

NeoCon

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NeoCon, the largest exhibition of contract furnishings in North America, was held this year from June 9 to 11 at the Merchandise Mart in Chicago. Now in its 40th year, NeoCon showcases the latest trends and innovative products for the office, health care, hospitality, residential, retail, and governmental environments. Exhibitors from around the world showcase cutting-edge products, setting the precedent for the contract furnishings industry. The range of products includes every aspect of the visual environment, including furniture, flooring, lighting, textiles, wall coverings, and architectural elements.

Office Trends

Many introductions at NeoCon were designed to accommodate the office design trend that is moving away from closed cubicles to more open workspaces, with lots more meeting and collaboration areas. Individual workspaces are smaller but more efficient, made possible partly by the popularity of thin screen computer monitors, which require much less desk space. A variety of LED task lighting options are also well suited to this new workspace—small lights that deliver lots of illumination.

The key word for the new office layout is “flexibility,” including moveable furniture, carpet squares, and clip-on lights. This focus on flexibility creates a need for room dividers rather than fixed walls, and there were several companies offering movable panels at NeoCon, including 3Form and Lumicor. Translucent panels can be made in a wide variety of colors, imprinted with patterns and embedded with sequins, grasses, or threads for an exciting visual effect. Textured glass panels from Herman Miller can be attached to one another to create a divider or an entire wall.



Yellow is a popular accent color, used for a splash of brightness in otherwise neutral decor. The rich yellow Scatter Chair is from Dakota Jackson.

The latest trends in contract furnishings were on display at the Chicago show

2008



Comfortable and moveable, the ScatterCaster chair from Dakota Jackson was one of the innovative and versatile office chair designs introduced at NeoCon. The wide seat, flexible arms, and adjustable height let the chair accommodate almost any sitter in comfort.



Dakota Jackson likes to explore the relationship between people and objects and between organic shapes and hard-edged architectural forms. The mirror-finish Arabesque tables are an interpretation of those relationships. The rich Azure color is part of a growing trend towards strong blue.



Beige neutrals with a splash of trendy yellow-lime form the color theme of the textured Convert modular flooring line from Interface-Flor.



Healthcare is an important area of specialty decor. The Arissa Collection from Ki is a healthcare furniture line for lounges and lobbies that need to accommodate all body types, including the overweight. It is available in neutral or bold colors to fit a wide range of decor designs.



Inspired by architect Le Corbusier, the Iko Comfort chair from Dakota Jackson brings great design and sophistication to practical furniture.

Colors

White or ivory desktops are quite popular. They look sleek and clean and reflect light for brighter workspaces. Plain is most popular, with no specks or texture.

Red and lime green continue to be the favorite bright accents, with orange and yellow in the second tier. Rich blue, with names like cobalt and azure, continues to grow in popularity. Dark wood is still popular for furniture, although warm mid-tones like cherry seem equally favored. Brown and gray continue to be the most common carpet colors, with gray outpacing brown. Monochromatic and two-tone color combinations are much more popular than multi-colored versions in both flooring and wall coverings.

The office chair is reworked in a dozen ways for introduction at NeoCon—all of which look very much alike to the average observer. But color creates an obvious difference, with bright blue, red, yellow, and lime green the most notable colors.

Pattern and Texture

Organic patterns continue in carpeting, with shapes and patterns from nature interpreted in monochromatic carpeting that appears to be carved into designs resembling a rockscape or undulating waves.

Wood flooring is rustic and distressed, whether reclaimed wood from old barns or reproductions scraped and spotted to look like the real thing. Carpet is textured to be visually and physically dimensional. At the same time, the sheen and luster of metal and glass surfaces is an important element of design.

Exotic wood veneers with lots of pattern in the grain are used to add distinction to high-end furniture, usually on an individual piece made to stand out.

Health Care Trends

Health care is the largest and most diverse of the Specialty Furniture sectors, and the movement is towards more color and style, especially in patient and nursing areas, which have often been cold and clinical in the past.

Health care in general is moving towards comforting—but not dull—earth tones, especially greens, golds, and rust, as seen in the Nurture line by Steelcase (which displayed an entire medical facility in its showroom, all in warm rusts and golds). If this reminds you of the

1970s, you are right, but that is the way of color trends—they eventually come back around. The goal is to reinterpret the use of color so it feels new—even to those who remember the old version. Cream surfaces and dark wood continue to be popular for high-end medical services, such as cosmetic surgery centers.

Stay Cool and Be Green

Along with the home furnishings industry, the contract furnishings industry has strongly embraced the “green” movement, expressed at NeoCon by the choice of environmentalist Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. as one of the three keynote speakers. There was also an expanded “Green-life” area featuring displays and education that showcase the best and brightest in green design.

The furnishings industry can make a big impact with its new efforts. At the manufacturing end, the effort is targeted to creating a healthier, more durable product in a cleaner way. At the disposal end, for products that are worn out or obsolete, it turns out that a great deal of the enormous waste generated by the furnishings industry can be recycled in some way, and the companies seem willing to find those ways.

The “cool” factor is always big at NeoCon, with the introduction of fresh, new styles and innovative products. The Best of NeoCon 2008 Innovation Award went to IdeaPaint™, which is paint that turns a wall into a giant dry-erase board, suitable for use with dry-erase markers and cleaners, and that also doubles as a projection screen. ■

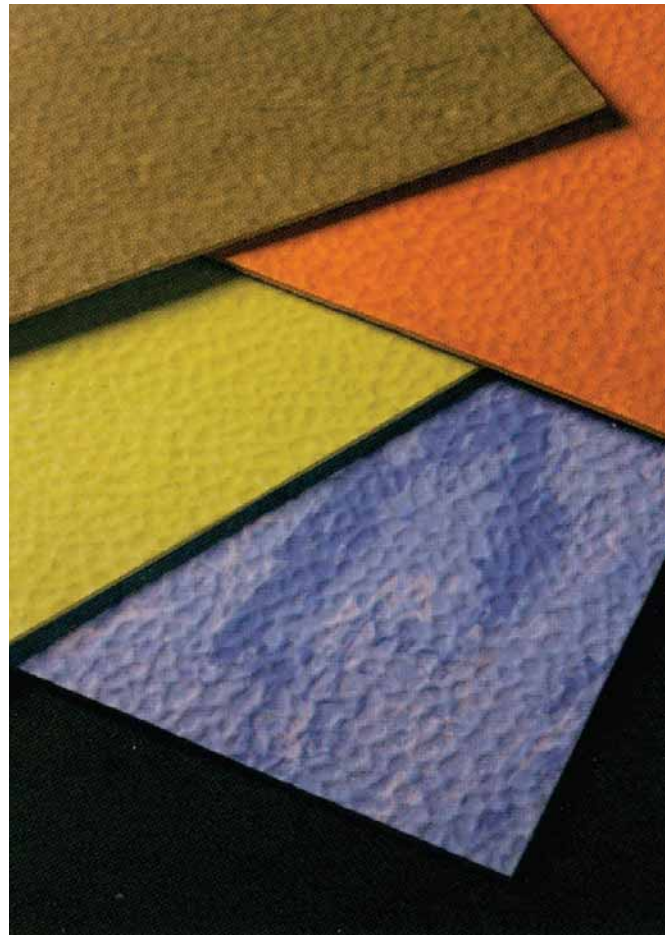
Vivian Kistler, CMG is a 20-year member and senior chairholder of the Color Marketing Group. Kistler is the editor of the Color Names Reference book, which contains more than 37,000 names for commercial products.



The Simply Real Collection from Pallas Textiles has "earthen energy" in fabrics made of recycled and recyclable materials. Blue and brown is still an important color combination, and orange is a persistent accent color that may finally be taking hold.



The TOD (Training on Demand) table and the Simon chair (both from Versteel) are both on wheels and well-suited to today's moveable, multi-use office spaces.



Durable, low maintenance, and "comfortable underfoot," Mesto rubber tile flooring from Johnsonite uses tonal marbled color to create visually appealing high-performance floors.