

# FRAMES

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# The City Inside

The Great Indoors Award

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The Great Indoors

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**178**  
**Exporting English Elegance**  
*Industrial Facility*

**Goods**  

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**UK Special**

Photo Andrew Meredith

Among the dozens of models that populate the shelves of Industrial Facility's highly organized workplace are telephones, lamps and pieces of furniture representing the studio's varied portfolio.

Industrial Facility

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# Reality Checkers



Kim Colin and Sam Hecht in their London studio, each seated on a Branca chair – a design they made for Mattiazzi.

**Sam Hecht and Kim Colin of Industrial Facility design tools to solve issues, using reality as their starting point.**

Words **Giovanna Dunmall**  
Photos **Andrew Meredith**

An intentionally neutral name, a portfolio of staggeringly diverse projects (everything from a fountain pen to a perfume kiosk), a knack for exhibiting and writing, and an online shop explain in part the difficulty of categorizing the output of London-based design studio Industrial Facility. The cofounders are happy to be called 'modernists', but Sam Hecht, who established the practice with partner Kim Colin, says the term has its limitations. 'The trouble with modernism is that people tend to think of it as cold, institutional, hard and unforgiving. Everything we do is blended with human wit and has a feeling of warmth.' They've also been labelled 'minimalists', he says, rejecting the definition as too narrow, given that they don't merely 'take away' from the form of a product but also add to it where they see fit. The continuity they strive for is more qualitative than stylistic.

Hecht and Colin have a high regard for the complexities and oddities of life, an ability to come up with ideas that transcend materials, and a talent for making easy-to-use products that are fun to interact with. Above all, these designers have a point of view. 'We're not really in the business of persuasion, which seems to be what most of design is about nowadays,' says Hecht. 'We're trying to show that what we make is an ongoing process and that we want to persevere. We're looking at – and trying to evoke – certain qualities.' Colin takes over. 'Clients often have a singular view of how people are living. They see the world through the things their company makes. Our view is much broader. We think very carefully about what's happening now.'



Branca's back legs – made from one curved piece of wood – support the critical joints of the armrest, the seat and the back of the chair.

## 'We always start with physical models rather than with the computer'

Their thoughtfulness and grounding in reality are recurring themes in our conversation and in Industrial Facility's work – themes that explain why, unlike many designers, they depend almost entirely on full-size and scale models and use computers only for support, specifically to calculate measurements and to analyse the ergonomics of a product. 'We always start with physical models,' says Colin, 'rather than with the computer.'

They show me a basic plastic-and-paper model of an outdoor chair they are developing for a French company; it's this model they will show the manufacturer in development meetings. It may look rough, says Hecht, but it has many advantages that a computer rendering doesn't have. 'We can immediately discuss the "real thing" with the client,' he says. 'You can stand back; you can see it from all sides; you can envision the end product.' 'On the computer, what you see is an idealized object,' says Colins. 'Whereas the model we're presenting is informed by structure, material research, relation to the body – all kinds of things that can be judged in real time and in real space.'

Another reason for eschewing computer-generated graphics and animations is that a product first designed on a computer often lacks warmth, says Hecht. To confirm his statement, he points to the graceful Branca chair that Industrial Facility made for Mattiazzi, an Italian company specializing in wooden furniture. Branca is the result of working almost exclusively with full-size models. Inspired by the way the branches of a tree twist, turn, come together and separate to go in seemingly random directions, the chair has a familiar shape and an obvious connection to nature that make you want to touch it, sit in it and enjoy it. The process of making it can be described as 'a judicious blend of craft and high-tech CNC machinery'. A short film by Juriaan Booij (available online) shows the chair being made, with the use of a computer-controlled eight-axis robot, assembled ...



The micro-kitchen commissioned by Whirlpool is a single unit rather than a collection of individual appliances.



Industrial Facility is interested in furniture that fulfils various functions: a prime example is Table, Bench, Chair (TBC) for Established & Sons.



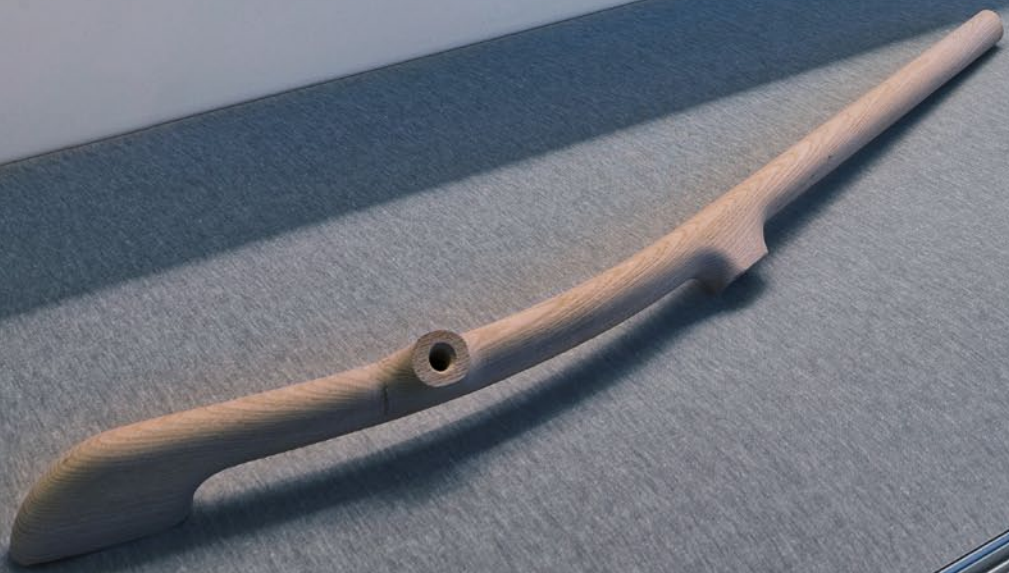
Telephone, a design for Muji, needs no base station. It relies on one wire and is activated when picked up.

Visible to the right of a study for the Branca chair is material for a project that Industrial Facility is developing with Jorge Macchi for French publisher Toluca Éditions.

Industrial Facility

Portrait

Sam Hecht /  
Industrial Facility  
for  
Mattiazzi  
:  
BRANCA  
CHAIR



19. Cars on same route join together to save space on roadway  
17. Collapsible Solar Panel  
23. Connected with breakfast carrier -> tells you when they arrive  
20. Interactive Manual  
slot your ID or Playbook  
AG, AS, AH in here  
- not attached to your phone  
- your car is your phone  
- seamless transition of information (see down page 18)



In this view of the studio, a Branca chair with a green seat is at the head of a Branca table, seen on the left. Stairs in the foreground descend to the designers' workshop.



... and finished by hand. The chair appears seamless and light, almost enigmatic, and the single piece of wood that forms its two curved back legs supports the joints of the arms, the seat and the back.

Hecht and Colin met at an Eames exhibition at London's Design Museum in the late 1990s. Colin had just moved to London from her native California, and Hecht had recently returned to the city after working for IDEO in Japan (he was head of design at IDEO London when they met). In 2002 they founded Industrial Facility. When I visit the pair at their East London studio, I'm struck by the marked difference in their conversational styles: Hecht speaks quietly, slowly and deliberately, whereas Colin expresses herself in a faster, engagingly free-flowing manner.

They are clearly united, however, in their intellectual rigour, their passion for strong ideas, and their desire to work in the sphere of the physical, the spatial, the here and now. It comes as no surprise that Colin has been a journalist and an academic, having taught at the RCA and the AA. The demands of motherhood have put paid to her teaching activities for the time being, but she'd like to resume that part of her career eventually. Hecht has also taught at the RCA and is currently visiting professor at KfG, a design academy in the German city of Karlsruhe.

Over the years, the five-strong practice has accrued an impressive client list that includes, among others, Muji, Droog, Herman Miller, Issey Miyake, Mattiuzzi, Margaret Howell and Established & Sons. The team's evolution, which started with products 'for the hand', as they like to say, has progressed to products 'for the body', such as chairs, sofas and tables. 'Right now,' says Colin, 'the spotlight is definitely on furniture.'

Unconventionally, perhaps, they began with small electronic products, a niche market that the design world finds difficult, messy and unsexy. At that point,

taking a look at all the fantastic furniture designers and interior designers already out there, Hecht and Colin felt they could make more of a mark in the 'unserved and unfulfilled' area of electronics. Their aim was, and still is, to 'inspire industry to do better things'. At times whimsical but always sophisticated, concise and simple to use, their electronic products often have a small feature or twist that makes them different, better and capable of eliciting a 'Why didn't I think of that?' from colleagues and customers. Examples are Jetlag, a travel alarm clock whose dual display shows current time and wake-up time simultaneously; the waterproof Muji Bath Radio, which looks like a soap dispenser; and, for Epson, a sleek-handled portable printer with rounded corners. Not only do these products deserve kudos for design; they have also had a modest yet weighty impact on existing typologies.

Industrial Facility's minimal TV design for Hitachi consists of a flat panel within a three-sided frame that continues as legs and contains the wiring. The 'Compression TV', which can be wall-mounted or simply leaned against a vertical surface, highlights the practice's interest in context. 'It's almost as if it requires the floor and the wall to exist,' says Hecht. 'Most products are designed to be completely and utterly independent of anything.' The focus on context – the environment that a product inhabits – is due in part to Colin's education: she has a Master of Architecture degree from SCI-Arc. ...

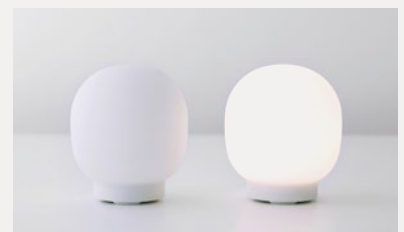
**'Most products are designed to be completely independent'**



The flex attached to Dryerhair – a design commissioned by Wallpaper – coils neatly inside the body of the appliance.



Elemental is a kiosk programme for displaying Issey Miyake Parfums and related products at various points of sale.



Timer Light for Muji offers the user a choice of 30 or 60 minutes during which the light dims gradually until it goes out.



... 'Context is really important to us, and I think we articulate that to our clients,' she says. 'Otherwise you just design beautifully rendered cups floating in space on computers, and what does that have to do with anything?' Or, as Hecht puts it, 'The assumption is you don't have anything in the room, so we're going to make a product. When, actually, your room is already full of furniture. It already exists. There's life in the room. That last option – the world of reality – is very much our entry point.' There's that r-word again.

Even when their products are not realized, they can be significant in terms of provoking change or prompting new discussions. When Whirlpool asked Industrial Facility to come up with a micro-kitchen, for instance, the team approached the task as if it were a small toy or a light for Muji. 'We designed it as a product,' says Colin. 'We turned something that was previously architectural – and made up of very different pieces from different trades – into one product, one thing.' And even though Whirlpool decided not to execute the design, the mini-kitchen did not go unnoticed. 'It influenced a lot of other people to make similar products,' says Colin.

Perhaps the project that showcases Industrial Facility's work most effectively is the firm's recently published book, *Usefulness in Small Things*, a collection

of inexpensive objects (each costs less than £5) found in hardware stores, supermarkets and pharmacies around the world. Designed and made to fulfil specific local needs, these products range from a Malaysian watering can-cum-plant mister to a wine-bottle sponge from France.

The selection was based not on beautiful design but on interesting ideas that centre on the product-consumer relationship and thus on the experience involved in using an object.

What the book reveals is its authors' fascination with the simple but powerful questions of how people live and use things – the anthropology of contemporary living, if you like. The reader won't find what Hecht and Colin refer to as a 'filter of design' or an 'enormous amount of resourcing going into packaging', but the makers of the 'small things' featured in this book have obviously gone to the trouble and expense of mass production. 'It's about man-made progress, essentially,' says Hecht. 'These are tools for solving issues, and they've had a great influence on us.' You could say that Industrial Facility makes tools to solve issues, too, but this outfit's tools are refined and beautifully designed. \_

[industrialfacility.co.uk](http://industrialfacility.co.uk)  
[retailfacility.co.uk](http://retailfacility.co.uk)

Cofounders Sam Hecht and Kim Colin in their studio workshop.



## 'Context is really important to us'



Industrial Facility not only developed a display system for Issey Miyake Parfums but also came up with an architectural programme for the kiosks.



The dial of the analogue World Muji watch is printed on the glass itself.



The Pentagon pens for Elephant & Coral have a five-sided barrel that holds the ink cartridge.



Industrial Facility designed a shirt with pockets on the back – handy for cyclists – for fashion designer Margaret Howell.

In the foreground, Knife Rack, made for Taylor's Eye Witness, stands next to Coffee Maker for Muji. The white box on the bottom shelf is a portable printer designed for Epson, and perched on the top shelf, at the left, is Bell Clock for IDEA International.



Industrial Facility

Portrait

ISSEY MIYAKE  
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