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GIVING VOICE TO THOSE WHO CREATE WORKPLACE DESIGN & FURNISHINGS

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Israel & Paris | Two Education Projects Abroad

This week, we conclude our September “Learning and Education” theme. Our reporting has found that firms are intent on solving education design pain points, but also on creating learning spaces that are beautiful, that serve many purposes for the communities that take ownership of them, and that drive the learning process to be more inclusive, more collaborative, more imaginative, and more joy-filled. Two final projects speak to these concepts. First, the **University of Law – Paris I** facilities, calling for the modernization of the Lourcine Barracks in Paris’ 13th district. The second, in a beachside residential area of Tel Aviv, is the new **TEO Center for Culture, Art and Content**.

FULL STORY ON PAGE 3...



Putting People First: OM Seating

After meeting a few key members of the **OM Seating** team some time ago, officeinsight Publisher Bob Beck was intrigued by the energy and passion he saw at the brand. The Ontario, California-based seating company is led by **Wilson Chow**, who sat down with Beck via Zoom interview to talk about the company’s journey.

FULL STORY ON PAGE 18...



Six Innovative Elementary Schools Come to Quebec

Students are graduating from K-12 environments without the skills and qualities companies are looking for, and in response, our teaching methods are slowly adapting for the better. In Quebec, **Lab-École** has unveiled the architectural designs for elementary schools to be expanded or built in Gatineau, Maskinongé, Québec City, Saguenay, Shefford, and Rimouski. The designs stem from the “**Imagining the Schools of Tomorrow, Together**” architectural design competitions launched by Lab-École, showing the best of what’s possible in elementary school design

FULL STORY ON PAGE 26...



CITED:
“ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTIONS ANY SCHOOL OR TEACHER CAN ASK IS SIMPLE: ‘HOW CAN WE BE MORE THOUGHTFUL ABOUT WHAT WE DO?’ UNFORTUNATELY, IT’S NOT THE QUESTION WE ASK MOST FREQUENTLY. THE QUESTION SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS HAVE FALLEN IN LOVE WITH—‘WHAT MORE SHOULD WE BE DOING?’”
—CHRIS LEHMANN AND ZAC CHASE, BUILDING SCHOOL 2.0: HOW TO CREATE THE SCHOOLS WE NEED

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OM Seating's Truly Chair. Photography courtesy of OM Seating.

Putting People First: OM Seating

By Bob Beck

When I first met **Eric MacDonald**, the leader of the product design and development team at **OM Seating**, I was struck by his confidence and his obvious love for his job and company. He introduced me to **Queenie Wong**,



the leader of the company's marketing team, and she also exuded the sort of energy I'd appreciated in Mr. MacDonald. At the time I made a mental note to follow up and learn more about what's going on over at OM Seating to engender such passion in two of its young leaders. They both told me I had to meet the leader of the company, **Wilson Chow**, and while it has taken a while for me to do so, here's what I learned.

In 1985 **William Chow** was the Vice President of a "mega-stationer" in downtown Los Angeles when

the City of Los Angeles decided to expand its convention center on the location of the company's store. Rather than relocate and rebuild, its owner decided to retire and either sell the business or close it. He offered to sell it to Mr. Chow, but after some soul searching and discussions with his friend **Wallace Hwang**, Mr. Chow decided the time was right to leverage his knowledge of the office furniture industry and start a manufacturing company rather than continuing in the more retail "stationer" realm.



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Mr. Chow was an investor in an egg ranch near San Diego, and there, along with Mr. Hwang and a third co-investor, he founded **Office Master, Inc.** in 1986. The company has since strategically focused on seating and is now doing business as **OM Seating.**

At the mega-stationer, William Chow was an enterprising and hard-working employee. Even when he'd attained the position of vice president, his wife jokingly called him "vice president of sweeping" because of his penchant for going in after-hours to do work well below his pay-grade, but work that needed to be done. His view was that getting the job done supersedes rank or title, and that attitude still pervades OM Seating today.

After a year of commuting to San Diego every day (5 days a week) the company was doing well enough to move to a larger facility many miles closer to home in Pico Rivera, California. It leased a unit in an industrial park and began to grow. Adding a unit at a time as needed to accommodate its expansion, by 1997 Office Master was up to 12 units and trying to manage a manufacturing operation spread among 12 facilities was a nightmare.

In 1998, the company moved into a build-to-suit new headquarters in La Verne, California. But by 2009 it had outgrown that one too, so it relocated to its current owned headquarters in Ontario, California.

In 2005 Wallace Hwang was the president of the company; William Chow having stepped up to CEO and aside to allow his friend and co-founder to exert his influence on the company as its president.

William Chow's son **Wilson Chow** had grown up in and around the company but he was actively pursuing a career as an IT consultant and market researcher in the internet world, and he had never intended to join the family business. In a Zoom interview Wilson said, "My father and I had never talked about my



OM Seating's Truly Chair. Photography courtesy of OM Seating.

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*OM Seating's Active Series**Active Stack**Active Task*

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joining the company – at all. I was doing my own thing when Wallace came to me and said he wanted me to join the company. That was a big decision for me to make; to abandon the path I was on. And I knew what the expectations would be if I joined the company and that a lot of people might think it was just another

example of nepotism. So, I felt like I had to work even harder – but working hard is a natural thing for me anyway. I try never to do things halfway.”

So in 2005, Wilson Chow joined the company and worked hard. Given his personality, upbringing and the company ethos, it's easy to imagine that he

may have earned his mother's honorary title of “vice president of sweeping.” In any event, he worked and learned, and in 2014 he had earned his current role as President.

Messrs. Chow and Hwang remain on the board and act in an advisory role. William Chow is still formally the CEO, but the younger Mr. Chow is clearly running the business. In the interview when asked about his aspirations for the company, without hesitation he said, “My aspirations are for the people as much as they are about the company *per se*. The company follows what the people in it do. What I want for the people is that they are able to attain their full selves. I realize that may seem a little trite, but what I mean is that each of us has a contribution to make and we all have a characteristic or a drive beyond what the company pays us to do. Many of us are inquisitive by nature, somewhat OCD – but not in the pejorative sense – we really have a strong need to figure things out. I want us all to maximize our potential and if we do, the company will follow. As for the company itself, what I want is that our customers – whether that



OM Seating's Werksy Collection



Werksy



Werksy

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Key team members. L to R: Queenie Wong, Marketing; Melissa Flores, Digital Platforms; Jordan Adams, Product Design; John Bueno, Plant Operations; Wilson Chow, President; Jane Kobayashi, 5D.2D Studio; Eric MacDonald, Product Design & Development.

means specifiers, our own sales reps, dealers or users of our products – customers in the broadest sense, I want to be well understood for what we offer and well respected for the quality of our solutions to customers’ problems in terms of seating, whether that means comfort, style or ergonomic support or flexibility.”

Not long after naming Wilson Chow president, the decision was taken to change the operating name from Office Master to OM Seating. I asked him to discuss that process, since a good company’s trade name is one of its most important assets. He said, “We’re not just working in offices, we’re very strong in healthcare, we’re in education, we’re wherever people need seating and nobody is the ‘master’ of the office, so in 2014 or 2015, Wallace

and I were having conversations about the name of the company and what the name conveyed to our customers.

Given the penchant for acronyms some people had been informally referring to us as OM for a long time, and I felt strongly that we should add ‘Seating’ because that’s what we’re strategically focused on. OM Seating is the trunk of our tree, growing out of the well-earned reputation and brand equity of Office Master. However, as the types and forms for seating will vary even as working places do, we hope we can leave room for our designs to branch out—and grow—into the new places and ways people learn, heal, work and collaborate in the future.

I asked about financial aspirations, and Mr. Chow responded, “I don’t have a way to specifically answer the

question of financial goals. I’m more focused on maximizing our people’s potential and that of our product line. We have to be profitable to survive, and financial strength allows us to withstand shocks like the COVID pandemic. However, I also don’t need to be one of the biggest companies in the industry. I want to be seen as a solid, reliable partner to our customers and respected for the knowledge and experience we have in seating.”

During our Zoom interview, I noticed the logo on Mr. Chow’s shirt and asked if there’s a story behind it. Turns out it’s not just a nice eye-catching logo, but in many ways the story of the logo is the story of the company. The “O” in the OM is made up of seven threads that have significance to the philosophy and values of the company.

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One caption: Manufacturing operations at OM Seating

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Mr. Chow explained, “I had asked Jane Kobayashi, our marketing design and brand partner from 5D.2D Studio, to develop ideas for a new logo. She presented many, many options, and I gravitated to the “O” that was made up of the seven threads as a visual form, but I think the best logos have meaning beyond just their graphic form. So I started thinking about what a circle made up of seven threads might mean about our company. I made a list, and very briefly, here’s what the seven threads represent:

End Users – without people to buy and sit in our seating we don’t have a business.

Dealers – we rely on our dealers to introduce & ideally sell our designs to their customers.

Our sales reps – we rely on our factory reps to convey our knowledge to the marketplace.

Influencers – people who study and then recommend our products based on their professional expertise but don’t directly sell them, for example, ergonomists, interior designers and architects.

Vendors – they are critical to our success. We learn from them and rely on them to supply us, on time, with material of the consistent quality we expect.

Our people – I think I’ve expressed how important our people are to the organization. Our people’s passion, dedication and spirit drive the all-important forward movement of OM’s whole system, our whole family.

The company itself – the sum of all the above. We believe that a successful company needs to always be thinking long-term, and make decisions accordingly.

It was a pleasure getting to know Wilson Chow, even if my visit was constrained to the confines of my office and the Zoom screen. I admire his values, especially the care he so ardently expressed for the growth and wellbeing of his people. It’s my opinion that the world could do very well with a lot more of his type of leadership. I wish OM Seating good luck and the sum of the growth of all its good people. ■



A training seminar



Sustainability measures include recycling



OM products are tested to BIFMA standards



Marketing library