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MAGAZINE

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EXPLORING IDEAS THAT SHAPE THE PLACES WE
WORK.

BY JOHN SACKS / / JUNE 25, 2017

2017 NEOCON IN REVIEW

At NeoCon this year, there was a great sense of confidence in the air. For once, many of the larger showrooms such as [Herman Miller](http://www.hermanmiller.com/) (<http://www.hermanmiller.com/>) and [Vitra](https://www.vitra.com/en-us/office) (<https://www.vitra.com/en-us/office>) 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 pretense 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 colors 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 color statement.

The Companies and the Products

OFS Brands (<http://ofsbrands.com/neocon/2017>) continues to impress, with a swathe of new products, many of them, such as *Elani* (<http://ofsbrands.com/products/seating/lounge/elani>) seating and *Wyre* tables reflecting the show's emphasis on breakout areas. Their versions of enclosures included *Qove* (<http://ofsbrands.com/products/seating/lounge/qove>) modular lounge units.



Image of Elani and Wyre courtesy of John Sacks



Image of Qove courtesy of John Sacks

In the midst of all the hype and excitement, the Steelcase (<https://www.steelcase.com/>) 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.





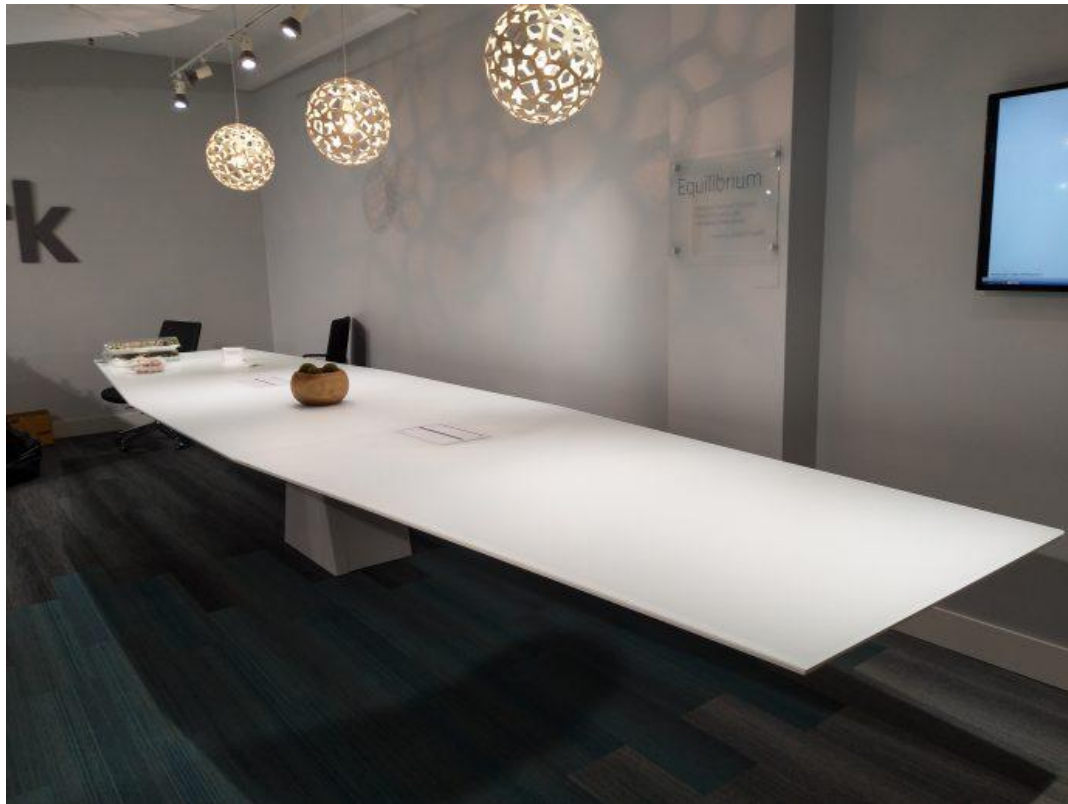
Some of the findings in the Steelcase showroom. Images courtesy of John Sacks.

Allseating (<http://www.allseating.com/>) from Ontario had moved further away from their roots in task chairs and presented a modular seating system, *Exchange* (<https://workdesign.com/2017/05/how-allseating-is-differentiating-itself-with-exchange/>).



*We caught designer, Nick Gillissie and guest enjoying Exchange
(<https://workdesign.com/2017/05/how-allseating-is-differentiating-itself-with-exchange/>).
Image courtesy of John Sacks.*

Some of the smaller showrooms impressed, often by displaying originality. Enwork (<http://enwork.com/>) from Lowell, Michigan, presented some seemingly gravity-defying *Equilibrium* tables.



Equilibrium conference table from Enwork. Image by John Sacks.

Another very impressive showroom was that of the Gold Award-winning Spanish company, Andreu World(<https://www.andreuworld.com/workspaces>). 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(<http://www.haworth.com/>)'s design credentials.



Image courtesy of John Sacks

Herman Miller had further developed their *Metaform* system with some new attractive accessories.



Image courtesy of John Sacks

Okamura (http://www.okamura.jp/en_us/) 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 by Okamura shown above. Image courtesy of John Sacks.

Dauphin (<http://www.yliving.com/modern-office.html>) 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. Image courtesy of John Sacks.

Cabot Wrenn (<http://www.cabotwrenn.com/>) 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 *A/a* groups of products.



Soak and Ala from Cabot Wrenn pictured above. Images courtesy of John Sacks.

The Davis (<http://www.davisfurniture.com/>) showroom was as impressive as ever with some beautifully designed products new to the market, some of which are made under license from Europe.





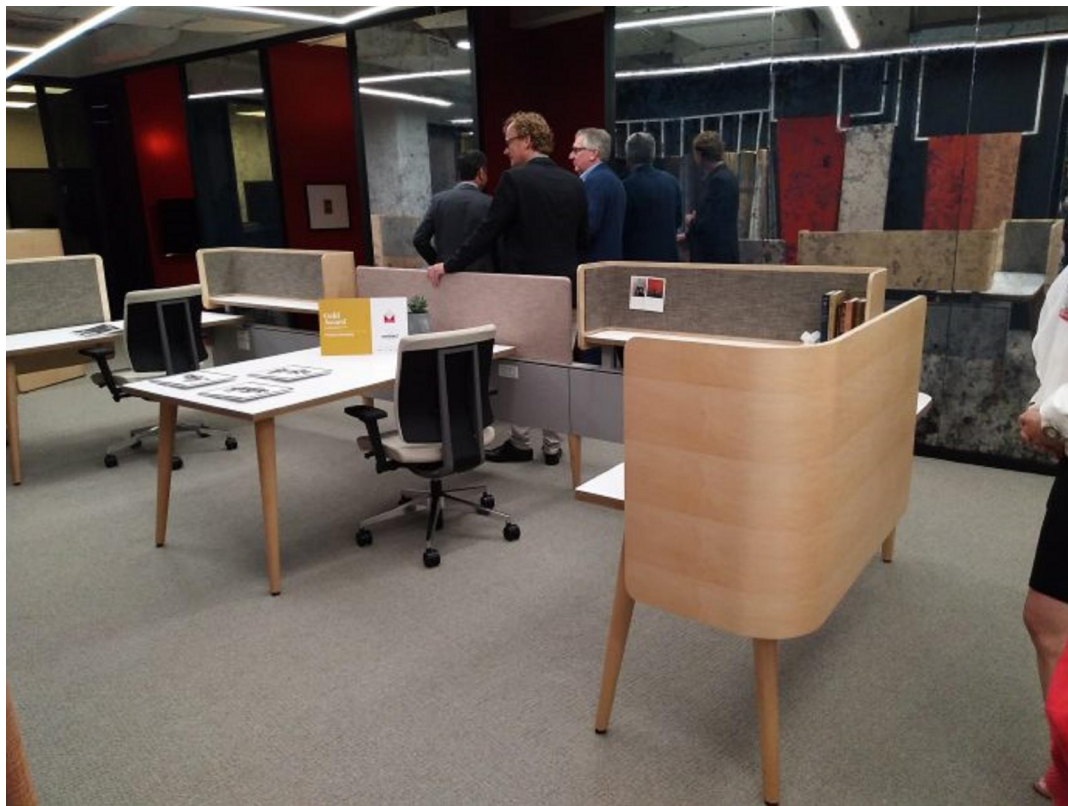
Attractive products including Q6(<https://workdesign.com/2017/05/furniture-inspired-work-today/>) and Hue(<https://workdesign.com/2017/05/davis-introducing-26-new-colors-hue-casegoods/>) casegoods from Davis pictured above. Images by John Sacks.

Boss Design(<http://www.boss-design.co.uk/>)'s 2nd year in the Mart saw them in a much larger space on the 11th floor. The resultant higher footfall was a worthwhile reward for the investment.



The well-attended Boss Design showroom. Image courtesy of John Sacks.

The Canadian company, [Inscape](http://inscapesolutions.com/)(<http://inscapesolutions.com/>), 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 pictured above. Images courtesy of John Sacks.

Another Canadian company, this time on the open floor spaced 7th floor, EzoBord(<http://www.ezobord.com/>), used a variety of simple materials to produce attractive and acoustically effective workstations and enclosures.



Image courtesy of John Sacks.

Teknion(<http://www.teknion.com/>), 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.





A sample of the Teknion offerings. Images courtesy of John Sacks.

West Elm (<https://westelmworkspace.com/>) 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.




*West Elm debuts Haus, a destination for individual and small group work.
Image courtesy of John Sacks.*


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 hordes 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. See you next year!


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