

NEOCON, CHICAGO 2022

JUNE 13 - 15

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A Review

The Show

Chicago demonstrated the eccentricities of its summer weather by presenting visitors over three days with an intense heat wave, as well as a mixture of overcast skies, thunder, lightning and torrential rain, not to mention a tornado warning which closed O'Hare Airport. Getting around the city became a challenge as vacant taxis appeared to become an extinct species.

Outwardly at least, there were very few signs of the remnants of any Covid-related precautions. Sadly however, there was plenty of evidence of the economic toll on the city with many boarded-up shops, offices and other commercial premises.

After the ravages of three Covid years, the packed showrooms, corridors and elevators of the Merchandise Mart – now re-branded as The Mart - were ample evidence that Neocon was back with a vengeance. The steaming heat – Tuesday's temperatures exceeded 95 degrees – encouraged a happy atmosphere and a wide diversity of bright summer clothing, although the guys from Framery were stylishly clad in tuxedos and white trainers.

In many ways, it was as if there had been no hiatus and clients and those there to serve them behaved as if they were picking up three-year-old conversations where they'd left off. Much about the Mart seemed reassuringly unchanged, although new showrooms had popped up, others had grown larger and a few had disappeared. A handful of companies including Teknion, Inscape and Miller Knoll had abandoned Neocon and the Mart in favour of independence and the dubious attractions of West Fulton Market, a former ten-block stretch of dilapidated warehouses and factories.



The Mart June 2022



Architecture and the river by the Mart

Words and photos - John Sacks

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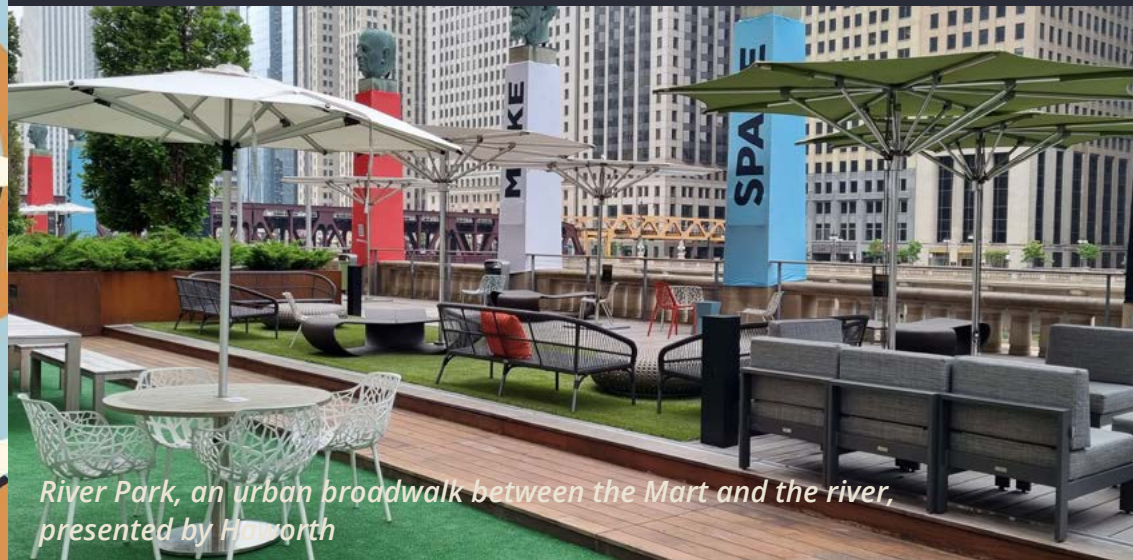
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River Park, an urban broadwalk between the Mart and the river, presented by Haworth

The Mart space released was quickly taken up amongst seven other companies so it's not at all clear that their presence will be missed. The show only runs for three days and with so many exhibitors in the Mart, the last thing that visitors need is to traipse across town to see a few more office furniture showrooms.

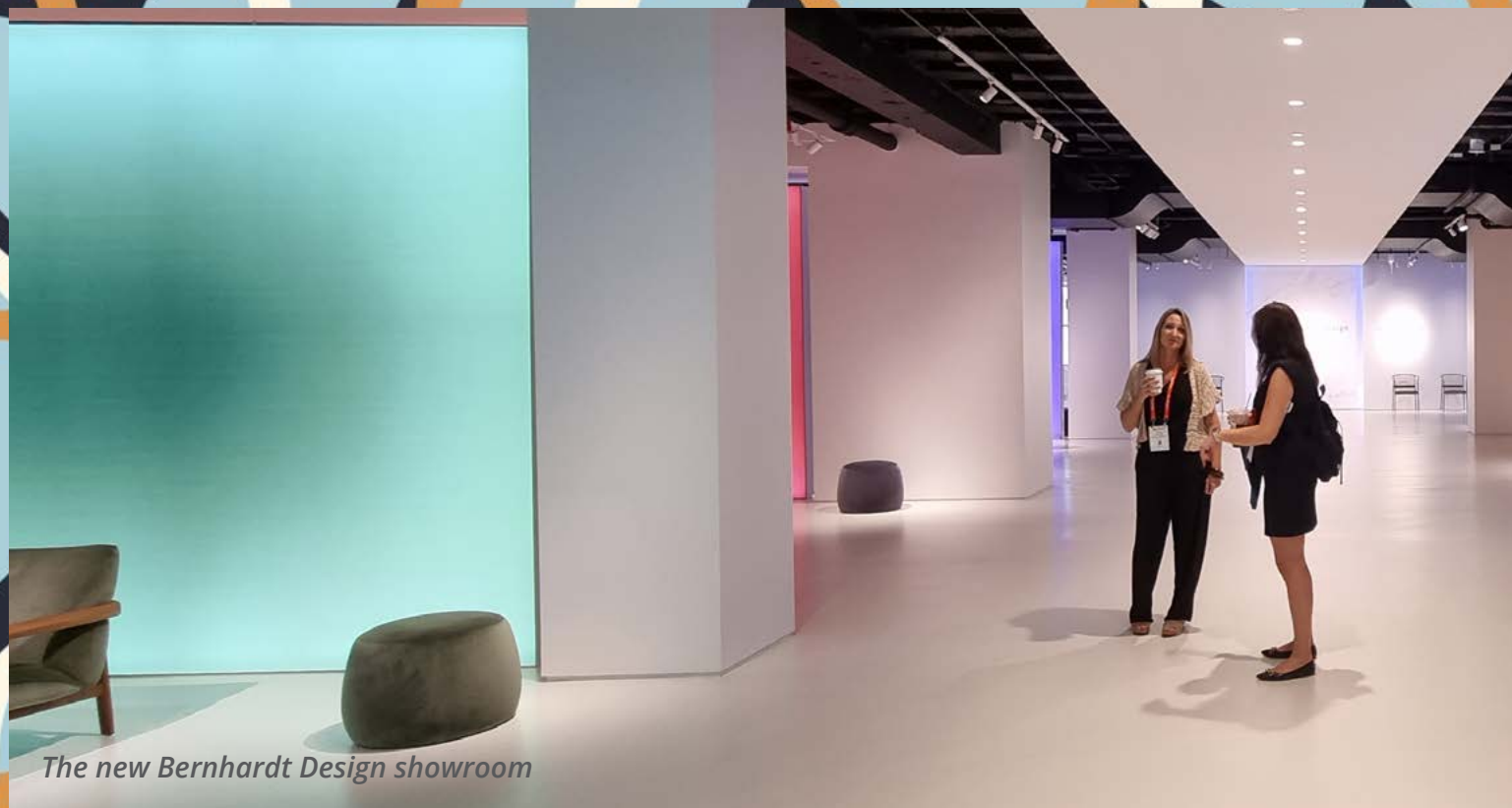
For regular visitors – some, including yours truly, have attended almost all of the 50 Neocons that have been held - the Mart is like an old, familiar friend. It's not bothered about being quirky, with its eccentric elevators and convoluted corridors that loop back on themselves, and often return the visitor unwillingly to where they started. It's also vast; when it opened in 1930, it was the largest building in the world, with 4 million square feet (372,000 m²) of floor space. Neocon uses just four of its 22 floors plus two floors of common space, but that's more than enough for most visitors.

The pace was frenetic, especially on Monday and Tuesday, and those working in some of the showrooms were rushed off their feet. Serious buyers and specifiers mixed happily with the window shoppers, design students and industry stalwarts, who were mainly interested in meeting and greeting old friends.

A number of companies such as Bernhardt had invested very heavily in creating beautiful showroom spaces with plenty of space and had avoided overcrowding them with furniture. They seemed to appreciate that specifiers tend to be positively drawn to companies demonstrating a holistic approach to design and which present their design credentials in ways other than just through their furniture.

In contrast with most western European companies at the show, few north American manufacturers talked much about the positive or negative environmental impact of their activities. Sustainability was generally quite a way down the list of attributes in which they seemed to think clients were interested.

Although this had been the first “real” Neocon for three years, old habits die hard and this three-day-show was as usual, effectively down to two, with many having fled a steaming Chicago on Tuesday afternoon.



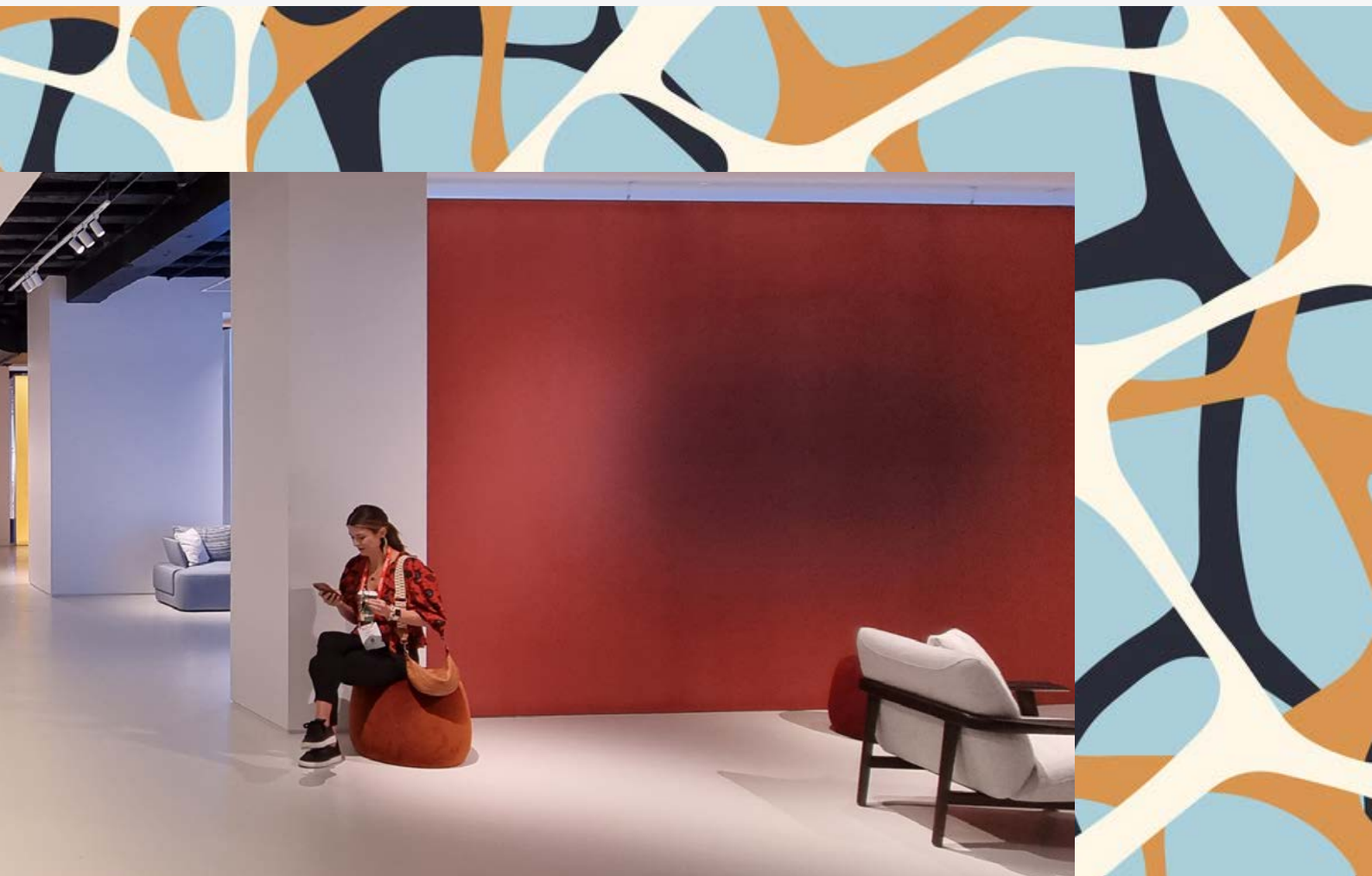
The Trends

Not unexpectedly, much of the product emphasis at the show was on upholstered furniture with sofas, booths, hubs and enclosures in all shapes and sizes. Styles were often organic and colours soft, using tones such as muted greys and beiges. All very homely and welcoming. Occasionally, there were minor concessions to technology with built-in USB sockets, but more attention seemed to be paid to acoustics than communications.

There were some workstations around, often of the sit-stand variety, as well as tables and benches but they were heavily outnumbered by a multitude of solo or duo workplaces for laptop work, zoom or phone calls, concentration, discussions or presentations.

There was little attention paid to traditional storage products – who uses paper? – but there were plenty of open storage systems, often on wheels, doubling up as space dividers that don't block out the light.

Outdoor commercial furniture was something new – often a hybrid between furniture for the garden (yard) and for the office. Designed to let you soak up the sun while working from home, without suffering a guilty conscience?



The Companies and their Products

[Ethnicraft](#) from Boom in Belgium have their own factories in Indonesia, Serbia, Malaysia and Vietnam. They presented some attractive designs including this quality finished home office using solid oak and a simple steel frame.



Home desk from Ethnicraft of Chicago

Another company from Belgium, [Extremis](#), based in West Flanders, showed outdoor commercial furniture – OOF – Out of Office - such as the easily adaptable AMAi system by designer Dirk Wynants.

[Andreu World's](#) large and beautifully designed showroom included some of the best of designs from Spain. Headquartered in Valencia, the company has a strong international presence and is well regarded by the design community. The Neocon Gold Award-winning system, below, of easily mobile screens and sofas – In Out Office - lent itself to creating semi-private meeting areas.



Outdoor commercial furniture from designer Dirk Wynants of Extremis of West Flanders in Belgium



Andreu World Screened off soft seating

Another version of flexible working environments was shown by Grand Prairie, Texas-based [Loftwall](#) using their Buffer screens.



Informal working area from Texas-based Loftwall

The unlikely named **Frövi** from the UK had a broad range of attractive furniture including this Neocon Gold Award winning adaptable open storage unit, Bamboo, made from carbon-negative, solid bamboo, which doubled up as a space divider.

OFS from Huntingburg, Indiana have a rapidly growing presence in the US market and their large, 11th floor, showroom presented a wide range of good looking, practical solutions for the office. The Kaleid collection of mobile presenters, self-irrigating planters and space dividers was attractive and well thought through.



Bamboo open storage and space divider from UK manufacturer Frövi



Versatile mobile wall storage system part of the Kaleid Collection from OFS

The Arcadia collection of sectionalised walls from the UK company, [Spacestor](#), seemed to be preparing us for when we all abandon Earth and settle on some new planet. 'WFM' – Working from Mars?



Arcadia space dividing screens from UK company Spacestor

Crate Divide from another UK manufacturer, [Allermuir](#), part of the largest UK group, Senator International, was easily rearrangeable.



The largest office furniture company in Lithuania, [Narbutas](#), has a large and growing international business, including an established presence in the USA. Its Zedo workstation system was very much in line with trending styles.



[Hightower](#) from High Point NC is one of the growing number of "Women Owned" companies. Its Arches adaptable bench seating was clever, attractive and comfortable.



Japan was well represented by one of the world's largest office furniture companies – [Okamura](#) - in their very large 11th floor showroom. They launched Cynara, one of the relatively few new task chairs being featured.



The sole representative company of Miller Knoll in the show was the UK seating manufacturer, [Naught One](#). Their new colourful stacking chairs attracted attention.

One of the busiest places at Neocon was the showroom shared between eight companies on floor 11, [Scandinavian Spaces](#), reflecting the serious interest in design from that part of the world. The furniture was colourful and fun, without being impractical.

[Sandler Seating](#) have established links with a number of European brands such as Tonon from France, whose Riverside Collection of stools was fun. They had commissioned artist Gianni Borta to paint onto fabrics which were then able to be reproduced as commercial upholstery textiles.



*New products from the shared showoom
Scandinavian Spaces*



*The Riverside Collection by
Tonon seating from Sandler Seating*



*Gianni Borta created fabrics for Tonon
from Sandler Seating*

[Boss Design](#) picked up a Gold Award for their Amelia lounge chair created by their in-house design team led by Mark Barrell, while [Pedrali's](#) Italian heritage was evident in their rich blue Social sofa system.



Amelia, Gold Award winning design from Boss Design



Pedrali created sofa

[Davis Furniture](#) from Highpoint had created a simple space for casual meetings.



A meeting enclosure from Davis Furniture of Highpoint NC

This year, [Steelcase](#), usually so ahead of the game, had gone back in time to create a wonderfully evocative display of re-creations of the furniture they made to Frank Lloyd Wright's 1939 designs for Wright's revolutionary [S C Johnson Administration Building in Racine, Wisconsin](#). The intention is to produce these pieces once again, this time with a price tag for a desk of around \$12,000.



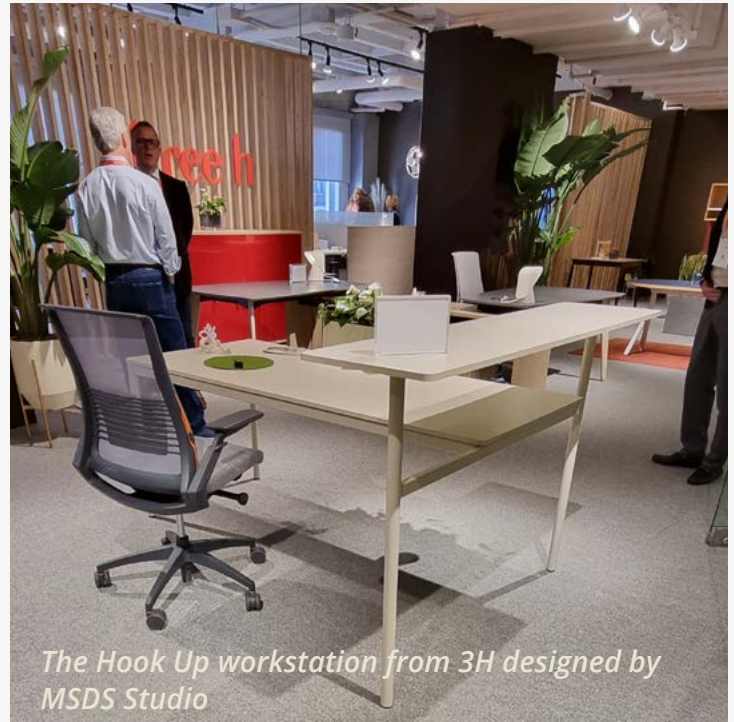
A recreation by Steelcase of the original Frank Lloyd Wright desk

[Steelcase](#) also showed their semi-private working enclosures.



A Steelcase semi-private working area

Union Designs were one firm creating business furniture for outdoor use, this time for [KFI Studios](#) from Louisville, Kentucky.



The Hook Up workstation from 3H designed by MSDS Studio

The soon-to-be patented Hook Up workstation designed by MSDS Studio for [Three H Furniture](#) based in Ontario, Canada featured a workstation ideal for impromptu standup meetings.



Union Designs outdoor commercial furniture creation for KFI

The need for furniture suitable for quick casual gatherings was also clearly in the minds of [HBF's](#) designers when they came up with the idea of this upholstered stacking stool.



Stacking stools by HBF

Another offering of seating suitable for informal meetings came from [Dauphin](#).



Casual meeting seating from Dauphin

[Silen](#) from Estonia won a Neocon Innovation award for their Hybrid soundproof enclosures, designed by CEO Andreus Arge. The company started in business just five years' ago and has 60 employees. Their success has been helped along by partnering with industry heavyweights, Kinnarps and Sedia Seating.

Visitors and exhibitors all seemed to go home happy, looking forward to 2023 where we are promised that some serious upgrades to the Mart will be on show.

John Sacks



Silen from Estonia and one of their attractive and practical meeting booths

Patricia Urquiola's beautiful designs were once again on show in the [Haworth](#) showroom, including this relatively traditional but re-imagined, working area.



A working area designed by Patricia Urquiola for Haworth



John Sacks

London, June 2022



"Advising office furniture businesses around the world"