

when saturday comes



We like to do things a little differently. Usually, that equals more work for someone – or for everyone involved. Take this Designers Saturday preview, for example. Rather than take the easy route of picking up the phone or sending a few emails, we decided to attempt to arrange for all 11 manufacturers involved in this exciting, new event to sit around a table and speak exclusively to us.





Therefore, we think it's only fitting to thank the people who actually undertook the majority of the organisation of this unique meeting, and of course the 11 gents who gave up their valuable time and offered such fascinating insight.

We are sat in the prestigious Soho House Hotel (where, to the ridiculous over-excitement of our Editor, Kings of Leon recently took up residence for their London summer shows), and, quite naturally in many ways, the opening conversation centres around the previous Designer Saturday and SAT events.

Before that though, we should introduce the 11 men, good and true. So, in no particular order of course, we have present; Jonathan Hindle of KI, Mark Spragg of Steelcase, Greg Bettis of Sedus, Alastair Stubbs of Humanscale, Paul van der Heyde of Kinnarps, Alan Gazzard of Knoll International, Julian Pollitt of Ahrend, Graeme Horne of Haworth, John Irwin of Bisley, David Cunningham of Faram and Mark Catchlove of Herman Miller.

A number of the guys around the table were involved in previous incarnations of Saturday industry events (Designer Saturday hit its peak in the late eighties, while SAT emerged at the start of the decade), so we start by asking: *where, if anywhere, the problems were that led to the demise of these forerunners?*

Alastair Stubbs (Humanscale):

'The original Designer Saturday was a very social event – with many, many students getting around the event. I can remember virtually every showroom having a little jazz band going on or similar. It was very busy and there were a lot of very drunk students. I think that was the main reason people decided to call it a day – the whole thing got rather out of hand and it became a little too busy and little too social. After that, when SAT was launched – I remember being involved in SAT 1 – I personally thought it was an extremely disappointing affair having lived through the original Designer Saturday. I would have welcomed the drunken students back at the drop of a hat, considering what SAT turned out to be – which seemed to be a whole load of kids going around with their parents! There didn't seem to be enough people floating around to make it worthwhile.'

Mark Catchlove (Herman Miller): 'I actually don't remember Designer Saturday as being negative. It was a series of annual event that, at that time, saw its day. It did

change – but I don't think there are negative memories of it. I think they're generally positive.'

David Cunningham (Faram): 'The main problem with the last one was that it didn't have the organisation that this one has. I think that's why it collapsed. If you look at other Designer Saturday events around the world, in New York or in Australia, they're really big events because they've grown over the years. We don't have that in London right now, but we're one of the world's major cities and we should have one. Hopefully, this will kick that off and the event will go from strength to strength as it has in other major cities.'

Taking David's point about organisation on board, we ask how much discussion has been put into the finalising of this month's new event, and in particular the timings – after all, SAT's demise coincided with a calendar move towards Christmas.

Jonathan Hindle (KI): ‘There has been a great amount of discussion between us all. We certainly didn’t want it to run into October if we possibly could. The earliest possible slot that we could find that didn’t have it fighting with London Design Week was immediately after it – hence the September 26–27 dates. We are hoping that the weather will be good – it wasn’t for the SAT 3 event, as you point out. I think also on the issue of SAT v Designers Saturday, the event is now open to a wider collection of industry players and now includes the largest global players in the field, so, de facto, we’re hoping that this will naturally broaden its appeal to the design community as well.’

Was there ever a thought of taking such an event away from the traditional Saturday slot?

Graeme Horne (Haworth): ‘When we first talked about this as a group we spoke about what the current exhibitions and events did and what they didn’t do – and we focused more on what they didn’t do. What they didn’t do was to provide that social aspect, that family aspect and that bit of fun – and that was a big deal. One of the negatives we’ve seen, I think collectively, is that where there is an exhibition in a hall, one of the biggest attractors is that industry people arrive on the Wednesday night or the Thursday night, and then drink maybe a little more than we would like! What I recollect of Designer Saturday, as I was young

salesman at Ergonom then, was the social aspect, the buzz, the popularity. When we talked about this, we talked about how successful it was. We knew it couldn’t be Designer Saturday, but being Designers Saturday was a big deal for us.’

John Irwin (Bisley): ‘All this started about a year ago when quite a few of us were sitting around together, and we were investing a hell of a lot of money into our London showrooms. We generally felt that we weren’t getting the throughput just by opening the doors, so we all felt a restricted event would be a good idea. It appealed to the MDs pretty much straight away.’

Interestingly, none of the 11 major manufacturers represented at this table today were officially involved in Design Prima this year. Is there a correlation?

Jonathan Hindle (KI): ‘I think the distinction here between exhibitions and what we’re doing here – which is distinctly not an exhibition – is that it is not just about showing your latest product range, which is the ‘small-boothed’ mentality of

many exhibitions. That has its place. The distinction for us as larger manufacturers is that this provides a platform that allows us to roll out a much wider story, a much broader sense of expertise and application that you cannot achieve with a small booth, showing your latest collection. This is moving the agenda on from being about products, to about a broader sense of competence and application – which is unique to the larger players in the marketplace.’

Greg Bettis (Sedus): ‘If you look at the SAT event, it was all about product. I think now we are differentiating. We’re not going to encourage people to just come and look at product in a showroom – which is essentially what the exhibitions and shows are all about. We all have a theme, a conceptual argument that we’re presenting here.’

Mark Catchlove (Herman Miller): ‘One of my memories of the original Designer Saturday and what it created over the years was actually a sense of community amongst the furniture and design sectors. Whereas, what happens with exhibitions is it becomes a ‘come buy from us’ mentality. You become a commodity provider. The idea of this is to actually create a community of which we are a part. We are not just furniture manufacturers – we are a part of a whole community, and I would say quite an important part of that. This is what I hope we can create here.’

‘The other big change I think we will see, and maybe I’m being a little idealistic here, is that for the last





Designer Saturday, people brought their kids. I think there is now a different generation and we'll see kids bring their parents. There are a lot of designers who have been helped and been funded, and it will be really interesting for their parents to come down and see what they're doing. I may be wrong, but I think it's another interesting area.'

So do you expect to attract a different level of audience?

Alan Gazzard (Knoll International): 'I think the event is all about the target audience. With the major exhibitions you have no real control over the target audience. Ultimately we all have a commercial spin on this and we want to attract people who may just come back, having seen something that is genuinely of interest to them.'

Paul van der Heyde (Kinnarps): 'I hope that this also enables designers to see the genuine differences between us, so that within the community they can then make positive choices about which people they really want to work with or do the next project with. Perhaps this will broaden the offer – and truly do so rather than in an exhibition where you sometimes pretend to be something you're not. In our own showrooms, in our own ways, we can show people what we truly stand for and then they can make their own minds up.'

Mark Spragg (Steelcase): 'Everyone's theme is not centred around product, and much more around the wider issue of what we're doing, how we do business and how we can add value in our own particular ways. I think this is more important to our industry than simply showing off 12 aesthetically pleasing desks.'

Greg Bettis (Sedus): 'I think another point is, if you look at the companies



around this table, we have a virtually new set of people from those involved in SAT – and some of the biggest manufacturers in the world.'

Jonathan Hindle (KI): 'Part and parcel of our aim to put this on a more serious platform is the CPD accreditation, but this is also a conscious effort not to make it too much of a party. We've learned lessons from what has happened before.'

'We also had a debate as to whether we should have a big party after this event and the general consensus was that this would generally lower the tone, it would undermine what we are looking to achieve. People can still have an enjoyable time and bring the children, and there are still opportunities within the two days to have smaller party elements. But the broader message is this is an opportunity for designers to come and appreciate our wider offering.'

Graeme Horne (Haworth): 'Educational, informative and fun; these are important things. I think the themes chosen by the participants are also extremely interesting. One point I hadn't really picked up on was that a lot of the participants from

SAT aren't here – and we did approach them. Maybe the negative association has kept them away – but I believe the response from many of them has been that they would like to participate next year, so what they are doing is sitting and waiting to see...

'Now, if you consider the original format of Designer Saturday, there were 12 participants, and we wanted 12 participants. We have 11, so there is one gap left and assuming everyone has a thoroughly enjoyable experience this year, we might be looking for a 12th party – otherwise we're in it for the long run.'

Mark Catchlove (Herman Miller): 'If you think back to Spectrum, it started off in a similar way, with an exclusive group of manufacturers, and it worked. Gradually it expanded and became a profit making venture. It changed, and this isn't the idea of this.'

So is this an elitist event?

Jonathan Hindle (KI): 'We all appreciate the true meaning of elitism and it is a word that is often misconstrued or misunderstood. I would prefer to use a word such as meritocratic. Importantly, the

steering committee took its cues from its target audience. Architects and designers were consulted and gave reference to who they would like to see participating. So it is very much up to aspiring participants to prove their case with the target audience.'

Graeme Horne (Haworth): 'We have stopped people using the word 'exhibition' – because unfortunately it has negative connotations. We don't want to be seen to be elitist, we want to be true to the principles of what we intended to do.'

Paul van der Heyde (Kinnarps): 'I think it's important that we are challenged to impress as well. Equally, the 11 of us here need to merit our position for next year.'

Alastair Stubbs (Humanscale): '...this again harps back to what we were saying

about Spectrum. You may have been a founding father of Spectrum but you weren't guaranteed a slot next year unless you came up with a new product.'

Mark Catchlove (Herman Miller): 'The other thing we should say is that this isn't just for A&D. What has happened is that many of our clients have become close to the A&D and I expect some clients to accompany their designers around the showrooms. There are many clients who are design aware and I would like to think they will be attending this event. That's important.'

Designers Saturday will run over two days – Friday 26/Saturday 27 September – was it always intended as a two-day format?

Graeme Horne (Haworth): 'There was a lot of back reference to Designer Saturday and my recollection was that the Saturday was very much the social side of things. We felt that Friday would bring

extra value to the overall offering. It is in all of our interests that every one of the participants succeeds, because it strengthens the argument and the possibility of this being a long term event.'

Alan Gazzard (Knoll): 'I think there will be a differentiation between the two days. My sense is that Saturday will just be more relaxed, more family-orientated.'

Mark Spragg (Steelcase): 'Our assumption is that it will be more relaxed on the Saturday. Looking at the attendees we'd have registering so far, there are an awful lot who are saying they are going to attend both days. Whether they're coming for different things on the two days or simply intending to spend their time floating around, we're not quite sure yet. We have the feeling that people will be rushing from their offices on the Friday to attend the evening showroom events and then come back on the Saturday for a more relaxed event. It would be good to have a businesslike feel on the Friday, followed by an evening event and then a more relaxed, family atmosphere on the Saturday.'



Each of the 11 participants has adopted a fascinating theme for the event – and, apparently, there was not a single clash amongst the manufacturers. We end this fascinating discussion by asking each of the guys in turn to tell us what we can expect from a visit to their showrooms.



Julian Pollitt (Ahrend): ‘We’re following on from our theme we showed in Milan, which was World Wide Working. We’re looking at how the world is getting a lot smaller and how we are developing that, so we will be working a lot with technology. For the kids and on the educational side we will be creating a big play area and will look at where the industry is going over the next 15-20 years.’



Mark Spragg (Steelcase): ‘Our theme will be the Millennials – the younger generation in the workplace, the way they work, the way they interact socially. There will be a whole series of different workstyles, different settings and different activities that link in with the young people in our workforce.’



Paul van der Heyde (Kinnarps): ‘The ageing workforce is a real problem, so we will be working with the Royal College of Art to look at how workplace can adapt – and I include myself in this – for those of us who might not be quite as sharp as we were when we were 21. It is too easy to assume that we’ll all cope in any working environment – and we don’t!’



Greg Bettis (Sedus): ‘We’re going to focus on acoustics in the office – so how office design has changed, particularly with the movement to smaller workstation footprints, densities of people in the environment. We’re going to have some interactive elements in the showroom display – acoustic booths, different types of materials in terms of wallcoverings, ceilings, flooring.’



Graeme Horne (Haworth): ‘We chose to do residential, domestic. There is an increasingly well known organisation called Home Sweet Home, with whom we’re going to work with to create London on our floor, with the Thames running through it. Everyone – architects, designers, children, you guys – will build a house. You’ll go into a little wendy house and pick up fuzzy felts, paper, crayons etc. You’ll buy a plot and create a house. We’ve also added in 20 iconic buildings on the Thames and given one each to a major practice in London, so they have to create, in a very green way, a new version of that building.’



David Cunningham (Faram): 'I think we're the only player around the table who has a partitioning side to the business. Our knowledge and use of glass is quite considerable, and what we're seeing is glass being used in the open plan more and more, in a coloured form, in a different form, so we're going to focus on what glass you should use, why you should use it and what benefits it has. With that, as we are Italian, we have some very nice food and part of our group is now a vineyard – they're coming over to host the event with us, which should be very nice. There will even be a wine tasting on the Friday night and we're putting an Italian Vespa up as a prize!'



John Irwin (Bisley): 'Ours is a slightly more traditional approach. We were originally talking about bringing some manufacturing into the showroom – the idea of bringing a robot in and welding a few kids together seemed a good idea, but we've toned that down a little! The theme will centre on Design and Engineering and will also have a party on the Friday night, complete with blues band.'

Alastair Stubbs (Humanscale):

'We'll be looking at how healthy is your desk? We'll be talking about trends and ways of working and how it differs from 20 years ago. We'll very much be focusing on ergonomics and how you can create a more comfortable place to work. We'll also have some face painting and entertainment for the kids and a party on the Friday night – which will be a pure social.'



Jonathan Hindle (KI): 'We're going to explore most filing and storage applications around the theme of Time and Space. We're going to make what is normally quite a dry subject a little more exciting with a Dr Who theme. So we're going to have mock Tardises, Dalek races and other spatially aware challenges for our visitors to engage in.'



Mark Catchlove (Herman

Miller): 'Our theme is Responsible Leadership – we'll be looking at environmental issues while the kids will be watching Happy Feet. We're looking at the issue of zero emissions, the seminar we're doing is the future of work based on global warming scenarios – based on research we did for the DTI. In addition to that we're going to have a 1960s Formula One theme with fastest lap competitions, people building furniture against the clock and there will be an eight-lane Scalextrics track.'

Alan Gazzard (Knoll): 'Our event will be based around Heritage. The event coincides with 70 years of Knoll working with world renowned designers, so the theme will be Past, Present, Future. We will have some very early pieces through to some newly launched pieces and we will certainly have an event on the Friday evening – and some slightly unusual speakers through the Friday lunchtime.'

