

Lista Workbenches Are A New Foundation For Great Design At The School Of Architecture At UNC Charlotte

One of the stated goals of the School of Architecture at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNC Charlotte) is to help each student “apply strategic thinking to environmental problems.” Recently, the students had the opportunity to strategize about a problem impacting their own classroom environment: they needed new desks at which to work.

Ken Lambla, AIA, Dean of the College of Arts + Architecture, explained the severity of the need. He said, “Our existing desks had worn out their welcome. These old desks were custom designed and custom made when we first occupied our building in 1991. They may have been sufficient then, but today they didn’t offer the kind of flexibility the students’ work demanded. Not only were the dimensions and ergonomics insufficient, but they were lacking in many

key areas of functionality: no power supplies, no wheels for mobility, inadequate display surfaces, and serious storage limitations.”

Lambla recognized the need for change. But to determine the requirements for the next generation of desks, he consulted with the true experts – the end-users themselves.



A meeting of minds.

“We have amazing students who are really smart and candid, and we have a close relationship with them,” he said. “It only made sense that, as emerging architects, they would have strong and worthwhile opinions on the elements of their classroom.”

So Lambla and the school’s Director of Laboratories, Rich Preiss, gathered a “focus group” of students around one of the older model desks

and held an in-depth three-hour discussion about what worked, what didn't work, and what was needed.

After they were able to establish the functional needs and design specifications for their next desks, Lambla and his team put the request out for bid – a required step given that UNC Charlotte is a state-supported, public university.



He and Preiss researched most of the available options, consulted with other schools around the country, and then narrowed their options down to about 15 companies.

In the end, for an array of reasons, the winner was Lista International, a leading manufacturer of modular workstations and storage solutions located in Holliston, MA.

List listens.

"We were looking for a workbench provider that could come through in three key areas, quality, custom design expertise, and on-time delivery," said Lambla.

According to Preiss, "One of our highest priorities was quality, given these desks will be used in a demanding environment and need to last a long time, and good looks as well. It had to be a product that would reflect the vision of our school. We're trying to train designers here so we want them to think quality. How we present ourselves to current and prospective students is really

important. Lista was able to provide us with the highest-quality, durable solution that was also very aesthetically-pleasing."

"Second," added Lambla, "the company needed to demonstrate an expertise to be able to refine the design and fabrication of our new desks. Being architects, we're pretty detail driven. We needed a company that was going to work

with us on the exact details of fabrication as it relates to the experience we've had over the last 15 years. Lista brought a lot of knowledge to the table and demonstrated an ability to create custom application-specific solutions."

Added Preiss, "At every level, Lista was much more flexible – from their material offerings to delivery options."

Lambla continued, "We wanted to work with a company that would be willing to listen to us. I think the 'L' in Lista actually stands for listening. They recognized and respected our input. We knew the dimensions we needed. We knew what type of worksurface was required. We knew what the critical wear and tear points were going to be. We knew how the desks were going to be used by the UNC Charlotte students. But Lista knew more about the availability of materials, the gauge of metals, and the actual fabrication techniques that could be used based on their design plans."

Lambla said that the Lista sales representative, Ed Piotrowski, was particularly strong in the communication department. He said, "Ed has been able to orchestrate a high level of communication throughout the process. He and the Lista team combined a technical expertise with an outstanding ability to communicate and work with me as a client."

"Lastly and very importantly," Lambla said,

"We needed somebody who could supply these workbenches within a very tight window of time – about eight weeks to be exact. This included about one week for delivery and installation. At the university level, we call the money that's left over from the annual budget 'one-time money.' This is what we were working with. And if we didn't use it by the given deadline, we'd lose it. Fortunately Lista came through, not only on-time, but with completely assembled products. Many of the other bidders were delivering only parts – Lista provided a ready-to-use solution."



Ventilation and motion.

The School of Architecture at UNC Charlotte has replaced 200 of their old desks with Lista's Arlink Student Workstations. One of the custom elements of these high-quality, handsome white workstations is the perforated metal that Lista used in the walls of the bench cabinets.

"The perforation was important in our case," explained Lambla, "because a lot of our students will keep their computer towers in the drawer for purposes



of maximizing space and security. In a fully enclosed cabinet, the heat build-up could affect the performance of the computer. Also, sometimes our students would put their lunches in the drawer and forget about it. The benefits of ventilation for this are obvious."

Some of the other design decisions that were reached in the student meetings and implemented in the new desks include: elimination of a flat file drawer to allow for larger side cabinets, and the addition of casters or wheels. The Lista casters were specified in a certain size so that they could roll over the classroom's above-the-floor

electrical receptacle "towers" without damaging them.

"When we would move the old desks," Lambla said, "sometimes the legs would fall into the electrical boxes and ruin the outlet boxes."

All the surfaces on the new workstations have been designed for maximum functionality. The worksurfaces are the composite "Lista Top," which is not only durable but can be flipped over after three or four years to extend its life. Each workstation also features a self-healing cutting mat.

"We were looking for sustainability with the worksurfaces. Not only could we get 6-8 years use out of each Lista Top, but after they wear out we wanted to be able to re-fabricate a certain percentage of them – get the most use out of our purchase," Lambla said.

The upper panels on the workstations' above-worksurface accessory system combine multiple material surfaces: a tackboard for pinning up papers, a magnetized board and an erasable dry marker board. This all-in-one functionality provides students with easy access to their work and a clear view of their work. This single multi-purpose vertical accessory system replaces a three-panel solution used in the old desks.

The old desks used at UNC Charlotte were also viewed by their end-users as lacking in power access, as they featured just a single duplex outlet box. The students use electricity for many



different items, including computers, tools, radios, refrigerators, and more. The Lista workstations extend the power with a well-integrated 15 amp power beam featuring ten outlets, a circuit breaker and on-off switch.

Overall Lambla, Preiss, and the students at the School of Architecture couldn't be more pleased with their new classroom equipment. In fact, when budget allows, Lambla said he plans to replace the 50 remaining old desks with new Lista workstations.

"Lista doesn't just provide the same off-the-shelf products year after year," Lambla concluded. "They excelled at meeting our unique application demands, and really helped us to figure out what improvement we could, and should, make. Lista seems to have a strong culture of always looking to put better products on the market."

And the improvements that the School of Architecture at UNC Charlotte has made are certain to improve the culture of learning at the school for many years to come.

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