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INSCAPE SYSTEM

The Inscape Solution

by Brad Powell

Many industry observers remark that most furniture systems, over time, tend to look alike. This is the result of normal market forces – values, desires, concerns, and let's face it, risk-avoidance that drive once-distinctive products to be adapted, extended, re-clad and/or reconfigured to the point of non-recognition. We would expect no less from the

manufacturing community: If you have an obvious winner, you will pursue its appeal in ever expanding directions. Obviously, benchmarking and the fact that there are a limited number of informed people all talking to one another also add their weight.

But what if we were to skip this normal evolutionary



SHARAD MATHUR



DAVID PARSHAD

process and jump to systems that work and blend throughout an office in almost every area. That's what we have seen over the past five years of so with the so-called landscaping or kit-of-parts product lines. "Good thinking," you might say. True enough, but the challenge here is in developing platform products that are truly >extensible in their ability to add new and distinctive features and aesthetics >interoperable, functionally and aesthetically, with other products including legacy products >scalable.

All of this requires another dimension of thinking.

Who better to take on this challenge than **Inscape**, which was in the forefront of this type of thinking when it introduced its **Platform** system in 1997. As its name suggests, the Plat-

form system was designed to provide a foundational framework on which the many requirements of office work could be built. Inscape later added several other related products, some of which strayed somewhat from the "platform" concept.

Inscape's **NeoCon WTF 2011** product introduction, the **Inscape System**, represents a re-emphasis of the platform idea, integrating many of the company's product developments over the past decade,

such as **Planna**, **Storwal** and **Interval**. (These integrated products will continue to be available.) The Inscape System, however, does not represent a retrenchment or a "me too" phenomenon. Rather, the company has refined its original thinking in a way that enables it to differentiate itself, and its product, rather than pursuing a broad,

low-cost approach to sales.

Two Inscape employees particularly involved in assessing market needs and developing the Inscape System are **Sharad Mathur, V.P., A&D**, and **David Parshad, V.P., Product Design and Development**. We explored their thinking about the new system.

OI: What's different about the Inscape System's kit of parts approach?

DP: Like many kit-of-parts products, the Inscape System has a great deal of flexibility, in configuration and appearance. Many products of this type, however, aim at a lower price point and, therefore, often do not have the more refined engineering bones of our system, nor the extensive options of our system. In addition, we are not aiming at a general, undifferentiated market.

OI: What is the Inscape System's target market?

SM: It is not quite the all-comers that one might think. In fact, we have a strong pre-qualification procedure to determine whether a project is suitable for our product and business objectives. Generally, Inscape is a mid- to high-cost provider. Not of a size or inclination to seek to be all things to all people, we look for projects to which we can add value. Our strong suit is that, through the flexibility of the Inscape System, we can create the design applications that designers and clients seek, rather than using the occasional shoehorn to squeeze a design feature into a product's limitations.

OI: What do designers want?

SM: When discussing project design concepts, we hear comments like, "Sure, I want your system, but ABC company has feature X, and I want that to." And why not?

What we see in the market now is an applications game, rather than a product focus. That means that

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designers and end users are becoming very focused on how products will or can be used, rather than on selecting a particular product. This means that often an assemblage of products are needed to meet the application needs that purchasers have in mind, or manufacturers must create products that have many uses. Obviously, we have seen both approaches, in various combinations, over the past decade.

The Inscape System takes the latter approach, but breaks through the limitations found in other kit-of-parts product lines, most of which still, while flexible, are most useful in more or less standard typical configurations.

OI: Everyone likes flexibility – except those charged with maintaining

order – but flexibility and multiple options carry their own drawbacks, and often make decision-making more difficult. How do you deal with that?

SM: The Inscape System has many, many parts that enable it to answer a designer's conception, but designers are not required to be fluent with the vocabulary of parts or even the extent of its capabilities. You see, it's not so much a matter of extensive capabilities, the designer's question is simply, "Can your product do what I want it to do?" The potential complexity here is defined not by the product, but by the design concept. This greatly simplifies the issues, narrowing them to a specific set of parameters.

There will always be designers

who enjoy playing with a kit-of-parts. The Inscape System will provide a great sandbox for that. But, given the demands on designers' time, fee structures and budget constraints, a designer may have nothing more than a sketch of what is desired. We take it from there. We will, of course, provide typicals for guidance, but our in-house staff, which is very familiar with the system's capabilities, will do the heavy lifting when it comes to specification details. We are also training some select dealerships to provide this capability.

OI: How exactly does this work?

SM: As you know, furniture specification usually comes at the end of the space design process, rather than moving from the worker outwards. Although this presents certain disadvantages, the benefit is that the design is not dictated or limited by the furniture. A disadvantage is that the furniture must be found to dovetail with the design, and this can run into expensive custom work. The Inscape System is designed to avoid these issues.



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As with the normal process, project furniture requirements and aesthetics are established by the design team. When it comes to us, we run it through our pre-qualification process to determine whether the project is suitable for us. We don't compete for projects solely based on price. On the other hand, where the project requirements have peculiarities that must be addressed, the Inscape System can meet them at a very good price with a very straight-forward solution.

OI: Has the Inscape System made your products such as Platform, Planna, and Storwal obsolete?

DP: No. These products will still be offered and are entirely compatible with the Inscape System. Indeed, one of the important characteristics of this system's flexibility is not just its ability to meet new plans, but also

its compatibility with legacy products, ours or someone else's.

You might find the evolution of this system to be of interest. We launched the Platform system as we grew from primarily a storage manufacturer – **Office Specialty** – to a more full-product vendor. Platform had 3.5" panels, providing a great deal of space for data and electrical cabling. In time, the aesthetic of thinner panels, 2.75", became popular and we introduced **a thin panel**. Both systems did well, responding to market demands, but they brought with them a fair amount of duplication in administration and manufacturing. In time, it became obvious that designers wanted the best of both worlds, as their design concepts demanded.

Along with market demands, the inefficiency in our processes resulting from the duplication began taking

its toll, on the company and on our environmental sensibilities, particularly as we began our work toward BIFMA *level* certification.

In our reassessment, it was essential that we maintain backward compatibility with existing products. We saw that we could use the same basic frame for both panel widths (3.5" and 2.75"), but we needed to revise what was then the different attachment methodologies of the two systems. We were able to provide the integration by designing two similar but distinct panel clips, one that would give us the wider panel, and a second that would give the thinner panel.

And so, with the Inscape System, just by changing clips, we can easily create two different fixtures with a single frame using the same tiles and the same backing process. (Of course, each width requires its proper end and top caps.) From there, it was easy to see the path to developing transition points that enable us to appropriately integrate both widths while configuring the system. At the same time, we made the changes necessary to carry forward the advantages of existing products into the Inscape System, e.g., refined aesthetics and exceptional technology capabilities.

Through all of this, we were able to achieve our objectives:

- >Integration of product capabilities desired by specifiers
- >Improved and easily adaptable aesthetics
- >Ability to easily make changes at any time with minimum effort and maximum reuse of existing parts
- >Reduction of space requirements
- >Simplification of specification of multi-variant, integrated configurations
- >Elimination of administrative and manufacturing redundancies
- >Achievement of sustainability goals, including reduction of waste



INSCAPE SYSTEM PANEL CLIP

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OI: What are the unusual environmentally positive aspects of the Inscape System?

DP: Sustainability is a very broad area for any manufacturer. We have mentioned some ways in which the Inscape System has helped us achieve sustainability through the elimination of waste and redundancy, as well as the ability to avoid the time requirements often needed to find a combination of products need to satisfy all of a project's design requirements. Reducing material usage in manufacturing and the use of recycled material are also part of our environmental story.

But what is peculiar to the Inscape System is its ability to help clients reuse existing furniture. Whether their inventory is of Inscape products or of another manufacturer, the storage products within the Inscape System provide flexibility and the ability to adapt and integrate. This takes giant strides in the area of updating/renovating and reuse. As we mentioned, for example, because we used the same frame structure that was used for our existing panel, it is quite easy to bring existing installations up to date.

OI: How do you reconcile the proposed benefits of your integrated system with the undisputed success of, say, Knoll, with its seven or so systems?

SM: Knoll is, of course, Knoll and we would love to emulate its success. But we are not Knoll, with its history, aura, experience and distribution. We can, however, look to take away the core lesson, which we believe is that the question is, "What can we as a company do for designers and their clients?" Knoll and others have a different foundation and experience that leads them to a different answer to this question than Inscape.

It is a great advantage to us that our very talented and successful competitors have such a diversity of products and capabilities which, collectively, expand the horizon of what is possible in the minds of designers and end users. While we are a much smaller company, with the Inscape System we are able to piggy-back, as it were, on these imagined designs and help realize them, at times, more simply and efficiently than the larger companies. Our concept is that, if you want a feature of, for example, Morrison, another of Currents and others of Horizon Dividends (all Knoll systems), we can give you that with the Inscape System.

The market is always changing and specifiers and users are always looking for the best of everything at the lowest price. As I mentioned, what was once a product focus has become an application focus. In a constantly changing world with ever-expanding product capabilities, it is hard enough for designers to keep track of general product capabilities; we cannot expect them to create complicated matrices that indicate what products have which capabilities.

OI: You know that many designers like to avoid using the same products and producing the same look for client after client. Are you concerned that will be a problem?

SM: Of course that's a consideration. But we think you have to carefully think about that concern. In the first place, we are dealing with work areas, rather than reception, conference and other quasi-public spaces. Second, the whole point of the Inscape System is to enable the furnishings to follow the design, not define it. We believe this system will help designers use their creativity, put a distinctive stamp on every job and more easily realize their designs. ■



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