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## Life Line

Surface steps inside the high-tech armory of Dainese, one of the world's leading producers of protective sports gear

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Story VIRGINIO BRIATORE

When inline skaters, flames spitting from their helmets, burst into view during the opening ceremonies of the Winter Olympics in Turin, few spectators wondered about the protective measures that allowed the athletes to make such bold moves. Securing their safety was the job of Dainese. One of the world's most renowned manufacturers of professional athletic gear and high-performance sports equipment, the Italian company created the skater's streamlined suits. >



**COMPANY LOGIC:** The expanded headquarters (above), designed by architect Silvia Dainese, includes a gigantic, automated distribution center and a showroom in which the display racks form a backbone reminiscent of the company's trademark back protectors.



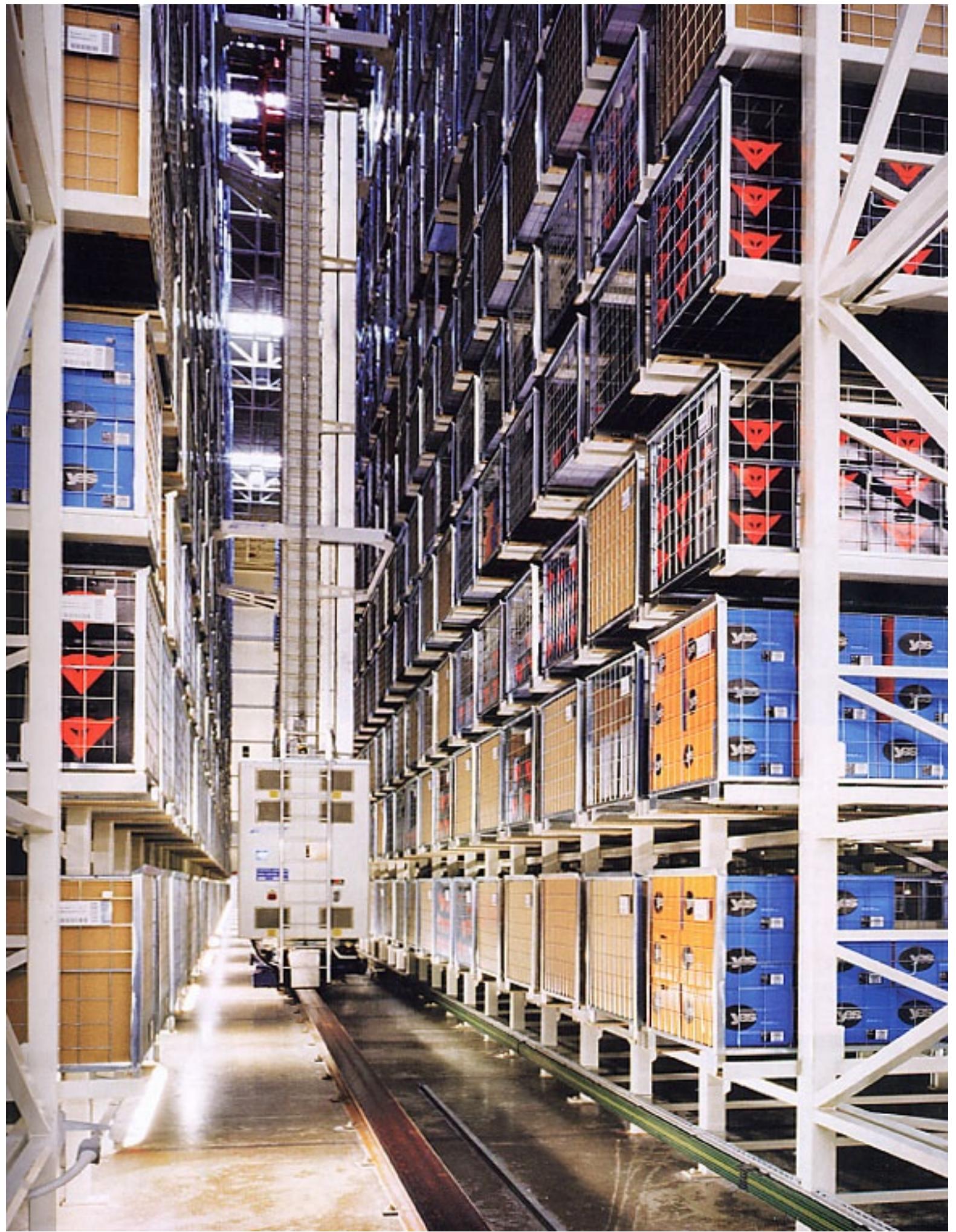
While its sleek safety products appeared on the world's biggest stage, the Italian brand unveiled its expanded headquarters, a striking architectural confirmation of the company's growth since its establishment as the manufacturer of Lino Dainese's leather motocross pants in 1972. Designed by Lino's cousin, Silvia Dainese – formerly a New York-based architect who now has a studio in the Veneto region – the new facility is a parallelogramic prism, a tiling monolith of gentle arcs and curves. It sits like a Futurist manifesto planted along the highway that runs between Milan and Venice, a windowless box that looks like a gigantic sail. Inside this computerized logistics center, five giant iron cranes roll back and forth at 15 miles per hour along a five-lane track, sticking their tentacles into 25,000 metal cells to grab and organize suits, boots, gloves, helmets, back shields and knee guards in an impressive display of precision. On one end, the factory is attached to the old Modernist headquarters and, on the other side, it extends into a Brutalist concrete showroom where a well of natural light highlights prominently displayed colorful suits.

Lino Dainese's studio is a large, sparsely decorated room. Among the few works of art on the walls are Christo's preparatory drawings for his famous wrapping of Berlin's Reichstag and two images crucial to the company's historical sense of self – original drawings of the little devil that would become the Dainese logo and the paper pattern of the first leather trousers Dainese designed. Every object hints at the primacy of solid design: a 16th century iron gauntlet, a medieval helmet with a visor and chin guard, and books on Renaissance and Japanese armor, all of which are direct inspirations for Dainese's capizzi-like, ergonomic products, reminiscent of the armor of Roman gladiators. "A chair is undoubtedly important, but it is just a chair," Dainese says. "Here, we feel closer to medicine than fashion."

Medicine requires a research lab and, indeed, Dainese's is named D.Tec. A real, stuffed armadillo acts as a symbolic figurehead, keeping watch over hundreds of full-body motorcycle suits that hang from a rotating belt. Torn, scratched or burnt during races, they have all been kept for archival purposes; these shoulders, backs, elbows and knees have collided with red-hot exhaust pipes, asphalt and protection barriers. Each suit has a rider's name emblazoned on it, as well as a collage of graphics, logos and of course, various myths. At the other end of the lab is an immaculate spacesuit worn for months by a Russian cosmonaut.

About 60 people work at D.Tec, including some of the design industry's biggest stars, like Marc Sadler, famous within the company for his trademark back guard, a novel structure that combines a soft base with a hard, polypropylene shell. Since 2004, the design team has worked under the direction of Renato Montagner, one of Sadler's protégés. Montagner leads Dainese's efforts to remain at the top of its field – >

*Photography PAUL WARCHOL*





specifically with gloves that use protective titanium plates, boots with fiber composites, anti-torsion structures, and the "Power Cell," which generates heat for the torso, the nape of the neck and the lower back. "Our objective is to be a safety company, active on all playgrounds," he says. Dainese supplies gear to athletes in many sports, from motorcycling to snowboarding to mountain biking. "Our results are then applied to everyday life, to help people who ride scooters or enjoy sports and want to play hard without getting hurt." In other words, what's good for those Olympic inline skaters will soon enough be good for you — whether you're preparing for the next winter games in Vancouver or just trying to get to work in one piece. VB

**SPEED OF LIGHT:** Athletes outfitted in Dainese (above) at the 2006 Winter Olympics opening ceremonies in Turin. The protective shield of the armadillo was an inspiration for the jointed protection of Marc Sadler's back protector (see opener page) just as the Renaissance iron gauntlet was for the motorcycle speed gloves with titanium inserts.

