



# all quiet on the mid-western front

Sunday night in Grant Park: as B.B.King closed his set with 'The Thrill is Gone', we wondered how on earth Orgatec can compete with NeoCon? A free gig in the Altermarkt with Kraftwerk playing 'Autobahn'?

Two nights later at Legends in South Wabash, Buddy Guy sauntered onstage in his own club, did his thing for a few minutes, and we got to thinking – why is Chicago one of the greatest cities in the world? Hum your answer in four four time while we knock back a Pabst Blue Ribbon.

If you told people you went to Chicago with the sole intention of checking out furniture, textiles and floorcoverings, you're either telling porkies or you sport a very beige anorak indeed. Mind you, that rainwear would have proved very handy on the Saturday and Sunday as Mayor Richard M Daley welcomed visitors to Chicago with the▶▶▶▶



Luxy



*Maharam*



*Havorth*



Teknion



Steelcase

►► biggest light show since Jefferson Starship rocked Aurora, Illinois. 20,000 lightning strikes (according to the USA Today pushed under the hotel room door on Monday morning) kicked off NeoCon with a bang.

Last year's review of NeoCon caustically harped on about the squillion awards that are doled out. Best of, Gold, Silver...we don't mind a few prizes, but The Merchandise Mart hands out so many that the point is devalued. Anyway, this year's show offered so few genuinely new products that the organisers must have struggled to hit their target of about 200 gongs.

It is of course no great surprise that there has been relatively little activity on the new product development front seeing as how the American economy has been a little sub-prime in the last year. So we turned up at the Kinzie Street entrance first thing on the Monday expecting NeoCon 08 to be a less than a stellar year.

We were not disappointed.

We could write a review of what was exciting, innovative and genuinely new in a pretty short piece – the North American interiors industry has quite rightly batted down the hatches. That's not to say there wasn't stuff of note, there were some excellent flourishes, but we would be wrong to imply this was one of Chicago's golden years.

Let's tell you about what we liked. Carl Magnusson demonstrated his Synapse chair in the Teknion space – a clever wood side chair with an innovative KD angle. Sticking with chairs, Haworth's Very offers plenty of reasonably priced options, particularly in ►►►►►



Knoll International



Details



Bernhardt

▶▶▶the meeting and visitor sector, and features some nice styling detail. The retro feel of the Nelsonesque First Sight seating collection from Geiger graced the Herman Miller showroom, while Giancarlo Piretti's latest offering for KI, Strive, included any number of useful variations on a theme.

Superstars Cini Boeri and Joe D'Urso presented understated elegance in their soft seating pieces for Knoll International, and the Cobi conference chair was a notable feature of Steelcase's energetic and busy showspace. Allsteel's Acuity is a genuinely good task chair with all the features you would expect – presumably alliance partners Ahrend have plans to market this excellent product over here. And we must mention Luxy – love the styling – not to mention the larger showrooms of the increasingly successful Humanscale and Interstuhl.

But pride of place in seating is definitely well earned by British flag bearers Allermuir and Boss. To our mind, Allermuir's two spaces presented more fresh design ideas in seating than most of their North American rivals combined, while Boss Design's alliance with Tayco offered some of the sharpest pieces in the Mart.

Unfortunately, we have virtually nothing to tell you about on systems furniture. Which is a shame, but there you go. Yes, most exhibitors showed a minor enhancement or two to existing lines, but we are struggling to report on anything that represents a real breakthrough in workstation design. Kimball, with the amusingly named 'Hum.Minds at Work' and the snappier but duller monickered Vicinity▶▶▶▶



Herman Miller



Details



Kimball



HON



Boss Design



Havorth



Conviva

►► offered new systems, but neither was really particularly new – at least in a European’s perception. Perhaps the outstanding exception to the rule was c:scape from Steelcase – a beam based desk system with a sliding top and decent cable management. Some nice features and certainly not an inferior product, but the system owes more than a little to German system furniture designs from about 15 years ago. Genuine congratulations to Steelcase for previewing a new range, and well done too for the almost inevitable Gold award, but it’s really hard for us to get too excited about what seems a pretty derivative concept. It’s noticeable that Herman Miller continue to press on with their ideas in electronics with Conviva – American FMs can now calculate how often their Aerons are being sat on. Which is a little depressing.

Staying with Herman Miller, the new Ayse Birsel designed Teneo storage system offers some true originality. The construction concept, the aesthetics – love those funky handles – got plenty of well deserved plaudits. Time will tell how Teneo measures up in the down and dirty world of space audits and information retrieval modelling, but for a fresh look at a sector essentially unchanged for a generation, it merits praise.

As is often the case, NeoCon 2008 was pretty inspiring in the textiles arena. Suzanne Tick is virtually as ubiquitous when it comes to American high end contract fabrics as Patricia Urquiola is to ►►►►►



Herman Miller



Steelcase



Luna

►►►funky furniture at Milan's Salone. Ms Tick's work for Knoll Textiles (Amplify and Bandwidth appear organic or high tech) and for Bernhardt is typically stylish. Also for Knoll, the Dorothy Cosonas designed Posh is a startling high gloss, almost patent leather like textile.

Designtex are as important as they come in this important market sector – and it shows. A fantastic showroom, great style and cool people are a pretty potent brew: if we had to name just one collection it would have to be Alchemy – a cradle to cradle Trevira fabric. A quick namecheck too for other standout fabric folk: Maharam, HBF and Luna, who all showed up well at the Mart.

Which brings us on to green stuff. If you're exhibiting at NeoCon and you haven't got a credible green story, you're dead in the water. End of. Of course the green marketing is everywhere, to the point of saturation – a 7ft high graphic of a Knoll chair comes to mind, detailing all the green bits, but none of the product features. It's almost crass now to ask if a chair features a bio-synchro mechanism – you're supposed to ask about how many soda bottles it's made from.

Shaw's Essay of Clues, a fantastic carpet collection that builds on the flooring giant's burgeoning collaboration with green guru William McDonough, was probably the environmental highlight of NeoCon. Other carpet manufacturers such as Milliken and Interface also impressed, as the American contract interiors industry continues to show real leadership in this area. Yes, there's still confusion as people increasingly try to examine the reality of reuse and recycling materials beyond their original purpose, and there are still more answers than questions. The greenwashers of a few NeoCons ago have largely been found out, these days the work in the environmental field is often inspiringly innovative and genuinely groundbreaking.

By Wednesday the Mart was eerily near deserted as NeoCon contracted into an involuntary two day show. But the weather was back to its early June best – 'a bit cooler today', commented the bellhop. It was 88 degrees. Have a good day y'all ●



KI



Allermuir



Shaw