



Life's a beech: Green Furniture Concept's seating with biophilic Leaf Lamp acoustic lighting system.

Bright ideas
take shape in the comfort zone

With aviation's recovery now in full swing, Paul Sillers looks at how COVID-19 has impacted the design of airport furnishings and seating.

As aviation gears up for a reboot, instilling in passengers a sense of confidence that the airport environment is a COVID-safe and hygienic space to be in is high on the 'to do' list. Consequently, terminal furnishings makers are shifting from providing such temporary measures as cordons and perspex partitions to more permanent solutions tailored for the post-pandemic air travel era.

For example, UK-based industrial designers and seating manufacturers OMK introduced a 'social distancing strap' for airports to fit on alternate seats at the outset of the crisis.

"We designed it as something we could sell almost at cost price to help customers manage the pandemic and

keep their facilities open," OMK's Managing Director, Matt Osborne, told *Regional Gateway*: "It wasn't something to make money off. We just thought that the more revenue our customers can continue to generate through this, the more likelihood there is of coming out the other side of it with our clients' businesses still intact."

As 'social distancing' has become a behavioural normality, Osborne says that OMK has been pushing the reconfiguration potential of its products, such as its Trax seating (installed at Rwanda's Kigali International and at Dublin's T2 in Ireland): "Our products have always been modular, and the easiest way to achieve social distancing, without turning the terminal into something that looks hostile, is to swap out a seat for a table."

LIKE ONE OF THE FAMILY

Another approach to achieving distancing has been advanced by the Malmö-based Green Furniture Concept. CEO Jonathan Nilsson explains that "many airports block out every second seat, forcing families to spread out, which is completely counterproductive. If you live in the same bubble, you should stick together and maintain distance from the next party."

To achieve this, the company's modular and meandering seating products, such as the Ascent Series and Nova C Series, can be colour-coded (using different coloured woods) into family or group-sized sections, says Nilsson, "to suggest to people where's a safe distance." Seating can also incorporate dividers which segment the seating "with a natural, cocoon-like barrier – it's a nice

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Jonathan Nilsson, CEO, Green Furniture Concept



Garden escapes: Green Furniture Concept is creating pleasant havens that replicate nature.



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OMK

OMK's Link (*above*) is a moulded polyurethane seat with a unique geometric shape which can be combined to create numerous dynamic configurations. OMK's Bridge (*below*) is a modular table designed to provide a convenient place to work and charge devices.



way to keep families together," adds Nilsson.

To support distancing, the company has been trialling QR codes on seating so that passengers in the terminal concourse can order and have refreshments delivered directly to their seats by café staff. "It helps airports reduce lines and have people sitting down and not running around too much," Nilsson says.

"It's only a pilot scheme, but I think the market will go in that direction."

LIVING IN A BUBBLE

At Chicago-based public space furniture specialists Agati, Director of Design Joe Agati reveals that "People want to claim their own personal bubble – a zone where they don't have to engage with others, and this contributes to what we

call the lost seat factor, known in the industry as seat spoilage. So just because you have 100 seats, if they're poorly configured, you'll rarely achieve 100% capacity because people will put their baggage in adjacent seats to create a zone for themselves."

To address spoilage, when COVID hit, Agati spoke with airports about its GEE modular lounge furniture system, which

offers screens where you can segment occupants. But the message he got back from management at one well known West Coast airport was, "I'm not going to invest in furniture that permanently addresses the pandemic."

"Essentially," says Agati, "airports just put 'do not sit here' stickers on chairs or apply some sort of barrier tape to deal with distancing, temporarily."

Elsewhere, Spain's Actiu, a family business with 50 years' experience in contract furniture, found a more receptive audience, at least in the Spanish market. In 2020, Actiu developed a new line of protective screens that were installed in regional airports all over Spain. The company has created new furniture designs that include Passport, installed at Mallorca Airport, designed by Javier Cuñado, and Transit (installed at Brisbane West Wellcamp Airport), designed by Marcelo Alegre, CEO of Alegre Design.

Marcelo Alegre says that "even before the pandemic, airports were focusing on

Comfort and a joy to behold: Actiu's elegant padded polyurethane benches provide a soft touch.

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Joe Agati, Director of Design, Agati

creating new spaces in transit areas where people can shop, live and move. Now, check-in areas are evolving towards digitalisation and automation. Personal assistance is being substituted by automatic devices to reduce human contact and improve efficiency."

MATERIAL GAIN

With hygiene now a non-negotiable element of travel (why wasn't it always?), passengers are now holding airports to a higher standard of cleanliness. In response, OMK, for example, has drawn on its expertise in hospital seating for the new sanitation levels required at airports.

At the start of the pandemic, OMK researched new antimicrobial treatments that could be applied to the company's 'go to' material, moulded polyurethane,

says Osborne: "We went through a period of trialling an additive, and ended up successfully managing to introduce a coating which we can apply post-moulding. So we're now offering that as an option to clients."

Moving forward, a clear design trend to come out of the pandemic is the wider adoption of natural materials and organic forms to create a more convivial and soothing ambience in the terminal.

"Airports want to welcome customers back – they don't want to have this sense of emergency that we have with COVID," says Green Furniture Concept's Nilsson. As a result, the company is deeply committed to the concept of 'placemaking' to create pleasant havens that replicate nature, a design approach known as 'biophilic design'. "Biophilic design brings nature indoors so we can give passengers a sense of tranquillity," explains Nilsson.





Even before the pandemic, airports were focusing on creating new spaces in transit areas where people can shop, live and move.

Marcelo Alegre, CEO, Alegre Design



Actiu's Transit bench seating system has massive potential for public areas, with top quality finishes inspired by modern architecture.

Complementing its biophilic seat designs, the company offers Leaf Lamp acoustic lighting – a system of tree and plant-like lights equipped with sound-absorbing woollen 'leaves' which dampen the reverberating noise commonly found in airport terminals. In addition, the Leaf system enables IoT devices, such as security cameras, speakers, sensors and cabling, to be unobtrusively embedded.

According to Nilsson, following the installation of its biophilic seating at Edinburgh Airport, "passenger satisfaction rose from 52% to 81%, while retail food or beverage sales experienced a double-digit increase, which pays for the investment in months. Airports struggling to survive should consider biophilic design."

The benefits of biophilic design are similarly embraced at Agati, whose VP Sales/Marketing, Tim Macal, says that the company's seating designs draw on two specific aspects of biophilia that relate to airports: 'prospect' and 'refuge,' which correspond to innate human behaviours.

"Prospect means the ability to survey your environment, understand what's around you – are there threats or allies? This is wired into us from when we were prehistoric beings," Macal explains. "And then 'refuge,' which is essentially having a safe space, like a caveman, literally dwelling in a cave, your back is covered so that no one can get to you from behind. We developed a lot of furniture that takes these biophilic human behaviour patterns into account."

Agati's biophilic designs are installed across many US regional airports, including Will Rogers, Grand Island, Rochester International and Eastern Iowa. At Omaha Eppley Airfield, Agati has incorporated its Pod Single, an enclosed seating unit with curved, upholstered wall panels, providing "a feeling of haven and focus."

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Biophilic design isn't just about bringing nature inside the terminal building.

OMK's Osborne reveals that "the big area we're focusing on at the moment is outdoor spaces, as we feel there's a much bigger focus now on people being outside."

The London-based specialist in public seating is poised to launch a modular outdoor system, designed with planters and "all sorts of architectural features, which will hopefully make it easy for customers to create an inviting environment outside of the terminal."

The premise, says Osborne, is that "the journey starts outside the terminal, not within it. The advantage of that is that airports can encourage people to arrive at the terminal to stay in an outdoor space, which is safer from both a COVID as well as from a passenger wellbeing point of view."

"Having that ability to let people be on the airport campus but not inside the terminal is something that we think may be a trend moving forward," concludes Osborne. ■