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Focus Office

Cathy Hayward talks to designers in the workplace design space and looks at some of the most exciting upcoming projects

Words by Cathy Hayward

1. Return to Cologne

From 25–29 October 2022, Orgatec returns to Cologne after a pandemic-inflicted break. Cathy Hayward reports on what we can expect from the world’s largest workplace design show

IT’S BEEN FOUR YEARS since the workplace design community descended on Cologne’s Koelnmesse for the biennial Orgatec trade fair. In that time the workplace world has undergone a seismic shift. What the themes and products at a 2022 fair would have been like had there been no Covid-19 is impossible to guess – one imagines a gentle evolution from 2018. Instead this year’s theme – New Visions of Work – leaves the debate wide open to talk about the pandemic’s impact on the world of work and workplace, and what the future really holds in a world where work has finally been completely unshackled from time and place.

Not entirely unexpectedly the event is smaller than in previous years. Just five of the Koelnmesse halls have been taken on – a far cry from in the past. And some of the big names in the industry are notably absent – or were in July when the latest exhibitor lists were published. But at more than 600 exhibitors and 120,000 sq m of floor space, Orgatec retains its crown as the world’s largest workplace design fair. And, given the challenges in our sector over the past two years, a must-attend for everyone in our sector.

The show is focusing on nine key themes.

Forever flexible: shaping spaces with interior design

Covid-19 has accelerated the need for adaptable office environments. Several exhibitors will showcase modular solutions for dividing spaces into zones. The Node+ system from La Cividina, designed by Ben van Berkel, comprises a series of upholstered parts, backrests, partition walls and accessories that can be combined in multiple ways in order to create spaces for work, relaxation, privacy or socialising. Meanwhile Mobel Linea and Palmberg also have new ranges for configuring office spaces using modular elements to divide a wide variety of workspaces into zones.

Versatile all-rounders: multipurpose furniture

It's not just space which has to be multifunctional – furniture does too. Examples on display at Orgatec will include the Fundamentals cabinet system from Lande or the benches and stools in the 4SIX collection from SMV, which can be rearranged quickly and in many different ways. The models in the new Pontis Hypa range from ASSMANN Büromöbel, on the other hand, can be used as desks, seminar tables or bistro tables. Thanks to their rechargeable batteries, the tables are height-adjustable and their tabletops can be positioned vertically to serve as whiteboards. Through the use of magnetic supports, the Stay Agile whiteboards from Swiss manufacturer Adeco are as flexible as their name suggests and can even be used as meeting tables. The new, multifunctional Slide table system designed by the kaschkasch design studio for Renz is equally versatile – available in various heights, infinitely adjustable and mobile thanks to castors. The Mudra universal stacking chair, developed by Brunner in collaboration with designer Stefan Diez for offices, cafeterias or private homes, boasts a similar range of uses.

Naturally sustainable: eco-friendly materials

While the climate crisis played second fiddle to health services during the pandemic, it is now back to playing an important role in the workplace world. Manufacturers are increasingly focusing on recycling as well as environmentally-friendly and certified materials. For example, the new Green Eco chair, designed by Javier Mariscal and available from Spanish brand Mobles 114, is made entirely from recycled material and is also fully recyclable. The Arco collection of

seating from Cantarutti and the new Lina chair from Calligaris have received awards for their use of FSC-certified wood. Although still a vision of the future, Palmberg has designed a desk that is made entirely of locally-sourced organic wood and feeds solar energy and the waste heat generated by equipment back into the workplace's electrical ecosystem.

Circular models: cradle-to-cradle in the office

Many office manufacturers have committed to basing their product cycles on the cradle-to-cradle principle, marking a further decisive step towards sustainability. The new Lino range of chairs from Kinnarps, for example, conform to the circular economy idea. It comprises only a few components, which can be easily disassembled, replaced, separated and recycled. The A22 stackable barstool, designed by Swedish designer Anya Sebton for Lammhults, is based on a similar concept. To facilitate recycling, it is made entirely of steel and has no bolts or screws. The yarn and felt backing used for the new Shadowplay carpets by Ege Carpets have also been recycled and can be reused.

Green working environment: taking inspiration from nature

Well-being through biophilic design is an ongoing theme in the workplace world and there will be several examples at this year's Orgatec. Room dividers like Para Vert from Brunner bring vertical planting into the workplace, act as indoor air purifiers and can be extended as required. New colour collections for the office, such as Pigment from Alvic or Cinque Terre Colours & Natural from Fantoni, which are inspired by colours from the natural world, also convey a sense of being close to nature.

Cosy office furniture: the new at-home feeling

Even before the pandemic, work was already increasingly freeing itself from fixed locations. This trend has also blurred the boundaries between design for the office and the home. While homes have become offices, offices are visibly transforming into home-like feel-good zones. Soft shapes and warm colours define the new welcoming culture in the world of work. Furniture ranges like HomeLine from OKA combine office functions with homely design. The latest seating furniture – such as the ingLife office chair from Japanese manufacturer Kokuyo, the Alex lounge chair from BOS Barcelona or the Pottolo chair from French label Alki – also introduces a touch of cosy comfort into the office environment. With their elegant styling, these pieces are suitable for both

work and home. Fun and playful designs, such as the brightly coloured octopus-shaped Medusa stools from Dileoffice or the Pony chair-and-table combination from gumpo also promise to liven up office work. Even company bosses avoid hard edges these days. Recent executive collections like Blade X from Alea feature soft, dynamic lines and welcoming wood tones.

Office design for the home

We all got used to working from home during Covid-19, with many people retaining some element of home working. Manufacturers such as Alea, Humanscale and Wiesner- Hager have developed special furniture ranges for remote workers that meet ergonomic requirements as well as the need to fit into a home environment. As an alternative to the kitchen table, height-adjustable sit-stand solutions such as the Gravit iDesk from Kesseböhmer introduce ergonomics and individuality to working from home. The tabletop can be personalised with bespoke motifs. Models like Poppe Swifel from Bla Station or Woom Light from Klöber are functional items of office furniture and comfortable armchairs at the same time, making them suitable for sitting for extended periods in home offices. Woom Light features a moulded non-woven seat shell made from recycled PET bottles and an integrated reading light that creates an extra-cosy ambience. The Souly office chair from Nowy Styl, designed by Oscar Buffon, is another sustainable seating solution, the individual elements of which can be flexibly replaced.

Audible well-being: improving room acoustics

The more open and agile the office environment, the greater the need for products aimed at optimising acoustics. That's why companies like Strähle are offering customers the option to preview spatial acoustics by entering their own room data. Room-in-room systems, such as the extended Se:cube Max from Sedus, are suitable solutions for existing structures and are both acoustically and visually attractive. Inspired by Japanese interiors, the Zen Pod from Abstracta also creates acoustically shielded spaces that can be used for digital meetings, quiet conversations and work requiring full concentration. The Flexia lamp from Artemide also takes its inspiration from Japan, and its origami-influenced design absorbs sound from its surroundings. Solutions like Silento Screen from the Lanab Group, which can be set up quickly to create meeting zones or individual workstations in open-plan offices, are designed to help people focus in a busy environment. More compact options include seating modules like Mute Focus from Swedish manufacturer Horreds and the upholstered Buddyhub unit from Pedrali, both of which provide small acoustic islands that allow users to concentrate on work in open office landscapes.

Healthier workplaces: ergonomic and antiviral products

The pandemic has raised the profile of healthy workplaces and hygiene is now increasingly finding its way into office design. The spectrum of current solutions ranges from ergonomic furniture for the workplace to room ventilators and antiviral surfaces. The lamps from Italian manufacturer Artemide featuring Integralis technology disinfect the surfaces they illuminate, for example.

Alongside a packed educational programme, Orgatec is offering benefits that only an in-person event can bring – networking and socialising. Known for being the place to meet anyone who is anyone in the workplace design world, the fair will provide opportunities for people to catch up on the past few tumultuous years.

As part of the peer-to-peer networking, Orgatec is offering guided tours to highlight the different themes, put together by architects for architects. The tours give an overview of the fair's spectrum of products and services, and allow professionals to exchange ideas with each other on the key issues facing the sector – hybrid working, the green office and office design more generally.

This year's Orgatec follows the inaugural Orgatec Tokyo which saw over 20,000 visitors gathered to see the latest trends in hybrid workplace design and furniture from 80 brands from eight countries. The show made it clear that there's potential for growth in the Asian workspace industry.

When the office furnishings industry finally meets again in person at Orgatec in October, the discussion will not only illustrate the rapid pace of change in the world of work, they will also show the ongoing move towards healthy, sustainable and intelligently organised office environments. And the importance of in-person events for people to get together to talk and do business.