The corporate client

Olivetti builds

The Italian-based manufacturer of business machines and office equipment also produces superior architecture on five continents as part of an integrated design program

Many of this century's architectural landmarks have been sponsored by corporations; the names of Johnson's Wax, Seagrams and Lever come immediately to mind. Yet none of the world's major corporations has promoted outstanding design so consistently over the last few decades as Olivetti. In its product design, graphics and advertising, as well as its buildings, Olivetti has set standards that other companies have tried—most of them only sporadically—to follow.

The reasons behind Olivetti's record as a design patron are almost too idealistic to be true: the corporation simply values design itself above any economic return it could yield. Those who doubt can refer to the architectural evidence: buildings like those shown here were obviously not designed just to improve the balance sheet. In the long run, outstanding design may or may not be a competitive asset (and Olivetti's worldwide expansion in recent years shows that it is no liability). Either way, management recognizes a responsibility to employees, customers and public to improve the corners of the world where its buildings, products and advertisements appear. Adriano Olivetti, a social innovator and design connoisseur who headed the company until his death in 1960, was one of the first business leaders to challenge profit as the only proper goal of corporations. He pointed out what the balance sheet had always implied: that profit is a *cost* to the corporation, money due as a return to investors.

Olivetti's mechanism for ensuring good design is uniquely simple for a corporation of such size (74,000 employees, worldwide). Responsibility for the *design* of everything the company produces or commissions rests with one directorate of cultural relations, industrial design and publicity, answerable only to the chief executive of the corporation. Located in Milan, this office is organized as an atelier of designers and architects, under the direction of Dr. Renzo Zorzi.

For a typical building project, the need is identified by the president of one of Olivetti's far-flung affiliates (in 30 countries). That need is then weighed by top management and construction scheduled in relation to overall commitments internationally. At this point, Zorzi and his staff are called upon to find and evaluate potential sites, while officials at the affiliate level develop the program.

The architects are proposed by Zorzi. For a list of candidates, he can draw on his extensive background, his own staff, and a worldwide network of informed acquaintances, both inside and outside the company. (Except in the early years of expansion abroad, when Italian architects designed for other countries, the policy has been to select local architects.) The final proposal is based not just on competence to handle the problem at hand, but on "ability to interpret the culture of the time and place." The roster of architects Olivetti has chosen in this way is highlighted by names like Egon Eiermann, Kenzo Tange, Louis Kahn and James Stirling, but it also includes architects of growing stature such as Edward Cullinan in Great Britain, Richard Meier in the U.S. and Cappai & Mainardis in Italy.

Olivetti's collaboration with the architect once he is selected has inspired more than one of them to call the corporation "the best client I have ever had." The company's performance goes far beyond good intentions, as one of these architects explains it; it includes ample attention to analyzing the program, knowledgeable review at all stages of design, and a thorough understanding of an architect's function.

Throughout the process, Olivetti sees architecture as one aspect of what it calls—using the American phrase—"corporate image." Zorzi and his staff are always in equally close touch with industrial designers (such as Ettore Sottsass and Mario Bellini) and advertising men (such as the irrepressible George Lois, who developed the controversial "Olivetti girl" campaign). They are also responsible for numerous Olivetti-sponsored exhibitions and an extensive publishing program that includes the periodicals *Communità,* in the field of humanities, and *Zodiac,* an international journal of architecture and industrial design.

Olivetti's integration of various design disciplines is well illustrated by their activities in the U.S. Their original 1954 showroom in New York (since dismantled) was a joint effort of Italian architects Belgiojoso, Peressuti & Rogers with sculptor Costantino Nivola, and it is most fondly remembered for its indoor-outdoor, please-touch display of Nizzoli-designed typewriters. The San Francisco showroom (1955) was by graphic designer Leo Lionni and architect Giorgio Cavaglieri (both Italian-born Americans). One of the company's major contributions to architecture in this country involved no design commission at all: it was the purchase and preservation of the former Pepsi-Cola Building in New York, one of SOM's most successful works, as their American headquarters.

Olivetti's "image" is complemented—as it must be—by enlightened employee policies (which have consistently set the pace in Italy) and economic decisions (location of factories in depressed regions of Italy, for instance). Corporate image, in this broader sense, has occasionally produced measurable economic benefits. A recent survey in Japan, for instance, shows that Olivetti—which has been active there only 12 years—is among the top 15 corporations for which university graduates would prefer to work.

Some of us may be uncomfortable with the classification of architecture as one aspect of "image." Yet unless it is part of a broader, conscious program, architecture—for any kind of client—can never fulfill its potential for user satisfaction. [JMD]

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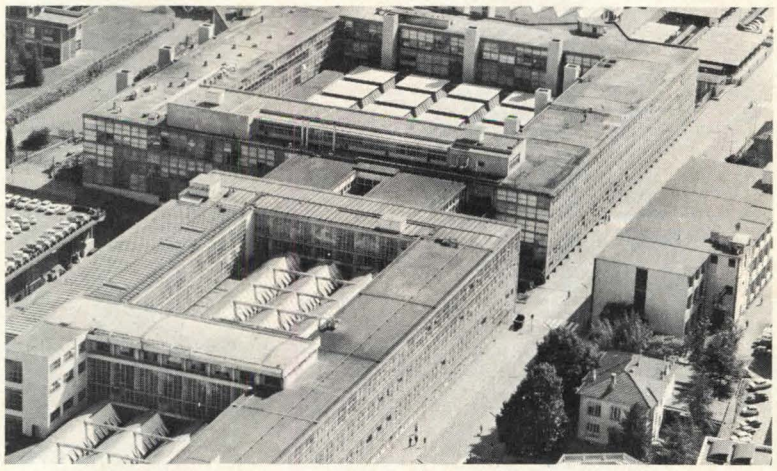

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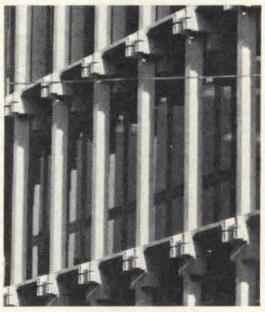

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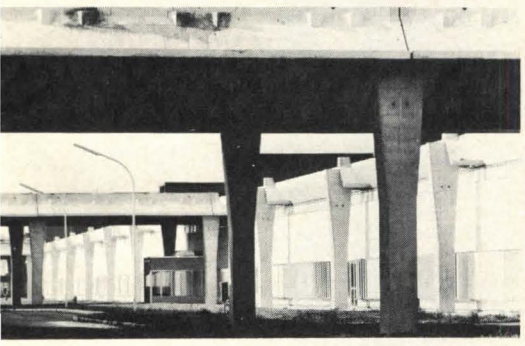

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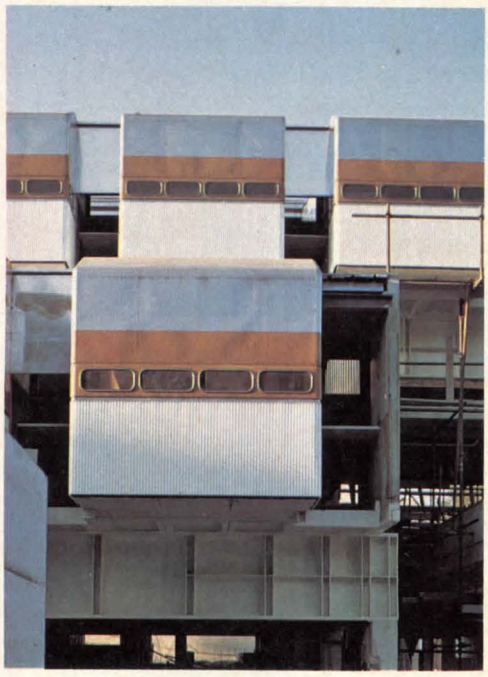

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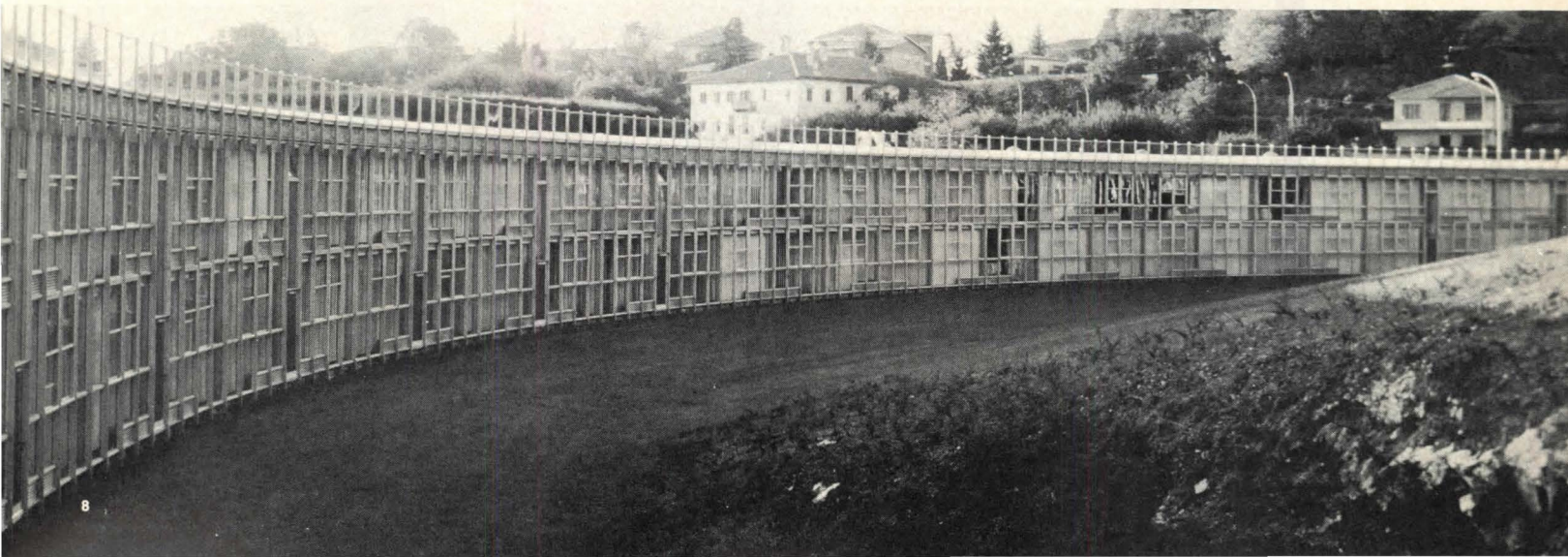

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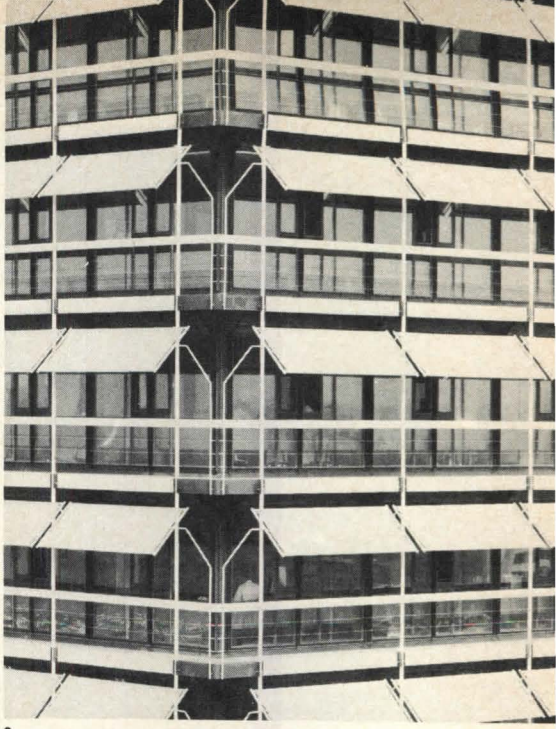

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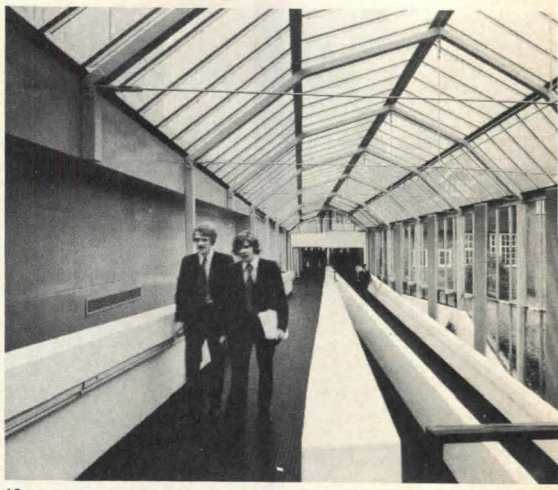

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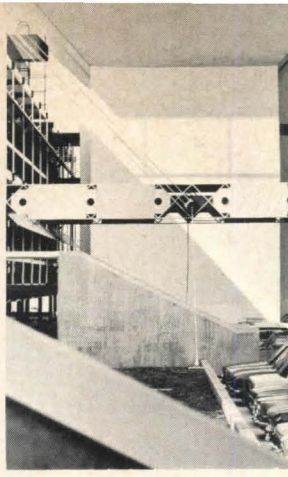
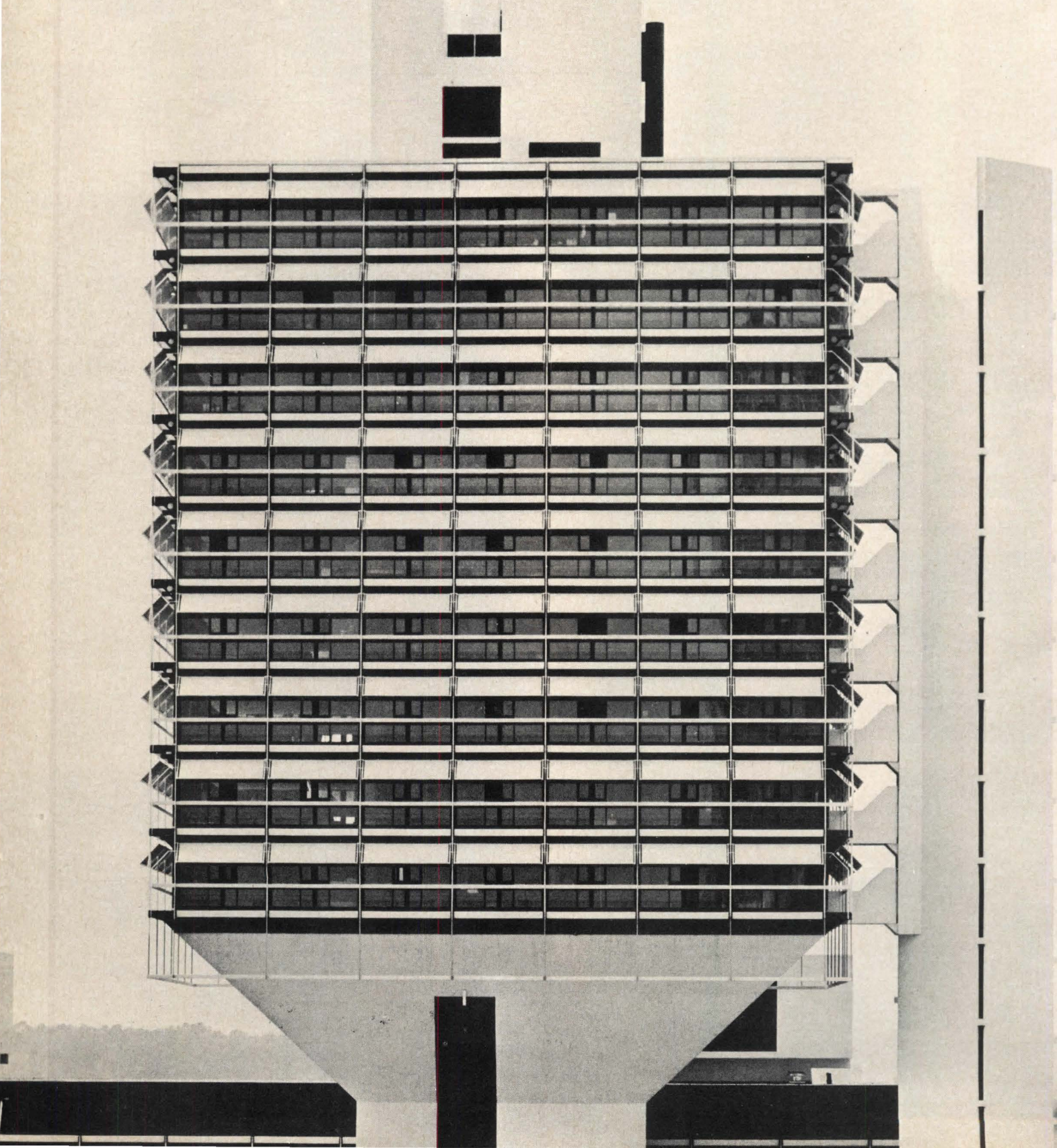
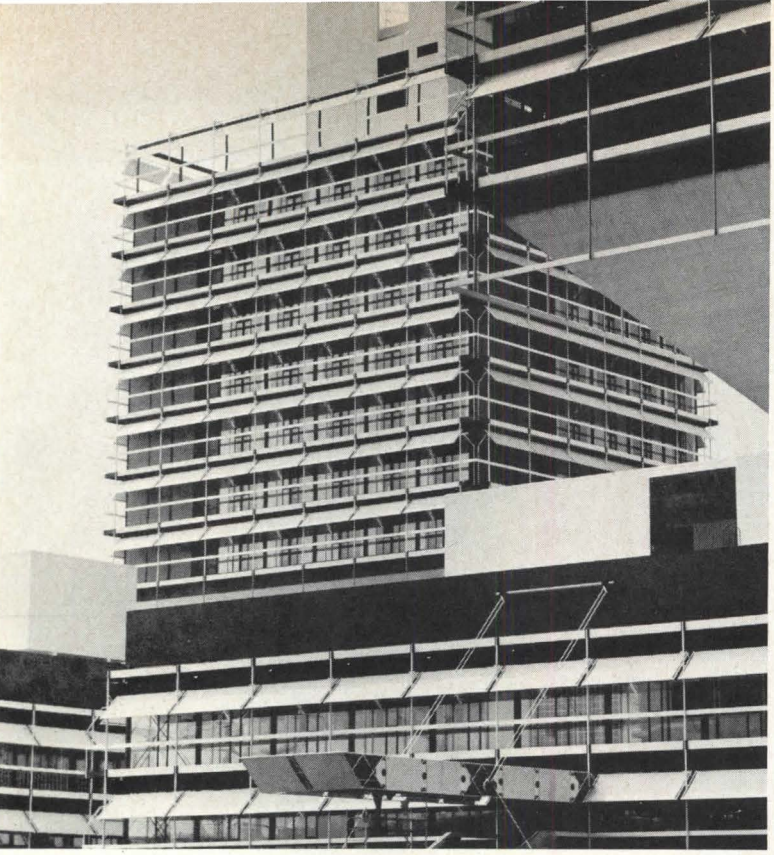
Olivetti buildings worldwide: 1 headquarters at Ivrea, Italy (1964, Fiocchi, Bernasconi and Nizzoli); 2,3 factories at Ivrea (1936–1950s, Figini & Pollini); 4 Olivetti Corp. of America offices, New York, formerly Pepsi-Cola Building (1959, SOM); 5 Florence offices (1972, Alberto Galardi); 6 factory at Marcianese, Italy (1970, Marco Zanuso and Eduardo Vittoria); 7 residential center at Ivrea (under construction, Cappai & Mainardis); 8 apartment building at Ivrea (1972, Gabetti & Isola); 9 headquarters of Deutsche Olivetti, Frankfurt (1972, Egon Eiermann); 10 British Olivetti training center at Haslemere (1972, James Stirling).

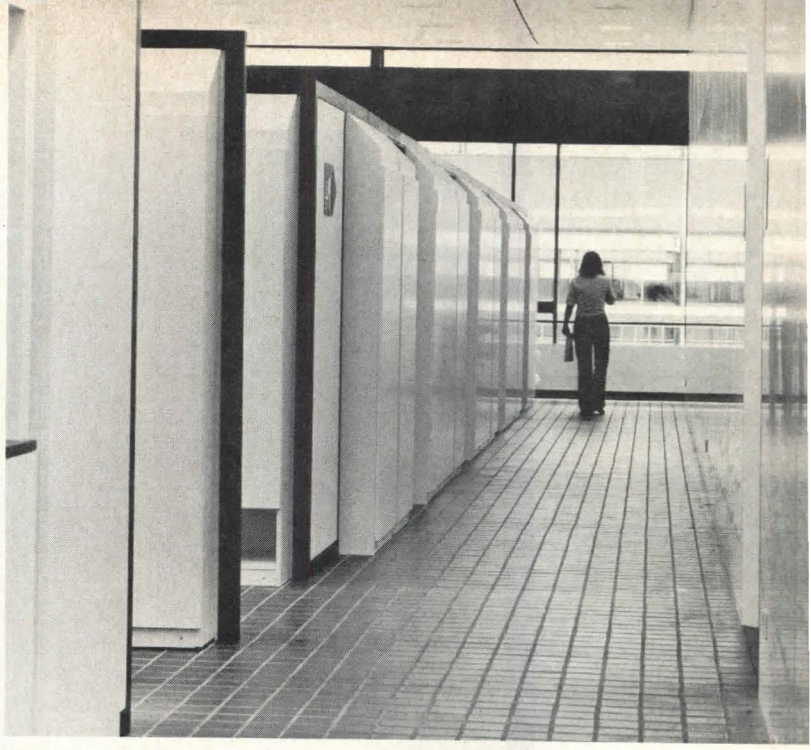
Photographs: RM Fotografia 1,2,3; G. Berengo-Gardin 6,9,10; Gabriele Basilico 5; John Morris Dixon 7,8.

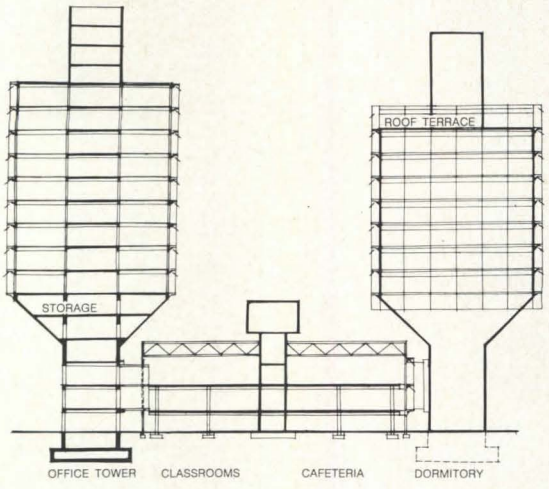


Olivetti builds

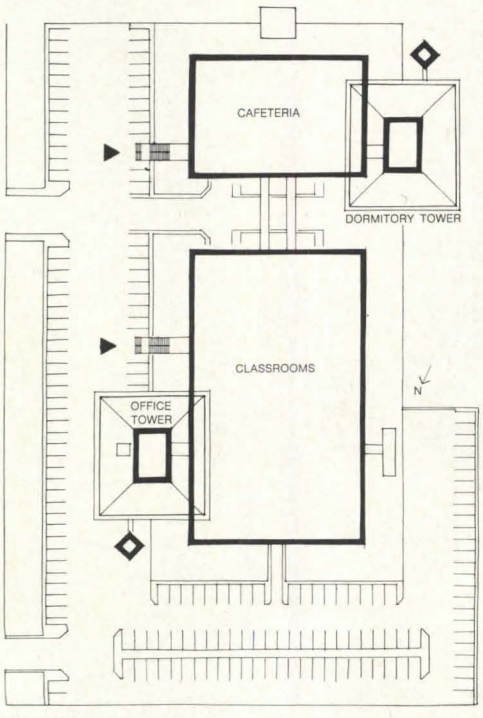








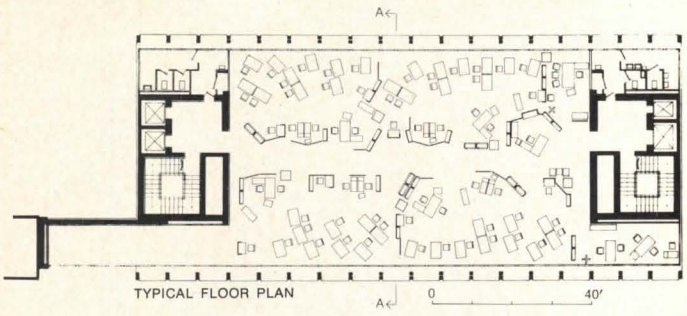
SCHEMATIC SECTION

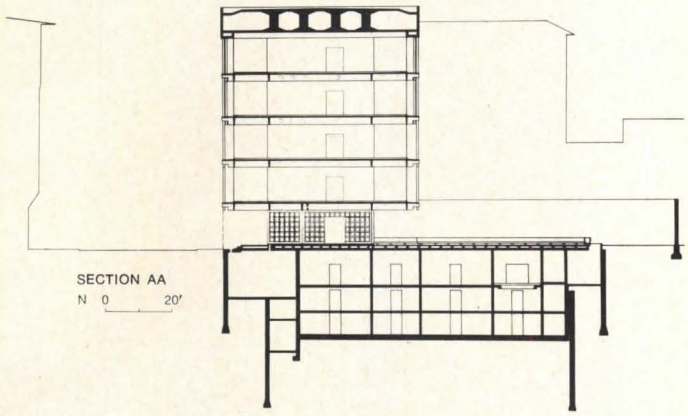


SCHEMATIC PLAN

For its German headquarters in Frankfurt, Olivetti commissioned Egon Eiermann. Completed in 1972, after Eiermann's death, the buildings show the same light, taut expression of steel framing that characterized his best-known earlier works, the German Pavilion at Brussels (1958) and the German Embassy in Washington (1965). Here the spareness of outrigger framing, suspension rods and cables is played against the monolithic concrete forms of the emergency stairs and the angular pedestals that lift office and dormitory towers above cafeteria and classroom blocks. Paint on both concrete and steel intensifies a nautical hull-and-superstructure image. Interiors of offices (top), living quarters (above) and main lobby (below) all have International Style look of clean white surfaces with gray-painted steel and earth-colored tile; ceiling heights and window designs vary, but all windows benefit from angled blinds (right) of synthetic fabric. Photographs: C. Berengo Gardin (except color, John Morris Dixon).

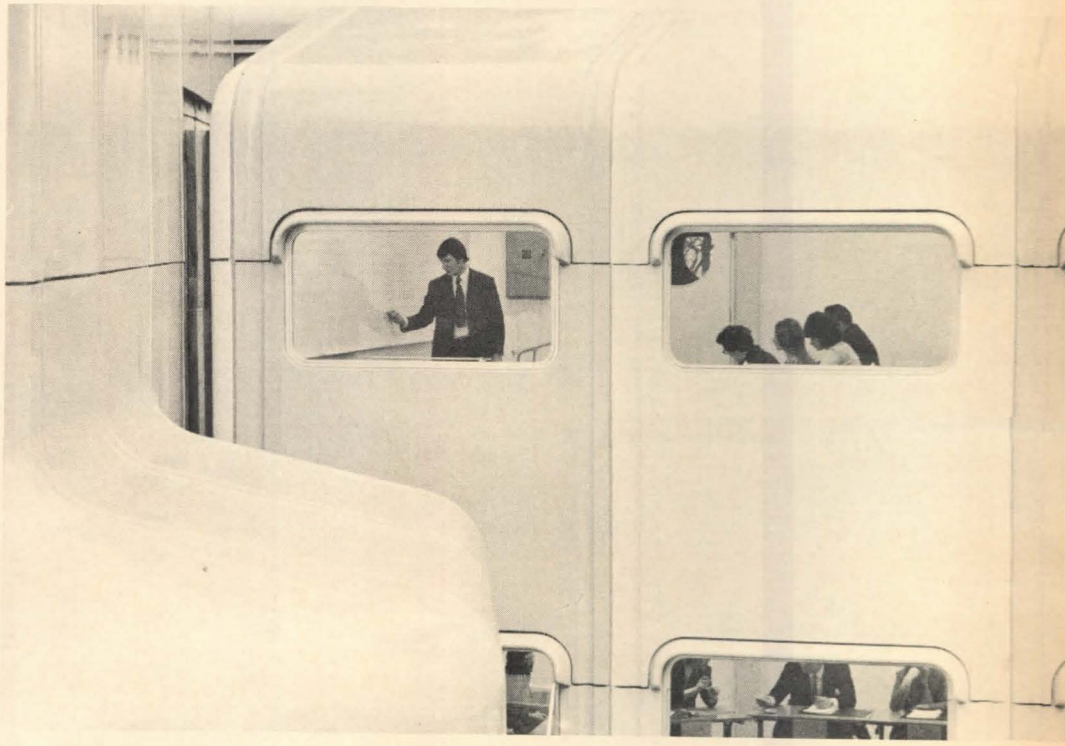
Olivetti builds



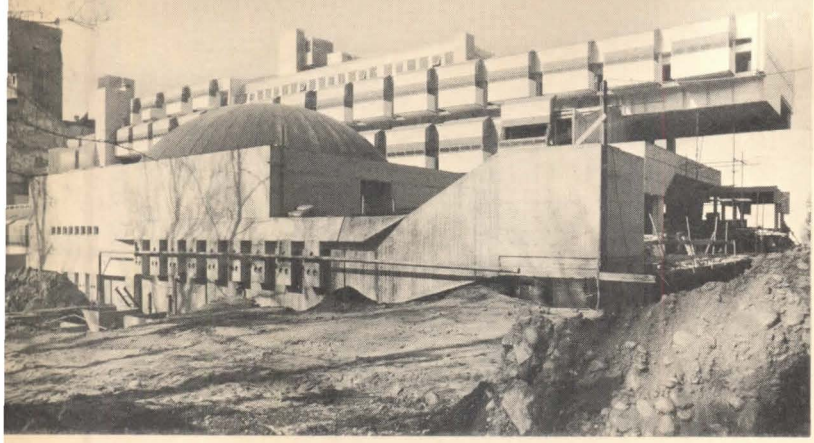


New branch office in Florence, by architect Alberto Galardi, encloses four floors of office landscape (using new Olivetti furniture system by Sottsass) in an envelope adjusted to the massing and scale of surrounding latter-day palazzi. Galardi has scrupulously expressed every joint in the precast structure—and capped every post-tensioning bolt—to get details of Renaissance scale and rationale. End view (right) clearly shows location of roof beams and the two distinct sets of tension columns carrying the office floors. Steel fence along street (right) and glass front wall can both be lowered out of sight to open lobby displays completely to public. Mechanical car-storage space under building roughly equals the volume of above-ground structure. Photos: Gabriele Basilico (right), Pino Abbrescia (below).

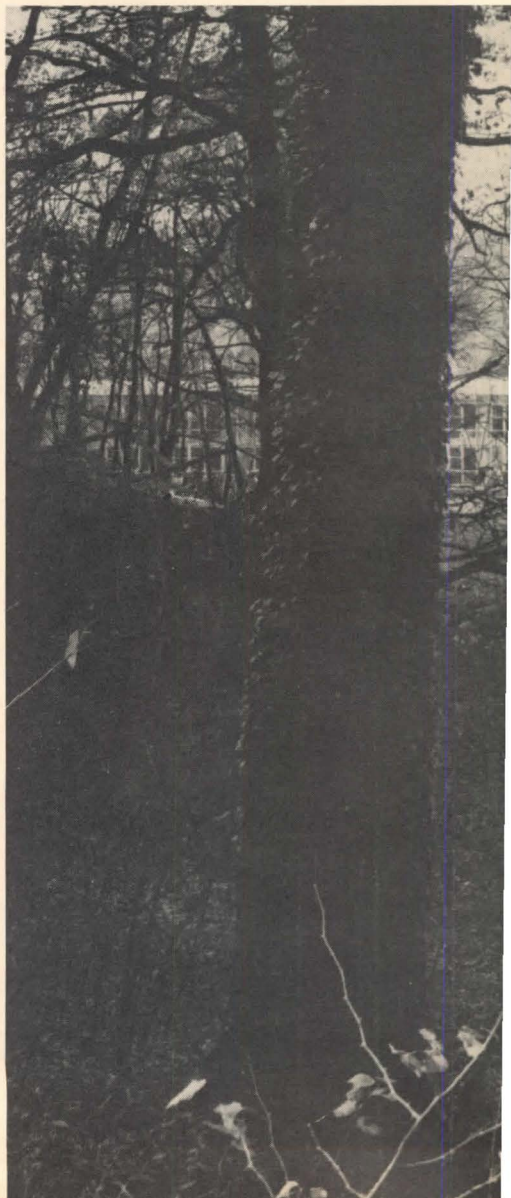
Teaching wing for British Olivetti training center at Haslemere, Surrey, by architect James Stirling, was added to residential facilities in an existing mansion. Two two-story classroom blocks—angled in plan to save existing trees—extend from a glass-enclosed link; the divisible multi-use room at the center of the structure can be combined with this galleria for dances, exhibitions, etc. The whole wing is enclosed with prefabricated panels of reinforced polyester; eaves are eliminated and gutters set at the base of the wall, so that the entire skin works in effect as a roof. Photos: G. Berengo Gardin.



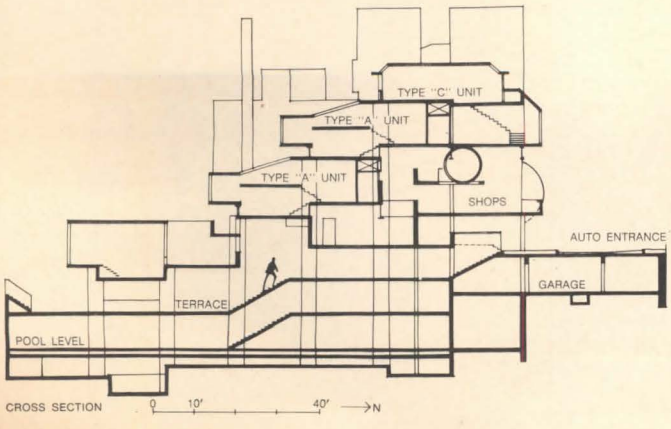
Olivetti builds

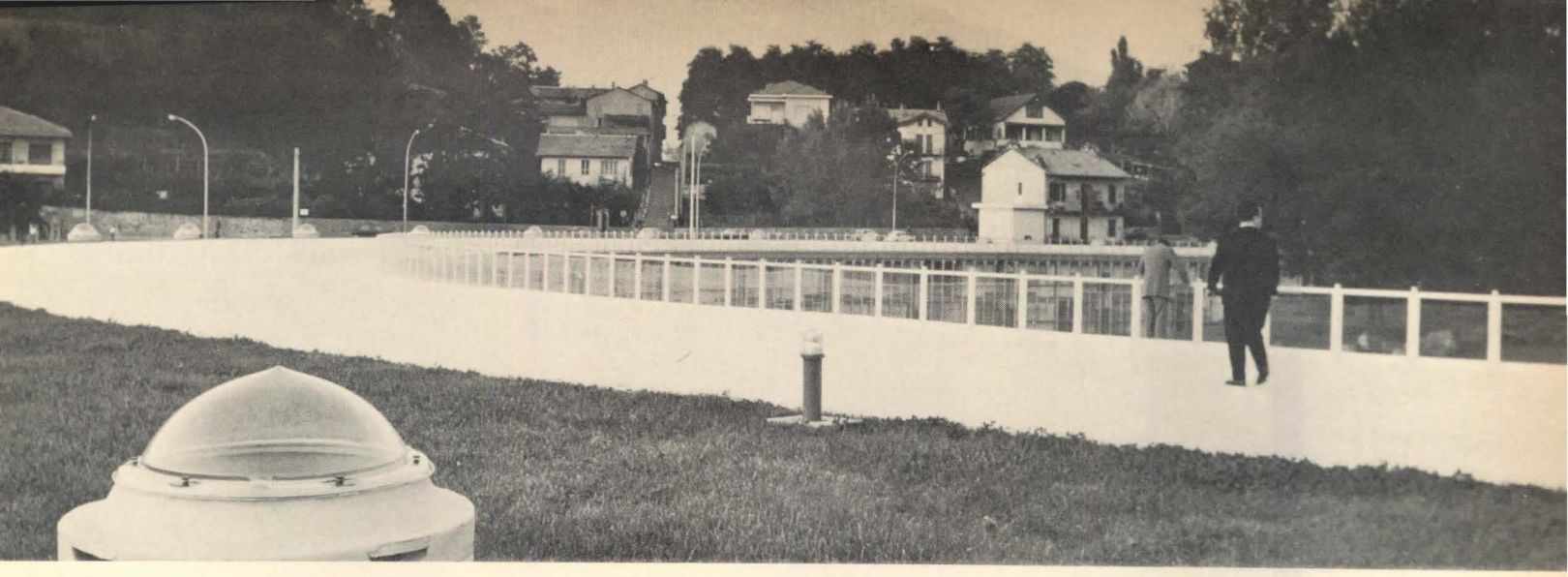


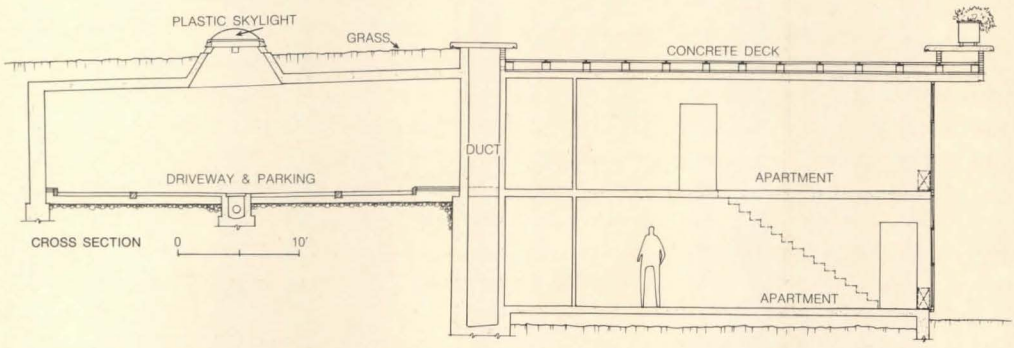
Apartment structure at Ivrea, for employees without families, contains 73 flats and 12 duplex units in a long arc around the base of a rocky hill. Architects Gabetti & Isola have made apartment roofs into a public promenade, linking two parts of Ivrea. Access-parking drive—entered from either end—is concealed beneath grass banks, lighted by occasional plastic domes (see section). Apartment interiors are furnished with modular seating and table units, bean-bag chairs, storage and kitchenette boxes in Pop scale and colors. Photos: G. Berengo Gardin (except top right, John Morris Dixon).



Residential center under construction at Ivrea, by architects Cappai & Mainardis, is an urban megastructure in miniature. Public galleries on several levels connect shops, restaurant, meeting hall, cinema, swimming pool, etc. Upper levels contain 55 "mini-apartments" for employees on short-term assignment, arrayed on tiers overlooking a park. Each unit has several levels, fold-out kitchen equipment, beds and dressing rooms—even a central mini-court—fitted together like a yacht interior. Metal-clad projections—which open to convert studies into terraces (photo above)—give the units the appearance of plug-ins. P/A plans full coverage of this structure in a later issue.



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GRASS
CONCRETE DECK
DUCT
DRIVEWAY & PARKING
APARTMENT
APARTMENT
CROSS SECTION
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