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Delights of NeoCon – Part 2

by Robert Allen

Overall:

Perhaps a better reflection of seeing the glass half-full – as many speculated on low attendance and open corridors – I was taken at the energy and vitality of this year's show amidst the backdrop of layoffs and slow movement in the industry. There was smart product to be seen and many shared a sense of optimism directed toward next year's market performance. Here are a few pieces that caught my eye:

**Product:**

>Cubist table: Norman Diekman (Tuohy, www.tuohy.com) – One of the disappointments of the show this year was the resounding similarity of so much product – definitely not a banner year for big departures and the unusual. There were some exceptions, however, and the small occasional table, “Cubist” by Norman Diekman was one of those. Either featured as a stand-alone piece or as a pair of larger top supports, the table is intelligent and delightful.

Refinement and minimalist have marked Tuohy approach for years and one had to wonder where they would go next.



Watching Mr. Diekman rotate the tables to different orientations, sit back, reflect and turn them again, coupled with the intensity of his whole manner as he explained the intricacies behind the design's simple expression and construction, made the visit worthwhile. Similar in simplicity to Max Bills/Hans Gugelot famous Swiss stool for children, or pieces by Donald Judd, the design is rich and stands up to scrutiny in the resolution of the detail. No lines of the tables are perpendicular and in keeping with any cubist experience, one sees multiple readings from each vantage-point, the perfect foil for any minimalist space.

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>BA table: Jeff Miller (Itoki; www.itokidesign.com) –

Another table effort of note, the bent steel table Jeff Miller produced for Japanese-based Itoki—strong, expressive and simple—another sculptural compliment for occasional area applications. Also of note, this piece, along with the five other products in Mr. Miller's collection for Itoki's, will be American-made.



>Setu chair: Studio 7.5 (Herman Miller; www.hermanmiller.com) – Herman Miller looked good this year with much new product and the crowds to echo the response. It was hard to pass up their new chair “Setu” by Berlin-based Studio 7.5---normally I am1 very reluctant to stop for every chair calling for attention, but this exoskeleton had to be sampled.

For 17 pounds and 14 parts, this chair made no concessions to comfort and good looks. Adjustment is literally part of the architecture of the frame, not associated springs and levers. Very comfortable and smartly detailed, the polymer Kinematic spine was remarkably effective at providing support and visual clarity without excessive finesse.



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>AC 4 chair: Antonio Cittero (Vitra; www.vitra.com) –

Another smart chair, quieter in expression, but with similar interests in ergonomic comfort is the AC 4 collection from Antonio Cittero. With automatic weight adjustment and three-zone comfort provision, the chair does provide technical intelligence, but not at the expense of classic styling. The arms visually borrow from the Eames group aluminum chairs, but so what? The effect is pleasing and appropriate to the design.



>WorkKit: Erik Levy (Vitra; www.vitra.com) – Before leaving Vitra, a simple table caught my eye. Although not a table one would look at for serious conferencing or boardroom activity, this table should make your list for a general workspace that needs to be flexible or provide for communicative office functions. Its flexibility is a function of the undertable bar support system that relies on a cast knuckle, named

PIN and what designer Erik Levy calls the tables DNA, to join the rails, cross rails and appendages as needed. This enables the table to grow in either direction accommodating either workstations or various general office activities. Also available is a screen system that can partition off areas and hide connecting cables, etc.



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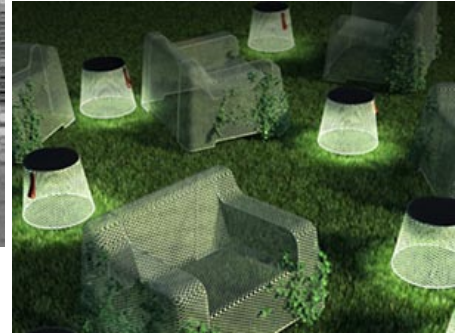


>Heaven Collection table (494): Jean-Marie Massaud (EMU, Italy; www.emu.it) – Another product that clearly borrows from historical precedent, in this instance the late Warren Platner, is the 494 table, introduced by EMU/Italy in 2007 as part of the Advanced Collection, but here marking the partnership at Neocon of Coalesse and EMU (in a compelling 20,000 leaf-green sticky expose). The table

(and chairs) are made from tubular, pre-galvanized steel wire-netting, designed to live well both inside and out, as is the case with the rest of the collection. Each piece is hand crafted at the EMU facility in the hills of Umbria Italy, as its products have been for over 80 years; the single weaving and welding process renders a beautiful product at a favorable price-point.

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>Ivy (589): Paola.Navone; EMU, Italy; (www.emu.it) – Another beauty from EMU and its Advanced Collection is the “Ivy” table, part of another exterior grouping, this time from designer Paola Navone. Inspired by the ancient topiary art – the trimming of trees and shrubs in order to give them ornamental shapes – these pieces are also made of molded bent wire-mesh, with ceramic tops available in 32 handmade and hand-painted Deruta majolica inset tiles.

What I liked about this piece is that the structure of sofas, armchairs and table, as molded structure, leaves an interior empty, allowing the pieces to visually become “ghosts” in the landscape. And in keeping with this spirit, Ms. Navone sug-

gests allowing the pieces to be “eaten up” by ivy, like statues, and become immersed in nature. On a practical note, as chairs and tables built with mesh cushions and run-offs, one never deals with wet cushions, hot seats or puddled water. What I see is a gossamer armature in the backyard, that suspends goldfish on a floating turquoise sea and provides for black beetles as they make their way across a floating white patch in space these are very special pieces.



>Tambient: Elliptipar (www.elliptipar.com) – Tambient is a new lighting product I ran across that is as much about strategy as it is product. Having an indirect fixture, mounted on systems furniture to provide immediate indirect light for a station, regardless of the building lighting plan, is not a new concept. What is new is that this fixture provides indirect lighting for lower, more community-like low-walled applications. It does this by utilizing a carefully engineered visual shielding system that one hardly notices, at transaction-height, but that delivers an almost atmospheric effect that I found subtle and compelling. The single component indirect fixture also provides direct task lighting that distributes light evenly down the panel surface, balancing the brightness of the worksurface, computer screen and backdrop panel; and includes what they refer to as a “batwing lens,” which reduces veiling reflections on glossier print materials.

And I should have guessed: the product is the latest innovation from Elliptipar, the legendary company renown for founder Sy Shemitz who believed that one never needed to look beyond indirect lighting to solve any lighting problem. The brainchild of their engineering group, the fixture suggests the ability to transform the often impersonal world of systems groupings into sophisticated, almost cozy, gather-



ing areas, no small accomplishment. Making open office feel like private office has long been an elusive objective of interior designers. This strategy offers up a solution long over-due.



>Atlantic and Hyde: Cul de sac and Fredrikson Stallard; Bernhardt (www.bernhardtdesign.com) – Two products at Bernhardt Design caught my eye. The new “Hyde” chair by London-based Fredrikson Stallard and “Atlantic” by Spanish designers Cul de sac. Both pieces are part of the Global Edition, new works commissioned by Jerry Helling,



Bernhardt Design’s Creative Director, with an eye toward hand craftsmanship, intricate detail, and timeless simplicity. Both featured beautifully wrought oil-rubbed walnut legs that were both gracious in form and elegantly resolved in terms of frame and upholstery detail. Both had wide stances and looked proportionally well-positioned from all angles.

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>Denizen: WilliamsSorel; Coalesse (www.coalesse.com)
 – West coast-based Coalesse, one of Steelcase's constellation of companies, introduced "Denizen," a new collection of casegood's that bridge the gap between the home and office settings. What caught my eye were the clean lines, smart details and wide range of product offerings. The aim of the product, as loosely extracted from the literature, is to provide the tools to create a more socially inviting space to better reflect the image of the individual in a company's culture. I feel the product succeeds in this regard. Designed

by American designers Otto Williams and Jess Sorel of WilliamsSorel, the collection includes a full line of ancillary and work tables, benches, secretaries, credenzas, towers, overhead storage and display components, all stitched together visually with repetitive detail features such as the handsome recessed metal bases. Designed to enhance the ability of environments to quickly and seamlessly transition into often disparate activities simultaneously, the components have many "embedded" technical features and meet a wide range of green criteria.

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>Landscape One: Lievore Altherr Molina; Andreu World Outdoor (www.andreuworldamerica.com) – Not the first time I have been taken by this Barcelona-based design groups work, whether it was pieces for Arper, Sellex or others, the work of these three individuals never fails to stir me and always manages to find its way into whatever show I am covering. This outdoor chaise is another in a long line of elegantly rendered, beautifully detailed products that can only be defined as eloquent.

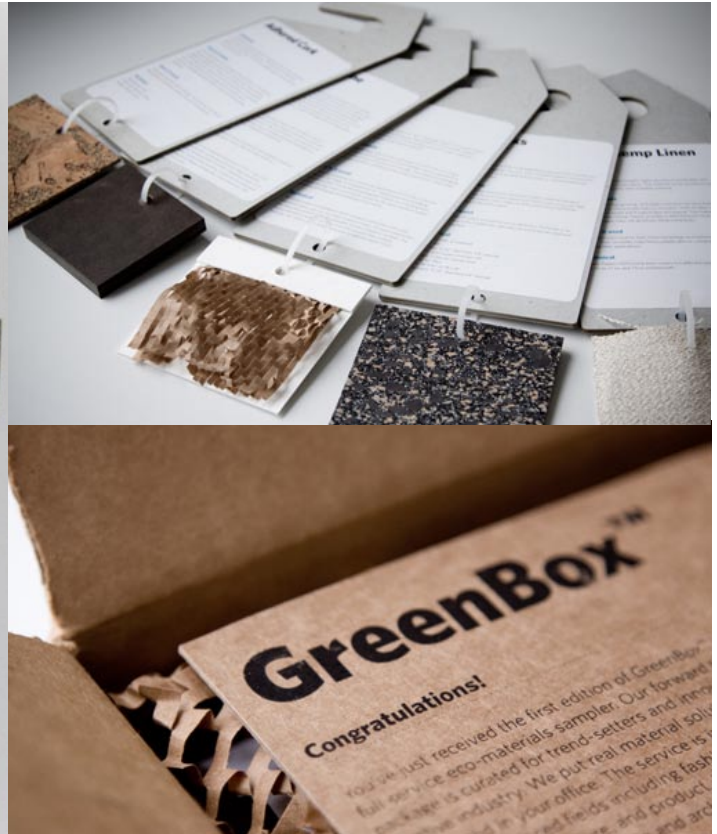
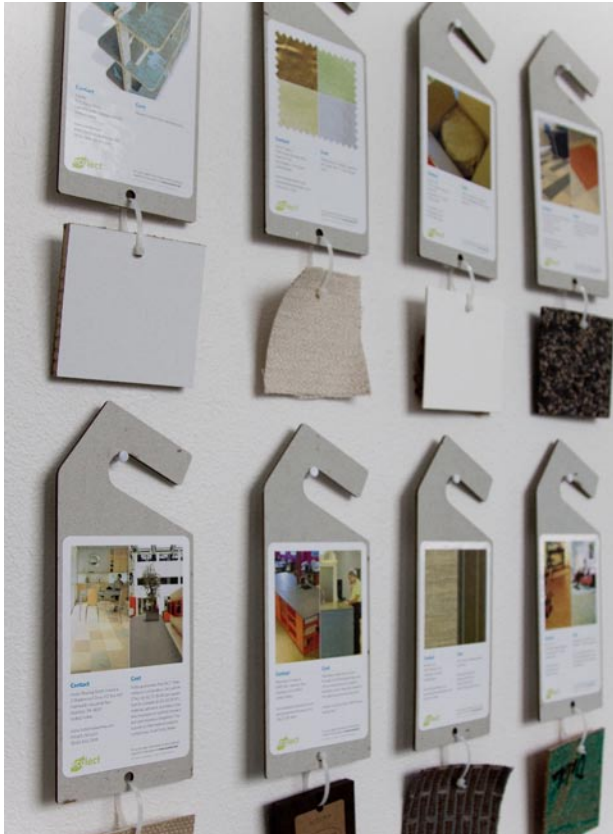
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>Ecolect: Founders, Joe Gebbia and Matt Grigsby; Ecolect (www.ecollect.net) – Positioned directly outside the press room, it was hard to miss these guys. Many of us just thought it was the Material Connexion, but after a few passes something was clearly different, starting with their name. Founded by designers Joe Gebbia and Matt Grigsby, graduates of The Rhode Island School of Design, both felt there had to be a better way to track down and obtain sustainable materials.

Faced with the seemingly endless quantities of product and material claiming to be eco-friendly, but whose information is hard to qualify, or compare – even using other subscription li-

braries and resources – and whose samples were often equally daunting to procure, these guys created a shared database of suppliers and devised a system to organize the material. Also available is a subscription service that provides current samples, four times a year, to firms and individuals for client presentation and library reference. Their website, built with fellow students and the guidance of RISD professors, provides a vibrant forum for designers committed to sustainability to share their inspiration, occasional frustration, new information and everything in between. It's a dynamic site that welcomes change and improvement; and best of all, access to the library is free.

Robert Allen periodically joins our journal to cover major design expositions, providing a designer's perspective. He is an associate professor at New York Institute of Technology's School of Architecture and Design and principal founder of the multi-disciplinary design group, Metalhouse. His product awards include:

>AIA Design Award for Tablet, by Geiger
>Silver Award, Best of Neocon and IIDA Acclaim Award for Best Product in Category for "Caucus" table program for Geiger/Herman Miller.

Past articles for Officeinsight include:

>Milan Salone Internazionale Del Mobile, 5.15.06 and 5.18.06;
>Interieur 04;The International Biennale for Creative Interior Design, Kortrijk, Belgium 1.17.05
>Orgatec 02, Koln, Germany-11.25.02

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