

NeoCon[®]

CHICAGO | 10 – 12 JUNE 2024

JSA
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FULTON MARKET

**Design
Days**

June 10 - 12, 2024



A Review

The City

Chicago is a city which never fails to amaze. It's the epitome of extroversion, with magnificent architecture, larger than life characters, almost constant, ear-splitting commotion, and frantic comings and goings. I go to Chicago every year, and each time there is profusion of elegant new skyscrapers, in different shapes and styles, each seeming to try to outdo the other. It's as if the city is constantly trying to outperform all others, as well as its own past.

The weather this year veered haphazardly from very chilly, to baking hot, with rain putting in an appearance every so often.

Prices have risen steeply in the past year, just as they have in many other parts of the world, and for the visitor from overseas, Chicago now feels like an expensive place to visit. Taxis, meals, drinks and pretty much everything else seem very pricey.

Although bicycles and scooters are in evidence, their numbers haven't yet reached London's proportions, and their riders seem to obey the rules of the road.

Maybe it's just in the Summer, but Chicago takes its entertainment very seriously with an abundance of festivals and music in the parks, including the annual four-day free Blues Festival, the largest of its kind in the world.



Chicago skyline



Chicago at night, from the State Street bridge



Words and photos - John Sacks

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Table of Contents

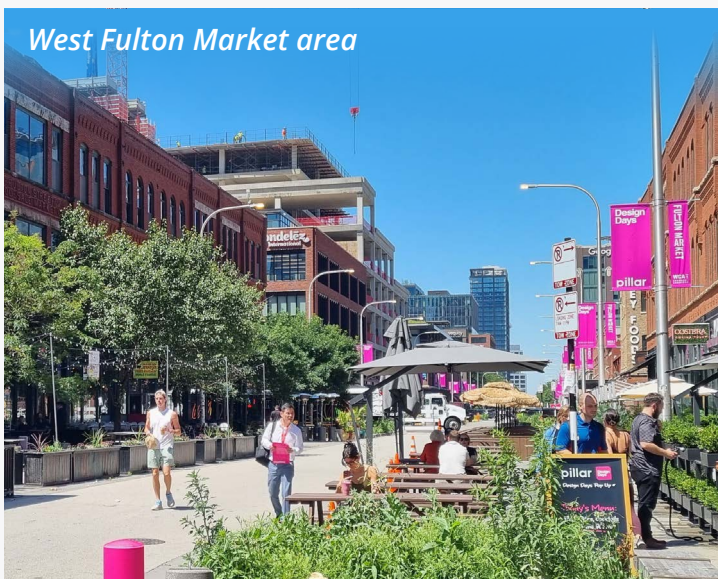
The City	02
The Shows	04
The Themes & Trends	05
The Companies and their Products	07
Design Days	13

The Shows

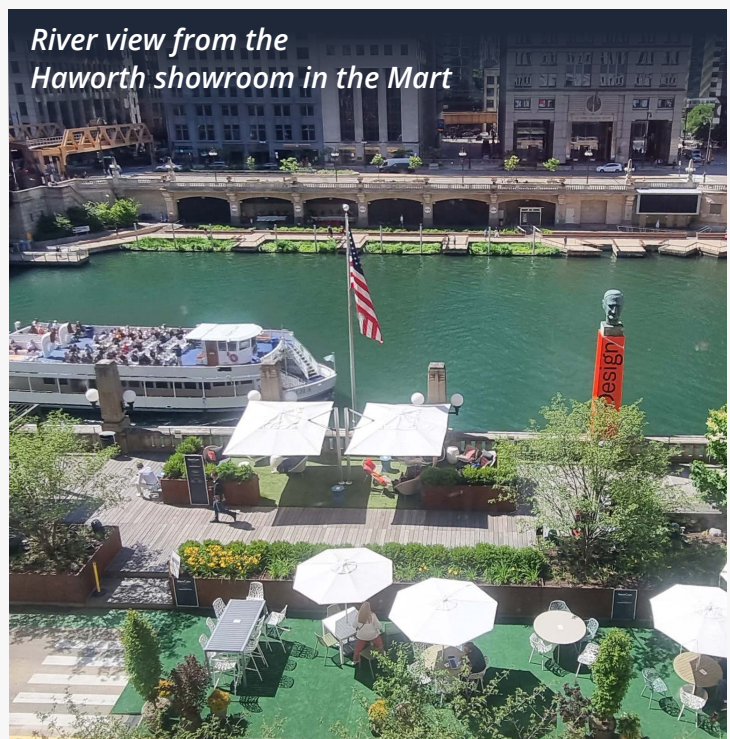
Although the Neocon show at the Merchandise Mart is thriving, with a record number of exhibitors and visitors, the character of the event has changed somewhat, with the formation of a breakaway show, Design Days. This has involved a relatively small number of some of the larger companies, including Humanscale, Teknion, Kimball, Teknion and Miller Knoll, having moved out of the Mart and set up showrooms about a mile away in the trendy West Fulton Market district. Of the very largest companies, the only two still remaining in the Mart are Steelcase and Haworth. Steelcase are rumoured to be planning to move in the Spring of 2025.



The Merchandise Mart river side



West Fulton Market area



River view from the Haworth showroom in the Mart

Although the companies that have moved have gained more of their preferred type of space, they may be missing out by not being able to share the infrastructure the Mart offers in terms of talks, discussions, events, awards and entertainment, as well as the sense of real excitement created by so many thousands of visitors. It should also be said that having to travel between two venues makes life for the visitor more difficult.

This year, the Mart was as busy and exciting as any in pre-Covid times, with the corridors, and many of the showrooms packed, and with long lines for elevators, especially on Monday and Tuesday. The talks and presentations were well-attended, and the many dozens of parties were very jolly.



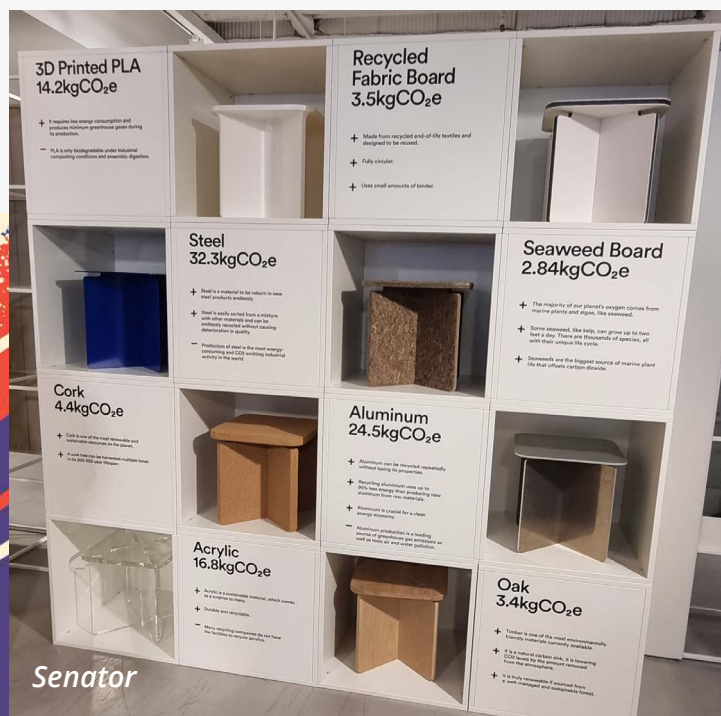
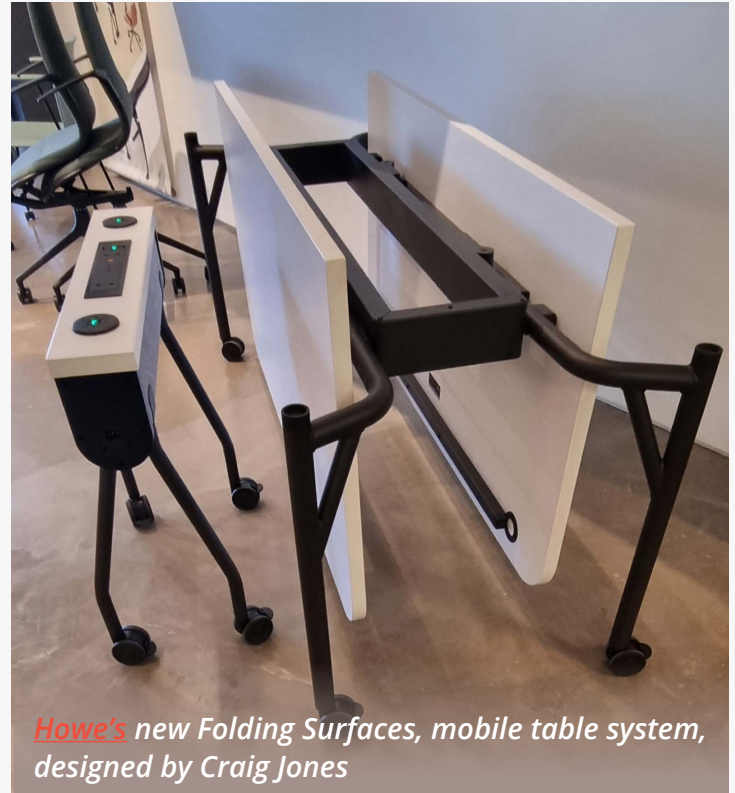
Neocon awards ceremony at Marshalls Landing at the Mart

The Themes and Trends

As we know, the pandemic led to more people working from home, and hybrid working. This encouraged many employers fighting against that trend, to adopt a more homely look and feel for their offices, the idea being that if furnishings at home and in the office were similar to each other, it could increase the attractiveness of office working. The effect of this on office furniture and furnishings was clearly apparent, with most companies showing much more lounge furniture than workstations, task chairs or office storage products.

Mobility and flexibility were seen by many companies as being a requisite for today's offices. The ability to arrange and rearrange furniture was applied to tables, screens, pouffes and pods - pretty much everything.

Sustainability was emphasised and promoted by many companies as an integral part of corporate culture, for example by [Haworth](#), with this display and by [Senator](#), with this presentation of the sustainability of the materials they use in manufacturing.



Okamura's *robot man* was demonstrating a new polymer-based material said to be a 97% recyclable replacement for traditional upholstery foam.



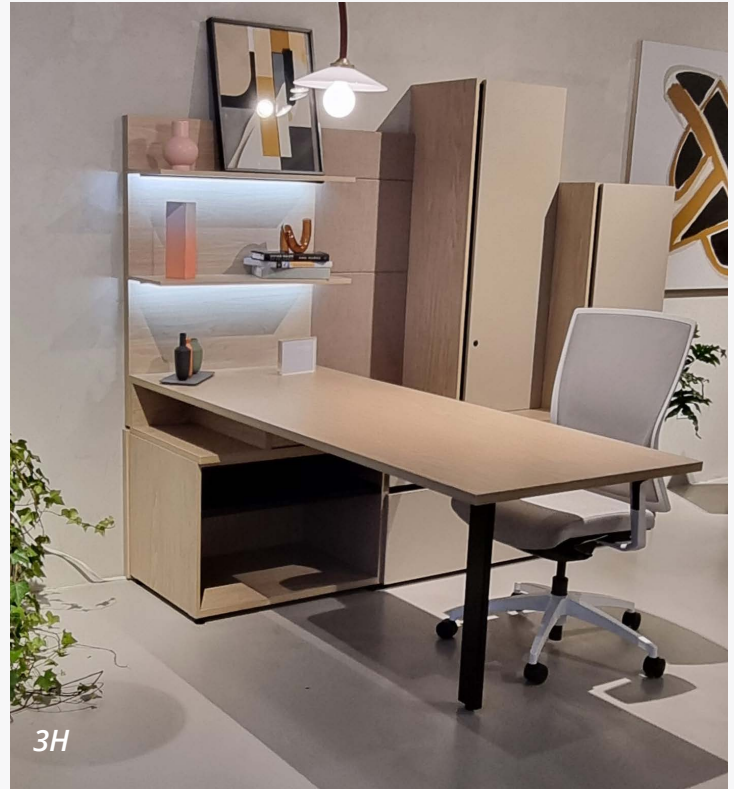
Shapes were generally more rounded, and lines softer. Colours were cosy and earthy. Tactility was a consideration, with the feel of surfaces being important. Desks have increasingly given way to enclosures, designed for individual working, or for small collaborative groups, or those involved in presentations. Judging by the products in showrooms, there have been important improvements in the way pods have developed, with improved ventilation and lighting, and the incorporation of more advanced technology, especially to help with video meetings and presentations.



Different companies' approaches to managing acoustic issues could be seen around the show, and not just from the specialists. Egan Visual's *Hoody sound solution* was just one example.

The Companies and their Products

[KI's](#) large showroom was helpfully divided into sections, either to highlight a particular sector, such as education, or a common theme, or an attribute, of the furniture they were showing. Here they wanted to draw attention to the flexibility and sustainability of mobile *Meeting Pods 2* made from patterned, textured PET, for small meetings or to allow for individual concentration.



[3H](#), from Liskeard in Ontario, specialise in panel-based furniture including executive workstations such as this one.

Another executive workstation setting from [Enwork](#), headquartered in Kent County, Michigan



Dauphin, from Offenhausen in Germany, are best known for their task and executive seating, but in line with current market trends, showed these 4+ *Relax chairs*.

Designer Nathalie Van Reeth was commissioned by the long-established Belgian manufacturer, Bulo – back at the Mart after a break of many years – for the *Senses* range of workstations they were showing. Some of the older industry lags were reminded of President Office Furniture’s Kyo range, which won a Neocon Gold award in 1992.

Extremis are another Belgian company, this time from Poperinge. They showed their patented A Frame table system, *AMAi*, suitable for indoor or outdoor use, including possible commercial applications, such as outdoor business meetings.



Dauphin



Bulo



Extremis



Steelcase



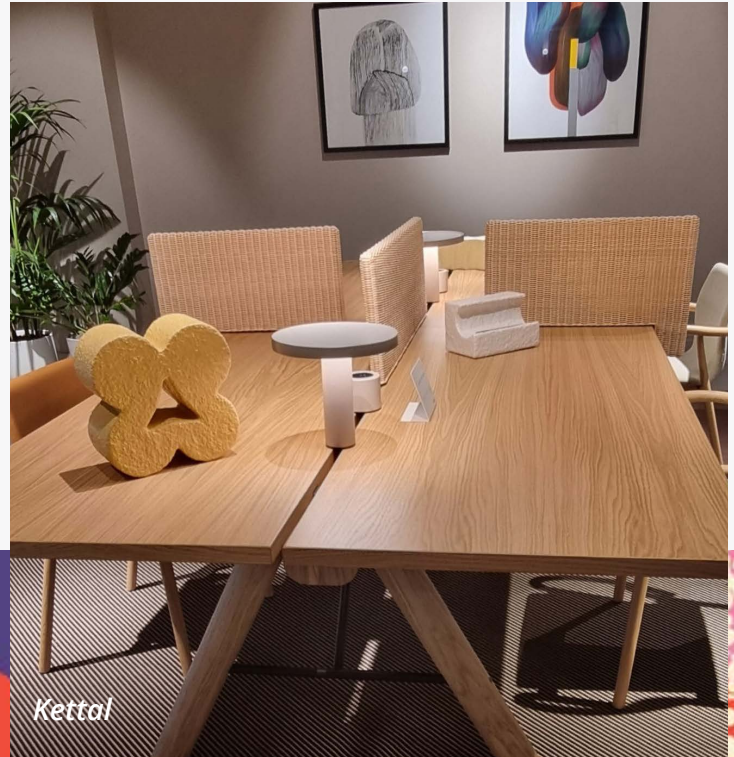
Steelcase

Steelcase presented the *Fuuga* armchair range and these, acoustically protected, personal workspaces.

Kettal, based in Barcelona, Spain, worked with the Japanese designer, Naota Fukasawa to create this *Range table system*.

Boss Design, from Dudley in the UK are one of the long-established companies in the Mart. Noted for their high quality design, and well regarded by the A&D community, they showed their *Bodie* sofa collection.

The fast-growing Lithuanian manufacturer, Narbutas, picked up on the show's theme of home-like furniture for corporate interiors with this attractive setting.



Kettal



Boss Design



Narbutas

One notable departure from trend was Haworth's emphasis on task chairs, including the *Breck* range from Haworth Design Studio, shown here.

One colourful company showing on floor seven was [Behr](#), a paint company from Santa Ana, California. Using a variation on the original Painting By Numbers idea, filling in the blanks on the bear proved to be very popular.

The large, attractive [Andreu World](#) showroom had upgraded their lighting very effectively. Their policy of working with some of the world's leading designers allowed them to feature a programme of well-attended talks and presentations, including from Patricia Urquiola who designed their *Brezal* Collection, shown here.



[BuzziSpace](#) is now part of the Haworth group of companies and their showroom displayed good examples of how control of acoustics could be intelligently incorporated into many aspects of corporate furnishings.

The combined [Allermuir](#) and [Senator](#) showroom had a strong emphasis on their sustainability credentials, as well as showing new products from leading designers, including this, their new *Contour* range, from Pearson Lloyd.

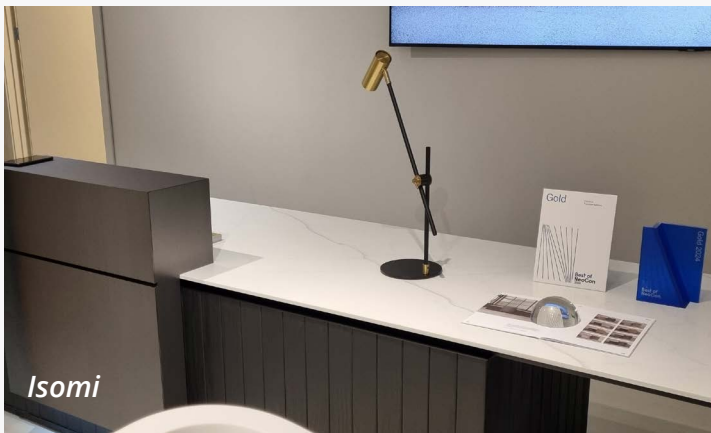
The Swedish company, [Mizetto](#), worked with designer Addi to create this casual seating range, *Lumber*.

Last year, [Davis](#) moved to a new corporate HQ in High Point, North Carolina, designed by Bob Bazemore and the Davis Design Team, and located alongside their manufacturing facility. They were showing a new shelving system, *Vida*, from designer Hanne Willmann.



Paul Crofts and Nick Walsh, founders of the Cheshire, UK business [Isomi](#), picked up a Neocon Gold Award for their *Layer* reception desk.

Designers Basaglia and Rota Nodari created this beautiful bench system, *Sierra015*, for ViaSeating, based in Sparks, Nevada.



[Ghent](#) from Lebanon, Ohio, manufacturers of whiteboards, glass boards and bulletin boards, presented some interesting and imaginative products, including this space divider system.

[SixInch](#), the foam furniture manufacturer from Antwerp in Belgium, went rather wild with the design for their showroom which attracted plenty of attention.



Design Days

Part of the somewhat confusing, multi-brand, [MillerKnoll](#) showroom in West Fulton Market.

[Teknion's](#) move to Fulton Market provided an opportunity to establish a very spacious and sunny showroom space divided into a number of large room settings. One of the areas was used to present their *Expansion Cityline* workstations.

[Sandler Seating's](#) showroom nearby showed a wide range of products, including this *Portus Lounge* range.



The MillerKnoll combined showroom



Teknion showroom



Sandler Seating



John Sacks

London, June 2024



"Advising office furniture businesses around the world"