation?

Systems

Until fairly recently there were major differences between the European and US approach to systems furniture. This was typified by the preference for high, panel based, systems in the US against a more open, low-rise, approach of desks in Europe. In the past five years or so at Neocon, we have seen a growing interest in European designed products and greater hankering for US producers to display their European credentials. This trend continues to grow and was very evident this year.

From a marketing perspective, US manufacturers have always been good at articulating the essence of a new product range to define a 'new way of working' - that feeds into the general understanding of workplace culture and the design of new ranges. So in Europe we have to acknowledge that our thinking about the workplace has been heavily influenced by American ideas, notwithstanding leading thinkers of our own in this field such as Frank Duffy and Jeremy Myerson.

For those engaged in considering the way we work, there are many ways to regard the workplace as a whole to create theories and identify opportunity. Hypotheses manifest themselves in the design of new products, either expressing new research and user needs, or simply responding to market trends. On either side of the Atlantic, user need should be identical in terms of workplace process, but in truth, the reason for different styles of product has been due to cultural preferences and the scale of the built environment in which the systems are used. As a more globally integrated culture develops, our individual preferences will also change.

Among the first European products to be seen at Neocon (from memory) were those brought in through ICF. Davis once makers of heavy American casegoods redefined themselves, moving their style completely to Europe through a license agreement with Renz

and work with Martin Ballendat. Vitra went solo into the Merchandise Mart, whilst others like Bene were represented through Inscape and, until recently, Ahrend by Allsteel.

Other UK companies have found solo success in the US. Sadler Seating has for years had a positive export business and now has a showroom in the Mart shared with Tonon. And Senator – trading in the US as Allermuir – has opened a new showroom on the prime third floor.

The presence of actual European products is one aspect of the trend and has been helped some years ago by the show introducing temporary exhibition spaces. This gave foreign companies a way of displaying their office furniture wares to the US market. Until then Neocon was naturally dominated by traditional US styles and designs but today Neocon has a genuinely international feel.

The classic corals or booths created by panel systems like *Ethospace* were used to divide huge inhuman spaces into smaller workable areas where privacy was the main driver. This suited the deep space of American commercial buildings. In most parts of the world today we need a mix of collaboration and privacy. Importantly, we place a greater emphasis on the quality of the environment we create. The rate of air circulation and natural light are not



C-Scape by Steelcase

just emotionally and psychologically beneficial, but in these hard pressed times make economic sense. LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) standards stress the value of natural ventilation and light as sustainable, and so as a matter of choice is driving the trend for panel systems to become low rise and top out at around 1.2 metres or 4 feet. Anything taller is for acoustic privacy and may be glazed to enable light to stream in.

The combined impact of design trends, workplace practices and environmental responsibility is bringing European and US products closer together, and although there are other regional difference throughout the world such as in the Far East, it seems at the top of the market an international style or global product is evolving.

One major product trend that was seen throughout Neocon was the style of system that combines linear planning, active storage and low-rise variable levels of seated privacy.

Steelcase's *C-Scape* product shown last year to great acclaim for the quality of the launch was on show again this year. Consisting of a series of slender steel carcasses, they create side units, credenzas and higher levels of storage units. They are designed to '*help define space for collaboration*'. As such, these units can be used to define a range of workstation types or high-level 'break-out bars'. Made from steel and aluminium, the carcasses are generally white on the outside and in one of three accent colours on the inside – a fresh sky blue, a fruity berry colour and a moss green.

Steelcase have been developing this kind of system for at least five years, having shown early prototypes at Neocon some time ago based on research by IDEO. Since then this type of architecture is becoming very popular with other companies like Teknion, Three-H, Turnstone, another Steelcase company and Riviera, plus many others showing similar systems.



Tour by Touchstone

In most cases they are about application and not about the detail. Most systems use standard construction methods to make boxes of varying proportions, some with novel features – like Touchstone's *Tour* line with its ability to slide desk level storage boxes mounted on top of low level credenzas.

US companies have led the development of this style of system, but paradoxically, this has made European desks and tables more readily acceptable in the US market. Vitra's *Joy*n has been successful in the education sector – where corporate conventions of booth's and corals did not exist.



Joy'n by Vitra

But the changing attitude and need for linear planning and benches has encouraged Allermuir to launch *Crossover*, and allowed Herman Miller to take *Sense* and *AE* (*Abak Environments*) from their international portfolio into their home market.



Sense by Herman Miller

Seating

Other launches at Neocon included seating, lighting and some office technology. Seating is the area of the market where serious research, development and substantial investment in tooling is required to make any impact. In relative terms, and increasingly over the years, seating takes the largest slice of any workstation budget and establishes the importance of good ergonomics and iconic design. On that basis four new task chairs were launched. Herman Miller with *Setu design* by Berlin based 7.5 –designers of *Mirra*. Knoll with *Generation* designed by New Zealand based Formway, Humanscale – *World Chair* and Okamura's *Leopard* promoted as creating '*Seat Cradle Design*', a seating concept that simulates the parent holding their child".



Herman Miller, Knoll and Humanscale all follow the path of reducing mechanical assemblies and moving parts by using intelligent materials and the specific properties to create movement, torsion and support where springs and weights once did.

The *World Chair* is a rationalisation of Niels Different's *Liberty Chair* – using the same form sensing mesh support but with a greatly simplified construction using only 80 components in the whole chair. This is driven out of Different's approach to constant improvement as well as being ecological and commercial. One key feature is that the tilting mechanism is adjusted automatically by the weight of the user transferred through the side frame of the seat.

A similar quest to reduce complex mechanical assemblies led to the development of *Setu* by Herman Miller. Visually reminiscent of Eames classic *Aluminium group*, the chair frame consists of two moulded side components with a series of exposed elements – much like the inside of a nautilus shell. These elements are strategically placed to predict the natural flex of the seat. By virtue of the level of engineering excellence, and use of materials, it is an advanced chair, but interestingly the reference to Eames somehow establishes a quieter aesthetic than *Aeron* did when it was launched or more recently *Embody*. As a result, *Setu* possesses an integrity or furniture language, that has in recent years been missing in the design of new task chairs.

Okamura's Panther chair was probably the most radical. With its unorthodox forward tilt, the Leopard is designed to take the strain off knees and back by accommodating the awkward mechanics of this somewhat un-natural motion.



Leopard by Okamura

Other things seen, included a new gas injection moulded low side chair for Knoll from Don Chadwick. Called *Spark* it comes in a sled and legged version and is low and wide but otherwise similar to Jasper Morrison's *Airchair*.



Spark by Knoll

Ever concerned with the well-being of the worker, Humanscale also showed a new desk top air purifier. With plenty of scientific evidence to support its claims it uses a patented '*Clean Air Zone technology developed in Sweden that creates a pocket of clean air around deskbound workers*'. Other products exist in the market making their own health claims. But whilst there is a keen and growing interest in creating healthy environments, it is hard yet to see any major impact of these types of products in the workplace.

The rest

Among the wackier concepts on show was Molo's use of expandable honeycombed kraft paper with inbuilt magnetic fasteners to make everything from bench seating to walls and lighting. At \$650 for a 4ft seating section, it may take a while to catch on.



Molo *softseating*

Finally, remember the advent of WiFi and Bluetooth and how you needed a plug-on device to enable your mobile phone? Well now that we have just about cracked wireless connectivity, wireless power or inductive charging is on its way. But as with most examples of emerging technology, although it starts out with laudable aims, it inevitably begins by being bulky, add-on and expensive.

The special interest group that developed Bluetooth included a whole host of manufacturers from the world of consumer electronics and telephony to ensure it became a single, reliable affordable compact technology. They succeeded. Inductive charging or E-coupling has been emerging for two or three years and recognised by early adopters as a natural and obvious development, but things take time.

Powermat showed a range of e-charging products to charge mobile phones, iPods Blackberrys and other devices without the need to plug in a charger. That's the aim once these personal devices are enabled. At present the only way to enable them is to either slip on a specially designed 'jacket' costing around \$50.00 or to plug them into a 'dongle'.



Powermat

The products were slim and stylish and will begin to catch on, but it will only be when manufacturers of the devices embed the charging interface, that wireless charging will become as ubiquitous as WiFi. The problem here is that there does not seem to be one standard. But the opportunity for furniture manufacturers is to possibly make surfaces smart. Powermat, who are working with Teknion, had a section of kitchen countertop with a 'hotspot' built in as an invisible charger as did KI.

It will happen, but it will take time.

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