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Only connect *London*

For UK-based design firm Future Facility, technology is a tool, rather than an end in itself. That's why it's working to ensure that the next generation of devices always puts the consumer first.

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1



2




Plug into your customers' needs

In the 2010s the idea of the “internet of things” (IoT), in which physical devices are linked together via the web, began to take off. This was thanks to faster internet connections, the increasing affordability of digital sensors and growing computing power. “When IoT products came out and you could have your washing machine send your phone a notification telling you that it was finished, we realised that everything had got a bit loopy,” says Sam Hecht, who established creative studio Future Facility with Kim Colin in 2016. Sitting in the practice’s London studio, surrounded by working prototypes of security cameras and battery packs, Hecht tells MONOCLE that both he and Colin felt that practical, human-centric product design had begun to give way to technology for its own sake. “It wasn’t that these were bad products – more that there wasn’t an understanding of the potential of what they were working with,” he says. “That’s where Future Facility came in.”

The company, which sits at the intersection of product design and technology, began as a complementary practice to Industrial Facility, a furniture-focused studio that Hecht and Colin founded in 2002 whose portfolio includes work for the likes of MillerKnoll, Mattiazzi, Santa & Cole, Muji and Emeco. By contrast, Future Facility set out to research, invent and prototype products that bring humanity to technology. “The way that engineers and industry experts imagine the potential for their products usually has very little to do with how we’re actually living with things,” says Colin. He adds that Future Facility’s way of addressing the aforementioned loopiness was to take technology off its pedestal and put it on level terms with a piece’s form and function.

It’s an approach that Leo Leitner helped to define when he joined Future Facility in 2021. The German-born designer is the firm’s creative director. “Big companies often try to make something that sounds technologically innovative but their products don’t actually bring a lot of benefits to the user,” he says. As an alternative, he points to an AI companion device that the firm developed with Taiwanese computer and electronics company Asus. Called Susa, it allows users to load maps, share photos, take phone calls and more. Its digital screen is hidden behind a perforated, tactile frontage made from Ceraluminum (fused ceramic and aluminium, specially developed by Asus), creating a deliberately low-resolution haptic surface. “This product was about saying, ‘You can do all of the things that you normally do on your phone but the screen is going to be lower resolution,’” says Hecht, explaining that the team wanted to reduce the appeal of glowing pixels and counter the overstimulating effect of a conventional screen, while also showcasing the beauty of the device’s materials.

The project sums up Future Facility’s ambition – one that places users and their needs at the heart of its product and technology design. (In Susa’s case, one goal was to help people to cut back on screen time.) “In our everyday lives, we don’t think of a chair any differently to how we think about our phone – both are part of our environment and the way we live,” says Colin. “What we do at Future Facility is think across product design and technology, and integrate them.” —  futurefacility.co.uk



1. Susa in action
2. The Herman Miller OE1 Powerbox as part of the Power Eco-System
3. Leo Leitner, Sam Hecht and Kim Colin

3