

DOZENS OF PRODUCTS WILL MAKE THEIR DEBUT AT THIS YEAR'S NEOCON. ARCHITECT GETS THE BACKSTORY ON THREE OF THEM.

Text Julie Taraska

To Market, to Market



A freestanding wall designed to help small companies in leased offices configure multifunctional workspaces when needed, Turnstone's Group + Community (at top left and far right) offers storage and tech-support elements. The product, created by design director Kirt Martin, is part of the next phase in the manufacturer's Tour line, which was launched at NeoCon in 2007.

Developing a new product might be 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration, to paraphrase Mark Twain, but resources, market research, and personal taste also shape the process. As a preview to NeoCon, we've traced the development of three products that will debut at the fair. Each is from a different field—furniture, textiles, and surfaces—and is created, respectively, by companies large, medium, and small. The final results prove that innovation comes in all sizes.

LARGE-SIZED MANUFACTURER

PRODUCT: Group + Community
COMPANY: Turnstone, turnstonefurniture.com
DESCRIPTION: Freestanding conference room walls containing storage and tech-support elements

BACKGROUND: Last year, Turnstone, a stand-alone division of the \$3-billion-a-year case goods giant Steelcase, introduced Tour, a midpriced workspace system of seven elements. Targeted to offices of fewer than 200 people, the products can be assembled with basic tools, reconfigured at will, and laid out without hiring a professional space planner. Group + Community, part of Tour's next phase, allows companies in leased spaces to create multifunctional conference rooms inexpensively and on the fly.

DESIGN PROCESS: Turnstone design director Kirt Martin says the idea came to him after noticing the popularity of table desks. "I began thinking, 'Let's utilize Tour's platform to create different types of collaborative areas,'" he says. From research, he knew that smaller companies rarely purchased panel systems: When they wanted to create a conference

room, they had a professional build one out or fashioned a space with storage furniture. So Martin designed a product that could be moved away from the wall; that had multiple uses, including storage and tech support; and that was 18 inches deep, to match the rest of Tour's elements.

PROTOTYPES: A fan of rapid prototyping, Martin expects to have made as many as 18 iterations by the time NeoCon opens. He's run the mock-ups—which started off as foamcore and have progressed to laminate and aluminum—by customer groups and his marketing and sales staffs. The response has been overwhelmingly positive, with the tweaks mainly focusing around functional preferences: which customizable storage and presentation elements to offer on the walls, for instance, or whether to add casters for mobility. Martin is also in the process of testing the walls in Steelcase's lab to ensure that their frames and structural components meet the company's lifetime warranty.

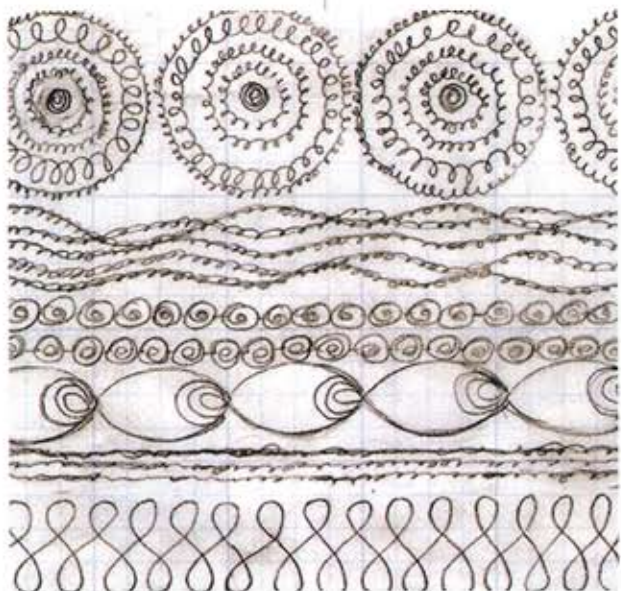
FINAL PRODUCT: Group + Community will have a range of customizable storage options and will be SCS Indoor Advantage certified. Available in heights up to 72 inches and in Tour's choice of 12 laminates, eight paint colors, and two fusions, the product has an estimated retail price of \$2,500–\$3,500 per wall.

MEDIUM-SIZED MANUFACTURER

PRODUCT: Jaipur textile, Knoll Luxe collection
COMPANY: KnollTextiles, knoll.com
DESCRIPTION: A hand-embroidered cloth for the high-end contract and residential markets

BACKGROUND: Among the largest fabric suppliers in North America, the specialized division of Knoll Inc. has long been associated with the classic modernist designs of its founder, Florence Knoll. To step away from those roots, as well as to court the high-end hospitality, corporate, and residential markets, KnollTextiles creative director Dorothy Cosonas has created a separate brand, Knoll Luxe. The initial line will feature finer fibers and more-experimental patterns than the company's traditional offerings.

DESIGN PROCESS: A pattern on a tunic sparked the idea for Jaipur, an Eastern-inspired, hand-embroidered design that Cosonas considers the collection's signature print.



The signature print for Knoll Luxe, a new collection by KnollTextiles, Jaipur (middle) was inspired by a tunic's embroidery. The stitchwork's design charmed creative director Dorothy Cosonas, who drew and redrew the pattern over several weeks, refining it into a series of stripes (above).

Transition glass (right), by Joel Berman Glass Studios, resulted from a client's request for a product that offered transparency and privacy in a single panel. Previously, the company had thought such a glass was not possible.

While doing archival research, she saw the shirt in a book, photocopied it, and did pencil drawings of it over the next few weeks, transforming the pattern into a stripe. "What I liked about the original design was that it wasn't too fussy, precious, or elaborate," she says. "I could abstract it and give it a modern twist." She decided on a cotton ground for the design, selected colors, and chose a small mill in Jaipur, India, to weave the fabric. The workers render the pattern yard by yard by pinholing the design into wax paper, creating a chalk relief of it on the ground cloth, and then chain-stitching it onto the fabric with individual sewing machines. It takes one week to create 4 yards of finished textile.

PROTOTYPES: Cosonas was thrilled with the initial mock-up. "As soon I saw it, I knew I had made the right choice for the mill and the design," she says. She tinkered with scale, increasing the pattern size by 5 percent so that it could better coordinate with the other Luxe offerings, but left everything else—color, material, and design—alone.

FINAL PRODUCT: Jaipur is available in seven colorways, including warm neutrals and a graphic black and white. The cotton-and-polyester fabric will retail for \$145 per yard.

SMALL-SIZED MANUFACTURER

PRODUCT: Transition glass

COMPANY: Joel Berman Glass Studios, jbermanglass.com

DESCRIPTION: Within the course of a single panel, the glass gradually changes from translucent to clear

BACKGROUND: Founded by artisan Joel Berman, the company makes off-the-shelf and custom glass pieces. Transition resulted from a client's request to create a product that melded transparency and privacy in one panel. The studio had been asked to do this before but thought it impossible. This time it opted to try because the problem was defined,

the solution was site-specific, and the project was large enough to fund the development.

DESIGN PROCESS: After researching the market and talking to his network of glass contacts, Berman came up empty. Hamstrung by a modest R&D budget, he turned to his staff, challenging his designers and master moldmakers to derive a solution. Their answer: Create a new type of mold and experiment with the firing schedule of the glass.

PROTOTYPES: It took two months to find the right combination of kiln temperature and cooking duration. In early prototypes, the clear-to-opaque transition was too abrupt, and the pieces



were so brittle they broke when cut. "That told us we probably weren't cooling the glass properly," says Berman. He declines to outline the final recipe, citing its proprietary nature, but notes that small alterations—like adding 15 minutes to the cooling rise, combined with placing the glass in a special inert ceramic mold the team carved by hand—resulted in "a different softening of the glass that allowed us to have a nice gradation of texture [and] temper it to meet universal safety standards." He credits the team with the design.

FINAL PRODUCT: Able to be technically cut, tempered, and laminated, Transition will be available in cookie-cutter or custom versions and in any color or pattern the company offers; it can be made from recycled glass as well. Pieces of 3/8-inch-thick tempered glass will cost \$75 to \$80 per square foot. Maximum size: 54 inches high by 108 inches wide.

OTHER NEOCON NOTABLES

Aside from innovation, aesthetics, and addressing gaps in the market, other concerns are driving this year's NeoCon introductions—in particular, greater eco-friendliness and durability. Both attributes influenced Migrations, Armstrong's line of bio-based resilient floor tiles. The collection features BioStride, a new polymer partially made from renewable plants. This binder, notes Armstrong marketing manager Kent Clauson, performs as well as—or, in some cases, better than—its petroleum-based counterparts, but "the tile will cost \$2.50 to \$3 a foot, which is still highly competitive." Similar environmental concerns shaped the Essay of Clues carpet collection by Shaw Contract Group. The company's second line with green guru William McDonough, the covering pairs Shaw's EcoSolution Q fiber, which contains 25 percent recycled content, with the company's PVC-free EcoWorx backing. Says Shaw Contract creative director Reesie Duncan: "As more projects seek LEED certification, a product's environmental attributes are increasingly important to consider."