

40 **Designers** A new generation of industrial designers is attempting to develop products which exploit the full potential of new technology – while also meeting the needs and aspirations of their users. James Woudhuysen profiles Perry King and Santiago Miranda, designers finding innovative answers to this challenge

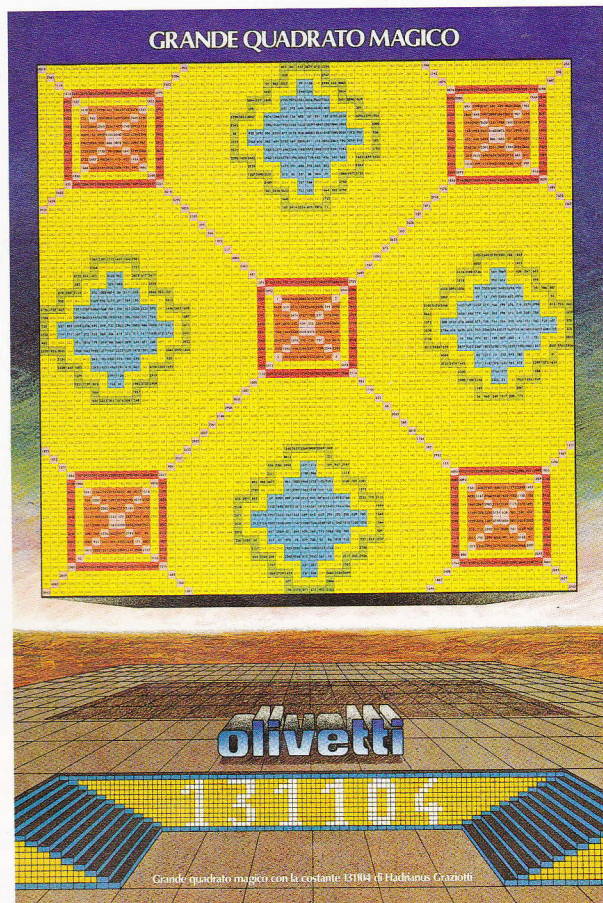
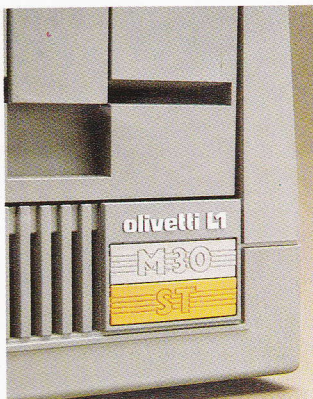
Priests at technology's altar



1 'A particular design for a light fitting can slot nicely into somebody's environment and lifestyle, it can modify them, or it can simply have no effect. But design clearly must comprehend not only technology and economics, but sociology, too. This leads us to the conclusion that designers must have a political or philosophical model on which to base their work – something which can at the very least explain the mismatch between their aims and their achievements.'

Looking at Perry King and Santiago Miranda's backgrounds and at their current situation, you might be hard pressed to define exactly what kind of 'political or philosophical model' they use. King is 43, a Londoner who trained at Birmingham College of Art; Miranda is 35 and was born and educated at Seville; their partnership is based in Milan, but then again some of their clients are Japanese. Looking at their output, you might again find it difficult to establish their precise stance on design, for they do plastics chairs, publicity posters, petrol-driven chainsaws, pendant lights and personal computers. They laugh about the terminology used in Italy's design press, but concede: 'In fashion there are "looks" or "styles" with certain names associated with them. Unhappily, the same is true of design. We try to resist this. Designers have a very big responsibility to society; how they fulfil it must be their choice, not that of the media or the critics.'

But if design is not about fitting in to other people's pigeonholes, what is it about? 'Power,' insists Miranda. In one sense this remark reflects his and King's experience in Milan, where hostility between different design currents sometimes gets very intense. But in another sense Miranda means by 'power' something broader: 'The design profession is one of today's priesthoods. Like priests, designers put people in touch with a particular kind of god – in this case, the twentieth-century god of technology. Moreover, the products designers create are similar to the rituals priests perform; both have a symbolic value. Both can form a significant part of national or international culture. As a



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Designers 'Design is one of today's priesthoods; designers put people in touch with the twentieth century god of technology...'

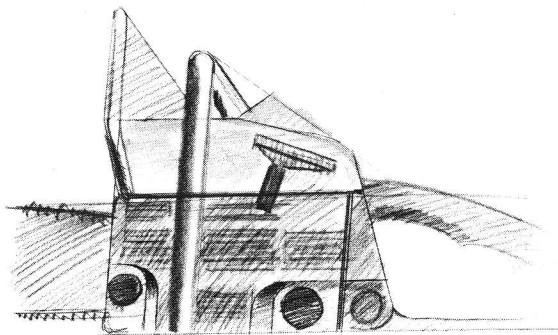
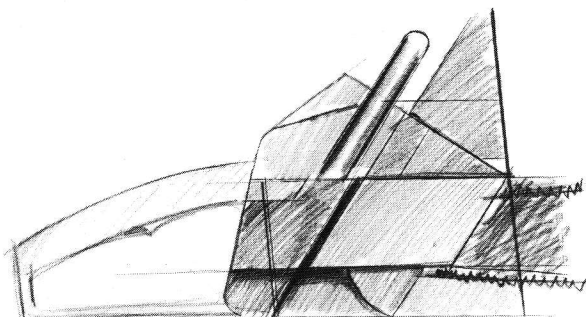
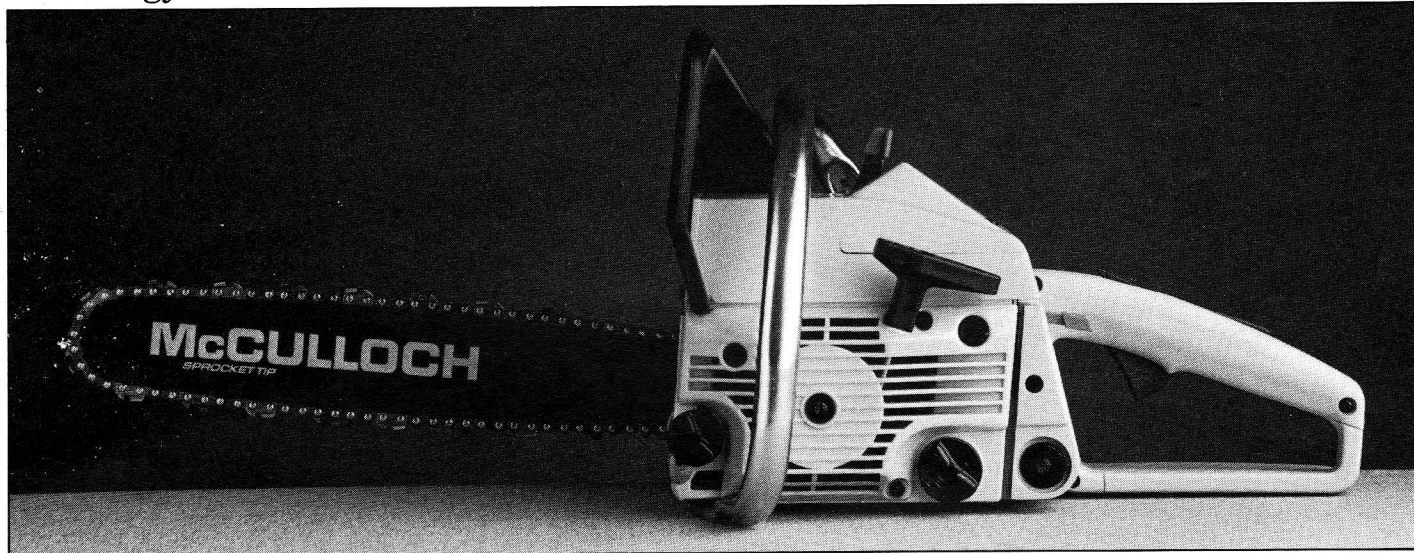
King Miranda's design for a chainsaw shows that they are just as at ease working with products that are slung in the back of pick-up trucks as with those that take pride of place on office workers' desks. The saw, made by Black & Decker's Italian subsidiary, comes in two versions: one for professional use, the other for amateurs. The first brings all the desirability of consumer

toys to a serious bit of engineering pitched firmly in the capital goods sector. The other does the reverse.

The design caters for more than good looks; comfort (low vibration level) and safety (hands well clear of the blade) are equally well looked after. They have to be – the standards governing chainsaw design are very strict.

Many of the users will be

wearing gloves, most will be working in rough conditions. Consequently, the details of the design are big and sturdy; this ensures the product is easy to use and to clean



result, design is a form of social power.'

King Miranda's output shows that they have not used this power to encourage post-modernism in design – 'at its worst, reactionary ideas clothed in revivals of fads gone by', says King dismissively.

Equally, they have no time for what they term 'Arcadian' design: 'tables,' as Miranda puts it, 'which because they are in natural wood, do violence to trees and thus to nature itself'. As a team they also reject attempts to describe their work as 'good Italian design': cool, tasteful, bourgeois. Rather, they aim to present technology as what it is: 'neutral, and therefore, potentially, a reassuring, comprehensible ally'.

They believe that they are able to perform this function because of certain skills – a familiarity with materials, a feel for colour, and a fondness for both the anatomical and psychological sides of ergonomics. 'Although Italy is a tough country, what remains of the Renaissance encourages one's humanitarian impulses,' says King.

Those skills have been well used since 1977, when King and Miranda first went into business together, and date back to 1964, when King, impressed by a *Stile industria* picture of the now-famous Elea 9003 mainframe Ettore Sottsass designed for Olivetti, left England for Milan to work with the Master. There is the red shiny plastics Valentine portable

typewriter (1969), the System P603 minicomputer, and the boldly painted Synthesis range of office furniture (Sottsass/King co-creations for Olivetti – the last two being described in *DESIGN*, January 1973, page 52). There are the typefaces King Miranda designed for Olivetti dot matrix printers (one of which has been adopted as a European standard for optical character recognition), and the book *Design process Olivetti 1908-1978*. And there are lights engineered by Giancarlo Piretti, and made by Arteluce and Flos, companies linked to the mighty Cassina group.

King says of the lights: 'In most cases Arteluce/Flos has simply told us to develop what we liked. But we're paid on royalties, so we've had to consider the commercial potential of the products we dream up very carefully. I think the product names we chose have had a lot to do with their popularity; the Milk-of-Magnesia blue and traffic-light amber industrial glasses we used have also helped.'

Much of King Miranda's work is the result of 'Unlimited Horizons', a programme of research into the relationship different product ranges have to each other and to the different spaces (domestic, workplace, public) they are put in. Says Miranda: 'Our lights vary quite a lot in technical principle and in appearance, but they have a certain

overall consistency. Universality in application is important.'

King Miranda's latest finished project is Cable, a collection of middle management desks and cabinets in oak, walnut and ebony-stained ash designed for Marcatré. King explains: 'Traditionally, middle management's needs have been given even less thought than those of the secretary. Middle management aren't regarded as sexy; nor can they be "high-powered" like senior executives can. But they have very specific requirements.

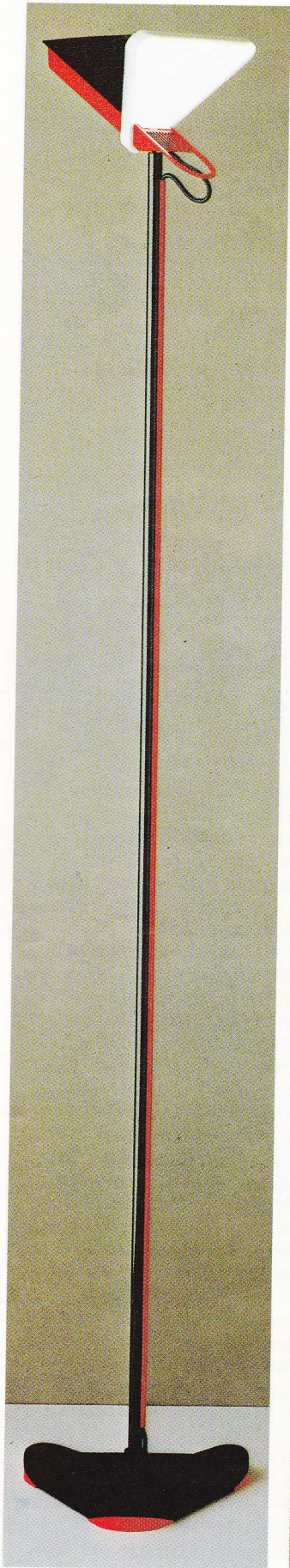
History may show that King and Miranda's most innovative work is still ahead of them. They are working with Antonio Macchi-cassia on a personal computer for Olivetti which will be the first Olivetti number-crunching machine in a long time not to have a Sottsass or Mario Bellini tag. They have also been developing for Olivetti a series of keyboards and consoles which are so user-friendly that they promise to take the international computer industry by storm. The project is under wraps at present, but, once completed, it could well determine the shape of terminals for the next 10 years, making the input of information into computers perhaps half as easy as it will be once voice operation becomes a mass market prospect. James Woudhuysen is a lecturer and journalist

■ For King (1, right) and Miranda it is not enough for design to be 'cool and tasteful'; it must attempt to make technology 'a reassuring, comprehensible ally'. Graphics, for example, need to be sensible and directional, but not bland – criteria met by books (4), posters (7), signage systems for business machines (2) and typefaces for dot matrix printers (6), all for Olivetti.

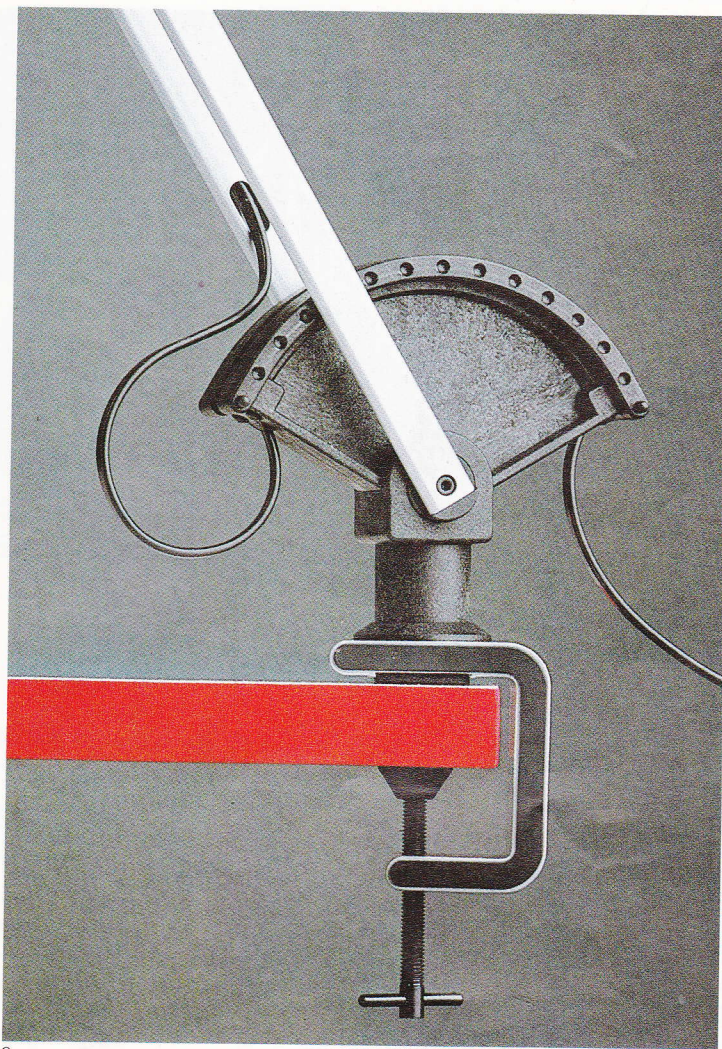
Cable (3,5), King and Miranda's recently completed furniture system for Marcatré, also does more than meet the basic functional requirements of, for example, efficient cabling; it also expresses 'an element of prestige' for the middle managers it is aimed at.

Their lights (below), many designed with Gianluigi Arnaldi, are innovative – but have to be commercially sound. 'Arteluce and Flos have told us to develop what we like – but we are paid by royalties'.

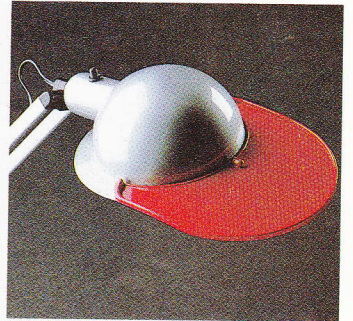
These products combine flexibility with advanced materials; Donald (9,10) El (8) and Mantis (11,12), work equally well at home or in the office. Crisol (13) is suspended from two thin wires which also act as conductors; its diffuser is of 'traffic-light amber', or 'milk of magnesia blue' glass – a homely touch. Caterina (14) and Monkey (15) are typically well detailed



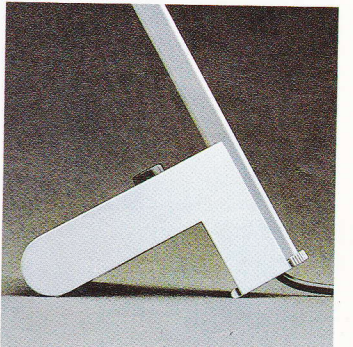
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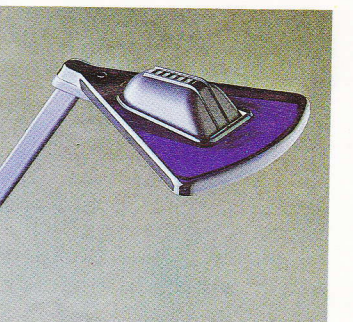
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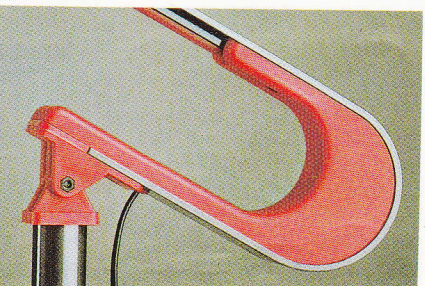
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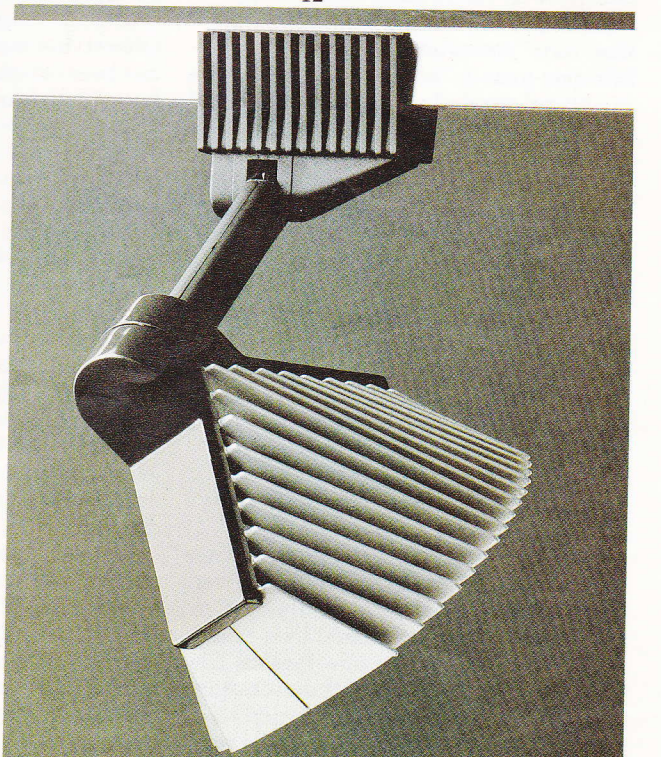
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