





Small Faces

What does January conjure up in your mind? Sales? Resolutions? Easter eggs in every supermarket? Well, for football fans January now means the transfer window - a chance to improve squads, unload dead wood or, even, resurrect the season. We didn't expect to be bringing you a story about a major appointment in this industry, in this issue, in this little ol' magazine. And certainly not one of this magnitude.

Steelcase International recently appointed the internationally renowned designer, John Small, as Director of Design. John took up his post on the 1st December 2010 and, despite the inclement weather, we were fortunate enough to be first in line to chat with him about this head-turning appointment.

John has earned international acclaim in the design community after 25 years helping to build Foster + Partners, London, into one of the world's leading design firms. He specialised in furniture product and interior design and, in particular, was responsible for these aspects for Stansted Airport. More recently he has been involved with the concept interior designs for the Swiss Re Tower Executive levels in London, the Supreme Courts in Singapore and the Hearst Headquarters building in New York.

John is, of course, no stranger to Steelcase, having collaborated with the global furniture leader on the impressive Forward system of desking, benching, storage and space division and, more recently, on the Dash LED task light.

We mentioned earlier that our meeting could easily have been postponed due to the terrible pre-Christmas weather. What we really should point out was that our journey into London from Essex was considerably less fraught than John's own epic adventure from France.

Despite the journey John is in fine form and clearly excited by this major new career challenge. 'I think there will be a huge learning curve for me because the organisation itself is very different from Foster's,' John admits. 'Certainly the concentration in a particular area, which is to do with how people work, how they communicate, how they collaborate - that focus is slightly different because the product design group that was set in '95 at Foster's had a very broad portfolio in terms of the type of projects that we undertook. I think it's not as narrow as you might think at Steelcase - they are also broadening their portfolio of interests.'

'I believe I can bring a knowledge of the architectural and design industry and also the management of design - which has been my role with Foster's - is possibly a way of working that they currently >>>>>

▶▶▶▶ products themselves will be looked at as if they are global products and the alterations to them will only be minor perhaps. There will be design generated in Europe as well, of course, so it won't just be a question of managing design from the USA.'

We ask John where he sees the future of design within office furniture and, indeed, within the Steelcase portfolio. 'I think a lot of the furniture is becoming calmer and the integration of technology is becoming a given – it's not even discussed any more. The things that Steelcase have been developing – certainly the new c:scape system – is seen by the North American market as a product which removes all the screens, which are so typical of the American office landscape. Seescape itself has a very international, European feel to it and I think that, within offices, the whole business of collaboration and communication, and certainly with some of the products that have come out and are in the pipeline for Steelcase, the way they are looking at the office landscape is more about simple products that are to do with your day-to-day work, combined with more complex products that are to do with communication.'

'It appears to me that more passive, quiet design is coming in – where the objects don't take on a robust masculinity. The use of

materials, the tactility of worksurfaces and of other products is allowing a softness to appear. It is interesting to see some of the materials that are now appearing in what would normally be the fairly hard world of the office. Certainly, with the work I was involved with, there seems to be that softness appearing inside the office landscape, but not just offices – even inside the hospitals I've worked on. It seems to be penetrating throughout design.'

'I've certainly been interested in the new Node chair here at Steelcase and the healthcare products that they are working on as well. The fact that somebody like Steelcase, with their background of research, is moving into other areas and producing product which is based upon observation and how people are using product and responding to that, is very exciting.'

We could easily go on – and on, but once again the word count has got the better of us. Have Steelcase laid the gauntlet down to the rest of the office furniture market? Should office furniture employ its own transfer window?

Either way, we wait with some anticipation to see what will emerge from the Steelcase design studios.

Who needs the January sales? ●

