companies

Dauphin’s Dynamic Spaces
by Brad Powell

Dauphin is an international company based in Germany. It has for many years operated a North American subsidiary, Dauphin North America, based in Boonton, NJ. Dauphin’s traditional product fare has been nicely designed seating for a variety of applications. The company’s strength is
still in that area and two years ago it introduced some very striking seating products at NeoCon 2010.

But two years ago Dauphin North America, under the leadership of Nick Bayvel, CEO, and Stuart Rogers-Brown, COO, launched something new under its Valo brand: Konstrux, which the company describes as an “adaptive furniture solution that enables people to thrive and connect in today’s interactive environments.”

This very flexible all-purpose kit of parts seems to be part of the new way of furnishing “collaborative” environments, some of which may also include the ability to provide more traditional work spaces. At this point, Konstrux is mid-market priced and the company stocks the many parts and pieces for ready shipment, enabling customers to immediately set up or expand their facilities, all of which can be done by the customer, if need be.

What is more interesting is that Dauphin has taken this to a further place, conceptualizing the nature of these new environments, which it refers to as Dynamic Spaces; it has even created a CEO (0.1) credit to help designers and others explored this idea in the workplace. To us, Dynamic Spaces is a breakthrough point of view since it encourages everyone to develop a new perspective of what a workplace should be like and look like. Many of us have been habituated to think of the best workplace designs as rather static pictorials with the idea that the well-designed workplace is, to a large extent, a piece of art, albeit one with a degree of functionality. The new “dynamic” perspective, however, suggests that our interiors might be designed to more closely mimic the ever-active and organic natural environment, but without its many limitations and inconveniences, such as sunlight glare, harsh weather conditions, and so on.

It is also very heartening to see initiatives such as Konstrux and Dynamic Spaces coming from companies other than the largest contract furniture manufacturers with aligned dealerships and this confirms, once again, that plenty of opportunity exists for those who can find it. In any event, we took the opportunity to speak with Mr. Rogers-Brown to get a glimpse of his experience with Konstrux since its introduction (see Dauphin, Stuart Rogers-Brown & Dynamic Spaces, officeinsight 6.7.10, http://www.office-insight.com/1172), and to get a better understanding about his thinking regarding Dynamic Spaces.
OI: You introduced your Valo Konstrux a couple of years ago. How is it doing?
SR-B: Konstrux has been a great introduction for us. It’s an important part of our Dynamic Space concept that is helping us integrate all of our products.

OI: What exactly is your Dynamic Spaces program? I see you have a traveling presentation on that subject.
SR-B: A couple of years ago we began getting more requests relating to facilitating the ability to move within the workspace, more interaction, more stimulation leading to more creativity. In addition to environments that more readily adapt to workers’ needs, clients wanted spaceless growth, the ability to expand staff while reducing space and other overhead costs. In addition, we’ve seen a trend toward more restrained or conservative offices, environments in tune with the expectations of younger generations such as increased collaboration, greater movement and freedom to interact with peers.

As we looked around in our industry, we saw and heard much talk about collaboration and the use of benching arrangements, but something was not gelling. We couldn’t see Workplace America moving wholesale to benching configurations. Putting everything together, we came up with our thoughts on the evolving office, which we call Dynamic Spaces. The idea is to create flexible adaptable furnishings that can marry the work environment to the employer’s work-style, culture and processes. That in a nutshell is what Dynamic Space is all about.

OI: What makes them dynamic?
SR-B: A number of factors, but primarily the ability to mingle very easily with varied client levels and work tasks. We espouse the benefits of using one system of furniture, Konstrux, throughout the environment, in a research environment, a reception area, an open space benching environment, more traditional cubicles, and so on. With Konstrux, all of these configurations are possible using a table-based rather than screen-based product line, making the table the foundation of the workstation or other work environment. This means that customers will be able to select a single system for use in a benching environment, a paneled cubicle configuration, and a case goods arrangement in a private office.

OI: I understand the flexibility element, but what makes the spaces dynamic?
SR-B: Flexibility with ease produces the dynamics. The various elements include a screening system that is easily alterable, a KAP system that facilitates the attachment of the legs, the screens, the connectors; even the employee can make the changes. So, if an employee wanted to add a little table, a D-end, at the end of their work surface, or wanted to link another work surface or add or remove a screen or make other modifications, they could do so without calling a special task force: no more lengthy planning, scheduling and just plain waiting; rather, we see a markedly increased amount of spontaneity – and thus productivity – supported by a single product.

A dynamic space enables people and groups to work in the most suitable arrangement, either long term or short, and to change easily from group work to isolated work, as appropriate. At the same time, workers are not restricted by someone else’s idea of uniformity. Designers are often faced with a dilemma of whether to create an environment with a uniform, fixed aesthetic or one that is highly personalized.

There probably is not single correct answer, but Dynamic Spaces embodies the ability to avoid the hodgepodge of facilities management nightmare of a chaotic product mix, while providing needed elbow room for different people doing a variety of changing tasks. Our experience is that, if changes are
very easy to make, most people are pleased and enjoy the adaptability and ability to work in the way that is most productive for them.

**OI:** I try to imagine some sort of ideal in which everything could be moved around much the same as an articulating task light.

**SR-B:** We are not there yet, but consider what is possible now compared with the office of a generation or two ago, with partner’s desks with two pedestals, inlaid wood and leather surfaces, and a large, heavy, leather-clad chair that could tilt and swivel, but not much more, a leather couch against the wall, and some brass lights with lamp shades.

All of this has been scaled down; we have tighter work surfaces with flat screens, monitor arms, adjustable keyboard accessories and so on. We have the space for functionality, but with more economy and the benefits of easier and more rapid communications.

**OI:** Dauphin is an international company. Where did your ideas for Dynamic Spaces originate, in North America or in Europe or elsewhere?

**SR-B:** As you know, Dauphin North America is run by Nick Bayvel, our CEO, and myself. We are both South Africans and we’ve done a tremendous amount of work over the years both in Africa and in Europe. We came to the States with a slightly different perspective, among other things, being very familiar with the Bürolandschaft system of Europe, which is essentially an open-plan system, and not as tied to the cubical forms more popular in the US. Even after coming to the States, we continued to work in Europe, as well as in the Far East and Australasia, which gave us additional exposure to workplace habits in many parts of the world.

We bring learning from this background to our work in the US market but we are also working globally on Dynamic Spaces with Dauphin. It has spent the last two or three years studying its own organizational structure and we anticipate some major changes down the line, of which we will be an integral part. We and our customers find it very helpful to be able to draw on many experiences and work styles from over the globe.

**OI:** Why did you decide to put the Konstrux system in your Valo division?

**SR-B:** The Valo division was originally created only as part of Dauphin North America, but customers in many other areas have been very interested. As a result, the division is now spilling into South America, Europe, and to companies in Africa and India. A couple of factors have contributed to the Valo success. First is the concerted effort to simplify all aspects of its products. Second, we operate on a stock basis, that is, we have inventory ready for our customers who want to pursue installations or changes in very tight timeframes. The customization, so to speak, is built into the product design and engineering. All of this, and the middle-market price point, makes decision-making for the customer quite easy, especially when faced with a situation of some urgency.

**OI:** Some manufacturers are introducing similar products at higher price points. Have you any inclination to do that?

**SR-B:** We’ve had several suggestions to develop a “konstrux” for our “Dauphin” brand. At this point, we want to stay true to our original plan, which has been key to our success. For now, at least, our focus is to enhance the Konstrux product to even better fulfill the demands of Dynamic Spaces. At the appropriate time, we will develop products for the “Dauphin” label that will work in combination with Konstrux. As a general matter, it is important that present and future products work together seamlessly.
Part of the Dauphin brand is that, when a customer deals with us, today, tomorrow or in ten years, our products will work in tandem with one another, hand in hand, enabling their offices to change and adapt to the requirements of their businesses.

OI: What have you learned in your first year of experience with Konstrux?
SR-B: Konstrux was new ground for us, although we had achieved some success with tables, which is the basis of Konstrux. The reception by the market was very gratifying. Still, there are always a couple of things that the market asks for. One element was the desire of some customers for a more traditional more-closed environment, and for whom benching was not a complete answer. It was also apparent that our initial screening designs, above the surface, was not sufficient.

Second, it became clear that customers’ desires for smaller footprints did not mean that a like reduction in work surface was acceptable. This meant that vertical space utilization had to be increased, either with shelves, overhead storage, or otherwise. Our solution here is fairly unique: overhead storage on a benching system that slides along a shelf structure. If people want to talk, they can slide the storage out the way or they can structure the storage pods to allow communication between them. The back of the storage pods can also be used, say as a raised surface for write or attaching notes.

OI: Who do you perceive as your prime audience for Konstrux?
SR-B: Our original focus was on small to medium-sized businesses, and the dealerships that specialize in that market. But, over time, we received some wonderful feedback from designers and also from clients in the medical and education fields. Some hospitals we are working with love the idea that we can put castors on our products, that they can screen-off two smaller tables, creating a semi-private workstation for nurses, and that they have the ability to gang tables and separate them at will.

Recently, we presented to a design firm specializing in corporate environments and open collaborative spaces. They were very impressed with our approach.

OI: How have designers responded to your introductions and concepts?
SR-B: Many designers believe that Konstrux will help them satisfy customers who increasingly want both attractive work environments and high functionality. For them, the Dynamic Spaces concept is immediately attractive. Increasingly, designers and facilities managers understand that not everybody can work in the same way and our work environments should respond to this. This, of course, presents new design challenges and opportunities.

We are beginning to look at interior design a little differently. Office landscapes, like the natural environment, change over time. We don’t live in static environments and fewer workplaces are being designed as a straightjacket. With the widespread acceptance of wireless, workers move around the workplace – or other places – with laptops and tablets.

The lesson, as we see it, is that fewer products are designed for isolated functions. Rather, products need to be able to be adapted to suit the functions required from time to time. That’s the core concept of Konstrux. For example, our frame KAPS (Konstrux Application Plates) are metal and work for many configurations, and it is not screwed into other parts, which could result in damage.
OI: In a very general way, it seems as though we are finding ways to increase our ability to conform our built environments, in this case, the interiors, to our needs and our activities in a very ad hoc or dynamic way.

SR-B: Yes, we are gradually modifying our buildings to more appropriately mimic and integrate with the natural environment, more natural light, views of nature, fresh air, coordination with the movement and condition of sunlight, and so on. There is a distinct trend towards aligning with the earth’s natural elements.

OI: What experience have you had with your Konstrux installations?

SR-B: We’re in the process of creating user surveys and gathering user feedback. One client acquired a small start-up, about fifteen/twenty workstations; this year it added another ten workstations and they’re extremely happy. Another client needed workstations for its construction management and production teams as they moved from site to site, adjusting the product as needed according to the project and the location.

OI: That seems an interesting twist on utility: temporary spaces, say for a few months to a year or so.

SR-B: Absolutely. And we have many people buying Konstrux for their home office because they can install it themselves.

OI: Who do you compete with?

SR-B: We compete with everybody, and that’s because of Konstrux’s great flexibility. Many companies have products with some of the capabilities of Konstrux. These products may have an advantage in one area or another, and there providers emphasize that particular capability. But many clients are not sure how to solve some of their problems and need versatility more than anything. Konstrux provides that and that is driving our growth.

OI: Are you an open line for dealers?

SR-B: I like to say we are not completely open; we are selectively open, and work closely with dealerships who are willing to work with us. There must be a mutual commitment.

We’re still a relatively small company; we’re working hard to grow our distribution and we’re having a lot of success. Dauphin is no longer thought of as just a chair supplier; we are a company that helps our clients grow and helps enhance their business.

Websites
http://www.dauphin.com
http://www.valofurniture.com