

# *Neocon, Chicago - 2017*

## *A Review*

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Words and photos - John Sacks



*Chicago skyline*

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## The Neocon Show - June 2017

Chicago is one of the world's great cities and in June, you see it at its brilliant best. Fabulous weather, great events such as the free, three day, multi-stage Chicago Blues Fest, the naked night bike ride, food and cocktails to die for, and all the fun of the Lakeside Drive beaches. However many times you have visited this multi-cultural mid-western metropolis, the city's dramatic setting between river and lake, and the boldness of its architecture never ceases to excite the senses. Whether you lean towards the fine arts, with world class institutions such as the Art Institute of Chicago, the Fields Museum or the CSO, or the down and dirty blues joints, restaurants and bars, the city is thrilling.

The final day's intermittent thunderstorms spoiled what was otherwise perfect Chicago summer weather with blazing sunshine and temperatures around 34 degrees. The Merchandise Mart dates from the 1930s and its retro-fitted and erratic air-conditioning system regularly leaves one area stifling and the adjacent one, Arctic-like.

There was a great sense of confidence in the air. For once, many of the larger showrooms such as [Herman Miller](#) and [Vitra](#) did not feel the need to cram in more and more furniture, as if they were trying to justify the vast amounts they had spent. Plenty of open spaces allowed products to be presented more attractively and viewed more easily.

There is no pretence of this being anything other than an American show. Unlike European exhibitions which actively welcome overseas exhibitors and visitors, Neocon grudgingly allows them to participate, so long as they remember they are guests. This is, after all, the largest office furniture market in the world and everyone would like even just a tiny share of it. The fixed locations of most of the showrooms, very familiar to those of the thousands of attendees who return year after year, put an onus on companies to reinvent their presence each year and the vast spaces occupied by the largest companies means the effort and investment involved is massive.

There was also a somewhat extended timeline this year with both the Sunday, the day before the show officially opened, being extremely busy and the Wednesday, when it is normally as quiet as a morgue, still seeing masses of people, and even queues for the elevators. The senior executives who often head gratefully home after lunch on Tuesday might want to rethink their arrangements for next year.

## Directions

There was a clear continuation of last year's homely theme, almost as if tasks function and efficiency were dirty words. Although there were benches and workstations in evidence –mostly electric sit-stands - the space they were allocated was dwarfed by sofas, booths, enclosures, soft seating and other upholstery. Where the more traditional work-oriented furniture was permitted, it was

invariably given a residential feel, with real wood finishes and textiles more commonly associated with the home rather than the office.

Some of the piping and other upholstery detailing on chairs and sofas was very attractive and clearly called for a high level of skills, as did the demanding processes of selection and preparation of fine quality and exotic veneers

Unlike the bright, bold, almost vulgar, primary colours seen at recent international shows in Europe and beyond, here in Chicago we saw subtle, thoughtfully coordinated shades of imaginative and attractive fabrics in browns, blues, pinks and greens.

By way of strange contrast, some companies featured monotones of blacks, greys, whites and every shade between, as if consciously trying to avoid making a colour statement.

## The Companies and the Products

[OFS Brands](#) continues to impress, with a swathe of new products, many of them, such as *Elani* seating and *Wyre* tables reflecting the show's emphasis on breakout areas. Their versions of enclosures included *Qove* modular lounge units.

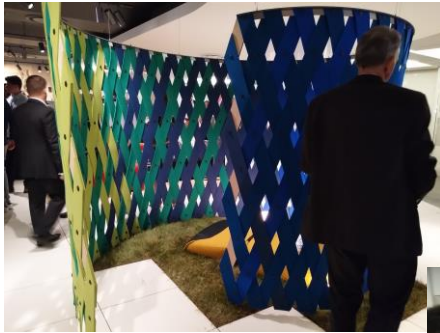


*Elani and Wyre*

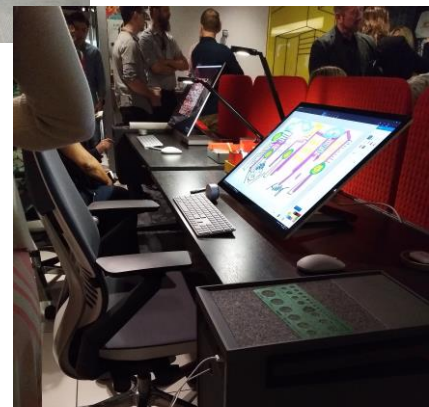
*Qove lounge*



In the midst of all the hype and excitement, the [Steelcase](#) showroom was just about the busiest of all, and at times it was almost impossible to move around, let alone view the products. The understated creativity was very impressive and despite the crowds, touring the area gave a sense of pleasure and comfort.



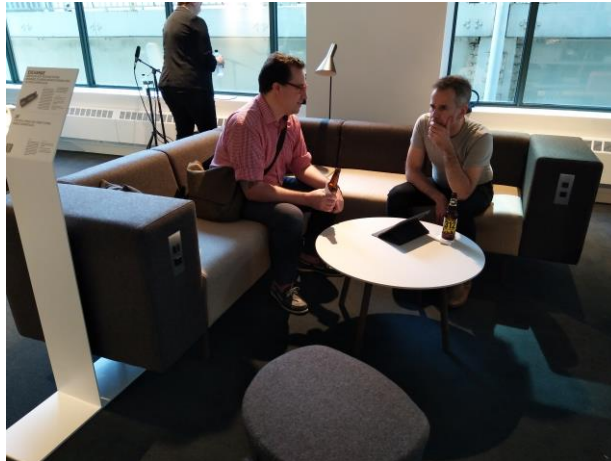
Views of Steelcase





[Allseating](#) from Ontario had moved further away from their roots in task chairs and presented a modular seating system, *Exchange*.

Allseating's *Exchange*



Some of the smaller showrooms impressed, often by displaying originality. [Enwork](#) from Lowell, Michigan, presented some seemingly gravity-defying *Equilibrium* tables

*Equilibrium* conference table from **Enwork**





Another very impressive showroom was that of the Gold Award-winning Spanish company, [Andreu World](#). Their presence in the show has grown year by year and the large space they now occupy seems out of synch with a company with fewer than 50 employees. This year, they launched a new chair from Patricia Urquiola who so successfully transformed [Haworth's](#) design credentials



[Herman Miller](#) had further developed their *Metaform* system with some new attractive accessories.

[Okamura](#) have a large showroom on floor 11 and amongst several new product offerings, their SW sit-stand systems was as well-engineered and thought through as you would expect from a major Japanese manufacturer. Additionally, their version of a co-ordinating adjustable individual side table – *Risefit* - was one of the cleverest in the show. Good products deserve better names.



SW and Risefit from Okamura

[Dauphin](#) from Germany have been established in the North American market for many years and their busy showroom was yet another focusing on breakout area furniture.

Dauphin's *4+Relax* series  
from designer Roland Zünd



[Cabot Wrenn](#) were another company reinventing themselves in commercial soft seating. Coming from a traditional North Carolina furniture making background they put their upholstery skills to good use with the *Soak* and *Ala* groups of products

*Soak* and *Ala* from **Cabot Wrenn**



The [Davis](#) showroom was as impressive as ever with some beautifully designed products new to the market, some of which are made under licence from Europe.



A clutch of attractive products from Davis



[Boss Design's](#) 2<sup>nd</sup> year in the Mart saw them in a much larger space on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor. The resultant higher footfall was a worthwhile reward for the investment.





The Canadian company, [Inscape](#), historically known for quality steel storage, has in recent years created a much broader line of attractive products. This year's offering included a Gold Award winning range of workstations, the *Inscape Bench*.



*Inscape Bench*

Another Canadian company, this time on the open floorspaced 7<sup>th</sup> floor, [EzoBord](#), used a variety of simple materials to produce attractive and acoustically effective workstations and enclosures.



*EzoBord*

[Teknion](#), the largest by far of the Canadian companies, show some of the fruits of their work with Pearson Lloyd, the British duo. There was a strong design theme pervading their showroom and the products which was confident mix of new ideas and further development of themes from the recent past.



Some of the Teknion offerings



[West Elm](#) is a company which burst onto the scene a few years ago and continues to make its mark with beautifully designed furniture, very well executed.



## And finally

This year's Neocon was the perfect proof that the days of mammoth office furniture and furnishings exhibitions are far from finished. Judging by the hoardes of visitors and the noise they generated, an idiosyncratic and inconveniently configured venue was made to work perfectly adequately for a few frenetic days in June. Neocon will be 50 next year and it shows no sign of aging. No other office show is quite as bold, as overcrowded or as exhausting.

**John Sacks,**

London, 20 June 2017



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