

# Orgatec 2010 - A Review



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Published by:

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Commissioned by JSA Consultancy Services

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In the aftermath of the last show in 2008, there were those that were convinced they had witnessed the last ever Orgatec. The economic crisis – the ‘Lehman Shock’ as the Japanese call it – and the atmosphere of doom and gloom, cast long shadows over that show, and even some Orgatec stalwarts wondered whether the show would survive to be held again.

Well survive it has. And it’s in pretty rude health, despite the efforts of two German railway unions which held a strike on the Tuesday morning, delaying incoming trains by a very German ten minutes. There were the same six halls as in 2008 – 6, 7 8 and 9 in the newer, brighter, North complex, plus the two floors of the older Hall 10 in the Eastern area of the site. And once again, there were more than 600 exhibitors. The halls were full of some bold and bright exhibition stands on which very considerable expense had been lavished. The colours used for both the stands and displays were often very dramatic, as if the exhibitors wanted to dazzle the visitors into believing that confidence levels were high. Brilliant yellows, dashing scarlets and bold royal blues abounded and many of the exhibitors had flooded their stands with dazzling lights and mirrors which were almost painful to the eye.

Exhibitors were trying to appeal to all the senses – the smell from Unifor’s big baskets of lavender was almost overpowering.



Unifor’s baskets of lavender

There were fewer exhibitors from Asia, and most of those who were there had smaller stands. Few of the North American industry giants apart from Haworth and Herman Miller were present and it was as if Europe, and especially German companies, had to some extent reclaimed the show as their own. Some of the majors had a massive presence; the stands of König +Neurath, Interstuhl and Vitra for example were vast. Although the internal height of the newer halls allows taller stands to be constructed, few exhibitors took advantage of this to construct upper level hospitality areas.

As always, the visitors came from all corners of the globe with large contingents from Australia, the USA, Japan and the Middle East, but with rather fewer from China than in previous years. And there were plenty of visitors. Yes Tuesday, the opening day, did start somewhat slowly and spaces at the café tables at lunchtime were rather easier to find than usual. However the pace soon heated up and on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, there were plenty of crowds on the “Boulevard”, the aisles and around the stands. Saturday was again decidedly quieter.

There are some stands at Orgatec that attract visitors like bees round a honey pot. Dauphin, Bene, K&N and especially Vitra are always heaving and help create the excitement that characterises a successful show. This year was no different; working one of these stands for the week is both exhausting and exhilarating.

Some of the better known companies were again absent – such as Ahrend, Knoll, Steelcase, Teknion, Fantoni, Faram and Boss Design - and there were very few exhibitors from France or the Benelux countries. Perhaps the economic climate had prevented them investing in new product development or alternatively, from spending on showing at the World’s only true international office furniture show. From those that did make it, there was a mixture of interesting ideas, responses to current market conditions and the usual crop of imitators. Although Steelcase were not exhibiting, they were involved. The Steelcase 2010 Conference iPhone App guided participants around two days of actual on-site and virtual conferences on topics associated with organisational change and design for life.

Encouragingly, most exhibitors used the show to launch new products rather than merely re-present existing ideas and models. Of the furniture being displayed, there were two recurrent themes. One concerned families of products that give individuals and groups the ability to reconfigure standard units to create their own choice of environment and style of working, and the other managing workplace acoustics.

There were some good things to be had from the major companies present, including Herman Miller, Vitra, Bene and Wilkhahn. A visit to the bustling and buzzy Vitra stand is always an Orgatec highlight. The company is notable for its continuous product development programme. In spite of tough market conditions, they always seem to deliver exciting developments at the show. This year was no exception as the company displayed a combination of brand new products and continued developments to their existing ranges, spanning work chairs, side chairs, sofas, storage, meeting tables, desking and a new free standing cubicle system called *Communal Cells*, designed by the Bourellec brothers. This can be used to create freestanding structures into which work surfaces, seating, beds, shelves, storage and coat racks can be mounted.

Vitra’s workhorse desk system, *Ad Hoc*, was given a refresh, with a new leg design, storage boxes and privacy screens. The most notable development to this range was a bar height work station *Adhoc high work* - a high level version of the standard height desk with the surface positioned at over 1000mm. This was complimented by a barstool height work chair from their new ID chair range. The worker can simply switch between

perching, sitting or standing at this raised surface, a refreshing and bold alternative view of the sit stand problem.



*Ad Hoc High*

Across the aisle, Bene had majored on its Pearson Lloyd designed *Parcs* breakout work system of upholstered blocks and cubicles launched last year. They had supplemented this with a new arm chair and a 'phone booth' cubicle; a slimmer version of the meeting room product for individuals to make private calls in peace.



*Parcs* by Bene

This new style of breakout furniture category has been crystallised with the *Parcs* product and has set a trend for large slab type upholstered furniture; the number of

*Parcs* influenced products around the show was clearly evident. Haworth had their own version in *LTB* and *MeetYou* which tick the same boxes of providing a mixture of bench seating, services distribution, media delivery, storage, integrated lighting and privacy. K+N had also been working on their version *City Life* and there was also evidence of a similar product on the Dauphin stand and that of the Turkish company Nurus with their *Lodge* and *Atlas* slatted pergolas that form their *Pitstop* concept.



Nurus *Pitstop*

This kind of product is actually ideal for the trade fair environment as witnessed by the multitude of visitors using it in the way it was intended; for informal meetings, relaxed private collaboration, working alone on a laptop or simply enjoying the hospitality.

There were several companies around the show with products with a similar agenda and spirit, albeit not with the same extensive range, as those previously mentioned but certainly using elements from them.

Privacy in breakout seating was one of the major trends of this year's show. Cor, the sister company of the German domestic furniture company, Interlubke, Vitra; with its new Citterio designed *Suita sofa*, Sedus' *Bla Station*, Allermuir's *Haven*, Connection's *Hive* and *Nook* and the *Phonebox* and *Niche* products from the Dutch company, Prooff all featured some kind of high backed, wing backed or alcove type seating for creating private, quiet, spaces.



*Hive* from Connection

As far as work chairs were concerned, there were a few new launches of note, most of which shared the common theme of providing well executed task chairs with a range of supporting meeting, cantilever and four-legged options to support the sales story. For obvious reasons, the economic downturn seems to have made some seating manufacturers refocus on products intended to generate sales volume. Herman Miller was at the forefront of this trend with their main launch - the *Say/* chair - designed by US based Yves Behar.



Sayl by Herman Miller



This was probably the most visually challenging, and to a degree, innovative chair launched into this market sector. The design of *Sayl* featured a relatively conventional seat mechanism with all the adjustability you would expect of a chair at this level, but with the unique selling feature of a flexible web back, supported only from the central back spine at the top and stretching down and around to connect to the arms at the bottom, thus creating a frameless full suspension back support, the first of its kind. The structure provides the sitter with more flexibility and breathable support than is generally found in conventional upholstered or mesh back task chairs.

The *Sayl* task chair was supported with a full complement of meeting and visitor chairs, providing a compelling sales story. Whether its unconventional looks help or hamper its success will remain to be seen - but there is no doubt about its quality and ergonomic integrity.

Humanscale, opposite Herman Miller, showed the continued work of Niels Diffrient and his *Diffrient World chair*, a simplified and less expensive version of the successful *Freedom* chair, but still upholding the same ergonomic principles.



*Diffrient World Chair* from Humanscale

Elsewhere around the show, there were seating products of more conventional appearance aimed squarely at producing volume sales. Most of these shared a similar simplicity, opting for a reasonable level of adjustments, a clean crisp look for wide appeal and a complementary range of side and meeting chairs.



*Freebalance* from Interstuhl



Of note were Interstuhl's *Freebalance*, Akaba's *Arin*, ICF's *Unaplus* and especially the Giroflex *656* which ticks all the boxes of a volume selling task chair. Slick modern look, lightweight, all the usual adjustments, a full programme of support chairs and backed with good environmental credentials.



Giroflex 656



Okamura's *Luce* chair

There were a few chairs that were somewhat more adventurous in terms of their ergonomics, notably Okamura's new *Luce* chair, taking its lead from their existing *Leopard* high back chair, both of which share the same style of mechanism that eases the user into a seated position and hence lessens the stress on one's legs.

New to Orgatec was the Taiwanese company Koplus and its red*dot* award winning *Bodyflex* chair. Designed and built in-house, this featured a unique pivoting seat mechanism and flexible back support that provided a very pleasing seating experience.



Koplus from Taiwan and their *Bodyflex* chair

If there was any definite trend visible on the desking side, it was perhaps the closer integration of work stations with storage elements. Benches and sit stand desks were still in evidence, but there were a number of companies showing a combined desk and supporting low storage unit. Bene perhaps typified this with its *RM module* system which appeared to pull elements from various existing ranges and combine them in new ways around a central wall panel system to create new work environments, all bound together with a cohesive narrative.

Herman Miller launched the Broome Jenkins designed scalable, height-adjustable linear plan desk range, *AE Exchange*, developed to address a range of applications from fixed back office to light trading, and to sit within Herman Miller's *Abak Environments* portfolio of twin-beam furniture systems.

Kokuyo displayed their new *Harmonii* circular area for individual and teamworking cleverly using a massive, ceiling mounted, 45 degree mirror to show off the product. Accommodating up to ten people, the design allows individual work with the workplace angles minimising visual disturbance from your neighbour. When ready for a team discussion, just swivel around and work around the central circular table.



*Harmonii* from Kokuyo

Elsewhere, the Turkish company Koleksiyon showed some interesting new ranges, most of which were designed in-house by Koray Malhan. The exception was their Porsche Design Group inspired *Micromega* range, a striking desk system that combined slim legged desks supported from monolithic storage spines with chunky fabric mesh dividing screens. Koleksiyon seem to go from strength to strength. They have produced some interesting furniture in recent years and their bold attitude will mean they are one to watch in the future.



*Micromega* from Koleksiyon

Coming from the storage angle, Bisley showed their *Consol* range of towers and pedestals that support work stations. Like several other companies it had added perforations to doors and backs which served to break up the wide expanses of bare metal.

In addition and worth mentioning was Wilkhahn's *Chassis* chair which was previewed at Orgatec 2008 as a 'please do not touch' prototype and is now in production. It's a groundbreaking chair in terms of furniture manufacture, utilizing steel pressing technology lifted from the automotive industry. With no visible fixings, this is a chair that actually looks just as beautiful from underneath. However, with a high price tag and limited stacking it is hard to understand the market sector at which it is aimed.



The *Chassis* chair from Wilkhahn

**In summary:**

In seating there seemed to be an attempt, by some manufacturers, to create more volume-focused seating programmes, aimed squarely at raising sales figures. In desking, there were no immediately obvious trends; benches and sit stand were still in evidence. If any trends were to be teased out, perhaps there was a move towards the integration of worksurfaces with other elements such as storage and screens.

The most notable overall trend of the show was the emphasis many manufacturers had placed on the design of furniture for breakout areas - third space furniture for informal working. There was extensive use of upholstery and an emphasis on privacy.

As to colours and finishes, apart from the extensive use of felt as a fabric and more natural walnut and oak finishes than have been seen in recent years, there were no real discernable trends. There were still hundreds of benches and workstations in white as if manufacturers were waiting to see what colour will be the next to be in vogue.

There may have been somewhat fewer visitors than in 2008 but it was busy at some times on all days, there was still a real buzz about the place and those that attended were generally very serious. Let's hope we see some of the absent larger companies returning as exhibitors in 2012.

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October 2010

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