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OLE BOUMAN

**MILAN • Interaction Ivrea is Olivetti's latest answer to the information society. Where typewriters were once fabricated, they now do research into communication processes. The discipline of architecture could learn something from this example of a strategic shift of focus.**

One cannot mention Ivrea but in the same breath as Olivetti. Lying in the Aosta valley not far from Turin, the town was once the capital of one of those industrial empires that typified the era of the typewriter. Thanks to Olivetti, Ivrea became a social experiment in which city, culture and industry went hand in hand. Countless architects erected elegant modern buildings over the years, buildings which were notable for their blend of functionality and landscape-awareness. One of the most familiar names was that of Adriano Olivetti, who founded a centre for social sciences with a brief to study a post-war form of corporatism in Ivrea. The enlightened Olivetti corporation stood symbol for an aspiration to couple rapid industrial progress with social improvement.

Then one day the knowledge economy, the digital economy, the New Economy arrived. It proved disastrous for Olivetti. The story is soon told. Olivetti went on making typewriters while the rest of the world migrated en masse to word processors. Their stalwart attempts to turn the tide were all too little and too late. If you care to press your nose to the window of one of the run-down, dusty warehouses that dot the industrial zone of Ivrea, you stand a good chance of spotting a teetering stack of unsold typewriters. A blanket of dejection drapes over this former industrial paradise, where company pride and labour productivity once shared a happy home. And had Olivetti not formed suitable alliances – just in time – the family name would have been consigned to the realm of cultural heritage long ago.

What was wrong with Olivetti that almost put it out of business? Suppose you make machines. As long as there is a demand for those machines, you can sell them. You build up an enlightened company culture around this activity, complete with a modern housing policy, a research programme and a company social scheme. Once

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# Interact or die



The Blue House on the Olivetti campus

demand for the machines slides, however, prosperity flies out of the window. The usual mistake is that after a century of company growth you tend to identify with the product instead of with the demand. Good intentions founder on the economic laws of the market. The lesson is that rather than building a company that makes machines, you ought to build one that generates knowledge about the social situations in which a need for that hardware arises. You can't just carry on being a box shifter, because your company has to instigate and manage 'consumption paths'. It's not enough to understand the nature of the demand, but you must identify where desires are born. Economy is tantamount to knowledge and a capacity to innovate.

The error was nearly fatal for Olivetti, but there are countless other areas of society in which exactly the same kind of thing is ongoing without the reckoning being finally settled yet. The sciences, professional disciplines, political parties, artistic movements, shops, educational institutes: they are all prone to founder in the belief that their own existence is a fact of life; that they exist because they exist. Meanwhile, insouciant

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tendencies could take an axe to the roots of all these institutions. Much of their adaptive capacity, in as far as it still exists, is then directed at a last-hour attempt to incorporate the 'new facts'. An ancillary discipline emerges, for example, or a political renewal committee is set up, a product range is expanded somewhat or an additional professor is appointed. But there is seldom any ability to turn the insurgent forces to advantage, and to start again from scratch. That can only happen once the pressure has become so great that a choice is unavoidable; for example when a company like Olivetti is on the verge of collapsing. What does a company like Olivetti do when things have reached that point? Why, it sets up a new research institute for interaction design, of course. It no longer develops products, but situations, interfaces and possibilities for communication. When products cannot withstand the Zeitgeist, you had better change the conditions for the Zeitgeist. Together with Telecom Italia, Olivetti put up 40 million Euros to found an independent centre that would apply itself exclusively to devising and testing theories about how people relate to digital technology and how they organize their communication. The institute's education and research aims at understanding how communication takes place and how communication processes renew themselves, instead of at the technology to achieve it. Technology and cultural production are treated as one. Heavily sponsored as it is by business, the institute will naturally also consider the business models implicit in this new outlook. The bulk of the programme, headed by the former Professor of Computer Related Design at the Royal College of Art, Gillian Crampton Smith, will consist of areas like wearable computing, smart urbanism and hybrid knowledge environments on the cutting edge of physical and virtual reality. The starting capital, the founding principle, the lecturing staff, the curriculum, the technical equipment, the international network: all these things have been brought jointly to bear on the central issue of interaction as part of the design task. Ivrea resurgent! It is striking that at least two of the research themes relate to architecture. While it is growingly obvious that no early breakthrough in 'smart spaces' is to be expected from the architectural design discipline, and that interesting developments in this area are more likely to

come from services technology or interior design, the institute's programme continues to nurture the architectural and urban design component. The issue is not what the discipline is doing now, but what its future tasks will include. This means Interaction Ivrea is important to architecture for an even deeper reason: taking the discipline's task as primary instead of its achievements, is bound to bring it to the same crossroads as Olivetti. Architecture, too, is often little more than 'box shifting', the disposition and marking of building volumes in which to accommodate programmed functions. It is increasingly clear however that the issue is moving from accommodation to the programme and how it is experienced, from an unequivocal style to flexible organization, from form-centred design to a psychology-driven process. That too is 'space' and 'context', of course, but no longer in a physical sense. The architecture associated with this is not concerned with the demarcation of space but with the 'in between', the transitional zones, the facilitation of physical and programmatic mobility. The practice of architectural design which is in touch with this tendency, which does not focus on enclosure but on the moments of interaction between people, goods and information, holds the future. This is where the crux lies. It is precisely the decision to get immediately into interaction design and postpone the question of its material embodiment that gives architecture the scope to fulfil its new mandate. If it sticks with box shifting (or arranging, trimming, stretching, slicing, tilting or any other kind of volume-related action), architecture could easily – like Olivetti – find itself lost for answers in the face of its new task. With this in mind, the location chosen for the new institute is surprising. The Interaction Ivrea institute chose to settle into one of the finest industrial buildings on the Olivetti campus - Edoardo Vittorio's 1950s Blue House, which owes its name to the ceramic tiles adorning its exterior. The architecture does not give even the least hint that the building contains an ultramodern design institute. On the contrary, the renovation by Marco Zanini of Sottsass Associati makes it into more of a building than it already was: interface design housed within a bastion of architecture. This does not of course imply the impossibility of results. The specification is full of testing rooms, lounges, studios, research labs and so on.

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