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$9.95
MAR/APR 2019
PM40048073 R09064

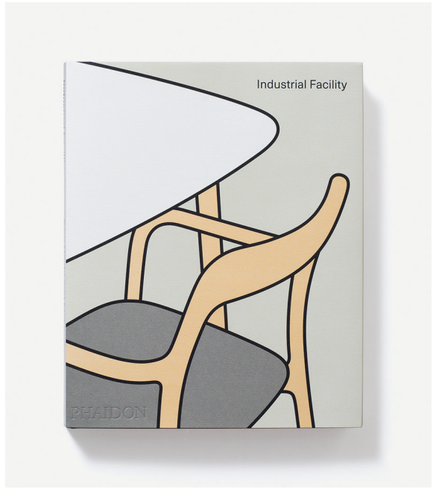
Q&A

“We work with a light touch”

Coming off a banner year for their 17-year-old practice, **Industrial Facility**’s Sam Hecht and Kim Colin talk to **Yuki Sumner** about what it takes to consistently work with major manufacturers while designing freely and creatively. (Hint: Wear several hats – and don’t sweat the small stuff)

Portrait _Gerhardt Kellermann

BELOW: Published in 2018, Phaidon's monograph on Industrial Facility is the first book to document the London-based studio's full body of work, from furniture and lighting to digital and electronic products.



ABOVE: Available in table (shown), wall and floor varieties, the ultra-simple, crisply geometric Pastille lamp was designed for Sweden's Wästberg in 2016 and produced last year. Its frame is made of bioplastic derived from castor oil.

RIGHT: Hecht and Colin's Run table for Emeco is part of a collection that also includes benches and shelves. This version is 244 centimetres long and features a walnut top with powder-coated recycled-aluminum legs.

We live in an age, writes Alain de Botton in his introduction to Phaidon's recent monograph on Industrial Facility, the London-based design studio founded by Sam Hecht and Kim Colin in 2002, that "tends to emphasize what is new and obviously surprising." By contrast, he observes, British-born Hecht and California native Colin, who trained in industrial design and architecture respectively, "care about what is permanent." The ability of Hecht and Colin – partners in life as well as design – to create commercial products that are as enduring as they are attractive has been a hallmark of their practice. Only six years after they established Industrial Facility, they were the subject of a 2008 retrospective at London's Design Museum. More recently, the museum included their multi-purpose Table, Bench, Chair, made by Established & Sons in 2009, in the current exhibition Home Futures. The couple's wide-ranging output, meanwhile, has encompassed everything from simple wooden toys for Muji to a full-blown work environment for Herman Miller. Over the past year alone, Industrial Facility's client roster has included Herman Miller, Emeco, Mattiazzi, ECAL, Santa & Cole and Wästberg.

So what are some of the secrets behind such success, to consistently working with major manufacturers while designing freely and expressively? In their tidy Clerkenwell studio, Colin and Hecht recently told *Azure* that, for one thing, they don't overcomplicate products or processes, preferring "big-picture" results to "slaving over details." "You don't need to create a whole universe," Colin says of companies and the designers who serve them, "just because you have a new toothbrush." At the same time, they often try to work with clients who are "mavericks" in their categories – commercial leaders looking to establish or get in front of trends rather than follow them. It's important, the duo notes, to keep on top of industry currents, but not get carried away by them. The successful designer, Hecht explains, is the one "who can feel all these different forces" at once.

Soon after meeting in 1999, you set up a studio together. How did you come to realize that you were compatible as design partners?
Kim Colin: Sam and I cannot be more different. We come from different places, different backgrounds. Through many years of working together, however, we have come to know that those differences are productive, not destructive. A product gets better and richer if it can hold different ways of seeing it.
Sam Hecht: Kim is good at contextualizing the problems and opportunities we face in much bigger ways than I can.
KC: And Sam is the one who is good with details. I'm not!

Your relationship with Muji has been a long one. Are you especially connected to Japan?
SH: We go to Japan every year because we have clients there, but also because we teach at Kyoto Institute of Technology. This year, we looked into designing something that could be both hardware and software. I think it's very important for young people to get involved with software and understand the idea that most of our lives are now in connected zones. We need to be careful to not be so nostalgic about our old world.

The past year has been a major one for you: You had your monograph published by Phaidon, and your Run furniture range for Emeco was widely acclaimed. How do you manage to keep producing great work well into your studio's second decade?
SH: We talk a lot amongst ourselves. Conversation is important to us. We do an enormous amount of dissecting all the conditions we face. And we test our ideas through building models and prototypes. There is very little drawing in our process, though. It's done very fast, like a scribble, to communicate. All of us are able to do that in our studio. It would be very frustrating if we had to work with someone who can't do that, who needs to draw very carefully and precisely.

This way of working allows us the flexibility we need. We work with a light touch. If we are too forceful, a product can look over-managed, too designed. We don't slave over every single detail. We also look at the big picture.

Perhaps the best analogy I can give you is the way the Japanese ceramicist Shoji Hamada used to work. When it came to decorating a dish he had made, Hamada would let the materiality of the dish take over the direction of the glaze. He would leave a bit to nature, although he was the one holding the brush. It's very different from, say, how a calligrapher might work, spending hours and hours honing a particular skill. We are not those kinds of designers.

Is that light touch akin to the "feeling of being just right" that Naoto Fukasawa ascribes to Muji products in the monograph?
SH: Yes, but that feeling is a consensual act in our case. It's achieved through conversations.
KC: Intuition plays a big role. It isn't stronger than any other force at work, but it's definitely part of the landscape. It's about trusting our experience.

SH: As designers, we have to consider a number of pressures and opportunities – there is the opportunity to create, but there are also the pressures of economy, of pricing, of how a particular product is marketed and sold. There are the constraints of manufacturing in factories. So there are many forces in design, and all I can say is that we are trying to reach a kind of natural equilibrium. If something looks cheap but is actually expensive, there is no equilibrium. A designer is someone who can feel all these different forces.

Can you tell me a bit about this new office chair you've developed for Herman Miller, with which you've also had a long relationship?
SH: It's called Lino and it's fully ergonomic, but it doesn't have the usual lumbar support. Instead it has an adjustable *sacral* support, which is placed lower down the back of the chair. A lumbar support gives you a false sense of security: Sitting in any chair for too long is, as you know, really bad for you. We wanted to give people the comfort, but not too much.
KC: We also studied the assembly line [on which it's made]. We tried to make that process more efficient. We use, for example, a drawstring mechanism to fit the fabric onto the seat of the chair to reduce the amount of glue we use.
SH: Glue is messy! We have also made the shape of the seat rounded because we know that people sometimes sit sideways to talk to other people. We wanted to make it easy for people to do that.

Your client list is impressive and varied. How do you manage to work with such a wide range of clients, especially as you remain a small studio?
SH: Our clients tend to be mavericks. They are looking to lead industry and, as such, aren't looking for repetitions or duplications. Design is an unknown quantity, but you can't omit risk from creativity. Unless a company is comfortable taking that risk, we are probably not the right people to work with.
KC: With Wästberg, for example, we felt comfortable enough to take an idea directly to the CEO. He was intrigued enough to pursue it, and that's how the Pastille lamp got started.
SH: This new lamp for Wästberg uses bioplastic made of oil from castor beans. The light we use is LED. The idea came from our exhibition, called Beauty as Unfinished Business, at the 2015 Saint-Étienne international design biennial in France. The starting point for it was the room [the lamp might be used in]. We didn't want to treat it as an object, but [as a tool that] lights up a room. This is where architecture and design cross over. We were thinking about the spatial context, a way of manipulating light against a surface, using the room as something we could rely on to produce, in this case, a pure circle of light.

How is manufacturing – your client base – changing?
KC: No one comes to us asking for home appliances any more. Why would they? You can buy a toaster for £10, which is nearly the cost of a loaf of bread around here. There are fewer and fewer demands for design in this area. It used to be that we filled our homes with objects – we personalized our homes that way. Now everything is packaged up and sold to us, down to the smallest detail, such as a picture frame. The whole idea of a home has been commercialized.

Is that why you set up a new department in 2016 called Future Facility? To help you and your clients cope with new challenges?
KC: With Future Facility, we are just articulating what we were already working on. It's the Internet of Things. With new technology, objects can now communicate to each other, not just to us. A good example of this is the electronic toothbrush we designed for the German company Braun. We started by asking: What can a connected toothbrush do? Is it a toothbrush that can remind you that you need to brush your teeth, or that you didn't brush your teeth well enough? Is it a toothbrush that can speak directly to your dentist?

We already have enough fear and anxiety in our lives before facing our toothbrushes. We didn't want to add more fear and anxiety to the world. We instead wanted to make something useful to people, to make our lives a bit easier, like being able to charge up an electronic toothbrush wherever we are or having an app that could tell us which replacement part we need to get.

Future Facility is there because companies are trying to figure out where they are going. There are moral and ethical ramifications in all of this. Companies we like have strong values; they want to be able to do the right thing. But when everything is changing so fast, it's hard to know which direction a company should take. So we like to help. But we are not just blue-sky thinking. We work with and rely on things we already have. That's what we set out to do, and that's what sets us apart from others. You don't need to create a whole universe just because you have a new toothbrush. **AZ**
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Industrial Facility's new Lino task chair for Herman Miller supports the base of the spine rather than the lumbar region. "A lumbar support gives you a false sense of security," Hecht explains, noting that Lino is comfortable and fully ergonomic but also encourages users to get up more often.