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Another Dozen By The Davis Team
by Bob Beck

High Point, North Carolina is best known as the residential furniture capitol of America. But Davis Furniture Industries is doing its best to change that perception. It may not be able to make the area into the commercial furniture capitol, that title must remain in western Michigan by the sheer weight of volume, but Davis has built a strong reputation as one of the design leaders (perhaps the design leader) of the industry.

Over the last eight years, attendees at the Best of NeoCon breakfast have consistently (and in some years repeatedly) watched a representative of Davis march up to receive an award. In fact, since the early 1990’s Davis Furniture has won 27 Best of NeoCon Awards including two for Best of Competition: Zoom (1995) and Aero (2003). Many of their products have won numerous other awards including the prestigious Red Dot Product Design award in Europe.

We wondered what they had in store for NeoCon 2014, so we wangled an invitation to High Point for a sneak peak. We were not disappointed. We know more than a few manufacturers who wonder how they do it, and admittedly we were also intrigued. Not surprisingly we found that the secret to the company’s success isn’t a secret; it’s just that Davis has made design a core value and a differentiator. Their company slogan is Design is a Choice, and they’ve obviously made that choice.

However its true quest is to be as consistent as possible to a philosophy of the highest possible quality in every aspect of its business. We saw evidence of that commitment throughout the operation. Yet the folks there are humble about it; not thinking they’ve done it, but striving to do it.

When we asked Davis President, Danny Davis, for a comment on how they manage to consistently win so many design awards he said, “First it’s the team. And by the team I mean from my team here at Davis and our global design and manufacturing partners. Over the years we’ve grown together and have a deep understanding of one another and what Davis’s goals and standards of excellence are and we all work very hard to meet those goals and standards.

DANNY DAVIS
ROB EASTON
"The second thing is that we love the process of product design and development and we focus on it as a core competitive strength. Our team members in engineering and manufacturing understand that new products are key to our success, that it’s how we grow and thrive, so everybody up and down the company is aligned with that strategy. We all pull together to meet the challenges of launching an aggressive number of new products at NeoCon each year. We could never do it without that level of commitment.”

Last year Davis introduced a new division branded Davis Elements. We wondered how the collection has fared and whether the fates had decided it merited continuation. Mr. Davis said, “Elements has been even a bigger success than we’d hoped. In Europe a lot of companies have well designed accessories for the office that can also be useful at home. We noticed in our research that there seemed to be an opening for products like that here, and we haven’t been disappointed. In fact this year we’re extending the brand with new products and emphasizing that it is its own brand by publishing a separate book for Elements."

We got a preview of this year’s edition of the Elements book and a look at the additions to the line. We particularly liked three new occasional table families.

**Stem** designed by Jonathan Prestwich is a wonderful work of geometric 3-D art. Combining a bent steel rod base reminiscent of Bertoia or Noguchi with a sleek thin top in Davis quality veneer or a new solid surface material, it plays interesting tricks on your eye from every vantage point. It not only invites one to move it around, it almost demands it, as every move creates a new look.

**Poise** designed by Jehs+Laub is a lightweight laptop table that functions the way a laptop table should: it’s very light and easy to move around, it is stable when one is pounding on the keyboard, the offset base is designed to provide maximum top overlap or easy straddling. But to an inveterate product guy, the best thing about the table is the way it’s made. The extraordinarily slim stainless steel base is strong enough because of its cruciform structure, and while you see that it’s a long cruciform there’s nary a weld to be found. This is managed by some skilled welding and grinding but also by a precise laser-cut opening in the top plate that locks quite rigidly with the vertical stem even before it’s welded.
Tosca designed by Wolfgang C.R. Mezger is a visually interesting geometric study made the more interesting by the use of spun, lightweight concrete as its base. The base is hollow to achieve a weight appropriate for an occasional table and spun to assure a smooth bubble-free surface. As you would expect from a master designer like Mezger this is a finely tuned composition of forms.

The “big guys” of the industry can afford to do extensive field research on user behavior and engage specialists to study applications and changes in the market. Rob Easton, Vice President of Design and Development, gave us a tour of the war room where Davis researches products and applications. It evidenced impressive and extensive lab research done on a smaller-company budget, but very interesting and valid all the same.

Given its reputation for design excellence, Davis gets to see the work of a great many product designers, unsolicited. But Mr. Easton assured us that most of their winning products derive from exposing designers to the war room and to the unique manufacturing strengths of the company. He said, “We don’t write design briefs. If we’ve decided we want to work with a designer, whether that’s because of a design they brought us or because we seek them out because we admire their work, we bring them here and expose them to our research, to our thinking and to the way we manufacture furniture. Then they go away and bring their creativity to bear on the solutions we need so that Davis continues to be
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an important resource to the people specifying and using our products."

This year’s class of new products for the regular Davis catalog is as extensive as usual. In fact Davis has developed such a reputation for introducing quantity alongside their exceptional quality, we couldn’t resist asking Mr. Easton how many of their numerous product launches over the years are successful in the marketplace. He replied, "We fall in love with every new product we launch. If we don’t fall in love, we don’t launch. But when you introduce as many new products as we do, not all of them will make it in the marketplace. Obviously we think they will; we would not invest all of the thought and effort that we do to just throw things out there. But realistically, we know that some products won’t be a hit. So we have to be pretty disciplined about dropping products that aren’t selling well, whether that’s due to their age or to the fact that they just didn’t click with the market. The bottom line is we’re growing very well and new products are at the heart of our growth strategy.”

From an unusually large class of 2014, even by Davis standards, we picked four of our favorites to discuss here. But trust us, there will be more than four launched at NeoCon 2014, and we invite you to attend "The Show" to see and experience the whole class.

Over the last several years we’ve seen many companies introduce the singular lounge chair for use in casual meetings, brainstorm sessions and reception areas. It’s an interesting typology and it seems many of the top product designers are intrigued by the challenges it offers. In their design for the Ora Chair, Jehs + Laub saw an opportunity to scale-up the aforementioned stem-base design of the Poise table to support a unique and highly inviting chair made of concentric circles of upholstery. It’s playful and inviting and just as comfortable as it looks. In this case the laser-cut base is combined with a swivel mechanism that allows the user to move around in a most agreeable way.

This year you will see a number of new barstools added to the Davis Collection. Mr. Davis said this is a response to growing demand from the hospitality sector for distinctively designed barstools as they strive to differentiate. The Davis team called on Wolfgang C.R. Mezger to take on the challenge and his Circo Barstool is once again a lesson in design detail by a master designer in his prime. His artful combination of wood, metal and plastic presents each of those materials in its best light.

Since they previously solved the design problems associated with making tables of unbelievable “unsupported” length in the Span and Pratt tables, Davis turned Mr. Mezger to the problem of designing a leg that would equally defy the logic of leg strength requirements for a table of unbelievable, unsupported length. Minimalists are going to love the Apex Table line. In addition to the usual Mezger detail refinement, it includes many shapes that do not defy belief; that are just very functional in the normal way.

Markus Dörner has made a point of learning the intricacies of wood joinery in furniture. His Rhombus Chair illustrates well what can be done. Combine a gorgeous double tenon, solid wood base with an artful juxtaposition of rhomboid shapes and you get an intriguing combination of modern tech and old world craftsmanship. And the molded seat and back structure provides just enough spring action to make this a truly comfortable side chair.
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*Side-by-Side* is an extensive program of modular lounge seating that builds a large number of permutations from a relatively simple set of building blocks. The smooth curvature of the seat and back design seamlessly curves from the back to the side in right or left modules. The base can be spec’d as a single, double or triple width and together with several arm/back height options offers a full-on program for public and collaborative spaces.

If these sneak peaks have piqued your interest, please visit the expanded and redesigned Davis showroom at NeoCon 2014. We think you will enjoy the show.

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