

## Olivetti of Ivrea

by Deborah Allen

A student of character, regarding the radiant countenance of an Olivetti calculator, might guess that it stands for more than a progressive design program. How much more was shown by an exhibition of Olivetti designs held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York this fall, which included not only the office machines that are Olivetti's legitimate product, but advertising brochures, shops, a housing development, a factory, and even a nursery school. The museum urges the American manufacturer to go out and do likewise, but it will not be easy. Olivetti's designs are only one facet of a thoroughly remarkable corporate personality, and the product of circumstances that do not naturally combine in the United States.

The Olivetti Company was founded at Ivrea, Italy, in 1908 by Camillo Olivetti, an engineer and a humanist, who designed a good typewriter and saw that the eight or so men in his early employ made it well. A good product, good manufacturing, and good human relations were the foundations on which Camillo Olivetti built his company. His first typewriter was big, black, shiny, and bristling with importance, and in the next 37 years, despite mechanical improvements, the Olivetti standard typewriter remained big, black, and shiny.

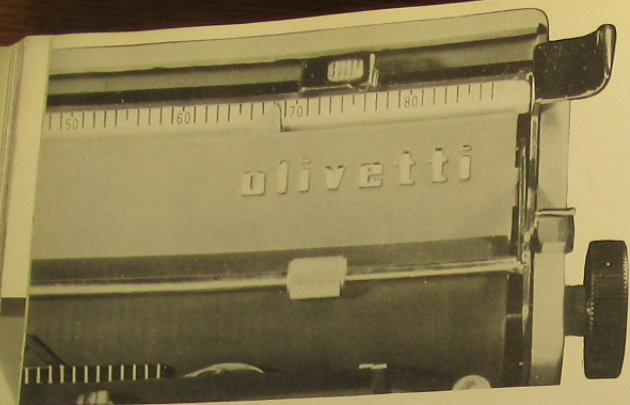
The man who perceived good design as an essential element of a good product was Camillo's son Adriano, who became president of the company when his father retired in 1933. As his father was, Adriano is an engineer and a humanist, and like many an Italian before him he is a patron of the arts. But for Adriano Olivetti the arts are not an avocation. His patronage

is dispensed through the family company, and it is this that gives the Olivetti designs their unique character.

The term "integrated design" that is sometimes used to describe the over-all excellence of Olivetti's designs suggests that the company has a set of rules adding up to a design program. In fact, such integration as there is derives mainly from the singular high taste of Adriano. His brother Dino, head of Olivetti in the United States, describes the company's activities as "coherent," meaning that Olivetti's effort to obtain the best in every field gives the visual aspect of its work a definite character.

Marcello Nizzoli, an architect, is the man chosen to make the appearance of the machines as perfect as their performance. Nizzoli is not supposed to be either an efficiency expert or a salesman, and in the terms of the American industrial designer his job is confined. His job, quite simply, is to provide an expressive shell for a mechanism designed by Olivetti's engineering departments. Although his aesthetic judgment is unquestioned, he has little influence over the working of the machines and their internal arrangement. The bones are engineered; the flesh is sculptured. When you remove the sculpture to clean the mechanism you are surprised to find Camillo Olivetti's machine almost unchanged in appearance—black, shiny, and gaunt. In the United States, where the professional industrial designer can generally go more than skin deep such contrasts are less likely. But that Olivetti's division of labor is reasonable is testified by Olivetti's machines, which can be judged as pure designs.





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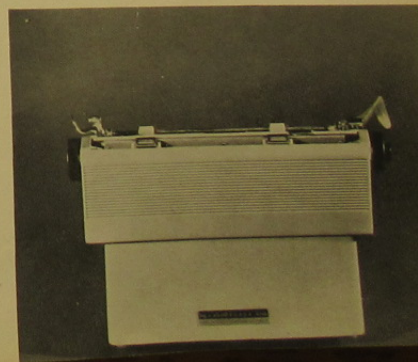
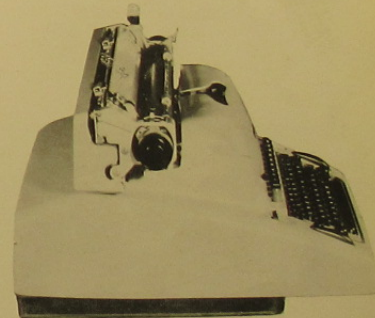
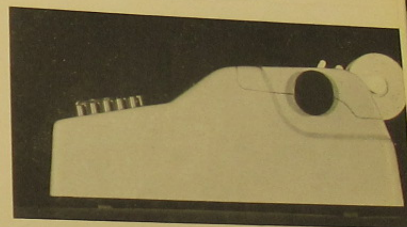
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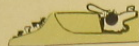
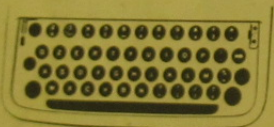
Opposite: Every mechanical detail of the Lexicon 80 is accounted for as an element in the design.

## the product



Top to bottom: Portable typewriter, calculator, electric typewriter, standard.



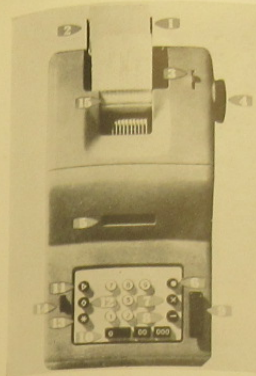


The illustrations above and at left show the Lettera 22 portable typewriter.

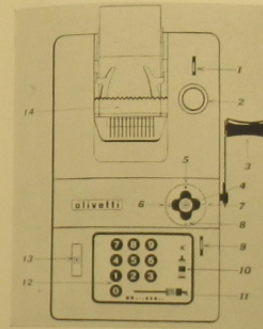
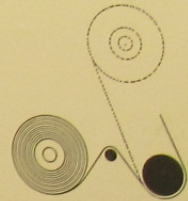
In the hands of Nizzoli the vacuous compound curves that seem to characterize modern stamped metal are drawn into limpid curves or lines of tense angularity. Often soft and harsh curves or outlines slightly at variance are set against each other, making a counterpoint that is at its clearest in the profits of the Summa 14, shown on the following page.



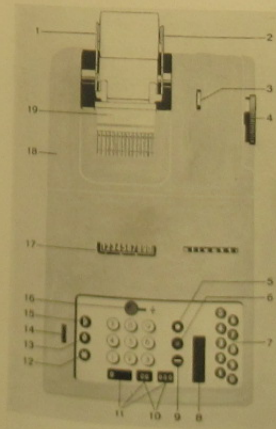
The Lexicon 80 office typewriter is an outstanding example of Nizzoli's ability to give the metal hood that hides a complicated mechanism a shape of some importance. Since a hood of this sort seldom reveals anything important of what is beneath it, it is virtually a problem in sculpture.



The Summa 14, an electric adding machine introduced in 1947, was the first Olivetti product designed by architect Marcello Nizzoli.



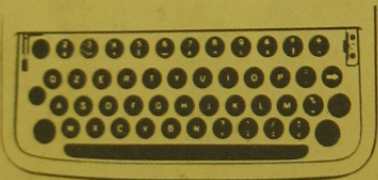
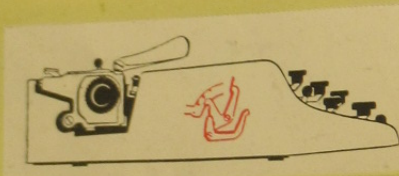
The hand adding machine was introduced in 1949. Like all the calculators, its brightly colored keys are set out on a field marked off like a game board.



The printing calculator, most versatile of Olivetti's calculators, records multiplication and division with simpler operations.







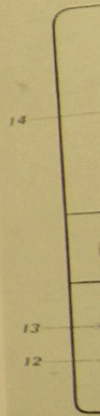
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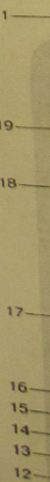


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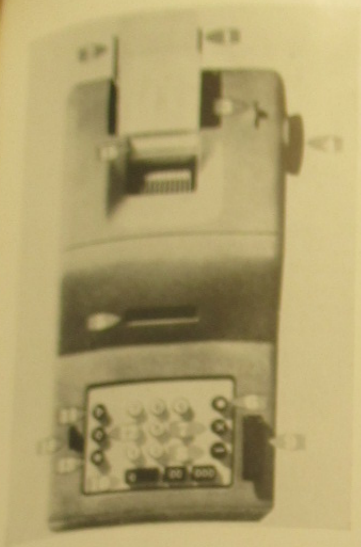
The Summa



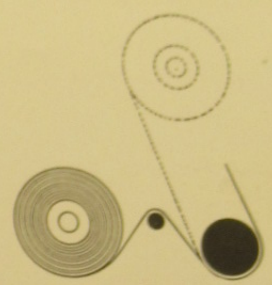
The hand



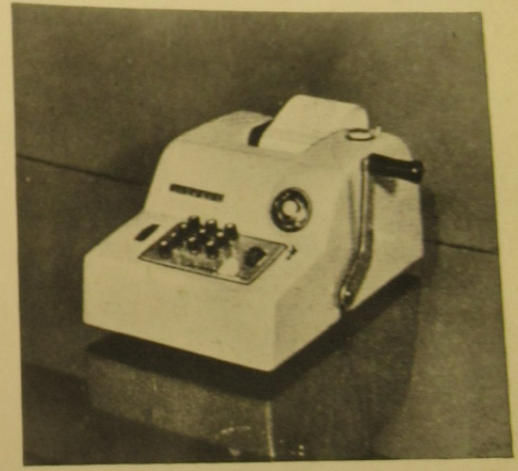
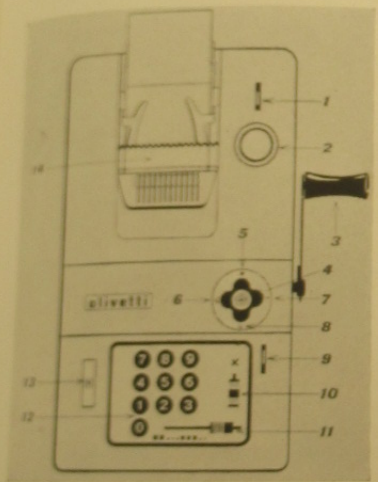




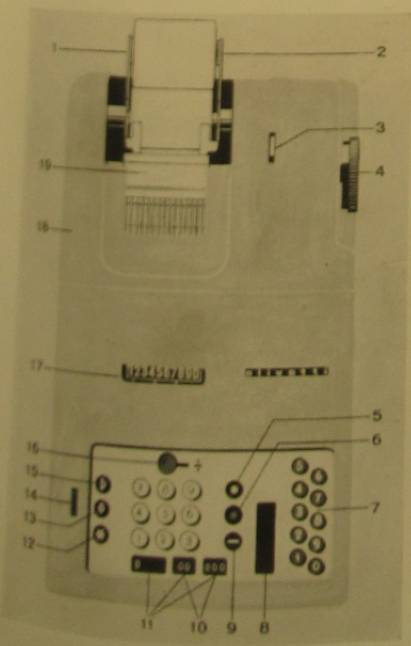
The photographs and diagrams on this page are from the instructions prepared by the Olivetti Company to explain various office machines.



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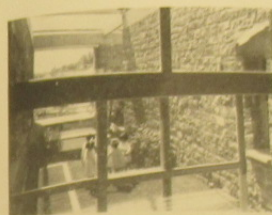




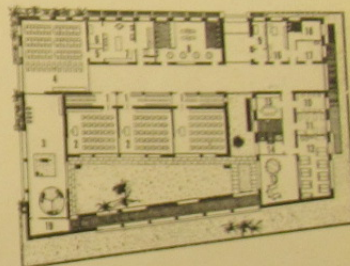
Adriano Olivetti, son of the founder of the Olivetti Company and its president since 1938. He is a chemical engineer by training, since 1938, an architect by interest, a student of the arts, a humanist by interest, a student of the arts, a founder of a publishing house that issues books and magazines on political, social, architectural, and technical subjects.

**the factory**  
**the social program**

The north side of the factory is sheathed in a double wall of glass 350 feet long enclosing a series of vertical louvers in an insulating air space about a foot deep. The concrete skeleton shows through it more clearly than this photograph indicates. A west-facing wing built in 1956 (below) has a frame of fixed louvers outside the double glazing. At left, a view of the offices; below it a ramp on one side of the skylit court.



Above and left: the nursery school. Three big windows piercing the heavy walls beyond the colonnade reveal that the heart of this stone block is a sunny play yard. A series of awnings can be used to cast shadows across the yard. Below: the plan. 1 Dressing rooms. 2 Classroom. 3 Playground. 4 Refectory. 5, 6, 7 Kitchens. 8 Bathroom. 9 Personnel. 10 Nursery. 11 Nursing dormitory. 12 Weaned dormitory. 13 Weaned playroom. 14 Disinfection. 15, 16 Staff rooms. 17 Doctor. 18 Isolation. 19 Storage.



Below: recent apartment houses by A. Focchi of the Olivetti architectural office and M. Nizzoli, like the earlier Figini and Pollini buildings, are an array of private houses, each with two exposures and its own balcony. These were built in 1950-51.







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## the factory

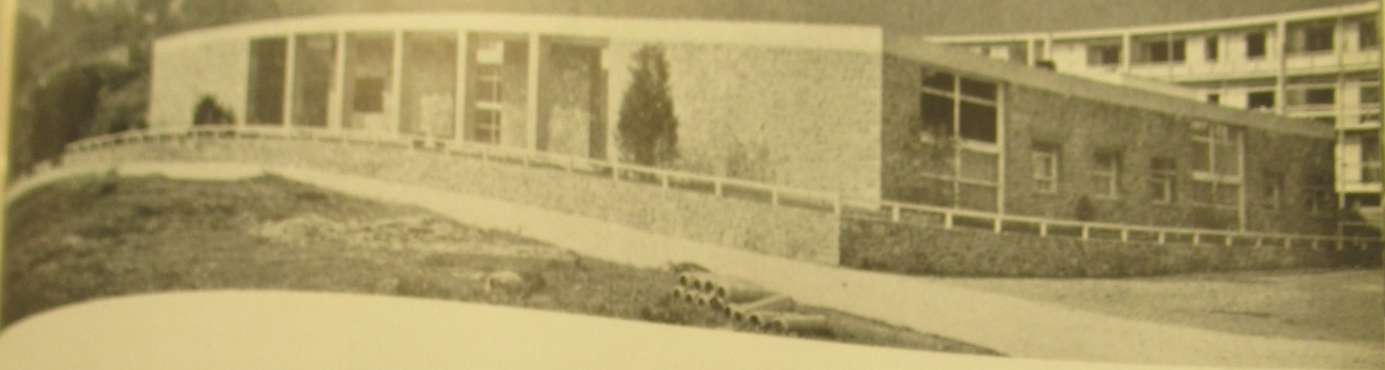
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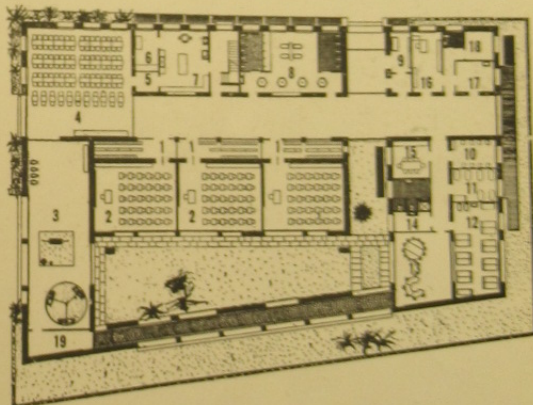
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Apartments by Perotti and Rossi, 1964-66



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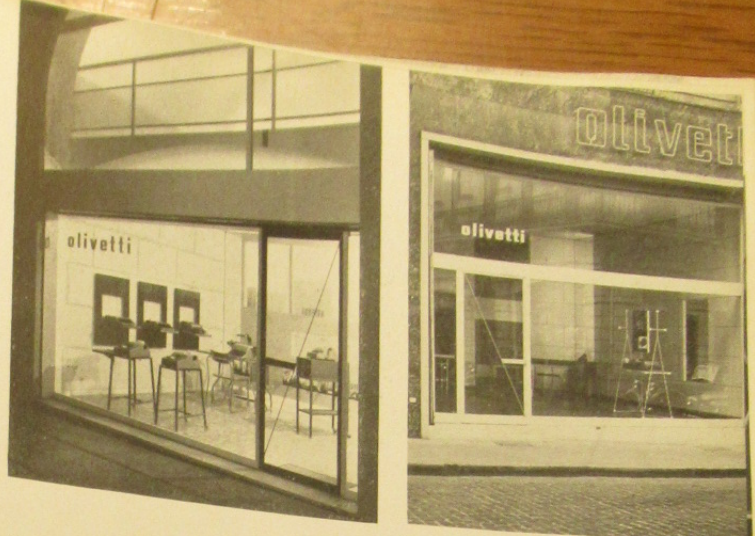


## the social program

For the Olivetti family good human relations are as basic to business as a good product, and good human relations concern both the customer and the employee. Adriano Olivetti is specifically interested in city planning. As luck would have it he has been able, and even obligated, to plan a city. The housing shortage in Italy has been so acute since the war that a law has been passed requiring every corporation to set aside a certain amount to finance government housing projects. Government building alone does not solve the problem, however, and although Olivetti as a matter of policy tries to keep its wages 10% above the average, like many Italian companies it finds it desirable to help the workers in other ways.

The character of Olivetti's modern building was established by Figini and Pollini, who started work on a new factory, a nursery school, and a group of apartment houses in the late thirties. The nursery school was planned for the children of working mothers, who are given a vacation with full pay until the children are eight months old and may then entrust them to the Olivetti nursery until they are six years old and ready for town schools. It is a building of classic proportions soberly placed on a stone platform above the road. Generous detailing and the rich plasticity of its arrangement around a protected playcourt do more than applied ornament could give it a sympathetic character. On two sides of the court there are schoolrooms, a large playroom, and a refectory. The third wing is equipped for nursing and weaning babies. On a hill like walk, reached by a ramp-like walk, is a stone play pavilion leading to gardens, a solarium, and a pool. A courtyard also lies at the center of the Figini and Pollini factory, but it is an interior court, roofed by great saw-tooth skylights and serving simply as an open space to provide light and circulation, and occasionally as a hall for such civic events as union meetings or concerts. On the street

(Continued on Page 148)



A variety of architects and mural painters have worked on Olivetti shops. Most of the recent ones are the work of Gian Antonio Bernasconi, including those at Forlì (left, above), Brussels (right, above), and Savonia (below).

## the shops



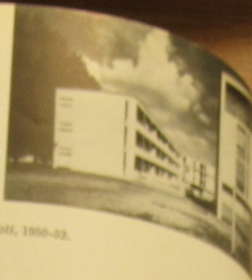
The Olivetti shop in Rome was designed by Ugo Sissa in 1946. The mural is by Renato Guttuso. The stair hall below is in the shop at Brussels.







Apartments by Finocchi and Nizzoli, 1950-52.



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### the shops



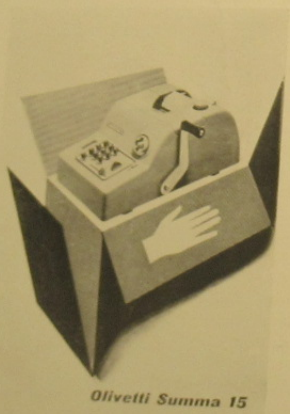
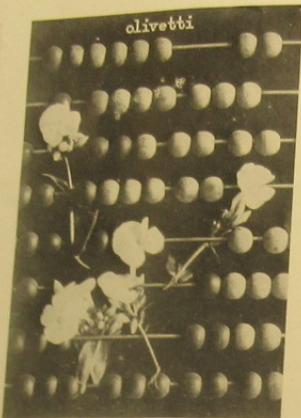
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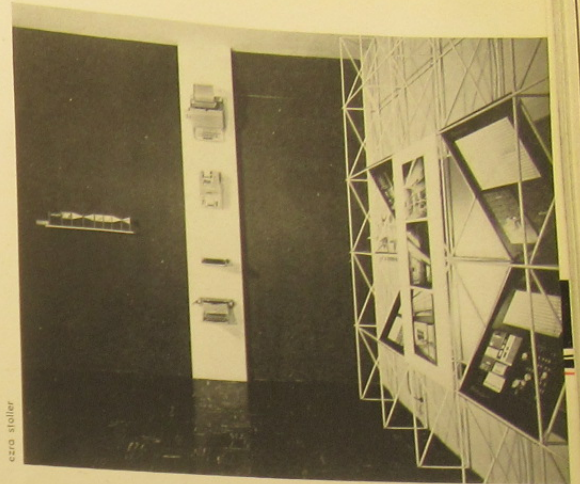
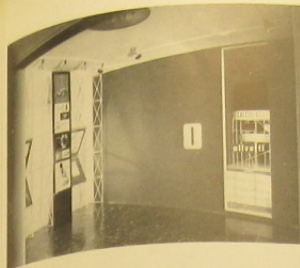


the advertising

Just as Olivetti's buildings express a belief in the human importance of factory workers, the company's advertising makes explicit the regard for office workers as human beings that is implied in the elegant and cheerful machines. Again and again the advertisements emphasize the human tasks that the machines can accomplish—in the finger-worn beads of the abacus, the nightmare array of numbers, the singing bird.



On this page are examples of the work of Giuseppe Pintori. Above: a poster, two covers of booklets, an advertisement. Right and below: a group of displays. Across the page: an Olivetti billboard.



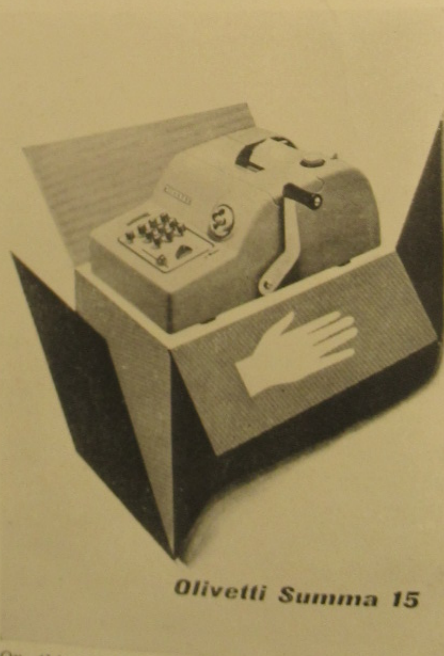
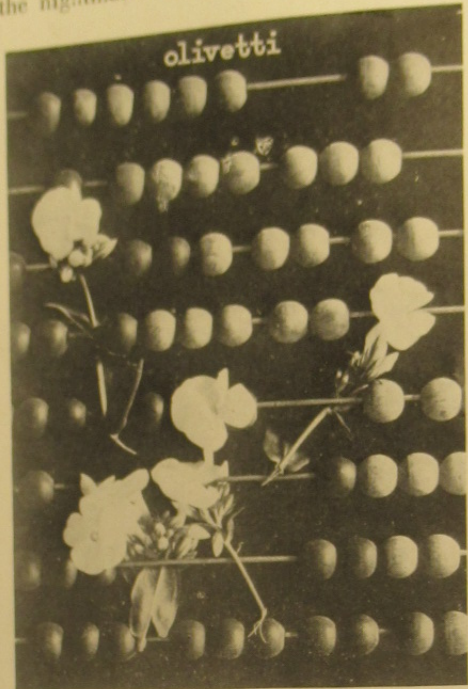
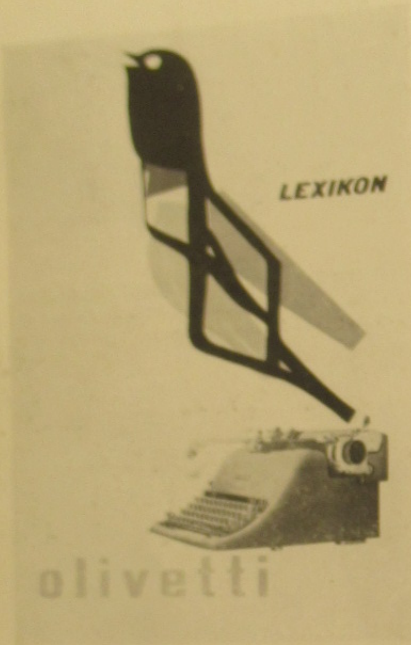
Above: Leo Lionni's installation of the Olivetti exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.



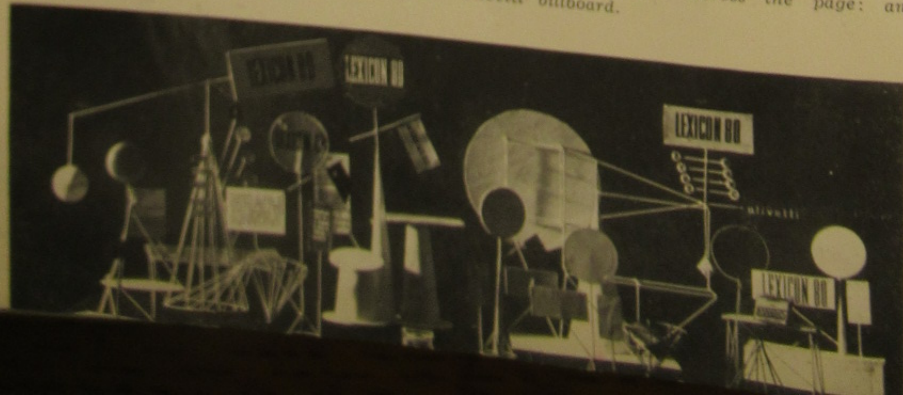


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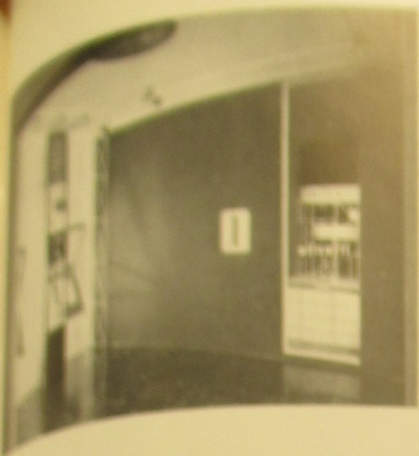


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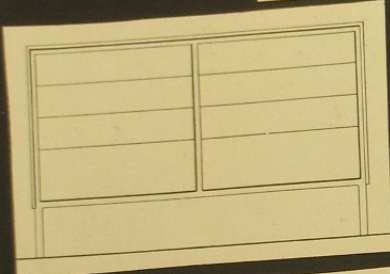
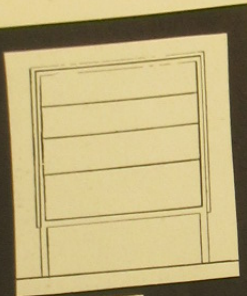
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show: Leo Lionni's installation of the Olivetti exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.

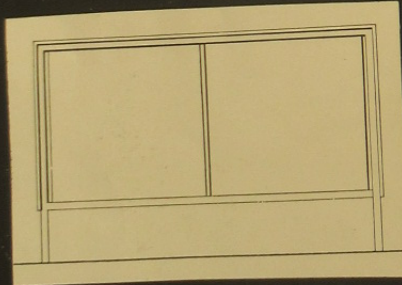
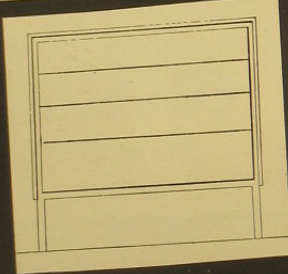




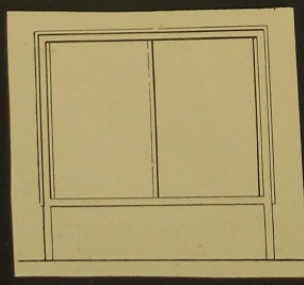
# 5



storage pieces



clear maple  
or walnut



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166 Lexington Avenue, New York 16, at 30th Street

Write for our brochure on your professional stationery

and chairs at Molla; some leaf-and-floral bedecked iron numbers from Florentine Craftsmen; and Gallo's dining and seating pieces that combine birch with black, white, or colored iron—to single out a few.

### Olivetti

(Continued from Page 109)

the factory's sturdy concrete frame is exposed through an elegant glass facade four stories high and 350 feet long. The Figini and Pollini apartment houses follow two plans. The three-bedroom apartments are three-story villas strung together like row houses. Each apartment has its own garden, and private stairs make corridors unnecessary, so that every apartment has through ventilation. Smaller apartments are spread out on one floor of similar three-story blocks, in which stairs leading to just two apartments on every floor again make cross-ventilation possible. In both types of houses, individual apartments are clearly outlined by balconies and vertical wing walls. Canvas curtains and horizontally slatted wood blinds at the windows that every householder arranges as he wishes encourage the impression of a series of private homes stacked up as a small community. Adriano Olivetti's aim has been to build at Ivrea a community coherent in all its functions. It is a beautiful aim, yet in this country, despite the abundance of students of city planning, such an idea is slightly suspect. Do we want the shape of society to be dictated by the employer—or for that matter by any socially-minded individual? Apparently such doubts have occurred to Olivetti. It is interesting in this connection that one of the workers' unions destroyed a tentative form of profit-sharing plan. So far

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and chairs at Molla; some leaf-and-floral bedecked iron numbers from Florentine Craftsmen; and Gallo's dining and seating pieces that combine birch with black, white, or colored iron — to single out a few.

## **Olivetti**

*(Continued from Page 109)*

the factory's sturdy concrete frame is exposed through an elegant glass facade four stories high and 350 feet long. The Figini and Pollini apartment houses follow two plans. The three-bedroom apartments are three-story villas strung together like row houses. Each apartment has its own garden, and private stairs make corridors unnecessary, so that every apartment has through ventilation. Smaller apartments are spread out on one floor of similar three-story blocks, in which stairs leading to just two apartments on every floor again make cross-ventilation possible. In both types of houses, individual apartments are clearly outlined by balconies and vertical wing walls. Canvas curtains and horizontally slatted wood blinds at the windows that every householder arranges as he wishes encourage the impression of a series of private homes stacked up as a small community.

Adriano Olivetti's aim has been to build at Ivrea a community coherent in all its functions. It is a beautiful aim, yet in this country, despite the abundance of students of city planning, such an idea is slightly suspect. Do we want the shape of society to be dictated by the employer—or for that matter by any socially-minded individual? Apparently such doubts have occurred to Olivetti. It is interesting in this connection that one of the workers' unions destroyed a tentative form of profit-sharing plan. So far

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as the planning of individual housing units goes, there have admittedly been mistakes, and recent buildings have been modified from an architect's pure answer to a sociological problem in order to fit the habits and desires of the people of Iyrea.

Olivetti is not devoted to the idea of presenting a ready-made society to those who will not, or cannot for lack of funds, house themselves. But the company tries to encourage private building of a quality that competes with its own projects by offering loans and its own unparalleled architectural services to employees who desire them. Thus Olivetti tries to use its inevitable power over the lives of its people as a good influence toward the natural evolution of an industrial society.

### Frank Lloyd Wright

(Continued from Page 116)

right idea in the right circumstances. Then by the instinct that its taste carry the expressions of life we call art as high in the scale of things beautiful as you please, beautiful as you know how to make them. God knows how beautiful buildings can be made now, as compared with those either standing or yet to stand inspired by any erudite trifling with outworn, out-moded traditions, whatsoever.

In the meantime, what great creative work have we to show as an actual working basis for the life which we have led or as proof of its validity? Not much. No, it was truly an escapist life we have led. We will find there in that life just application of the word "escapist" if the word has any meaning at all. All of our culture has been this poor second-hand attempt to, on the left or on the right, escape from the actualities of existence by

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## Median Mosaic Topped Table



### Beauty

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