A Genealogy of Branding: the Case of Olivetti

ANNMARIE BRENNAN
University of Melbourne

Strolling along Manhattan's 5th Avenue during the 1950s, Tom Watson, chairman of IBM, stumbled upon a unique showroom. A typewriter placed on the sidewalk in front of a shop window sparked his curiosity. Watson described his encounter:

> [The typewriters] were on stands with rolls of paper in them for anybody's use. They were in different colors and very attractively designed. (In those days you could have an IBM typewriter in any color as long as it was black [...]) I went into the shop and also found attractive, modern furniture in striking colors with a kind of collectiveness. The nameplate over the door was Olivetti.[1]

The discovery of the New York showroom was an illuminating moment for Watson. The space, designed by the Italian architectural firm BBPR in 1954 would become a milestone in retail design. Critics hailed the showroom as a successful amalgamation of art and industry, introducing the United States to "a new concept in the difficult art of selling and presenting products."[2] The showroom not only symbolized the achievements of the Marshall Plan and the resulting Italian Economic Miracle with its importation of Italian goods to the most prestigious Avenue of American consumer culture; more significantly, the showroom heralded what Watson termed 'a kind of collectiveness' - the concept of corporate branding.

The Olivetti Company, one of the largest industries in Italy during the 20th century, manufactured typewriters and calculators with additional factories in Spain, the U.K., Argentina, Brazil, and South Africa. Its first major expansion occurred during the 1930s under the management of Adriano Olivetti. In addition to modernizing Italian industry by imparting principals of scientific management, Adriano   Olivetti was best noted for his business organization which included gathering Italy's most accomplished architects, artists and engineers to design a wide range of projects for the company; from the planning of the company town to the design of their products. The Olivettian model demonstrated the possibility of a multi-faceted *continuity* in design which the Italian architect Ernesto Rogers described as encompassing everything from the "spoon to the city."

This paper investigates a historical fragment of Olivetti's utopian project, the Olivetti Showroom in New York. The goal of this work is to add theoretical rigor to the concept of branding by asking

the question: Could Olivetti's success in branding be linked to its cadre of architects and designers who previously trained and worked under Fascist rule? By providing a parallel to the origins of the Olivetti project with those of the Fascist Movement, one can begin to see common strategies at work, strategies which contribute to creating what Walter Benjamin has defined as the "aestheticization of politics."[3] It is not a mere coincidence that one of the most notable companies in brand recognition began its rise in popularity during the early years of the Italian Fascist Regime. By reframing Olivetti's utopian project within the context of Italian Fascism and post-World War II neo-capitalism, this work illustrates how design can perform as a powerful medium at the intersection of economic and political power with collective desire.

PHANTASMAGORIA

Located under an arcade, the store façade was a large sheet of glass with a minimum of framing, with one piece measuring 12 feet by 15 feet, at the time thought to be the largest piece of glass on 5th Avenue.[4] One entered the space through an oversized mahogany door measuring 16-feet tall and described as a psychological element in which to entice the curious customer. The Mannerist, oversized hinges line the side of the door from floor to ceiling. One of the architects of the project, Ernesto Rogers, expressed the design intention this way, "…[I]n this long, narrow cube, we wished to give a sense of natural richness and interpenetration, like stalagmites and stalactites in some imaginable cave."[5]

Domus magazine described the showroom as one of imagination and liberty, where the atmosphere was "absolutely poetic, and with a particular magic which we all know from the things by Belgiojoso, Peressutti and Rogers."[6]

The typewriter on the marble pedestal outside the store and the floor-to-ceiling glass window created an ambiguous delineation between inside and outside. The pedestal was not simply placed outside on top of the sidewalk pavement; it emerged, like a stalagmite, from the continuous floor of green marble which extended beyond the glass storefront. Placed throughout the showroom, they surfaced at differing heights to display the company's typewriters and adding machines. Suspended above each one was a lighting fixture of hand-blown Murano glass by Venini.

Each undulating surface of the showroom provided the appearance of positive and negative carved space. The stairway leading to the office space consisted of a black metal frame inlaid with imported rose marble treads. The stockroom, located in the basement floor, contained a dumbwaiter in the shape of a large wheel based on a design by Leonardo Da Vinci. It was intended to bring product from the stock room, allowing the salesperson to stay with the customer, however the creation of a dumbwaiter was opposed by the New York Building Department and the wheel remained as a display device. The mezzanine level housed the office space for the salesmen; its height strategically kept the detritus of everyday workspace out of the customers view, thereby suspending the surreal, coordinated image of the retail experience.

The highlight of the store, a 70-foot bas-relief mural spanning the length of the space, was created by the Italian émigré Constantino Nivola and provided the retail space with the atmosphere of an art gallery. He discovered a unique sand-casting technique on the beach near his Long Island farmhouse. While digging in the sand with his children, he noticed the impression their bodies left on the sand. Wanting to capture their forms, Nivola poured plaster into the negative space. He described his method this way:

> I cast it in sections at my place on Long Island, close to the shore. How is it created? I tell you. First off, in wooden forms I place wet sand and make my design. My tools are anything – a knife, a shell, my thumb. When the design is complete I pour Plaster of Paris into the sand mold. When the plaster hardens, there is my sculpture, wearing a face of nice, fuzzy sand.[7]

This process not only allowed Nivola to create large murals which could span the facades of buildings; his combination of mural sculpture and architecture epitomized the goal of Nivola's close friend Le Corbusier, whose postwar objective in architecture was a 'synthesis of the arts'. The first appearance of this technique was used as an architectural element in the Olivetti showroom. Nivola would continue to create larger murals for the exteriors of buildings including the Mutual Hartford Insurance Company, the Bridgeport News Building, and the encased-sculptures for Eero Saarinen's Stiles Morse College at Yale University.

After studying under the architects Giuseppe Pagano, Edoardo Persico, and Marcello Nizzoli at the Istituto Superiore delle Industrie Artistiche in Monza, Nivola was employed by Olivetti where he was the director of the Office of Publicity from 1936 to 1939. His brief employment at the company was due to the fact that Nivola and his wife Ruth Guggenheim left Italy for fear of the anti-Semitic laws established by Mussolini.

FROM PROPAGANDA TO PUBLICITY

In order to understand the significance of Adriano Olivetti's postwar project, it is necessary to first view it through the lens of the avant-garde architecture of the Fascist Movement. Many of Olivetti's designers started their careers as part of the Rationalist architecture group, the Gruppo 7, which included, among others, architects Giuseppe Ter-

ragni, Luigi Figini, Gino Pollini, Marcello Nizzoli, and Ernesto Rogers. They were 'technical intellectuals' conscripted by the Fascist Movement, submitting competition entries for Fascist government structures while working on projects for Olivetti such as the main factory, workers' housing, a regulatory plan for Valle D'Aosta, planning for the company town of Ivrea, advertising campaigns and even the design of the Studio 42 typewriter.

Among the designers employed by Olivetti, of particular note is Marcello Nizzoli who can be credited as one of the main impetus behind developing the Olivetti 'style'. Before working with Olivetti, Nizzoli worked alongside Giuseppe Terragni in such projects as the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution (1932), the Palazzo del Littorio competition in Rome (1934), as well as the façade decoration project for the Casa del Fascio in Como (1935-36). Nizzoli began to work for Olivetti in 1938, first designing an Olivetti store in Venice followed by the design of bodywork, or *carrozzeria* for an Olivetti calculator, the Summa 40 (1940). After World War II Nizzoli would continue to design advertising, *carrozzeria*, as well as larger architectural projects such as the workers' housing in Ivrea and the Olivetti office building in Milan.

Terragni and Nizzoli's façade decoration for the Casa del Fascio is an interesting case study in the communicative nature of modern architecture and its implementation as a mass medium.[8] It is also perhaps the first time we see the use of mechanically reproduced images for permanent decoration of a building façade in Italy. The proposal consisted of a series of images or photomontage. As Diane Ghirardo has noted, "The photomontage proposed by the Terragni group presents a striking contrast to the otherwise reserved and unadorned structure: it has the appearance of a political billboard, a schematized presentation of selected aspects of the history of Fascism."[9] In fact, there were two façade proposals completed by Nizzoli. The first scheme included photographic reproductions of individual citizens whereas the second proposal included images of masses and specific symbols representing fascism along with one large photo of Mussolini placed above. These images would be transferred onto baked enamel panels and composed in a grid-like manner. While Ghirardo's article on the Casa del Fascio façade is crucial in the study of this work, she failed to mention a key

passage within the pages of *Quadrante* describing a third proposal for the façade of Terragni's building and other future Party Headquarters:

> We think that this beautiful wall facing the Piazza dell'Impero could be best utilized for the cinematic projection of propaganda, not to mention that with the arrival of television the wall could serve as the live reproduction [broadcast] of the Duce when he speaks to the assembled crowds.[10]

It is with this canonical building where we see the potential combination of architecture and film – as architecture literally serving as a mass medium, broadcasting the words of Il Duce in real time.

Another photomontage depicting the type of visual continuity, which the Fascist utopia strove for, can be seen in the same *Quadrante* issue. A photograph by Ico Parisi captured the interior of the Federal Office within the Casa del Fascio with a strategically arranged glass desktop reflecting the Duomo of Como in the background through the grid of the building façade. In profile and montaged into the foreground is the Olivetti MP 1 portable typewriter with the caption, "Federal Office, harmony of architecture, furniture, and objects," and in parenthesis, "(Olivetti typewriter)." One might first interpret the use of the word 'harmony' to signify an aesthetic harmony between architecture, furniture, and machine. However upon closer examination, what is really at work is both an aesthetic and *political* harmony, where all objects here have been aestheticized for political purpose.

The significance of this image and Nizzoli and Terragni's cinematic façade proposal is that they illustrate the role of design and architecture in what Walter Benjamin has described as the "aestheticization of politics."

Since the cinematic/television façade of the Casa del Fascio was simply a mere proposal, we can only image the effect it would have on the residents of Como. What we can clearly surmise, howver, is architecture's function as a mass medium and its role in the Fascist movement. Like the Olivetti typewriter on the federal secretary's desk, the Casa del Fascio façade is a mechanism of control and management, a tool for communication in a Fascist government. Its presence would be a constant reminder of the Fascist Regime and function as a tool to broadcast propaganda, incite terror, and ultimately lead to Benjamin's forecast:

udio del Federale. Armonia di architettura, d'arredamento, di oggetti (Macchine da scrivere Olivetti.)

"All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war."[11] The verity of this statement is confirmed when observing Nizzoli's façade design containing, in bold letters, the Fascist creed: "Believe, Obey, Fight." [Credere, Obedire, Combattere].

TAFURI

One of the few historians who began to suggest the similar design strategies of the Olivettian project and the Fascist Movement was Manfredo Tafuri. In his cryptic style of criticism, he indirectly leads us to making the connection between Rogers' goal of 'continuity' with the design strategies applied to the creation of Fascist architecture. In the introductory pages of *History of Italian Architecture 1944-1985,* Tafuri compared the work of BBPR's Monument dedicated to the victims of the German concentration camps at the Monumental Cemetery in Milan with the Fosse Ardeatine Monument in Rome by Mario Fiorentino, Giuseppe Perugini, Nello Aprile, Cino Calcapina, and Aldo Cardelli. He described the BBPR monument as being focused on "a cultural situation still considered to prevail." The BBPR latticed-cube monument, considered by many as "too rational," epitomized Roger's postwar call for continuity with the past. However Tafuri points out the ambiguous nature of the BBPR monument and the problem facing Italian architects in the postwar period:

> The lyricism that makes us look forward, that does not let us forget, is, however, accompanied by a commitment to search for specific tools that could contribute to the problem of reconstruction: this

culture intent on the new immediately appeared to be tied to discursive practices in use since the twenties and thirties.[12]

What Tafuri is saying here is that the architects who were entrusted to lead the postwar reconstruction were the same designers who still relied on the rational design strategies implemented to create architecture during the Fascist Era. To simply continue the same designs, which conjured the Rationalist style of the Fascist Movement, was problematic in the post-World War II era, especially for a monument which commemorated the victims of that same Fascist Regime.

Within the same text Tafuri claimed that Olivetti's success in industrial design began with the production of the MP1 typewriter in 1932. This achievement was based on the foregrounding of strategic organization and the acceptance and importation of the "American myth - Fordism plus company reorganization" resulting in successful manufacture of the Olivetti product line. Adding to the success would be the publicity department, the first of its kind in Italy, headed by Nivola, then Leonardo Sinisgalli, and later Giovanni Pintori. The typewriters and calculators designed by Nizzoli "did not so much represent the product," Tafuri noted, but most significantly they, "promot[ed] a global cultural and political project that grafted itself onto market operation."[13] The Olivetti products, according to Tafuri, demanded their own "exhibition" space in which to sell the wares. Designers Nizzoli and Schawinsky were recruited to design exhibitions in Venice and Turin. What was displayed in these forums was not merely product, but glimpses of the overall utopian Olivetti project.[14]

The most important statement made by Tafuri for this argument is regarding the role of the architect in transforming the image of a mechanically reproduced commodity into an object of art. The crucial mechanisms for this metamorphosis were the spaces in which these goods were sold, or rather, 'exhibited'. According to Tafuri, these spaces were "precious spatial coffers whose character was entrusted to an architectural surrealism that suspended the project in a void that isolates it from its material context in an attempt to cancel its mercantile character" and thereby infusing these objects with "an impalpable 'aura.'"[15] Indeed, by 1954, the Olivetti products were already established as objects of art in the United States

when they were exhibited in a rare company show titled, *Olivetti: Design in Industry* at the Museum of Modern Art.

THE ART AND BUSINESS OF TOTAL DESIGN

Aline B. Saarinen, a critic for *The New York Times*, held up the Olivetti Showroom as an example of an organic union of art and business in a 1954 article. The topic of the article was on a new program installed at the Museum of Modern Art, the Art Lending Service, which would make part of the Museum's collection available for use in Manhattan offices or "as background on television shows or in other types of display where goods are sold."[16] She criticized the lack of art appreciation among young Manhattan business entrepreneurs. As a means to head off this cultural vacuum, the Young Presidents Organization held a symposium and exhibition on the values of integrating art and commerce. The purpose of this initiative, according to its organizer Michael Levy, president of Federated Brokerage Group, was to locate "logical and natural methods in the normal course of their business activity [in order] to stimulate this kind of natural and logical cultural progress."[17] For Saarinen, the Olivetti Corporation was the ideal European example of integrating art with business:

> Nivola's handsome sand-mural (with its fascinating interplay of texture and shapes), the exquisite materials, the plastic forms, the concern with design of products – from typewriters to adding machines – and with stationery, advertising layout, promotion material [...] – all these are clues to the broad program which insists on beauty in every aspect of the company's work and environment, even unto factories, administrative offices, workers' housing and schools. This is the kind of organic connection between business and art toward which the Young Presidents Organization might aim.[18]

While the article's main concerned seemed to be the Young Presidents Organization and its relationship to culture, the article oddly shifts to the discussion of art in business and their function in developing "a country's cultural maturity." Saarinen continued, "the existence of a country's culture at all – has to do not with a few surface embellishments or isolated acts of patronage, but with an unselfconscious, convinced, continuing concern with the sponsorship and creation of beauty in *an entire environment*."[19]

The architecture critic of *The New York Times*, Ada Louise Huxtable, also addressed the question of the role of art and architecture within the business environment. While she lamented that the most serious offense of Modern Art was the movement's inability to communicate, she cites works such as Nivola's bas-relief mural for Olivetti as exemplifying how some pieces of abstract art enhance modern architecture. The union of abstract painting and sculpture with modern architecture provided a specific pleasure that the works alone could not offer.[20] The major impetus for this happy marriage, claimed Huxtable, was the contrast of the big, bright, highly texture art forms (without scale) juxtaposed to austere, sleek forms of high modernist architecture:

> This extreme plainness [of Modern Architecture] is enforced by technological and economic necessity, but it may be at once relieved and emphasized by the proper use of art. And whatever criticism may be made of abstract art as an independent expression it ideally extends contemporary architectural design. To fill a need, art has come out of its ivory tower and into the office-building lobby.[21]

For Huxtable, Nivola's sand-sculptured mural epitomized the perfect combination of art and architecture, merging the two art forms in order to communicate with the 'the man on the street.' "Used in this way," Huxtable continued, "abstract art offers a positive and enjoyable experience to many persons who otherwise find it meaningless. At this scale, and in this kind of setting, art communicates directly with the spectator, even if its message is not literal, pictorial or personal, and even if it does so only in a passing moment of an average day."[22] The compatibility between abstract art and modern architecture caters to the New York *spectator*.

This insight into modern architecture and art echoes Walter Benjamin's observations paralleling architecture and film, where he observed: "the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. This is the most obvious with regard to buildings. Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction."[23] According to Huxtable, modern abstract art joined with modern architecture can be viewed in the same way: "[A]bstraction is the easiest and most rewarding form of art for the spectator on the run.

In conjunction with architecture it makes no extraordinary demands on the viewer. Rather it calls forth the most direct and primary reactions, in the shortest time, at the most spontaneous emotional level."[24] Huxtable concluded by claiming, "*The total building* is the architect's work of art."[25]

BENJAMIN

Both Saarinen and Huxtable's description of the perfect amalgamation of business and art included the Olivetti showroom. Moreover, the defining characteristic of the space for both authors was the concept of a total environment. Architecture is the main organizing vehicle for representing an image, bringing together the disciplines of art and business. As Beatriz Colomina has theorized in *Privacy and Publicity*:

> To think about modern architecture must be to pass back and forth between the question of space and the question of representation. Indeed, it will be necessary to think of architecture as a system of representation, or rather a series of overlapping systems of representation. [...] The building should be understood in the same terms as drawings, photographs, writing, films, and advertisements; not only because these are the media in which more often we encounter it, because the building is a mechanism of representation in its own right.[26]

While it is easy to envision the goal of the fascist aestheticization of everyday life as exemplified in the Casa del Fascio, it is perhaps a bit more difficult to understand how the aestheticization of politics relates to the Olivetti project and the concept of branding. It is in branding where we see an intersection of Benjamin's Work of Art essay and its relevance to his Arcades project. His goal was to connect the aestheticization of politics with the rise of modern industrial culture. According to Benjamin, culture in the 20th century was able to merge with economic production and political regimes. This combination resulted in the aestheticization of politics which would grant objects produced by mechanical reproduction with the 'aura' of art in order to exploit for political motivation.

A key term which explains the appeal of total design and its relationship with the aestheticization of politics begins with Marx, who popularized the word 'phantasmagoria' to explain "the world of commodities that, in their mere visible presence, conceal every trace of the labor that produced them. They (phantasmagoria) veil the production

process, and – like mood pictures – encourage their beholders to identify them with subjective fantasies and dreams."[27]

Susan Buck-Morris described phantasmagorias as a "technoaesthetics" where the goal is to manipulate the spectator who undergoes an anaesthetic moment, not by numbing, but by overwhelming the senses:

> These simulated sensoria alter consciousness, much like a drug, but they do so through sensory distraction rather than chemical alteration, and – most significantly – their effects are experienced collectively rather than individually. Everyone sees the same altered world, experiences the same total environment. [...] Sensory addition to a compensatory reality becomes a means of social control.[28]

One of Olivetti's aspirations in the interwar period was the modernization of industry in Italy. He published journals and created a political ideology based on the factory and technological innovation. At the same time, to eliminate what Tafuri deemed 'its mercantile character,' it was necessary for Olivetti to create a cultural and political environment which promoted its products as works of art, rather than commodities reproduced by employees who had to adhere to the physical and psychological regime of applied principles of scientific management and mechanical reproduction. And like the continuous, totalitarian spectacles orchestrated by the Fascist Regime to overwhelm the Italian people in their march to war, Olivetti's showrooms offered intoxicating spaces to shop for 'objects of art' without having to see or imagine the traces of organized, mechanized labor.

Similar to most utopias, fascist or otherwise, the Olivetti utopia required seamlessness, a totality of image that converted into the concept of total design. As Mark Wigley has pointed out, "Total design is a fantasy about control, about architecture as control,"[29] and architecture controls and manipulates by appealing to a collective desire and responding by providing collective wish-images. For the postwar Manhattan crowd, its wish-image would signify a heightened artistic awareness and, as Saarinen noted, "a country's cultural maturity."

Today, the concept of total design has translated into the terms 'branding' and 'lifestyle,' however they perform in the same way by locating a

particular lifestyle and then creating a brand image by manifesting, in built form, the values of that group. Olivetti achieved a successful branded style by co-opting many of the cultural and political strategies of the Fascist Movement, creating a type of "self-conscious reversal" of Fascist ideology. The aestheticization of politics and the resulting total design was transformed from a mechanism of Mussolini's totalitarian political ideology into a function of business ideology and consumer spectacle for the Olivettian project. The architects recruited by Olivetti created the cultural facades for the Fascist totalitarian regime (or, as in the case of Nivola and Giovanni Pintori, were trained by the artists and architects of the Fascist Regime at the school in Monza), were co-opted to design the surfaces of the Olivetti corporate identity.

If Fascism was a totalitarian regime with power imposed from above through the "forced organization of people within its corporate structures," then Olivetti's proposal attempted to realize his liberal socialist philosophy in a similar form and, like Fascism, envisioned an "encompassing and 'total' conception of the world." And just as Fascism implemented the skill of designers to create propaganda for national identity which included symbols, the articulation of surfaces, and the coordination of image, this similar effort of spectacle mutated into publicity, trademarks, logos, and branding in the postwar corporate environment.

ENDNOTES

1. Thomas J. Watson, Jr., chairman of IBM. Unindexed quotation published in *Design Process Olivetti 1908-1983* (Milan: Olivetti, 1983) 46.

2. Gino Tomaiuoli, "Il negozio più bello della Quinta Strada," *Il Tempo*, Rome, reprinted in *Notizie Olivetti*, n. 18, June-July 1954: 5.

3. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) pg. 242.

4. "Talk of the Town: Natural," *The New Yorker*, June 5, 1954.

5. "Talk of the Town: Natural."

6. "Un negozio come un'invenzione," *Domus*, n. 298, September 1954.

7. "Talk of the Town: Natural."

8. Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity. Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1994) pg. 14.

9. Diane Ghirardo, "Politics of a Masterpiece: The Vicenda of the Decoration of the Façade of the Casa del Fascio, 1936-39," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 62, no. 3, 1980:468-470.

10. "Un'Idea per le Case del Fascio," *Quadrante*, n. 35/36, pg. 32.

11. Benjamin, "The Work of Art ...," 241.

12. Manfredo Tafuri, *History of Italian Architecture, 1944-1985* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989) pg. 38.

13. Tafuri, 5.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Aline B. Saarinen, "Business and Art. New and Encouraging Developments Looking Toward the Future," *The New York Times*, June 6, 1954.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid. My italic.

20. Ada Louise Huxtable, "Art with Architecture: New Terms of an Old Alliance," *The New York Times,* September 13, 1959.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Benjamin, "The Work of Art ... ," 239.

24. Huxtable, "Art with Architecture ...,"

25. Ibid. My italic.

26. Colomina, 13-14.

27. Susan Buck-Morris, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October*, vol. 62, Autumn, 1992: 25.

28. Buck-Morris, 22-23.

29. Mark Wigley, "What Ever Happened to Total Design?" *Harvard Design Magazine*, n. 5, 1998: 1.