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*SLIGHTLY IMPOSSIBLE*  
*by Deyan Sudjic.*  
*In studio with*  
*Industrial Facility*





Left: a rechargeable battery for Herman Miller

If one is looking to understand Industrial Facility, the studio set up in 2002 by Kim Colin (an American architect) and Sam Hecht (a British designer), the monograph on their work published by Phaidon is a good place to start. As you might expect for a studio that has built its reputation on a series of quietly resonant objects, and from Colin's experience as an editor at an earlier stage of her career, the book is as carefully considered and as well-crafted as any of their remarkably refined designs. That Industrial Facility chose to ask Paul Neale and Carole Courtillé of GFT to design it for them suggests a certain modesty. Apart from all the design work that it documents – ranging from cordless telephones and cities-in-a-bag wooden toys for Muji to projectors for Epson, by way of eccentric clocks for Alasdhair Willis's Established & Sons – the book stands out both for its front and back covers, and perhaps even more for the author of its foreword. The covers use line drawings made with a sensibility somewhere between that of Patrick Caulfield and Michael Craig-Martin. The drawings capture the essence of two of Industrial Facility's designs – for the Bell alarm clock, shown from the back, rendered in flat pillar-box red with just a flash of lime green, and the Branca table and chair on the front cover shown as a close-up fragment. It's a

span that encompasses both product design and furniture, two fields of work that while superficially similar are actually quite far apart. "A piece of furniture is different from a product; you can't design a product without understanding the components. You start inside and gradually build your way out," says Hecht. "A chair has to sit at a table or a bench. To do furniture well you have to bridge methods of production, and architecture, furniture contributes to the feeling of a space. We were in California in the summer and saw some of the Richard Neutra houses, and understood how much of the furniture was built in. Product designers can have a tendency to over-complicate furniture."

The drawings are a further distillation of what Industrial Facility have already materially achieved – reducing physical objects to their essential minimum. They seem to suggest what Colin and Hecht would do if they were freed from the material weight of physical objects altogether, as if they were trying to make an object into an icon – not the same as an iconic object – or an archetype. They hint at the idea when they describe their approach to design. Talking about a product that they designed for Herman Miller, they discuss trying to find the way to give an adjustable mechanical table (otherwise a piece of seemingly mute equipment) the quality of 'tableness'.

Yet Industrial Facility is rooted in the analogue world of material objects much as the world of ideas. Of their alarm clock, they admit that; "even though the growing digital world has made the archetypal analogue alarm clock appear like a historical record, people are still attracted to them for their loud sound, and simple interface. Bell [the clock] was designed to help this product take up a more desirable position and to satisfy people who struggle with the layers of information required to set digital clocks." When they unveiled their design for Pure's Evoke radio, they suggested that: "radio behaves inherently differently to playing from pre-defined playlists – it is generated from broadcast media and is generally unexpected content. For many, this is why radio is like a re-assuring 'real-time' companion in the workshop, bedroom, kitchen or bathroom." With its perforated wood front, it looks like a radio, if not like a retro styled product – but it's internet capable, like a smart speaker. The digital interface is provided by a small screen that – since it is rarely used – is concealed under a flap, to leave the object itself looking reassuringly uncomplicated.

Its design is a response to two related tendencies that have had a magnifying effect on each other. On one hand, "radio has now become this confusing product that struggles to know whether it's a speaker, a



Above: Pure Evoke Radio

clock or a multimedia device,” as they put it. At the same time, digital appliances have consumed other products. “Phones and laptops suddenly became media devices.” Like the Herman Miller adjustable work surface, Pure’s Evoke is the comfortingly simple essence of ‘radioness’, even if it can actually do a lot more.

Revealingly, Alain de Botton contributes that foreword, in which he quotes Horace: “The art lies in concealing the art.” Perhaps the first time in the recent history of design criticism that the Roman poet has been cited – but it explains how much Colin and Hecht’s restraint and consistency can achieve. De Botton does not refer to his own books, but the idea of the consolations of the well-considered everyday object, if not the idea of philosophy, hovers over his words.

Industrial Facility’s work offers the simple pleasures of a handle that feels good to touch, a machine that communicates how it works without any need to read the instruction manual, and a colour palette that could have come from a Giorgio Morandi still life. Except for the colour, it’s part of an approach to design that reached its first clear expression in the work of Dieter Rams for Braun. But it would not be correct to call Industrial Facility’s work Rams revivalism. Their work belongs to a different time, and relies on a different technology and a different audience. It has

things in common with Jasper Morrison’s laconic refinement, as well as the designs of the Bouroullec brothers. It carries a sense of being more than a fleeting response to transient circumstance.

Sam Hecht once approvingly described an exhibition of Rams’ designs as looking as if they had all been made for the same room. He is as interested in the legacy of designers, including Joe Colombo, Richard Sapper (the German-born Milanese designer of radios for Brionvega), and his partner Marco Zanuso as in that of Rams. Part of Colin and Hecht’s first exhibition at the Design Museum was a display of their collection of pieces of anonymous mass-produced ingenuity – from a chain-mail oyster-shucking glove to a combined craft knife and scissors set, suggesting that close observation is an essential part of their working method.

While this is clearly an unusually cerebral design studio, that is not to say that they take themselves entirely seriously. The effect of Industrial Facility’s important-looking polished door plate on the studio door in Clerkenwell is somewhat undermined by the words ‘Est. a while ago’ embossed in the brass below the name in a Helvetica font.

Industrial Facility was started more than two decades ago. Colin was in publishing. She worked with the LA-based

artist Mike Kelley to build the architectural models for Educational Complex, his artwork that is now in the collection of the Whitney in New York, and later interviewed veteran Californian architect Pierre Koenig and the photographer Julius Schulman for Koenig’s monograph. Hecht had worked for the high-tech specialist consultancy IDEO in California, Tokyo, and had moved back to Britain. Among many other projects he was on the team that designed the pioneering technology for Prada’s Rem Koolhaas-designed stores in New York and Los Angeles that eventually proved to be too far ahead of its time. Prada invested in a premature attempt to use radio frequency tagging, now standard, but at that point at least five years away from being generally adopted. A decade later the sales staff would have used off-the-shelf iPads – in 2001 Hecht and IDEO designed specially made devices for them. They were beautiful but did not survive the impact of the actual shopping experience.

Behind their brass door plate, Industrial Facility occupies the upper three of a small five-floor building. The lowest level has the neat sense of order of a well-organised carpenters’ workshop, tools of all shapes and sizes have a place, hanging on walls around a workbench. Next up is the studio, with a single line of work tables facing a wall of books arranged as carefully as the tools



Above, left: The Ishinomaki Chair  
 Right: Kim Colin stands behind the OE1 Mobile Easel

below, on Rams' Vitsoe shelving system. They work with a handful of assistants: "We are small, but we are very ambitious."

Reached by a spiral staircase, the top floor is empty. Colin and Hecht use it to show clients their work. In fact, they use each of the three levels to orchestrate their presentations. "When we present, we only show one solution. It's a high-risk strategy: we may spend two or three months working on a project, but we will only show the solution that we believe in," says Hecht. "We start a presentation downstairs, and show the essence of the project, then come upstairs, where we might reveal some prototypes, up here we have invested in a final working model. It's always a physical model, which is a completely different experience from showing a rendering. Even if it's a chair made of paper, and they can't sit on it, we can make it look as if it's resin." If Industrial Facility's methods are determinedly analogue, it should not be understood as nostalgia, any more than Wes Anderson or Quentin Tarantino can be called nostalgic for committing to using film. "There is an analogy with film," they say. "You have to be editing in your mind as you work when you are making physical working models, you have to be economical, which is not something that digital design encourages." They do not apologise for

being interested in giving form to objects. "Physical objects are what we are good at. It's what we enjoy doing."

But they are as interested in how things are used as they are in what they look like. Their recent work with Herman Miller is driven by the changing nature of the workplace. In a world of work where people no longer have their own desk, let alone an office of their own, Industrial Facility has come up with a range of products that respond to the realities of working from home, and to a workplace that has become a single – supposedly flexible – shared space.

Nook is for those who don't have a desk of their own, in which to carry the essential tools they will need in the course of a day. The OE1 Mobile Easel is an easily moved focus for group working. The OE1 Micro Pack can be mounted against a wall, a compact desk that can adjust to sitting or standing work for concentration away from others. The most recent element is a shareable mobile power source, a rechargeable battery that can run a laptop and power a phone, with a locator tag inside. It's available individually, or as a set of four, and has what Industrial Facility would call a look of 'batteriness'. It comes with a carrying handle that expresses portability, and a chamfered form that gives a sense of its power.

Industrial Facility are as fluent in their work in furniture as in product. Their new chair for the German Thonet company is very much in the mainstream of furniture design, and the duo are well aware of their client's remarkable history going back to the start of the 19th century. Thonet has been manufacturing the 214 bentwood 'café' chair since the 1850s, perhaps the most successful mass-produced chair of all time. The company worked with Mart Stam and Mies van der Rohe in the early days of modernism. Industrial Facility's S 220 chair is designed in response to what they call Thonet's request for something "slightly impossible", a plywood shell chair that felt as if it belonged to the company catalogue. Their strategy was to give the chair a profile that referred to the company's history, and to use contemporary moulding techniques to give it a higher level of comfort.

Few periods in history have seen a faster rate of change than the past 20 years, coinciding with Industrial Facility's work to date. It has seen the mass extinctions of whole categories of object, driven by the digital explosion. And yet objects still offer us the consolations of a relationship with the things we need and use in everyday life. Few designers have been as skilled in giving those things lasting meaning as Industrial Facility.

