Orgatec 2014 - A Review

By John Sacks

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Introduction and overview

Cologne’s autumn weather was generally kind to this year’s Orgatec visitors, unlike the Lufthansa pilots whose one day strike kept first day numbers down and caused considerable frustration. Normal service was quickly resumed however and the efficient machine which is Europe’s largest office furniture show moved smoothly into top gear with all the excitement, colour, noise and bustle one has come to expect from the bringing together of so many specialists from all parts of the world. The six massive halls, housing about 600 exhibition stands, are loosely held together by a wide ‘Boulevard’ and require the intrepid visitor who doesn’t want to miss out on anything to walk and walk, and walk.

Some of the initial fair chatter is always about comparing this Orgatec with those of past years. Fewer halls? Visitor numbers down? Missing companies? New market entrants? Where is so-and-so? The most notable last-minute absentee was Bene, whose well publicised difficulties meant that their usual large space in Hall 9 was handed to Haworth who made very good use of it. Whether the show was slightly more compact than previously or if there were slightly fewer attendees really didn’t matter. There was a real feast for exhibitors and visitors alike; most of the time the show was open, there were just as many seriously interested buyers, dealers and specifiers as most companies could handle. And there was more than enough choice for the most particular of visitor; every type, style, design, colour, technology and theory of office furniture was represented many times over, and coming from every part of the world.

The hum of serious business was everywhere. The fact that the show is only held every two years means that it is real event, with manufacturers timing their design and development programmes and product launches to coincide with Octobers in even-numbered years. And the huddles one sees on stands and in cafés and corridors are evidence of the many international one-to-one meetings which are fixed for when it is known that everyone who is anyone from the world of office furniture will be around.

Orgatec is not a frolic; it’s a serious working show. The high cost of exhibiting means that companies make sure their products are perfect, their staff well trained and their objectives in being at the show are clearly defined. That doesn’t mean there isn’t any fun. There are evening parties and entertaining a-plenty and hospitality on some of the stands during the show is bountiful. Lunchtime at Vitra’s stand resembled feeding time at Cologne’s zoo.
The trends

By far and away the most prevalent trend focused on matters acoustic. There was some evidence of this in 2012, but this year, it was everywhere. Companies which have never been known for anything other than workstations, task seating or storage, suddenly found themselves in the land of fabrics, presenting brightly coloured enclosures, high-backed and hooded chairs, screens and furniture for quiet working spaces.

Benches were kept alive by changes of colour; far less pure white, surface areas being separated with screens with some sound absorbency properties and lots of accessories, some of dubious practicality. Many new chair products were either finely sculptured injection mouldings or low, casual, wide-winged affairs.

There was some increase in the use of wood and wood finishes, perhaps as part of a more domestic, homely feel to many of the products from Sedus, Fritz Hansen, Vitra and others. There were also new fibre-based products on show because of the emphasis on acoustics, with several companies such as Vehyl using coloured and shaped panels pressed and formed as visual barriers with sound absorbing characteristics.

Colours were bright; really bright with yellow, orange, scarlet and bright blue in abundance. Some of this was clearly to catch the eye of the visitor but the theme seemed to be linked to the soft and breakout seating products, as if companies were happy to throw off the shackles of sombre coloured, ultra practical workstations, task seating or storage products.

Highlights

The undoubted highlight of the show was the Vitra stand. Bold, imaginative, challenging and confident. Rather than making statements, the company seemed to be happy raising issues and asking questions. Hack designed by Konstantin Grcic was a fold up, sit-stand workstation which could double as a sofa. Will it go into production? Let's see what reaction we get, says Vitra.
Dutch fashion brand G-Star RAW were inspired by the challenging 1950’s industrial style designs of self-taught French engineer-architect Jean Prouvé to create *Office Edition*. Can we buy it? Well it’s a ‘limited edition’ and will only be on sale for twelve months.

The Bouroullec brothers have taken their *Workbays* enclosing screens and extended their application to individual or team workspaces in a variety of shapes and sizes as well as including storage and utility areas.

*Profim* from Poland showed *Wyspa* high backed screens surrounding seats and sofas from ITO Design and the *Nu* tub chair from Paul Brooks which could be encased in an acoustic hood.

PearsonLloyd designed *Senator’s* *Ad-Lib WorkLounge* range of comfortable seating and integrated work surfaces for collaborative working which was shown as part of a large offer of new seating and workstation products.
Another successful British company, Elite, showed their move into the seating and acoustic sectors with a selection of new products including enclosure booths. Bisley had their usual large stand reflecting the very high proportion of their business which derives from Europe outside of the UK. Hitch Mylius, again from the UK, made a welcome return with a display of some of their soft seating.

**Dauphin**'s constantly busy stand brought together all of their brands for the first time to allow clients to see their inter-relationship – Dauphin, Zuco, Trend! Office and Bosse. They also displayed one of the few new ranges of task seating launched at the show, Kick-off. Sedus’ swing up was another and this featured another trend – chairs which supported users who wanted to twist their upper torso from side to side while reclining; this was in line with general discussion about the ergonomic benefits of changing posture. A chisel-wielding craftsman on the atelier schneeweiss stand was a nice reminder of the skills required to make high quality furniture.
Famo from Portugal had one of the more attractive stands at the show using open lattice framework and good lighting. Another Portuguese company, Guialmi, also had a large bright attractive stand showing some colourful benching products, while Mikomax from Poland, displayed a wide range of colourful integrated workstations, acoustic accessories and very clever counter-balanced height adjustable tables.

Karim Rashid designed the unusual Hook range of workstations shown by the Italian group, Newform Ufficio featuring semi-circular glass screens, lighting and panels.

By far and away the most startling stand design was by Oki Sato's Nendo of Tokyo for the Japanese office furniture group, Kokuyo. A large area with a white floor and walls featured three settings of representations of tables and shelves in
black, which were not to be touched, and one black executive chair repeated several times. Stunning!

Okamura, also from Japan but now well established in Europe, showed new seating ranges as well as their Muffle range of screens and furniture which they launched at Neocon in June.
Haworth were one of the very few north American companies on show. Their large stand was very busy and displayed a wide range of products and accessories including Openest screens and casual furniture from Studio Urquiola and Harbor Work Lounge furniture. Another was Humanscale which showed a wide range of existing and new seating and ergonomic products including trea, a stylish side chair by Tod Bracher, said to have been inspired by the movements of an exoskeleton and evolved with efficient mathematical surfaces to bring support and comfort to the sitter in both upright and reclining positions.

Italy’s large seating company, Sitland, had as colourful stand as anyone, including their display of new curved modular reception units. True Design, the Italian company from near Venice, better known for their auditorium seating, had several ranges of innovative breakout and acoustically accentuated soft seating.

Openest by Haworth

trea from Humanscale

Sitland from Italy

True Design
More high-backed acoustic seating from Actiu of Spain and Koleksiyon from Istanbul, Turkey who had a very large stand with furniture from many leading designers, including members of the owner family, the Malhans. One feature was a randomly modular storage and space dividing system.

Another leading company from Turkey, Nurus, showed a wide range of well designed workstations, seating and breakout furniture including the Ashbury executive range designed by Stefan Brodbeck.
A group of nine manufacturers from France came together for the show including Buronomic and Majencia, who presented the winning product from a student design competition run in conjunction with l'Ecole Boulle, a very comfortable two-position chair which rocked backwards and forwards, Wide Angle.

and finally…

......wooden tree decorations for the office designed and made by Lovi Oy of Finland were a bright and cheerful end to an Orgatec which seemed very successful for exhibitors and visitors alike.
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