

The shape of sounds to come

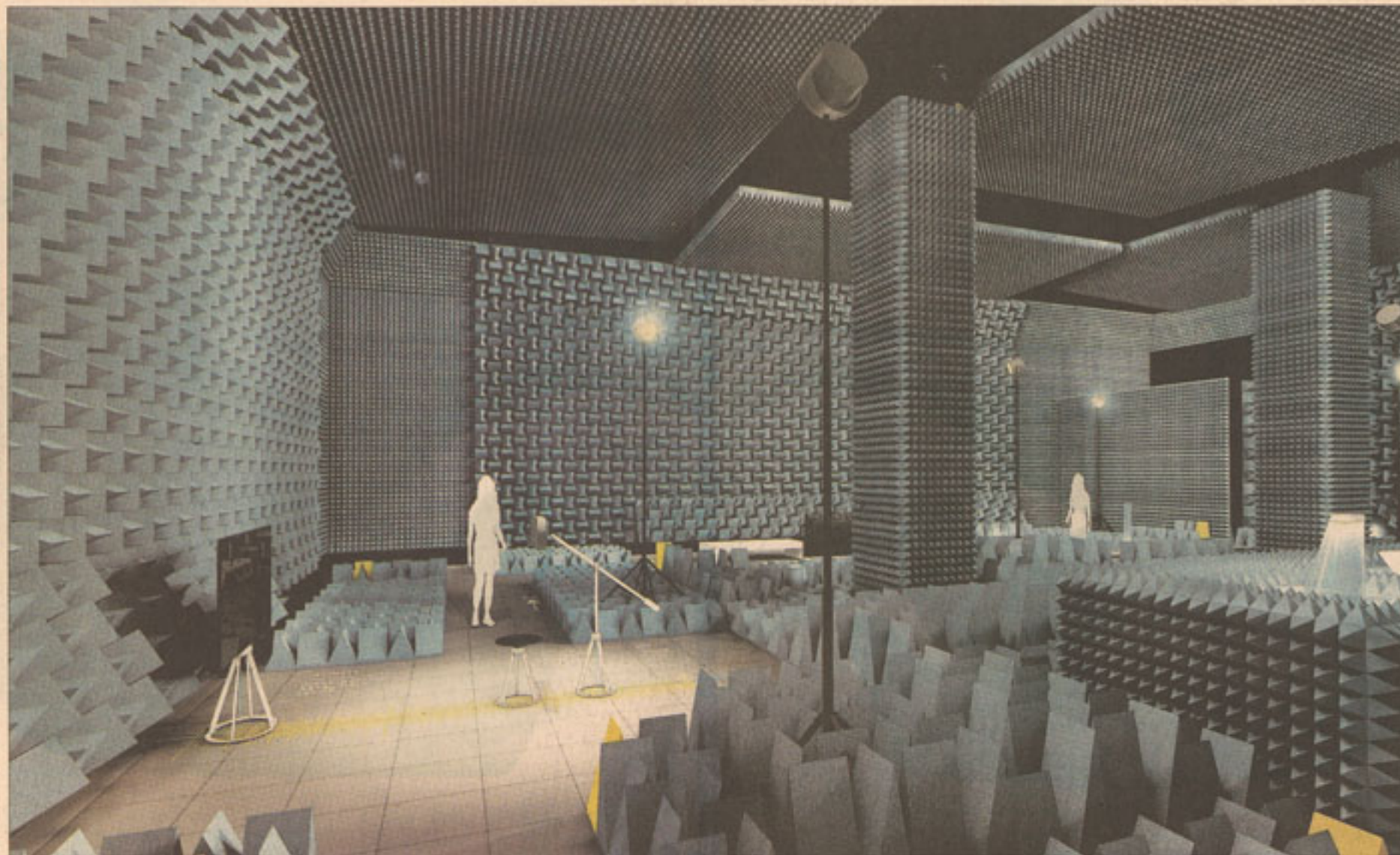
Sony is collaborating with design duo BarberOsgerby to sculpt a new technological aesthetic, writes Nicole Swengley

Seismic shifts are taking place in our domestic landscape. Familiar products such as radios, hi-fi systems and DVD players are beginning to disappear from our homes as consumer electronics become increasingly digitised and virtual. Even televisions look set to evolve into internet portals for streaming films and programmes. These technological shifts present significant challenges to electronics companies. Not only is hardware vanishing in this increasingly virtual, touch-screen world but also, potentially, brand identity.

No wonder some of the industry's key players – Japanese giants such as Sony, Toshiba and Panasonic Corporation – are subverting historic rivalries by teaming up on various projects with South Korean competitors such as Samsung and LG Electronics, in an effort to find new directions. The key to maintaining individuality, however, still relies on finding fresh ways to interest consumers in innovative technologies.

Take Sony. Aware that it can no longer rest on past glories such as the Walkman, it is instead focusing on voicing its strength as a powerhouse in design technology. The company ploughed 6.4 per cent of its total global sales revenue back into

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its research and development division last year and, for the first time, Sony Design UK, the creative arm of Sony Electronics, will showcase the company's technical virtuosity during Milan's Salone Internazionale del Mobile later this month.

In the Via Enrico Stendhal, in Zona Tortona, a neighbourhood south-west of the city centre that comes alive with vibrant, edgy exhibitions during the annual celebration of design, Sony will collaborate with London-based designers Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby to create a laboratory in which design objects are the centrepieces of experimental sound environments.

It seems appropriate that Sony – a brand-name with sonic overtones – is flaunting its technical creativity by exploring this particular sensibility. And it is smart to involve the BarberOsgerby partnership, whose interest in working with sound was

demonstrated by their Listening Post at the London Design Museum's *Super Contemporary* show last year. "BarberOsgerby has a very honest design style, which is why we've worked with them to present a purer, deeper experience of our design vision," says Takuya Kawagoi, director of Sony Design Centre Europe. "Sony believes in minimal design language, avoiding all redundant decoration to preserve a product's true design essence but also in a harmony of presence so that it's part of a lifestyle environment when not in use. I believe there's a great opportunity to do interesting things with design-led technology in the living room."

The Zona Tortona installation will comprise an anechoic (sound-absorbing, echo-free) space in which sound waves are trapped within a forest of tiny foam cones cladding the walls, ceiling and most of the

floor. Within this silent space will be five areas where sound experiments take physical shape.

"We want people to leave this installation feeling as if they've experienced a total immersion of their senses," says Osgerby. So, walking into a dimly lit corridor, visitors will don plastic boots (to assist with sound absorption). The light will dim to twilight as they enter the main space, perhaps making them slightly disorientated as external stimuli diminish and their senses internalise. A vast, concept version of Sony's Monolithic television standing on a stone slab will confront them and, sitting on a stool beside a loudspeaker, they will watch abstract images on the huge screen while they are surrounded by sound. It might feel as if the sound is arising from within them rather than without because the stimuli are being

projected in such close proximity to them.

Visitors will then encounter a horizontal unit supporting three conceptual objects – a wooden dome, a clear perspex cone and a Corian ring – that look like modernist objets d'art. Each will contain a solenoid (a wire coil in which a magnetic field is established by passing an electrical current through it) that sets up a vibration and makes the objects behave as loudspeakers, transmitting sounds fed to them from an MP3 player or other source device.

The wooden dome, which wouldn't look out of place, for example, on a dining table, emits omni-directional sound through 360 degrees, so the projected music or speech sounds exactly the same wherever the listener sits in relation to the dome. The Corian ring could sit on a low table as it throws sound upwards, while the clear perspex cone is designed to be floor-standing,

with sound thrown upwards and outwards from its angled surface.

The shapes of the objects were dictated, after many experiments, by their sound qualities, while their construction materials were similarly chosen as the optimum transmitters of sound. "We wanted to create new archetypes that would co-exist happily in a contemporary interior," explains Osgerby. "They don't look like technological items. There are no boxes or wires."

Anyone who prefers a more familiar-looking design should check out the nearby pendant light hanging above a table. It looks, and acts, exactly like a conventional fitting yet the shade doubles as a loudspeaker – truly a *son et lumière*.

It should be emphasised that these sound-objects are experimental concepts and not available for purchase but it does not take a great leap of imagination to grasp their potential for our domestic landscapes. "Although they seem like passive objects, they're technically geared up," says Osgerby. "They could be activated to receive Wi-Fi, so you could send a song from your laptop direct to the object which would 'play' it," adds Barber.

You will then reach a space where a very thin television sits within a cube made from white, honeycombed resin produced by digital, stereolithography techniques. Loudspeakers are positioned inside the cube, which is acoustically "transparent" – meaning that the sound emanates in all directions without loss of quality. "Currently it is not a viable commercial proposition but an experimental concept from which other ideas may emerge," says Barber.

The show concludes with a more conventional scenario – a huge, high-quality surround-sound TV embedded in a wall unit with four acrylic loudspeakers arranged in a typical pairing of two in front and two behind the viewer, allowing them to gently re-engage with current technology while demonstrating BarberOsgerby's design flair.

What Sony has done with this fresh, exciting show is open a window into the parallel universe of research and development underpinning our use of contemporary electronics. And if its goal is to reposition the brand's design technology as the "soul" of an object, rather than its exterior shape and styling, then its Milan debut looks set to be a fine start.

'Sony Contemplating Monolithic Design', April 14-19, 35 Via Enrico Stendhal, Milan.

Sensation

A computer generated image of the Sony BarberOsgerby sound lab

Nick Rolfs/
Universal Design
Studio