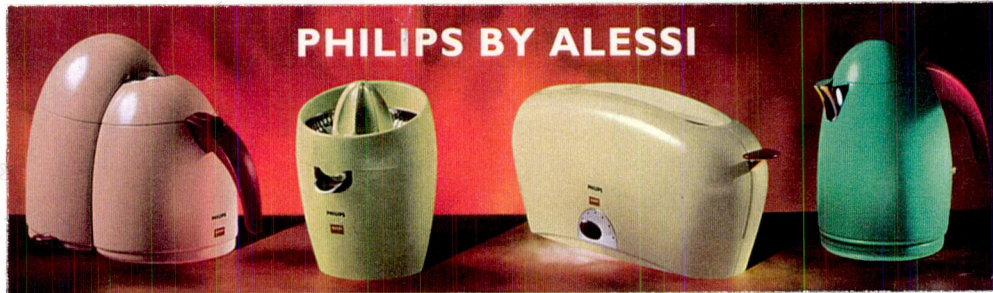




National College of Art and Design
Faculty of Design
Department of Industrial Design



The Dream Team
(Philips and Alessi..)
An Analysis of the Range of Kitchen Appliances
produced by Philips and Alessi in 1994.



by
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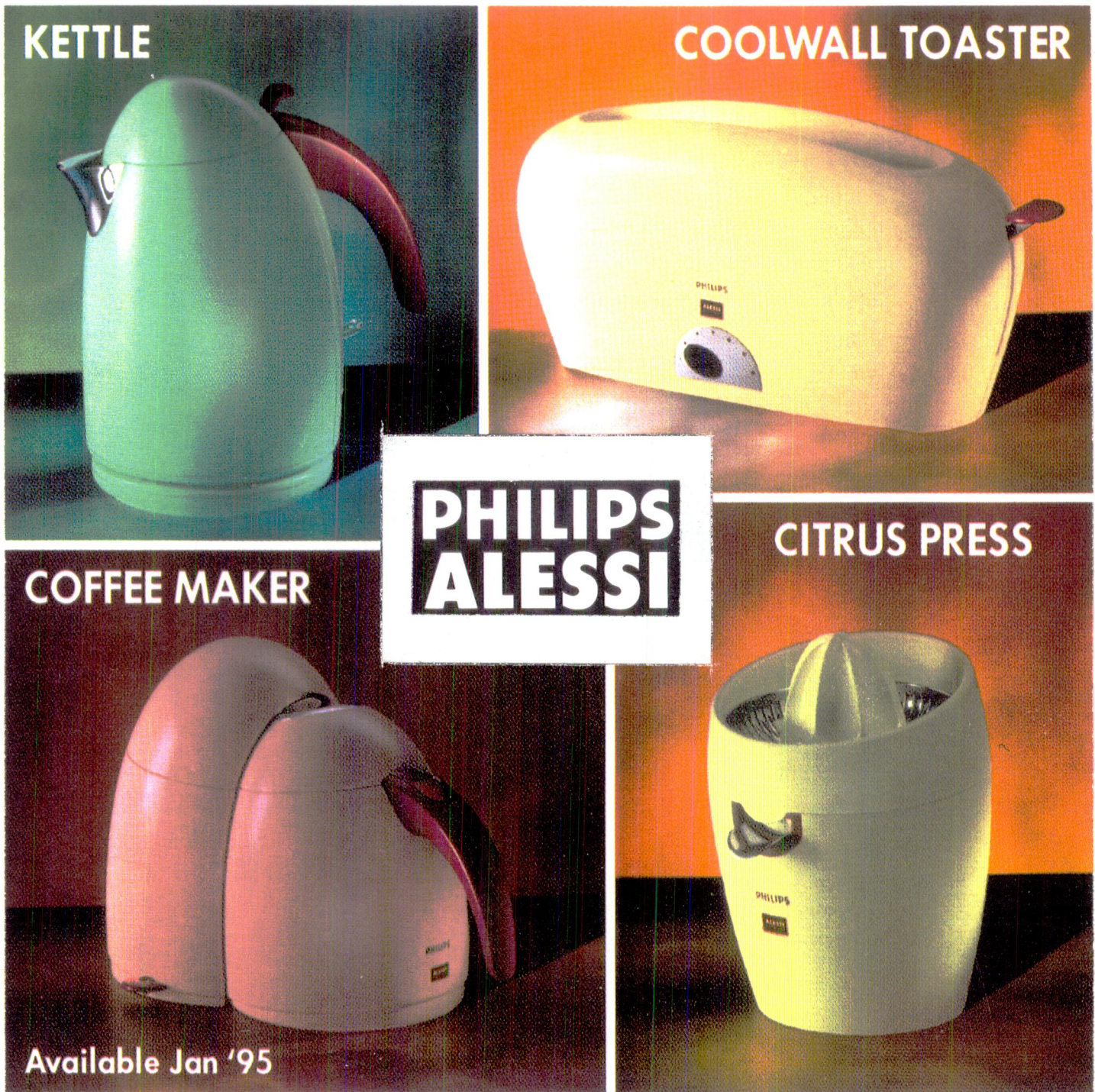
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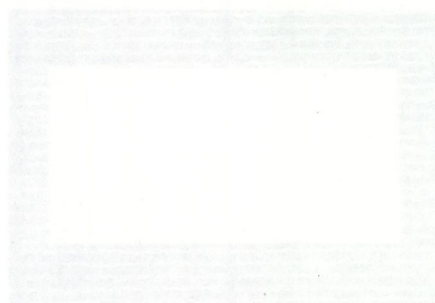
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Introduction



Fig.1 The Philips-Alessi Range





The Philips-Alessi line consists of a toaster, a citrus press, a coffee maker and a kettle. See Figure 1. They were introduced to the world on the 27 September 1994 kicking off a huge publicity campaign worldwide. They were presented to the international press in the Groninger Museum of Modern Art which was designed by one of the designers involved in the project Alessandro Mendini (Domestic Appliances Philips, D.A.P., 1994, n.p.).

What interested me in these products was the combination of two such completely different firms, Alessi the small Italian design factory and Philip's huge mass producing electronics company. Philips issued a statement in their monthly newsletter DAP stating the idea behind the project.

The rationale of the Philips-Alessi line project stems from the belief that, by in large, present day international mass production of consumer goods is dominated by technological and marketing considerations and is therefore little inclined to take into account the poetical aspects of life. This is leading us into a world of all-alike, anonymous and emotionless objects. We are experiencing a pivotal change in the ecology of the human species: people are surrounded not so much by other people but by a multitude of soulless, pseudomorphic objects, even though mankind, as never before, has become aware of the unquenchable thirst for an art and poetry which dominates all areas of human experience (DAP, 1994)

This ideal of putting art and meaning into mass produced products whose main features before have been cost effectiveness and efficiency, housed in bland white or black box aesthetics, seems the perfect direction for a new era of true quality in mass production. In an article "For the new man" Vittorio Magnagno Lampugnani states how every design culture cannot do without a design Utopia, it must have one (Magnagno

Lampugnani, 1995, p.3). Perhaps this idea behind the Philips-Alessi line is the design Utopia for the nineties.

Alessi have been accused of designing essentially useless objects bought for their stylishness and name whilst on the other hand Philips is associated with mass produced, quality, functional and aesthetically unimaginative products. The combination of the two could lead to the perfectly design project. This thesis examines what was the result.

Chapter one deals with the approaches of the two firms to design, the rationale behind the Alessi aesthetic, and Philips' new approach to design they have named High Design. Has the combination of these two outlooks led to the beginnings of a new design utopia or is this simply another marketing ploy on behalf of Philips? Since the eighties Philips have built up one of the strongest corporate images of any company in their field. This has been attributed to the hard work of Robert Blaich who took over as the Manager of Philips Corporate Design in 1980. One of his favourite publicity seeking ventures was to engage a well known designer or design consultancy to work on a project with Philips. These workshops created oceans of publicity for the company and played a big role in raising the companies corporate image (Evamy, 1991, p.13). This project with Alessi sounds very much like one of Blaich's marketing ploys. Chapter one examines if this is the case.

Chapters two and three look at different aspects of the products and what function these aspects play. Chapter two concentrated on ergonomics, ease of use and the functions of form and colour in the four objects and

compares the results with the original design brief for the project.

Chapter two also looks at the function of aesthetics in the designs. It examines why retro styling chosen. The use of retro styling in general, has been labelled "plagiarism dressed up as nostalgia" (McDowell, 1996, p.20). It is an easy way to create imagery and comparisons behind a product. These images already exist in peoples minds. This area of chapter two looks at what associations Philips and Alessi were trying to make by using fifties styling.

Chapter three looks at marketing matters and evaluates the success of the line profitably for the companies. How big a role did marketing play in the success of these products?

In conclusion what makes a design classic? Do the Philips-Alessi line have what it takes?

The majority of research for this thesis was collected from Philips itself. A copy of the design brief for the project together with promotional literature and marketing information were essential in discovering the reasoning behind the range.

Hundreds of articles have been written about the different approaches of Philips and Alessi to design, Peggy Scheinn's "As Alessi sees it" (1991) from the journal Form Function Finland and Michael Evamy's "The High Way" (1994) from Design magazine were the two main sources of information from journals used in Chapter one. Also John Heskett's Philips a study in Corporate Management of Design (1989) and Raffaella Poletti's La Cucina Elettrica(1994) were main sources of

research. Heskett's book in particular was useful in researching Philips' design philosophies during the eighties.

For chapter two a background of American fifties design was mainly researched using Richard Horn's Fifties design then and now (1985) and Christopher Pearce's Fifties Source book a visual guide to the decade (1990).

The main research for chapter three was using the marketing information from Philips in Eindhoven and from interviews with stockists of the products in Dublin e.g. Haus. Numerous other works were consulted during the research for this thesis, the journals and books named above are some of the main sources of information.

Chapter One



The Alessi Design Aesthetic

Philips' High Design

"Art is primarily transmission of feelings and so I see my products as art objects. Alessi's designers are artists, that is the only word I can use for them" (Scheinn, 1990, p.40).

Alberto Alessi is the managing director of the Alessi company since the late seventies. He represents the third generation of a family business which has been going strong since the 1920s. Today the company employs up to 200 designers at any one time working on a variety of projects. All of these designers come from outside the company, since the forties Alessi have left the designing to outsiders. Alberto Alessi himself has no design qualifications, he is a lawyer by profession but he does have a very strong idea of what Alessi products should be (Scheinn, 1994, p.41).

To explain the Alessi approach to design, Alberto Alessi says:

I usually make a distinction between two opposite attitudes of design, on the one side design is seen essentially as one of the many tools available to marketing and/or technology, for the purpose of producing and selling better, of meeting peoples needs, but in actual fact serving the needs of the manufacturer. On the other we have the view that design is a Global Creative Discipline with a strictly artistic and poetic mainspring, and is geared to the realisation of peoples dreams (Poletti, 1994 p.183)

This rather utopian view of Alessi is all very well and it is a wonderful approach to create "poetic tools" as Alessi describe their products which fulfil peoples dreams and make them happier. But how do they actually achieve this, is it possible? Alessi's view is that people don't buy products for "purely practical reasons,...people need status symbols. People don't buy our pots and lemon squeezers because they have to boil water and squeeze lemons but because they want aesthetic pleasure" (Scheinn, 1991, p.41).

So Alessi concentrate very much on styling often to the detriment of basic functionality.e.g. the Alessi Bollotire kettle designed by Richard Sapper in 1983 is a perfect example of an Alessi product, good looking, stylish design with an added touch of humour, a whistle which mimicked the horn or siren of an American train. See figure 2. It however had overheating problems, yet sold well, purchasers perhaps willing to risk their safety to achieve stylishness (Vickers, 1991, p.11).

However, this again is another philosophical approach of Alessi, what actually makes their products status symbols is the star studded cast of designers Alessi employ e.g. Philippe Starck, Michael Graves, Alessandro Mendini and so on. They use an idea pushed by Christopher Dresser of allowing their designers to stamp goods with their names and style. In other words their products are signed in the way an artist signs a painting. This gives their products credibility and status, the fact that each product in Alessi has a different designer gives each a sense of individuality. Alessi explains that their aim was "to offer architects and designers a place where they could work out and put forward experimental methods, form and styles" (Scheinn, 1990, p.40). They are given great freedom and encouraged to use humour and fun in their ideas. Yet even though Alessi employ such a range of designers, each with their own style, they also manage to keep a sense of continuity throughout their products. Therefore its perfectly acceptable to have a Richard Sapper kettle beside a Philippe Starck lemon squeezer. See figure 3.

All Alessi's products embody a sense of humour with tremendous quality

Fig.2



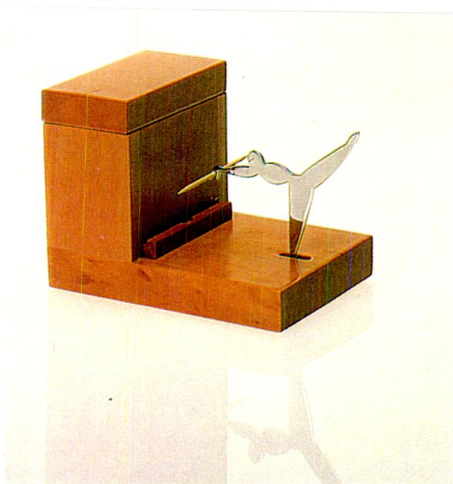
Richard Sapper Bollotire kettle

Fig.3



Philippe Starck juicer

Fig.4 Twergi household ware for Alessi



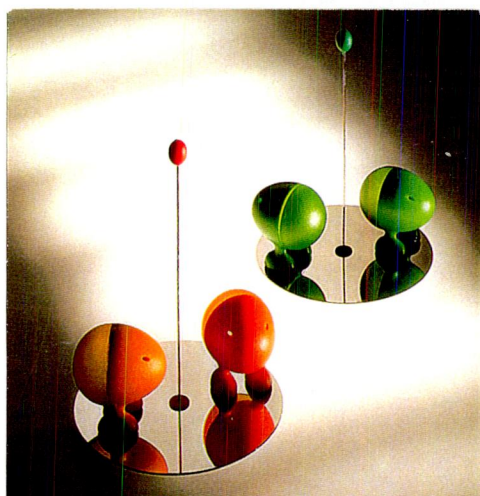
Toothpick holder



Coffee Mill

Fig.5

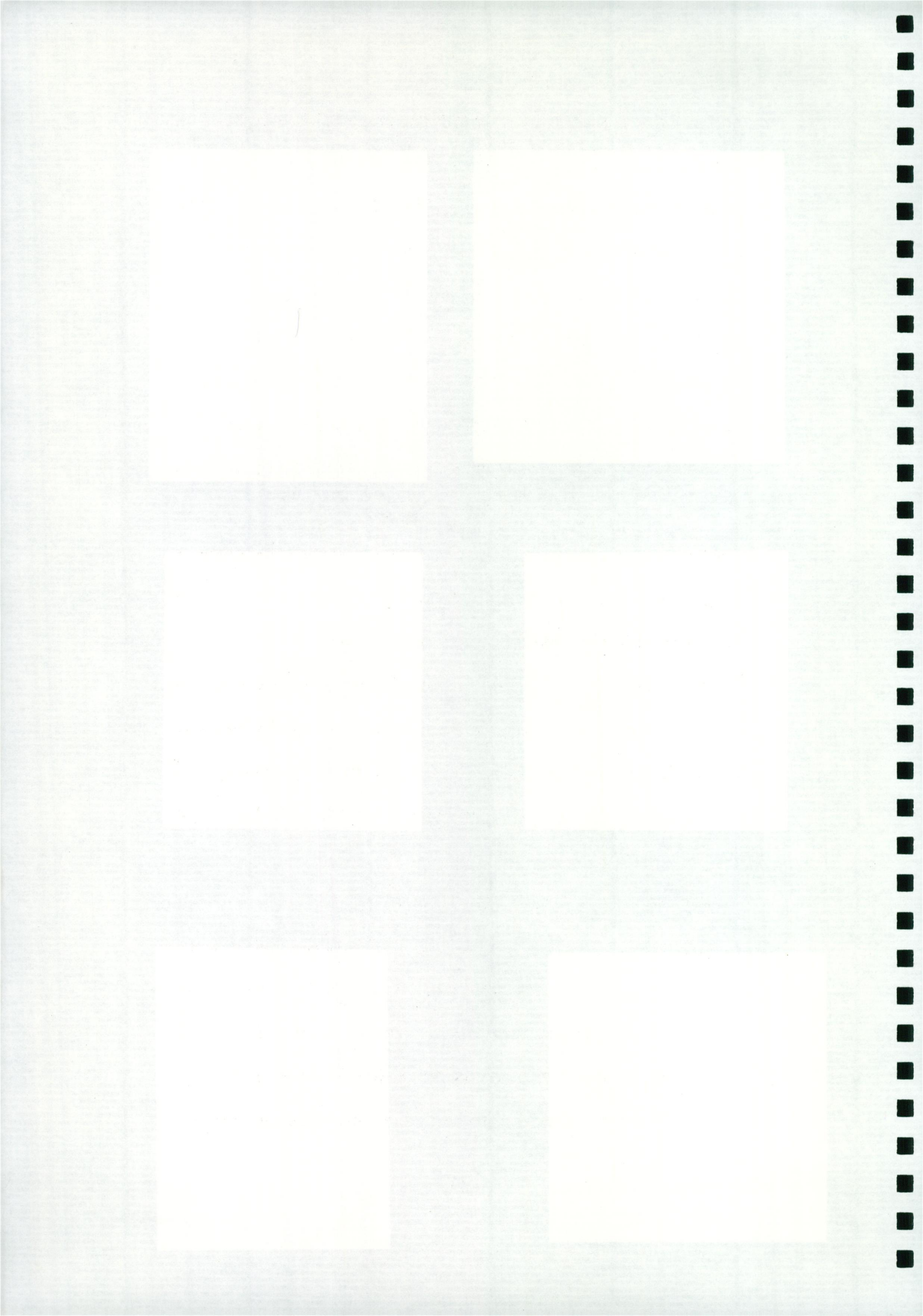
**Steel and Plastic
household ware
for Alessi**



Salt and Pepper



Nutcracker



in production, Alessi is almost like a craft workshop. They use traditional materials like wood, glass and stainless steel. Their products are at the same time beautiful with clean lines and finishes and alternatively quirky and whimsical. Figure 4 shows a range of household products designed by Twergi a subsidiary company belonging to Alessi. Alessi are also associated with using strong bright colours, in more recent times they have started using plastics a lot in their designs combined with the materials mentioned earlier in unusual and fun ways. Figure 5 shows examples of household tools designed for Alessi using plastic and stainless steel. So in fact products are very easily identifiable as Alessi even though up to 200 free lance designers are designing for them. It is important to note Alessi's design approach in creating quote "poetic tools" when looking at the Philips-Alessi line to compare with Philips approach.

Philips Corporate design has been run since 1992 by Stefano Marzano who like Alberto Alessi has a very set direction for his companies products. Philips claim he has brought about a "radically new design development process" he refers to as High Design (Beckwith, 1994, p.11). The aim of this High Design process is "to keep everyone focused on a vision of responsibly designed, longer lasting products of higher value and higher quality, that are more compelling because of greater attractiveness". Marzano seems to be taking a leaf out of Alessi's book here, what makes Alessi's products stand out from most others is their strong aesthetic sense and it is this X factor Philips have decided to explore. Marzano claims by making higher quality goods his products will be more responsible designs.

Up until now companies according to him have relied on goods which become obsolete quickly to gain profit. His wish is to design durable products which people want to keep and thus rid the market of irrelevant products which date quickly. However he recognises how quickly technology is developing in other product areas and therefore the philosophy of durability would not really be valid, causing products in reality to be more expensive for the company to manufacture and the consumer to buy. Therefore Philips also produce "cheaper short cycle products in highly technical areas" using recyclable materials.

If this is what Philips are striving for across the board, it is a massive undertaking. Firstly they are of a very broadbased nature as well as producing domestic appliances they are involved in consumer electronics, information technology, electronic components, medical equipment and lighting and so on. Secondly if their Japanese rivals still continue to churn out endless amounts of cheaper alternatives to Philips one enduring product, they will be successful in feeding a consumer appetite for new goods which is still here. Marzano seems sure that "the Japanese are moving in the same direction as Philips". According to him they also have found from research that Japanese consumers are seeking more spiritual gratification and new aesthetic values in products. If he is wrong it would seem Marzano's noble plans for the company will inevitably fail unable to compete with constantly changing products from competitors (Evamy, 1994, p.20).

Jos Brouwer of the European Design Centre in Eindhoven has

worked frequently with Philips. He feels Marzano's High Design is just another name to make them seem different while they really remain the same. He says however Marzano's philosophy of products which last and become of intrinsic value to a consumer is a very valid one. It was an idea Victor Papanek talked a lot of in the sixties.

Philips certainly seem to be attempting to use this approach in the Philips-Alessi line, however Brouwer's view here is that projects like this one with Alessi are unusual, their image has not really changed. He feels this union between the two firms is window dressing on behalf of the firm aimed at an elite consumer market. Essentially the rest of the Philips products stay the same and it is from these that Philips make 99% of their profit (Brouwer 1995 Appendix A).

There are doubts to Marzano's sincerity in his claims for the future of Philips and indeed his hopes for the future of design. After all it is his job as it is for Alberto Alessi, to maintain a high Corporate image and sell more products. To do this he is keeping on a tradition his predecessor started and Alessi has been doing for years using outside designers.

When Robert Blaich took over as managing director of Philips Corporate Industrial Design in 1980 Philips had a very bad image. Their goods were considered "dull and disparate" particularly for the younger generation. They were used by the older generations as they worked well yet looked bland. Something was necessary to change their image in people's minds and also to cater for groups like the younger generation which had been neglected. Blaich set up task forces to deal with these

groups e.g. Youth task force, which came up with some winning designs like Philips Roller Radios which were colourful and different from anything Philips competitors in Sony or Sanyo were doing. See figure 6. But one of the most successful tools Blaich used during his time as director to raise Philips poor image was holding joint workshops between Philips and outside designers e.g. the videophone workshop with Frogdesign, which helped create oceans of publicity for the company. This pulling in of famous designer friends did the world of good for Philips image, as with Alessi it gave their products status and credibility. Blaich is credited with pulling Philips out of the doldrums during the eighties to become one of the most successful, largely known Western electronics companies able to compete with its Eastern counterparts. His use of workshops with well known designers were often criticised as being public relations exercises but they were mainly the reason why Philips profile was raised in consumer's minds (Evamy, 1991, p.14).

Marzano by joining with Alessi for a workshop has used the very same method as Blaich. Alessi are after all a very well established design group and give good foundations of styling and aesthetics to the Philips-Alessi line. The idea it seemed was to combine Philips the established electronics company mass producing functional domestic appliances with Alessi, providing the X factor which would raise the range to a higher level. This relationship was also beneficial to Alessi, it was their first venture into the electronics field where their products would reach a much wider market.

Fig.6 Philips Roller Radio 1980s



However for Philips there were other reasons why this project was important. Perhaps the main reason for the convergence between the two groups was in the late eighties and early nineties Philips had hit a slump announcing a fall in profits of 19% and in 1988 and 1991 there were threatened job losses of up to 20,000. Philips were no longer selling well particularly in the area of domestic appliances. Blaich had been due to leave in 1990 but stayed on to try and help Philips overcome this slump and also to train in Marzano as his successor.

An article in Design in May 1988 blamed firstly Philips problems in it being over stretched but also catering for too narrow a middle market. This image made them unable to command premium prices for products or to compete at the lower end of the market (Gardner, 1988, p.30). This so called middle market label was obviously doing no good at all to Philips newly acquired Corporate image via Robert Blaich. It seems to escape this label producing a range of designer high quality domestic appliances like a toaster, a kettle, a coffee maker and a citrus press (most frequently sold items) using a high profile advertising and publicity campaign was essential.

Blaich had said "if we design the most beautiful e.g. light in the world and put it through the normal channels of Philips' distribution, they wouldn't know how to sell it. It would be too expensive for them they wouldn't have the intellectual capacity to present it (Evamy, 1991, p.14).

Marzano obviously did not agree. He chose to promote the Philips-Alessi line and aim them at a high end market. In a very vocal publicity campaign

on behalf of Philips and Alessi Marzano spoke out about his hopes for the design, he described the Philips-Alessi union in terms of "the complementary strengths of Philips and Alessi". Alessi himself described it more poetically "it could produce the ideal family relationship linking the paternal qualities of the mass production industry with the maternal qualities of the Italian design firms to produce a well balanced consumer child. Successful exploration of this area could generate a new, higher quality in industrial mass production" (Philips, 1994).

It would seem from this approach a perfect product would be achieved functional, beautiful, catering for users needs and desires - a design classic for the nineties. It has already been mentioned various more financially based reasons for Philips to join with Alessi in the project other than raising the quality and level of design in mass production.

It is only by examining each item in the Philips-Alessi line in real terms can it be seen if this has been achieved. The following chapters attempts to do this, to point out the qualities and flaws of the four products and also to show if they have fulfilled the expectations of the designers and consumers alike.

Chapter two



The functional aspects of design

Ergonomics

Colour

The function of Aesthetics

Philips have described the Philips-Alessi range as "the very best in form and function" (DAP, 1994).

The following chapters deal with the functionality of the four products in the range. The functions of design are manifold, there is no one definition. Adrian Forty set out a kind of design criteria in his book Objects of Desire. According to him design aims to make things beautiful, to solve problems but also design is a means to make profit. Another interesting element of design he describes is its ability to create myths behind products (Forty, 1992, p.8). According to Graham Vickers the term functionality embraces many more things than just simple ergonomics. There are also marketing matters, ease of manufacturing and styling to take into account (Vickers, 1991, p.1). This chapter examines how well the four products work ergonomically, have been designed to aid ease of use. It examines the function of the form and colour of the designs.

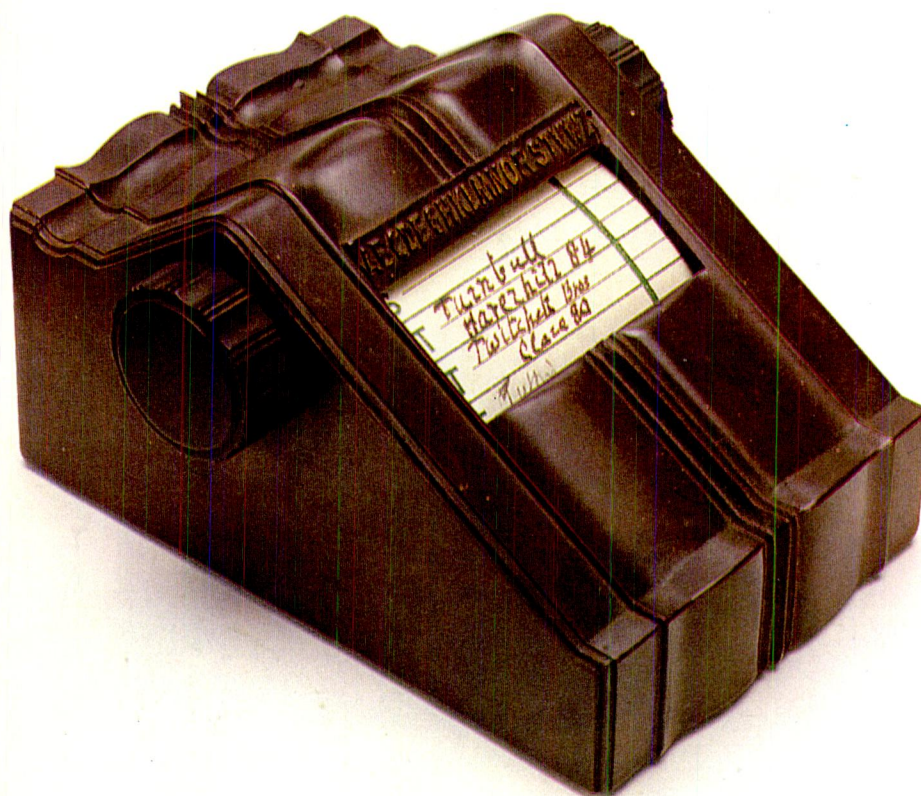
Ergonomics

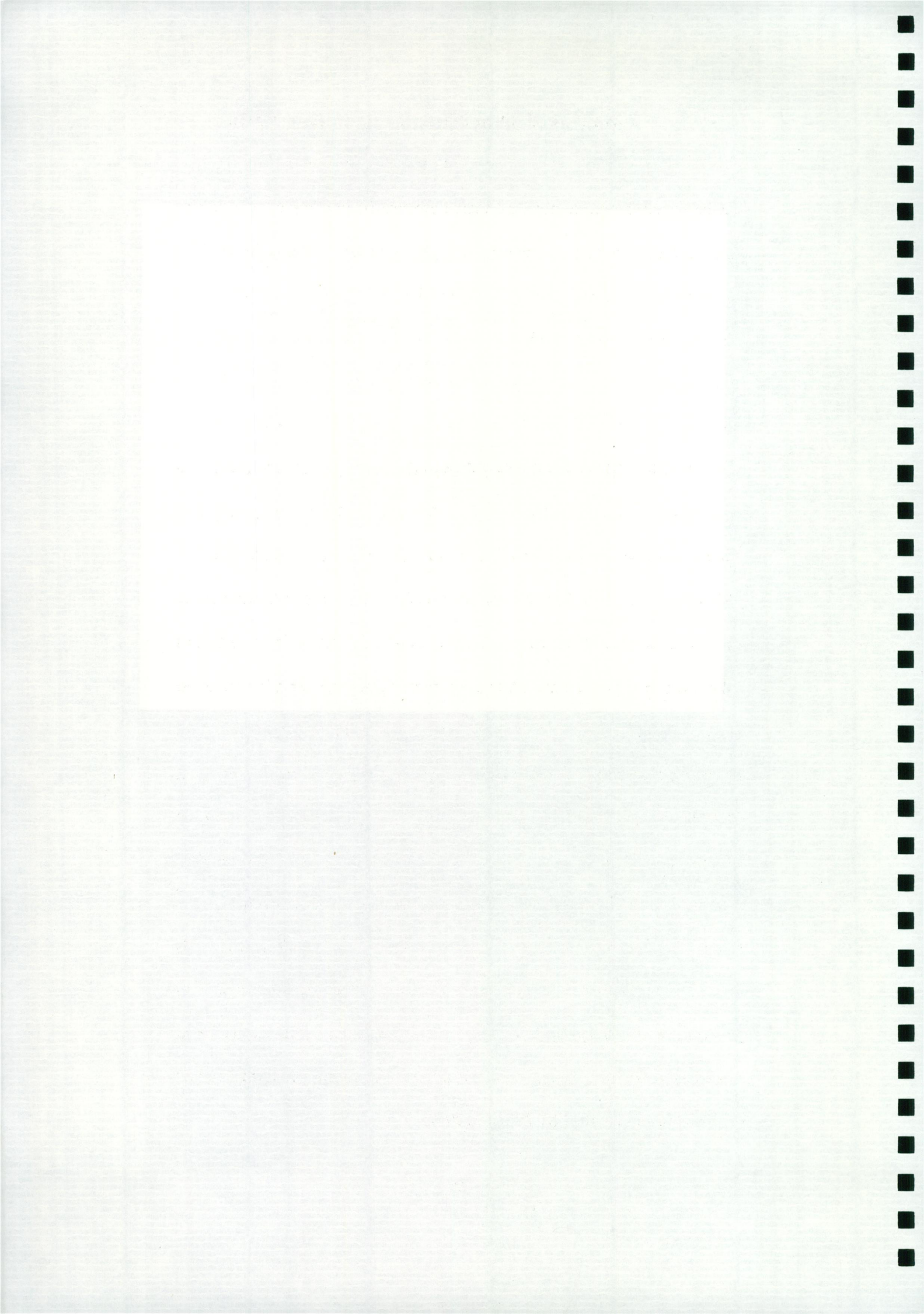
Philips claim their products fulfil all their functions ergonomically and aesthetically. It does seem obvious given Philips experience in electrical goods they will work well. However given Alessi's involvement and their belief that functionality is never an essential element to achieve successful design, the question do they work does seems to merit attention.

In their design brief for the project Philips and Alessi say "that the products are not only innovative and aesthetically appealing but eminently practical, efficient, effective and easy to use" (Philips by Alessi, 1994, n.p.). To do this they chose to move away from highly technical goods

with unnecessarily complicated interfaces and gimmicky added on extras which they felt made products inaccessible for users. They used the term "core functionality" in describing the function of the products, each one carries out its one core task simply and reliably. This seems to be a return to early modernist products of the thirties and forties, simple uncomplicated black or white shells containing electrical goods whose functions were emphasised by overly large buttons and dials for ease of use. Also their functional shell often in bakelite made the products durable (Katz, 1984, p.6). Figure 7 shows an example of thirties design, this radio is encased in a bakelite shell which makes it appear very strong, almost indestructible. It also has very large controls which emphasise its ease of use. This is what Philips/Alessi wanted to portray. All of the Philips-Alessi range are encased in thick plastic polypropylene shells which give them a sense of stability and reliability. They look strong and durable and their weight suggests the same. Visually they have the same sense of convenience and reliability as similar products in the thirties. Yet ergonomically they have been criticised. Jos Brouwer E.D.C. while working with Philips heard complaints of people having difficulties using them e.g. some people found the handle of the kettle too big to control (Brouwer, 1995, Appendix A). Some of the stockists in Ireland e.g. Haus and Presents of Mind, have had to return many of the four items to Philips which simply came apart. Philips had talked of making products easy to disassemble for ease of repair but this seems a bit excessive if they fall apart so easily. The coffee maker in particular has been criticised for its size and weight compare

Fig.7 Radio Speaker by Thomas de la Rue, 1930s





the two and a half cups of coffee it provides. The most criticised of the four items from an ergonomic point of view however, is the toaster. The device which is used to push the toast downwards, in complete contrast to early modern design is delicate and very flimsy. Philips themselves admitted they had complaints of it breaking off. 'Presents of Mind' felt Philips needed to go back to the drawing board with the toaster', ergonomically it seems a disaster. From my own experience with the products they all appear to be very heavy and difficult to manipulate for example it is difficult to take the lid from the kettle and also to divide the two different parts of the coffee maker. It is also difficult to take the juicer apart even though it claims to be easy to disassemble to help cleaning.

This is an elementary flaw in these products which is hard to believe given Philips experience in the area of electrical goods. Robert Blaich was always a believer in ergonomics. Philips products have been considered good maybe bland and dull, but functional. The emphasis Philips and Alessi have placed on the two of them joining together, two opposites each offering an essential component of design is contradictory if the four elements in the Philips-Alessi line are simply an exercise in styling. In their brief they described the union of the two firms as "the best of both worlds".....In terms of skills and capacities, Philips as manufacturer of electrical goods for the mass market with top rank technological expertise and a long tradition of functional design....., an exact compliment of Alessi's non electrical goods for a niche market with strong emphasis on aesthetics and craftsmanship" (Philips by Alessi, 1994).

In the description of the products it seemed they were paying particular attention to simplifying the controls of each item and improving its function. According to them the citrus press features a powerful motor with a "unique pressing system" to provide faster juicing with less force needed by the user than usual. An unusually silent motor which means the noise level is minimal, so while in use the juicer is not intrusive. Meanwhile the toaster has a special sensor system which means each piece of toast browns to your own personal choice every time it's used. Both are easily cleaned and disassembled if repair is required. Both the kettle and the coffee maker are easy to fill and pour from, the kettle has a boil dry protection, the coffee maker is insulated and unbreakable (Philips, 1994, n.p.).

With such emphasis being placed on ease of use and the durable qualities of the products it is disappointing there are problems in the designs. The adding on of unnecessary extras like the ones just described, is exactly what Philips and Alessi have done if the products themselves do not carry out their one task successfully. Their claim of "core functionality" is therefore completely invalid. Philips seemed to compromise their whole philosophy, by not fulfilling the basic ergonomic requirements. Perhaps these shortcomings in the products are mistakes which can be overcome in future models. The Richard Sapper kettle for Alessi which was mentioned earlier had quite a major problem of overheating initially, later these were dealt with. There is the same possibility for the Philips-Alessi range, being the forerunners for a new design ethos they are bound to have some preliminary hic-coughs. However

it is a risk for Philips to take to be associated with such bad quality goods.

It is their good name in electrical appliances which makes the goods so attractive, in their description of the goods they promised the best in "form and function". It would appear that this description is not very well balanced.

Colour

One of the most striking aspects of the Philips-Alessi line are the bright colours used. Colour is one the most expressive characteristics of any object, yet generally products in the electrical field vary from white to grey. There are a number of reasons for this, mainly that manufacturers are afraid to experiment in case they fail and people will not buy their products. Also electrical appliances must match their setting to some extent, this has generally been achieved by using very nondescript muted colours like white to blend products into the background.

As well as fitting in with people's decor kitchen appliances must compliment all the other units used in the kitchen like food processors, microwaves and so on. These units will be in all probability designed by different companies and thus by remaining white they will be at least visually compatible. Another reason white has been used for so long in kitchen appliances is its associations with cleanliness and hygiene.

The decision by Philips and Alessi seems quite a risky one to take in view of all the added bonus's in sticking with white. However Philips being a leader in their field are in a position to dictate changes like this. They experimented with colour before in the eighties with the Roller Radio shown in Fig.6 These were quite revolutionary at this time and allowed companies like Sanyo and Sony to produce similarly bright, cheerful stereos for the younger generation.

The obvious advantage of colour is it makes a product stand out, during the fifties there was a lot of experimentation into colour. Products

during this period were produced in various shades of lemon and turquoise to name but two. Each year a colour was predicted as is still the case in the world of fashion, which was then the "in colour" for the year across the board, car design, product design and so on. Figure 8 shows advertisements for the ranges of colours available in fifties cars and refrigerators, as can be seen they are very similar. The fifties is credited with "redefining the standard bland white box that is accepted as normal for kitchen appliances". Philips and Alessi chose fifties styling for their range, using pastel shades, the coffee maker is salmon pink, the kettle mint green, the toaster cream and the citrus press a lemon shade. They may have been simply referring to this period for colour influences also. The products would probably look very strange seeing as their form is so retrospective, if the colours did not match this.

When discussing how they chose the colours for the four products Philips and Alessi's reasoning is very general. They state how it was their aim to move away from white box products. The colours chosen had to compliment the food and drinks they were associated with. The colours finally chosen were a compromise between the bright outlandish colouring used by Alessi and the bland white products normally produced by Philips. Each product was given its own separate colour to give it a sense of individuality. The touch of burgundy used in each product was used as a means of identifying them as a family unit. Stainless steel was used for example in the spout of the kettle and of the juicer to associate the products with Alessi. Presumably this was added to match any Alessi goods people

Fig.8 Fifties car and refrigerator advertisements

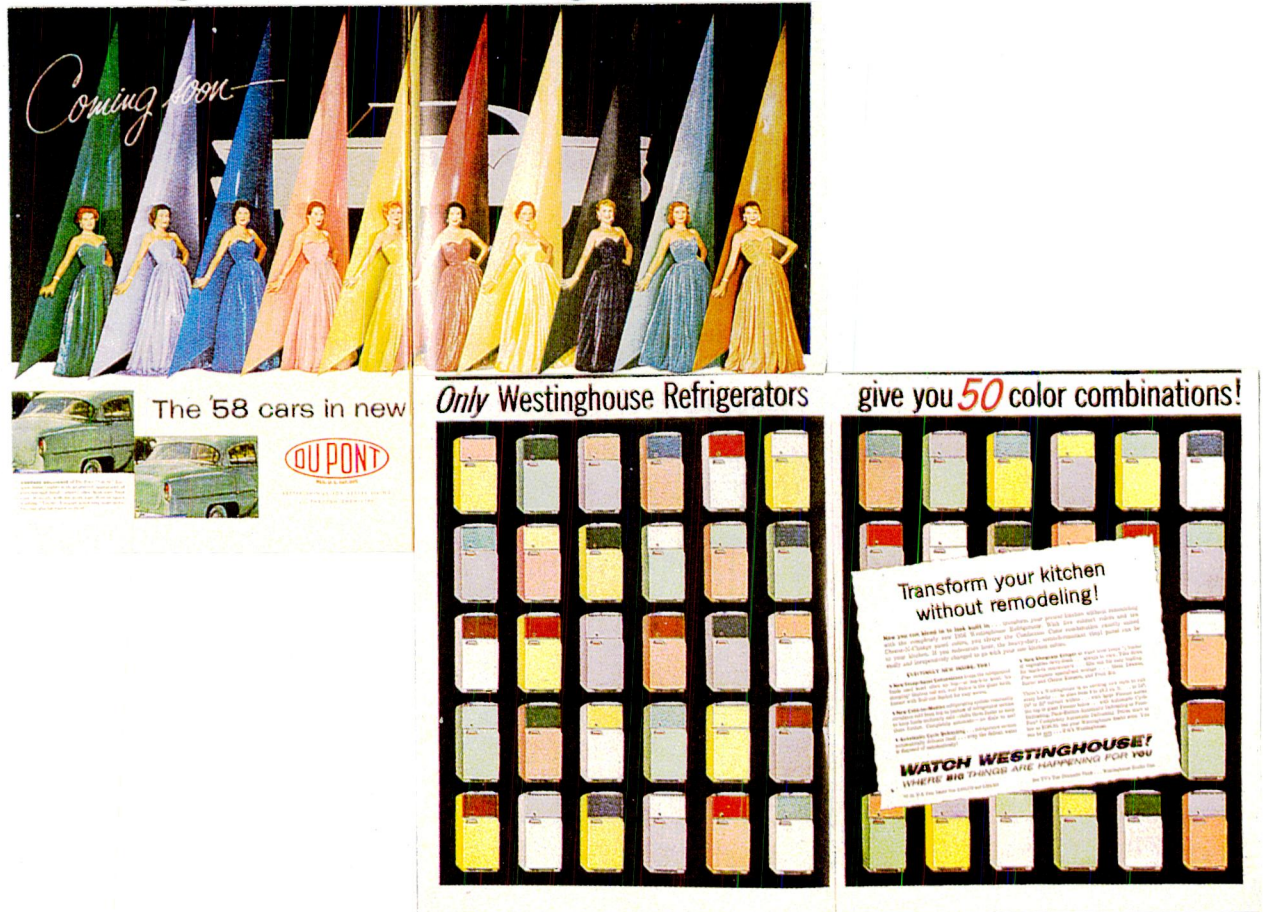
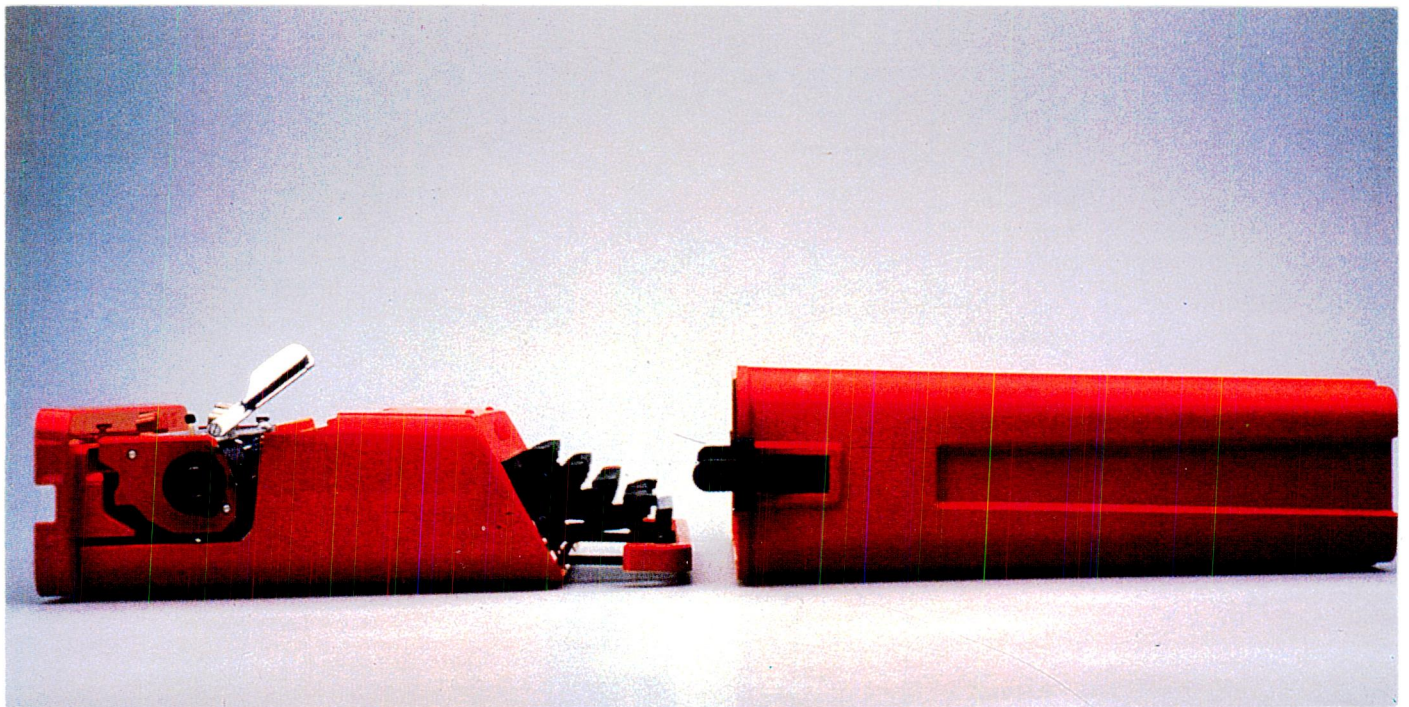
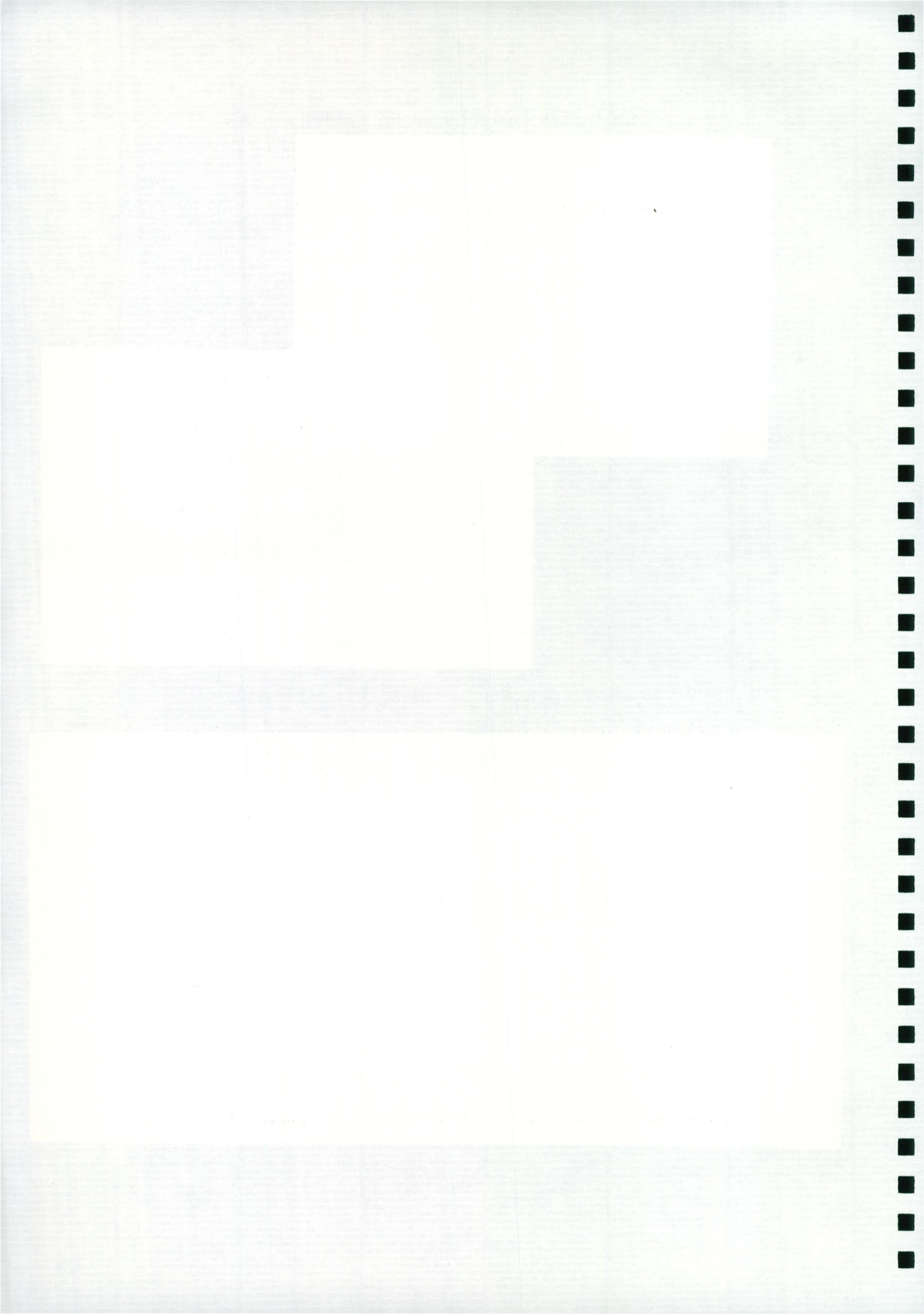


Fig.9 Valentine typewriter by Ettore Sottsass for Olivetti





might already own. The final colour chosen was described as being neither garish or insipid which is rather a negative reflection on previous colour choices by both firms (Philips, 1994). Obviously as colour is one of the strongest aspects of any object this is an area where the products could reflect too much the aesthetics of either company. One answer is of course to compromise.

Philips and Alessi do not give the logic behind each colour chosen for each product, in fact they are very vague. Perhaps they chose the colours which are quite soft, as a reaction to the harsh artificial colours so prominent in eighties design. An article in the Financial Times describes them as soft and cuddly for "the Dream Kitchen", their colour and styling reflecting the softer more reflective nineties (Van der Post, 1994, p.14). Pastel shades are usually associated with toys particularly for babies i.e. baby pink, or are a way of hinting at products being as much for pleasure as for business. This is the message Philips and Alessi wanted to convey, the idea of products that do more than satisfy people's needs, but endeavour to fulfil their dreams also. Even though Philips and Alessi describe the colour of the products as being "neither garish nor insipid", the final colours are more than just a compromise between the two firms. They are a safe choice for the products, colour is a risky thing to play around with particularly in this area where products are predominantly white. The pastel colours are not too overpowering, they are in fact rather anaemic. They will fit into a traditional and also a modern kitchen. Another important factor in the colour choice is that Philips and Alessi

have not only targeted their products at a female market. They say in their design brief the preparation of food is no longer solely a female task, it is a "joint ritual undertaken by equal partners" (Philips, 1994). Yet the pastel shades chosen were used in the fifties to appeal to a female market. The coffee makers pink tone in particular is a typical example of the type of colours used in the fifties. Men are no longer being bombarded with dark colours as the only option they have, fashion for men is today as colourful as it is for women. Men are encouraged to be more adventurous. Also today the philosophy of the fifties pink for a girl, is no longer applicable, colour is not used so crudely to categorise masculine and feminine.

Colour is becoming less of a barrier for designers, the safe option of white and black box design no longer suffices in an over saturated market, in making a product stand out. Colour of course has been experimented with before, but not with lasting success e.g. the red Olivetti typewriter in figure 9, which was a novelty initially but soon lost its appeal (Vickers, 1991, p.25). If Philips and Alessi do what they have promised and re-evaluate the colour of their products frequently, this will help stay in fashion and not run the risk of becoming dated so quickly.

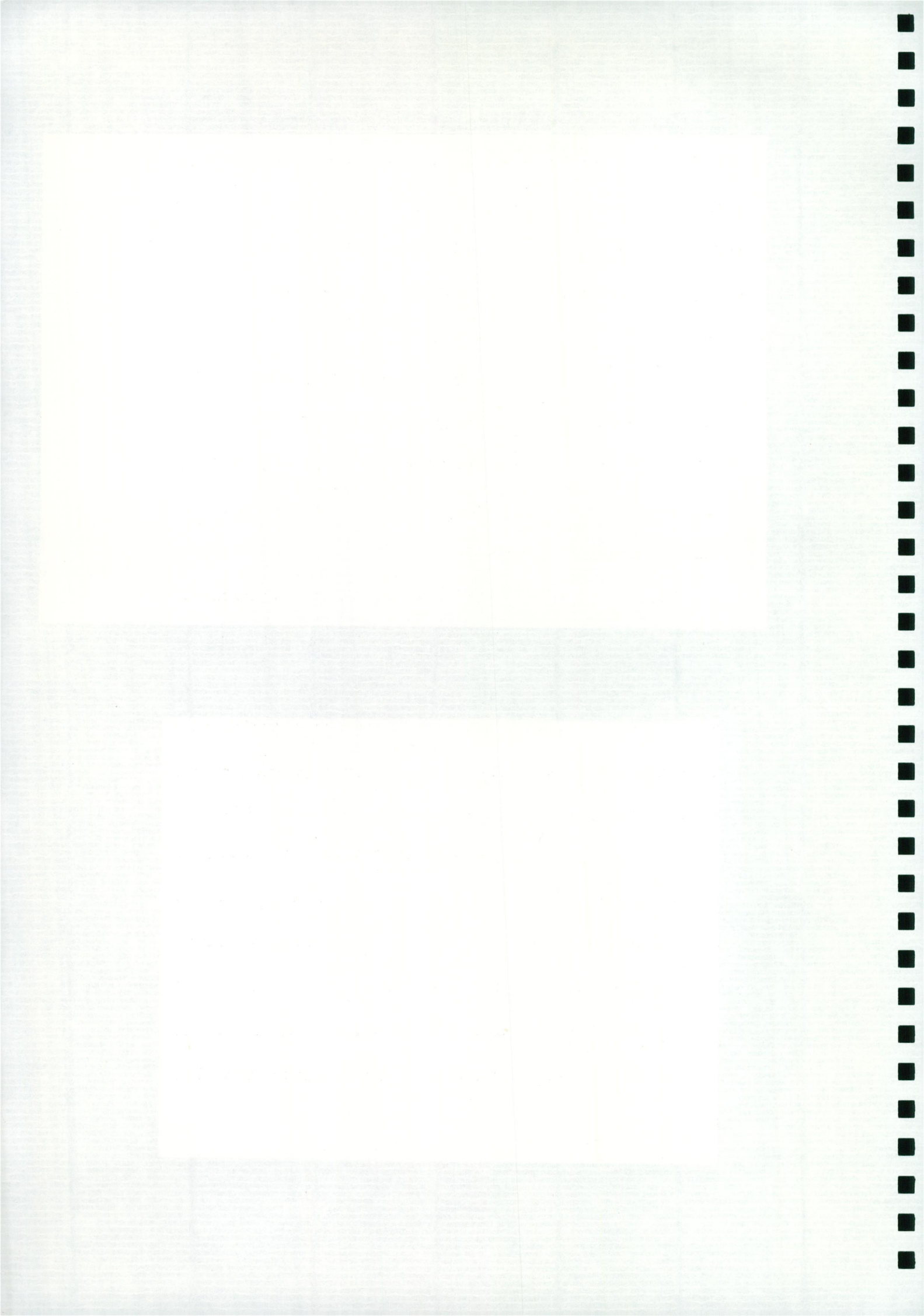
Fig.10 The Studebaker car by Raymond Lowey



Fig.11 Dole Deluxe Coca Cola dispenser by Raymond

Lowey,1947.





The function of aesthetics

Since the 1980s there has been an overwhelming return to fifties American design. This is very evident in the Philips-Alessi line, with their bulky curvaceous shapes, their colourful plastic exteriors and stainless steel detail they are a perfect example of retro styling. They are particularly reminiscent of American car and product design.

There is an argument that by using aesthetics or styling like using ergonomics to "fit a product to a users body you can fit a product to a market". The styling defines your market (Ferther, 1990, p.33). What associations with the fifties did Philips want to recapture to make their product appealing to their users?

Firstly many designers using fifties design are trying to convey the whole feel good atmosphere of the decade. The fifties was a time of great optimism for people worldwide after the end of World War Two. In America particularly optimism was very high after their victory. After years of depravation and food shortages during that period, post war consumers demanded new designs to match their mood (Horn, 1985, p.5).

There were many different types of 1950s styles but it was the streamlined styling used in fifties cars such as those designed by Raymond Lowey that had the biggest impact. Figure 10 shows a car designed by Lowey, the Studebaker in 1950. The styling used in these cars spread across to product design for the home and to a lot of areas of industrial design from Coca Cola dispensers shown in figure 11, to Petrol pumps and so on.

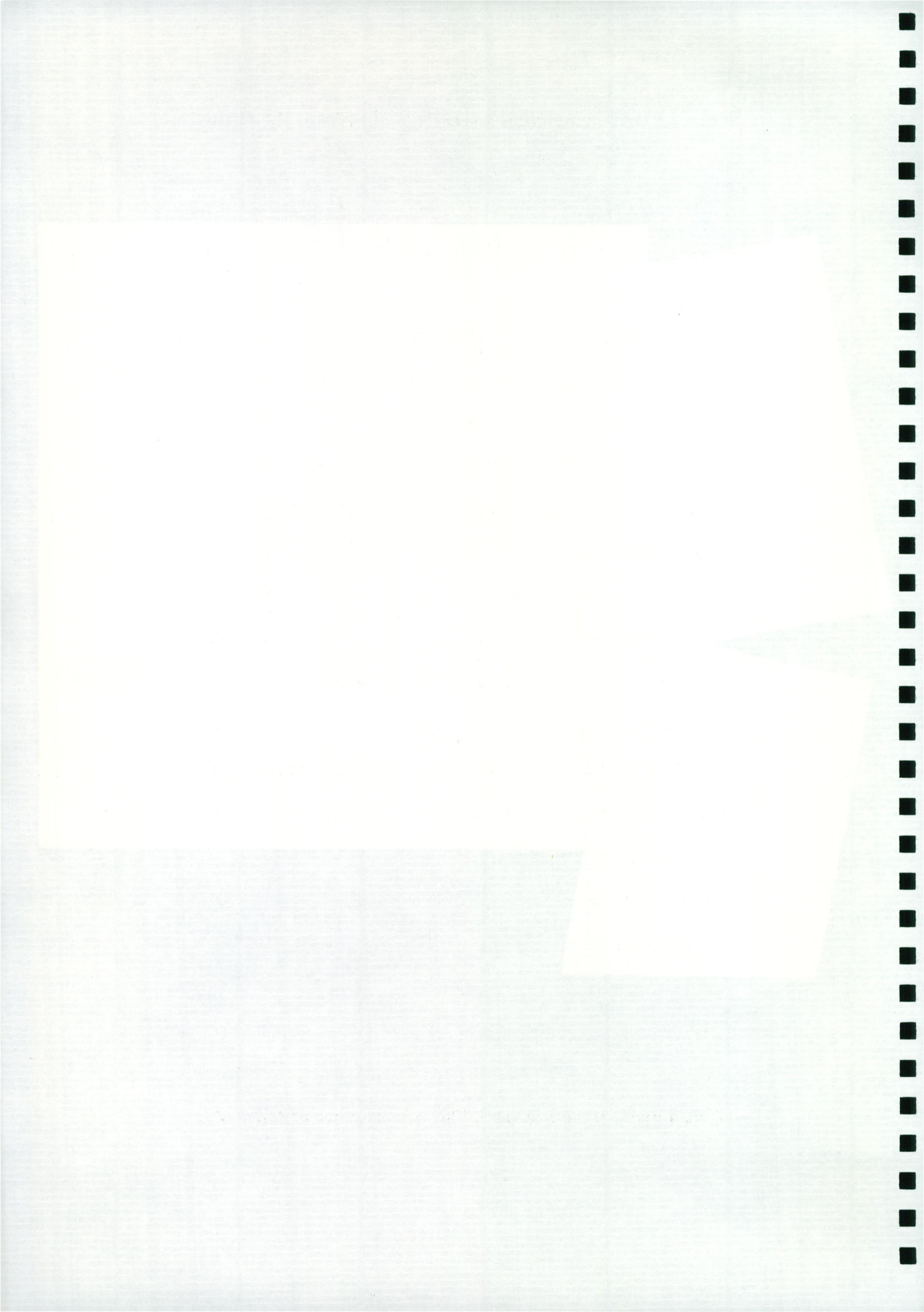
The cars of the fifties designed by Ford and General Motors and Chrysler were visually outrageous. They boasted added extras such as high-performance engines, better brakes and lighting systems but in reality they were completely impractical quite similar to the Philips-Alessi range. They guzzled petrol and were really a fashion item which became obsolete after one or two years. As with Alessi products these products were not bought for their functionality. They were symbols of status and power. They were an antidote to the war years.

The styling used in car design crossed over to product design and here we see another example of fifties design which made it a suitable choice for Philips. Due to the separations and personal losses suffered during the war period, there was a huge emphasis placed on family 'togetherness', as a result the kitchen took over as the most important room in the house. This was the place the family sat down as a unit to eat together. More time was spent in the kitchen and therefore "dream kitchens" were designed, advertisements such as those shown in figure 12 were bombarded at women. Products for the kitchen became available in all shapes and sizes and colours. As cars at that time were marketed as dream objects for men, domestic appliances were marketed in the same way for women. Products were said to be beautiful even when not in use (Horn, 1985, p.12).

This reflects one of the major objectives of Philips and Alessi, in their brief they say there is a need to return to the preparation of food which reflects the kitchen as the "central family place". The aim of the

Fig.12 Dream Kitchen advertisements from the fifties





project was to "rehumanise the kitchen", by designing 'modern kitchen tools' which emphasise eating as a ritual (Philips, 1994). Referring to fifties domestic appliance design, Philips are using this association to convey their message of the renewal of the importance of food preparation, of eating as a ritual.

Neither Philips and Alessi refer to the styling they used as retro or in any way reminiscent of fifties design. However it cannot be denied how derivative the products are of fifties styling. The retrospective colours of the four products has already been discussed. Even down to the stainless steel detail, they refer to the gleaming chrome accessories used in the car design of that decade.

Revamped fifties design in the nineties is often referred to as "kitsch". This label is quite trendy, it is considered in the worst possible taste which is only recognised as such, by people with the very best taste and a good knowledge of design. Designers can plagiarise design from previous decades and call it nostalgic. These products are marketed particularly at consumers with an interest in design and are aware of the associations of using fifties design.

Yet another similarity between fifties design and the design of the Philips-Alessi line is the anthropomorphic values placed on products. Products in the fifties were often shaped like little robots to give them a sort of human quality. Figure 13 shows a juice extractor which looks like a little person waiting to serve. This is also true of the Philips-Alessi range to add to their long term value or intrinsic value. This is another area of design which

Fig.13 Juice Extractor, Jura, Saffa, 1950s



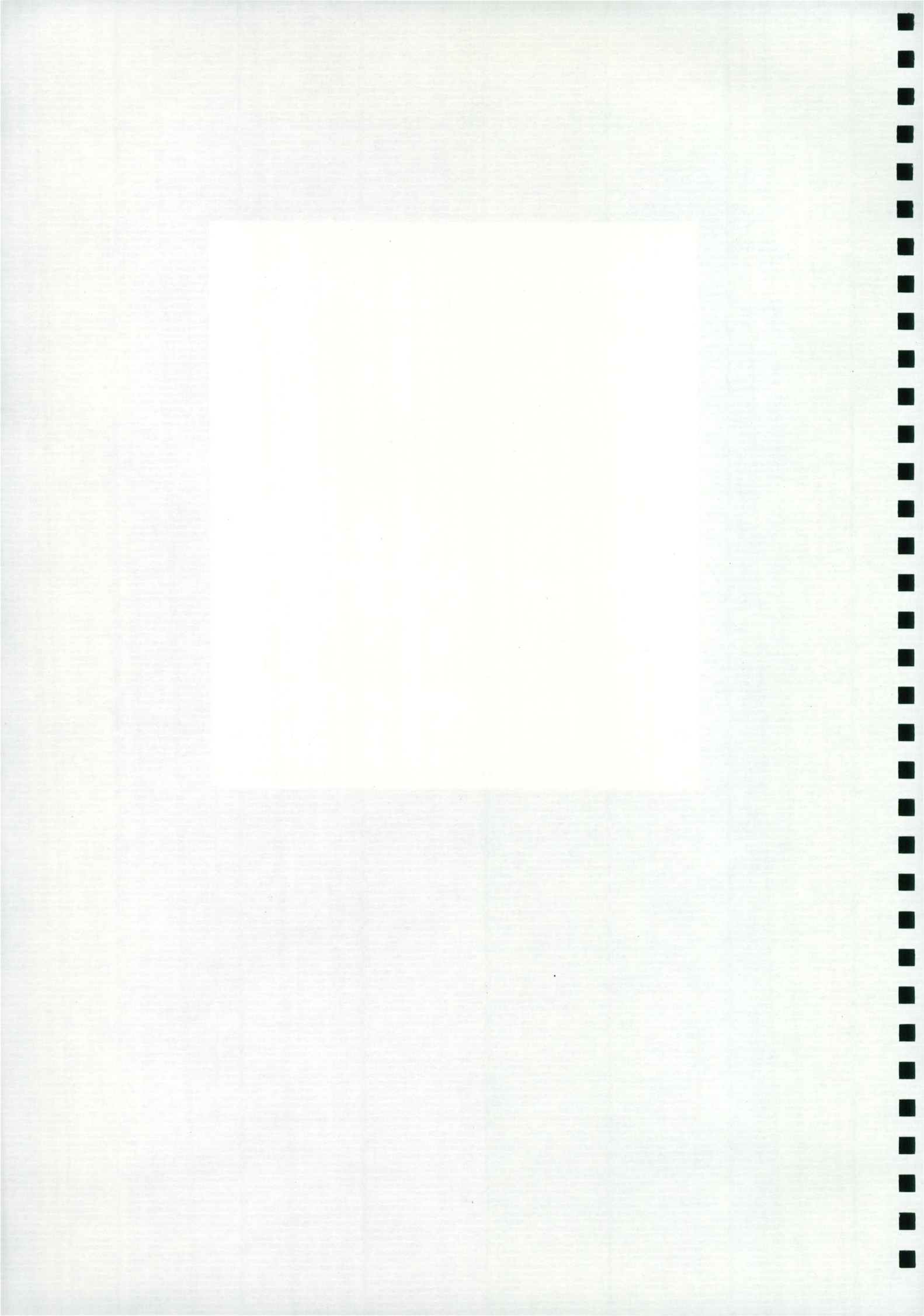


Fig.14 Penguin Tea for Alessi

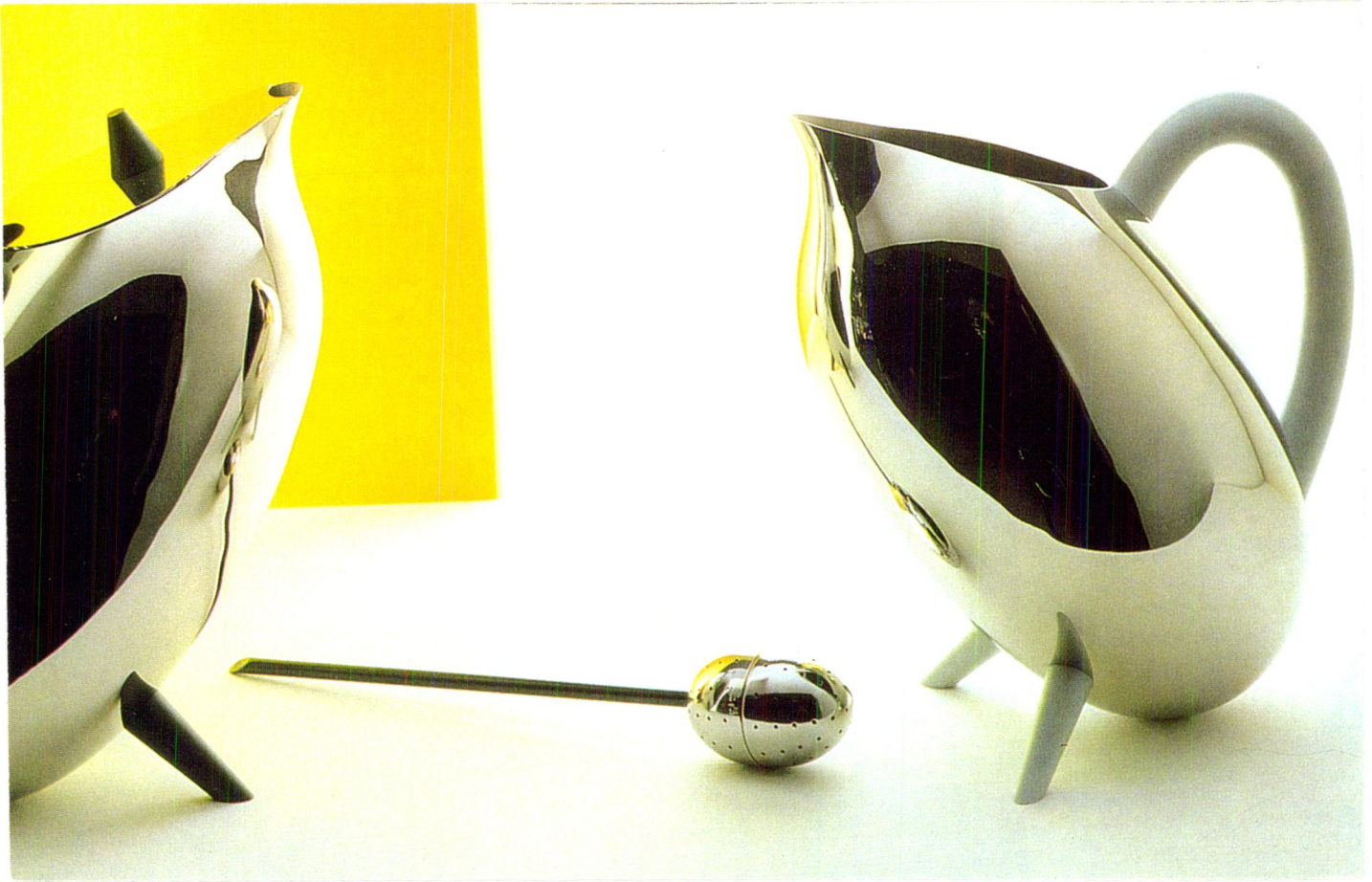
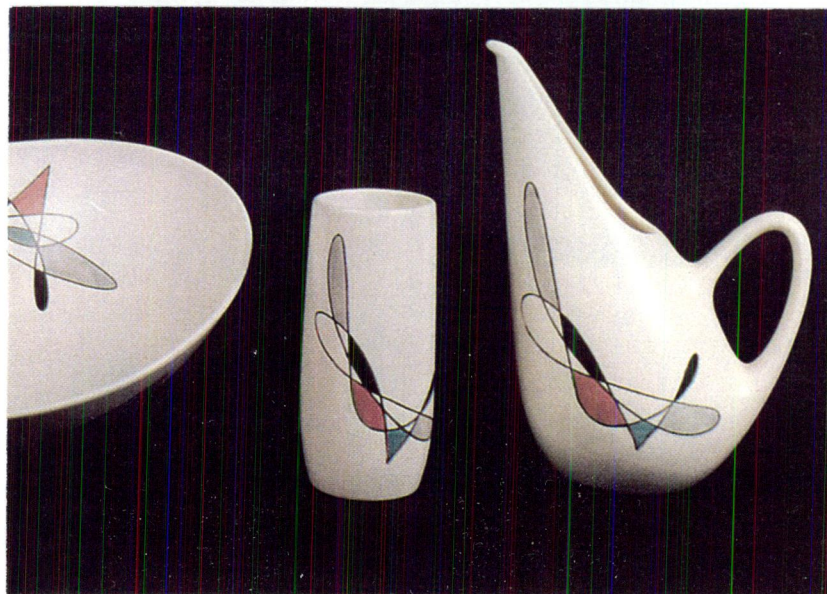
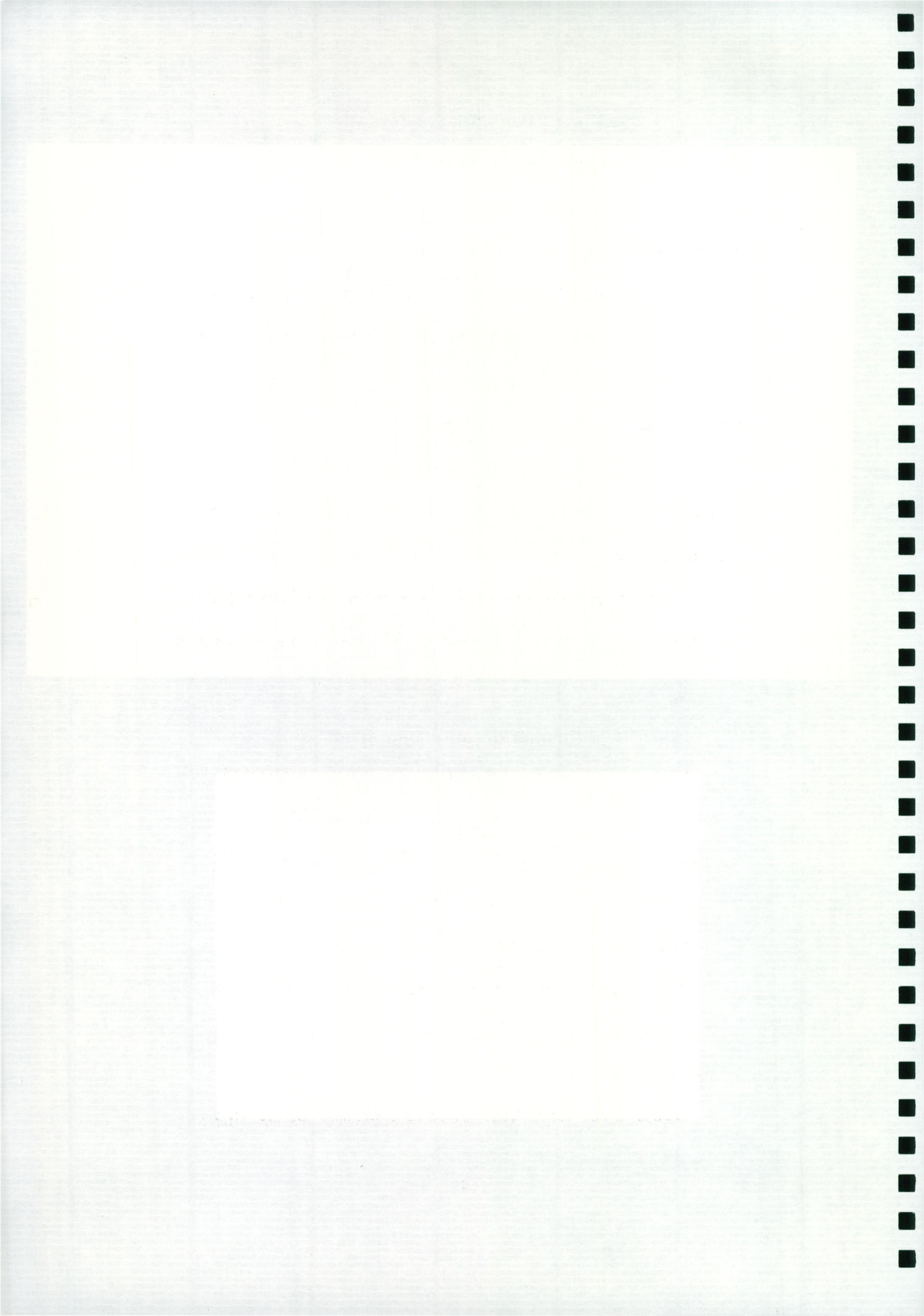


Fig.15 Californian dream range from the fifties





serves a function is form. This can be explored by relating the form of an object to its task. In the Philips-Alessi range their forms also serve the purpose of making them seem very reliable, the stocky rounded shapes suggest this and also durability. In relation to the tasks of the products the kettle for example is leaning forward like a jug ready to pour. Philips and Alessi describe its form as that of a silent butler or servant. It is similar in form to a teapot designed for Alessi by Pierangelo Caramia, called Penguin Tea shown in figure 14. This teapot also leans forward as if waiting to be poured. There are also examples of this type of form in jugs and pouring vessels from the 1950s. See figure 15. This use of semantics is carried throughout the range. The coffee maker is described by Philips-Alessi as a couple snuggled up together, this is to reflect the container of coffee in contact with the electrical part of the appliance which heats it up, "the two parts of the Coffee Maker, the machine itself and the insulated jug, snuggle up to each other like cuddly little animals - almost pets". The purpose of this description is for people to see the products with human like qualities, to consider them as friends rather than characterless machines. This is part of Philips and Alessi's plan for the range, if people become attached emotionally to these objects they will be less inclined to throw them away. The products will be more durable.

The toaster description is almost human, it ejects the toast "quietly so as not to disturb", the citrus press also "works almost silently so as not to intrude" (Philips, 1994).

People today might also associate references to the fifties in

America with money. It has been called a "golden era", there were people with enough disposable income available to buy cars they had to replace within a year. There are a lot of people with similar amounts of disposable income today.

The styling of the four products was an extremely important element Philips and Alessi had to take into account in these products. It is the first thing consumers notice. By using the type of styling they did the products immediately stand out in outlets from the other products. Fifties styling said all the things Philips and Alessi wanted to convey to their consumers, as has been described above. Also the styling used did not reflect too much the aesthetics previously used by either company. Therefore the four products will not be associated with one company over the other.

Chapter three



Marketing

Fig.16 Philips/Alessi promotional photograph

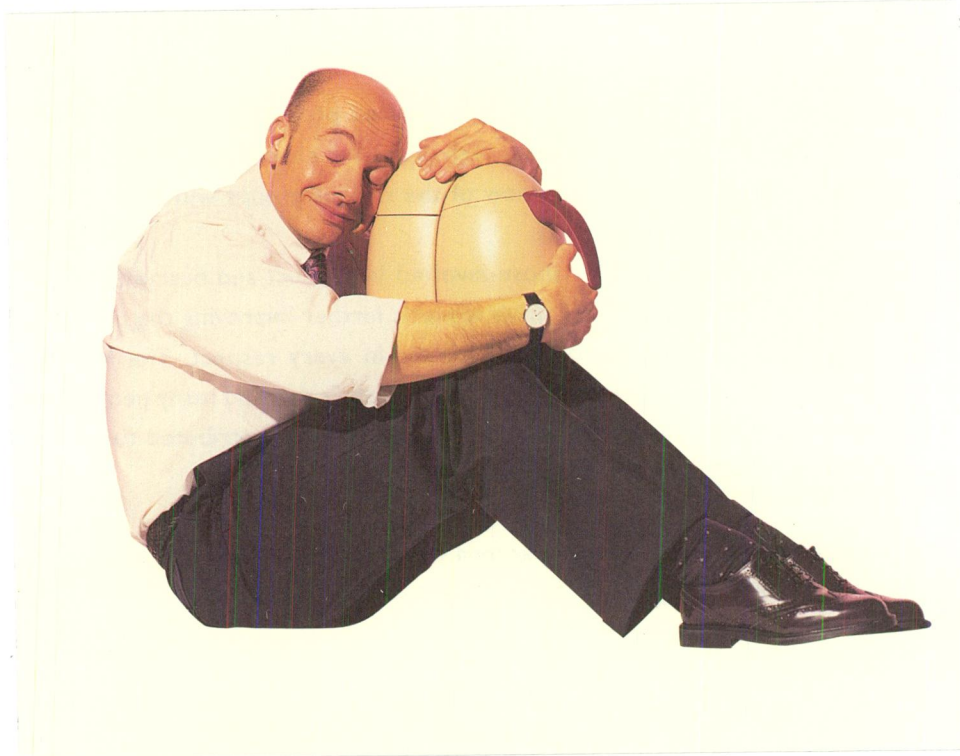
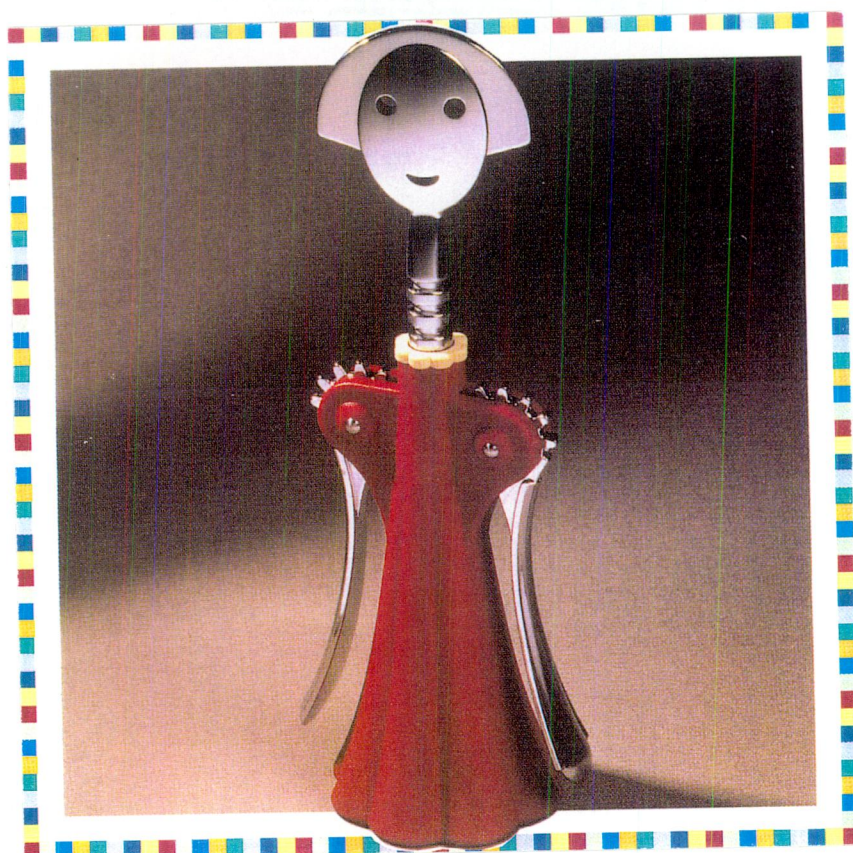
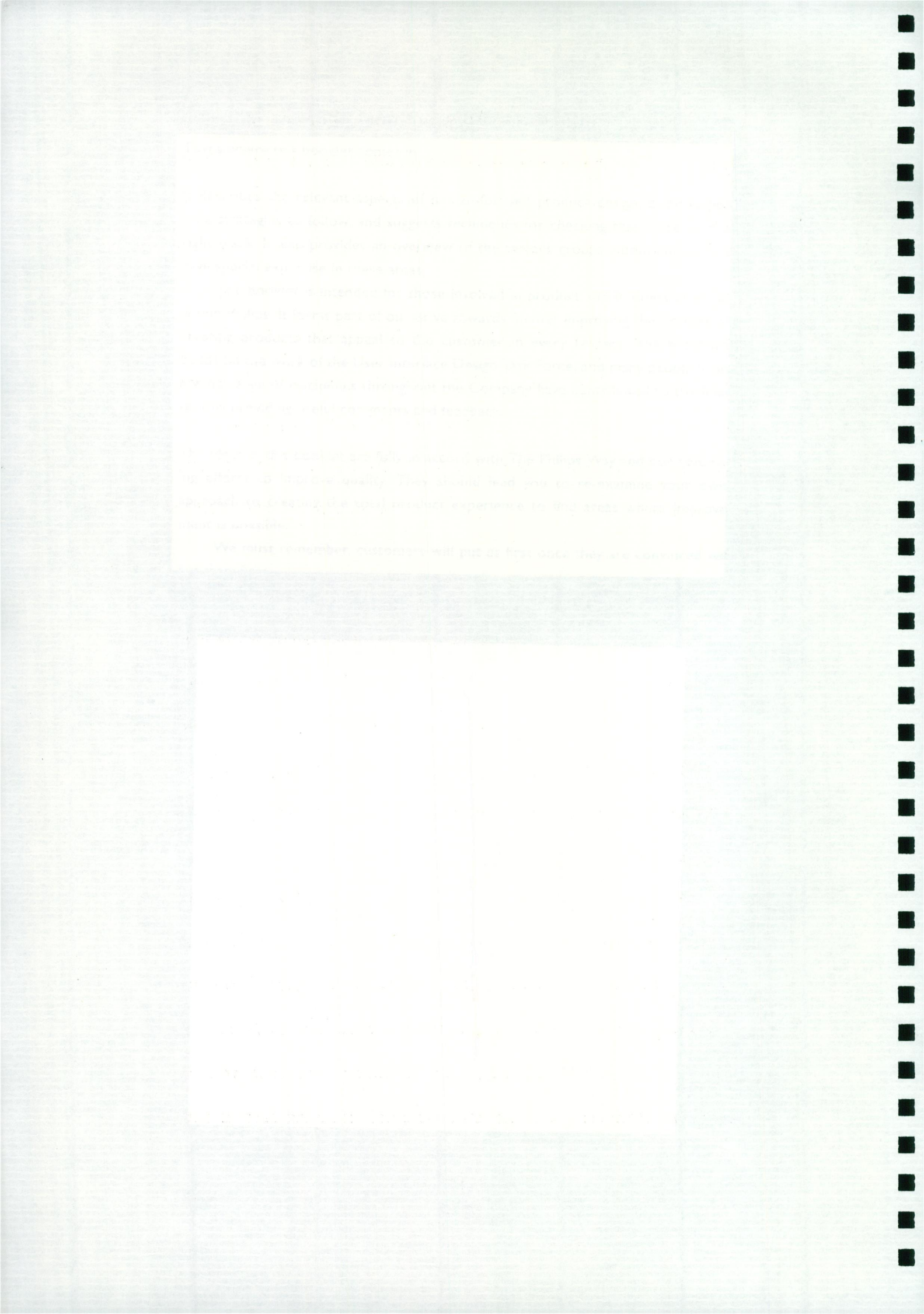


Fig.17 Anna G corkscrew for Alessi





Who actually buys the Philips-Alessi products? One interesting aspect of the range is it is not orientated towards a female market alone. Women make up by far the majority of buyers of kitchen appliances, yet, Philips in one of their promotional photographs for the range show a picture of a man hugging his coffee maker shown in figure 16. Philips have used terms such as "man's best friend" and "easy on the eye" to describe the products, these are very much male terms (Philips, 1994). The styling used in the products is very reminiscent of fifties car design i.e. highly stylised, high cost fast cars which appealed to the male ego. This together with men's obsession with cars in general seems to be the direction Philips were heading with these designs.

Another example of male marketing is the free gift of an Alessi cork screw called 'Anna G' when one buys one of the range, which is in the form of a women. See figure 17. This product is aimed more towards a male consumer than to women. I spoke to one of the stockists of the goods 'Presents of Mind' to see if men were in fact actually buying the products and was Philips male marketing working. Approximately one third of the products sold are to men.

The biggest factor as far as men are concerned in buying the products is the cost. Money is often equated with quality and with status, the high price and Alessi label together with Philips good name in the area could easily be perceived as the perfect buy. Women used to shopping in this area would probably be looking for the best quality product with the best value. However a designer label and a high price tag make it seem

more of an object of desire in comparison to an ordinary Philips kettle. Products in this area can be bought very cheaply, so much so people no longer attach high value to for example the average Philips jug kettle. As this is the case people throw the products away more easily, they can be replaced without breaking your bank balance. By pricing the Philips-Alessi range quite expensively, up to four times the price of your average kettle or toaster, people will in all probability keep them for longer periods and associate the products with quality and durability. This is shown in sales, stockists say one of the main reasons people are buying the range is as a present, particularly a wedding present. These are kitchen appliances you could give as gifts to friends and family without the usual repercussions of being seen as boring.

Philips actual description of their target market is:

Communication Target Market

People:

- *adult consumer
 - *with an interest in design
 - *with a higher social/cultural/economic background
 - *successful with a good status/position
 - *current up market buyer of Philips and or Alessi products
 - *preoccupied with bigger issues in life such as the environment, the future of the planet, healthy living, spiritual/intellectual development, art etc.
 - *in search of balance, control and quality of life
 - *products are not status symbols but style symbols which express their philosophy of life
- (Philips, 1994)

This very specific market seems a very idyllic description of what some people are striving for rather than an actual group of people. Obviously as these items are rather expensive up to three to four times the

cost of your average kettle or toaster, they are aimed at a premium market. People who have enough disposable income to afford to achieve style at quite a price.

The products are distributed through all the usual Alessi outlets of small design shops, museums and luxury household shops where they are displayed with a range of other designer goods. They are also distributed in 5% to 10% of Philips outlets. Here they are displayed separately from the rest of the domestic appliances on simple glass or wooden shelves as a family unit. Philips stipulated that they be displayed in this way, they obviously wanted to give the products a sense of exclusiveness by separating them, in fact to say they are exhibited would be a more accurate description. By this the products become like objects of art not simply just another kettle or toaster.

Philips have planned every step of these products journey from their factories to the consumer's homes, even down to the packaging. This is simple and discreet brown card bearing the Alessi Workshop logo (specially created for this project) and the Philips' logo, also there is an attractive photograph of the product on the side. See figure 18. It is carried using a rope handle, which makes "it easier to carry" (Philips, 1994). This is repeated in some of the promotional blurb available with the products which are tied together using string and covered with brown card etc. shown in figure 19. Using their own packaging immediately differentiates the products from any others in the shop and shows everybody around you what you have bought, with the handle and box there is no need for a

Fig.18 Philips/Alessi packaging for the range

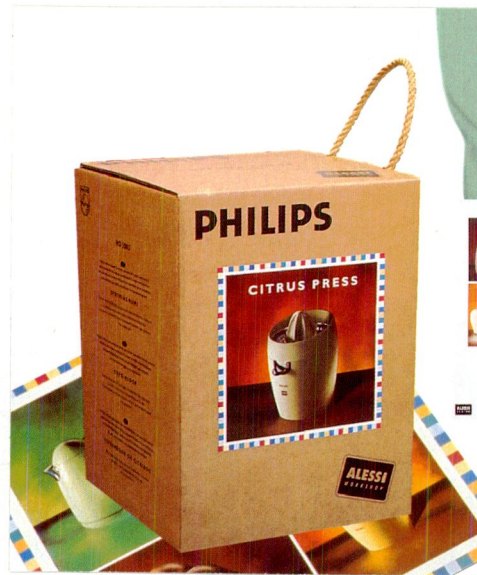
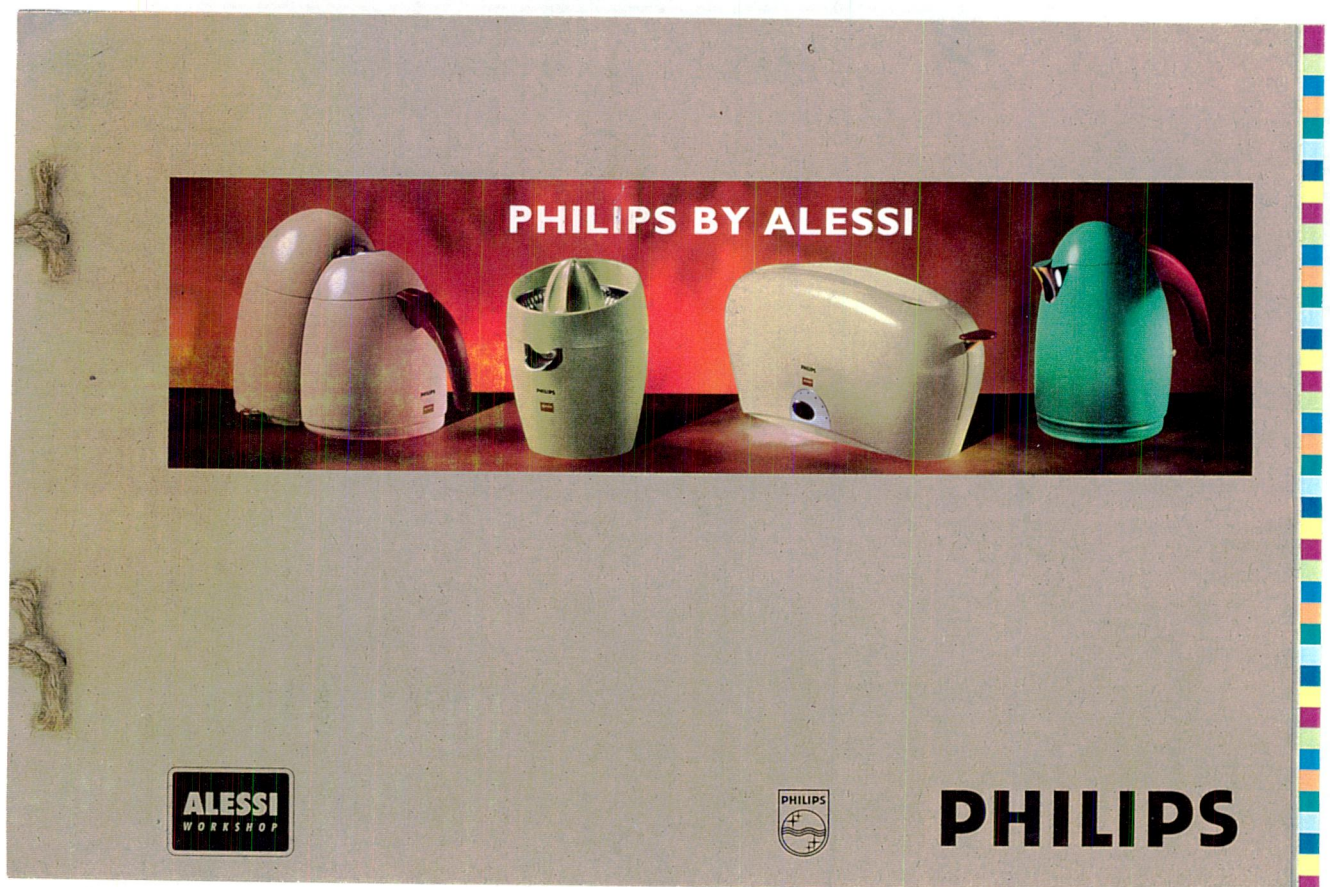
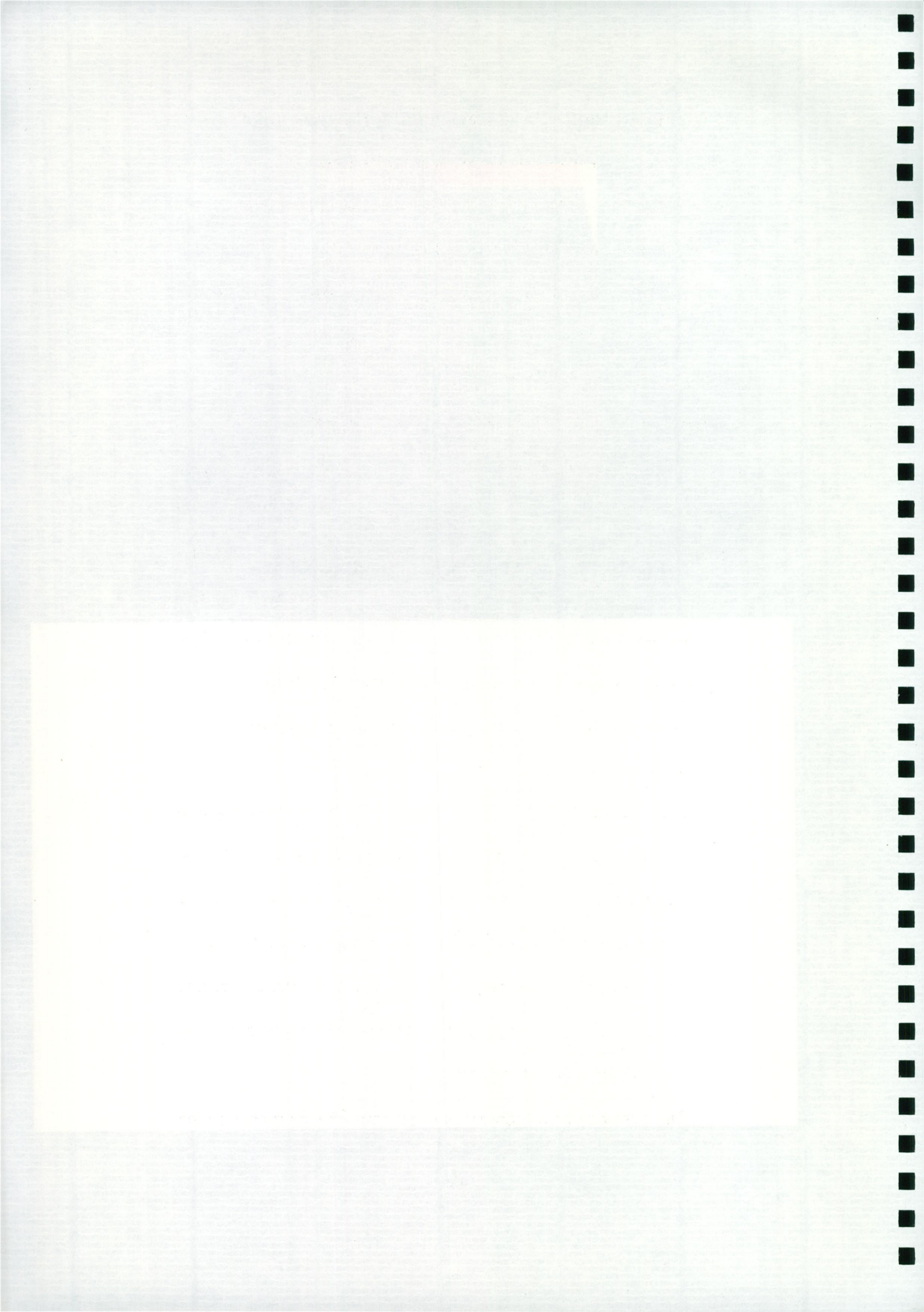


Fig.19 Philips/Alessi promotional brochure





department store bag. In other words you have achieved all the things Philips stated in their description of their target market i.e. successful, good status preoccupied with.. the future of this planet and so on.

This understated brown packaging is also used by Habitat, it has become associated with craft, green design, quality, people who are concerned with "big issues in life like the future of the planet and in spiritual balance" would obviously want to show they are environmentally friendly.

The consumer obviously must be fully aware of the brand name Alessi to appreciate the value of such a designer label. Philips are planning to introduce the Philips-Alessi line to the Far East sometime this year. Alessi are not well known there so brand perception is not high. They are firstly planning to promote the name Alessi and follow this with a huge promotion of the four products. If this is successful it will be a great coup for Philips. They will be serving a high premium market in the domestic appliance area one which currently their rivals are not targeting and they will be competing with their rivals on their home territory.

Philips have claimed to be very satisfied with the performance of the Philips-Alessi project. Stockists have reported high sales thus far and Philips on re-evaluating the range have decided to join with Alessi on another workshop. Philips plan to update the colours of the products every two years if necessary, this is very good way of creating more publicity. It will stimulate interest in the products and boost sales. It means keeping up with fashion changes and so forth.

The success of the Philips-Alessi range financially for the companies

involved must be relatively tiny. These products represent about 1 % of the products Philips produce and despite the noble philosophies to design responsible and durable designs for the future, they are aimed at a very elite design conscious consumer. Their description as mass produced objects is hardly suitable given their exclusiveness and small distribution network. They are really more beneficial for the publicity and media attention achieved as far as Philips is concerned. From Alessi's point of view it was their first project in the area of electrics and the brand name of Philips gave more credibility to these products than to Alessi's usual designer ware. The success of these products show that there is a market out there for designer goods particularly those which claim however falsely outstanding functionality. People want things that look good and say something about their lifestyles.

Conclusion



An article in the Sunday Times put forward the question "how to recognise in advance what makes a design classic?" (Anon, 1996, p.21). The main element, it was concluded, was something which makes a big impact when it first appears. If this is the case the Philips-Alessi line will definitely still be known in fifty or a hundred years time. When they were first introduced they were presented from the Groninger Museum of Art. Philips and Alessi began to make associations with their products and art through their use of the modern art museum as early in their life span as this. It is associations such as these that Philips and Alessi used in every aspect of the products life cycle which have greatly contributed to their success. Detail as to how the products should be packaged and displayed were all taken into account at concept and design stages of the project.

In chapter two it was discussed how inefficiently the four products work ergonomically, how derivative the line is of fifties design in colour and also in form. If these goods are plagiarised and don't function this would not make me view them as potential design classics.

Yet there is something very difficult to define, not a tangible element, such as appearance or functionality that the line possess which make them work. They have undoubtedly been a great success for the two companies, perhaps not financially as they are very exclusive, but in terms of publicity and a chance to venture into a different area of design for both companies.

In the introduction to this thesis I asked the question is the approach used by Alessi and Philips in this project really the beginnings of a new

design utopia. In chapter one I discussed the approach to design used by both firms. Essentially both firms are in the business of selling products and whatever marketing tool works, they must use. The idea of working with outside designers is perhaps the most interesting aspect of the project, used by both firms. It is this which may become the norm for all companies. It creates publicity for the firm, it gives consumers something which has more individuality than the usual mass produced product on the shelves. It has already been used by an other firm e.g. Ferguson commissioned Philippe Starck to design a television for them. It is the idea of giving products a label which is emerging, having a face to associate with these products giving them a more personal touch.

People have a higher awareness of design in general today and it is this Philips explored. They have in some sense fulfilled their goal of creating durable, quality, mass produced goods. As I discussed in chapter three, in terms of marketing, costing, packaging they have created myths around these products which encourage people to look at these products in a new light. Products such as these in the area of domestic products are generally quite inexpensive and most companies produce very similar looking products, of the white box aesthetic which because of their unoriginal styling and cheapness are more replaceable than the four products Alessi and Philips have produced.

I really cannot say if these products will become design classics I can only speculate, they are unique in terms of a marketing success. They are enticing to buy with their charming rounded forms. The market they

have been aimed at has been examined thoroughly by Philips and Alessi. Fifties styling was used to create an air of nostalgia, to remember a time when much emphasis was placed on the kitchen and kitchen products. The colours are not too shocking, they will blend in with a modern or traditional interior. The price and label of the products exude quality and exclusiveness. The Philips-Alessi line are truly marketing design classics.

Appendix A

Interview with Jos Brouwer

of The European Design Centre, Eindhoven, the Netherlands
12 October 1995

1. Could you tell me about Philips' approach to design, an approach which is being called "High design"? How would you define it.?

Ans. The name is always changing to make the approach seem different but it's the same thing. Marzano's philosophy of durability is a valid one however, Papanek talked of this in the sixties. Marzano employs a lot of soft scientists i.e. anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists etc. to research the human aspects of design.

2. During the time Marzano has been the design manager of P.C.D., Philips have done a number of projects in conjunction with companies and designers from other countries. Are they looking for a new approach for their design? Has the Italian influence in the Philips-Alessi project given their products anything more than a sense of style, exclusiveness, up to a point where they feel they can charge exorbitant prices for these new products?

Ans. Marzano has gone to his former colleagues in Milan. Their approach hasn't really changed with projects like "T.V. for the Crossroads" and with Alessi. It is a bit of window dressing for Philips, the rest of their products stay the same. The Philips-Alessi products don't look like Alessi products which are produced in a different set up. Their workshops are smaller, more crafty. Although a lot of the product parts are machined, quality

goods are produced. Maybe the Philips-Alessi look more like the coffee pots or kettles designed by Alessi in form anyhow.

3. Marzano has talked of green design, designing products which instead of the usual built in obsolescence factor are seen as "poetic tools" with "no loss of functionality". Could you tell me about Philips' eco-design?

Ans. Phil White is really the person in charge of Philips' Environmental Design department not Marzano. Philips were involved with the European Design Centre in developing the Eco-Indicator. It has its own standards e.g. it splits up the materials, manufacturing, technology. Toxics are in one part of the plant, recycling in another and so on. However they don't make a big issue of a product being green or they will be asked about the rest of their products. They have done some research into recycling in products available now e.g. cases of T.V.s are recyclable, circuit boards which are eco-friendly etc.

4. Are Philips putting a lot more significance on the Philips-Alessi range, more than it deserves?

Ans. Yes. There is too much emphasis being placed on these products, I have problems with them being so expensive. Ergonomically they are not good e.g. people have found the handle of the kettle too big to control.

5. What do you think of the fifties styling used?

Ans. Retro never works. If Marzano wants a product to be everlasting, something you cherish and hand down from generation to generation it is the wrong look. An object or a piece of architecture, to fulfil his philosophy should be timeless yet when you look at it should be seen as a

classic example of design from its period i.e. should have some qualities of the nineties. It will be interesting to see if in the future people throw these products away and keep the black and white box products.

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