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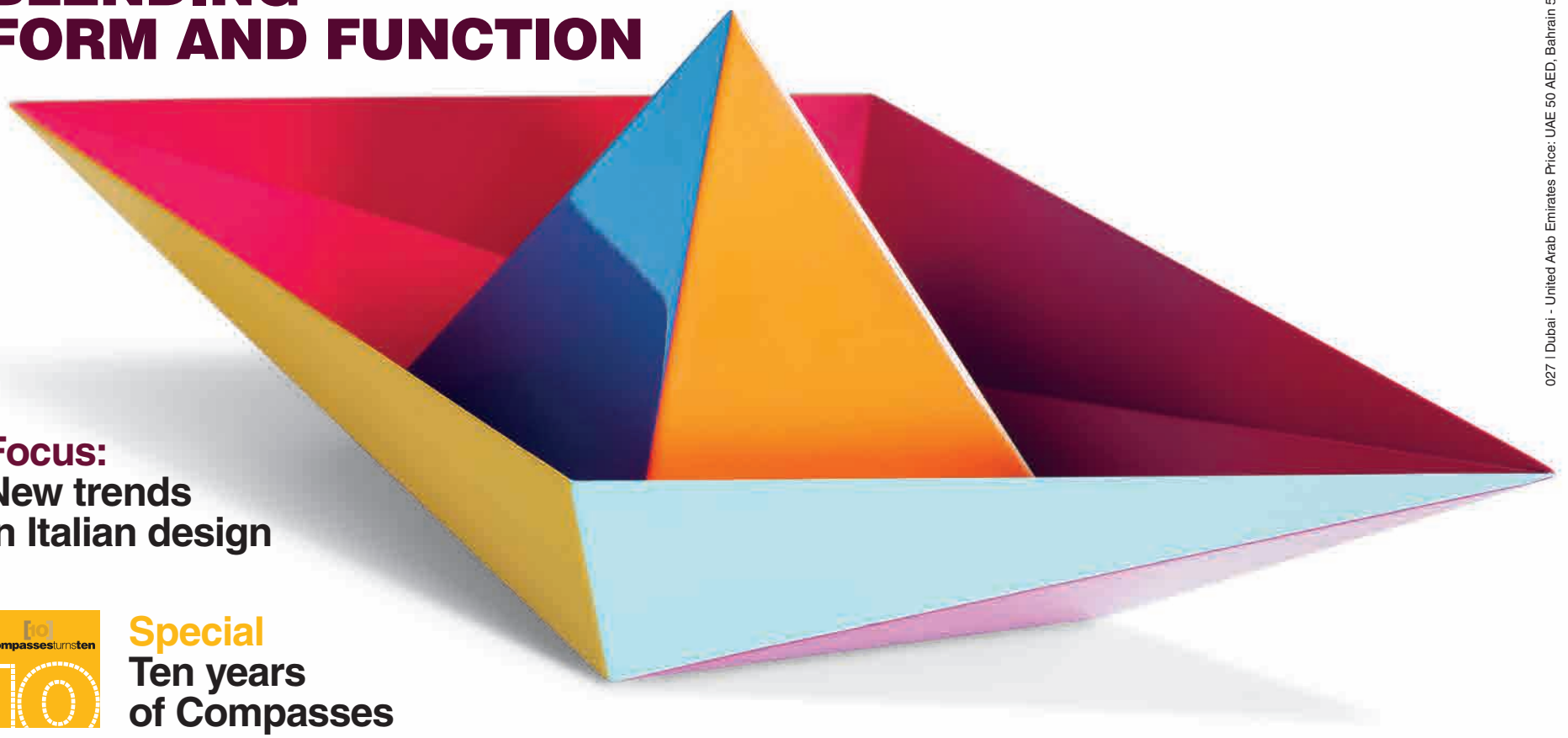
DESIGN
BLENDING FORM AND FUNCTION



Focus:
New trends in Italian design

Special
Ten years of Compasses

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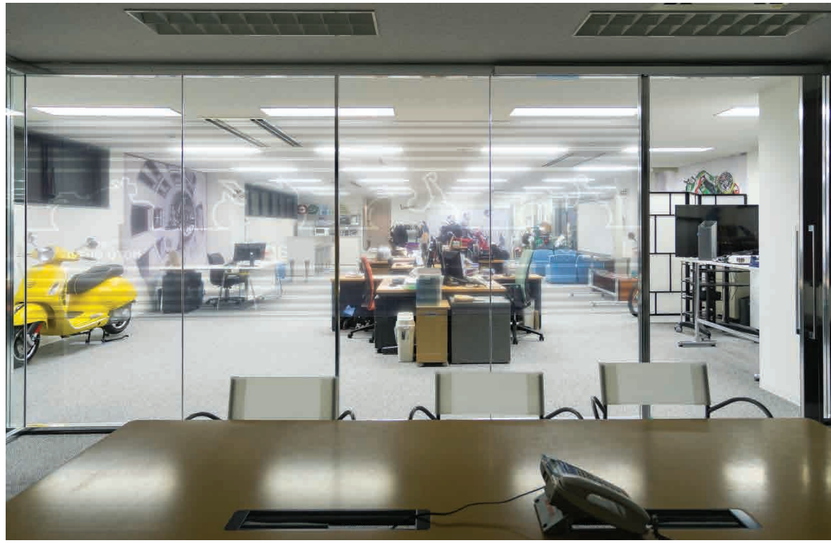
A touch of Italian style in Japan: the new Piaggio store in Tokyo

Matteo Belfiore Architecture

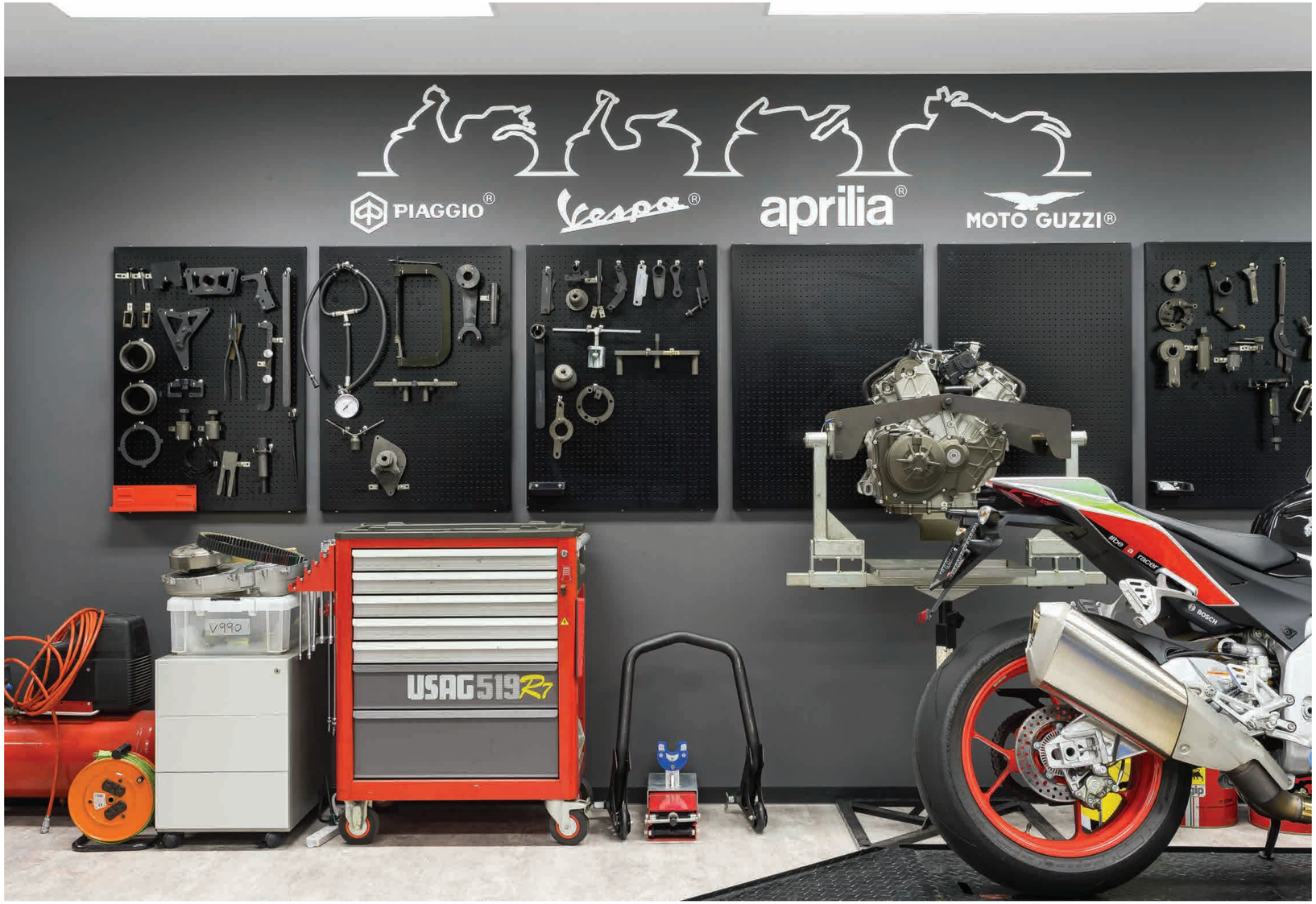
Work
Piaggio Group Japan Office
Client
Piaggio Group Japan
Location
Tokyo, Japan
Project Year
2017
Architecture and Design
Matteo Belfiore Architecture
Size and total area
350 m^2
Additional Functions
Main Contractor: Shukoh
Furniture brands: Unifor, Molo Design
Image credits
Lorenzo Barassi

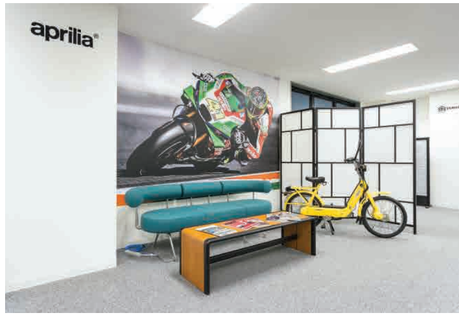
Daria Verde

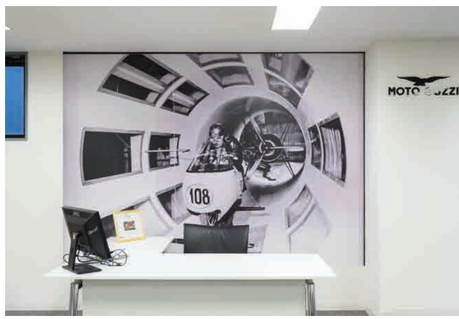
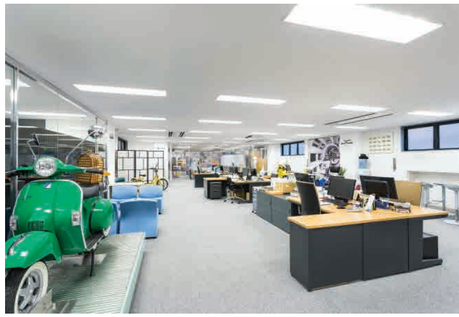
It is not easy to imagine a city that combines tradition and innovation better than Tokyo, the world capital of technological development, where historical temples are lit by the neon lights of nearby skyscrapers. Here, in this ever-changing metropolis, Matteo Belfiore – former director of the international architecture firm Richard Bliah Associates – recently completed his first project as an independent architect in Japan: the new headquarters of the Piaggio Group, which includes Vespa, as well as Moto Guzzi and Aprilia, and is the largest European manufacturer of two-wheel motor vehicles.
When the Japanese branch first decided to move its offices to a new location in the area of Shibakoen, it was explicitly requested that the new facility should include – for the first time in Piaggio's history – a motorcycle garage and a workshop. Therefore, the main challenge of this project was to combine three different functions, which were previously carried out in as many separate locations, in a single 350 sqm space. In order to achieve this goal, the young Italian architect's idea was to design an extremely flexible space, managing both to turn the garage into a proper showroom and to allow the new structure to contain numerous features and several possible layouts.
Thanks to RP partitions – produced by the Italian company Unifor and designed by Renzo Piano – space is efficiently and rationally organized into three different functional areas, becoming more and more private as you move from one to the other: at >



first there is the entrance with the showroom and the workshop, then there is the open-plan office, and finally the meeting room and the warehouse, for employees only.
In order to get the flexibility necessary to host different functions, the showroom includes Paper Softwalls, high-quality movable space partitions made of black recycled paper and produced by the Canadian company Molo Design. This innovative architectural element plays the key role of unifying the exhibition area, by separating it from the workshop and representing a scenario for the motorcycles displayed in the showroom. In fact, thanks to its elegant design, it immediately draws the visitor's attention to the colorful vehicles, the silhouettes of which stand out from the black wall. Furthermore, this freestanding wall can be easily arranged as a room divider to absorb sound and delineate visual privacy or to create a striking backdrop for an event or a performance. Because of its extreme flexibility, the Paper Softwall is one of the most interesting feature of this project, conveying the idea of freedom and of infinite possibilities that has always been associated with the world of two wheels. In the blink of an eye, it can indeed be shaped in any curved or linear formation and even be shrunk to the thickness of a book if necessary, allowing the main space to host events linked to the activities of the Piaggio Group in Japan, such as launch parties for new products and retailers' training courses. The workshop even includes a special wallpaper, which can be used as a blackboard during these encounters.
Therefore, it seems clear that the concept behind the interior design of the store takes inspiration from typical elements of Japanese architecture, particularly from traditional houses in which the size of every room can be changed by altering the partitioning and moving the portable furniture. In fact, in both cases space is conceived as a versatile element that can be defined from time to time, according to the ever-changing practical needs of its inhabitants. Nonetheless, this link with national tradition is combined with cutting-edge technology, as it is also evidenced by the high-strength vinyl floor of the workshop, that can withstand the weight and stress of the motorcycles, while showing an attention to details common to both Italian and Japanese design.
Besides, in accordance with recent trends in workplace design, the open-plan office area includes corners to promote social interaction and workers' well-being. As a matter of fact, the work environment itself is thought of as a space in which relationships generate new ideas and possibilities, thus reflecting a lifestyle that is free from conventions. >







Even the furnishings are intended as devices to enhance constructive discussions among coworkers: several repositionable modular seats can be used to host informal gatherings and as a waiting area for customers, while a large counter is dedicated to lunch and coffee breaks, but can also be used for short meetings.
Therefore, the office – as well as the showroom – is designed as a flexible space, a communication platform made of common areas and more intimate ones, an environment where work can be declined in unconventional ways: during the day employees can freely choose to sit at their desk or relax on the couch, make an individual phone conversation or a collective meeting, work alone or together over a cup of coffee.
However, this is not the only way through which this architecture manages to make its employees feel like home: the choice of reusing most of the furniture from the previous office in this new facility, in addition to reducing the overall cost of the project, certainly made the transition easier to the group. Nevertheless, a considerable effort has been made to harmonize the general aspect of the open-plan office, adopting new furnishing elements compatible with the existing ones.
Finally, since the client requested to ensure maximum visibility to all the brands of the Piaggio Group, different areas dedicated to each brand have been located within the facility. The graphics used consist of archive images of Vespa, Moto Guzzi and Aprilia, including a frame of the popular early 1950s movie “Roman Holiday” showing Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck having the time of their lives as they ride a Vespa around Rome, thus introducing the Italian scooter to an international audience. The meeting room instead hosts a collage of the advertising campaigns that have made this successful brand famous all over the world.
It is therefore clear that the decision made by the Japanese branch to assign the design of the new Piaggio store to a young, yet talented architect as Matteo Belfiore has proven to be successful. In fact, the result is a brand-new facility where no detail is left to chance, and that doubtlessly manages to balance Italian creativity with Japanese pragmatism.