Computex: heaven on earth for geeks

From tech-savvy trendy to cute and environmentally conscious, here's a list of highlights from the world's second-largest computer trade fair

BY **DAVID CHEN**
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Computex, Taiwan's annual computer trade fair, is a paradise for electronics enthusiasts.

At last week's edition, there were life-sized displays of microprocessors and cooling fans that would make computer gamers drool; dizzying rows with hundreds of booths displayed components and parts for nearly every electronic device imaginable; and if that got too boring, "booth babes" in short skirts and high heels roved about the exhibition halls, emceed product launches, handed out company-branded freebies and posed for photos — anything to make circuit boards look sexier.
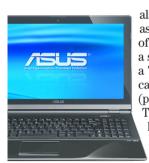
But the exhibition has also become a showcase opportunity for innovative Taiwanese companies. In fact, convention organizers started the Computex Taipei Design and Innovation Awards last year to promote up-and-coming Taiwanese brands.

Here are the *Taipei Times'* picks of the latest products from local companies that created a buzz at this year's Computex, as well as a few stylish novelties.

NETBOOKS: EVEN THINNER AND LIGHTER

"Thin and light" continues to be the mantra for laptop PCs, which are getting slimmer and more energy efficient.

And the craze appears as strong as ever for netbooks, mini-laptops with screens measuring 11 inches and under.

Asustek (華碩電腦), also commonly known as **Asus**), the creator of the netbook, made a splash in 2007 with a 7-inch screen device called the Eee PC (pronounced 'e-p-c'). The device's popularity helped spawn a full-blown product line that was on display at the company's Computex booth.

Asus' UX50, a 15-inch laptop that has a thin form-factor similar to the Macbook Air. PHOTO COURTESY OF ASUS

The "Seashell" Eee PC units cover all the basics for users who want Internet functionality above all. A few of the latest models on display were the **EeePC Seashell 1008HA** and **EeePC Seashell 1005HA**, which have 10-inch screens, weigh just over 1kg and sport an outer casing with a smooth surface and round edges; Asus claims a battery life of up to six hours. These two models are available now and range in price from NT$15,000 to NT$18,500.

While these book-sized PCs are great for portability, the keyboards can feel a little cramped. But the **EeePC Seashell 1101HA**, which was announced at Computex, strikes a nice balance; it has a 11.6-inch screen and weighs 1.38 kg. The keyboard looks full-sized and typing seemed faster and smoother compared to the 10-inch models I tried.

Asus' new Eee PC Seashell 1101HA pushes the limit on netbook size, with an 11.6-inch screen. PHOTO: DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES

Asus claims a battery life of up to 11 hours on a single charge, thanks in part to the new Intel Menlow chip. But this remains to be seen until after the device's release in Taiwan in the fall. The retail price will be around NT$21,000 and the specs are similar to the 1008HA and 1005HA: 1GB of RAM, 160GB of hard drive storage, Wi-Fi and Bluetooth, and Windows XP Home.

But one of the more eye-catching products at Asus' booth wasn't a laptop — it was a keyboard that's actually an "all-in-one" computer. The **EeeKeyboard PC EK1542** packs everything into a standard-sized, wireless keyboard: audio speakers, an Intel Atom processor, 1GB of RAM memory, and SSD hard drive with either 16GB or 32GB storage, and a miniature display screen.

Asus' EeeKeyboard PC EK1542 is actually an all-in-one computer that runs Windows XP. PHOTO: DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES

The 5-inch screen is located where the numeric pad is normally found on a keyboard. The screen is touch-sensitive and brings to mind the icon-based interface of the iPhone or Google's G1 phone. The computer runs on Windows XP, which can also be viewed on the screen and was surprisingly easy to navigate using my finger. Retail price will be around NT$23,000; expect it to be available in Taiwan during the latter half of this year.

Acer is equally on top of the netbook game — the company's latest, the 11.6-inch **Aspire 751**, can be seen as a direct competitor to the larger **EeePC Seashell**. It has virtually the same specifications, but claims a slightly lower battery life of eight hours.

In playing around with the demo models, I preferred the smoothness of the **751's** keyboard to the slightly rougher finish on the Eee PC notebooks. Typing felt more fluid on Acer's model, with a soft, barely noticeable click.

The Aspire 3810T 13.3-inch laptop, part of Acer's new Timeline series, is one among many thin and light portable computers that appeared at this year's Computex. PHOTO COURTESY OF ACER

TRADITIONAL LAPTOPS LOSE A LITTLE WEIGHT, TOO

At this year's Computex, Intel heavily promoted its ultra low voltage (ULV) chips, which allow laptop producers to slim down the traditional-sized models and provide better battery life.

Acer is using the ULV chips in its **Aspire Timeline** series, a set of 13.3-inch, 14-inch and 15.6-inch laptops that the company says have achieved a new balance between weight and energy efficiency.

The 13.3-inch **Aspire 3810T** weighs 1.67kg and claims a battery life of up to eight hours. When closed, the body is tapered so that it's 29mm at its thickest and 24mm at its thinnest.

The Timeline series also has a "multi-gesture" pad; pinch your fingers on the mouse pad to zoom in and out of pages or scroll up and down on a page or folder. The feature is attractive but doesn't work very well — it was hit or miss on the various demo models at Acer's booth and feels awkward compared to the Macbook.

All in all, the Timeline series looks like it will get the job done for those who mostly use office programs and Internet browsers. In terms of specs, all models come with 2GB of RAM, a 320GB hard drive, Wi-Fi and Bluetooth. DVD drives aren't available for the 13-inch model, and Intel Core 2 Solo chips are the standard for the line. But Core 2 Duo — which allows for more powerful and faster computing — is available as an option for the 13-inch and 14-inch models.

The new Acer laptops are available now in Taiwan and come with either Windows Vista Home Basic or Home Premium, and range in price from NT$24,900 to NT$31,500. But it might be worth waiting for the late October release of Windows 7, which improves on some of Vista's annoying quirks.

A few more notable new laptops included Asus' 13.3-inch **UX30** and **Micro-Star International's** (MSI, 微星科技) **X-Slim** series, both of which have a sleek, ultra-slim form-factor similar to the Macbook Air.

The X-Slim is currently available in North America from US$600 to US$1,000, while the Asus model will be available in Taiwan in the fall for between NT$30,000 and NT$35,000, according to a company representative.

This MSI laptop, part of its new X-Slim series, has a thin form-factor similar to the Macbook Air, and a lower price. PHOTO: DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES

NOT JUST COMPUTERS/ ON THE PERIPHERY

While PC manufacturers make the most noise on the exhibition floor, Computex is also a good opportunity for start-ups and small companies to show off some interesting and novel products.

Have too many business cards? **Penpower Technology** (蒙恬科技, www.penpower.net) offers a solution for the entrepreneur or anyone who has to manage a lot of contacts.

WorldCard is a small scanner built for digitizing business cards. You hook it up via USB to a computer, scan the card, and the accompanying software converts and stores the information for programs like Address Book (for Mac) or Microsoft Entourage. The data can also be saved in vCard, text, and html formats.

For the person who has too many business cards: WorldCard scans your business cards and then digitizes them. Its software coverts the data for use in Address Book or Microsoft Entourage. PHOTO COURTESY OF PENPOWER TECHNOLOGY

Penpower's demo model at Computex was pretty snappy — the cards scanned in what felt like five seconds, and all of the information — company name, address, cell phone and e-mail, appeared on the WorldCard software immediately afterwards. WorldCard has won several design awards in Taiwan and abroad and is available in Taiwan at most electronic stores, with retail prices of NT$4,490 for PC and NT$4,990 for Mac and PC.

The world is now your screen thanks to **Aiptek's** (天瀚科技, www.aiptek.com) **PocketCinema V10 Plus**, a handheld projector that projects video or images up to 100cm. You can plug in just about any device with an AV output jack: ipods, digital cameras, camcorders or mobile phones.

Aiptek's PocketCinema V10 is a portable projector that easily fits in a large pocket or purse. PHOTO: DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES

The device, which uses an LED light, is about the size of a TV remote control. The V10 Plus also plays music that you can store on one gigabyte of internal storage. There's also an SD card slot that can hold up to 32GB. It's currently available at Tsann Kuen 3C (燦坤) in Taiwan and on Yahoo Taiwan, where prices range from NT$10,000 to NT$15,000.

It's a fashion accessory, it's a storage device: **Pretec** (www.pretec. com) has dressed up some USB flash drives with bling. Its **I-disk Sparkling** is a necklace pendant adorned with Swarovski crystals, and costs NT$1,099 for the 2GB and NT$1,799 for the 8GB model.

For the kids (and kids at heart), there's Pretec's **I-disk Smelly Tofu** USB drive, which has a picture of cartoon figure called "Smery." The drive also comes with a mini figurine of Smery, who has a square-shaped piece of tofu for a head. The 4GB drive costs NT$788 and the 8GB model is NT$1,058.

"Smery" is a mini-figurine that comes with Pretec's Stinky Tofu USB drive. PHOTO COURTESY OF PRETEC

But A-Data (威剛科技, www.adata.com.tw) does Pretec one up with a USB drive that's cute and useful. The **T806 Kissing Octopus Couple**, a pair of mini Octopus figurines with detachable USB drives, doubles in function as magnets. The USB drive can be pulled out of the Octopus' mouth, and reversed so the USB side sticks out of its mouth. This product, which won a design and innovation award at this year's Computex, is sold in pairs at NT$2,110 for the 8GB, and NT$1,050 for the 4GB. They're currently available at Tsann Kuen 3C (燦坤) in Taiwan.

These "Kissing Octopuses" are USB drives in disguise, and they won manufacturer A-Data a design and innovation award at this year's Computex. How about a little bling with your data? Pretec made this USB drive into a necklace pendant adorned with Swarovski crystals. PHOTOS COURTESY OF A-DATA AND PRETEC

On the environmentally friendly side, **ATP Electronics** (華驍國際科技, www.atpinc.com) has the **EarthDrive**, a waterproof USB drive made out of recycled materials. ATP claims it as a world first, and says it will donate part of its profits to an environmental organization devoted to planting trees. The EarthDrive is available in Taiwan at the PChome Web site (shopping.pchome.com.tw) at NT$850 for the 4GB model and NT$1,320 for 8GB.

ATP's waterproof EarthDrive is made out of recycled materials. PHOTO COURTESY OF ATP

Computex buzz: are smartbooks the next big thing?

Last year Computex was all about the netbook. But now the buzz has shifted to the confusingly named "smartbooks," which were introduced at this year's exhibition. The devices are basically netbooks but even smaller with different components.

Smartbooks will require less power, thanks to a high-performance microprocessor based on the ARM chip architecture, which is already used in smartphones. Many netbooks currently use Intel's Atom chip.

Qualcomm, which manufactures an ARM chip called Snapdragon, says smartbooks will have a battery life between eight and 10 hours and include Internet use and 3G connectivity. Current netbooks yield an average of two to four hours.

Smartbooks can also be built to be thinner than netbooks, as the ARM-based chips don't require a cooling fan. Another factor that reduces both cost and energy consumption is the operating system: for the moment ARM chips are only compatible with Linux-based operating systems, which includes Google Android.

There are no details available on exact release dates, but Qualcomm says to expect a device towards the end of the year from various manufacturers.

— DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES

Russians gone wild: Computex, the after-party

BY **THOMAS WALK**
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On a hot night at the beginning of June, where does a computer geek go for a good party? That was the question on the minds of many visitors to Taipei's annual Computex computer exhibition, the second-biggest in the world.

The first answer most people will give is Carnegie's, otherwise known as Carnage to savvy local expats (for obvious reasons), especially on a Wednesday night — ladies night, when women get in for free and drink "champagne," gratis.

I heard that hordes of people from the computer industry, be they designers, salespeople or marketing managers, would be there, so I went to check it out.

On arrival, I saw about 50 people outside, swilling champagne, beer from who knows where, whiskey from 7-Eleven, and vodka from duty free shops.

Most were Russian, which was obvious from the songs they were singing and the way they would stop cars in the street to say cheers with a bottle of vodka.

"It's a Russian party. Almost 50 percent of the people here are Russian," said Boris Chen, managing director of Gigabyte Russia, a man who would know the difference between a Russian and other foreigners because he speaks the language fluently.

A consultant from India who attended Computex said there was an increase this year in the number of buyers from Russia and Asian countries, including China and India, but a decrease in attendees from Europe. He seemed bemused by the party atmosphere and quickly exited, saying his hotel was nearby.

How did so many Russians find out about this one bar? "It's a well-known place because it's worldwide — there's even a Carnegie's in Moscow," said Ivan Volin, testlab chief for Hardware

Electronics companies showcased their latest gadgets last week at the annual Computex trade show, which is a boon for both Taiwan's computer industry as well as Taipei's nightlife. PHOTO: REUTERS

Experts, a consultant for Rambler, a Web server in Russia. "My friends told me to come, so I came." (Carnegie's management says there is no franchise in Moscow.)

Inside, it wasn't easy to move without stepping on a foot, bumping into sweaty, suited men, or spilling your drink down the back-side of one of someone's dress.

The Russians made their presence known on the bar, where a group of five danced, true to Carnegie's form. But conspicuously absent were the bikini-clad women often seen atop the bar.

Carnegie's wasn't the experience Volin was expecting, because "it was too crowded inside, so I stay[ed] outside, where we can drink on the street."

The bar was full, but despite the fact that Wednesday was ladies night, most patrons were male. If you were there to drink and hang out, it was a great place to be, but if you were a man and looking for romance, the odds were stacked against you.

"Everybody knows about Carnegie's — a place where ladies dance on the bar — but seriously, there were too many blokes in there," said Tony Ricardi, sales and marketing director for Mesh computers. "It's a wiener fest."

Which should not have come as a surprise: men far outnumber women at Computex. "Of course, it's like that every year," said Carnegie's manager Jonathan Wy, who estimated there were 400 people inside the bar on Wednesday and another 150 to 250 outside. "If it were a fashion show, it would be a different story."

Not everybody was willing to deal with the five-to-one ratio of guys to girls. One Computex trader from Mexico, who will be known simply as Tony (no relation to Ricardi), said in Spanish: "The girls are very beautiful in Taiwan. But there are too many *hombres* here. I need to find a woman. Can you tell me where the red light district is?"