

LISTEN UP

Is Sony's future in hi-fi furnishings? Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby in an anechoic chamber with prototypes for a new kind of home entertainment. See their exhibition for Sony at Officine Stendhal, via E Stendhal 35, Milan, during the Salone del Mobile



SPEAKERS CORNER

How Sony and BarberOsgerby are rethinking surround sound

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Over the course of the last few decades, the technology giants have driven demand by flattening and fitting media into ever smaller spaces. We've seen LPs become CDs become MP3s. We've also seen TVs become 3D and everything else get increasingly mobile and intelligent and see-through.

Sony Corporation has been at the head of the charge – its production lines have kept on rolling out ever shinier, sexier gadgets, even as Apple got all the press and plaudits. But the game is changing. The future, according to Silicon Valley soothsayers anyway, is no longer to be found in the creation of shinier, sexier gadgets. In fact, gadgets, as we know them, are going to disappear. When entire entertainment and information systems fit into oblongs of varying size, portability and touchscreen-ness, the options narrow. All of which begs the question – what happens to the mega-tech companies that have dominated our lives and living rooms for so long?

Sony, somewhat surprisingly, is pitching up in Milan for the Salone del Mobile. Having seen the future long ago, and been busy conducting all manner of top-secret, hi-tech experiments in its superlabs in Japan, one of the company's strategies is a surprising shift into the furniture and interiors market. And, for this year's furniture fair, it has enlisted the help of British furniture design duo BarberOsgerby to help it demonstrate exactly why.

Says Edward Barber: 'Curating and designing this space for Sony, we got to see behind the scenes, new areas of home electronics and products that simply don't exist at the moment.' For example, he explains, 'the technology has already been developed to turn pretty much anything you can think of into a speaker'.

As part of the pair's exhibition for Sony in Milan, Barber and his design

partner Jay Osgerby have developed experimental archetypes that explore the future of sound technology in the home. Displayed in a series of five rooms, in a huge, specially constructed anechoic chamber (a noiseless space designed to attenuate sound), visitors to the show will see domestic objects – stools, bowls, lamps – made from turned wood, Corian and glass, all functioning as speakers.

The idea of the speaker as a black box in the corner is now redundant. Instead, a variety of different materials can be used to broadcast sound, in far more intuitive forms than before. What's more, the control panel will begin to disappear from audio equipment, as miniature touchscreen projection devices inch ever closer to the mass market. Ultimately, the speaker as part of the furniture may be all the kit that's needed.

'The possibilities are endless,' says Kazuo Ichikawa, general manager of Sony's Creative Centre, project leader for the company's Milan initiative and a firm believer in the upcoming 'living room revolution'. 'With clever and forward-thinking design, consumer electronics products could indeed evolve to integrate much more with lifestyle objects such as furniture. To our mind, products are intended for people to use, so it only stands to reason that these products be designed with a human touch.'

Describing Milan during Salone as 'the most creative, lifestyle-orientated platform in the world', Ichikawa is confident of making an impact on the taste-makers in the world of design. 'We wanted to build on our current design direction and take its thinking to the next level, experimenting with the boundaries of technology and furniture design.' The future is no longer in portable music, it seems, but in true surround sound. ✪

Salone del Mobile runs from 14-19 April, www.cosmit.it; www.barberosgerby.com; www.sony.co.uk