The responsible company

Can industry set itself objectives? And must these objectives be limited exclusively to the profit index? Or could there perhaps be a higher goal, an ideal scheme of things, a destination, a vocation – even in the life of a factory? These were fundamental questions for Adriano Olivetti, an entrepreneur taken with the idea of creating a responsible factory; he was a man who considered both economic and cultural factors and used his factory to transform the territory and society. Olivetti's project was tightly bound to the history of the first Italian factory for typewriters (followed by electronic calculators and computers). It was characterized by the study of function and aesthetics and quality was guaranteed by art, architecture and design. The factory was founded in 1908 by his father Camillo, an eclectic and brilliant engineer. Adriano Olivetti's biography bears witness to his versatility. After obtaining his degree in 1924 he began his short apprenticeship in his father's business. The next year, he travelled to the United States to study different factories and upon his return home he proposed a wide program of modernization for the company. By 1932, when the first portable typewriter, the MP1, appeared, Olivetti had already activated the company's Advertising Service with the collaboration of artists and designers.
He applied himself not only to industrial matters but to problems involving urbanism, architecture, culture, and social and political reform projects as well. He guided the family company toward technological excellence, innovation and opening to international markets, dedicating particular attention to communications and industrial design. He financed social services and projects; he reduced the number of working hours for his employees while maintaining their salary level; he hired contemporary architects to create new residential neighbourhoods; and he invited artists and writers to meet his factory workers. In 1952, at the New York's MOMA he presented various Olivetti machines, like the Lexikon 80 (1948) and Lettera 22 (1950), which now are considered works of art. In 1955, ADI (the Italian Industrial Design Association) awarded him the "Compasso D'Oro" for merit in the field of industrial aesthetics. In 1956 Adriano, who had considered commissioning Le Corbusier to redesign the family's factory, won the Great Prize of Architecture in Paris for the architectural merit, originality of industrial design, and social and human objectives which are a part of every Olivetti product. His products and his communication projects were designed by top-caliber specialists like Marcello Nizzoli, Hans Von Klier, Xanti Schawinsky, a former Bauhaus maestro, Bruno Munari, the Boggeri studio, Mario Bellini and Ettore Sottsass, who designed the portable typewriter Valentine in 1969. During the 1940s and '50s, many products that were destined to become true cult objects were put on the market, continuously increasing his range of merchandise. In 1952 he opened a research laboratory in the US to study electronic calculators and in 1959 he released the Elea 9003 on the market, the first calculator developed and produced in Italy – three months before IBM released their model.
Adriano Olivetti can also be thanked for the restoration of the Sassi of Matera in the south of Italy, which UNESCO has named a patrimony of humanity. Back in the 1950s it was said that half of Italy's intellectuals worked for Olivetti and the other half dreamed of doing so.