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STEELCASE TORONTO: CUSTOMER OASIS

Steelcase Toronto Showroom

by David Lasker

'Twas the night before IIDEX, last month, when all through **Steelcase's** new, 9,600 sq.-ft. house, hundreds of creatures were stirring at the showroom's opening-night party.

The big gold numbers on the travertine-clad lobby stop at "23," but by special arrangement with building management at Toronto's Sun Life Centre, two elevators now go a storey higher to access a new address: Suite 2400. Steelcase occupies what was formerly wasted mechanical penthouse space, with a fabulous view, on prime real estate

at King Street West (one streetcar stop from the big bank towers at King and Bay) and University Avenue, the city's main processional axis.

To call the space a showroom, implying a static display of attractive office furniture, doesn't do justice to the more ambitious mandate implied in the name of the space: **WorkLife Toronto**. The launch-party invitation describes this as a place that "brings technology and the future of the workplace to the forefront with its expansive digital and virtual experiences."



ELEVATOR LOBBY



CUT OUT IN ELEVATOR LOBBY WALL

The space does double duty as a working Steelcase office, showing that the company walks the talk. In this way, visitors from the A&D community can learn about and get fired up by Steelcase's latest ideas on the workplace, its furnishings and technology.

A feeling of eager anticipation mounts in the elevator lobby as one walks toward its focal point, a dramatic cut-out in a tall, sculptural wall segment, exploiting the floor's 23-foot height, framing a preview of the showroom floor. The showroom design is by Toronto's **Superkül Architect** working in conjunction with Steelcase's Global Design Team.

Rounding the entry corner, we encounter the hospitality lounge-like Customer Oasis, a showcase for Steelcase's media:scape with HD videoconferencing. Clearly, we're not in office-furniture Kansas anymore, Toto.

Banquettes – pardon me, media:scape TeamTheater setting units with ledges – are arrayed around a lounge-height coffee table. The table has a media well with power and easy-to-use, hockey-puck-like data connectors that link your personal device (laptop, tablet, smart phone) to the pair of monitors on the facing wall. Right now, the monitors crawl with a three-ring circus of images, including Steelcase's introduc-

tory brand video running in an endless loop, and numerous Twitter feeds.

We pause to enjoy the breakfast buffet of mini-quiches and fresh fruit as we're greeted by Steelcase Canada's **Stav Kontis**, Manager, Brand Communications; and **Lisa Snucins**, Regional Sales Manager; Architecture, Design and Real Estate Community. They paint the big picture of what Steelcase sees as its mandate, then lead us on a tour of the premises.

OI: How does your Toronto showroom link to the brand message Steelcase wants to share?

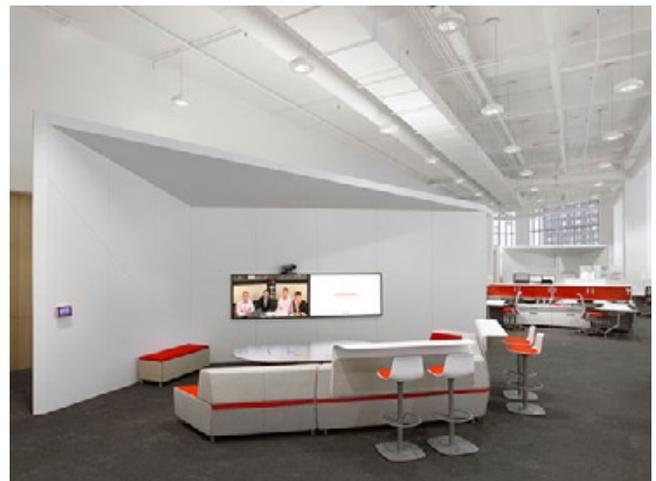
SK: The messaging happens on different levels, from product differentiation and personal use by our own staff, to creating a place that the design community can visit and leverage for their own purposes to help shape their clients thinking. We think of this as an inspirational space that designers can bring people to, but also one that



NODE CHAIR WITH VIDEO CONFERENCING AREA BEYOND



ENTRANCE



CUSTOMER OASIS

supports what we are trying to do from a research perspective.

As much or more than anyone in the industry, we invest in research in understanding how people work. In the product development cycle, we look at how that product supports work, not just how beautiful the product is. This is a point of differentiation for Steelcase.

We offer customers a series of tools to ensure workplace satisfaction. We're leveraging the work environment to help customers attract, retain and develop the right talent to their organization.

People can work anywhere, from home, hotel room or airport, but we want them to come to the office. The work environment should draw them

in. People work best when they're interacting with other people, so if the workplace attracts people and draws them into the building, you will get a better outcome.

OI: What you're saying jibes with Yahoo's famous 2012 memo telling all its remote employees that they needed to work in company offices or quit. [Yahoo HR head Jackie Reses wrote, "Being a Yahoo isn't just about your day-to-day job, it is about the interactions and experiences that are only possible in our offices."]

SK: You can work at home in your pajamas all day, but without sharing your ideas, you won't get the best ideas.

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OI: We're in the Customer Oasis now, and it feels more like sitting in someone's living room than an office meeting room.

SK: Every space here is a destination that someone will go to for a specific reason. In this one, we are leveraging video conferencing and how you connect with teammates over the world. This is as close as you can be, face to face, without being there.

LS: The media:scape provides a much better experience of connecting virtually with a team member on the other side of the world than you can get at home. We have a bigger and higher-resolution screen and great bandwidth, so your face-time meetings won't drop off in the middle of a call.

Building brand and culture is another workplace issue. This space supports that. The screens show Twitter and Facebook feeds with news about what's happening with Steelcase around the world. Toronto may be a small office compared to Grand Rapids, but we all share the same values.

Sitting here and watching those feeds is a passive way to get information on the company culture. We have internal blogs and sites to get this information, but people don't have time to do that. So just by having a coffee, you will say: "Oh, I see, it's sunny in DC, Gensler did something with our Washington office"; or events in Toronto, "We opened our showroom." People outside Toronto can see what's happening here.

OI: How do the various display areas in this showroom interrelate?

LS: This is as much a working environment as a showroom. It helps our customers envision how they can work in the space while supporting the way that we as a global organization work.

In an interconnected workplace, we may share many spaces throughout the day, whether in space for individuals, such as workstations or a



CUSTOMER OASIS

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private office, or in shared spaces like a café, training room or lounge. We want to offer users control and choice throughout the day about where and how they work.

For instance, in a workstation in an open area, I might not be able to focus on writing a report or making a phone call, so we need to provide a touch-down space or a focus room.

OI: "Focus room?" That's new to me. It's a good term. Very expressive.

LS: I just made it up. People need to be supported through four different modes of work: focus, learning, collaborating and socializing. We will show you examples from each of these quadrants that offer users a palette of spaces throughout their day. [Ed. Actually, those are the work nodes identified by Gensler in its Workplace studies.]



HEADS DOWN FOCUS AREA



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For instance, for “focus,” maybe they need an enclave, or a door, or somewhere with no visual access, for doing heads-down work.

SK: You won’t put the focus area right next to the customer hospitality area right at the beginning of our tour; rather, you want it at the perimeter, where people go away to stay away but still be in close proximity to other people.

“Collaboration” means many things. We put it into three categories: **supportive, evaluative and generative.** “Supportive” may be leader-led by someone who has more information than the others, and who is sharing that information.

In “evaluative,” people have to make a decision. The tools vary depending on whether the group is leader led. For example, I can plug my laptop into a media:scape and show everyone what I’m typing, or a video. The person sitting next to me can do so, too, simultaneously [on the adjacent screen]. Our group can compare and contrast those presentations and make decisions faster, or make better decisions, by seeing both screens concurrently.

The third category is “generative,” when a group comes together to create information. The types of tools and behavior are different. Everyone in the group needs the ability to share and toggle between digital and analogue. For instance, people will sketch and scribble, then, look up something on Google.

SK: We have smart whiteboards for brainstorming, which then capture the information digitally.

OI: Why do companies need new collaborative spaces? They already have boardrooms with nice big tables that everyone can gather ‘round.

LS: Many boardrooms don’t have whiteboards or the ability to project images, or have tabletop power and data

connections. We don’t want to plug our devices [laptop, tablet, smart phone] into the wall because stretched-out cords inhibit people from walking around the table and sharing.

SK: Our research has found that most collaboration takes place in

groups of three to six. The giant table doesn’t lend itself to this kind of collaboration. It’s mostly good just for informative meetings, such as when the board of directors meets.

LS: The boardroom is usually not intimate enough for us to do our work.



BENCHING, SAMPLE & CONFERENCE AREAS



SEMINAR ROOM

OI: Now we're touring some of the highlights of the showroom floor. Here is a meeting room with a spectacular view of the towers lining University Avenue, culminating at the Richardsonian Romanesque sprawl of Queen's Park, the Ontario capitol.



COALESSE AREA

LS: This is an example of what we might share with a customer to help them envision a different kind of meeting space. Here we feature **Coalesse**, which brings residential sensibilities to the office. People work at home, they work at the office, you see a blend-

ing. Going between the two, they want some of the comforts of home because they're spending a longer time at the office. This could be a really cool dining room or meeting room, or the office of an executive who's not always here.

The idea is to bring products that you could see in your home into the work environment. Although this setting is somewhat formal, it doesn't elicit formal behavior when you're here. I mean, how formal can you be? Just scooch over, right, to get into the banquette that you might have at your kitchen table.

OI: Those big, comfy Bob lounge chairs are certainly Fifties retro-looking, a tad Saarinen Womb chair-like. That's informal.

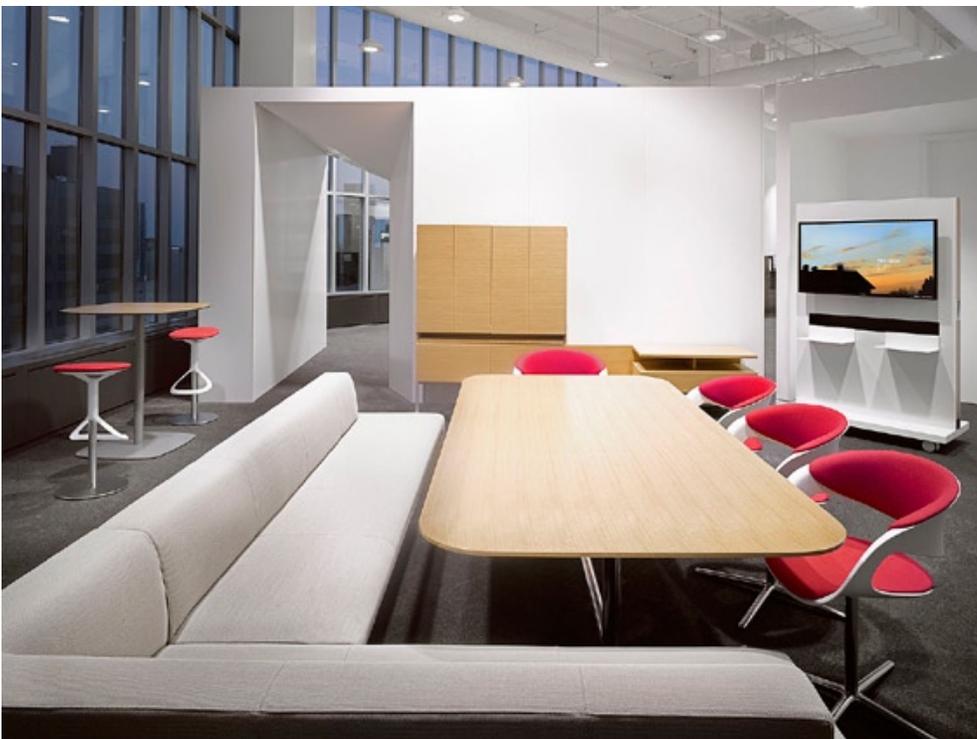
LS: We had 16 designers in here last week, quite comfortably, and it was better than putting them into a training room or a more formal environment.

This space speaks to a palette of postures: If you choose to perch [on Enea café stools], you can still participate in the meeting. Other people choose to scooch on the couch or sit in an individual chair: you can choose how you want to participate in a meeting.

This space also shows a palette of scale. We want to share things large, to make the experience more immersive. This Coalesse piece can be used as a space division and, using our media:scape technology, to share information digitally. The other side has a whiteboard. So this is an architectural piece that brings people together, but also divides space.

OI: Now we're standing in front of a one-person workstation with tall panels.

SK: This is a quiet reflective space or a quiet collaborative area. We talk to customers about how they allocate space on their floor plan to support the interconnected conversation. An area could be an I-owned space, a we-owned space or a we-shared



COALESSE AREA

space, depending on your real estate strategy. Regarding the palette of spaces, depending on where you want to work, the farther you go from the hub, the more private a space can be; we don't have walls to the ceiling back here, but it's actually quite private in this space.

This is a non-dedicated individual location. As a mobile worker, I have a place to put my bag, my keys, my phone, and I can plug in here. This is a **Details Airtouch** height-adjustable table with **Sotto** tools with a bag caddy and a canopy light at the back, surrounded by **Anthro** panels.

But the collection is really about the application and what behavior we're supporting. This would be an example of an I-shared space that someone could come to and feel that they could do some head's-down work, but not have to go away in order to get that done.

OI: So it functions like a private office?

LS: A just-in-time private office. And by adding some glass, from 54 to 66 inches high, here, I have the

option of seeing who's coming and of being inspired by the view. At standing height, I would see someone approaching, so I wouldn't be startled when they arrive.

SK: The glass also signals to people that she's in there and probably doesn't want to be bothered. People here know that this is a focus area. I wouldn't necessarily have two people meeting in there.

OI: I can see a whole wall of small offices of varying size and configuration with sliding glass doors. What's the story there?

SK: The showroom not only shows settings around research, but around sizing. Designers visit and ask, "What does a six-by-six office feel like?" "What does a six-by-seven feel like?" "How big is a six-by-eight?" So we've also, from a strategy perspective, done different sizes so they can envision how that might feel for them. And we give them different levels of privacy with heights, and different materiality, so they can envision how the same product would look with a variety of finishes and feels.

OI: This office display here is eye-catching because of its perpendicular orientation.

SK: The idea on this particular layout is what we call parallel planning. We're facing the walls parallel instead of facing out.

There's research that says facing this parallel wall to the aisle helps me to focus a little more. If I'm facing out and people walk by in front of me, the tendency is to look up. It's more distracting if it's straight in your line of vision. But from your peripheral vision, it's less distracting. Especially if you're on camera [during a video conference]. This side wall enables you to engage your team members [at other locations of the video conference] more effectively.

And, talking about choice of posture, perhaps I want to stand for awhile. Within this small space, I have a choice of whether I want to be seated or standing. I could have another person join me in a meeting. This could be an informal meeting space. Again, this is an example of how we can support all those different business issues.



PRIVATE OFFICE WITH COALESSE BOB CHAIR



PRIVATE OFFICE SCENARIOS

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OI: Moving along the showroom floor, here is the new Hosu chair from Coalesse by Patricia Urquiola. This must be the most residential-themed item Steelcase has ever offered – where’s the macramé plant hanger? – especially in its chaise longue configuration.

SK: This addresses a small but growing niche within the workplace. We have a new generation entering the workforce and if you want to attract and retain them, you need to start thinking differently about the kind of spaces you’re offering them. This is a seating product for that new generation.

Hosu speaks to some of the re-search on them. The Gen Y’s or Millennials like being a little more on the floor. They want to sit in a more natural position, as they would at home. Hose supports a posture that they are very comfortable in.

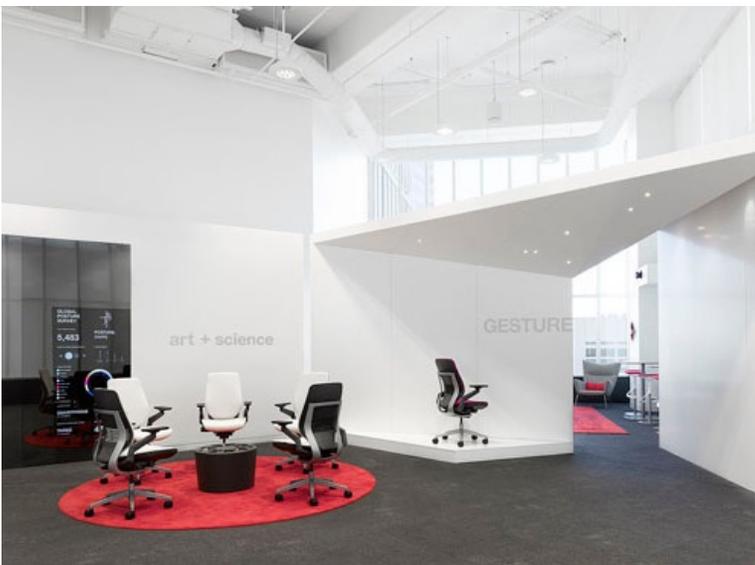
OI: Well, Hosu exemplifies how one hardly knows what to expect from Steelcase anymore. You have broadened out so far from desks and cube farms.

SK: Yes, we’re the new Steelcase. We just celebrated our hundredth anniversary, but we think of ourselves as a five- or 20-year-old company because we’re always thinking about what’s that next workplace issue we need to address. That’s why we are a hundred, because we’re constantly reinventing ourselves. ■

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LATERAL FACING PRIVATE OFFICE



GESTURE CHAIR DISPLAY



COALESSE HOSU LOUNGE CHAIR