



MAKERS

Claridge Adds to the ‘MIX’

OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS, WHILE MAINTAINING ITS REPUTATION FOR QUALITY AND SERVICE, CLARIDGE ADDED BEAUTIFUL DESIGN TO ITS NEW PRODUCTS WITH THE HELP OF QDESIGN.

BY ROB KIRKBRIDE

Claridge has been around for 72 years and during that time has built a business on its institutional writing surface products. The company was well-known and well-respected, but didn't exactly inspire designers to specify its products.

Over the last few years, while maintaining its reputation for quality and service, Claridge added beautiful design to its new products with the help of Qdesign. It's in the process of revamping its entire line to make the products more attractive and functional. The latest new product line, MIX, was introduced at NeoCon and turned some heads. It also gave designers another reason to consider Claridge.

Far from a stodgy company, this septuagenarian firm is ready to take on all comers and is laying claim to this growing segment of the industry. Marketing Director Kurt James said the company is putting a stake in the ground and going in a pioneering direction for the industry, using market data and leveraging the expertise of partners like Qdesign.

"We're bringing on the brightest minds in the business to make sure that we support this move," he said. "I think it's entirely wide open for Claridge, and this is just the start. For me, my vision would be the best has yet to come, and I really think that's the mindset of everyone in Harrison (Claridge's headquarters in Arkansas). They're excited now, they're embracing these changes. They overcame that fear of making the move and pivoted, and everyone is moving into that new direction."

This embrace of design is a huge move for Claridge, which is a family owned business. The company has always evolved over time along with the evolution of the whiteboard and writing surfaces. Claridge has been predominantly associated with the educational side of the business. A catalog business, over time its writing surface capabilities evolved from painted hard boards to aluminized steel to porcelain steel and even into glass.

Claridge always worked in the contract furniture business, too, but it decided to work hard to establish itself among the Silicon Valley startups. That has resulted in quadruple sales on the West Coast over the last decade and led Claridge to Qdesign, the product design and development branch of Chicago-based Whitney Architects.

Qdesign immediately saw the evolution of visual communication tools like white boards, glass boards and other writing surfaces and how they were being integrated into the architectural elements, said Rick Joutras, senior designer.

"We could see that these elements were really evolving from a day two specification or very base specification into a much more tailored, design-driven, aesthetic-driven specification," he said. "These are decisions that are really at the interior design level or with that A&D community. When we approached this project with Claridge, we were really looking at how we could best provide a product that had an architectural element to it that really gave the specifier some flexibility and nuances that would enrich the interior space."

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On display during NeoCon

From that, the Claridge MIX product line was born. The MIX line comes in a variety of configurations. It can be specified as a wall-mounted marker board made from a mix of wood and either glass or porcelain dry erase surfaces. It can also be specified in a contemporary mobile or industrial mobile and as a biophilic panel.

Specifiers can customize nearly every marker board component — from colors, finishes and writing surfaces to metal trays, bases and accent strips — giving them a virtually unlimited palette. It is the mix of materials that really resonates with the design community. The frames are made of responsibly harvested ash in Vellum, Ghost and Rustic Bengel stain colors. The partial and full height mobiles measure 72 inches from top to bottom, in panel widths ranging from 36 to 60 inches. The boards are available in Claridge glass and LCS3 porcelain writing surfaces and Claridge Cork tack surfaces. The company uses hubless casters with brake locks and offers optional metal shelves for the partial height mobile, available in powder coat colors to match the base. Cork or a biophilic panel can be added to either side of the markerboard.

“So we don’t just see this product as a visual communication tool, but really as an architectural element or an aesthetic element going into a corporate interior spaces, and I think that’s what’s unique or what’s great about the MIX product line is that it is a substantial board,” Joutras said. “It has some weight to it, some aesthetic presence, a visual presence to it, but has the ability to mix and match different elements that we see as trend markers within the architectural community or the interiors community.”

“As you go through that product line and as you look at its offerings, you can see that it ranges from what we would call more of an urban loft, a little more loft aes-



Qdesign team

thetic, clear coat wood or lightly stained wood, kind of a translucent stain, really seeing that grain come through, clear coat steel with industrial casters to something a little more polished, powder-coated finish, nice gloss on the metal work and a finished frame. With variable sub traits and writing surface sub traits, it really almost becomes a writing system or a visual system to be specified within the interiors market.”

From a functional standpoint, Claridge products are still performing at the highest level, said Mark Lawer, a division manager at Claridge. The company’s products now have a visual appeal, but also the design behind them. “The design-driven contract furniture is, to us, the new standard, which is completely different,” he said.

The MIX product line changes the conversation between Claridge and the design community, said Gregg Steliga, vice president of sales and business development.

“I think the MIX product has made a statement loud and clear and Qdesign did a phenomenal job picking up on the market, the market trend where wood seemed to be mixed into the product,” he said. “A lot of wood is coming back, and this product really, not only did it add the frame back to the marker board but it also integrated the wood back into the contract furniture business. So, I think Q nailed it with their product and I think by our reception at NeoCon this year is what we’re seeing in questions on pre-orders and on orders already, they really hit it on the mark.”

Claridge knows its work is far from done. It has strong competitors across the country and around the world. So the company is not only launching new products, it is going back through its catalog and refreshing everything.

The “institutional” company isn’t so institutional anymore. In fact, Claridge is on the cusp of hitting the big time in the A&D community. **BoF**