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Humanising the office with PearsonLloyd

Chicago

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Predominant within contemporary office furniture design is a desire to move the discipline on from its early days of Taylorism. Could a workplace, the thinking runs, be more humanistic than mechanistic?

It's a theme that has been embraced by a huge variety of studios and brands: from Industrial Facility's Living Office Work with Herman Miller (<http://www.disegnodaily.com/article/why-do-we-need-to-collaborate>), to Konstantin Grcic's Hack Desk for Vitra (<http://www.disegnodaily.com/article/konstantin-grcic-on-silicon-valley>). Now, it is the turn of British studio PearsonLloyd, working with Canadian brand Teknion, to raise questions around the way our offices are organised through a series of conceptual furniture pieces and accessories.

"Funnily enough I suddenly realised where the phrase 'line manager' came from the other day," says studio co-founder Tom Lloyd, who developed the collection in collaboration with partner Luke Pearson. "It's from the production line, because in Taylorism you have a line of desks and someone to manage them. The office

was a factory for clerical work and one thing contract furniture does is chase function in a very particular way. Suddenly you lose identity, memory or any sense of cultural resonance around these objects."

PearsonLloyd's response to this status quo was presented earlier this month at the NeoCon trade fair in Chicago. Within the collection there are a wooden hat stand, love seat and workstation, all produced from wooden rods joined together to form sketch-like objects. Alongside this are a series of brass, marble, glass and beech trays, vases, iPad stands and bowls. For an office collection, they're luxurious materials and they come together in aesthetic compositions more reminiscent of a breakfast in bed than a line of workplace objects.

Around all of these pieces is both a whiff of ritual and an encouragement of human interaction. The loveseat only makes sense as an object when two people sit at it ("as close as you can get before HR get involved," notes Lloyd), while the accessories stack up into homely totems. Far from the soulless ubiquity, sterility and isolationism of cubicle culture, these are objects designed to be personal and humanising.

That the material palette is warm and nostalgic – and that many of the vessels are milled with irregular slanting tops, rather than cookie cutter-like level rims – creates the sense of a collection consciously pro vacating against the traditions of office furniture design. "The desk is becoming more and more a commodity object, so where do you celebrate your working day? asks Lloyd. "How do you evoke quality of life when you're putting together these very practical, rather soulless objects? Suddenly desks that used to be tables have become strange machines, while the complexity of office furniture sometimes neutralises enjoyment of the fact that these things are made in factories by hand."

The collection was developed with no set brief on costing or target market. While some pieces are likely to enter production as is – the hat stand and accessories – others will require development. The High Table, for instance, is too tall and spindly for production, yet operates as a conceptual challenge to commercially available workspaces: it is an open, friendly structure (while still demarcating personal space) and builds in as essential something as seemingly trivial as a coat stand. It is a small touch, but one that suggests that its user's personal needs are being taken into account.

Highlighting domestic-inflected objects such as coat and hat stands seems to tie the Teknion collection to mid-century designer George Nelson's famous quip that the ideal office should be a "daytime living room". Yet while the blurring of home and office spaces is a growing concern within design, Lloyd is careful in his consideration of this theme.

"I think we haven't found the right language yet," he says. "People talk about the domestic in the workspace, but that's not quite the reality. What's important for us is that the office has been mechanised for too long. All the way back to

Taylorism, the dynamic has been about control: controlling your staff and productivity. There's a heritage from that point on about efficiency and practicality. Only recently have we begun to understand that you have to celebrate individuals and workers, even if that is just enlightened self-interest in terms of retaining talent.

"The key isn't the domestic, it's finding something with a life rooted somewhere beyond the office in terms of materiality, spirit and its functionality. So this collection is half provocation and half serious. This could be a future, even if the pieces don't have built in batteries, Wi-Fi and USB ports. They can still be relevant in making good office spaces."

NeoCon took place in Chicago between 15 and 17 June

WORDS Oli Stratford, *Disegno's* deputy editor

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