

NeoCon 2011: Positive Energy

Inspiration Through Collaboration

By Deb Barrett

Most interior design trade shows have struggled over the past few years, so I wasn't quite sure what to expect of NeoCon 2011. Overall, the mood was positive and attendance seemed up a bit from 2010. If you haven't ever been to the NeoCon, it is the world's largest contract trade fair. It can seem like a sea of desks and chairs, and if your niche is on the residential side, you might be saying *'why am I here?'* But as the contract and residential markets continue to merge, it does make sense to explore the floors at the Merchandise Mart for inspiration.

As I walked the permanent and temporary showrooms set up for NeoCon, I didn't see any earth-shattering new ideas or products. But several themes did emerge for me: collaboration, past/present/future and residential crossover.

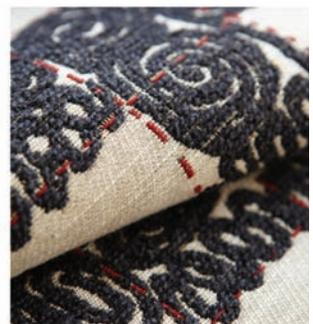
Collaboration

A popular way to refresh a brand or line, collaborative efforts between manufacturers and designers have grown in the range of options they offer. I noticed two main categories of collaboration:

1. Manufacturers forging partnerships with a variety of designers, museums, and design thought leaders to produce collections and products.
2. Manufacturing shifting their design and product concepts to reflect the different types of work we are doing, either in the workplace or remotely (brainstorming, thinking, writing, meeting, calling and researching in combination with relaxing).

Besides showing more green products and products that catered to technology, workspace manufacturers like Steelcase or Herman Miller all but deleted the traditional cubicle from their new introduction. Increasing surface areas, boards, screens and tools, all integrated with technology, was the collaboration theme.

In order to differentiate, manufacturers are coming up with innovative ways to accommodate technology in their designs, i.e. the use of iPads, video conferencing, etc. Many of these new components are easily reconfigurable and are all about enabling people to create their own environment, or are about the environment adapting to the needs of the individual or team.



COLLABORATION: DesignTex

Through a licensing program, the Museum of New Mexico Foundation invites manufacturers to use its four museums, six monuments and archaeological-studies office as inspiration. Kimberle Frost, vice president of design at DesignTex, mined the vast collections as sources for 11 upholstery patterns that make up the core of the company's new Shelter collection.



**COLLABORATION:
Coalesse**

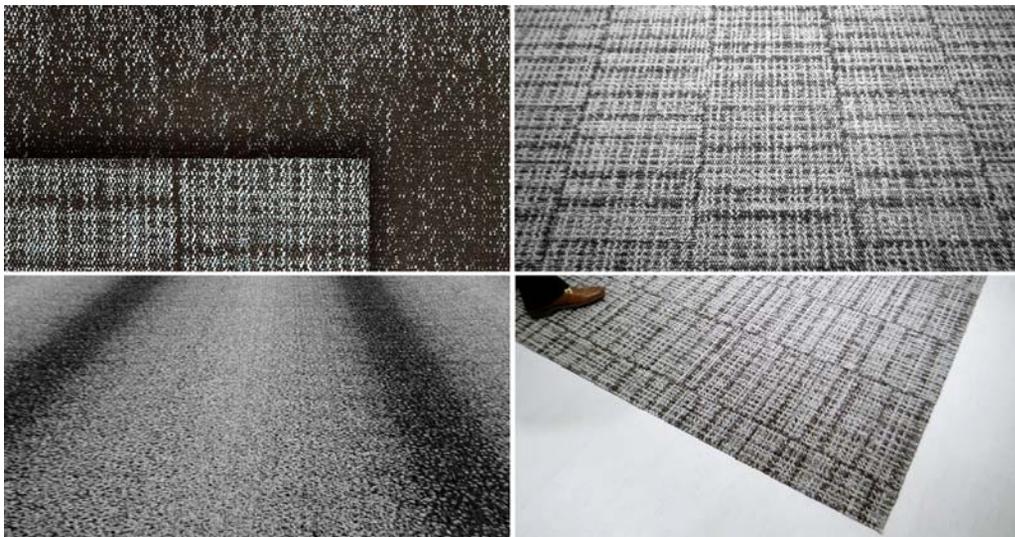
The Sebastopol collection—two matched shapes each offered in two heights— is available in five different laminate colors, balanced with wood exteriors in oak or walnut veneer with optional sheen finishes.

Deconstruction, adaptability and multi-tasking themes spring from collaboration and lead to lots of new “parts and pieces” for existing product lines, which have increased flexibility and created more variety in work configurations. Everything is designed to be able to be moved, pushed, lifted, rearranged, assembled and disassembled. Desks where you can have a pedestal file or not have one. Dividers that you can have up or down. Lamps, files, and cables. It's all about having a variety of space and tools for a variety of constantly-changing tasks.

A great example of this is the Sebastopol collection from Coalesse,

developed by Emilia Borgthorsdottir while she was still a design student. Borgthorsdottir wanted a large work surface but didn't have room in her small apartment. So she divided her preferred maximum service area into geometric shapes and started playing with them, refining them until the proportions felt right.

“I am a problem solving person and bringing up new perspectives is one of my strengths,” said Borgthorsdottir. “I like to create aesthetically pleasing products that ease the activities of daily living, focusing on the function and ergonomic value of the design.”



COLLABORATION: Mannington

Reaching out to Korean design firm, Ryan Harc, Mannington was right on target with its new Equinox collection. Inspired by the play of light and shadow, the collection uses a proprietary ultra-large denier fiber with patented variable twist technology.

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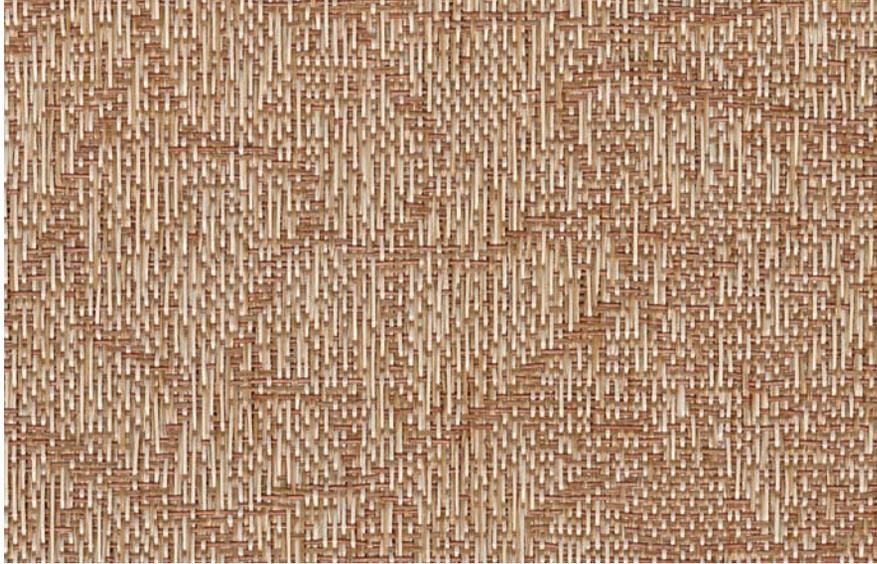
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COLLABORATION: MechoSystems

MechoSystems launched a new series of fully recyclable shadecloths, created in collaboration with William McDonough, one of the world’s most well known advocates for sustainable design. Based on MechoSystems’ EcoV-eil® shadecloths, the patterns in this series are inspired by McDonough’s own photographs, collected during his visits to Iceland. The collection includes five jacquard weave patterns, each in several colorways, interpreting the stunning natural landscape of Iceland. Shown here is Earth in Sienna and Basalt in Moonlight.



The shadecloth material is a technical nutrient—the Cradle to Cradle term for non-natural materials that are safe, highly stable, and used in closed-loop manufacturing cycles that take materials from producer to consumer and back again indefinitely. (Typically, shadecloths are woven with a PVC jacket and a core of fiberglass or polyester core, which cannot be separated for reuse.) The thermoplastic olefin (TPO) yarn used in the shadecloth fabric is more than merely PVC-free—it can be reclaimed and recycled indefinitely.

Originally from Iceland, but now working and living in the U.S., Borgthorsdottir submitted the drawings for Sebastopol to Coalesse two years ago at NeoCon, one week after graduating from design school. After hearing that Coalesse was not adding them to their collection, she moved on to other projects. But last summer the company contacted her to let her know it planned to produce the line., and this June she was thrilled to introduce her designs, remarking that after seeing the finished product it reminds her of the glaciers in her native Iceland and how they can break away or butt together.

Residential Crossover

Employers shrinking the size of their offices and staff means tough times for office furniture manufacturers. One example of a company looking for revenue beyond cubicle and desk chair sales is Haworth. The Haworth Collection is the

company’s foray into offering crossover products for the home based on their experience as a commercial furniture manufacturer. The aim is to offer high quality products which are designed to compliment a residential environment but contain functionality and durability derived from their commercial office furniture heritage.

As proof that there is opportunity in the crossover market, one of this first an-

RESIDENTIAL CROSSOVER: Haworth

“With two great brands coming together, our customers can get beautiful, high quality products previously only available on the commercial market,” says Raymond Arenson, executive vice president for merchandising and design for Crate & Barrel. “Haworth’s products make a great addition to our portfolio of products.”



nouncements at NeoCon 2011 was that that Crate & Barrel will carry three products from the new Haworth collection: The Eddy table, available in July, followed by the VeryTask and Very Conference chairs, available in August.

“With this Crate and Barrel relationship, Haworth can take another measured step into the retail world,” says Tom DeBoer, Haworth product manager. “We find ourselves pulled in the retail direction due to the beauty and quality of our products as well as the trend of office and residential coming together. We are excited to work with a great retail brand like Crate & Barrel.”

Another great example of crossover design is the Nub chair collection by Patricia Urquiola for Andreu World America. Sophisticated cabinet-making processes combine with contemporary elements with curiously inviting results—a Windsor chair for a post-design era.

I love everything this prolific designer does and I love the fact that a childhood memory inspired the chair... “I used to play with my grandmother’s bobbins for making lace,” Urquiola recalls. “These small wooden bars were playmates that I have now reimaged.”



RESIDENTIAL CROSSOVER: Andreu World America

Traditional woodworking techniques, gently updated, produce the wing chair and side chair’s notable beech backrest: Its bars widen at the height of the lumbar region, alternating to add dimensionality. The frame comes in red, white or black lacquer and 21 wood finishes.

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Past/Present/Future

Exhibitors reached back into their past and pulled out inspiration and reissues from their archives to build their new launches. Tweaks and twists are supplied by new technologies, from digital printing and finishes to wireless communications and fibers.

I am always excited to see what Knoll Textiles will introduce or revamp from their rich storied history. Included in their annual archival reintroductions is the expansion of Cato, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary.

Since its introduction in 1961, Cato has never gone out of production. It was originally hand woven in Germany in 30-yard runs. In the 1970s it was turned into machine woven goods in Scotland, where it has been made ever since. Cato has become an iconic design for Knoll Textiles, often pictured on classic Knoll Studio pieces such as Eero Saarinen's Womb chair.

Another take on historically inspired textiles is the Border collection by Hella Jongerius for Maharam. Jongerius somehow always manages to find the right balance between cutting-edge, pushing-the-envelope design and the practicality inherent in her Dutch design roots. The Border collection explores her continued interest in ethnic textile techniques, based this time on Mayan backstrap weaving.

And although I noted no blow-your-mind innovation, I always love NeoCon's take on textiles, so I've included some of my favorite picks from a variety of resources. **V**



PAST/PRESENT/FUTURE: Knoll Textiles

Over the years, Knoll Textiles has added and deleted colors. For Cato's 50th birthday, Dorothy Cosonas, creative director of Knoll Luxe, has brought back three colors from the original 60s archives: natural, yellow and hot pink. This high performance fabric is made of 86% wool and 14% rayon. It exceeds 100,000 double rubs, and is now available in 12 colorways.



PAST/PRESENT/FUTURE: Maharam

This new collection by Jongerius may not seem like something you'd be wowed by, but upon closer inspection, it has such an interesting (slightly random) pattern that I find myself itching to see it used in a large-scale project so I can get the full effect.



TEXTILE PICK: Création Baumann at Carnegie Textile

Carnegie Textile showed Swiss textile manufacturer Création Baumann's Halina and Halina Stripe curtain fabric—an airy textile with an African touch. The innovative textile won a Gold award. Halina (shown left) achieves a 3D effect—the finely-stripped weave is vertically pleated and horizontally embossed. Halina Stripe (opposite page) is a broad stripe of contrasting colors reminiscent of woven raffia. The design picks up on current fashion trends and adds an up-to-the-minute touch to any interior.

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