

Neocon, Chicago - June 2013



Chicago skyline

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Neocon June 2013

The Chicago weather this June was decidedly unseasonal. Delegates to Neocon were welcomed on Monday by overcast skies and low temperatures and were bid a fond farewell on Wednesday by threats of a derecho - destructive winds, golf ball-sized hail, flash flooding and even tornadoes, which were expected to sweep through the Chicago area on the final day of the show. In between, the weather gave us a taste of everything, including fog. In contrast, the business atmosphere was anything but cool - it was like old times, with lots of optimism and enthusiasm. There may not have been quite as many dramatic new products as in the high-flying days but after years of economic upheaval and the dumbing-down effects of aggressively priced commodity products from Asia, there was evidence of fresh thinking and design-led investment from some of the larger companies.

More than 45,000 had pre-registered for the show, many more than in recent years, and judging by the massive Monday morning crowds fighting their way through the registration process, they all arrived at the same time. In theory, Neocon is a three day show and if only visits were spread more evenly over all the show's opening hours, the visitor experience would be much more satisfactory. Instead, everyone turns up on Monday, overloads the elevators, blocks the corridors and swamps the showrooms, especially on the third floor. No one expects to get salespeople's attention on Monday, so new ideas and products go unexplained and visitors have to guess the stories behind what they're seeing. The trickle of visitors still around on Wednesday have the luxury of viewing the displays in peace and quiet, but no hope of seeing anyone senior – they have all gone home, exhausted.

Neocon has increasingly become two shows; the permanent showrooms on floors 3, 10 and 11 have little to do with the temporary show stands on floors 7 and 8. Us and them. Who is 'us' and who is 'them' depends on your perspective. The space available on floors 7, and to an even greater extent on 8, was not fully taken up which was probably a reflection of the dismal state of the markets in the countries from where these exhibitors usually hail. Similarly, there seemed to be fewer overseas visitors than in past years. By contrast, everything about the permanent showroom floors was hyper – not a spare inch of space and heaving crowds of visitors making it hard to get around, and very noisy.

Directions

The most obvious trends involved aspects of technology, European styling, homely furniture, earthy colours and felt. It's been three years since Steelcase launched *Mediascape* and in that time, the scale of collaboration it was intended to foster has grown from a few people gathered around a screen to transcontinental. Some companies seem to be so intent on promoting the technology, they seem to have forgotten they're furniture manufacturers.

Although there was no evidence of any wholesale invasion by European companies into the market, European styles of benches and high backed seating enclosures abounded; [Teknion](#) had gone one step further with their prominently displayed new alliance with [B&B Italia](#).

As for colours, white benches were fighting upholstered furniture shown in primary colours and all shades of yellow and orange. However, there was also a noticeable use of earthy, muted, browns, tans, warm greys and greens.

The use of felt as an upholstery material made its appearance in 2012 but this year, it was everywhere - suspended from ceilings, sitting on floors and dividing up spaces.

For some years, the trade association, [BIFMA](#), has heavily promoted its environmental and sustainability standard they call *Level* which has been taken up by 50 companies, including some from outside North America. This has led to signed-up companies, and others, this year, for the first time, promoting all things environmental. One wonders whether all the claims they made were in fact sustainable.

The products

The outstanding “major” this year was undoubtedly [Herman Miller](#). Their showroom had been recreated to present the *Living Office*, the company’s answer to the results of their research into the ways people sit, stand, communicate, gather and perform countless other activities in a work environment. The furniture was attractive and elegant. *Locale* from Sam Hecht and Kim Colin created attractive open plan working areas and *Metaform* designed by Studio 7.5 used lightweight modular blocks to allow easily reconfigurable areas for almost any purpose.



Locale from Herman Miller’s *Living Office*

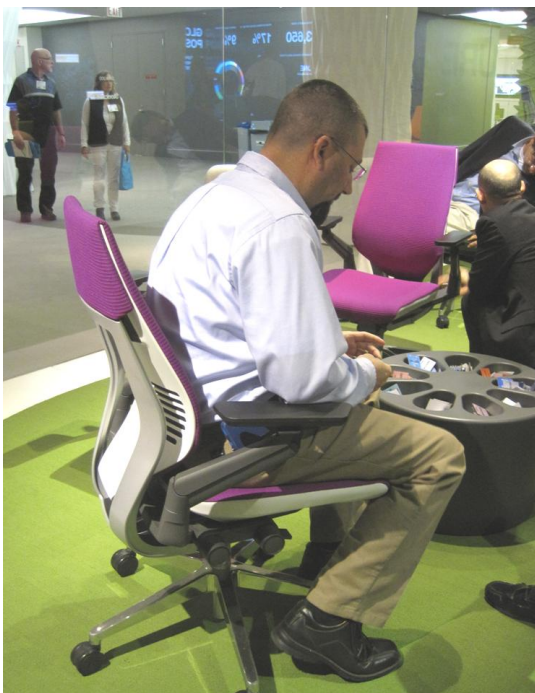


Herman Miller’s *Metaform*

[Davis](#) is one of the smaller companies with a permanent showroom in the Mart but has a larger than life image. This design inspired organisation manages to achieve high manufacturing quality to match the quality of its designs which come from some of Europe's finest. This year, it showed an elegant, very long, walnut veneered table, *Span*, supported only by four slim, veneered steel tube corner legs. Their *Stix* coat racks also attracted attention.

Davis *Span* tableDavis *Stix*

[Steelcase](#) had further developed their *Mediascape* collaborative table and screen so that users were optionally connected wirelessly, but their real star was the clever *Gesture* chair designed by Glen Oliver in conjunction with their in-house team. The design was driven by the different ways people sit to use tablets and smartphones. The chair is 'one size fits all' with arms which can be contorted in all directions. Claudio Bellini inspired the in-house team in the creation of the new *V.I.A.* wall system which had good acoustic properties and a wide range of options.

Steelcase *Gesture* chairSteelcase *V.I.A.* wall system

The Steelcase company, [Coalesse](#), which is often a source of innovative product ideas, showed a design from Jean-Marie Massaud - the *Massaud Work Lounge*, with a Canopy which could be lowered to completely enclose the occupant.



Coalesse *Massaud Work Lounge & Canopy*

More usually known for their classic design led furniture with strong aesthetic appeal rather than for clever engineering, [Knoll](#) this year launched *Tools for Life* by Rem Koolhaas which uses three connected square cylinders in two sizes which pivot to create reception and lounge furniture units.

[Haworth](#) focused on collaboration, using technology and soft furniture, and presented [Bluescape](#) – a San Francisco based collaboration with Obscura Digital. This software allowed massive screens to run tablet type activities for participants anywhere in the world, all joining in at the same time – highly impressive, but perhaps shades of anarchy? The *Collaborative Lounge* range of ultra lightweight screens looked very practical.



Haworth *Bluescape*

[HNI Corp](#) companies together occupy several large showrooms in the Mart, each under one of their brands which include HON, Allsteel, Gunlocke, Paoli and HBF. The group's companies and products serve the broad middle market sectors and they have been known to describe themselves as "fast followers" rather than innovators. This year, unusually, [HON](#) introduced a truly ground breaking product, the attractive and cleverly engineered *Purpose* chair from the charismatic Marcus Koepke which uses passive technology rather than knobs, buttons and levers to create a very comfortable sit.



Purpose chair by Marcus Koepke for HON

The group has very considerable resources and if this launch is the harbinger of further substantial investment in creative new products, it will make the market sit up and take notice.

Away from the permanent showroom floors, [Saosen](#) from Dongguan City in China showed brightly coloured workstations made from epoxy powder coated MDF and [Kwick Screen](#) from the UK attracted plenty of interest in their very large, flexible pullout screen which can quickly divide areas and form temporary rooms. David Winston from Los Angeles showed his simple and elegant *Eyhov* workstation system for [Scale 1:1](#) which uses a very limited number of components to form highly practical and well thought out configurations including *Bolla* shelving which used boldly coloured steel and plastic to create an innovative storage system.



Saosen Bench



Scale 1:1 *Bolla* shelving



Scale 1:1 *Eyhov*

The acoustic and environmentally friendly properties of felt were being promoted widely. [Knoll](#) showed the highly colourful *Fitzfelt* hangings and floor mats by Ayshe Birsal and the new [BuzziSpace](#) showroom left you wondering just what you couldn't make from felt.

[Humanscale](#), whose iconic designer Niels Diffrient died on the Sunday before the show opened, aged 84, launched his new *Smart* chair which took the already understated *Liberty* chair to a new level of simplicity.



Smart chair for Humanscale by the late Niels Diffrient

Another interesting design-led group, [OFS Brands](#), showed further developments of their *11 Work Space* range and *The Edge* by First Office – a mixed use collection for the office.



OFS Brands *The Edge*

[Vitra](#)'s showroom featured a variety of enclosures including *Workbays* by Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec. [Okamura](#) from Tokyo showed their new *Choral* task chair whose deceptively simple appearance concealed innovative technology including ankle tilt recline and seat pivot suspension.



Vitra *Workbays*



Okamura *Choral* chair

[Kl](#)'s enclosures - and most showrooms had variations on the same theme - were for individual use rather than group activity. Apart from the new link-up with B&B Italia which grabbed a large part of the [Teknion](#) showroom, the company also announced the launch of a new textiles division which attracted considerable interest and also showed their new *Interpret* range of benches and workstations and the *Fractals* seating group of soft seating which won a Neocon Gold Award. The UK's Allermuir launched *Tonina – She Comes in Colors* – an Italianesque plastic stacking chair.



Teknion *Interpret* bench



Teknion *Fractals*

There wasn't as much light-hearted fun as usual at this year's Neocon. Apart from lots of noisy bucolic showroom parties – why on earth were they all held at the same time on Monday afternoon? – there was only AIS' silent disco; a bit like the visual equivalent of a karaoke – which bemused most visitors, who looked as though they were rather too self conscious to join in.



AIS "Silent Disco"

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