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Student hotshots show furniture designs at NeoCon trade fair

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Grace Youngeun Lee's waste bin

For 42 years, Chicago's Merchandise Mart has hosted **NeoCon World's trade fair**. Over the course of three days, the show hosts 700 exhibitors making it North America's largest design conference for commercial interiors and contract furnishing.

This year, a group of students and recent grads had the chance to show off their talent to the event's estimated 40,000 design professionals.

The Furniture Revolution Gallery is a new concept which allows select students to display their work. Displaying the work of innovative students to the professional design crowd at NeoCon grew out of the organization's desire to expose student work to the major industry players.

Antonio Larosa served as project chair of the Furniture Revolution Gallery. Along with the Merchandise Mart staff, he helped put together the gallery in less than three months. The display features the work of ten recent grads and student designers from schools like the **School of Art Institute Chicago**, **The Rhode Island School of Design** and **Cranbrook Academy of Art** among others.

Larosa's goal was to increase the visibility of young designers and expose companies to their work much like the exposure he received as a design student in his native Italy.

"When I was in school, a lot of companies would come to our school to find new designers," he said. "Here, it is different. There is no collaboration between the schools and the design industry."

According to Larosa, the gallery has already started to change that: "So far we're having a lot of success. We had students talking to manufacturing companies to produce their work on display."

Among the students selected to exhibit was **Justin Dehner**, a recent graduate from **Savannah College of Art and Design** with a MFA degree in Furniture Design.

He displayed his **tria sofa**, which he said combines lighting with a seating element which counters the dim

lighting found in some hospitality venues. The piece features three wooden arms -- two arms on the end and one in middle which Dehner said he added for privacy. He adds that this piece could also be done in different materials like using metal instead of wood for the arms. In any material, the piece is functional and stylish.

Now that he's graduated, Dehner is eager to get out and start designing. "I'm really looking to get into research design," he said. "A lot of my pieces are based around people and observing them."

Also exhibiting from SCAD was **Timothy Luscher** and **Lacey Campbell**. Luscher's intricately woven metal wire pieces created a sleek and modern chair. Topped with a red cushion, this piece would be a conversation starter at any office. Campbell's vibrant blue otto- table and chairs would brighten up any porch.

MFA grad from Cranbrook, **Grace Youngeun Lee**, exhibited her **waste bin** which won a Bronze IDEA in the International Design Excellence Awards this year. **Glenn Jufer**, also of Cranbrook, showed "Good Wood" a lighting piece inspired by parking blocks and made from walnut, copper and 200 LEDs.



Chairs by Martin Goebel

Martin Goebel, from the RISD MFA program, describes his work as "premiere furniture for modern living." With modern desks, chairs and other wooden displays his work seems to fit his desired aesthetic.

Next year, Larosa said he aims to include more students from even more schools, but he added, "This is a good start; the [Merchandise Mart] is the right place for this. They have the top companies for this exhibition."

According to Larosa, generating buzz for young designers is good for students, school and companies.

"I wish everyone from companies, schools and the press would work to help this new generation of designers to get the economy moving again," said Larosa.

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