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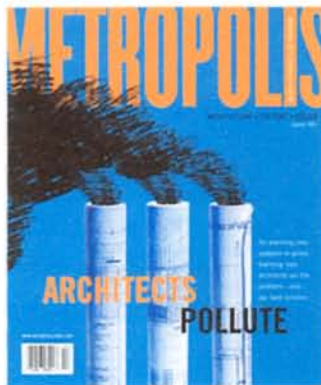
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Urban Journal

IIDEX 2003 Proves Gem of a Trade Show

By Yetta Starr
Urban Journal

The northern sister of NeoCon World's Trade Fair-Chicago, IIDEX/NeoCon Canada is an annual two-day event concentrating on interior design products and services. Established in 1984, the trade show was held in Toronto at the National Trade Centre building from Sept. 18-19 and brought together over 350 exhibitors and 14,000 visitors.

One of the most refreshing aspects of this year's IIDEX was the deliberate allocation of thematic spaces within the exhibit hall. Among the specialty clusters, Retail on Display stood out, providing a crisp white backdrop for visual merchandising options and store design. Möller Leather Flooring was one of the area's notable vendors; the company used the design conference to launch its exquisite wood-backed modular leather tile. Möller principal Norman Möller explained that the tile system is not only beautiful, but also practical, for it incorporates raw material with installation technique, resolving any potential application inconsistencies.

Another outstanding cluster was the sustainable practice products. Doubling in size from the previous year, this area featured more than 60 exhibitors dedicated to eco-friendly manufacturing and services. Several of the regular environmental advocates were positioned in the GREENlife area, including Interface Flooring/Fabrics Groups and the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC); however, the expanded space allowed for new resources, including Century Wood Products, a remarkable company that reclaims aged wood from vintage buildings. Having somewhat stumbled into existence five years ago, the result of overseas demand for aged North American lumber, Century now kiln-dries and mills soft and hardwood species to order.

Although usual suspects such as Herman Miller and Steelcase were represented at IIDEX, they were without the exuberance and fan fare that accompanies new products. Instead, lesser known manufacturers like Metalumen--known for its advanced photometric engineering and distinguished fixture designs--provided the innovations. The family-owned business (which recently tackled the photometric refurbishment of the Toronto-Dominion Centre, a significant dual tower design by Mies van der Rohe) added to its linear fluorescent lighting systems with Frain and Weblight, two new entries in its Regiolux Line. While Frain offers an ultra-thin 5/8" (16mm) visible profile with varied light levels for an unobtrusive functional application, Weblight introduces a free-form pendant fixture with a delicate wire frame that wraps around a polycarbonate diffuser.

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Photo by Yetta Starr

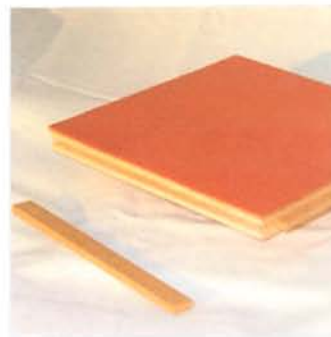


Photo by Yetta Starr

IIDEX's organizers also took the time to honor local roots with "Catapult: Launching Canadian Design to the World." A curated exhibition celebrating Canuck design and manufacturing, the exhibit profiled seven Canadian firms, including Crinion Associates and Scot Laughton Design (both based in Toronto) and KARO Design (based in Vancouver). The exhibit was a welcome departure, as it allowed conference-goers to view exquisite objects and mingle with the talent that produced them. In addition, the exhibition was a nudge to re-consider the value of those companies' previous designs, including the Gazelle indoor/outdoor chair created by Jonathan Crinion nearly fifteen years ago, or the more recent Jube Jube light by Scot Laughton.



Despite all of the items on view, IIDEX was not only about production and consumption. Indeed: In his keynote speech, environmentalist, explorer, and filmmaker Jean-Michel Cousteau implored attendees to utilize their creative problem-solving skills as designers and manufacturers to help reverse a disregard for the environment and natural life-supporting systems. After a presentation about the beautiful coral reefs that, world-wide, are being devastated by waste, he offered a note of hope: These fragile eco-systems might be saved if action and continual care are taken by the international community.

In all, IIDEX 2003 was wonderful and unusual. Whereas trade fairs usually focus on individual manufacturers, IIDEX grouped information and items, so that the attendee could easily maneuver between themes and products. With such an organizational structure in place, it was a pleasure to explore topics as diverse as sustainability and Canadian design, and merchandise that ranged from lighting to tile and marble flooring. It's a shame that many expositions lack this cohesiveness, instead offering individualized components--seminars, special events, work sessions, and layers of products--that are not related in any clear way. Those trade fairs should take a cue from this gem of a show.