

Vision Quest



Every so often these pages talk about a dream. It may be about an idea or an ambition that becomes reality. It's rare indeed though, for us to delve deep into two dreams in one article. And rarer still for those two dreams to be inextricably entwined.



We're in the Veneto, just inland from Venice. We've come to look closer at Ray Atkinson's dream, the appropriately monickered Vision system. The longer that time passed, the more we realised that there was another dream unfolding, and that was the creation of Italy's biggest office furniture company Mio Dino Faram.

And dream is the right word. In both cases the starting point was a passion, a belief, an idea. Neither was founded in dry-as-dust analyses, or dull formulaic positioning.

Let's start with Vision, and as it's well worth the explanation, Ray Atkinson's background. Ray's been in office furniture over 40 years, mostly in the moves and installation business. His company, The Atkinson Group, is probably the leading player in its field, particularly in London. We won't bore you with a list of his blue chip clients; put it this way, who do you think is working on PwC More London, the mega project of the moment?

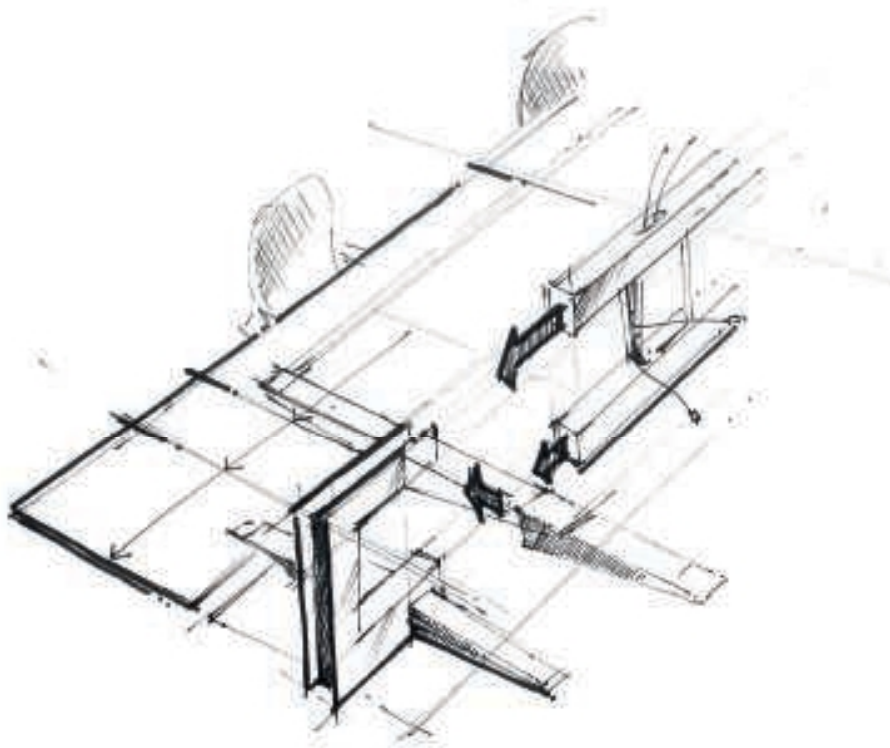
Ray knows furniture backwards, and he knows it at the sharp end; what assembles well (and badly), the logistics, the pitfalls, the nuts and bolts. And when you're moving kit around every weekend for four decades you tend to know what clients want. And, conversely of course, what does their head in. If you think about it, all that Ray's done for 40 years is bespoke furniture for his clients. Which is interesting in a market that sells modular systems, don't you think?

Cutting to the chase, Ray put his money where his mouth is to develop a furniture system that's based on 40 years getting it right for demanding clients. Money? Mouth?

Ray first turned to Gensler to get this dream of his together, and then took the concept to his longtime partners at Mio Dino Faram. The result is arguably the purest system in a generation. It's not the tedious four-legs-and-a-top that the sector's awash with. Vision harks back a tad to a golden age of Race and Burdick in all its clean, engineered, floating, sliding glory. Yet, simultaneously, it's more contemporary, more appropriate than most of what's out there today.

But we talked at the top about two dreams. Ray's dream is linked with another, so let's shimmy aside for a moment and learn more.

'To start with, the desire started many years ago with Mr Dino Mio,' explain Paolo Mio, Managing Director of the Mio Dino Faram ▶▶▶▶▶



customers. We're now developing new products for the American market. Everybody says we're crazy, they tell us it's too difficult. We're not stupid and we're not naive – we have a strategy and we really want to be there. We've got orders already because we're willing and we work hard – at the end of the day that's what clients want. Look at the UK, a very avant garde market. In the past the A&D were very important and nobody would say anything about their choices of furniture. Now, the client is the most important thing.

'In terms of products, every market has its own requirements. So our strategy is to have core products – such as Vision – that we can adjust appropriately for different customer and market needs. That's a major strength for us – as I said, we design products for the customer. We're flexible, we customise. Although the American systems furniture concept is very rigid and prescriptive, we think Vision will be successful there. It's a new methodology to their traditional approach, but it can be equipped in a wide variety of ways that Americans haven't seen before. Crucially, it can be built according to client needs.'

Customisation, bespoke, flexible...it seems to us that the MioDino Faram dream is based on the same concept as Ray's. We ask him to flesh out the detail for us.

'My concept, based on over 40 years experience installing and reconfiguring furniture, is to take away the obstacles. Nobody makes bad furniture, but look at the obstacles. The bench concept you see everywhere has obstacles – those feet, the fixed pedestals.

'The concept for Vision is based on nature – think about a tree. Vision has no legs, sliding pedestals that can go left or right. You can turn it into hot desking, or make it into a meeting table. It has minimum fittings and really low installation costs. It's that flexible, bespoke, built to customer needs idea that Paolo is referring to.

'I brought my idea to Gensler in July 2009. I already had a close relationship with Gensler and they were moving back into the product development arena. The way I look at it, designers like Gensler are inventors – it comes from their head. What I can offer is a huge amount of knowledge of the reality of installing, moving and living with furniture. And I wanted someone to listen to me and my installation point of view. And the beauty is I knew my friends at MioDino Faram could turn the whole concept into reality.



▶▶▶▶ Group. 'The two companies were always competitors, but the two founders always had a strong respect for each other. Mio Dino bought Faram at the end of 2009. It was really quite significant because a small company of about 100 people bought a well known bigger company four times its size. The opportunity was finally there, at the right time, to claim a much bigger share of the market.'

'It was always Mr Mio's dream to be the biggest Italian manufacturer,' adds Ray Atkinson.

'That's right,' confirms Paolo, 'that was the dream – and we're proud that the family fulfilled the dream. For sure we're now number one in Italy, and at about 120 million Euro turnover, the Group is now in the top ten in Europe.'

So now one aim has been achieved, what's the plan?

'The target is to consolidate our position in Italy – and then to be a pain for the large American companies! We're talking about global reach. Already we have a presence in Europe, Asia and North and South America, and our plan is to grow that presence internationally. We've invested a lot over the last year – particularly in the USA, UK and the Middle East. Our feeling is also that Europe will recover soon – we're winning major projects in France, such as CMA in Marseille, designed by Zaha Hadid.'

But the US market's a notoriously tough nut – how are you going to crack it?

'We've been in the States for five years now,' notes Paolo. 'We already do 15 million Euro of partitions there, with major



»»»»»»So I had various conversations with MioDino Faram, and then I brought Ken Baker of Gensler over to Italy. And I'm delighted that there was an instant relationship, a meeting of minds. There was a really healthy tension as we developed details. Ken said that it was the first time he'd worked in such a real partnership.'

'We're not a hierarchical company,' comments Paolo. 'Everybody's allowed an opinion – it's a co-operative team-based approach and work method. R&D, production and sales work together in a short, quick, continuous process. But I think Gensler gave us a new way of thinking

about a product. Co-operation with an international design firm is bound to create a positive effect.'

'I think we also recognised that working with Gensler made our ideas about a progressive change for the company concrete,' adds Commercial Director Enrico Venesia. 'We felt this was the right time. The most important thing for us is constant development, and Gensler opened the way for a new more sophisticated process, as we developed Vision into a complete new system. We've changed in other ways too, not only working with an important design partner, but also working with major

multinational companies. We've teamed with a market research firm and those major companies to study work patterns – and of course customer needs – as we fine tune the integration between end user, designer and manufacturer.'

Paolo confirms the new approach. 'Working with Gensler opened up a new way of working for us. We now have a much more sophisticated, integrated methodology that brings together all the elements: R&D, communication, HR needs, facilities management and so on. Now we gather all the information to develop a product that the client really wants.'

Production Manager Valerio Savorgnan explains how the Vision concept developed from an engineering standpoint.

'Gensler came to meet with us with the broad concept for the system. We then worked together to fine tune all the technical details. The scope was always clear; it's an easily understandable shape with a strong aesthetic. I studied the concept from a technical point of view, and realised that we could be true to Ray's idea and get rid of the obstacles.

'The strength of Vision is in the beam. The challenge, of course, is to provide length of span without losing strength and rigidity. We've used very strong steel, more usually found in house construction. There's a simple screw feature too, which allows adjustability. The upper and lower beam are linked by two bars – again a technique taken from house construction.

'The lower beam houses the cable management and is not load bearing, but adds significantly to the system's overall aesthetic. And there are plenty of other nice details too. The pedestal runs along a rail, which is great for quick, easy changes. The work surface brackets are very strong – and very elegant – and lock quickly into place. There is a really nice 'floating' aesthetic for the work surfaces, nice and light, but the reality is this is a really strong, rigid, stable system.'

It's sophisticated yet simple. Easy to understand quickly, but containing more than immediately meets the eye. Vision has a lot to be said for it, and for anyone who has yearned a little anorakishly for another time in systems furniture, it's an absolute festival.

But, actually, that's not the point. Vision doesn't navel gaze and glory in itself. It's 100% interested in its user. The customer.

Which is, if you think about it, what the two dreams of Ray Atkinson and Mr Mio have in common ●

