

# Field Work

FROM A FARMHOUSE IN THE NORTH OF ITALY, A COUNTRY KNOWN FOR CHAOTIC SIGNAGE AND MUNDANE PACKAGING, THE DESIGNERS OF METALLI LINDBERG ARE WORKING FOR UN CAMBIAMENTO POSITIVO.

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By Ellen Shapiro



**The view could be a postcard:** a tile-roofed farmhouse surrounded by verdant fields and a row of tall poplars, set against a backdrop of undulating hills. In fact, it *is* a postcard, the iconic image that represents Metalli Lindberg SRL, a design firm headquartered near the small market town of Conegliano, Italy, 20 miles north of Treviso, 50 miles north of Venice. The surroundings couldn't be more idyllic, and even the day's structure sounds alluring, with espresso breaks around 11:00, leisurely lunches at the studio or at a trattoria in town, late afternoon breaks involving more espresso and perhaps some *dolci*.

The setting is *pastorale*, and the studio, two floors of a converted barn and hayloft, is

+ **Facing page:** The postcard-perfect view on the road to Conegliano—cornfield in foreground, *Préalpes* in background—is the iconic image used on Metalli Lindberg's home page, business cards, promotional brochures, and banners in the studio reception area. Photo by Derek Stewart.  
**Above:** A 19th-century barn and hayloft in the Italian countryside north of Venice was renovated by Metalli Lindberg in 2002. Left to right: intern Laura Colomban; creative director Derek Stewart; designer Francesca Spinazzé.



splendido, but these designers are serious. Serious about the value of design, about their work, about making a contribution to the world.

They call Metalli Lindberg a *laboratorio di comunicazione e disegno*. “We think of what we do as a science,” explains Derek Stewart, the firm’s Edinburgh-born, London-educated design director, or *creativo*. “It’s not that we do experimental work; it’s more about the experimentation that goes on, our working process. It’s a science because there’s research, calculation, analysis, solutions,” he says. “All with a touch of intuition.”

The firm also has a tagline: *lavorare per un cambiamento positivo*. That needs a little translation. It means “Working for positive change,” which was chosen, Stewart says, as “something to keep us on our toes, to give us direction. We look for every opportunity to introduce social values, such as respect for the environment. ‘You are the change you want to see in the world,’” he adds, quoting Gandhi. “It’s a lovely thought, and what we aspire to—to do design that’s innovative, intelligent, informative, and changes people’s outlooks.”

That mission sounds like it shouldn’t be too hard to accomplish in Italy, with its rich artistic history and leadership in contemporary interior design, furniture, fashion. But, according to Stewart, graphic design is different: “In terms of groundbreaking design, Italy is far behind other European countries. Signage systems here are chaotic. TV graphics are mundane. Packaging design is dire. The identity created for the new state railways is already dated.”

That means there is much work to be done. And, luckily, there are opportunities to do it in ways that are becoming antiquated in countries where marketing departments have supplanted the CEO as sole decision-maker. Most Italian companies are still family-owned, and the design firm principal can have a personal relationship with the *proprietario*, the owner. “It’s still the way things were in the *cinquecento*,” muses Stewart. Perhaps nurtured over *pranzo* (lunch), the relationship can blossom into opportunities to develop the strategy and build a brand-identity encompassing logos, packaging, visual merchandising, environmental design, and more.

Metalli Lindberg has developed its own strategy, which involves making an immediate impact on the client with storyboards composed of images, copy lines, and a color palette chosen to express the company’s values and aspirations. One scheme is presented that’s close in spirit to the client’s initial request, and one or two alternatives showcase concepts that emerged during the experimentation process. “This is the way we open up discussion,” says Stewart. “Throughout the give-and-take of project development, the storyboards are continually updated but the core concept remains.”

Although this working methodology is not entirely different from



that of other top design firms around the world, it serves Metalli Lindberg well in the Italian, and increasing *tutto* European, market. “Don’t take the science thing too literally—we aren’t going about in white coats,” Stewart advises. “Perhaps a better analogy is the science of cooking; let’s add more flavor, or turn up the heat.”

To enhance results, the firm encourages ongoing client feedback: “About everything, success or failure, from alternative choice of packaging, printing processes, and new eco-materials,” Stewart says. For a client company that makes mountain/trekking boots, Metalli Lindberg offered one scheme that promotes cleaning up hiking paths, with its own slogan and poster, and another that encourages responsible tourism. “It turned out that the client had the same things on his mind,” Stewart says. “With his input, we are working out the details.”

Thus, the *laboratorio* approach can lead to something more all-encompassing than the logo or brochure the client originally requested. For a cosmetics company seeking a Web site design, Metalli Lindberg answered the brief with a concept for the site and added proposals for packaging, advertising, and retail design. Because the client understood how a cohesive image built over time could benefit his company, it now has what Stewart calls “a year’s program of work” instead of a single project.

For Italy’s largest distributor of organic food products, Ecor SpA, Metalli Lindberg has designed everything from witty packaging for breakfast cereals and pasta to store interiors. The informational



+ Facing page: Perpetual calendar sold in gift shops and at events to raise funds for Der Stazione in des Mundo, which produces cultural events such as concerts and plays designed to bring people together. Logotype is burned into the wood. Left: Movable shelving for Ecor’s B’io chain of natural food stores, designed in partnership with Gruppo Fon architects. Displayed on shelves are examples of Metalli Lindberg’s packaging for Ecor’s organic jams, canned goods, olive oil, pasta, rice, cereals, and cleaning supplies.

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**Left, above:** Press launch kit for Aprilia's eco-friendly, catalytic motor scooter is a gardening sack containing an artificial-grass folder with press releases, CD, and photos. **Left, below:** Valore Alimentare, a publication for customers of B'io organic foods. **Center:** CD sleeve for a producer of designer furniture, part of an identity that included catalogs and advertising. **Far left:** Sales promotion for a new range of colored wood flooring materials. The striped cover is a sleeve that holds a kit of multicolored paint. **Far left, below:** 3D version of restyled Moto Guzzi emblem. **Facing page:** Capabilities package for a construction company that restores villas, churches, and other landmarks.

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aspect of "positive change" is especially evident in how facts and figures are communicated to consumers. Ecor's initiative for its "B'io" chain of organic food stores is *b'io trasparenza*; "b'io" signifies organic and "trasparenza" means letting the public know exactly how many euros are spent producing, packaging, and transporting the food, and how the profits are invested. To this end, Metalli Lindberg has designed inserts for 130 Ecor products. For its bottled water line, they used the back of the label to remind consumers that water is a precious resource.

"Metalli Lindberg shares our values and beliefs," says Fabio Brescacin, president of Ecor. "They are very good at interpreting

our characteristics, at fulfilling our demands for the type of communication we need."

Stewart adds, "We always look for opportunities to enhance the situation, to express values like respect for the environment." For a sports complex with little architectural interest, the firm researched local wildlife and created murals combining verses of poetry with silhouettes of native birds, insects, and animals: A heron perches over the swimming pool and giant dragonflies grace the walls that lead to the gym. They even found opportunities to ramp up the social responsibility quotient in work for motorcycle maker Moto Guzzi. While redesigning its venerable logo and catalogs and creating iden-

tity guidelines to be followed in hundreds of shops, they proposed a road safety campaign for motorbike riders, i.e., most of Italy's population. The owner has yet to implement the program, but hasn't rejected it yet. Sometimes these things take time.

If clients aren't always amenable to every new idea, the studio creates its own projects. Inspired by a children's book about a train that picks up kids around the world and introduces them to different cultures, they founded a nonprofit educational organization, Der Stazione in des Mundo, which produces events designed to bring people together through workshops, storytelling, music, theater, and food. The launch party was held in the first floor of the studio, a former stable, and featured a children's theater performance. Then came a series of classical concerts organized by a violinist in Milan's La Scala orchestra, a friend of Metalli Lindberg managing director Stefano Dal Tin. Der Stazione is sponsored in part by another client, Banca Popolare Etica, a commercial bank that makes loans that foster third-world economic development.

Who are Metalli and Lindberg? One might wonder, but the only answer is the charming explanation that the two partners exist on an "aspirational" plane. When he founded the firm in 1992, Dal Tin chose names intended "to give the studio an international, north European feel," he says. "Metalli signifies metals that are precious, rare, solid." Lindberg "points toward Scandinavia," where the graphics are cool, clean, and admired by Benetton and other big Italian manufacturers. The strategem worked, and Metalli Lindberg now numbers six—Dal Tin is chief client liaison; Stewart, creative director; Francesca Spinazzé, Michela Cella, and Joel Robinson, designers; Fabiola Frasson, administrator—plus a marketing consultant, Stefano Rovatti, based in Bologna. They've chosen to remain small, but now compete with the major studios in Italy and the U.K. "We don't have armies of researchers, account handlers, PR people," Stewart says, "so we have to do everything better, especially when we're up against the big boys." The strategy is succeeding, and Metalli Lindberg's work has been represented in competitions ranging from Art Directors Club Italiano to the U.K.'s prestigious D&AD Global Awards.

Stewart, a graduate of the London College of Communication, is the firm's veteran "foreigner." He joined in 1999 after stints in several London studios, including "a brief but memorable time" at influential creative director Malcolm Garrett's Assorted iMaGes, designing print media including CD packaging, annual reports, and books. Five years after meeting his Italian-born wife-to-be, Patrizia, atop a London double-decker bus, the couple moved to Italy. "Patrizia wanted to be closer to her family, and I wasn't enjoying London as much as I used to," he says. "I'd loved art school there, the buzz, the people, the studios, though socially it was a bit of an in-crowd



thing—talking about work and little else. But it was getting expensive, and I missed long walks in the country, bike rides, and hiking. Italy seemed like a good idea: good possibilities for work, good food, spectacular mountains," he recalls. "It was tough at the beginning, fitting in and learning the language well—it still is. Ha!" Now they are raising two bilingual children. "Life is never dull," Stewart says. "It's a bit like the way Italians drive: race, brake, race, brake, swerve, race—never a smooth ride."

Are there any disadvantages to locating your studio in a converted barn 20 miles from the nearest city? No difficulties that can't be turned into positives by these guys, it seems. Dal Tin muses that not being in a metropolis means not being able to, say, hop into a museum or the Lamborghini showroom. Like *creativos* everywhere, the team at Metalli Lindberg finds the Internet indispensable for sending files to the printer or getting a summary of the news. "But you can't beat the real experience of seeing and hearing firsthand," says Dal Tin. "That's why we try to get away as much as we can, be it briefly, for an intense soaking up in cities elsewhere such as Milan, London, or Stockholm." *Sfortunatamente!*

It sounds like the ride for Metalli Lindberg may be exquisitely smooth in the years to come. In addition to working for positive change, these designers are producing outstanding work—and enjoying life. "I'm optimistic," Stewart predicts. "Design really equals service, which means giving clients visibility, but also taking seriously the responsibility for putting human needs first."