

Reactionary Heroes

Industrial Facility forges ahead



Industrial Facility is a design office whose name, while sounding big and mighty, in reality describes a team of two in a petite London studio with a skeleton workforce who run a rather low-profile practice. One could agree that small is beautiful inasmuch as the pair work in a concentrated way that embodies particular values and a certain way of thinking, thereby achieving notice by the sorts of clients that appreciate their more intimate approach. Intent on exploring the junction between industrial design and the world around them, the duo fashion a variety of objects of varying purpose in relation to spatial, cultural and performative landscapes, all-the-while keeping things honest.

LAURA HOUSELEY

Industrial Facility is an increasingly influential design practice that has captured the attention of brands like Muji and Herman Miller, and is behind some of the most significant product and furniture designs in recent years. Yet, the duo manages a small studio and achieves all of its many plaudits whilst staying firmly, and happily, under the radar.

Products such as a hard drive, a hairdryer, and wooden toys, are sometimes the fruits of Industrial Facility's design work; on other occasions it might be an accessory, like a clock or a desk-tidy. Furniture such as an expansive office system or a wooden chair can also sometimes be the end product, or even an interior. There is no question that Industrial Facility, led by Sam Hecht and Kim Colin and established in 2002, is behind a diverse collection of industrially produced objects – but one thing is constant: they give their clients more than just product design. Their working method is immersive, propelled by a desire to understand where a product might sit: in

a wider culture, in our lives, on our shelves. To this end, Hecht and Colin's approach is tailored to each client, each situation; it is an intimate process that includes much investigation prior to design, and an active involvement, or at least an interest, in the positioning of the products post-design. Determining a culturally valid reason for a product to exist and then helping their commissioner to see, understand, and articulate it, is central to the way Industrial Facility tackles each project. "In our minds, there is something much deeper [than commercial considerations] that has to be operating in order for a product to be successful in the end, for it to really be something that people want to buy, and should buy, and should be living with for a long time", says Hecht.

ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE

An on-going relationship with the famous Japanese merchant of everyday things, Muji, is one of Industrial Facility's most well known and enduring ventures;

CITY IN A BAG, 2003-2012
Facing page:
SAM HECHT AND KIM COLIN
Photo: Petr Krejci



they have been advisors to Muji since 2002. That collaboration is the source of some of their most celebrated design solutions; Second Phone was a product that perfectly described the changing attitude to landlines in 2002, whilst City In A Bag is surely amongst the most recognisable and loved of contemporary toys since its introduction in 2003. The current conversation between Industrial Facility and Muji is about the way people buy furniture now, and how that might affect the way Muji departmentalises its offerings. “Perhaps it’s the right time to reappraise the purpose of providing things. The great thing about Muji is that it’s not a static brand, primarily because of the target market that it’s supplying. That target market is generally quite young, everyone from students to housewives building a family, so those are very non-static types of lives.” Watching that market and how it evolves, and then anticipating the products that can better the lives of those consumers, is classic Industrial Facility territory. Acknowledging and servicing an increasingly transitory society is one example of where they and Muji align.

The impact of divorce and of the ageing society in Japan, both on the rise, are other cultural areas that have inspired recent products from Hecht and Colin; “There are Muji customers who have grown up with the brand who are not particularly young anymore though still enjoy Muji, and so is it right to think about products that are more sympathetic to them. We designed a stationery range that included notebooks and diaries that were easier to read. White



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graphics on a black background, for instance. And the diaries had very big numbers, and you are meant to write over the number. These items are sympathetic to the needs of older people, while not just specifically for them.” The pressures of the everyday, the conditions of modern life, over-consumption, and mobility, are in Hecht and Colin’s minds when designing for Muji.



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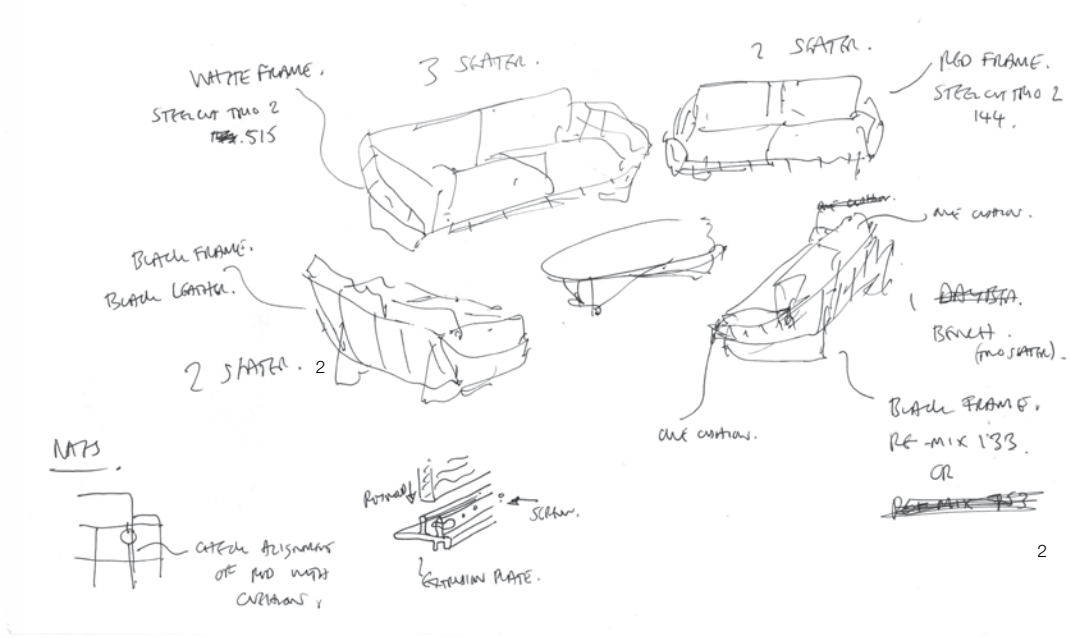
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STRAIGHT AS AN ARROW

The detail in everyday life is always at the forefront of Industrial Facility’s thinking. This is clearly demonstrated in their book Usefulness in Small Things, 2011, in which Hecht and Colin curate a selection of mass-produced objects and demonstrate each object’s ingenuity. It provides an efficient insight into the thinking of this self-proclaimed egoless design agency, where designing for ‘the greater good’ is a genuine concern. Honesty is another studio attribute. “We are very frank and clear in how we see a project and in what we feel is the right thing to do. And sometimes it’s very... it can be a little bit threatening”, says Hecht. “We raise a lot of questions. A company, or certainly the division that we’re dealing with, has to be comfortable with being asked questions”, adds Colin. Describing the way brands come to them, the duo say that they haven’t approached a manufacturer in years and that all of their recent work is the result of them being sought out. “When we started Industrial Facility, Kim and I said we wanted to be of service to industry. And we are, by the same token, extremely lazy at promoting ourselves and looking for projects that we’d like to do. We are a little more reactive than proactive.”

THINKING BEYOND

This reactionary approach can result in some unexpected collaborations, and is undoubtedly behind the variety of projects at Industrial Facility. Currently, the studio is working with a forward-thinking medical firm, and on an arts project with Philippe Starck. Those who seek them out find a receptive and open-minded studio. “We work in a very different way to other practices. And I think that is maybe quite refreshing for the people that we work with. We approach projects with our own perception of what quality is”, says Colin. Hecht and Colin believe



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WIREFRAME SOFA FOR HERMAN MILLER, 2013 (1/2)

ALUMI CHAIR FOR TECTONA, 2012 (3/4)

TELEPHONE FOR MUJI, 2002 (1)
SEMPLICE FOR OLUCE, 2013 (2)
NUTCRACKER FOR MUJI, 2013 (3)
MAGNETS FOR MUJI, 2013 (4)



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BRANCA CHAIR FOR MATTIAZZI,
2010 (1/2/3)

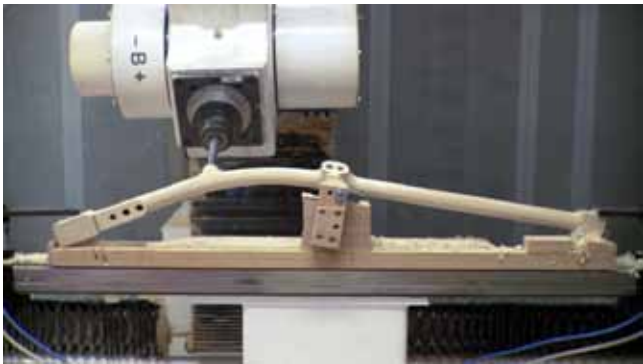
BRANCA TABLE FOR MATTIAZZI,
2011 (4)

that their ‘non-proactive’ method of finding new clients results in a serendipitous meeting of minds. “Many of the companies that come to us know that we have a point of view and that we take a stand on what we do... they want to see if we really do have those kinds of values, that kind of follow through, and that kind of capability of thought... Recently, people have been asking for more than just products or individual things; they’ve seen that the products come with a way of thinking, and that that way of thinking can sometimes really impact their organisation”, says Colin.

They have launched a new venture they are calling Future Facility – a company that is positioned alongside Industrial Facility, and they have also relaunched their online shop, Retail Facility. Future Facility’s goal is to redefine research as something visionary - just as Industrial Facility has redefined the typologies of so many of our consumable products.



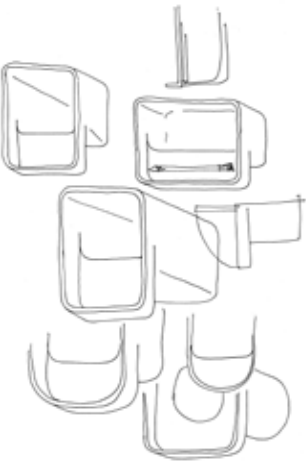
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Perhaps the clearest example of the types of projects they might undertake is the Branca chair for Mattiazzi – a seminal product that helped catapult a little-known Italian producer to becoming the toast of the design world. The Branca is reminiscent of a hand-crafted object, familiar and yet entirely futuristic at the same time. Its design married the worlds of hand-craft and robotic industrial production in a poetic way, establishing a new direction for Mattiazzi and capturing the design zeitgeist. “It reminded people of what wood could do”, reflects Hecht, and when asked if he thinks Branca is a zeitgeist product, he responds: “You may say zeitgeist, but we’d probably say equilibrium...”, adding: “What we are good at is showing the future, and that the future can be comfortable rather than threatening.” Throughout their history, Industrial Facility has proven adept at doing this. From their earliest products for Muji that so succinctly place a sticking plaster over everyday problems, to their newest project, Locale, for Herman Miller.



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FORMWORK FOR HERMAN
MILLER, 2013
Paper model (1)
The complete landscape (2)
Photo: GTF

LOCALE FOR HERMAN
MILLER, 2013 (5)
Technical analysis (3)
Table testing (4)



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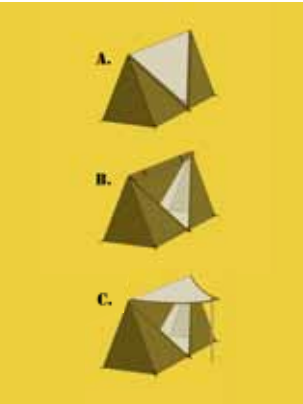
LOCALE FOR HERMAN MILLER, 2013 (1)

RADICE FOR MATTIAZZI, 2013 (2/3)
Photo: G. Kellerman

V TENT FOR LOUIS VUITTON, 2012 (4)

LOCALE FLAVOUR

The Locale series of office furniture re-evaluates of-
fice life, a culture in flux. Hecht and Colin have ap-
proached the commission with characteristic zeal
and a quiet revolutionary attitude. The system chal-
lenges common preconceptions about how office
furniture should function and look. There are dras-
tic reinventions: tables don't have legs, everything
is laid-out in a linear fashion; and there are subtle
touches too: a rounded edge to the individual desks,
making them more approachable as meeting spaces
for more people. Locale launches in January; prior
to that, Industrial Facility introduced a collection of
desk accessories with Herman Miller, called Form-
work, that demonstrate their commitment to this
new office landscape. The Locale project has been
a big one for a small office (three years of research,
to date). "We have deliberately stayed small", says
Hecht, "but that has never been a barrier to working
with very large companies, or with artisans either.
Obviously, we have to be extremely efficient to be
able to do the projects we do, otherwise it would just
be chaos. And that efficiency is something that we've
built up, and that we enjoy ... we enjoy all of the
small things and all of the big things about what we
do. We enjoy being productive, we enjoy our work-
shop, we enjoy the people around us, we enjoy the
companies and the travel... We genuinely enjoy all
the parts of running a design practice, really. It's like
a hobby, you could say... a very nice, but efficient,
hobby." <



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Formwork desk accessories and containers for Herman Miller were
previewed in September 2013 and are available from Retail Facility. The
Locale office system, also for Herman Miller, launches in January 2014.
Semplice, the lamp for Oluce, previewed during the Salone del Mobile
2013, and is now available.

industrialfacility.co.uk / retailfacility.co.uk / futurefacility.co.uk