

# Neocon 2010

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## A Review – through European eyes

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The Merchandise Mart, Chicago

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## INITIAL THOUGHTS ON THE SHOW

June in Chicago is usually glorious – bright sunshine with a delightful breeze cooling everyone down just enough to make it bearable. But not 2010. For this, Neocon's 42<sup>nd</sup> year, visitors were mainly treated to overcast days, drizzle and even the occasional rainstorm.

The atmosphere inside the Merchandise Mart, however, was upbeat with lots of people and plenty of buzz. The lines (or queues, to use the quaint English expression) for those elevators you love to hate were longer and despite the improved flow-control systems for people and vehicles, there was still too much time spent waiting for them, as well as for taxis, food and information.

Neocon can always be relied upon as a barometer to indicate the state of the US furniture market. This year, with business still slow, we didn't expect an 'exciting' show. In many ways, our expectations were fulfilled.

In the past, commentators have bemoaned the lack of 'interesting new products' and 'innovation.' We have often disagreed with this point of view, in that we find lots of small product launches which indicate that despite its frozen appearance, there is still life beneath the surface of the American office furniture industry.

These signs – and other pointers towards recovery – were indeed visible at the show. Apart from the increase in visitor numbers compared to last year's all-time low, manufacturers seemed full of hope for the coming year; but launches of 'radical' products were thin on the ground. From reports in the US press earlier in the year, it seemed that lots of new developments were on the way. Well, either they weren't ready for launch, or the reports were over-hopeful, but either way we anticipated quite a lot from the show and for once were a little let down.

Although visitor numbers were up - Monday and Tuesday were especially busy - from conversations with several manufacturers, it seemed the general view was that many attendees were designers

coming back to the show after not having attended for two or three years, and who were looking at products without specific projects to match them with.

The 'business' side of meetings at the Merchandise Mart still seemed slow, as if the recession was not yet over and the projects not yet returning in any great numbers.

One of the impacts of the slowdown in office furniture, which we had started to see in previous years, is that many manufacturers were increasingly applying themselves to other markets. Most recently it has been healthcare, and this trend has continued, but at this show, education was the growth area – the biggest news being Steelcase's move into this sector.

There was at least something of an altogether lighter atmosphere, with evidence of some companies taking themselves less seriously. Izzy Design led the way with their tiny Mini squeezed between the usual monster trucks on the Merchandise Mart forecourt. New this year, the surfboard on the roof may have been intended to suggest a suitable recreational activity. Who knows...



Outside the Mart

Other examples of whimsy included teddy bears in the clutches of grown adults walking the aisles, and elephant sculptures all over the place, including, next to the entrance, the giant

Nomkhubulwane, or Mother Earth, by South African artist Andries Botha, sponsored by InterfaceFLOR.

iPads were everywhere. If they weren't being used to present products and features, they were being propped up on mini easels, supported on monitor arms, played with by all and sundry or given away as prizes.

From a European perspective, the increased emphasis on matters environmental was hardly remarkable. The US is still some years behind mainland Europe, especially Scandinavia, in this area, but many if not most companies were stressing their green credentials, and 'green' and 'eco' and 'sustainable' was everywhere.

## THE PRODUCTS

### Seating

For many, the most innovative product launched at the show would probably be Steelcase Education Solutions' *Node* Chair. This is a mobile combined chair and desk, intended for dynamic classroom situations, able to... 'flex from a lecture based mode to a team based mode and back again, without interruption'. This suggests the same type of flexible classroom environment for which Keen's '*Orbital*' desk, designed by the Azumis, was developed in the UK back in 2003.

Steelcase *Node* Chair

The *Node* chair focuses on three areas, storage, movement and fit. Its base consists of an open cage which can hold bags and rucksacks, keeping them off the floor, while the arms have small notches, allowing bag handles or straps to be hooked on safely and held close to hand. The base, which is mounted on castors, provides the movement and although it looks heavy in the pictures, it's surprisingly easy to move once you are sitting in the chair. The seat swivels, as does the (optional) tablet, offering many postural possibilities.

The seat itself is a mildly flexible bucket shell, allowing for a variety of body shapes and sizes and providing, through its flexibility, a comfortable seat for long sitting times. The tablet is quite large, giving plenty of worksurface, rotating not quite fully around the seat, but pivoting from the edge of one side. It also allows for a wide variety of depths (from the slimmest of adolescents to fairly large adults) and the use of the tablet for right or (very nearly) left handers.

The product ships in a small box, being separated into base, seat and tablet and assembles in 30 seconds.

The obvious comparison would be the Brayton '*Migrations*' seating of 13 or so years ago, incorporating storage in the base, with a mobile seat and a tablet. Does it take that long for the educational world to catch up with the office one? The 'fully loaded' product is in the region of \$600, we were told, and although we are not experts in US school purchase budgets, this is steep for the UK. Having said which, the first production run of seats had sold out before the show!



*Luce* by Okamura

After recent exciting introductions by Miller, Knoll, Humanscale and Wilkhahn, it seems there were far fewer new task chairs at Neocon than usual this year. One notable introduction was from Okamura, who launched '*Luce*', a chair derived from the 'robot leg' technology of their *Leopard* chair. Developed in collaboration with Giugiaro Design in Italy, *Luce* is more accessible than the challenging 'love it or loathe it' aesthetic of *Leopard*. The sleek one-piece frame styling of the seat and back is seductive and the arm is incorporated well into the design. The mesh of the back is

graduated, with a denser weave around the lumbar area for more support and a more open weave above for flex.

Allermuir US, the American arm of Senator International, were showing 'Evo/ve', their new task chair by Paul Brooks.



***Evo/ve*** by Allermuir US

Boss Design introduced five new products to the US through their partners, Tayco. Mesh back chairs 'Lily mesh' and 'Money penny' (once again designed by Paul Brooks), as well as their two new conference and meeting tables, 'Apollo' and 'Pegasus', were joined by the 'Kruze Lounge', which suited the relaxed, 'discussion and meeting' atmosphere of the Tayco showroom extremely well. It effectively highlighted one of the newer emerging themes of US offices in these Neocon shows, and indeed workplace design generally – relaxed work and 'offdesk collaboration'.

**Boss Design *Kruze Lounge***



In similar vein, Dauphin's new '*Perillo*' chair, made from thermoplastic and polished chrome, was surprisingly comfortable.



Dauphin *Perillo* chair

A couple of interesting introductions in training and nesting chairs came from Knoll and Allsteel. The Davis '*Site*' collection of low benches, tables and modular storage pieces pointed to another new direction for group working furniture, with its highly domestic character. The pieces can be put together to provide 'lounge based' collaborative work areas as an alternative to the traditional conference room.



Davis *Site* Collection

The large low round table suite was typical of the range. Spaced around the table and radiating out from the centre are three sets of power outlets with sliding covers for power to laptops – and now probably also, the ubiquitous iPads.



Coalesse, a Steelcase company, introduced ‘SW1’, a collection of lounge-like seating and low tables, designed to be used for both relaxed conferencing and collaborative work



**Coalesse SW1**

The SW1 tables have tablets which slides out, bringing a laptop within easy reach, and the collection was rounded out with the ‘Power Pod’, a neat tabletop power extension and accessory pot.

Together with the Davis Site collection and other recent products like Coalesse’s *Denizen* storage, which won a Gold Neocon award last year, these pieces herald a new category of ‘relaxed conferencing or ‘group task’ products, likely to have considerable impact as the nature of work changes.



**Coalesse *Powerpod***

Other chairs that stood out in the show were ‘*Seek*’ by Allsteel and ‘*MultiGeneration*’ by Knoll.

*Seek* is a highly functional side or training chair. It’s unique in that it stacks or nests – or indeed both at the same time; stacks of chairs can be ‘nested’. The chair is available with or without castors and the castor version stacks and nests with a groove in the centre of the castor slotting over the leg tube of the next chair and providing location and spacing in the stack. The nests and stacks are extremely tight; the trade-off is that the open chair is visually a little unbalanced, as the backrest is set high allowing the seat to tip up tightly. The back is available in a solid plastic or mesh and has a weight activated pivot to provide recline, making for a very comfortable ‘sit’ over time.



**Seek chairs from Allsteel**

Knoll's *MultiGeneration* chair – a side, training and small general use chair - filled out last year's Generation range of seating from New Zealanders, Formway.

The chair consists of a comfortable, flexible single-piece shell, moulded with a selection of holes in the back for flexibility. The crisp looking shell was a superb moulding, showing no split detailing or rough edges, and the 'sit' was extremely good for a 'hard' one piece moulding. The tube frame was simply formed to give a 'cantilever' support to the four legged castor chair.



**Knoll *MultiGeneration***

## Desking, Systems and Work tools

Just as there were few seating introductions, so was there a dearth of launches of new furniture systems, or rather, new systems concepts. Benches have definitely arrived in the US with a vengeance. Last year there were one or two; this year, very few companies known for their desking were without them. This year, they were generally in light colours and shown with divider screens, cable management and accessories just as one would expect in a showroom in Milan, Amsterdam or Clerkenwell.

US manufacturers such as Herman Miller and Steelcase have clearly recognised that the low dollar value of projects won with benches needs to be compensated by the added value of storage accessories, monitor arms and LED lighting – all of which were in evidence. Miller's recent acquisition of the UK's Colebrook Bosson Saunders was marked by a full display of their products in their 3<sup>rd</sup> floor showroom, including the Miller-branded arm, '*Wishbone*'.



Steelcase *FrameOne*

## Lighting and accessories

Work tools, lighting and support items were a big story again this year, with Teknion and KI both showing wireless charging

technology. KI had '*Ecoupled*' furniture, tables with wireless power built in, created in collaboration with Fulton Technologies.

Teknion had new developments of their '*Powermat*' technology, including desk edge clips, screen mounts and a *Powermat*-enabled base on one version of their *Conflux* family of lamps.

*Conflux* is a comprehensive collection of LED lighting by Carl Magnusson consisting of desk lamps, a floor lamp and under-cabinet lighting. The desk lamps are unique with their USB port for charging peripheral devices, they can easily be dismantled (arriving in a very small, material saving carton – a constant theme from many manufacturers in this 'greening' age). They adjust through 360 degrees, and from 13" – 18" in height. The column also tilts and the head angles upwards from flat to 15 degrees. The lamps are control by PIR (Passive InfraRed) technology, which senses body heat from either side of the lamp and can be set to turn off at a certain time after the user has left the area. A simple power-saving idea. There was a vast array of LED lights on show, many relating to the central power and 'support zones' of bench systems.

In fact, most of the new furniture introductions were bench systems, prompting MMQB<sup>1</sup> to comment: '*The products are a breath of fresh air and give the industry a fresh new look as the new generation of office workers enters the workplace.*'

Compared to the European interior office landscapes, the American approach to benching is an important alternative to panel systems and the closed-in 'bullpen' approach that has dominated furniture systems in the US for the last 20 years.

It would seem that the welcome 'freshness' of European benching products is more about openness, linear space and collaboration. It may be, given the larger spaces and somewhat different approach to real estate in America, that the 'reduced cost' and 'pack 'em in' mentality that seems to go hand-in-hand with benching in the UK may not be true for the USA. In many cases in Europe the bench option is the cheap route, both in terms of product outlay per person and indeed in space allocation itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Monday Morning Quarterback – [www.mmqb.com](http://www.mmqb.com)

Steelcase's innovative *C:Scape* range with its 'high end' benching solutions has been on the market for a couple of years. This year their introduction was '*FrameOne*' a true European style benching system. This comes complete with some interesting work support and division products, which define and organise the users' work space much more effectively than simple bench systems. This provision of space and storage support seems to set this second wave of bench products apart from the pared down, soulless benching solutions we see so often in Europe.

The over-desk 'sorters and dividers' of *FrameOne* provide trays for stashing small items, a lockable box, power outlets close at hand and options for storing files or magazines, all of which help both to define and screen off the personal space.



*FrameOne* storage

Allsteel showed their *Stride* system, which can adapt and transform from a panel or storage based product to a benching solution with less divisions. Alongside this, Allsteel was also showing their Neocon Gold winner; a storage cart, similar in concept to Bisley's '*Bite*' pedestal, and which can be positioned along a bench using a notch in its side, thus acting as a pedestal below the bench and a screen / personal storage unit above.



***Stride* by Allsteel**



**One of Allsteel's bench storage units**



Other notable bench products came from Knoll, with *Antenna Workspace*, which can be used with other products such as *'Template'* to provide storage based desking, or *'Fence'* for spine-based planning. Their 'big table' layout provides a typical bench situation, whilst linked desking offers a single sided version.



**Knoll *Antenna***



**Knoll *Antenna* with storage boxes**

Group Lacasse, who usually show low to mid-end casegoods and simple panel-based desking, also launched a bench product, *C.I.T.É.*, which won the Neocon Gold Award for systems.

This looks like a lower-cost panel based product which still managed to provide easily accessible central services and storage. Lateral division is provided for by simple freestanding or thumbscrew-adjusted acrylic dividers.



***C.I.T.É.* from Group Lacasse**

Even Paoli, which usually concentrates solely on more traditional casegoods, showed more 'open', storage-supported desking, highlighting the ubiquitous European influence.

## CONCLUSIONS

It may be that there is a subtle difference in the specification of projects in Europe and the USA, a product of budgets and space, but it certainly seems as if product styles on either side of the Atlantic are converging at an accelerating rate. If the requirement for providing unique and well appointed workspaces that seems to be current in the USA continues, and can override the 'budget' approach to workspaces that seems to be prevalent here in Europe, the future really will be brighter.

As workforce numbers decline and 'Generation Y' - the Millennial Generation - arrives, with its fresh sets of values and attitudes, the need to attract and retain staff will become more and more important themes for the future. Izzy Designs took up the cudgel with their new *Nemo* personal space concept, providing a collaborative area for seated discussion using solid teak framework..



Izzy Design *Nemo* personal space

Haworth had teamed with Kvadrat to produce '*Cloud*' – interlocking, fire retardant, acoustic fabric panels suspended from the ceiling.



**Haworth *Cloud***

And Halcon, very much a traditional casegoods company, showed an unusual approach to filing with their use of felt folders suspended from their furniture wall.



**Halcon felt filing folders**

A final thought: the industry in the US is very powerful. Even, perhaps especially, in a downturn, the constituent elements pull strongly together as if for protection. It's as if the manufacturers, dealers and designers all realise just how much they need each other for survival - and the trade association, BIFMA and shows such as Neocon are seen by all as being very much part of this close-knit team.

Neocon 2010 Review produced by JSA Consultancy Services in conjunction with Roger Carr and David Williams of Radar

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