

Neocon, Chicago - 2016

A Review

By John Sacks



Photography – John Sacks

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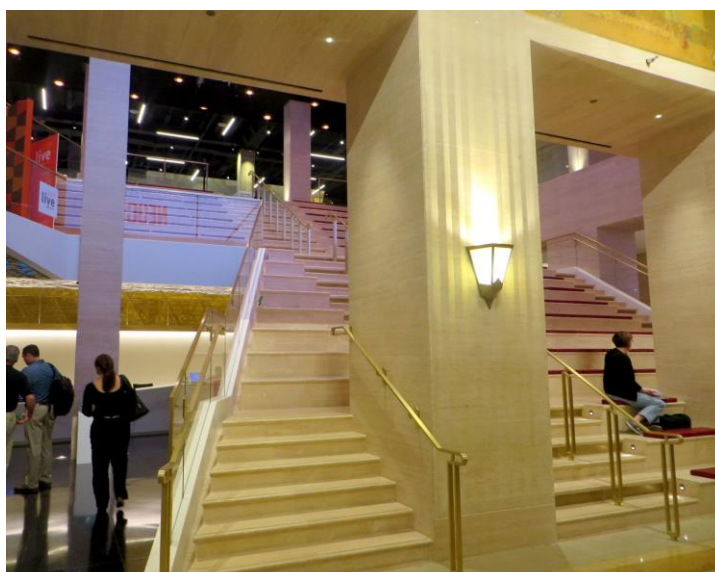
The Neocon Show - June 2016

Chicago turned on the style for Neocon last week. The fabulous weather, hot and sunny, helped of course, but the US office furniture market has been buoyant and spirits were generally high. The city was buzzing and everything, except for the almost gridlocked traffic, seemed to be moving at double pace. The bars, clubs and restaurants was packed with both locals and conventioners, whose proprietors were making hay while the sun shone. Delegates looking to stretch their dollars could enjoy the free, three-day, Chicago Blues Fest on five stages in nearby Grant Park.

The show opened on Monday. Well it didn't really, because Sunday, with the Merchandise Mart fully open for business, is actively used by most of the participating companies for dealer and VIP presentations, product training, staff briefings and fine tuning the displays and the presentations. But the Monday of Neocon is a one-off. Always the show's busiest day, this year, the aisles, elevators and showrooms were heaving. It seemed there were many more visitors than in 2015 and at times, it was almost impossible to move around freely or to see any of the products properly.

Most visitors were exhausted by about 4pm when the showroom parties kicked off, and if you tried to attend them all, you'd only have time to spend a few minutes at each. It does seem a pity that they are almost all held at the same time rather than being spread out. Why not use Sunday evening or hold a breakfast event early on Monday or Tuesday? Exhibitors would probably get much better value for the dollars they spend.

There were some big changes in the Mart this year. The owners, Vornado, have spent a reputed \$40m renovating the building including creating new features such as a 50-foot-wide marble staircase and a much improved food court.

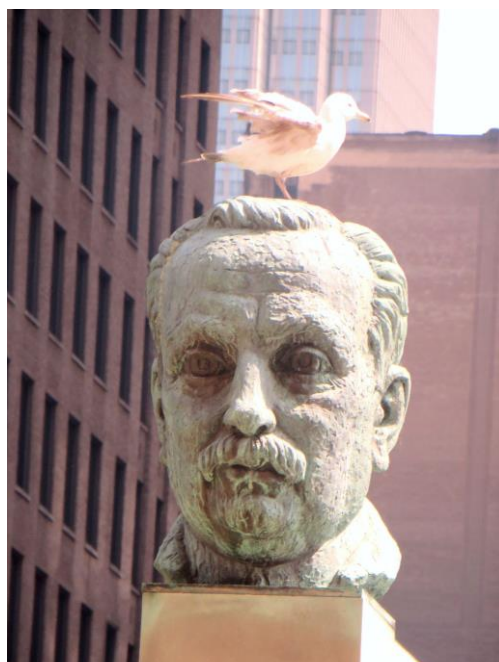


Marble at the Merchandise Mart

More pertinent for Neocon was the containment of the general exhibition area to the 7th floor alone, and the closing of the 8th. This allowed the show organisers to be very picky about which companies participated, and that, in turn, raised the standard of exhibitors, many of which were drawn from smaller, newer and creative companies from North America and Europe. A great improvement.

Neocon' visitor profile seems to shift each year. The overwhelming majority of the 60,000 or so attendees are always relatively local but those from further afield this year came mainly from Central America, especially Mexico with fewer than previously from Europe and Asia.

There was also less in the way of frivolities and giveaways as if companies had decided to concentrate efforts on exploiting the hard selling opportunities presented by a strong market.



Independent observers?

Directions

There was a dearth of genuine, cutting-edge, innovation this year. Talk was of 'refinements' and 'range extensions'. With Haworth's new *Fern* chair reputedly five years in the creation, it's not surprising that not every annual Neocon presents ground breaking products. Sit-stand tables were everywhere although with little apparent effort being made either to integrate them with their fixed-height siblings or to promulgate any health-related arguments. There was more breakout furniture and individual and group enclosures on show this year, but nowhere near to the extent as might have been predicted by recent European trends. Work surface tops were showing some style with less of the solid, plain flat surfaces and more waterfall fronts and natural and quasi-natural

textures. Felt, and plain, primary colours seem to have been replaced by imaginative and often beautifully patterned textiles with a rich hue of colours, some of which were exclusive to one or other of the larger companies.

This year, furniture colours were darker with black – notably from Vitra - beginning to replace white and the wood finishes, beginning to be seen in 2015, were moving from light-coloured oak, ash and beech to walnut.



Vitra – black waterfall tops

The Companies and the products

The Frankfurt-based seating company, [Dauphin](#) is well established in the US and their large 3rd floor showroom had several new products, including the reclinable *4+ Relax* chair from Roland Zünd.



Relax by Dauphin



Inscape's *Bench*

The new (imaginatively named?) *Bench* system from [Inscape](#) designed by David Parshad provided an attractive package of worksurfaces, storage and collaboration units with sit-stand options as well as using a new antiqued wood-effect finish from the company's alliance with Sedus of Germany.

The vast [Steelcase](#) showroom on floor 3 showed a continuation of their previous years' theme of furnishings for personal spaces with *Quiet Spaces* from Susan Cain, further development of their business class airline seat inspired *Brody* enclosure and an innovative small steel pedestal system

with electronic locking. The new *Bivi* workstation system with its walnut veneered surfaces had a clever mix of technology and homeliness.



Steelcase - Bivi

The *Cocoon* meeting enclosure and *Agent* meeting tables attracted high volumes of traffic to the 3rd floor showroom of [Boss Design](#), one of the UK's leading manufacturers of contract seating and meeting room furniture.

One of the high profile companies of recent years has been [Buzzispace](#) headquartered in Antwerp, Belgium. Active in several export markets, their US business is headquartered in High Point, North Carolina. They had a large ground-floor presentation of their new *BuzziJungle* steel-structured climbing and seating frame and, in their 10th floor showroom, showed their Gold Award-winning *BuzziBalance* system from 13&9 Design, in two sizes for individual or dual use, which gave users pleasant floating sensation.



BuzziJungle and BuzziBalance



[Darron](#), also from, High Point, used massive Acacia logs, sap and all, to create some beautiful conference tables



Darron table

The [Haworth](#) space is vast and the company's story is well explained and presented. This year, a large part of the showroom was taken up with the story of the design and development of *Fern*, a new task chair inspired by Ito design. The chair's back construction supports, while allowing a full range of movement and the interrelationship of the flexing of the inner and outer structures is exposed to view. The company also reminded visitors of its craft manufacturing heritage with a series of live displays of different upholstery skills.



Haworth's Fern and craftsmanship

The third floor of the Mart houses some of the largest showrooms from some of the industry's largest companies. The way [Herman Miller](#) steered visitors around a predetermined route, Ikea style, attracted some negative comments but with Monday's vast hordes descending on them, it's

difficult to think of any other way that so many visitors could have a chance of really understanding what was being presented.



Metaform Portfolio from Herman Miller by Studio 75

There were various sit-stand options on show. [Humanscale](#) showed the prototype of a version of their monitor arm and keyboard tray which easily allowed a full range of working postures while the worksurface remained static; [Knoll, who's](#) new *HiLo* stool was perfect for perching, also showed some attractive light screens and Rockwell lounge furniture.



Humanscale, and Knoll *HiLo*



One of the most interesting new products on display was the extremely comfortable *FF* chair from the studio of Ito Design for the Japanese manufacturer, [Itoki](#). The chair back was made in individual segments connected with rubber which flexed in all directions as the user moved. [Koleksiyon](#), a leading company from Turkey, opened their new large 11th floor showroom and had an impressive display including the new, attractive, *Vis* bookshelf and open storage system.



FF from Itoki and *Vis* by Koleksiyon

Another first-timer was [NaughtOne](#), a British manufacturer of breakout furniture which recently announced a strategic partnership with Herman Miller. [Pinta Acoustic](#) from Minneapolis show *Air Hush*, an innovative screen panel system using an inflatable 100mm thick core.

[Senator Group](#) from the UK offers products to two different sectors out of separate showrooms, under the Senator and Allermuir brands. The new *Orb* workstation encouraged easy switching between individual and collaborative activities.



Orb by Senator

[Teknion's](#) 10th floor showroom was a hit with the judges. Contract magazine's 'Best of Show' went to their *Zones* space management and enclosures system and they also won awards in five other categories.



Teknion Zones and UpStage, with magnetically attached screens

There were other notable product presentations from the Australian company, [Zintra Acoustics](#), [West Elm](#), an Inscape company, for their new wood sit-stand workstations and the Belgian manufacturer, [Six Inch](#) – the distance between your left and right ears – of colourful meeting room tables and chairs.

And finally

The flags outside the Mart, and indeed everywhere across the city, were at half-mast for the victims of the Orlando killings and cast a more sombre shadow over an otherwise happy and successful show.

John Sacks,

London, 20 June 2016



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