

Radio Resurrection

Words Joe Lloyd Photographs Sam Hecht

One day in late 2019, the London-based design studio Industrial Facility was approached by home audio company Pure with a brief. The brand wanted nothing less than a complete refresh of their portable radio range. This was no mean task. Radio has been threatened with obsolescence for decades. The Buggles had lamented its decline in 1979 at the hands of video, long before the advent of streaming platforms. Within this wider diminishment of the field, Pure was a company whose defining product, the digital Evoke-1 radio, was almost two decades old. “They needed,” says Kim Colin, one of Industrial Facility’s co-founders, “something to be proud of.”





The Evoke Play radio, fitted with a perforated wooden grill: a new variant upon Industrial Facility's design that is due to launch in September 2022.

There was certainly pride to restore. In the post-millennium years, the Pure Evoke-1 was a consummate consumer electronic, to the degree that when London's Museum of the Home eventually reveals its early 2000s room, the Evoke will inevitably be in there, nestled on a shelf between The Streets's *Original Pirate Material* and Dido's *Life for Rent*. It was created by a company called Imagination Technologies, one of the earliest developers to successfully create a digital audio broadcasting (DAB) decoding chip.

In 2001, Imagination Technologies released the Pure DRX-601, which it billed as the world's first portable digital radio. The DRX-601 was a pale oak box with components and a shiny chrome fascia in the shape of a stingray, centred around a tiny screen. On either side, slanted grills let the sound out. It was topped with a curved metal handle reminiscent of the Gateshead Millennium Bridge.

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The DRX-601 was one for the audiophiles only, retailing at £499. But later that year the company developed a more compact, limited-edition model. This design was encouraged and funded by the BBC, which sought to celebrate the centenary of Guglielmo Marconi's first wireless, transatlantic radio transmission¹ while promoting the benefits of DAB over the older FM format. Priced at £99, the more affordable set swiftly sold out and, the following year, Imagination Technologies built on its success with the similar Pure Evoke-1. Having abandoned the elaborate facade of the DRX-601, the Evoke-1 faceplate centred around a capsule-shaped oval, one half given over to the speaker and the other to the control panel. It was another instant hit. By 2015, they had sold more than 5 million units. But the glory days did not last. internet radio dramatically reduced the number

¹ Marconi arranged for a message to be transmitted from Cornwall to Newfoundland. Previously, it had been believed that it was impossible to transmit information further than 200 miles due to the Earth's curvature.

of consumers looking for a DAB set and, in 2016, Imagination Technologies sold Pure to an Austrian investment firm for just £2.6m.

Within that same timeframe, Industrial Facility had gone from strength to strength. Established by the Los Angeles-raised architect Colin and London-based industrial designer Sam Hecht in 2002 – the same year that the Evoke-1 was released – the studio had carved itself a distinctive niche bringing design principles to consumer electronic goods. “The genesis of Industrial Facility was always working with companies and industry,” explains Hecht. “In the early 2000s, one of the most neglected, or the most compromised, areas of products was the electronics industry. We decided that we would focus on small products and see if we could make an impact.”

The studio made waves early on through its work with Muji, helping the Japanese retail group transform into the diverse, design-conscious retailer it is today. “We introduced them to some very new ideas for electronics and appliances,” says Hecht, “and they entertained those ideas really well. This new Muji suddenly became popular as a place to buy products, not just furniture.” Industrial Facility's product designs for Muji encompass telephones, magnets, a nutcracker, a coffee machine and a bathroom radio that has been cunningly disguised to resemble a toiletry bottle. Alongside these pieces, the studio steadily built a portfolio across technology brands, including portable printers for Epsom, an alarm clock for Idea International and digital storage devices for LaCie.

Over time, Industrial Facility's work expanded in scope and scale. In the past decade, it has become particularly renowned for its poised, meticulous contributions to furniture design. Recent notable products include the Sling Lounge Chair for Takt, the Fronda seating and table collection for Mattiazzi, the w182 Pastille lamps for Wästberg, and the height-adjustable OE1 Micro Pack desk for Herman Miller. These works have been praised for their return to certain precepts of mid-century industrial design, both in terms of their clean aesthetic and their aim to genuinely improve users' lives. Yet as the high-end furnishing commissions waxed, those from electronics companies waned. “I'm not quite sure why,” says Hecht, “but it's probably for several reasons. One is that a lot of designs started to occur in-house. And another is that a lot of products started to erase—”

“Or consume,” Colin interjects.

“Or consume other products,” Hecht continues. “Phones and laptops suddenly became media devices. Products like radios and clocks became less important.”

Industrial Facility was surprised, then, to be asked to design a range of radios at the end of the 2010s. It was doubly surprising to be asked by a British company, one based in the Hertfordshire commuter belt. “In 20 years, we’ve only been asked by two or three British companies to do a product,” says Hecht. “I think we are not really

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—Kim Colin

understood here. Perhaps we sound a little bit foreign and there’s less manufacturing in the UK.” As such, Colin and Hecht accepted the brief, keen to return to the roots of their practice. “It came when we had a lot of furniture projects,” Colin recounts, “so it was exciting to think about technology again.”

“I’d not thought,” continues Hecht, “that we’d ever do another radio.”

Having accepted Pure’s initial brief, Colin and Hecht began by researching their new client. “They had a very new CEO [Peter Ogley],” says Colin, “so we would listen to what his ambitions were. Then we went away and did what we had to do. Companies often have slightly rose-tinted glasses, in that they see the world through their industry. But we’re seeing the [real] world – that’s what I think design can bring to a project.” They were also supported by Pure’s head of design Adrian Nordhaus, a German designer who joined the company at around the same time that Industrial Facility was commissioned.

In the years since the launch of the Evoke-1, the aesthetics of radio have reached what might, unfortunately, be described as a nadir. “You start to look at radios,” says Hecht, “and you realise that it’s utterly dismal.” This downward spiral is due to a pull in two contradictory directions, both of which demonstrate that radio manufacturers lack faith in their products’ future. On the other hand, there has been a fetishization of the retro. British radio manufacturer Roberts, once pioneers of the technology,

now specialise in products that resemble those from the mid-20th century: the brand’s website particularly highlights its Revival range, based on a product from 1956, which it boasts embodies “Decades of Distinct Design”. Many lesser companies have also adopted this aesthetic, almost as if to remind potential buyers browsing on Amazon that they are looking at a radio. “Then on the other side,” explains Hecht, “are products that try to pretend they are high technology, with glitzy displays, keypads and numerous lights, as if saying, ‘I’m actually a computer. Look at how many buttons I have. You can programme me.’ Much of it is a visual device, nothing to do with function or ease of use.” He continues: “radio has now become this confusing product that struggles to know whether it’s a speaker, a clock or a multimedia device.”

Pure had succumbed to the latter tendency, developing designs that include spurious additional features. The Pure Evoke H4 features a kitchen timer, alarm and 40 preset stations. The Pure Evoke F3, the company’s first major model to feature Bluetooth connectivity, has a huge screen that takes up much of its user interface, and a black shell that gropes towards the aesthetics of modern computing. Pure had lost any sense of purity. “I would say that they were at a slight crisis point,” says Colin. “They had made their mark as the first to do something. They had a very big hit, then many other companies followed them. So they no longer held the unique place in the market”.

This problem was compounded by the decline of DAB, the technology for which Pure was created, but which has fallen victim to a period of exponential technological advance. FM was invented in 1933 by the engineer Edwin Armstrong, and it remained the leading radio platform until the turn of the millennium with the introduction of DAB. But DAB had less than 20 years to establish itself before internet radio all but superseded it. Pure’s response was to throw new platforms into its products. “They thought, ‘Let’s add the next one and not jeopardise those who use the current one,’” says Colin “This happens to lots of products – they want to migrate their current market along while gaining people who want to use the next technology. But they’re also competing with companies that just do the new technology.”

The radio as a discrete object was also facing stiff competition from Bluetooth speakers, which can play internet radio through other devices. “It’s a perfect

example of products consuming other products,” says Colin. “The physicality of radio has disappeared and it has become just a speaker.” For some audiences, especially those aged under 25, radio is just another type of streaming media – one to be played through computers and speakers along with Spotify, YouTube videos and podcasts. “A lot of people are happy doing that,” says Hecht, “and that’s fine. But I think equally there are people who have a need for a specific device. And that specific device had been hijacked by the two extremes. So we wanted to make something a little bit more authentic – or pure.”

Through speaking to friends and assessing their own habits, Colin and Hecht soon realised that the anecdotal data suggested that demand for physical radio still exists.² “I listen to the radio every morning,” says Hecht. They also found an appetite for a radio as an individual object, physically divorced from other devices. Recent years in particular have seen work and leisure compounded into the same phone and laptop screens, where work emails – or the lack of them – are inescapable. They further noted that the radio plays a unique role in exposure, introducing listeners to artists and pieces of music that they would not find through streaming. “Radio plays a part in my life,” says Hecht, “and if I didn’t have it tomorrow, I would miss it.”

Pure’s brief focused on home listening – radios for an individual listening experience. “Products where the context is built in are always interesting,” says Colin. “You have to ask, what information do you get from the environment versus from the technology?”

“After we’d formed that point of view,” explains Hecht, “we went about designing a product, very, very carefully, thinking about the component tree, the orientation of components, how the speakers could be aligned and positioned.”

The aesthetic was determined by both this context and the electronics that needed to be arranged inside. One of their first instincts was to pivot against the sort of many-buttoned, screen-focused interface that had become the norm. They realised that the way most people listen to radio involves settling on, at most,

² This is backed up by the stats. According to Radio Joint Audience Research Limited (RAJAR), 89 per cent of the UK population listened to live radio in the last three months of 2021, for an average of 20.3 hours per week. DAB accounts for 42.5 per cent of radio listening, internet for 16.9 per cent, and digital TV for 5.1 per cent.

a handful of favoured stations. “You’re not searching through 5,000 stations on a daily basis,” says Hecht. “It’s not quite like TV, where you may be looking for a new piece of media.” In consequence, they decided to downplay their design’s buttons and screens dramatically, if not outright conceal them.

If you view the Pure Evoke Play – the series’s core model – at eye level, you may not perceive the buttons at all. They are a series of subtle ridges rising from the top of the unit, in the same black or white colour as the radio’s resin shell. On the right, there is a circular knob that functions as both the on/off button and volume control, with a small LED light beneath that to tell you whether the radio is turned on. In front of it are six tiny nodules – even less raised off the radio’s surface – which set the radio to your chosen presets.

Pure’s brief specified that the radios must include a screen, which is purchased on licence from another company and cannot be altered. Industrial Facility’s elegant solution was to place the screen so that it folds down smoothly into the main box. It only needs to be visible when searching for new stations. In addition, the Evoke Play has a handle in the form of a C-shaped cylindrical aluminium tube, which also folds down, dormant except at the moment of use. “Most people probably won’t carry it around that much,” explains Colin, “but if they do want to move it, that will make it easier.” The smaller Evoke Spot, which is designed to sit on a shelf, and the larger Evoke Home, dispense with the handle altogether; Industrial Facility reasoned that the former was light enough without one and the latter was likely to find its home in one fixed place.

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—Sam Hecht

The Play’s metallic, rounded handle was influenced by its antenna, which Pure had designated another unalterable aspect of any design. This also retracts. When both handle and antenna are raised, there is a symmetry in their size and verticality.

With the screen, buttons, handle and antenna exiled to the top and back of the device, the facade

of the new Evoke series is radically devoid of features. But it is not quite blank. In the current model, it is sheathed in grey textile from Kvadrat's recyclable Atlas series, which has a complex, dappled texture, with the subtlety of a Vija Celmins greyscale. The colour lends the technology a domestic softness. "Black was a message we felt we didn't need more of in the home," says Colin. This plain facade, which is slightly slanted, also plays on the physical qualities of sound. Colin again: "It feels like the sound is coming towards you."

Meanwhile, Hecht describes this design as: "Technology that serves us rather than us servicing the technology" and "something we'd like to live with."

When Industrial Facility presented this to Pure, it was the manufacturers' turn to be surprised. "They had started to rely," says Hecht, "like many other companies, on screens as a form of communication—"

"And to advertise," continues Colin, "that it's a modern product."

Pure asked if there were any other options. "We said no," says Hecht. "We've gone through it, and we think this is the radio that you should be producing." This aligns with Industrial Facility's usual practice. "When we can," explains Colin, "we give one response because we've taken the time to edit and curate them. Most often it's convincing, because we're presenting a clear point of view – we've taken a stand about what is important."

Pure's second question was about the lack of the MDF box, which had become Pure's design signature. "It was pretty meaningless functionally," says Hecht, "but there is this attraction to wood in these sorts of products. People find it comforting." Wood also calls back to the mid-century radios built by manufacturers such as Roberts and Bang & Olufsen, whose wooden frames helped them fit into the domestic interiors of their time. "We flipped it," says Hecht, "and we said it would be ridiculous to make the body in wood because you're never going to be able to engineer it correctly. But I can do this – and I presented a wooden grill." This grill lies at the heart of another version of the Evoke trio – one that has yet to be seen publicly. Instead of fabric, this version is faced with a wooden board, pricked with minute perforations to allow the sound to flow. Industrial Facility observed this system in the walls of today's high-tech concert halls, including Herzog & de Meuron's Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg and OMA's Casa da Música in Porto. Implementing

it in radio form, however, was not at all easy. "It was challenging," says Colin, "because they had never done it before. So they had to find a resource for manufacturing." That resource has now been found, however, and the wooden edition will be available in September.

The design process was not without its challenges. "We argued about the number of preset buttons," explains Colin, "because we tried to have as few buttons as possible." They also asked for a battery option, which the Evoke Play ended up having. Pure, for its part, desired a remote control, but Industrial Facility disagreed. "It felt like it promised 'more' without giving much more," explains Hecht. Pure compromised, so only the Evoke Home has one for users with large rooms. Both company and designers also had to contend with the pandemic and the resultant uncertainty. In-person retailers – still an important site for the sale of electronic devices – were closed. Disrupted supply chains also had to be managed. "I have to hand it to them," says Hecht. "They didn't cancel the project. They kept supporting it."

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There is still an element of hybridity in the new Evoke series. The devices offer FM, DAB and internet radio, making no distinction between the three. This was to allow for Pure's customer base, which spans a huge age range, albeit the majority over 25. "Everyone from 10-year-olds to 90-year-olds now use electronic products," says Hecht, "and their consumption of technology is fast at the beginning before then slowing down."

"People who are no longer early adopters need something familiar as an entry point," continues Colin. These needs are also addressed by the presence, in the Evoke Home, of a CD drive – a technology that



The Evoke family of devices contains the Spot, Play and Home radios.



has arguably become almost obsolete. It is included as a discreet slit on the top of the unit. Otherwise, the additive features of previous Evoke models have gone.

For Pure, the new radios have been a success. “The response has been incredible for them as a company,” says Hecht. “They feel incredibly proud of this radio.” It also signalled a shift in the company’s approach, from brand-led to product-led, and from engineering-led to design-led. Industrial Facility has turned a consumer electronic product into a refined design object. If the radio as a typology is to survive into another era, this may be the way it does it. **END**



Industrial Facility ensured that the number of buttons added to the device was kept to a minimum.