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The 5 Trends at NeoCon

June 2013

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Despite the threats of a derecho expected to sweep through Chicago on the final day of the show, the business atmosphere at Neocon was anything but stormy — it felt like old times, with lots of optimism and enthusiasm.

It wasn't quite as dramatic as the high-flying, pre-recession 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.

The most obvious trends visible in products this year included:

1. **Technology:** It's been three years since Steelcase launched *Mediascape*. In that time, the scale of collaboration it was intended to foster has grown from a few people gathered around a screen to transcontinental meetings. Some companies are so intent on promoting the technology that they seem to forget they're furniture manufacturers.
2. **European styling:** 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 its prominently displayed new alliance with [B&B Italia](#).
3. **Earth colors:** As for colors, white benches were fighting upholstered furniture shown in primary colors and all shades of yellow and orange. However, there was also a noticeable use of browns, tans, warm greys, and greens — all very earthy and muted.
4. **Felt:** 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.
5. **Green:** 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 led to companies of every kind promoting all things environmental. One wonders whether all the claims they made were, in fact, sustainable.

Smart seating steals the show

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.

Herman Miller Locale 1 – John Sacks



Herman Miller Metaform – John Sacks

[Davis](#) is one of the smaller companies with a permanent showroom in the Mart but has a larger-than-life image. This design-inspired organization 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 *Sticks* coat racks also attracted attention.

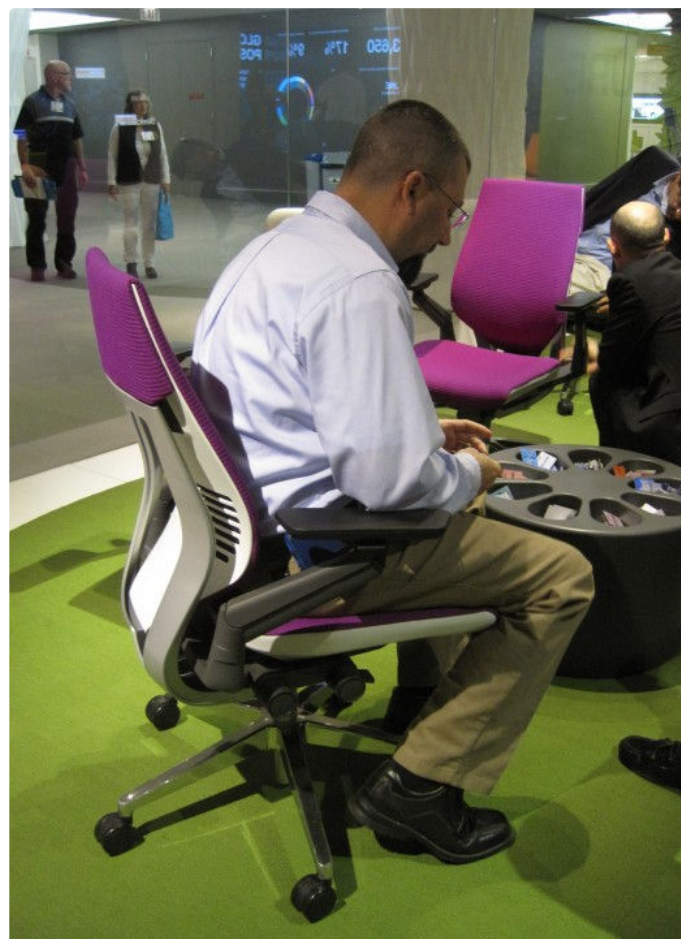


Davis Span Table – John Sacks



Davis "Stix" – John Sacks

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



Steelcase Gesture – John Sacks



Coalesse Massaud Work-Lounge and Canopy – John Sacks

Knoll usually is more known for their classic design-led furniture and strong aesthetic appeal rather than for clever engineering. However, this year the company launched *Tools for Life* by Rem Koolhaas. The system uses three connected square cylinders in two

sizes that pivot to create reception and lounge furniture units. 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.

[Haworth](#) focused on collaboration. Its use of technology and soft furniture complemented its new *Bluescape*, a software project with San Francisco-based Obscura Digital. It entails massive screens for displaying tablet-type activities to connect participants in virtual meetings from 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 Collaborative Lounge – John Sacks



Haworth Bluescape – John Sacks

[HNI Corp](#) companies together occupied 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, however, [HON](#) introduced a truly ground-breaking product: the attractive and cleverly engineered *Purpose* chair from the charismatic Marcus Koepke. Rather than knobs, buttons, and levers, it uses passive technology to create a very comfortable sit. 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.



HON Purpose Chair – John Sacks

Away from the permanent showroom floors, [Saosen](#) from Dongguan City in China showed brightly colored workstations made from epoxy powder coated MDF. [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.



Saosen Bench – John Sacks

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 clever configurations. Those include *Bolla* shelving, which used boldly colored steel and plastic to create an innovative storage system.



Scale 1:1 Eyhov – John Sacks



Scale 1:1 Bolla Shelving – John Sacks

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



Humanscale Smart Chair – John Sacks

Vitra's showroom featured a variety of enclosures including *Workbays* by Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec.



Vitra Workbays – John Sacks

Okamura from Tokyo showed their new *Choral* task chair, whose deceptively simple appearance concealed innovative technology including ankle tilt recline and seat pivot suspension. **KI**'s enclosures were for individual use rather than group activity; most showrooms had variations on the same theme.



Okamura Choral Chair – John Sacks



KI Enclosure – John Sacks

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. It also showed their new *Interpret* range of benches and workstations and the *Fractals* seating group of soft seating, which won a Neocon Gold Award.

A few thoughts on the attendee experience

In theory, Neocon is a three-day show; however, everyone turns up on Monday, overloads the elevators, blocks the corridors, and swamps the showrooms — especially on the third floor.

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.

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. If only the attendance could be spread evenly across all three days.

Nevertheless, the trickle of visitors still around on Wednesday had the luxury of viewing the displays in peace and quiet, but no hope of seeing anyone senior — they had all gone home, exhausted.

But Neocon increasingly has 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 floor 7, and to an even greater extent on 8, was not fully utilized; this probably was 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 were slammed — not a spare inch of space was free, and heaving crowds of visitors made it noisy and hard to get around.

But one light-hearted element — which most attendees looked too self-conscious to join — was AIS' silent disco; it was a bit like a visual karaoke, which bemused most visitors.



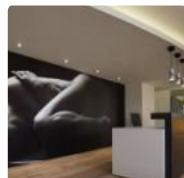
AIS Silent Disco – John Sacks

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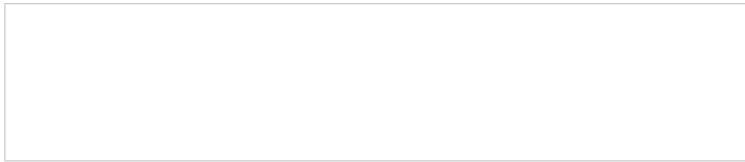
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June 2013

Have you been to the M@dison?



"It's becoming a 'go-to' place," said Joel Smith, AIA and partner at Neumann/Smith, about Detroit's new

M@dison Building. "People are asking, 'Have you been to the M@dison?' I didn't realize what an impact this has had on the city. ...

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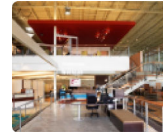
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