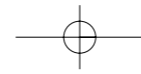


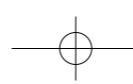
The interesting thing is what happens when you're presented with an object that's never existed before. How do you get people to have this sense of familiarity, and enjoy it?

The form has to be seen to hold the central idea. We're not talking about the preciousness of a form for its own sake; not fetishising the form.

words Marcus Fairs
photography David Levene

Sam Hecht and Kim Colin of Industrial facility >>





left FlexLamp for Droog
right Twice LCD alarm clock for Lexon
below right Solid range of knives for Taylor's Eye Witness
below Landscape camera, an experimental project that replaces the viewfinder with a mirror

>> are industrial designers but they approach their work with a critical rigour more common to architects. They coin serious-sounding slogans such

as "product as landscape" and "voluntary simplicity" and they publish booklets setting out their inspirations and philosophies that are as close as product design gets to manifesto.

Working out of a small studio near Old Street, London, under a name chosen deliberately for its blandness, they discard many of the norms of contemporary industrial design: the way that form is often driven by precedent or whim rather than research; the way manufacturers load spurious functionality onto their products; the way that many products are designed with the point of sale in mind, rather than the point of use.

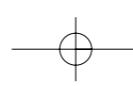
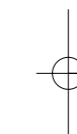
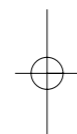
Industrial Facility's work includes a non-ergonomic telephone that has precisely zero additional features, a camera that has no controls and no viewfinder and a battery-free torch that is recharged by shaking it like an aerosol can. Its work is austere and often seemingly perverse, both aesthetically and commercially.

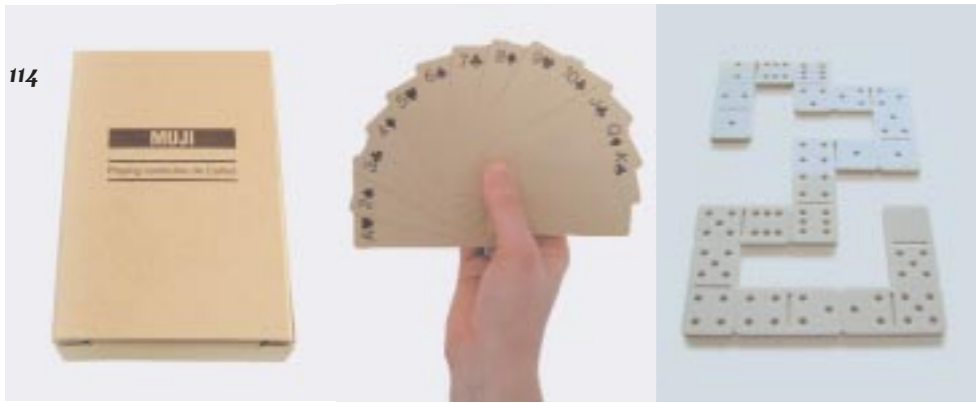
One of the practice's best-known projects is a range called Constellations for the French company Lexon. With this, it deliberately set about creating a family of digital objects – including a miniature radio, a calculator and a variety of USB peripherals – that each do just one thing. "Of course, it's going against the market," says Hecht. "Rather than a product being an agglomeration of several features, we tried to separate them out into individual products."

"We wanted to make low cost things with minimum functions," Colin adds. "We found ourselves evacuating functions and trying to simplify products."

Visiting them in their studio is a bit like being initiated into some kind of cult: Hecht speaks in a quiet drone that holds your attention entirely, which Colin punctuates occasionally with her West Coast chirpiness. She is the wine to Hecht's bread. I came away feeling I had been privy to something important but indefinable.

Yet they are on to something: their Sound





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Gum MP3 player/USB storage device predated the similarly gum stick-shaped and mono-functional iPod shuffle; their Give & Take business card holder – which contains compartments for both your own cards and those you receive – is one of those “why didn’t I think of that?” ideas.

Hecht, a Londoner, studied industrial design at the Royal College of Art and worked in San Francisco, where he met Japanese designer Naoto Fukasawa. The two then moved to Tokyo, where they set up an office for industrial design company IDEO. Hecht later returned to London to head up IDEO’s office but his work retains a degree of calm eastern inscrutability that one might lazily describe as being Zen-like.

Colin studied history and architecture at the

Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-ARC) in her native Los Angeles before coming to London to work as an editor at publisher Phaidon and to teach architecture at the RCA.

They formed IF in 2002. “We started to experiment with the idea of a product relying on its landscape,” says Hecht. An object does not exist in isolation, nor solely for the benefit of the user, but as part of a landscape of interdependent forms. A cordless telephone, for example, only spends a fraction of its life being used to make calls; for the remainder, it is part of the domestic topography. “We’re not just designing things in isolation,” adds Colin.

“Essentially what we are saying is that rather than take a position of man being at the centre of all things – which is the Renaissance model – we



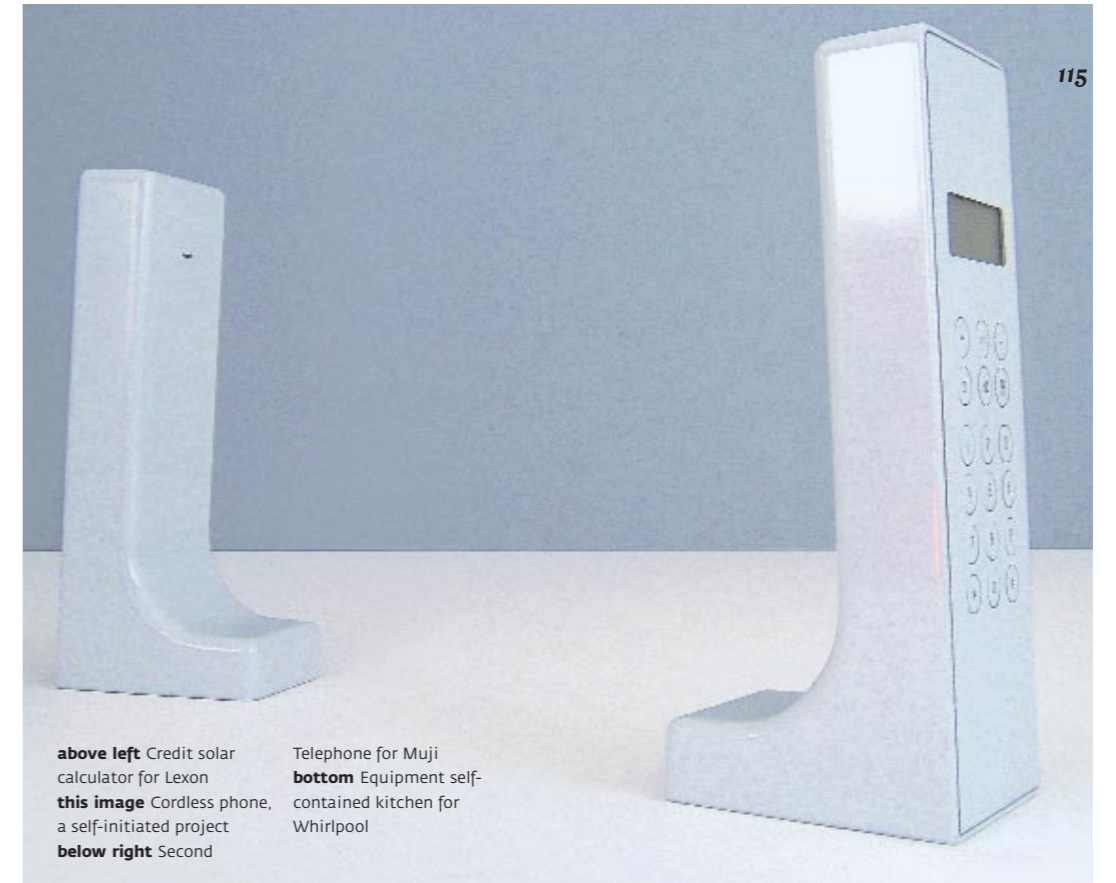
are saying that all things are equal,” says Hecht. **“If you think this way, then you can start to rely on a landscape of dependence – where things come with less because what’s next to them fills in the gaps.”** The result is that products can be thought of more in the context of their landscape – which is contemporary culture – rather than being designed primarily for the shop. Objects start to look simple and more intuitive because they respond to our minds just as much as our eyes.”

Thus Industrial Facility’s Second Phone for Muji – designed, as the name implies, to compliment the domestic user’s main handset – is based around the idea that the device will spend most of its time lying around the house not being used. Its unadorned brick-like form is devoid of screens and extraneous function buttons; when resting, the flush numeric keypad is hidden on the underside and the single protruding “engage” button means the device is disabled by the weight of the handset pressing down on the flat surface. The phone becomes live simply by picking it up. You cannot do anything with it except receive and make a call. The rest of the time, it is an unobtrusive addition to the domestic landscape.

“Why design a phone with a base if we acknowledge that the table or any horizontal surface is already present to support it?” Hecht explains.

IF has taken this idea further with a digital cordless handset, a project the pair initiated itself. “There are technologies that suddenly become affordable but have completely lost any kind of typology – they’re just made to sell,” says Hecht. “The price point for cordless phones is incredibly low: you can get a DECT [Digital Enhanced Cordless Telecommunications] phone in Argos for £12.”

Yet the numerous models on sale all seem to be



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above left Credit solar calculator for Lexon
this image Cordless phone, a self-initiated project
below right Second Telephone for Muji
bottom Equipment self-contained kitchen for Whirlpool



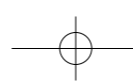
above left Playing cards and dominoes for Muji
above right Radius FM stereo receiver for Lexon
this image digital projector for Epson

suffering from an identity crisis: the pseudo-ergonomic handsets are formally more akin to mobile phones, even though they will rarely be slipped into a pocket, and they bristle with bogus features.

IF’s version references old-style phones, with the mouthpiece set at an angle to the earpiece. But apart from that, the phone looks strangely alien: the keypad is on the back, not on the concave inner surface as you’d expect, and it stands upright rather than reclining.

“A cordless phone spends more time idle than being used and is nomadic. In some ways the phone needn’t announce all the time what it does; the visual clues can afford to be very subtle. The phone-ness is apparent only when you’re using it. Charging contacts are hidden out of sight, with dialling buttons at the back. We tried to hide the speaker and the microphone – unfortunately we couldn’t do it, you do need a hole. So it realigns the product, from a market point of view. It becomes a sophisticated product just by rearranging the components and the functionality.”





For their digital projector for Epson, IF has similarly appropriated the form of a familiar but defunct forerunner. Hecht says: "Epson came to us with a super fascinating technology where they took a regular LCD projector and amalgamated it with a DVD player. So suddenly you have this product that can project movies without requiring anything else."

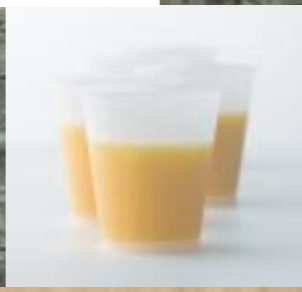
Existing LCD projectors are all horizontal in format, although Hecht says there is no good reason for that: "an LCD projector is something from the office that has migrated into the home. Someone just decided to make them horizontal."

IF's version is upright and A4-sized, which makes more sense, according to Hecht, because it means it can be put away on a bookshelf. "It's not like a TV that sits out all the time - you take it out to take to your mates' house to watch the football or something."

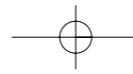
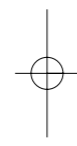
The projector has two circular recesses on one flank, mimicking the spools of a film projector: DVDs snap into the first while the second holds a removable, disc-shaped remote control. This has just four PlayStation-style controls. "All the navigation is on the screen," says Colin. "People are familiar with that, through computer gaming controls and TVs. So instead of hijacking the

In a lot of our work there is something slightly familiar but you're not sure why.

Products can be thought of in the context of their landscape rather than being designed for the shop.



above top Mouse Trap micro-optical mouse for Lexon
above centre Haptic Cup for Takeo
above Chantry Modern knife sharpener for Talyor's Eye Witness





this page photos taken by Hecht to explain his concept of Product as Landscape and published in a book of the same name. These include a bollard set at an angle to prevent damage to cars' bodywork (far left) and a signboard without a sign that unintentionally frames a view of the landscape

form of the remote from the business world, we've used something that is more familiar to people."

"The interesting thing is what happens when you're presented with an object that's never existed before," says Hecht. "How do you get people to have this sense of familiarity, and enjoy it?"

"The form has to be seen to hold the central idea," adds Colin. "We're not talking about the preciousness of a form for its own sake; we're not fetishising the form."

Another of IF's bugbears is the way that products are often seemingly designed around the false landscape of the retail environment. A visit to an electrical retailer, for example, will reveal dozens of near-identical hi-fi systems, kettles and so on, all with minute variations. IF's approach is to rethink the product while retaining enough clues so that it

remains self-evident to the consumer.

There is a crisis in the marketplace," argues Colin. "If you design a telephone, it's usually surrounded by hundreds of other telephones, so there has to be some telephone-ness to it.

We often battle to figure out the central crux of the project – what is the part that will be familiar about it? what is the tie to things we already know how to use? It's usually not obvious. It's usually a fairly absurd choice. But there needs to be something to root the project to a reality that is already known. So in a lot of our work there is something that is slightly familiar but you're not sure why." †



