

**CLOCKING ON**

Students Nic Zambetti and James Tichenor in Interaction-Ivrea's electronics workshop. Zambetti co-designed 'Quattro', a radio alarm clock (centre), that works in tandem with a bear - squeeze to snooze



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Time for a city break

Typewriter giant Olivetti oiled the wheels of Italian innovation in the town of Ivrea for most of the 20th century. Next month's move to Milan will close a chapter in design history

The age of industrialisation has often thrown together a town and a corporation. Like General Motors and Detroit or Apple and Cupertino, the place and the product become one. For years Italy has also had its own pairing, the company being Olivetti, and the place being Ivrea. Nestled in the Canavese region, Ivrea is sandwiched between the Italian Alps and the industrial hot spots of Milan and Turin. On one side of the river is the small, sleepy medieval town, with a brick castle and cobbled piazzas. Cross the river and the urban panorama changes to a striking industrial landscape of glass factories and modernist workers' housing blocks, a vision of modern production.

All this was generated by a company that first started manufacturing typewriters in 1908. Ivrea's urban development grew in parallel with the Olivetti family's vision. During the 1940s, under Adriano Olivetti, the company positioned itself at the forefront of a new type of industrial culture with design at the heart of its corporate strategy.

Adriano Olivetti set about restructuring the social make-up of the town using urban planning and progressive ideas about architecture and design. He launched projects for the building of new production facilities, offices, employee housing, canteens and nurseries, developing a complex system of social services. In 1937, for example, he commissioned a residential housing estate for company employees, designed by architects Luigi»



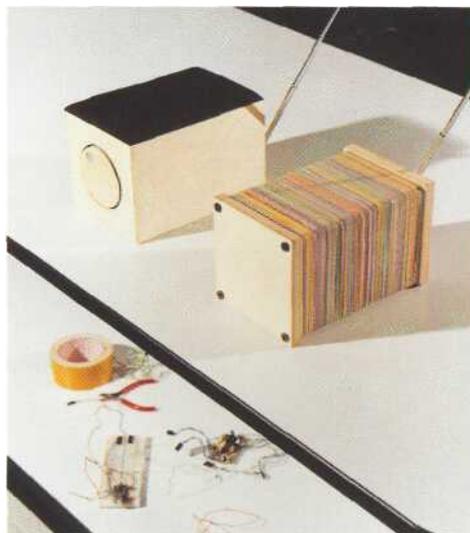
Figini and Giro Pollini. Buildings were located to maximise natural light. Olivetti also enlisted the talents of many leading Italian architects, such as Marco Zanuso, Eduardo Vittoria, Ignazio Gardella, Annibale Fiochi and Luigi Cosenza, for Olivetti offices and plants in Ivrea and worldwide.

Business-wise, meanwhile, Olivetti launched a multi-faceted attack on the market using design as a key component. He commissioned the country's top names in product design, including Marcello Nizzoli and Ettore Sottsass, and between the late 1940s and the late 1950s, the company launched a number of products that soon rose to cult design status: the lexikon 80' typewriter (1948), the 'Lettera 22' portable typewriter (1950) and the 'Divisumma 24' calculator (1956). Olivetti's strong visual slant was reinforced by graphics and advertising by US designer Milton Glaser and Michele De Lucchi.

For years, Ivrea was hailed as a model town, a place where the pope and dignitaries of state would flock to on official visits. In the late 1970s, under the control of vice chairman and CEO Carlo De Benedetti, Olivetti turned to personal computers, and over the next 18 years proceeded to become a global computer powerhouse. Then, in the mid-1990s, production declined and the success story turned sour. Olivetti

LEARNING CURVE

Above, the 1971 Unita Residenziale Ovest, renovated as student accommodation
Below, 'Feel the Music I and II, by James Tichenor and David A Mellis. To tune in, the user 'feels' the stations through touch



eventually lost its grip on the market, closing plants and making thousands redundant in the process.

A straightforward recovery in such a peculiar landscape was never going to be easy. While Ivrea suffers high levels of unemployment and the paradoxical situation of possessing an overqualified, privileged, professional class, the eerily half-empty buildings continue to stand, a ghostly testament to a visionary man and his dream. And now the final link to the town's rich legacy of technology and innovation is finally being broken. The Interaction Design Institute Ivrea (Interaction-Ivrea), an independent, non-profit organisation, founded by Telecom Italia and Olivetti, and now part of the former's Progetto Italia initiative, is moving into Milan after five years in Ivrea.

The institute retained the tradition of the town in its approach to innovation and technology using design. It has a diverse cultural make-up, comprising students and professors gathered from more than 20 countries, but the social set-up is familiar. The institute specialises in technology for interface design, exhibitions, installations and physical devices, as well as for the new design arena of services.

The pedigree of visiting professors, lecturers and resident faculty is impeccable. Gillian Crampton Smith, academic director of the institute, was previously»



professor of interaction design at London's Royal College of Art, while on the steering committee stands Bill Moggridge, founder of international product design group IDEO, Bill Verplank of Xerox fame and Marco Zanini of Sottsass Associates, responsible for the renovation of the institute's buildings.

But Interaction-Ivrea was never a straightforward campus; rather, it stresses the constant ongoing relationship with international and Italian companies. Specific workshops with market leaders such as Orange, Hitachi, Sony and Fiat mean the students get a taste of what's out there, while the business world can tap into up-and-coming concepts. The institute is currently working on service design concepts with Hilary Cottam, director of the Design Council's experimental RED unit, who won the London Design Museum's Designer of the Year award in June this year.

So far, the institute has exhibited its work widely in Italy and abroad, twice at the Milan Furniture Fair. This April it showcased 'Strangely Familiar Future', a collection of everyday devices redesigned to give them a more poetic and meaningful use. These working »



PULLING POWER
Above, 'Tug Tug', by Haiyan Zhang and Aram Armstrong, is a pair of dedicated telephones with linked cords, allowing callers to connect physically by giving a tug

Left, students James Tichenor (left) and David A Mellis



ACCORDINGTOTYPE

Above, this typewriter-shaped building, *Unita Residenziale Est*, was designed in 1971 as housing for Olivetti managers and later became a hotel. Today it is semi-derelict, but ripe with potential

Right, students Myriel Milicevic and Oren Horev in front of *Unita Residenziale Ovest*. The renovated apartments have Flos and Magis furniture and some still hold the original 1970s fittings, now collectables



prototypes included 'Message Table', a desk that's also an answering machine, which was designed by Shawn Bonkowski with Dana Gordon, and 'The Egg' by Jennifer Bove, Thomas Stovicek and Nicholas Zambetti. This scheduling device allows you to rearrange meetings and appointments by giving it a good shake. The interactive wallpaper, 'Not So White Walls', designed by Interaction-Ivrea alumni Dario Buzzini, and now in its third prototype, was also on show. Meanwhile, at Milan's San Siro stadium, second year students displayed their theses as work in progress as part of *Domus* magazine's Circular event, an all-night show of art, design and music.

Last year, in an effort to meet the demand for exhibition content and installations from curators, retailers and event organisers around the world, the institute set up the Exhibition Unit. So far, the unit has been invited to numerous events, such as Beijing's first Architecture Biennale, Copenhagen NEXT 2004 and the Pitti Immagine Uomo fashion shows in Florence. In summer this year, it showed a series of installations at London's Victoria & Albert Museum exhibition, 'Touch Me', and it was also present at the Venice Biennale with an information wall installation.

With a new crop of students just graduated this summer and an array of ongoing projects that cover most design disciplines, Interaction-Ivrea is forging a new aesthetic which it will take with it to its new Milan campus. For the town of Ivrea, meanwhile, the future is looking rather less rosy. ✪

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