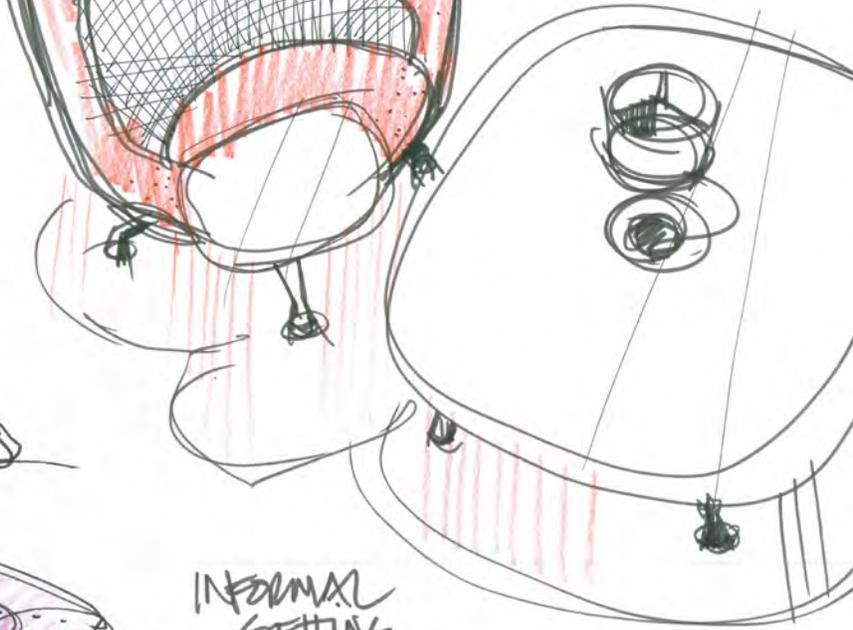
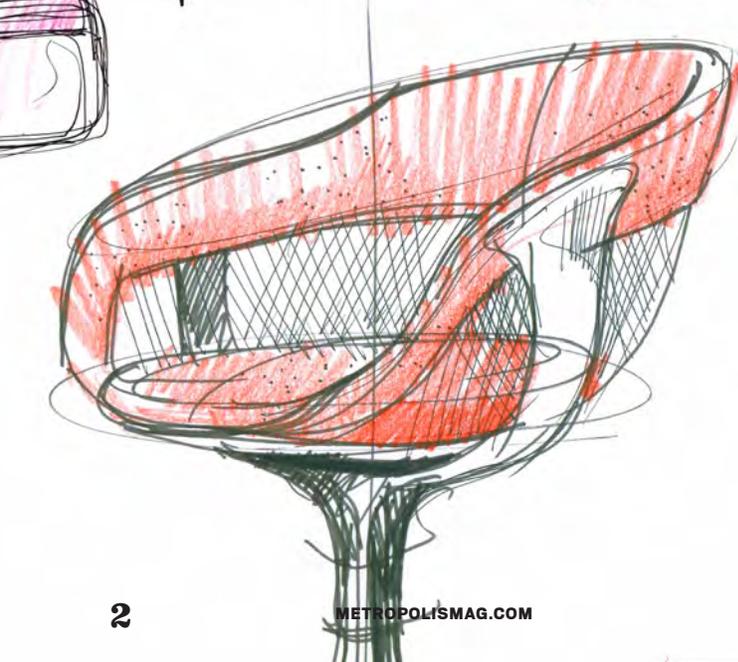
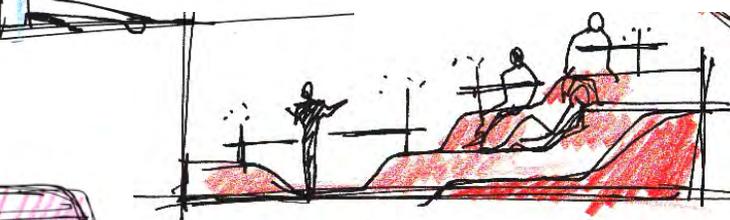
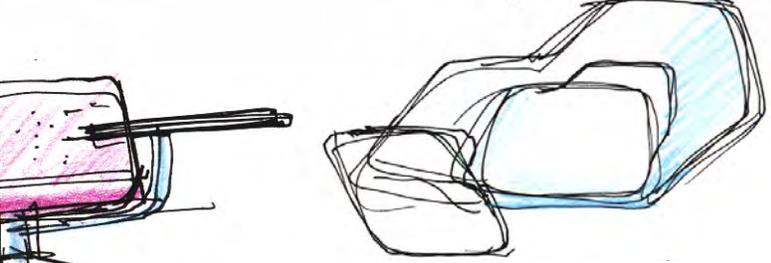
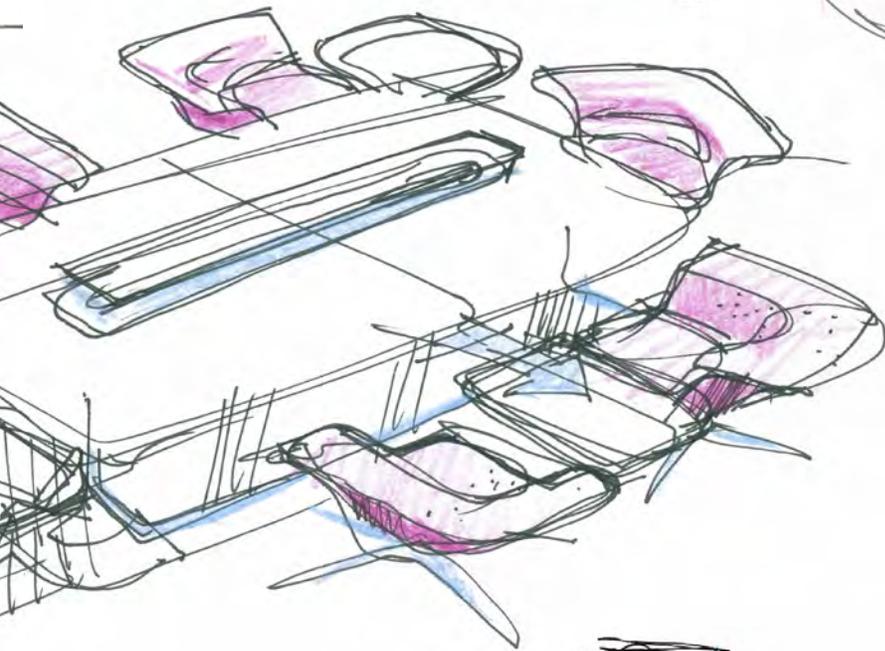


METROPOLIS

by
**Martin C.
Pedersen**

Corporate

**CULTURE
SHIFT**



Designed with the creative worker in mind, Coalesse's new SW_1 line embodies the changing nature of the office.

How does the prospect of an all-day meeting strike you? If you're the type of worker who emerged in the new millennium—a project-based team member with colleagues in different cities and time zones—it probably seems perfectly normal. Face-to-face “idea creation” meetings are routinely daylong affairs. But the traditional conference room—a rectangle dominated by a long table and high-back chairs—wasn't conceived for these loose, lengthy, collaborative gatherings. It's something of a relic (as old as the office itself), largely intended for short catch-ups. For many creative organizations, meetings today are less a rote recitation of information and a series of dreary PowerPoint presentations than a messy exchange of half-formed ideas. This cultural shift was the impetus for SW_1, a new line of conference-room furniture from Coalesse, designed by Scott Wilson.

The Wilson collection, debuting this month at NeoCon, is a logical extension of the Coalesse brand, which, since its formation by Steelcase in 2007, has

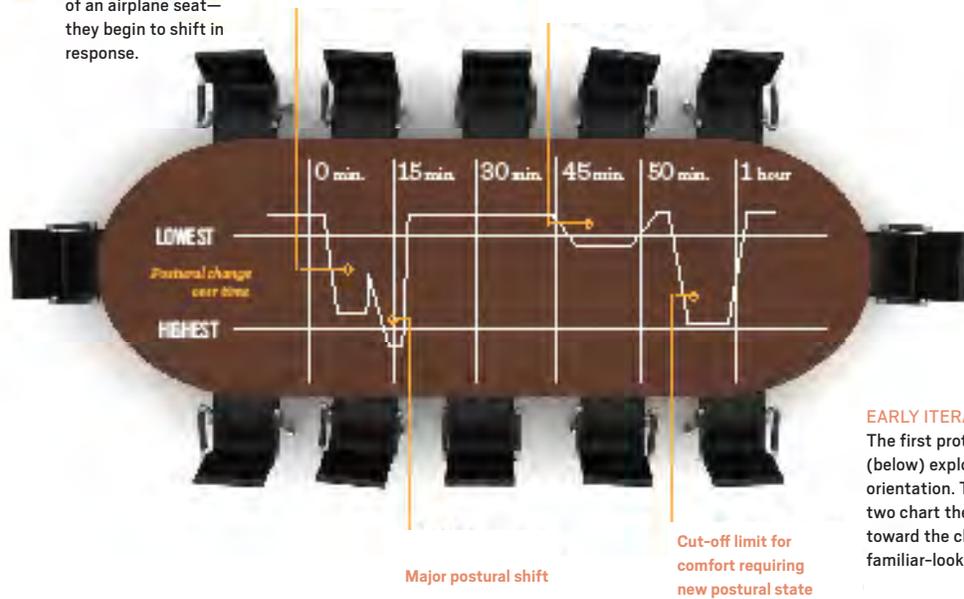
Left: The SW_1 collection was designed to support the relaxed postures assumed in long meetings. **Background:** Exploratory sketches by Scott Wilson, who designed the collection.

POSTURE SHIFTS

Early in meetings, people are highly active. When sitters are restricted—think of an airplane seat—they begin to shift in response.

Series of micro movements

Discomfort begins as ergonomics break down



“The reality was, people were working in coffee shops, airports, hotels, and they were picking up a flavor of what they liked and didn’t like in those spaces.”

been fueled by a straightforward premise: because technology now allows people to do their jobs anywhere they want, the workplace is (slowly) evolving into a hybrid space combining elements of office and home. “For years we said that was going to happen,” says Jason Heredia, Coalesse’s vice president for marketing. “And the reality was, people were working in coffee shops, airports, hotels, and they were picking up a flavor of what they liked and didn’t like in those spaces, and bringing those expectations back to the primary work space and asking, ‘Why can’t we do that here?’”

To begin design development, Coalesse tapped into existing research, which told them that a meeting’s length

EARLY ITERATIONS

The first prototype (below) explored body orientation. The other two chart the progress toward the chair’s familiar-looking form.



often determines its social characteristics. The most common business gathering, the daily or weekly 10 a.m., for example, is essentially a progress report. It’s about exchanging facts, figures, dates, times—what the Japanese business theorist Ikujiro Nonaka calls “explicit knowledge”—and the dominant physical posture is leaning forward, usually in a task chair. “It’s our premise that those meetings are under attack,” says Robert Arko, creative director at Coalesse. “They’re the most common meeting by far, but more and more of them are being replaced by technology.” Longer meetings, on the other hand, tend to have a strong conversational component, especially for creative organizations. There is an element of play involved. “When you have your three-hour planning meeting, people are in a lean-back mode,” Arko says. His own experience led him to conclude that traditional conference-room furniture didn’t support the relaxed and passive postures typical of “longer-duration, social-dominant meetings.”

On paper, Wilson was a somewhat curious choice for the assignment. The 41-year-old’s industrial-design firm, Minimal, based in Chicago, doesn’t specialize in furniture. It more often works for the likes of Microsoft—the Xbox account is one of its biggest—Nike, and Motorola, creating the gadgets and gears of the digital world. He could conceivably build an entire practice

LOUNGE AND SLIDING TABLET

The lounge sits away from the table to allow people to lean back. The work tablet also lets them subtly separate themselves from a meeting.



USER NEEDS

Coalesse asks designers to do a “total user-need assessment,” taking into account body position, work surfaces, storage needs, and technical support.



Information graphics redrawn by Kendall Tynes



Scott Wilson freely admits to getting inspiration for the lounge chair from two iconic pieces: Knoll's Womb chair (for comfort and style) and Herman Miller's Aeron chair (for task-chair capabilities).

“Eventually, we dialed it back to something that was a little bit more acceptable but had a unique presence when you walked into the room.”

MATERIALS

The chair is basically a single piece of polyester knit stretched over a tubular-steel frame and polyurethane padding.



around cell phones and gaming devices. But Arko—who considers himself a “casting director” and prides himself on identifying new talent—was intrigued by something else. Wilson had at one point designed a conference-room phone. “He’d done work around this activity but from a different lens, and I loved that idea,” Arko says. Wilson was also, like Arko and the Coalesse team, a walking focus group, a designer who had lived the problem, spending much of his professional life with his laptop open, leaning awkwardly across conference-room tables for hours at a time.

During the first phase of design, which began in 2007, Arko asked Wilson (and a competing firm) to simply explore an idea: What might a conference room that blended aspects of work and home look like? Wilson sketched dozens of scenarios, envisioning different chair and table heights, furniture relationships, and spatial configurations. It was a kind of visual brainstorm that created a template for the eventual design. “A bunch of sketches went pretty far out there, looking at the typology of seating surfaces, work surfaces, and a dual functionality of both,” Wilson says. “Eventually, we dialed it back to something that was a little bit more acceptable but had a unique presence when you walked into the room.”

That presence Wilson refers to is an intimate one, and he achieved it by lowering the table about three inches below standard conference-room-table height, creating a welcoming visual cue. “One little piece of research we found was, sitting cross-legged on the floor is considered the most committed



posture,” Heredia says. “We wanted to leverage that ‘proximity to the floor equals intimacy’ equation.” He calls the Wilson table “Japanese-ceremonial-tea height.” The accompanying chair is, appropriately, a mash-up of a lounge and task chair—think of it as the Womb meets the Aeron. “It definitely pays homage,” Wilson concedes. Ironically, the table’s defining feature is optional: a sliding tablet that allows people to pull back from meetings—to check e-mails, surf the Web, or write. It creates zones of privacy without anyone ever having to leave the room.

For Wilson, a self-proclaimed “tech guy,” the fabrication process was refreshingly tactile. “There’s only so much you can do digitally before you have to get real with the materials, which is what I love about

“One little piece of research we found was, sitting cross-legged on the floor is considered the most committed posture. We wanted to leverage that ‘proximity to the floor equals intimacy’ equation.”



furniture,” he says. The chair is essentially a single piece of polyester knit wrapped tightly over a steel frame and polyurethane padding. “You get the natural tensile structure just by the pattern of the knit. Once you’ve got the right proportions for the chair, you begin doing multiple iterations. The first one is always big and sloppy. Then you say: ‘OK, I have to shorten up the distance between x and y in order to get more lumbar support; y doesn’t have enough tension from top to bottom.’ And you keep dialing it in.”

The short-term prospects for the Wilson collection—along with pretty much everything else in the commercial building sector—aren’t all that great. The long-term trends, however, appear a lot more promising. While SW_1 is clearly aimed at creatives—advertising agencies, design firms, Web sites—meeting rooms, even at the stuffiest companies, are getting smaller and more informal. “Almost every one of our clients, including our investment-banking and law-firm clients, have conference rooms that are more loungelike,” says Todd DeGarmo, CEO of Studios Architecture. “That’s probably a generational thing, because you have a whole group of workers now who pretty much have only worked with mobile technology. So the idea of walking over and sitting on a sofa with a laptop with a couple of other people isn’t alien to them.”

SW_1, which has one foot planted firmly in the contract-furniture world and another tentatively dipping into hospitality, doesn’t radically rethink the conference room. It’s more important, perhaps, for what it reveals about the changing nature of work and the ultimate role of the office—the physical place, not the virtual one. “Historically, offices have been containers for machines and data,” says Daniel H. Pink, whose 2005 book, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, influenced the Coalesse creative team during the formation of the brand. “You went to the office because that’s where the machines were. Then you went to the office because that’s where the data was. But when people can carry around the machines and the data is in the cloud, the question becomes: why even go to an office? You go to an office to be interrupted. You go to randomly run into colleagues. You go to the office to collaborate.” ■



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