Graphis336

Dialogue: At Ivrea, the Olivetti dream continues...

Italy now has their own M.I.T. Media Lab. This fall, the Interaction Design Institute Ivrea opens its doors. Graphis meets with Gillian Crampton Smith, executive director of the new institute to talk about the challenge of combining a progressive academic curriculum with its many industrial applications.

By Virginio Briatore

Milan, Central Station, 7 AM, 15 minutes before departure: I learn that the train tracks are interrupted 10 kilometers before Ivrea, and no one seems to be able to tell me how to reach my destination. I remember seeing it on the news: the river washed the bridge away, and now that spring is here, it is still not fixed. No problem. 10 kilometers certainly aren't going to stop me.

Starting October 2001, this private institution, will welcome 30 lucky post-graduates who will work on interaction design projects for a two-year period. The initiative is financed, for the next five years, by Olivetti and Telecom to the tune of 40 million Euros (1 Euro= $0.89).

Olivetti is an industrial holding company that operates in telecommunications and certain areas of the Information & Communication Technologies industry. It has revenues of 30.1 billion Euro and more than 120,000 employees as of December 31, 2000. Olivetti's core business is fixed and mobile telecommunications and Internet services. Its operations in this area are conducted through the Telecom Italia Group, acquired as a result of a Voluntary Public Tender Offer launched in February 1999 with its Tecnost subsidiary, which merged with Olivetti at the end of 2000 as part of a group reorganization.

The president of the school is senator and former Fiat's CEO Franco Debenedetti, and I am about to meet the executive director, Gillian Crampton Smith, founder and previously director, since 1989, of the Computer Related Design Department of the Royal College of Art in London. The steering committee includes Barbara Ghella, John Thackara, Bill Verplank and Marco Zanini, aided by an Explorer Club composed of 14 international experts, including architect and designer Ettore Sottsass.

Sottsass represents the link between the enlightened world of Adriano Olivetti—who inherited the company from his father Camillo in 1933—and the 21st century. After designing Olivetti typewriters, computers and furniture, at the age of 83 Sottsass is now involved in the restoration of the "blue house"—where the Ivrea institute headquarters are located—designed by Edoardo Vittoria in 1950. Sottsass thus joins the list of the great architects like Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, Kenzo Tange, Richard Meier and James Stirling who have collaborated, since 1935, in the construction of what is known as the Olivetti community. An ideal city where the factories have big windows and are surrounded by residences, daycare centers and sporting facilities.

Can the dream continue? The prerequisites are in place. This project comes after the groundbreaking experience of Domus Academy, the school founded in Milan in 1983 by Andrea Branzi, and now controlled by majority shareholder Webegg—a leading player in Italy's new economy. In 1993, Fabrica was born as a communications workshop for Benetton, with a building designed by Tadao Ando. Today near Bergamo, a High Technology Research Center project, sponsored by local industries, is underway—designed by Jean Nouvel. These are all signals which indicate an intention to imitate the American educational model by attracting talent from around the globe, a phenomenon already in progress in Italy in the fields of fashion and furniture design.

In the meantime the train has pulled into the provisional station. The snowy peaks gleam on the horizon. Another question comes to mind: will this band of worldly talents, accustomed to a metropolitan pace, be able to coexist and thrive in this small, rather gloomy town of 25,000 inhabitants? One encouraging sign is the fact that the director is a woman—truly a rare event in Italy. She leads me inside the Institute with her engaging smile and a reassuring look.

The Casa Blu stands out, with its walls covered with small tiles, among the other buildings of the Olivetti complex, against the backdrop of a green, wooded hill. In the entrance lot, trucks of well-known companies are unloading furniture and equipment. The construction is almost complete, but the electricians and physical plant specialists are still busy raising plenty of dust. The central staircase, connecting four levels of the building, is beautiful, wide open and vaguely blue, like the dome of a mosque. I observe the work in progress: the library, the big café with its kitchen counter already which displays its potential for convivial relaxation, and the many ateliers. One can see the hand of Sottsass in the use of colors: the

flooring with its composite look, the circular knobs on the doors, drawers and workstations, and desks equipped with cabled turrets.

Scattered throughout the rooms, these totems look like adventurers about to set off on a wired journey in the Middle Ages of the future. We sit down on a blue divan, on the top floor overlooking the greenery. Thanks to a lasting relationship with Venice where she has kept an apartment for 10 years, the director speaks excellent Italian.

Graphis: What is interaction design?

Crampton Smith: Interaction design determines how people interact with computers and communications technologies. This is an issue of profound economic and cultural importance. Interaction design determines the value of a communication service to its users, and the quality of experience they have when using it. It brings together the skills and knowledge of many design disciplines: communication and product design, animation and film, fashion and furniture. Computers and networks are transforming every aspect of our lives. As networks converge, almost everything we use, or do, involves some kind of interaction. There are interactions between us and the system, or between one object and another. Interaction design shapes the kind of experience we have when this takes place. The world is already filled with 12 computer chips for every man, woman and child on the planet. By the time a child who is five years old today leaves school, her world will contain thousands of chips for every human being alive. In a world of such complexity, interaction design will influence the kind of life one lives. Compared to physical products, communication services are experiences, not things. Interaction design deals with immaterial processes, and with services that adapt to an individual's needs and preferences. This is a completely new kind of design.

Graphis: Where is the difference between Interface and Interaction?

Crampton Smith: Interface design is the design of the interface between a person and a system, usually through a screen. Interaction design is broader, encompassing the design of the whole interactive system: both what it does and what the experience of using it looks, feels and sounds like. It may include physical, auditory as well as visual elements. Today the imperative is to interact, everything has to be interactive!

Graphis: What's so new about interaction design?

Crampton Smith: It is not only how to interact with a product or a service, or how to design an interface; it is a new experience. Even a coffeemaker has a handle through which we interact, but the new order is defined by microprocessors that shift the complexity. In other words, we can say that if sound is the first dimension, the screen is the second, the buttons the third and time the fourth, then the fifth dimension is interaction design: the quality of the response you obtain. Just think about the mouse, about how to improve the quality with which we control the first four phenomena.

Graphis: What is the role of design in society?

Crampton Smith: The role of design is to define the scenario in which we live, not only deciding what things should look like, but also determining their very identity. Here at Ivrea we want to design the right things, and design the things right. If this project is not a laboratory or a school, what is it?

Graphis: What is its mission?

Crampton Smith: It is a research institute and graduate program drawing on the skills of artist-designers (rather than engineer-designers) to design the ways people interact with communication technologies and computers. We aim to develop deep technical and cultural knowledge, and to foster entrepreneurial skills in the field of innovative communication services. Our mission is to learn how to innovate tomorrow's communication services, producing new concepts, new skills, new aesthetics and new business models.

Graphis: Why Italy?

Crampton Smith: I find the Italian heritage fascinating as a whole, a force composed of fashion, design, small cities, and widespread entrepreneurial activity. Our objective is to integrate this culture with new technologies. Let's take the example of the Department of Communication Sciences situated in the building facing us: it combines disciplines like psychology, semiotics, and philosophy with the

(Opposite) Photo portrait of Gillian Crampton Smith by Jim Marks

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traditional human sciences, and it is a form of teaching that doesn't exist in England. In Italy there are great intellectual resources that can be utilized, and I am very interested in arguments like the representation of knowledge and knowledge management.

Graphis: Where do the students come from, and what are their backgrounds?

Crampton Smith: We are selecting students on the basis of their experience and portfolio; those that have accepted so far come from five different countries, including, of course, Italy; they come from backgrounds in web design, product design, computer science, graphic design. Most have worked before returning to study.

Graphis: How much will it cost?

Crampton Smith: $22,000 (USD) per year, including room but without board. There will be many study grants for students with low incomes, but we are also interested in communicating the fact that education has a cost.

Graphis: Will everyone who pays be promoted?

Crampton Smith: I don't think so. At the end of the first year there will be a break, and to continue each student will have to submit a working project.

Graphis: Why were you called into the picture?

Crampton Smith: Perhaps because I've been working on interaction design for ten years now. I bought my first PC in 1981 because I wanted to try to make sketches on the screen for the pages of a journal.

Graphis: Who invited you?

Crampton Smith: Franco Debenedetti. The original idea came from Roberto Colanninno, the CEO of Telecom, who wanted to create a school of information at Ivrea. He asked Debenedetti to work on the idea, and Debenedetti began to think about the uncharted territories of interaction. Then they went to California to talk with people at Ideo, Apple and other venues, and my name emerged.

Graphis: Why did you accept?

Crampton Smith: The force of the building, the pleasant town and the grand Olivetti tradition were decisive factors. My husband is an architect and a professor in London, and he has also worked for Olivetti. Then I asked that the project not be a school but a research institute, because research is what attracts the best teachers, scientists and theorists. For some time now I have been attempting to construct a dialogue between education and industry: they need us and we need them. It is not a compromise, but an exciting form of cooperation.

Graphis: What's your dream?

Crampton Smith: Among the elements that led me to this choice, the most important was to be able to participate in the regeneration of a city that has suffered greatly in the passage from the old to the new economy. The task of this school goes beyond education. Among the companies mentioned as potential partners we find the names Globo, Mediaset, Microsoft, Philips, American Express, corporations famous for their business acumen, but not for their dreams.

Graphis: Do you think they will be interested in making your dreams come true?

Crampton Smith: These are companies with whom we have made contact, but none of them are interested in beginning this project with us. It's possible that the original partners will soon be joined by another large company, but it is too soon to talk about it... certainly the dialogue will not be simple.

Graphis: What kind of relations exist between the education system and industries?

Crampton Smith: Staff and graduate students at the Institute will undertake research into the potential of new technologies applied to people's everyday life. In this kind of research, design projects are experiments, using real contexts, but looking beyond the markets of today for future possibilities: new kinds of services, new kinds of products, new kinds of aesthetics—and new types of business models to make them economically sustainable. An example of such a project was FLIRT, carried out by the Computer Related Design Research Studio at the Royal College of Art in London on new services for mobile phones. In collaboration with the Helsinki telephone corporation, Philips Research Laboratory and Infogrames, a large French games company, the CRD team developed a range of about 30 ideas for possible WAP services (Wireless Application Protocol). Three of these were then developed in detail (including the screen design) for a small trial in Helsinki (The project report is available at crd@rca.ac.uk.).

Graphis: I've looked at the Web site and the 20 pages of the press kit, but I didn't find words like poetry, fear, sweetness, water, uncertainty, love. Is this a school for superheroes?

Crampton Smith: No... In my inaugural talk I said that we have to design things and concepts that have the quality of good architecture, architecture that speaks to us, that isn't made just to keep the rain out. I want projects that combine poetry and plumbing!

Graphis: This institute is pervaded, like others, with the urge to do. I am reminded of a phrase by Edgar Morin that intrigued me: "There is something no school in any country in the world teaches: how to deal with uncertainties. Everyone concentrates on factual teachings. The result: students find themselves helpless in the face of the unexpected, but the unexpected is one of the basic ingredients of our existence nowadays."

Crampton Smith: That can be a problem: on the one hand the more you do the more elements you have for evaluation, on the other, the more you do the less time you have for reflection. At the Royal College of Art we organized the programs to have one week of design work and one week of reflection. Here as we will see, it's a real challenge: we have the task of generating ideas, knowledge, education, but also of producing things, applications, and business systems.

The interview is over, and I am given the video presentation of the institute, with the rather humorous title: "Interaction Design: making it easy as a kiss." Quite a challenge indeed! The dialogue continues in the restaurant of the Olivetti complex, inside a 17th-century building that includes the church of San Bernardino with its gorgeous frescoes. Food and wine worthy of the Piedmont tradition, and the manual design of the breadsticks is an experience in itself.

Back on the train, I stop in Italy's first capital, Turin (in 1861), to stock up on some of the multiple varieties of the supreme local art of chocolate. I wonder when the many foreigners of the Ivrea team will discover the link between Turin and ancient Egypt, between Fiat and chocolate, Guarini and Martini... I look back on the project by Sottsass for the Elea 9003, the first Olivetti electronic data processor, and the final point of a program begun by Adriano Olivetti in 1952. It was that very same year that a small electronics laboratory opened in Canaan, USA, to establish closer relations with the most advanced developments in research. Completed in 1959 with the collaboration of the German graphic designer Hans von Klier and the Dutch designer Andries van Onck, the Olivetti processor is composed of a central console in the form of a piano, and a series of voluminous cabinets—not unlike the towers of Ivrea's new workstations. Not a product, but an environment.

Sottsass outlined it as follows in *Un museo del disegno industriale in Italia* (Abitare Segesta Cataloghi, 1995) "You think you are designing an object, instead you wind up conditioning the man who works, not only in the direct, physical relationship to the object, but also in wider-ranging, more penetrating issues regarding the entire act of working. You wind up conditioning the relationship between these complex mechanisms of action and the physical, cultural and psychic reactions of the working human, conditioning the relationship that exists among emotions, death and the setting in which the long, brief drama unfolds." I read this and wonder what all this was called 42 years ago, before the words interface, interactive and interaction were invented, or reinvented.■