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NeoCon 2016 in Review

By Peter Wolf

I'm not sure how it happened, possibly somebody sold their soul to the devil, but if you had looked at the forecast for NeoCon less than a week out from the show you were preparing yourself for a hot and wet week in Chicago. But something amazing happened, it didn't rain, and it never got that hot. This was a blessing for this year's NeoCon attendees, with pre-registration up around 6% and the new smaller elevators in place, hot and wet could have spelled disaster.

NeoCon this year was anything but a disaster, overall everyone I talked to was pleased with the



Herman Miller

attendance, and with the absence of the 8th floor, the 7th floor had a noticeably different feel. In years past the traffic on seven and eight often times felt lite, even on a Monday, and by Wednesday it was often times a ghost town, but with the consolidation to one floor every booth was occupied, and this presented a small problem around lunch time thanks to the absence of the large seating areas we've become accustom to over the past few years, but the lack of lounge space created welcome traffic and buzz on the 7th floor.

Showrooms on three, ten, and eleven were crowded as well, the Herman Miller showroom became so

crowded at one point that I decided that it was my least favorite showroom of the year, this was due to the claustrophobic feel they created with their maze like curtain layout that eliminated large amounts of natural light that once flooded the space.

Enough about traffic and claustrophobia, what about the products? "What one thing should I see?" "What would you recommend I see?" "What product stood out to you?" All good questions that I was asked throughout the show, sadly I never had a definitive answer for anyone. There was lots of good product at the show, and some not so good product. Some made me say, "Yes, they've done it right."



Neutral Posture's Icon



OM's Truly

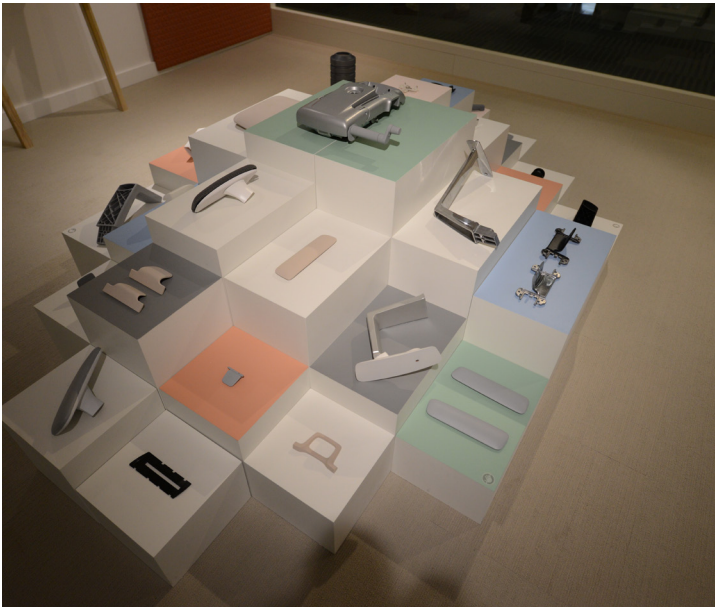


SitOnIt's Novo

While others left me scratching my head, unable to contemplate how they could've gotten it so wrong.

In many cases my inability to find a single product that truly stood out wasn't the products fault, but rather due to strong competition in the same category, take for example the new seating options in the form of Neutral Posture's Icon, OM's Truly, and SitOnIt's Novo. All three sit very nicely, they all look good, they're all around the same price point, and each has a unique feature, but not one overshadow the other. But I don't think that's a bad thing, if anything it's the opposite, we're spoiled today for good seating choices, and at competitive prices.

All three chairs (Icon, Truly, and Novo) however were more satisfying to me than Haworth's new Fern chair. I can't quite put my finger on it, or some reason Fern just didn't work for me, it sits well, sure, but it looks large and heavy. Everyone I talked with about Fern had something different they didn't like, a British friend who is on the smaller side found the chair literally too large or "American sized", another found it looked too heavy, while yet another thought it was literally too heavy after trying to pick it up, some didn't like the synchro tilt mechanism, others thought the price point was too high, and one person thought that the design of the chair back



Haworth Fern



Okamura Workveil



HÅG Capisco



Teknion Zones

was going to collect dust due to the large opening in the back. Only time will tell if these initial observations are valid, but overall Fern just didn't seem to overwhelm people. Fern was however presented well in the showroom, getting to see how it evolved from concept to finished product was an effective way to tell its development story, and showing it in deconstructed parts gives you an appreciation for the design and engineering that goes into a chair.

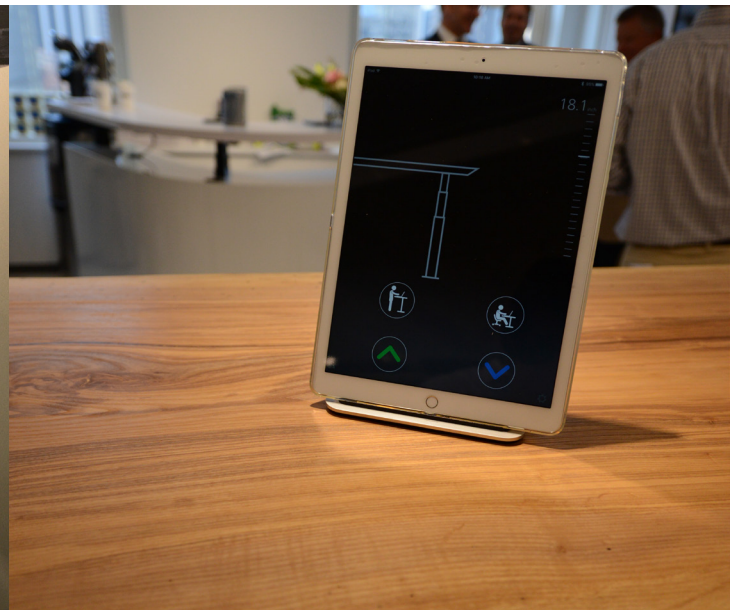
In the task seating category I have two shout-outs though, first to Okamura for their crazy 180° "Workveil headrest" that made me do a double take, and it should be quite useful in open plan offices.

The second shoutout goes to the classic HÅG Capisco chair, it's a chair that I've repeatedly overlooked throughout its long life spanning more than two decades. Perhaps it was because it was late on Tuesday and my feet and back were running on empty, but the Capisco might just be the most comfortable chair I sat in at NeoCon this year, in the moment its unique saddle inspired design just felt perfect.

If you've read 24x7 this week you know I'm not entirely sold on this "Resimercial" trend we're seeing in the industry of small collaboration areas, some product feels quickly adapted, others feel rushed through development and not up to the high indus-



Sorry Bob King, I sat in the Diffrient Lounge Chair prototype



Linak



National



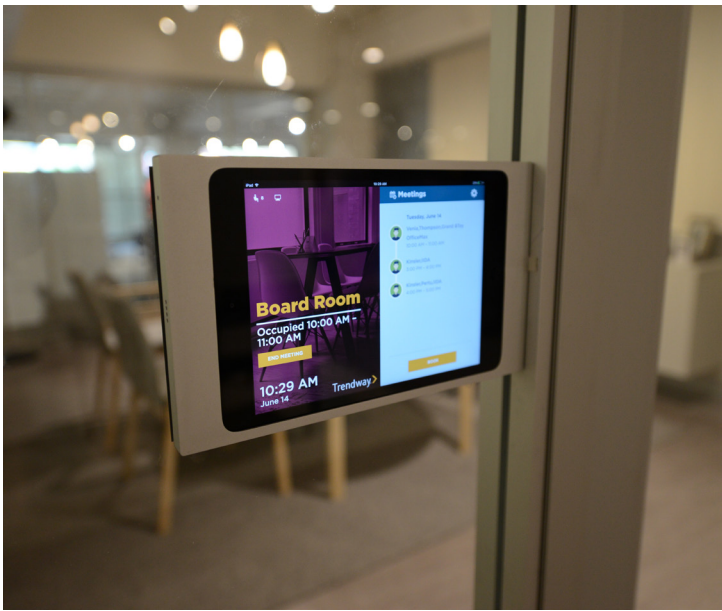
E-Ink / 3form

try quality and fit and finish standards we've come to expect, but one product did stand out from the rest in this category for me, Teknion's Zones. Zones takes a more refined approach to the open office collaboration area, rather than a textile upholstered panel Zones utilizes bent and cut wood, giving it a clean and modern ascetic. It's more grownup looking than any other in the category.

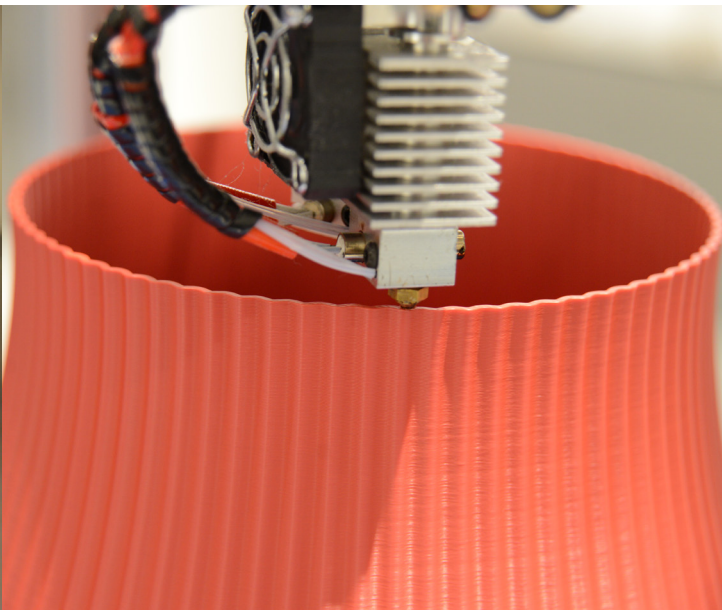
I'll quickly just mention Humanscale's Different Lounge Chair on last time, the example on display was a prototype, so despite my excitement that it was actually in the showroom I'll continue to hold-

out for the production version, though I'll admit it did sit in the prototype for a minute, and it was what I had hoped it would be, comfortable.

We're seeing technology's present ever increasing in products this year, from usb chargers integrated into just about everything, to Linak's bluetooth connected height adjustable base demonstrated at their booth with a beautiful slab of natural wood crafted by Billie Bradford. Technology is even giving life to 3form's Woven wall product thanks to E-Ink, through the use of the E-Ink technology the Woven wall can change colors and patterns, turning a static



Trendway



Wilkhahn



Coalesse LesThanFive



DIRTT

wall in to an always changing sculpture. I also owe Jim Hackett an apology, years ago Steelcase introduced Room Wizard, at the time we laughed and thought it was a silly idea, little did we know it was just on the leading edge of the “internet of things”, as such we’re seeing variations on the concept of Room Wizard appear, like this wireless unit utilizing E-Ink technology, or this adaptation of an iPad mini found at Trendway.

Other things I liked at NeoCon this year include Wilkhahn 3D printing stools in their booth on the 7th floor that will be entering production, and

will be 3D printed. I also enjoyed seeing coalesse’s LessThanFive chair’s new feature, they can now print graphics onto the expensive carbon fiber chair.

Finally I want to acknowledge the never-ending relentless drive of Mogens Smed and DIRTT, DIRTT has come a long way over the years and the product they are producing today is truly remarkable. From the incredible timber treehouse they created this year to their incredible augmented reality system they demonstrated at the Chicago Theater, DIRTT is pushing what is possible and for that I thank them. 