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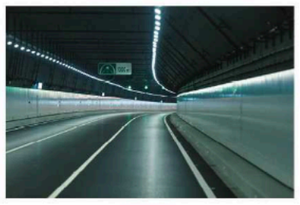

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Stroking a Cat the Wrong Way

"We do get titillated by oddity," says Sam Hecht, one of the founders of Industrial Facility.

Words Will Wiles Studio photographs Jermaine Francis

Kim Colin and Sam Hecht seated next to their stainless steel Piatto table for Brianza-based manufacturer Fucina. The Piatto family of tables feature polished vertical planes that cut across the tabletop, creating the optical illusion that the piece is resting on only two legs.

Product images by Miro Zagnoli and Gilbert McCarragher, all courtesy of Industrial Facility.

If it's known for anything, Industrial Facility is known for its longstanding relationship with Muji, purveyor of Japanese minimalism to the high street. But while Muji's brand of cultivated affordability is a quality that can be found throughout the studio's work, there's something else as well. While minimal, Industrial Facility's design is never plain, it's not purged of interest – there's a distinct, consistent, thread of character. That's what Hecht is trying to describe.

"It's important that as designers we allow space for oddity," Hecht says. "Where we're not quite sure if [a design is] right, but there's something about it that is unique enough to be able to continue having a conversation."

> "The product doesn't have to invent its entire universe. A lot of designers imagine a product as a world unto itself. That fiction doesn't exist with us." —Kim Colin

"It's a tension," volunteers Kim Colin, Industrial Facility's other founder. "It's a friction. Some kind of gristle."

Gristle?

"It's like…" Hecht continues, "you can stroke a cat, but when you stroke it the other way, you get a tension. It's the same cat, it's the same fur, but what's changed is the direction, the feel. So I think that's one part of it. It's not a roughness."

Not a roughness, but also not a slickness. The neatness and cleanliness of Industrial Facility's products – radiused corners, smooth plastic surfaces – might lead one to expect that their design work has evanesced out of the intangible world behind the Mac screen, as is the case for more than a few of their peers. They inhabit two floors of a small Clerkenwell office building and all around them are other studios where only mouse clicks disturb environments otherwise noise-reduced by Bose technology. But Industrial Facility's facility, by contrast, has pleasing signs of actual industry: the bandsaws, machine tools and workbenches of physical making.

"It's quite important for us to try and reach perfection, as much as we can, within our studio," says Hecht. That includes prototyping, on the premises, as far as possible. "So even if it's quite rough, eventually it's going to pop out quite beautiful. We try to do that. [Elsewhere] it's kind of disappeared. But we're still quite old-school in that."

For Colin, this idea is at the heart of why she and Hecht founded Industrial Facility in 2002, and what makes the studio different. "At the time, computers were becoming the predominant tool for design, and now for generating design, even," she says, adding that Industrial Facility never begin a design process on the computer. "[If] you see a glass of water that's just floating in white space, because you can model it that way, you visualise it that way[…] and design starts to be concerned with things that float in the non-gravity of space and you're [only] evaluating the object's surface."

Instead, Industrial Facility remains rooted in its context, which is what permits its peculiar brand of practical and stylistic innovation: it admits that surroundings exist. Take one of the studio's first great successes, the Second Phone, designed for Muji in 2002. It is a highly distilled object, just a shaped white handset with an alphanumeric keypad. And that's it: it's so distilled it has done away with the cradle. The handset doesn't have anything to sit on – or rather, it has everything to sit on, because it exists in a world filled with tables, desks and shelves.

"If we understand that the phone handset is always going to sit on a surface, we all have surfaces," says Colin. "The product acknowledges the fact that we have other things, and those things could be doing the job [so] the product doesn't have to. The product doesn't have to invent its entire universe, as if nothing else exists. I think a lot of designers imagine a product as a world unto itself. That fiction doesn't exist with us."

Nevertheless, the lack of a cradle in the Second Phone is faintly disturbing – a thread of the oddity or tension that Hecht and Colin describe, which opens up new functional possibilities. The button that takes the phone off the hook when it's laid down naturally sticks out when it's picked up. In a sweet Rams-ish

touch, the phone's microphone has been integrated into this button, so that it's a little closer to the user's mouth.

The duo attribute their close attention to this kind of context to their differing backgrounds. Colin studied architecture in Los Angeles and Hecht studied industrial design at the RCA – they cover what Colin calls "the micro and the macro". "Industrial design is looking at the details," she says, "and architecture is thinking about the building as sitting on the ground and the street in the city."

But the ease with which Industrial Facility's objects cohabit with the rest of their owners' material universes, combined with the naturally self-effacing business of minimalism in general – especially Muji's no-brand variety – means that the pair can be, as Hecht says, "a little bit invisible". They don't have a PR company or marketing team, and they are resolutely un-starry. They are, in many respects, designers' designers. They are not name-value designers who brands approach when they want a statement sofa for an ad in *House & Garden*.

"Companies come to us when they have more fundamental questions, and they come to rely on us for our honesty about what we find when we're doing a project – sometimes not even related to the project," says Colin. "We're quite generous in our thinking. And often with our long-term relationships that's exactly the kind of thing that gets embraced and companies want more of. They want to know how we think as outsiders, but we actually have quite an effect internally."

This process is well illustrated by Lino, Industrial Facility's new task chair for Herman Miller, which had an extremely long gestation. Ten years ago, the studio was one of a group of designers brought in to review the company's design work – practitioners chosen specifically because they weren't employees of the company, and had no vested interest. "There was a chair that was trying to be [produced at] a more affordable price, and it just looked dreadful – it looked really unfortunate," Hecht remembers. "And we said to the CEO, 'Why would you give the most complex, difficult challenge – making an affordable task chair, with all of those features and all of those requirements – to one of the least experienced designers?' It's less of a challenge to make a $5,000 chair, but to make a $300, $400 or $500 chair is tough. I think that stuck with him, and years later he came knocking on our door."

The Lino will be the cheapest task chair that Herman Miller makes, but it has achieved this without sacrificing functionality. To enable this, Industrial Facility studied Herman Miller's production line and watched where costs started to add up. For instance, the chair has a rounded cushion, which needs only one seam – more complex shapes require multiple seams, each of which adds to the price.

> "It's allowing oddity to exist in a design and trying not to eradicate it or streamline it, but instead to see where it's going." —Sam Hecht

The chair also does away with lumbar support, long seen as essential in ergonomics, but now up for dispute. "We spoke to comfort specialists at Herman Miller and they said that it's actually the sacral, at the base of the spine, that matters," Hecht says. Happily, sacral support requires a much smaller component than lumbar.

As a whole, Lino has a softer, rounder appearance than most office task chairs, which often have an aggressive, over-designed look. The shape of the back is borrowed from Thonet's bentwood café seats and somewhat recalls the flowing form of Industrial Facility's own CNC-carved Branca dining chair for Mattiazzi. Every aspect of the form and the controls of Lino has been simplified, with the result that some find it a little, well, odd. "People say the arm rests aren't ergonomic, because they don't look all shaped," says Hecht. "And we say they are, because they're wider at the back than at the front, as is your arm."

Let's get back to the gristle-including, cat-stroking business of oddity. Because it should be said that Industrial Facility's work is not odd, even if it draws character from its oddities. "It's not oddity for oddity's sake," Colin says.

"It's an ease," Hecht continues. "It's allowing oddity to exist in a design and trying not to eradicate

Above: the Pastille lamp for Swedish lighting brand Wästberg. Below: one of the workspaces in Industrial Facility's Clerkenwell studio – a space that incorporates the prototyping facilities Hecht and Colin use to develop projects.

Above: the Lino task chair for Herman Miller stands next to the brand's wooden Tronco chair for Mattiazzi. Below: in 2018 the studio partnered with Phaidon on the production of a new monograph devoted to Industrial Facility's work.

it or streamline it, but [instead to] see where it's going. It's only possible to do that through conversation. It's very hard to deal with that if you're a single designer working in isolation. We talk amongst ourselves enormously in the process and tear things apart."

Oddity, then, is the hook that pulls the conversation forward, and which keeps things interesting. And it's these searching, roving conversations that drove the design for Pastille, the studio's new lamp for Wästberg. At its core is a slender pole, supporting an armature that houses a single LED, whose output is spread into a "perfect halo of light" by a generous reflector and diffuser. The pole is not fixed to anything – instead it ends in a simple ferrule that can be slotted into a base. The power cable runs up the middle of the pole, and the ferrule has a slit, so the cable can exit either to the side or out the bottom.

"Just that simple movement opens up a world of potential," says Hecht. The lamp can be mounted in a base, as a mobile task light, or fixed in place on a table with the cable running out underneath. Or it could be mounted on the wall or on the ceiling. The on/off switch is located at the top of the pole, neatly filling its circular section. "It's not on the cable, it's not on the head, it's not on the base," says Hecht. "You're following it up and there's a very pleasing logic to that." There's one further twist. From a distance, the lamp appears to be made of powder-coated metal, but it's actually made from bioplastic, derived from castor oil, which needs no painting or coating. Again, this is a project pitched at the more affordable end of the market, exactly where Industrial Facility likes to work.

"All of these ideas of materiality, simplicity, application are trying to reach equilibrium," Hecht says. "It's not a statement piece – it's a piece that brings light to surfaces. And that's another reality that companies have been grappling with over the last few years. How can you reach an equilibrium with all those factors and [still] have something that you value and can afford? The only way you can get to that level is through care and conversation."

"You have to step back and appraise your own work," Colin adds. "Ask if it has reached that point of balance or if it has tipped over into being just one thing – so strange that it's just a novelty, or so mundane that it has no character at all."

Conversation is a vital part of what Industrial Facility does, but – in terms of interactions with clients – it's plainly not idle chitchat. "We've always said that the route to simplicity is an extremely complicated process," says Hecht. "If we work with a client who is not prepared to ride those waves and discuss things and tear them apart, or who is scared of a different opinion, then it generally doesn't result in a good project."

More than once in our conversation, a certain gloominess comes over the pair as they survey the field of industrial design. Hecht senses that the world has shrunk, in both scale and ambition. "I feel the landscape of companies out there has changed," he says. "When we work for a company, they themselves have to have a fairly good level of knowledge and intelligence. When that's not there, it's very hard to get somewhere that's fundamental. You might argue, what's fundamental about a door stop [such as the studio's 2010 Twin stopper for Droog]? But it sold; it's still in production; people still love it." The Twin stopper combines a thick wedge and a thin wedge, arranged in an L shape so it doesn't stick out and trip the user. A simple object like a door wedge might seem almost unimprovably stable, but a prolonged confrontation with the form revealed a way. "That's because there was something fundamental about the knowledge that was in that conversation," says Hecht. "And there are fewer and fewer companies that are willing to work with wa designer who will question the very nature of what they're trying to do."

Moreover, there are new areas of consumer culture that are crying out for intelligent design. Take the Internet of Things. "A lot of these devices are just there to sell the services, they're not thought of as a product," says Colin. "They're not things yet, there's no typology for them. The product, the hard stuff, shouldn't just be a seduction for the service." To try to create a market opening in these areas, the studio has founded a conceptual design wing called Future Facility. Among its first projects was Amazin, a proposal for a fully serviced subscription-based apartment, which was exhibited in *New Old*, the Design Museum's 2017 show on design for the ageing population.

For the moment, though, many consumer goods companies seem to have opted to jettison design and fixate on price. "It makes a terrible situation

for society, where our expectation is that a toaster costs less than a good loaf of bread," says Hecht. "You can buy a toaster for £5 but a loaf of bread from [London artisanal bakery] E5, a good sourdough, is £6. It's a weird society where that happens."

Not that there's anything wrong with cheapness in itself – indeed, part of Industrial Facility's reputation is based on the name Hecht and Colin made for themselves as poundshop connoisseurs, with their longstanding *Under a Fiver* project, collecting weird yet inventive cheap objects from around the world. (Japan is a particularly fertile hunting ground.) *Under a Fiver* has been an exhibition, a book and a recurring magazine feature (in *Icon*, at the time this writer worked there), while the couple's eye for design is the basis of another part of their shared philosophy – they are keen borrowers, forever adapting forms and details for other purposes, a practice that gives their work some of its contextual rootedness but also some of its oddness. The typescript on a ubiquitous Japanese steel ruler becomes the Circumference watch face; the format of the passport becomes a notebook.

"Often we've looked at something very mundane and very close by, and borrowed it," says Colin. "So the diameter of the broom handle is the diameter of the handle in Branca for instance – not because we wanted to make an alignment, but because that made sense. There's something familiar there, even though the chair had never been seen before. You have to have something that grounds it with familiarity – it didn't [just] come from space."

Borrowing, then, feels like the tissue that connects oddity and context, forming the supporting tripod of the studio's philosophy. And it's a philosophy that Industrial Facility is now keen to spread. Although the studio's low media profile has not hindered its commercial progress, it does bring frustrations. "A few years ago we decided that much of our thinking and work was being appropriated by companies and designers who weren't actually aware of the philosophy behind it, which is very important to us," says Hecht.

"That's purely because images are shared so freely on the internet, so we end up on a lot of mood boards, devoid of context," adds Colin.

In response, the couple accepted an offer from publisher Phaidon to create a book. But rather than a typical designer's monograph, they wanted *Industrial Facility* to be animated by the same principles that underlie the studio's work; Phaidon gave them unprecedented freedom to shape the project as they saw fit.

Context is the connecting thread that runs through the book. Every project exists in a world that contains every other project – nothing floats alone in space. "We came up with this idea of doing it like a film," says Hecht. "Often when people see our things, they don't know it's us who have done them. They take up a position in people's homes and offices as people do." The book draws on this sense of Industrial Facility's products being a seamless part of the environment. A door handle, a very early project, opens a door to reveal the frame of a Herman Miller sofa; on the next spread a toy for Muji is pictured at the foot of the same sofa. A casual glance at the book wouldn't reveal the scheme, but once you notice it, it's gratifying.

A central section, meanwhile, has "project notes", which try to avoid matter-of-fact descriptions of the studio's work and instead give the "absolute reality" of how the pieces came about. "All the stuff that is never discussed about mistakes and frustrations with clients," says Hecht, in the hope that this proves more educational than just names, dates and smoothed-over, sanitised marketing copy.

One project – the Semplice lamp for venerable Italian atelier Oluce – came about because the brand kept emailing the studio looking for another designer called Sam. "Eventually he said, let's do it, because it's ridiculous," says Hecht. "But this sort of thing is really never described, you just see the gloss." The passport memo, one of the studio's biggest successes, had no heroic origin story. "There wasn't a single drawing, it was just a conversation over the phone telling them what to make and describing it," says Hecht. "That was trying to show that there is a form of design education that follows but it's not prescriptive, it can never be prescriptive and any designer who says it's prescriptive is deluded. It doesn't work like that: it's a whole manner of clashes of opinions, characters and thoughts."

Again, it comes down to conversation, to teasing out that odd strain of thought until it becomes a perfect, balanced, gristly object. "Whenever a client says, 'It can't be that easy,' then you know," says Hecht. "That's the one." **E N D**