



Villa at Kimball's showroom in Chicago



Lounging Around

The office furniture industry is responding with a flood of new and innovative products that make office lounge spaces hum.

By Rob Kirkbride



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In the past, lounge areas of offices were all show and no go. Often, these were designer showpieces that were rarely used. What a difference technology and collaborative workstyles has made.

Over the last decade, the humble lounge has grown in importance. In many offices, the lounge has become the most sought after workspace -- inviting, comfortable and collaborative -- a definite departure from the cubicle culture.

And the office furniture industry is responding with a flood of new and innovative products that make office lounge spaces hum. It isn't an easy task. Designers still want to use lounge areas as their office showplaces. Yet the demands on the furniture have changed greatly. Lounges are no longer just for lounging around. They are de facto extensions of the greater office and they must function as such.

When designing lounge furniture, manufacturers must consider ergonomics, wire management and collaboration. So much for a simple sofa and a few side chairs. Blame it on the young generation of workers flooding offices around the world, said Keith Metcalf, senior industrial designer at Kimball Office who helped create the company's new Villa lounge furniture collection.

"A lot of the changes that we see going on seems to filter through younger generations based on the way they study and work, plus add to that technology," he said. "Technology has allowed us to get so mobile. It doesn't necessarily matter where you work. A lot of times what we'll see is people will take laptops and mobile devices and work in these mobile places. They are so much more laid back and they become so

much more productive because it is almost like they are back at home."

Kimball designed Villa to be everything to everyone. Designers get to create beautiful spaces that adapt to any environment and workers get comfortable, productive furniture. "Villa is a product that can be configured in any space you want," Metcalf said. "There are no restrictions. Customers say, 'We have a waiting area that needs an update.' Villa ties into the existing environment, but it can also do things like work around walls. Still, it is appealing to people who want to do heads down work and teaming, but in a little more relaxed environment."

Mike Keilhauer, president of Keilhauer, said he noticed a large emphasis on lounge furniture at Orgatec. European companies like Bene are producing striking lounge furniture that supports work and collaboration, but looks beautiful as well. It's Toguna piece, part of the new PARCS collection designed by Luke Pearson of PearsonLloyd, uses a circular, half-open shape that creates an acoustically screened, free-standing piece of furniture to be used in collaborative spaces.

Companies like Vitra and Dauphin also displayed new lounge furniture. "There's something going on," Keilhauer said of the change in lounge furniture. "I think what's happening is that our customers are trying to adapt workplaces to changing technology. Really, chairs and seating have been driven by technology since we started 30 years ago, from a secretary taking dictation to an iPad, iPhone and Blackberry where workspaces become more portable. It used to be you would work in an office and have a separate lounge area. Now



Keilhauer's Meet swivel chair

you can actually work in those teaming areas.”

Keilhauer created its Cahoots lounge furniture, launched at NeoCon, to address all the needs of the modern office lounge. Cahoots allows the lounge space to evolve as technology and workstyles change.

Lounge spaces have not eliminated the need for conference rooms, Metcalf said. The changing nature of work have created office spaces that blend a bit of everything. There might be a smattering of cubicles mixed with some lounge pieces and a few small private conference areas. “A lot of the changes you are seeing have to do with technology and space limitations,” Metcalf said. “Any square footage is money, so designers are watching how they lay out the space. When you mix the furniture, it allows different solutions for employees.

“You are seeing generations coming out of college nowadays who learned in teaming environments. That’s how work is being done today too. It is also opening the door to some of these lounge solutions. Lounges used to be used as an entrance way or decorative area. Now it is a workspace.”

Keilhauer said he sees the same trends affecting orders at his company. And the collaborative lounge areas aren’t just limited to creative firms like ad agencies and design houses. “All of our work is being driven by our thumbs now,” he said. “Accountants are working the same way as designers. If you look at lounges in the lobbies of buildings, you find people working away. Anywhere you go now can become a workplace. I’m finding it to be an interesting challenge. If people are doing work that intensely everywhere, how do you support that interaction. We can’t ignore technology. The rise of

devices like the iPhone and iPad, what does that mean?”

Kimball’s Villa and Keilhauer’s Cahoots both are based on the concept of modular building blocks of furniture where each piece has its own individual function, but all pieces can be combined to create flexible lounge landscapes.

“We didn’t just think about the spatial relationship between furniture and the space it inhabits,” said Gernot Bohmann, principal of EOOS, the firm that designed Cahoots for Keilhauer. “Our goal was to integrate social components in our design concept. The Meet chair (a triangular club chair) for example, is ideal for communicating in a small group of up to four people. If you place four Meet chairs in a square, you create a private environment, open to the people inside the circle, who are shielded from outside distractions.”

In contrast, the Work chair, when combined with the Notebook table, builds a place for concentration, ideal for single workers. Relax, an upholstered shell chair, works well for taking a break or for more casual seating when using a laptop or notebook computer.

Metcalf said Kimball wants to create lounge furniture that’s “upgradable.” “I wanted to develop a product that was sort of like building blocks,” he said. “I wanted our customers to be able to outfit a space with these shapes and sizes and arrangements so they can go around walls or any obstacles. Aesthetics of it feature simple, clean lines and this building block principle. That keeps it simple.”