

REVIEW

UNIVERSAL APPEAL LIFTS BELGIAN BELLWETHER

With all thoughts of Europe turned towards our impending divorce, it's easy to lose sight of the freshest furniture trends and views from the Continent – late last year, Paul Farley returned to Brussels Furniture Fair to take stock of the situation ...

Visiting Brussels Furniture Fair is always a pleasure. Accessible, well presented and hospitable, Meubelbeurs is viewed by many serious UK buyers as an invaluable bellwether for the coming show season – in essence, a substantial teaser of some of Europe's commercial trend-setters ahead of this month's immo.

Taking place in early November each year at the spacious Brussels Expo, Heysel, the show principally features (and targets) members of the Belgian furniture trade, but also reaches out to the Netherlands, France and Germany, and, to a lesser extent, the UK.

The show's general manager, Lieven Van den Heede, admits that he was apprehensive of how well the show would perform, given the prevailing trade winds in Belgium.

After furniture sales fell by around -6% in 2017, they dropped a further

-2.7% YoY in H1 2018, reports Belgian industry representative, Fedustria. Furniture exports were down -0.3% in the same period, with exports to the UK falling -8.2% YoY.

"As a trade fair, we are not immune to the difficult situation in the furniture trade, and did see a slight fall in overall visitor numbers following a small increase in 2017," admits Lieven, revealing a -1.76% decline in visitor numbers (amounting to 329 fewer people – the fair typically attracts around 20,000).

Despite those negative export statistics, attendance from the UK and Ireland remained stable, accounting for 2.9% of the fair's total.

Undoubtedly, its international appeal helped paper over any cracks. Visitors from 40 countries (including nine non-European countries) attended the show, which sported 268 exhibitors (only 43% of which were Belgians) from 24 countries.

The number of exhibitors was up, but the show overall contracted to 60,000m², making it similar in size to 2016's edition – and 76 of the show's exhibitors were new, reflecting a significant level of churn.

But, numbers aside, how did those involved rate the event's performance? "We were told by a number of exhibitors with whom we were able to speak during the fair that buying from both Belgian and foreign visitors was better than had been expected or feared prior to the start of the fair," says Lieven. "In general, the closing balance of this year's fair was positive. It would seem that the furniture trade believes that the way to get out of this impasse is to renew its offering."

Indeed, Meubelbeurs' offer is certainly ahead of the curve when it comes to product trends and designs. Offering a fusion of northern and southern European styles that has



Fresh thinking
at Meubelbeurs



Low swivel diners from *Passé Partout*

proven a good fit for the UK consumer for many years, the principal players show no signs of holding back.

Examples include Mintjens, whose contemporary cabinet offer has become increasingly refined. Gone are the chunky tops, replaced by thinner, sleeker surfaces (“unfortunately for us, these simpler looks can often prove more complicated to manufacture,” laughs export manager Guy Vermeeren). Dark, Italian-esque wood finishes have replaced the lighter Scandi look, while inventive engineering and mixed media – from frosted glass to ceramics – help lift Mintjens’ products into the higher end, offering greater opportunity for differentiation and higher margins.

European upholstery giant Passe Partout presents an evolution of its low-seater living/dining concept (why sit up for dinner when you can sit down at the table?), introducing swivel mechanisms and fresh fabrics – while Rom proudly displays its modern seating lines (which benefit from bespoke sizing to the nearest 10cm), using the experience with UK buyers here to evaluate each model ahead of the January Furniture Show.

Meanwhile, the Balthazar awards again recognise pioneering designs across the show’s sectors, and reveal a rich, progressive culture of product development. The 2018 winners are: Reset by Magnitude sleep design concept by LS Bedding (Best of Belgium); the recyclable Resleep bed from Velda (Innovation); the Glide table by Kluskens (Best International); and Moome’s Lucy sofa (Love at First Sight).

“The trade needs innovation in order to be able to make sales figures rally again next year,” says Lieven. “It is therefore no



surprise that those exhibitors who sold well had also made huge efforts to come up with innovative, surprising or original products that are also commercially viable.”

However – and, perfectly understandably, given our predicament – it seems that many UK buyers are reluctant to embrace the newer lines, preferring to stick instead with more conservative offers. And although the Belgian market is too small to be anything other than export-oriented, there’s little evidence of its manufacturers going the extra mile to impress UK buyers on their own terms.

“Belgians are adopting a wait-and-see mentality with regards to the UK – no-one is sure what the costs will be,” says Lieven.

Yet Belgian brands are not the only draw here – alongside the likes of Theuns, Recor Group and Veldeman Bedding, there’s IMS Benelux, Richmond Interiors and By Boo from the Netherlands, Egoitaliano,

Maxdivani and Calligaris from Italy, and Rauch, Wiemann and Himolla from Germany.

And there are exhibitors from the UK, too, bucking the trend by taking a more proactive approach to exports.

Baker Furniture’s MD Mark Callaghan sees Brexit as “an opportunity, rather than a threat”, and is using Meubelbeurs to shore up the company’s activities in Benelux and beyond, exposing new iterations of its reclaimed, industrial and art deco ranges to buyers ahead of the new year.

Nearby is Tetrad’s stand, which is split into three distinctive displays, featuring Tetrad, the Mulberry Home brand tie-up (launched in June) and Spink and Edgar, respectively. The product presentation is up there with the best the show has to offer – and, in an event which looks this good overall, that’s no mean feat.

“Brussels is a good-value show, very commercial, and we write a lot of business here,” says Tetrad’s Janus Cooper, who explains that the show benefits his UK-facing business as much as it does the brand’s European agents, thanks in no small part to the organiser’s generous hosted buyer programme.

Future editions are likely to see even greater focus on visitor experience, says Lieven, who is conscious that elements such as trend displays, free catering, Instagram-friendly installations and a wealth of accommodation options all help make the buying experience more pleasurable, encouraging buyers to revisit each year.

Who knows how different the picture will be for UK buyers when the next show comes around, from 3rd-6th November 2019?

www.furniturefairbrussels.be



Mulberry Home from Tetrad



Mintjens