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JRB STUDIO: ANIMATE+ BY TOM NEWHOUSE

Tom Newhouse & Animate+

by Peter Otterstrom

Tom Newhouse and I met in the 70's when we both worked for Herman Miller in Zeeland, MI, during the explosive development days of open plan systems furniture. Since then, Mr. Newhouse has been deeply involved in the

design, evolution and relevance of office environments. His product designs have earned 28 design awards and a long list of speaking engagements in the U.S. and 10 foreign countries. This is a man dedicated to the actual working needs of the user and the facility manager, but more than that, he is very concerned about preserving the health of both worker and world.

At **NeoCon WTF 2012**, his design for Baker Manufacturing and JRB Studio, **Animate+**, won the Best of NeoCon Gold in the height adjustable table category. It's winning attribute is its ability to function as a more system-type or grouped collection of height adjustable workstations, rather than simply as free-standing items. We had a chance to chat at this year's NeoCon. Here is some of what he had to say.

OI: What do you like most about being a successful designer?

TN: Successful designer? Well, I like mostly being a designer. It's always been my passion to be an artistic person in the interesting profession of industrial design. The success I think had to be earned. I was fortunate to work with several great designers in my early career and I think it rubbed off a little. I work in many product sectors. Contract office contract furniture is a good quality one. Decision makers care about durability and sustainability, so I'm loving it. This might be my fortieth NeoCon! I lived in England for two years so I might have missed a couple of them in the 1980s.



TOM NEWHOUSE AT HERMAN MILLER IN THE 70S

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OI: Were you designing things in England?

TN: Yes, I was consulting with Herman Miller-Europe. By then, the early 1980s, I had set up my own design studio in Grand Rapids. The European experience provided a great expansion of my knowledge of contract furniture for the office environment. There were no systems in Europe like Action Office and all those panel based types of solutions. Desk-based workstations were the norm there and I learned about freestanding open office furniture.

OI: And back in our Herman Miller days, what was your part in designing Herman Miller systems?

TN: I was very fortunate to join Herman Miller right out of the University of Michigan. I worked there for six years, the first three years in the corporate facilities design group working for **Bob Blaich**. There really weren't HMI openings for staff industrial designers but I guess Bob believed in me and asked "can you do interior design, space planning, showroom design and exhibit design?" I said yes! So for three years I designed HMI showrooms and offices all over the U.S and Europe, working with **Fred McConkey** and others. This early experience gave me a good awareness of what the emerging open office paradigm was all about. I studied the end user's space planning needs and learned how to space plan whole open office floor plates.

The second three years at HMI I worked for **Bob Propst** on the Action Office design team. **Charles** and **Ray Eames**, **George Nelson** and **Alexander Girard** were still visiting Zeeland in emeritus design consulting roles during that period. I had the opportunity to work directly with Charles and Ray Eames, and Alexander Girard on exhibitions of their later work. That was a very fortunate start to a career.

OI: Well how did you get started with Baker Manufacturing and the JRB Studio creating the Animate+ project?

TN: When I went on my own in 1978 my first consulting project was assisting **Bill Stumpf** and **Don Chadwick** on a desk system idea as a counterpoint to the cube farms. (I probably shouldn't be using the word **cube farms**, but the term has stuck now, in the panel-based system world.) **Hugh DePree** (President of Herman Miller) and **Tom Pratt** (Director of Marketing) asked Bill and Don to design a new HMI line. The question was, could we do a non-panel based alternative? It was either that or HMI was going to have all of their products in one very large basket with Action Office. By then Propst was getting less and less interested in all of this; he wanted to go off and do his own stuff and modular homes and he had moved to Seattle.

I ended up as the junior under Bill Stumpf and Don Chadwick and I was asked to move to Europe to work on the desk-based open plan workstation solution; Bill and Don didn't want to move at that time. I had a wife and a small baby, but I locked my studio and we moved to England for a full year and then on and off for two more years. I learned a lot about the cool stuff going on in European office space planning. It was a different set of hot buttons; it was a table desk-based world. The Europeans never embraced the panel system.

Ultimately, I did the Newhouse Group free standing desk line for Herman Miller; this was in the later 80s. Then for a time I did less office furniture, primarily designing a wide variety of major appliances for Viking Range, then turning to LED lighting. About twelve years ago I started working with Baker Manufacturing designing height-adjustable tables to be blended into other manufacturer's office systems environments. Baker is just great at building contract tables, the tops and the frames and the up and down motion control with pins, cranks, electric actuators and counter balance. For the last decade, Baker has been an alliance partner with Herman Miller, supplying a key ergonomic upgrade, the sit-to-stand or crank adjustable table, into Herman Miller environments. The alliance has been quite successful.

A little over two years ago Baker's President **Charles Martin** asked me a very interesting and exciting question, "What would I design if I had a blank slate and could create an ultra ergonomic workstation "concept car" that would point Baker Manufacturing into the future, something that could shown to the public in less than 3 months at NeoCon 2011!

OI: Now you had to actually build something?

TN: Oh yeah. He gave me all the resources I needed. I worked with **Roger Arnold**, Chief Engineer and Product Development Director in Louisiana, and we cranked out **Presto** (the concept car code name for Animate). There were a lot of quips about *Presto Change-O*, etc. So we built what you might call a show pony, pointing to what ergonomics revved-up for groups of users could be, and this was shown at NeoCon 2011 and well received. Nobody really had done that deep of a dive into full sit-to-stand systems-like work settings, where you can build from a single free standing workstation to four-packs, six-packs, eight-packs, etc.



TOM NEWHOUSE

So, about three hundred and sixty-five days ago, Charles said to me, "Now you have to re-design Presto for

production and it has to be economical, beautiful, sustainable and ready to launch at NeoCon 2012! One year later



ANIMATE+



ANIMATE+

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Animate emerged. Presto show pony was possible but too expensive. It also had a flaw: it was built around a beam that everything had to be fastened to, so it took a long time to put together and take apart.

The key in the next design iteration is that all of Presto's functionality could be obtained starting with a simple height-adjustable table platform with a vertical dovetail slot in the proprietary aluminum leg that things can be fastened to. We now have a smarter table that nobody else has. You can have a fixed height or a pin adjustment, which are very economical, or a crank that's created for adjusting multi-shift seated work, or a new generation of electric sit-to-stand height actuators. So now we have a state-of-the-art, unique looking table that is very highly tooled. Baker invested heavily in die cast aluminum feet, the extruded dovetail column, and the injection molded trim caps. Animate uses height actuators from proven actuator vendors and Baker manufactures everything else for Animate in-house.

That's Animate. **Animate+** is only about a couple of dozen more parts and we can reproduce four-packs, six-packs and eight-pack layouts with a fraction of the parts-count of panel systems. In a sense it's me making amends for past sins, because facility managers don't want thousands of loose parts in their back room.

I love the term **Oliver Wendell Holmes** used which is "simplicity on the far side of complexity." So I strive to solve the design problem better than it's ever been solved, but with fewer parts, lower cost and inherent beauty. I've always been a very green designer, so sustainable design is something I always strive for as well. My logo is four squares, indicating aesthetics, sustainability, ergonomics and economy. All Baker and JRB Studio products are Green Guard certified and BIFMA *level* certified.

OI: And durability?

TN: Animate+ is very robust and durable. I always design for ease of assembly and disassembly with a Cradle to Cradle materials-use philosophy. The contract furniture world is great because it cares about durability and it has long product warranties, all cool stuff. So what is Animate+? It's a new, affordable **system alternative** with relatively few parts, that revs-up ergonomics so that people can healthfully sit and stand during the day. And the Animate+ **FlexCableways** can manage all the cords that have to go up and down. With the "sit and stand" footrest, and soft add-on comfort edges, we have really raised the bar on ergonomics. Users now have more choices for how they stay healthy at work.

Sitting and standing during the day, instead of just sitting, is brilliant. Most office workers cannot or do not want to stand all day, but sitting all day is pretty debilitating, even in the best ergonomic chair. It's a sedentary activity; you should get up and move, the torso should move and the spine should move.

OI: What mistakes are being made in systems proliferation?

TN: The evolution away from the cubicle or the panel-based cube farm to benching and what I call the low-slung open office workstation stuff is interesting. Low-slung can be fine; it's cool to have natural light. I love that. What I really don't like is the giant bench, aircraft carrier, *super* tables. They are dumb, really expensive, not moveable and not height adjustable. That doesn't seem to be going in the right direction to me. Its fixed height and it doesn't have privacy, other than, maybe, a low screen between you and your peers. The benching extreme of these low-slung workstations doesn't solve many work-related problems. It looks cool, and it photographs cool. But, move people in, get their technology



ANIMATE+



ANIMATE+

and junk all over the place, it looks like hell. No tackability, no marker boards, no stuff that really functions for people and very few work tools.

Then you get into the new, case-goods based hybrids...lots of parts, some casegoods, some cobbled together low panels, it's kind of a weird blend, and surprisingly complicated. At least with the old Action Office idea, it was a coherent set of mechanics.

OI: How did you decide on the key capabilities for Animate+?

TN: There are always constraints. With Baker and JRB Studio, the core competency is metal bending, metal welding, assembly, mechanical sophistication, motion control and making tops, basically making sophisticated tables. This helped me to conceive of the table-based Animate+ work settings. I built on that.

The human visual sense is the most powerful; you can seduce specifiers with a great looking product, but it must function or the users will eventually hate it. I think we have a good balance in Animate+. Getting the **Best of NeoCon Gold Award** for Animate+ certainly felt good after an intense product development year.

OI: What kind of changes or additions do you expect from Animate+ in the next few years?

TN: Our design and development team is working on more work support solutions, work tools and privacy options. We'll expand beyond the ergonomic workstation into complementary areas in the open office and private office. There'll be more and smaller storage units and devices to handle technology and cabling. My other passion is LED lighting fixtures. We still need a pool of personal light that can be adjusted, so you can read the little print, the hard copy. LED illumination is ultra compact, super efficient, extremely durable and mercury free.

OI: What about sound control?

TN: Short of bringing back the Dilbert cubical days with lots of 80" tall acoustic panels, you can do very little with furniture. Even when all of those panels were high NRC fabric-covered things, you still had sound control problems in the office. You can do almost no acoustic tuning with furniture elements.

The ceiling is most important, the carpet second. Sound masking can make a good contribution to speech privacy.

OI: Do you anticipate anything radically different in the furnishings of the future?

TN: Much of the future seems to be in technology. Communication devices continue to shrink and become embedded. There's a wrist iPhone, the iPad and other tablets and ultraportable computers. Whole glass walls are coming with embedded technology. Press a button and a large glass wall could turn white. You'll be able to draw on it, have still and video images fly in on it. The walls of your office, your conference room, your collaborative areas will be digital displays and so on. You be looking at your peers anywhere in the world through the virtual wall, and in three dimensions.

As an industrial designer the future is scary. Will I be needed anymore if much of what is needed is in the software, including interaction design of how you touch and gesture. I live in the world of three-dimensions and real goods.

OI: What are your overarching thoughts about the universe of design?

TN: First I want to complement the contract furniture industry for its relatively early acceptance of sustainability. I wish it had happened even sooner. I was a dedicated tree hugging, green designer when I got out of the University of Michigan in 1972. At that

time there was little awareness in the A&D community about environmental sustainability and ecological design issues. Finally, in the 90's, our industry became interested in green buildings. I know some of the people that formed the USGBC and LEED. Several of them were from Western Michigan and helped write the LEED standards and such. I'm really complimenting the U.S. contract furniture industry's contribution, half of which is located in a twenty mile radius from where I live and work in Grand Rapids.

This "greening" has been very helpful in my design studio practice. It is no longer a battle for me to do "green" contract furnishings industrial design. In fact, I hardly ever see anybody completely clueless in the contract furniture world. There are still many residential furniture companies that are clueless, so I haven't had many residential furniture clients. The negative side of our industry is what is sometimes an overemphasis on "looking cool," leaving facility managers and users with functionally deficient equipment and designs.

I will always be critical of those who just want the cool look and don't deep dive into the user's functional needs. Solve the problem deeply; someone is going to live and work there. ■

Websites:

<http://www.thomasjnewhouse-design.com/>

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