



TRANSFORMING TRADITION

INSIDE THE REVAMPED ROOM 290

Shaping tomorrow: today's classroom transformations

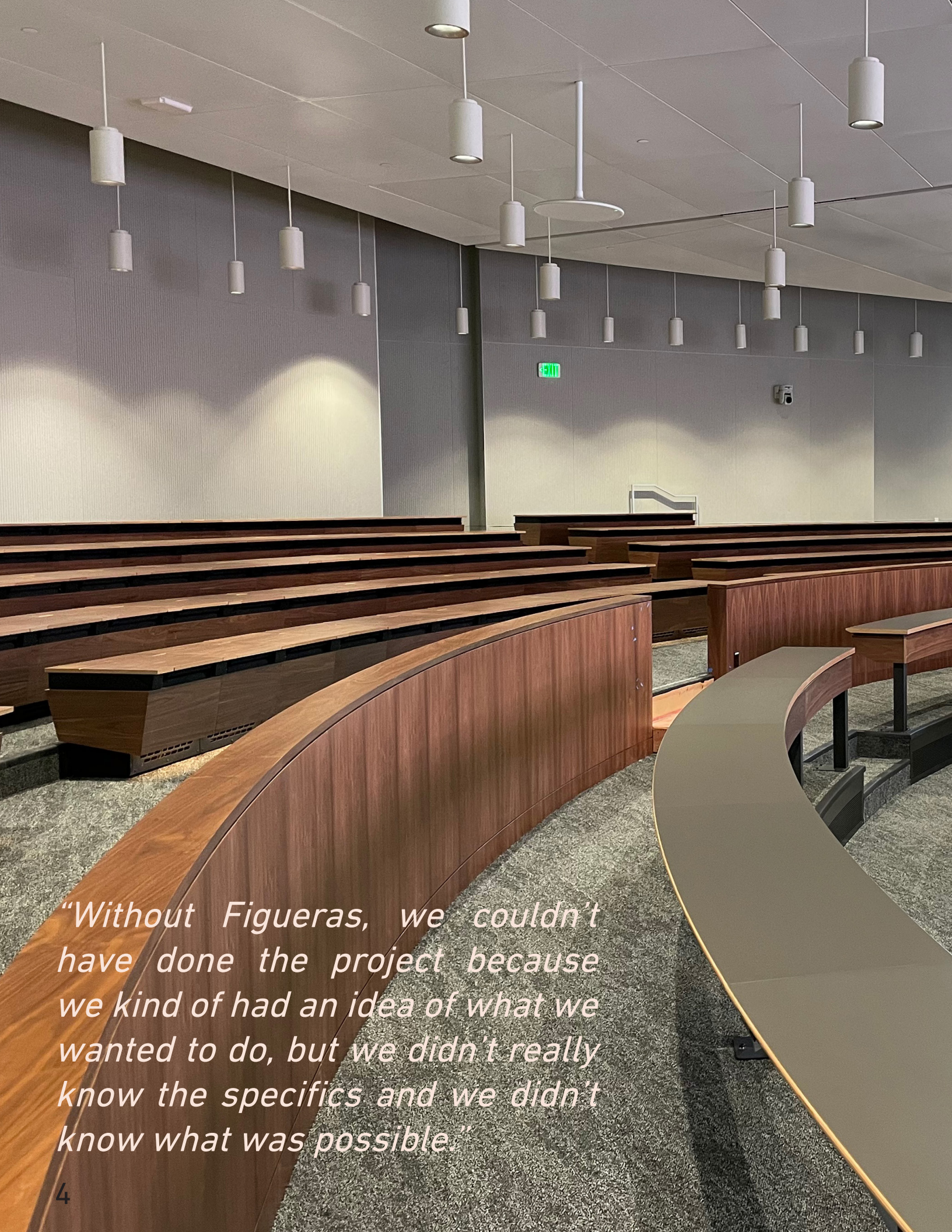
One of the most prestigious education institutions worldwide, nestled in the heart of Silicon Valley, recently unveiled its revamped Room 290. This transformation, led by MK Think, the future-forward consulting studio, combines innovation with elegance.

Today education requirements and techniques have rapidly evolved. So should its seating. Education pedagogy methods have rapidly advanced. So have the requirements and needs of in-person classrooms. Students and teachers in classrooms function differently, they interact more laterally, they have spaceship standard technology tools at their fingertips and they benefit from digital communications tools significantly advanced from the teacher-to-many traditional method tooling by chalkboards and projectors to Hyper-Socratic didactic engagement informed by rapid access to information.

When Stanford Law School set out to advance its premier large education theatre, they set out to define and then create the most advanced, thoughtful, and effective collaborative learning environment.

These intentions extended directly to the question of "... how should the seats work." Rather than consider this an ancillary consideration, the inventor/architects of MKThink suggested that the seat was actually a core consideration that needed to be as useful and dynamic as the other aspects of the room. It also had the added criteria to respond personally to the variables of individual user satisfaction - if the user is





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not accommodated comfortably, nothing else in that learning experience will be optimal.

This transformation was designed by the award-winning San Francisco architects/inventors MKThink. The result is the room designated #290 - humble in name but impressive in intention and result. This recently rebuilt theatre classroom sits within a mid-1970s “brutalist” and restrictive concrete shell but has been transformed into a dynamic multimodal accommodating education cohorts of 70 students as well as theatrical seat events for as many 325 people.

To accomplish the design goal of innovation-with-elegance, MKThink, and the renowned Law School turned to the pioneering leader of educational furniture innovation, Figueras Seating.

In the realm of furnishing educational institutions worldwide, Figueras has carved a niche for itself as a renowned expert. Our specialization lies in crafting bespoke solutions that seamlessly adapt to the evolving needs of colleges and universities. With a track record of collaborating with some of the world’s most prestigious universities, including Princeton, Cornell, and Georgetown in the United States, Figueras brings a wealth of experience and expertise to the table.

In this exclusive conversation with Mark R Miller, FAIA, Chair and Design Lead of MK Think, the forward-thinking consulting firm, we delve into the inspirations and challenges behind this ambitious project, blending tradition and modernity, a project that perfectly exemplifies our commitment to redefining educational spaces.

Figueras: What was the initial vision of the project and how did it evolve over time?

Mark Miller: The macro challenge was how to transform this 1970s artifact which is old and concrete and kind of hard to occupy comfortably and effectively into something more modern and necessary for today’s and tomorrow’s students. That plan is going to take perhaps



Mark R Miller, FAIA, Chair and Design Leader MK Think

a decade to fund and to implement the phases.

The first part of that plan is a series of a few rooms that the law school needed badly and wanted to exemplify what is possible. The premier room in that set is the one we call 290, which is the largest room

in the school and was renovated 20 years ago. It served well for 20 years, but over time, technology changed, the law school is now bigger, and it needs to accommodate more people, both students and visitors because the school law hosts from local to international events, we have Supreme Court justices here and lots of famous people and lots of debates and different events. And it needs a room that’s of a standard of the people who use it, shall I say.

“This room provides a new type of teaching room, one that is able to serve two very different-sized sessions comfortably and provide flexibility to educate, in presenter-driven mode for 275 people or lecture class for 72.”

F: What were the most significant challenges faced during the project, and how were they overcome?

MM: Where the seats come in is that the room, when we took it over, had 180 seats designed for previously. And as I said, it’s the largest room in the school, all the walls are concrete and almost impossible to change the outside perimeter. The primary objective was twofold. Firstly, the space needed to accommodate 300+ people. Secondly, we wanted people to use it a lot, but due to the law school’s shortage of classrooms, the room also had to be versatile enough to comfortably fit 72 students. The challenge was to seamlessly transition between these two



capacities, 72 and 300, without compromising the room's ambiance. Whether serving 72 or 300, the room should feel purposefully designed for that specific number. A room designed for 300 might appear too spacious for 72, which could diminish the overall experience.

F: So how do you achieve this versatility in the room?

MM: We were thinking about different things, seats that slide out, a wall that would move, and all sorts of devices like that. And we realized they all looked compromised. Neither was ideal. After re-evaluating the room's seating arrangement, we found that by altering a section, we needed significant adjustments, including to the ceiling. By steepening the front rows, we added more seats and enhanced sight lines, allowing attendees to sit closer yet comfortably. This allowed us to add an extra row with a dramatic seating style for the first 72 seats. However, we still needed 180 more seats. To achieve this, we introduced two seating configurations: a steeper one in the front and a flatter one in the rear, where the Figueras seats are located. This dual-seating approach increased our capacity to around 260 seats.

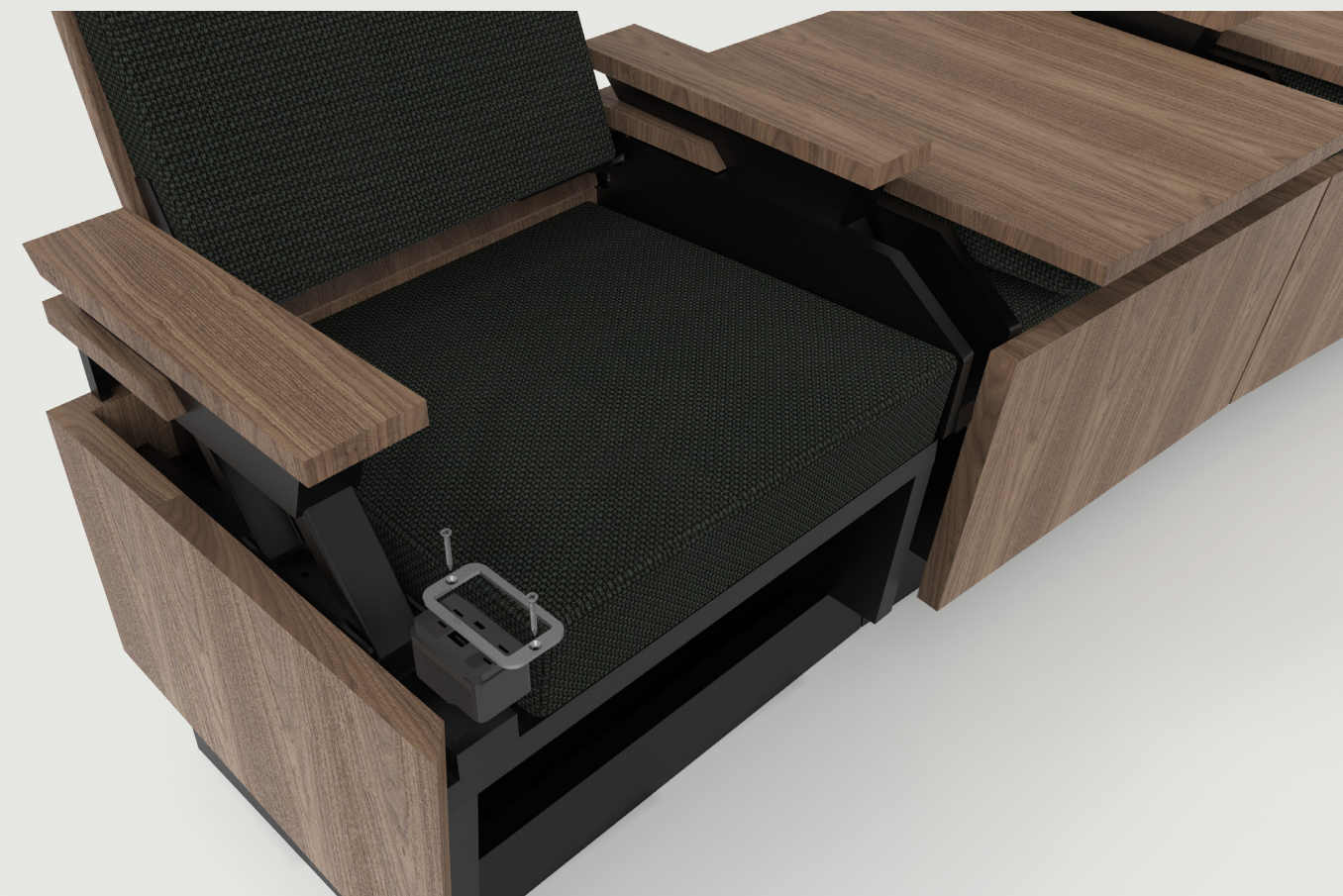
F: Then is where Figueras comes into play.

MM: We found that installation that you had done in the Telefonica building in Madrid, so we realized that a solution was possible, but what we needed did not yet exist That is why we reached out to you both about

that specific seat but also, as designers and engineers, to help us maybe create something new. You know, it did not exist, but it would, inspired by our needs and your skills. The key to creating an appropriate design was to join and workshop with your team. Seeing the techniques and range of how you fabricated various systems, helped us create the core concepts for ideas for functions, dimensions, and specifications for something that was both challenging but comfortable for Figueras and I could bring back to the law school. Figueras created a two-tier, 4-chair mock-up, shipped it out and we tested it out, we have some fun mock-up pictures of people sitting and sliding in the open and closed positions. Seeing people actually enjoying the mock-ups reinforced our confidence in the potential of the chair.

F: How did the Figueras team collaborate to bring your vision to life?

MM: Your company was very, very great to work with. Very talented. The product is at a price point that worked. Without sacrificing quality, and the customer service is excellent. Tolerances because of the way we design and the way you design, are tight. And the team responded well to help deal with a little, you know, thing. And so, it's a very, very successful solution. In collaboration with Figueras, we achieved a seat that maximized space and provided flexibility in form which increased room capacity while ensuring comfort, ideal for presentations



The Bench

The installed product in Room 290 is an elegant bench crafted from solid beech wood. It features a versatile design that can transform into individual seats by simply sliding off the top cover, which then becomes a cushioned backrest. Activating a mechanism raises the armrests for added comfort. Additionally, each seat comes equipped with a power outlet, allowing users to connect computers and other devices during conference sessions. This seating system serves a dual purpose based on the position of the folding backrest. When the backrest is open, it provides ergonomic and comfortable seats, ideal for a conference room setting. When the backrest is closed, the model seamlessly functions as a continuous bench, offering flexibility for various uses.



rather than note-taking sessions. These seats had fold-down features, armrests, and comfortable backs.

F: There was a back-and-forth, but finally we achieved a good solution for this room.

MM: Without Figueras, we couldn't have done the project because we kind of had an idea of what we wanted to do, but we didn't really know the specifics and we didn't know what was possible. And we don't design lots of custom seats at MK Think. We design lots of different things: we do design products, we do architecture, we even create software, so we understand the potential of the seat design. But to go and commission hundreds of chairs for a special seat that doesn't exist for a critical function at an important school is not something that we set out to do necessarily, because there is little tolerance for problems. Working from a successful precedent that was working and having direct access to your designers and team encouraged the inspiration. Well, actually two things: you provided us the inspiration that we could do this, and you provided us with a lot of references in general of what could be done with seats. And then we're very, very collaborative, and good to work with, professional to work with. So that combination made this happen. And sometimes people say, oh, it's only seats, but without those, these seats, we could not have that flexibility, and therefore the room would not work.

F: How did you ensure that the hall meets the diverse needs of its users, from students to faculty and visitors, and what was the main reason for selecting this bench?

MM: The strategic planning phase analyzed the utilization of the various rooms and indicated that room 290 was low utilization because it was too large to accommodate the current class sizes and too small to serve the various large presentations and events. Staff and Faculty workshops to understand different modes of interaction that would not only meet the capacity needs but support flexible teaching/learning needs of various curriculums. We prepared a full-scale mock-

up of two rows of four seats and tested the materials, construction, and ergonomics in both the bench mode and seat with the back up mode. The mock-up was first tested in the MKThink lab and then on campus with students, faculty, guests, and actual board members.

F: What considerations were made during the product implementation, such as acoustics and visibility?

MM: Visibility at full capacity was a big deal and the room needed to serve two very different-sized events: 72 students in a lecture style and 300+ in an event mode. When serving 72 students, we did not want the unoccupied portion of the room to look vast and empty. The box seats design enables these two modes to co-exist: by lowering the rear tier angle for the box seats and raising the tiering of the front rows (those with tables) we created more favorable site lines from the presenter position. The box seats in the down position disappear the rear seating rows from this perspective. The result is the room seems comfortable in the 72-seat mode. For breakout sessions, the flat tops provide group areas for discussions before returning to the front seats with tables. Also in the down mode, the capacity is about 25% higher than with the seats up. And this creates a less formal vibe. Combined this provides significant benefits for the room utilization and flexibility of character.

F: How do you envision this room contributing to the legacy of such a prestigious school in the years to come?

MM: This room provides a new type of teaching room, one that is able to serve two very different-sized sessions comfortably and provide flexibility to educate in modes that are presenter-driven for 275 people, or lecture class for 72 with ready-to-go breakout sessions. It can be formal with padded seats for 325 people in the bench seat mode. This type of flexibility with quality is unprecedented. Perhaps it provides some inspiration and support for other designers and clients to invest in rethinking seemingly ordinary room components

to expand the potential of adaptive reuse of existing facilities.

F: How do you see the role of architecture evolving in the context of educational institutions?

MM: Prestigious schools like this are prioritizing high-performance adaptive reuse of existing facilities to be able to remain square-footage-neutral while also providing state-of-the-art education facilities. Room 290 sets the new standard for how to do this in a large theater classroom.

Figueras also designed the tables in the front rows, with a design that complements the bench and the rest of the room. Connectivity options were also incorporated to allow laptops and various devices to be connected.



Project Details

School of Law

Location: Stanford, CA, USA

Capacity: 72 to 275

Supplied Product: Bespoke bench

Year of Development: 2023

Architecture and Development: MK Think

Figueras Seating has codesigned and produced the benches and the tables.

