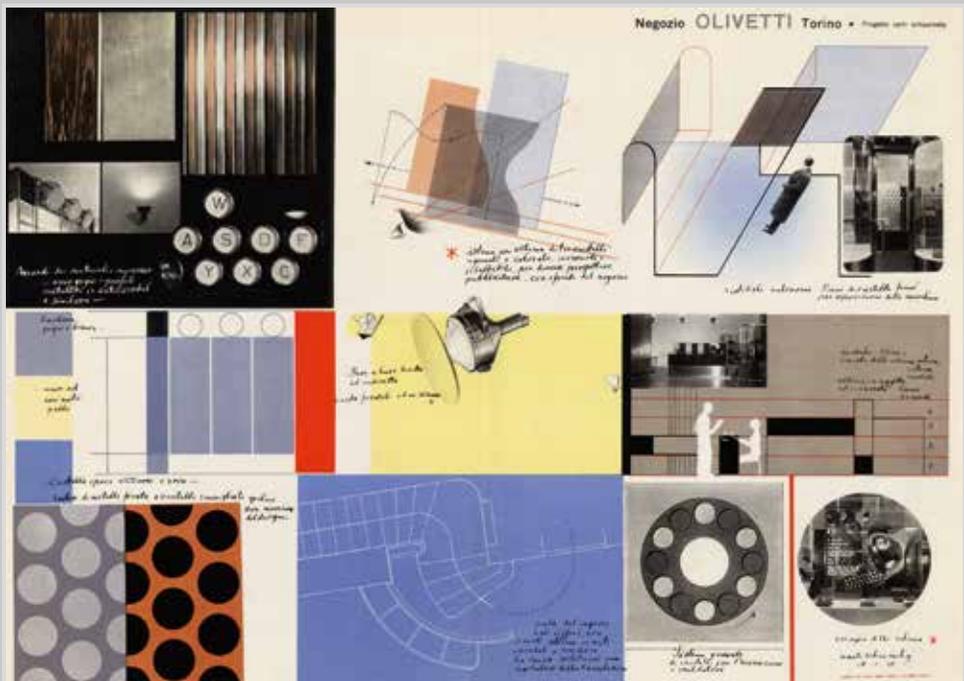


# Olivetti Identities. Spaces and Languages 1933–1983

edited by Davide Fornari and Davide Turrini



Triest

front cover

*Negozio Olivetti Torino* (Olivetti showroom in Turin),  
design Xanti Schawinsky, gravure printing,  
33.3 × 47 cm, from *Domus*, 92, 1935.

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## Abbreviations

AAMCM	Archivo de Arquitectos Mexicanos, Facultad de Arquitectura, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Ciudad de México
AASOI DCUS DSSS	Associazione Archivio Storico Olivetti, Ivrea / Direzione Comunicazioni Ufficio Stampa Direzione Sviluppo Servizi Sociali
ACSR	Archivo Carlo Scarpa, Collezioni MAXXI Architettura, MAXXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Rome
AFAFHM	Archivo Franco Albini-Franca Helg, Milan
AGAM	Archivo Gae Aulenti, Milan
AHCOACB	Arxiu Històric del Col·legi d'Arquitectes de Catalunya, Barcelona
ALCM	Archivo Legorreta, Ciudad de México
ANCS	Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya, Sant Cugat del Vallés
ASBM	Archivo Silvana Bellino, Milan
ATMM	Archivo Tomás Maldonado, Milan
AWBM	Archivo Walter Ballmer, Milan
AZM	Archivo Bazzani Zveteremich, Milan
BAB	Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin
BGGP	Biblioteca Giovanni Gronchi, Pontedera
CSACP	Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione, Parma
FJVBDM ASD	Fondazione Jacqueline Vodoz e Bruno Danese, Milan / Archivio storico del Design
FRL ACLR	Fondazione Centro Studi sull'Arte Licia e Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, Lucca / Archivio Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti
MfGZ	Museum für Gestaltung Zürich
MoMAANY	The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York
SIAW	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington

## Olivetti identity: From Self-Representation to an Agenda for the Future

Davide Fornari  
 Davide Turrini

*Olivetti Identities. Spaces and Languages 1933–1983* has little ambition to be the latest in a series of analyses, some more in-depth than others, of the iconic Olivetti company in Ivrea, for which the praise of critics (of architecture, design, graphics, politics, and economics) has long since shifted from any historiographic aspirations to the panegyric of nostalgia. Instead, this collection of essays divided into sections takes a point by point look at case studies and experiences over a precise period, offering a panoramic view of the multiple identities that the Olivetti company adopted over this decisive timeframe.

Olivetti was founded in Ivrea on 29 October 1908 by Engineer Camillo Olivetti and other minority partners, who were associated with him through friendship or kinship. It all began in the CGS (Centimetro Grammo Secondo), a red brick factory already owned by Camillo, which produced electrical measuring instruments. From that initial nucleus, the Olivetti factories developed along today's Via Guglielmo Jervis in Ivrea, at the heart of the Canavese district. Although an area traditionally known for agriculture and craftsmanship, it was now to give rise to the first national typewriter factory.

In 1932, the company was taken over by Camillo Olivetti's son, Adriano, who led the company to global success with a set of far-reaching strategies, the exceptional nature of which is still evident today. Adriano expanded the initial product range of typewriters and calcu-

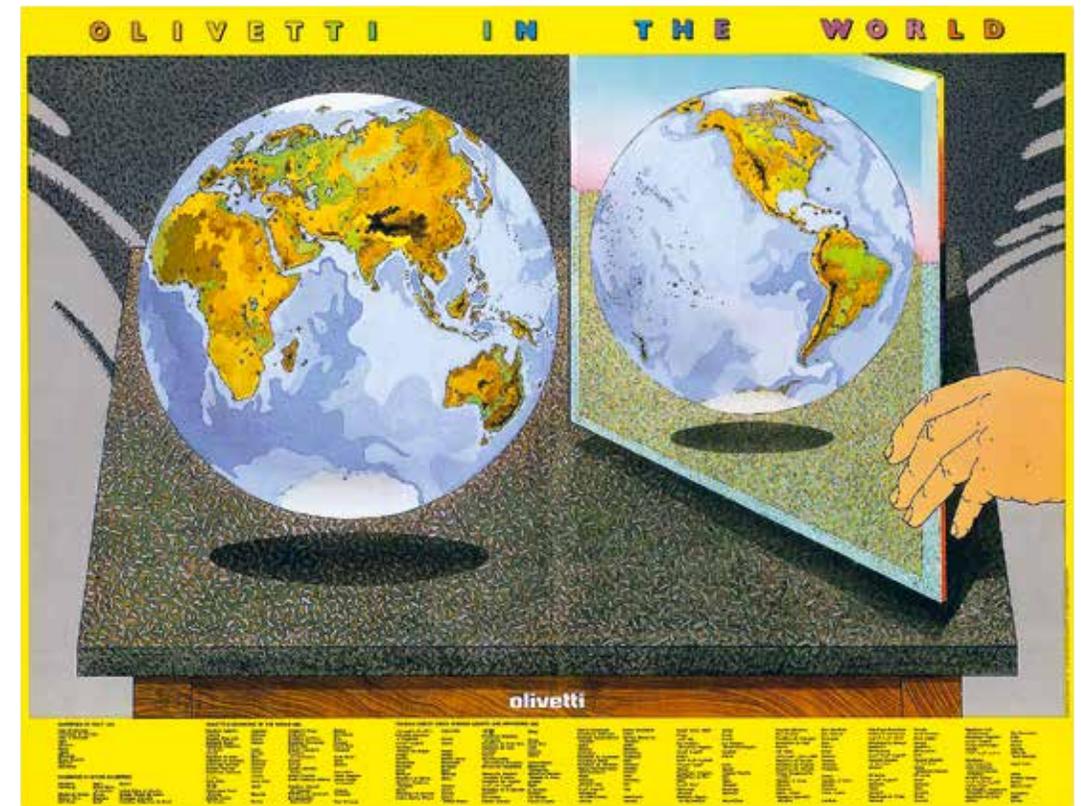
lating machines, and by 1959 the company had embarked on the production of calculators. The 1960s marked the peak in a process of international growth that saw Olivetti open showrooms and promote its image through communication products, books and exhibitions.

When Adriano Olivetti died in 1960, his son Roberto took over the management, but the general economic situation led to business difficulties that convinced the family to open up to new partners. Both the financial (IMI, Mediocredito) and industrial (FIAT, Pirelli) associates gauged the electronics division too risky, despite the success of the Programma 101 machine, in essence, one of the first personal computers.

The sale of the electronics division to the American firm General Electric in 1964 was a turning point in the company's history, as it led to a reduction in R&D investment, considered too costly. The company led by Roberto Olivetti and a management team that tended to marginalise the role of "family" shareholders continued, however, to open new factories and divisions, such as Synthesis for office furniture.

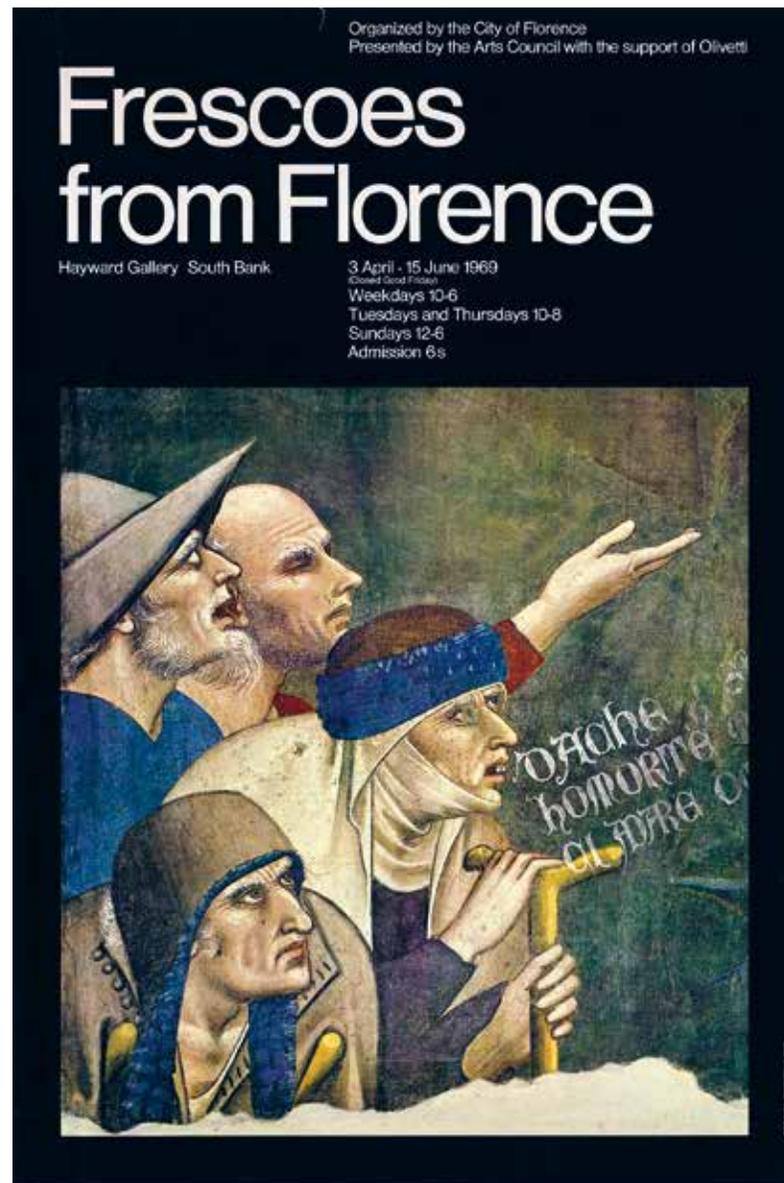
In 1978, Carlo De Benedetti became CEO and later chairman of the company, in which he was the majority shareholder. Partly to offset financial difficulties, investment in emerging information technologies product development was intensified. Corporate culture had by now changed radically, though, favouring marketing strategies over the profoundly humanistic and cultural approach of Adriano Olivetti. Beginning in the 1990s, the growing ICT market generated a series of mergers of Olivetti business units with other industrial partners. The financial drive led to the takeover of Telecom Italia in 1999 and a share swap in 2002, in which Olivetti was de facto renamed Telecom Italia. Olivetti is now a brand controlled by the TIM Group, with the task of expanding into the Internet of Things (IoT) field.<sup>1</sup>

1 For a complete company chronology, the editors refer readers to *Cronistoria Olivetti 1908-1987*, a typewritten bound volume for internal company use, probably edited by the Olivetti Press Office, held at AASOI, Biblioteca Olivetti, Storia Olivetti, Storia Olivetti - Fabbrica, pp. 124, file 9.



17

Poster *Olivetti in the World*, graphic design King & Miranda, 1978.



18

Poster for the exhibition *Frescoes from Florence*, London, Hayward Gallery, 3 April – 15 June, 1969, graphic design Walter Ballmer, 1969.

### Self-Representation: Letting Books and Exhibitions Tell the Story

From a historiographical point of view, during its years of full activity, Olivetti told its story through publications and exhibitions, starting with the celebratory booklet *25 anni Olivetti*, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the foundation. This was the first example of Adriano's carefully planned communication strategy, always focused on highlighting the company's various areas of activity. Despite the mere sixteen spiral-bound sheets, the booklet encapsulated the contemporary graphics avant-garde. Printed in 1933 in Milan by Guido Modiano, it was edited by advertising expert Renato Zveteremich with the graphic designers Riccardo "Ricas" Castagnedi and Bruno Munari.<sup>2</sup>

In-house promotional strategies were necessarily interrupted during World War II and the company only mentioned itself in sporadic internal bulletins, which used the emphatic language of the time. This was quickly replaced during the post-war reconstruction, however, with Adriano Olivetti's typically understated approach.

In 1952, the exhibition *Olivetti: Design in Industry*, held at New York's MoMA, was the first high-impact revival of Olivetti's unique integrated design, capable of combining the technological, formal and commercial aspects of industrial production in an organic and particularly virtuoso manner.<sup>3</sup> The curator of the exhibition was Leo Lionni, who also designed the catalogue alongside the museum's Art and Design Department. The format included categories and sections on architecture, products, graphics as well as the social and cultural initiatives that would characterise Olivetti's future communication style.<sup>4</sup>

In 1958, to celebrate the company's 50th anniversary, Riccardo Musatti, Libero Bigiaretti and Giorgio Soavi published the book *Olivetti 1908-1958*. The cover was designed by Giovanni Pintori, the page layout by Max Huber and the ample photographic content was by Aldo Ballo and Ugo Mulas, among others.<sup>5</sup> The publication begins with "Appunti per la storia di una fabbrica" written by Adriano Olivetti himself and with two paragraphs on the founder Camillo and his first assistant, Domenico Burzio. Factory architecture, industrial design, advertising, the commercial side, and social services were all given

generous coverage. The company's multiple identities were reflected in the images and texts, to which Franco Fortini also contributed, while the wide-ranging chronology at the close reflected the multisided approach of the company itself.

A new exhibition was held in 1961, this time at the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Zurich and, at the beginning of the following year, at the Neue Sammlung in Munich. The title of the exhibition was *Stile Olivetti. Geschichte und Formen einer Italienischen Industrie* and the catalogue, designed by Walter Ballmer, echoed the style of the previous one.<sup>6</sup>

The 1970s opened with the exhibition designed by Gae Aulenti, *Olivetti formes et recherche* (Olivetti Concept and Form), which travelled to Paris, Barcelona, Madrid, Edinburgh, London and Tokyo. Curated by Renzo Zorzi's Cultural Relations, Industrial Design and Advertising Department, it went a step further in consolidating the idea of a company that addressed society, expressing its own cultural policy through its products and activities. The stylish catalogue also helped drive home the concept: designed by Franco Bassi, it included selected texts by architects and designers such as Louis Kahn, Kenzo Tange, Ettore Sottsass and Enzo Mari as well as reproductions of works by artists such as Mario Ceroli, Roland Topor and Milton Glaser.

Bringing the promotion of Olivetti's cultural tradition to a close was the retrospective exhibition *Design Process. Olivetti 1908-1978*, once again organised by Zorzi's Department, in association with Nathan Shapira, and held in various venues in the US and Europe, in form of a retrospective anthology that achieves an extensive self-representation of the company. The spirit of this "exhibition-catalogue" was repeated in 1978 and 1983, in publications that were exhaustive and chronologically organised.<sup>7</sup>

2 *25 anni Olivetti*, booklet printed in Milan on behalf of Olivetti to mark the first twenty-five years of the company.

3 Dellapiana 2020: 34-36.

4 *Olivetti: Design in Industry* 1952.

5 Musatti, Bigiaretti and Soavi 1958.

6 Fischli and Rotzler 1961.

7 Shapira 1979; Giudici and Zorzi 1983.

### Critical and Historiographical Attention

From a critical point of view, Olivetti garnered almost immediate interest in the trade press through the publication of many works commissioned by the company. From the post-war period onwards, in fact, architecture and design magazines continuously chronicled the company's succession of factories, shops, products and advertising posters, too numerous to be dealt with here. On the topic "Industrial policy and architecture: the Olivetti case", the December 1976 issue, number 188, of the French magazine *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* (edited by Giorgio Ciucci, Bernard Huet, Amerigo Restucci and Georges Teyssot) reveals, perhaps for the first time in a monograph, the interdisciplinary mix that made Olivetti's case unique.<sup>8</sup>

Ten years later, Manfredo Tafuri in his *Storia dell'architettura italiana 1944-1985* focused on the relationship between Italian urban planning culture and the Movimento Comunità founded by Adriano Olivetti during the years of post-war reconstruction, and on Olivetti's architecture, including the numerous projects in Ivrea, the Pozzuoli factory and various showrooms all completed in the 1950s (New York, Düsseldorf, Venice, Paris). Tafuri gave ample space to architecture in the initial chapter, entitled *Aufklärung I. Adriano Olivetti e la communitas dell'intelletto*, highlighting the ups and downs of Olivetti's commissions, the greatest flaws of which, in the author's opinion, were to be found precisely at the level of urban planning.<sup>9</sup>

Adriano Olivetti's ambitions and successes in terms of town planning – from the project for the Valle d'Aosta onwards – have been examined in depth in the book *Costruire la città dell'uomo. Adriano Olivetti e l'urbanistica* edited by Carlo Olmo.<sup>10</sup> The volume traces Adriano Olivetti's activities from the 1930s to the 1950s, drawing conclusions that differ from those of Tafuri, and highlighting the role Olivetti played in promoting Italian urban planning at the end of the Second World War, and thus in the critical period of reconstruction and the foundation of INU, Istituto Nazionale di Urbanistica (National Institute of Urban Planning).

Between 1996 and 1999, the Municipality of Ivrea catalogued the Olivetti buildings, incorporating them into MaAM, Museo a cielo aperto dell'Architettura Moderna (Open-air Museum

of Modern Architecture) in Ivrea. The city now had seven sites with panels illustrating the most important groups of buildings. The information has been collected in a volume that also examines the context in which the buildings were conceived. Edited by Patrizia Bonifazio and Paolo Scrivano, it serves as a catalogue to the museum, officially opened in 2001.<sup>11</sup>

In 2000, Rossano Astarita published the monograph *Gli architetti di Olivetti. Una storia di committenza industriale* (with a preface by Cesare De Seta). He traces the design genesis and construction process of the works commissioned by Adriano up until he died in 1960, looking in particular at the factories and residential projects.<sup>12</sup> The topic of shops is further explored in 2007 by Dario Scodeller, in his *Negozi. L'architetto nello spazio della merce*, in which the chapter "I negozi Olivetti. Progetto d'identità e autonomie espressive" focuses on the company's commercial spaces, particularly in the period between 1935 and 1958.<sup>13</sup>

Curated by Manolo De Giorgi and Enrico Morteo, the exhibition *Olivetti: una bella società* was held in Turin in 2008 to mark the company's centenary. Although not promoted by Olivetti, it continued the tradition of self-narrative through publications and exhibits. Indeed, the exhibition design and catalogue returned to an idea of multiple means of expression, developed this time by selecting ninety-five items, identified by as many headwords, and singling out objects, architecture, other projects, and key figures in Olivetti's history.<sup>14</sup>

In her *Millesimo di millimetro*, Caterina Cristina Fiorentino observed the evolution of the Olivetti visual code in the period from 1938 to 1977, analysing the posters, photographic and advertising campaigns and films that characterised the Ivrea-based company over such a long period.<sup>15</sup>

8 *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 1976.  
9 Tafuri 1982.  
10 Olmo 2001.  
11 Bonifazio and Scrivano 2001.  
12 Astarita 2000.  
13 Scodeller 2007: 104-139.  
14 De Giorgi and Morteo 2008.  
15 Fiorentino 2014.

In 2018, the company's 110th anniversary was the occasion for numerous initiatives that multiplied the narratives starting from archive materials, a source of constant rediscovery. Although the exhibition *Looking forward. Olivetti: 110 anni di immaginazione*, curated by Ilaria Bussoni, Manolo De Giorgi and Nicolas Martino<sup>16</sup> at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Rome does not seem to have added new perspectives to the centenary exhibition ten years earlier, it did provide an opportunity to relaunch the corporate ambitions of the Olivetti brand managed by Telecom Italia. The exhibition *Olivetti Makes. Diseño, industria y sociedad*, curated by Pier Paolo Peruccio, in Mexico City and Puebla, represented a specific in-depth study of the much lesser-known vicissitudes of Olivetti's commitment in Latin America, based on material from Ivrea and local archives.<sup>17</sup>

*L'Idioma Olivetti 1952-1979 (The Olivetti Idiom 1952-1979)*, exhibition curated by Caterina Toschi and organised by New York University at Villa Sassetti in Florence, traced a photographic and documentary history of Olivetti's identity regarding exhibitions, showrooms and, for the first time, the training activities of the CISV, Centro Istruzione Specializzazione Vendite (Sales Education and Specialisation Centre) in Florence.<sup>18</sup> Also part of the 110th anniversary celebrations was Mauro Broggi and Pier Paride Vidari's book *Lezioni su Olivetti. Storia, editoria, design*, a noteworthy example of carefully selected personal memories, which offer fertile ground for new studies based on oral history practices.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, at a time when it is still possible to gather first-hand accounts from the last direct protagonists of Olivetti's commissioning activities, director Davide Maffei has given voice to these central figures in two full-length documentaries, *Paradigma Olivetti*<sup>20</sup> and *Prospettiva Olivetti*.<sup>21</sup> The first recounts the history of the company from the death of Adriano Olivetti to the presidency of Carlo De Benedetti, with interviews and archive material; the second, the result of painstaking research in the archives, as well as visits to buildings commissioned by the company and now destined for other uses, focuses on the languages the Ivrea-based company relied on to transmit its identity: visual communication, industrial design and architecture. Architects and designers join in to look back and add personal reflections.

### The Olivetti Ethos: Symbolic Values and Models of Sustainability

Over time, alongside critical and historical studies, the name of (Adriano) Olivetti has become a positive symbol. Starting with Thomas J. Watson Jr, who based his business plan for IBM on the vision of the Olivetti showroom on Fifth Avenue in New York, many Italian and foreign entrepreneurs have, to a greater or lesser extent, seen their names linked to Olivetti's, because of the goodwill of their actions. In the case of Silvio Berlusconi, the journalist Sandro Bondi has pointed out the similarities between the Comunità project and Berlusconi's urban planning, real-estate and then political activities;<sup>22</sup> the entrepreneur Brunello Cucinelli mirrors Adriano Olivetti's experience in caring for the territory in which his company is set and in corporate social responsibility;<sup>23</sup> even the business project and cultural commitment of entrepreneurs Miuccia Prada and Patrizio Bertelli has been compared to that of the Ivrea company.<sup>24</sup> Over time, Olivetti has acquired the status of a real utopia and aspirational model for good patrons of architecture and culture. A model that is even more unattainable because unrepeatable in terms of its complexity and geographical and chronological vastness.

From a critical point of view, there seems to be a lack of systematic studies and little new in-depth research that does not fall back on the almost hagiographic repetition of the equa-

16 *Looking forward. Olivetti: 110 anni di immaginazione*, curated by Ilaria Bussoni, Manolo De Giorgi, Nicolas Martino, Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, 20 February – 3 June 2018.  
17 *Olivetti Makes. Diseño, industria y sociedad*, curated by Pier Paolo Peruccio, Mexico City, Palacio de Bellas Artes, 11 October 2018 – 13 January 2019; Puebla, Museo Tecnológico de Monterrey, 12 February – 31 March 2019.  
18 Toschi 2018.  
19 Broggi and Vidari 2018.  
20 *Paradigma Olivetti* (Italy, 2020, colour, 90') directed by Davide Maffei.  
21 *Prospettiva Olivetti* (Italy, 2020, colour, 88') directed by Davide Maffei.  
22 Bondi 2009.  
23 Cucinelli 2018.  
24 Gillo Dorfles, cit. in Paracchini 2009: 25.

tion between the Olivetti company and the excellence of the projects (architecture, design, politics) it has promoted over time. Without these detailed studies, it is hard to grasp the difference between the Olivetti industrial and cultural project and that of our contemporary epigones: the holistic and restorative approach to the changes inflicted by industrial production on the natural environment and civil society. Through the years, Olivetti promptly implemented environmental and social sustainability measures in its attempt to remedy this dyscrasia: coordinating an urban plan for the Valle d'Aosta, commissioning housing for its managers and workers, providing education for its workers and their families, humanising innovative technical products through user-centred and ergonomic design, analysing the nature itself and the presence of these new machines through cultural activities, while at the same time ensuring its success and development and the economic sustainability of its operations.

This interaction between business and culture, between the sale of products and the promotion of ideals deserves more in-depth studies if we are to fill in the gaps in the literature. Our aim here is to take a critical look at some of the lesser studied phenomena of the vast Olivetti commercial network, that stretched across a large part of the world between the 1930s and the 1980s. This network has remained largely unexplored and has never been the subject of a specific, systematic study: only a very few showrooms, designed by architects such as BBPR, Carlo Scarpa, Franco Albini and Gae Aulenti, have received any detailed attention. These are but a circumscribed and partial cross-section of the complex strategies the company adopted for its sales and representational spaces. The same can be said for the multiplicity of temporary initiatives aimed at promoting the Olivetti image and product (technical exhibitions, participation to trade fair stands, communication projects).

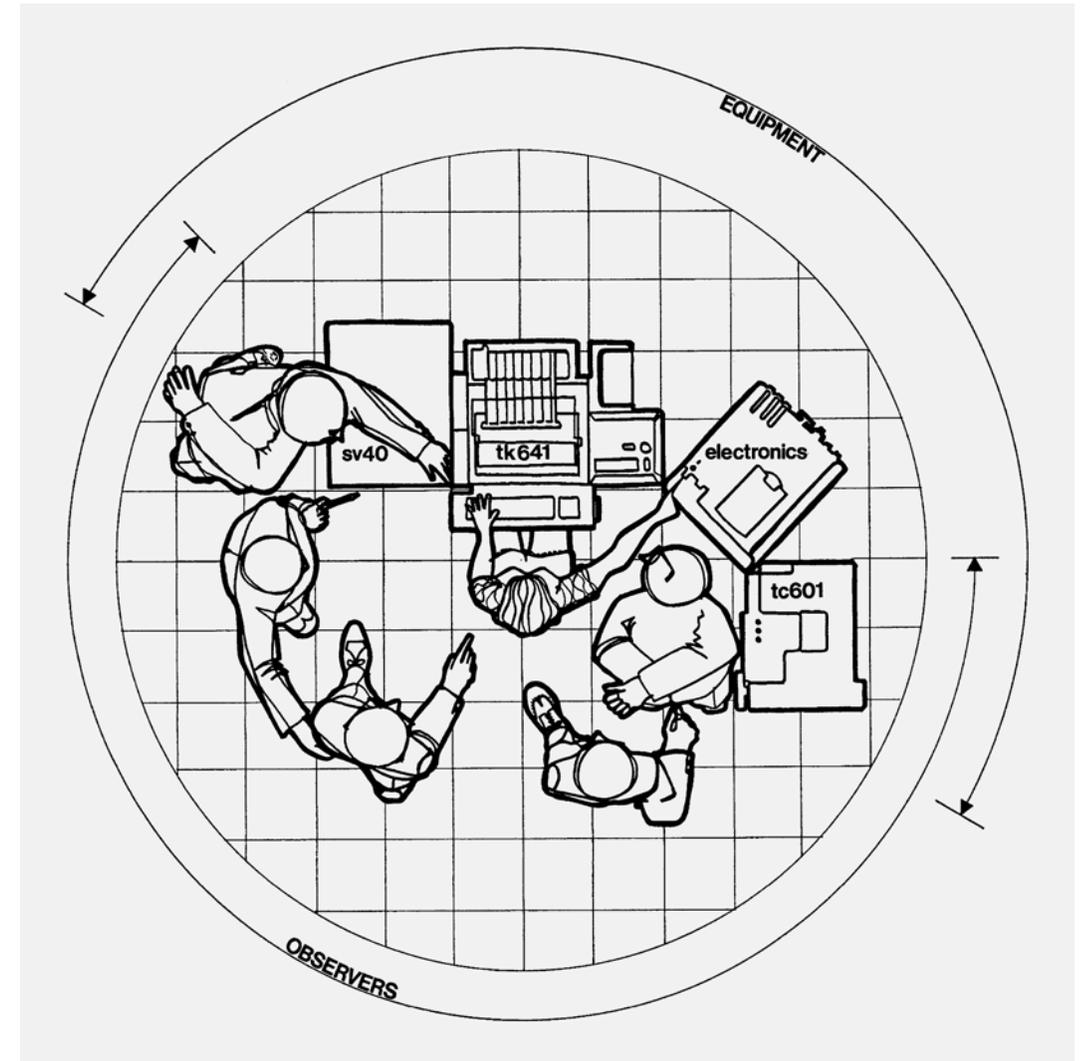
In short, the unanimous recognition of the exceptional nature of the Olivetti experience in these sectors too – in addition to those of architecture and product design, which have long been acknowledged and extensively researched – has not been matched by a suitable process of historicisation and valorisation; and in this specific case, the loss of memory is

all the more irreparable given that the commercial displays and exhibition events leave no physical traces in the present – except on very rare occasions, such as Carlo Scarpa's showroom in Venice.

#### Spaces and Languages: A Collective Research Project Based on Primary Sources

The authors have set themselves the task of retracing the phenomenon as a whole, identifying its defining features in relation to Olivetti's entrepreneurial history and the plurality of creative approaches generated by the contribution of designers (both internal and external to the company) such as Franco Albini, Gae Aulenti, Walter Ballmer, BBPR, Silvana Bellino, Gian Antonio Bernasconi, Egidio Bonfante, Piero Bottoni, Bernardino Coda, Giorgio Colombo, Federico Correa and Alfonso Milá, Jacques Famery, Ignazio Gardella, Milton Glaser, Hans Hollein, Perry King and Santiago Miranda, Leo Lionni, Tomás Maldonado, Bruno Munari, George Nelson, Marcello Nizzoli, Giancarlo Palanti, Roberto Pieracini, Giovanni Pintori, Roberto Sambonet, Bruno Scagliola, Carlo Scarpa, Xanti Schawinsky, Ugo Sissa, Giorgio Soavi, Ettore Sottsass, George Sowden, Clino Trini Castelli, Pier Paride Vidari, Hans von Klier, and Renato Zveteremich.

Albeit incomplete, this list of names is an immediate measure of the richness and complexity of the Olivetti phenomenon, far more effective than any purely historical approach that has often concentrated on what has already emerged from contemporary secondary sources. The focus of this publication has therefore been on the materials in the Olivetti Historical Archives kept in Ivrea by the Association of the same name. The physical archiving and its digital translation completed in recent times have made it possible to search the databases by keywords. The practice continued during the numerous visits to the archive to examine the relevant folders. The archive holds a wide variety of materials: in addition to documents (letters, notes, accounts, balance sheets), there is a vast library of literature related to Olivetti themes and an *eidoteca* (image library) with a database of analogue and digital images. At the Ivrea site are also architectural models and real artefacts,



19

Floor plan of a solution for display and interaction at the Olivetti showroom in New York City, 500 Park Avenue, design George Nelson, 1971.



20    Poster for the international *Save Our Planet* campaign promoted by Olivetti and UNESCO, graphic design Ernest Trova, 1971.

such as posters, as well as machines manufactured by Olivetti over the years. The material goes well beyond Company documents, including collections that have been contributed over time by former employees and their heirs. Over more than a century, there has been a sedimentation of primary and secondary sources that make the Olivetti Archives in Ivrea the starting point for producing new knowledge.

This typically archival approach has been complemented in many cases by oral histories. When visits to Ivrea, and to the many other archives the authors consulted, left blind spots in the case studies, recourse to unpublished direct and indirect accounts proved crucial in confirming or refuting the assumptions of the research. Using oral sources also helped demystify studies on Olivetti-related phenomena, enabling primary and secondary sources to be read critically to produce new knowledge that would support the historical and critical debate beyond the eulogistic approach of many studies. It also shone a light on aspects hitherto neglected, such as working conditions in the Advertising Office, the importance of marketing or the role of less studied figures.

In the broad scope of the study, the essays that make up the book have concentrated on the two macro-themes present in the title, namely the design of spaces commissioned by Olivetti and the languages through which the company has expressed itself over time. The aim of the case-study approach is to explore broader themes that lend themselves to further study in the future.

The book covers fifty years of history, from 1933 – the year following Adriano Olivetti’s arrival at the helm of the company and the 25th anniversary of its foundation – to 1983, the year the Olivetti pavilion at the Hannover Messe officially opened. This date is considered as the decisive moment in the company’s unique and particularly effective identity strategy, which finds its own historicisation with the permanent inclusion of the company in the most important trade fair of the period. Specially commissioned for the occasion, the visual essays at the beginning and end of the book give an account of these two historical moments.

As we said, the book develops around the two main topics related to the design of spaces (shops, showrooms, trade fairs and technical

exhibitions) and the use of languages (visual communication, interaction design, cultural and promotional activities) in the period under study and it is organised in five sections that deal thematically with episodes that have received less attention in the existing literature, through case studies based on new archival research. An essay contextualising the individual cases introduces each section. The volume ends with a series of interviews or recollections from direct witnesses of Olivetti’s multiple identities: designers and sales managers.

The first section of the book looks at showrooms, as it outlines the characteristics of the vast network of Olivetti shops between the 1930s and the 1950s. It examines the guidelines laid down by Adriano and the extent to which and the way in which they were put into practice by designers such as Nizzoli, Bottoni, Albini and Gardella (Graziella Leyla Ciagà). The aspects of this “multiform consistency of style” are pieced together through an investigation into the work of Bernasconi, Sissa, Coda and Palanti and thanks to a series of mostly unpublished European and South American examples (Stefano Zagnoni). The reconstruction of the sales space at the Turin showroom, designed by Xanti Schawinsky in 1934, is the subject of a detailed examination, further enhanced by analysis of primary sources (Davide Fornari, Chiara Barbieri). The group of Spanish shops designed by Correa and Milá between the late 1960s and early 1970s constitutes a particularly interesting case, both in terms of their number and the brevity of their activity (Amparo Fernández Otero, Josefina González Cubero). The peak of the trend of Olivetti’s large designer showrooms, in the same years and at a time of crucial transformation of the company, is focused through the design of the Park Avenue showroom in New York with project design proposals – also in this case largely unpublished – by Ettore Sottsass and George Nelson (Davide Turrini). From this overview emerges the very special relationship between Olivetti shops and the arts of the 20th century (Dario Scodeller).

The second section of the book, dedicated to the design of technical fairs and exhibitions, opens with an essay on Olivetti’s exhibition experience in Italy between the 1950s and the 1970s (Alessandro Brodini). How the exhibition *Design Process. Olivetti* was conceived is analysed

as a whole: from its roots in the concept of integrated design established in 1952 to the technical exhibitions and Olivetti spaces of the early 1980s (Caterina Toschi). Two cases on the other hand deal with emblematic and little-known examples of commercial exhibitions, such as the kinetic Olivetti exhibition for *Italia 61* in Turin (Alessandra Acocella) and the Olivetti technical exhibitions designed by Egidio Bonfante in Moscow, London and Madrid (Elisabetta Trincherini). The visionary and exceptional quality of the travelling exhibition *Olivetti formes et recherche* designed by Gae Aulenti is comprehensively analysed through archive materials (Marcella Turchetti). Finally, Hans von Klier's contribution to corporate visual culture is examined in detail (Elena Dellapiana).

The company's well-known activities in the field of visual communication and its less familiar forays into interaction design are the focus of the third section of the book. An in-depth review of the approaches and strategies adopted from the 1930s onwards reveals how these had an enormous impact on subsequent corporate culture (Caterina Cristina Fiorentino). The role of the Triestine advertising executive Renato Zveteremich in the development of the first Advertising Office and the not always idyllic relations with Adriano Olivetti are described thanks to material from the family archive (Alessandro Colizzi, Renata Bazzani Zveteremich). The by now canonical version of an Olivetti Style is questioned through a comparative analysis of corporate communication strategies from the 1950s to the 1970s (Carlo Vinti). The role of the Swiss art director Walter Ballmer and the atmosphere in his office at Olivetti are investigated through oral sources that challenge the vision of an exemplary workplace (Chiara Barbieri, Davide Fornari). The international relevance of the company division specialising in large electronic calculators is examined starting with the design input of Ettore Sottsass (Elisabetta Mori) and the experiments carried out in Ulm under the guidance of Sottsass himself and Tomás Maldonado, in collaboration with Gui Bonsiepe on behalf of Olivetti (Raimonda Riccini).

The fourth section focuses on cultural and promotional activities – a sort of diplomatic language collateral to marketing, with which the Ivrea-based company promoted its identity and contributed to a more general cultural discourse,

as part of a global interest in culture that went beyond corporate reality in the established sense. Adriano Olivetti's constant interest in the visual arts is explored through his relationship with the multifaceted talent of the art critic Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti. Involved in both the visual arts (Paolo Bolpagni) and experimental cinema during the decade 1954–1964, he produced a series of documentaries on Italy's artistic, architectural and cultural heritage (Lorenzo Mingardi). The special relationship between Carlo Scarpa and Olivetti is demonstrated through the pivotal projects for the showroom in Venice and the *Frescoes from Florence* exhibition in London (Elena Tinacci). Olivetti's involvement in the publishing world, in *Zodiac* magazine, in particular, is another significant example of the international scope of the company's strategies (Marcella Turchetti). Turning to Italy, Tuscany stands out as a little-studied episode which saw a high concentration of Olivetti's production activities, political ambitions and design excellence (Denise Ulivieri, Marco Giorgio Bevilacqua, Lucia Giorgetti, Stefania Landi). Olivetti promotional gadgets are anything but pretty and anodyne design objects: a close look sheds light on the complexity of the industrial design discourse in dialogue between publishers and designers and highlights the role of objects in company policies (Ali Filippini). The exhibition *Arte programmata. Arte cinetica. Opere moltiplicate. Opera aperta* is a compelling case study of Olivetti's ability to recognise the vital contribution of the arts to the public cultural debate and their impact on corporate culture (Azalea Seratoni). Finally, Olivetti's participation as technical sponsor at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics illustrates the company's ability to combine long-term activities, such as its presence in Latin America, with occasions of massive international visibility, such as the Olympic Games, all in the name of the global quality of the design project (Pier Paolo Peruccio).

A fifth and final section, which cuts across the previous ones, features five chronicles that are particularly useful in highlighting lesser-known aspects, objectives and experiences. The design of dot-matrix characters and the approach to the design of interfaces and interaction processes are the focus of the conversation between Santiago Miranda and Davide Fornari. The interest in ergonomics and the work atmosphere within Ettore Sottsass's group are discussed by

George Sowden and Daniela Smalzi. Three testimonies by former Olivetti employees confirm the correct interpretation of the phenomenon in our sight: economic achievement was partly responsible for the success in implementing such distinctive cultural and corporate actions. Good practices with respect to staff training at Olivetti and its foreign subsidiaries are addressed in the account by a former manager (Paolo Rebaudengo). Training in sales strategies, carried out at the Olivetti School in Florence, was one of the reasons for economic success (Galileo Dallolio), as was the capillarity of the sales network across the territory (Alessandro Chilli).

#### Olivetti Identity: From Historical Narrative to an Agenda for the Future

An inspiring essay by Stefano Zagnoni on the multiform and systematic nature of Olivetti showrooms during Adriano Olivetti's presidency lies behind the origins of this volume.<sup>25</sup> Little studied by historiographers – apart from a few iconic projects, such as the Olivetti shop in New York designed by BBPR (1954) and the only surviving showroom, designed by Carlo Scarpa in Venice (1958) – many spaces were lost or their precise location never identified. Examples included the showroom designed by Xanti Schawinsky in Turin (1934) and the numerous Hispano Olivetti shops in Spain, designed by Federico Correa and Alfonso Milá (1968–1972). The editors' interest was therefore naturally kindled at the start by those splendid instances of interior design, whose ephemeral nature had cast into the shadows, in favour of the more enduring works of architecture. These include the Olivetti factories or office buildings that have survived over time, now gathered at MaAM – the open-air Museum of Modern Architecture in Ivrea. In 2018 they were added to the UNESCO heritage list as part of a 20th-century industrial city.<sup>26</sup> Starting from the observation of the transient nature of architectures considered minor and from regular visits to the Olivetti Historical Archives in Ivrea, the editors found a generalised interest in many lesser-known aspects of Olivetti's activities. Among these were exhibition designs, cultural activities, communication artefacts, ephemeral by nature, and

interactive artefacts, gradually superseded by technological progress and then forgotten.

A scientific committee, among whom the editors, and Paolo Bolpagni, Graziella Leyla Ciagà, Beniamino de' Liguori Carino, Raimonda Riccini, Dario Scodeller, Caterina Toschi, Marcella Turchetti, Carlo Vinti and Stefano Zagnoni, coordinated by Daniela Smalzi, met at the end of 2018 to plan an international scientific conference around these topics, to be held in 2019. It was to be awarded FIR 2018 funding by the University of Ferrara, with co-funding from the HES-SO strategic fund for research in the field of design and visual arts granted by ECAL/University of Art and Design Lausanne, and a contribution from the School of Doctorate Studies of the IUAV University of Venice. Many other partners joined in the year leading up to the symposium, including the Associazione Archivio Storico Olivetti (Olivetti Historical Archives Association) in Ivrea, the Fondazione Innovazione Urbana of Bologna, the Fondazione degli Architetti di Ferrara, the Olivettiana association and the Fondazione Centro Studi sull'Arte Licia e Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti of Lucca.

A work plan was drawn up with the assistance of the scientific committee members and researchers were invited from Italy, England, Spain and Switzerland who were developing innovative studies, the result of unpublished archival or historical research. All the abstracts received in response to the editors' invitation were evaluated by the scientific committee and circulated, in Italian and English, prior to the conference in an open access publication.<sup>27</sup>

The conference was held on 12, 13 and 14 December 2019 in three different venues: Palazzo Tassoni Estense, seat of the Department of Architecture of the University of Ferrara; the Manfredo Tafuri lecture hall at Ca' Badoer, seat of the School of Doctorate Studies of the IUAV University of Venice; and, finally, in the Farnese Chapel of Palazzo d'Accursio, seat of the Fondazione Innovazione Urbana of

25 Zagnoni 2017.  
26 Ivrea, industrial city of the 20th century, in [Unesco.org, whc.unesco.org/en/list/1538](https://www.unesco.org/whc.unesco.org/en/list/1538) (last accessed 8 August 2021).  
27 Fornari and Turrini 2019.

Bologna. The conference was sponsored by the Associazione italiana storici del design (AIS/Design), the Adriano Olivetti Foundation of Rome, the company Olivetti Spa and the Venice Delegation of FAI, Fondo Ambiente Italiano (Italian Environmental Fund), which lovingly tends the Olivetti showroom at 101 Piazza San Marco, keeping it open to the public.

Some forty speakers attended the symposium, with a total audience of around two hundred people over the three days, and there were lively debates at the end of each day. It therefore seemed of immediate interest to publish selected contributions, after submitting them to a double-blind evaluation by a committee of international experts, for a conceptual and formal review of the essays. The reasons for having the volume reviewed are so that we can offer a scrupulously compiled publication to a wider audience, involving an extended scientific community in an ongoing process of clarification and debate. To complete the five sections that make up this volume, some of the authors were asked to contribute contextualising essays or provide new interviews.

The editors wished for great attention and care to be given to the book, both in the overall project and in the choice of the visual material, much of which is made of unpublished archive sources or produced specifically for the occasion. Many trips to the archives were made after the conference, and unity in the art direction was a primary objective.

Without these in-depth studies, it is hard to grasp – and, as far as possible, to translate into modern terms – the difference between the industrial and cultural project of contemporary epigones and Olivetti's holistic project, which restored the impact of industrial production on the natural environment and civil society. Adriano Olivetti implemented measures of environmental and social sustainability to remedy the shortcomings of mass production.

This retrospective insight, confirmed and complemented by archival sources, as well as evidence continually updated by new discoveries,<sup>28</sup> allows comparison between past and present to identify strategies and possible developments, without any apologetic nostalgia. While a historiography that takes a critical

and methodical look, albeit incomplete, at the activities of the Olivetti company – both an industry and a patron of culture – speaks of the past, at the same time it offers an operating model for the future.

28 See Roberto Bazlen, cit. in Calasso 2021: 41–46.

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tion *1969. Olivetti formes et recherche, una mostra internazionale* (6 December 2018 – 24 February 2019).

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*Spaces and Languages 1933–1983*

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back cover  
Crystal diagram describing the complex  
domain of Olivetti's activities, for the exhibition  
*Design Process. Olivetti 1908–1978*,  
design King & Miranda, 1979,  
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Olivetti's world-famous typewriters epitomise the company's industrial legacy and visible identity, which was both innovative and complex, material and immaterial. These identities are at the heart of an interdisciplinary research project carried out by ECAL/University of Art and Design Lausanne and the University of Ferrara, in collaboration with the Olivetti Historical Archives Association in Ivrea.

*Olivetti Identities. Spaces and Languages 1933–1983* presents the results of this research, with contributions from 37 authors, analysing the Olivetti phenomenon as a whole and paying particular attention to corporate evolution and the approach of designers such as Xanti Schawinsky, Carlo Scarpa, Ettore Sottsass, Hans von Klier, Egidio Bonfante, and Walter Ballmer, among others.

The book examines the development of Olivetti's corporate identity, from the opening of the Olivetti Advertising Office in 1933 to that of the permanent Olivetti pavilion at the Hannover Fair in 1983, seen as the final step in a particularly efficient corporate identity strategy.

Divided into four sections, the work covers showroom and exhibition design at trade fairs and expos, as well as the languages that shaped the corporate vocabulary: visual communication and interaction design, cultural and promotional activities.

Designers Santiago Miranda and George Sowden, along with former Olivetti sales and training employees, add their own personal accounts in the final section, while two visual essays of published and unpublished documents from the Olivetti Historical Archives complete the book.

