

Diversity as the principal value in Mexican Furniture Design

Identity of the Mexican Furniture Design

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses tangible and intangible values exposed in Mexican furniture and point out the “diversity” as their principal attribute. Nine pieces of representative Mexican furniture were analyzed in order to give solidness to the literature research. Furthermore, the relation between the basic concepts of “identity” and “diversity” was explored. These two concepts showed to have both strong benefits and particular challenges in Mexico.

KEYWORDS: Cultural identity, cultural diversity, aesthetics values, identity in design

1. INTRODUCTION

Local production is a “natural” trend in the actual global economy. The reduction of the environmental impact by shorting the distance between the products and the consumers is one of the main consequences of this actual trend: the resources used for the production and transportation of goods and services are decreasing because they are obtained in local areas (Leonard, 2010).

This local production is assertive just if people from a specific region –as a country or a state- have enough knowledge about

their own identity. This identity is strongly related to the culture of each region. The customs, traditions, language, values, symbols and ways to do, to see and to understand life are the ones that make every culture to understand and to express itself in a unique way.

At the same time “exponential growth of telecommunications, audiovisuals and the Internet, characteristics of the new globality, are creating new cultural homogenizations. As a reaction to this, it is arisen a strong resolution to recreate identity and in Mexico, as in other countries, a great effervescence

in the creation of new identity codes is evident". (Arizpe, 2011, p.70)

Mexico has a huge diversity of culture and traditions. Each region has their own flora and fauna, their own food, their own music, their own traditional clothes, their own objects and their own way to produce them. For instance, the elegance and richness of the *tehuana istmeñas* contrast with the simplicity of the *yalalteca*, even when both of them belong to the same region. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. a) Tehuana istmeña traditional clothes. b) Yalalteca traditional clothes

This cultural diversity enriches the identity of every region providing prouddness for its own roots.

This relation between identity and diversity is also present in Design. For instance, Japanese Design –one of the most renowned design that is well-known for its excellence and high quality (WDR, 2017)- has a strong cultural identity: its design and its way of life have been influenced by different perceptions and philosophical interpretations of a style that it is so different from the rest of the world. Imbalance, simplicity, austerity, nature, depth and calm are some of the values that guide Japanese Design (Bodí, 2013).

The above mentioned suggests that countries with a huge diversity like Mexico possess a lot of qualities and knowledge to share with the world. However, a deeply knowledge of the cultural identity is necessary in order to share all these characteristics with the world. So, a question arises: which are the principal values that are shared in Mexico as a multicultural country? To understand a multicultural country as a complex system with a lot of different elements that interacts between them is really important. This review focuses in Mexican furniture design in order to recognize some of the aesthetic values that provide a cultural identity to Mexican Design. Parallel to this article, an analysis of some representative pieces of Mexican furniture has been made. This analysis complements and justifies some of the statements that are asserted in this article.

1.1 Structure

This article is divided into two main sections: the first section seeks to provide the reader a better understanding of both concepts “identity” and “diversity” and the approach that I decided to take about them. Simultaneously, the challenges and benefits of these concepts are presented. The first section is based on reflection and analysis of the consulted sources.

The second section describes the aesthetic values in Mexican design. This section is based on the analysis of literature as well as on the analysis of some representative pieces of Mexican furniture.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

A bibliographic research in the field of “identity and diversity in design” was made.

In order to understand the aesthetic values that provide this identity, some representative pieces of Mexican furniture were analyzed. These pieces (see *Appendix 1*) were selected under the next criteria:

- The piece must be recognized in Mexico at least with an award, nomination or mention.
- The piece must be recognized in the international field at least with an award, nomination or mention.
- The piece must have been done in Mexico, designed by a Mexican designer or produce in a Mexican industry, workshop or by Mexican craftsman hands.

Popular/non scientific articles and personal experience were also used to build a cultural context.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 National identity in design

Design is related to a context. This context is as broad as the criteria allow it to be. The context can be a neighborhood, a town, a region, a country or a nation. National design has some essentialist assumptions. First is the inevitability of belonging to a nation (Caminal Badia et al., 1996, p. 162).

Cultural products -including Design- contain the character of a nation. This implies that

every product will be characterized by the context where it belongs to.

Design is also related to the everyday living, thus, nationhood can be reproduced through design (Martínez, 2016).

Besides, national symbolism is also generated abroad through exportation, which allows to expand the market and to increase the sale of the products.

3.2 Global production vs local production

While the industry's concern is mass production for exportation, local design puts more attention to its context. The context gives it valuable information about the user as its customs, traditions, values and symbols. Also, the context provides specific materials and processes. It conducts a way to understand life and also a way to represent it.

Nevertheless, as a consequence of the extensive distribution of mass products, knowledge and wisdom of the local producers is being lost. Nowadays, local producers and small business are opting for produce and sell imported products or similar ones. Besides, it seems that new generations are more interested in “global” products than in the local ones.

3.3 Diversity in Mexico

Mexico is one of the 12 megadiverse countries of the world. With about 200,000 different species, it has from 10 to 12 percent of the total world's biodiversity (SEMARNAT, 2017).

Furthermore, cultural diversity in Mexico is one of the wealthiest in the world: its language heritage is made up of 68 languages and 364 variants (CDI, 2017). This linguistic and ethnic richness is expressed in several areas such as gastronomy, music, clothes, among others (Paz, 2015).

3.4 Current perception and conception of Mexican furniture

In spite of the influence and expansion of mass products, in Mexico there is a “new” tendency: designers are working together with handicraftsmen and local producers.

The main philosophy of this trend is to use local materials and workforce to produce furniture. The knowledge of handicraftsmen and local producers during the design process is used to develop a wiser design.

Nevertheless, Mexican identity has been combined with the “international identity” in specific with the identity from the US and Europe, causing the lack of a national framework in design (González, 2002).

4. ABOUT IDENTITY

4.1 Identity, more than a peculiarity of Being

“(…) according to Heidegger, (…) the idea of Existence cannot be thought of without the idea of Being₁” (Rivkin and Ryan, 2004).

Something similar happens about the relation between Being and identity. Identity is intrinsic to the Being. It creates unique beings by providing specific characteristics

and attributes to each of them. Heidegger explains: *“The self that gives way to its own care belongs to Being while at the same time having to differentiate its self through the creation of a self identity”* (Fry, 2006).

The statement above can be useful to understand that identity is one with the Being and at the same time it has the peculiarity to allow belonging to a context without losing its self identity.

4.2 Identity as an engine of knowledge

The world is full of knowledge because each culture in the world has an own way to face challenges. This diversity makes us strong species. The wisdom of non-industrialized communities can be applied as an alternative method for solutions to current problems (McDonough and Braungart, 2013).

Nations with a firmly rooted ideology and traditions -such as Japan, Poland, Denmark- use their cultural background to experiment while design. Thus, their solutions are at the leading edge, without losing their past, but by seeing to the future. (González, 2002).

As Mexico has a vast number of different cultures, it also has an extensive knowledge to contribute to the world's wisdom. In order to develop national design, it will be necessary to deeply study our past and merge it with elements that currently surround us. (González, 2002).

¹When Heidegger talks about the being he is referring to the meaning of “Human Being” (Cavalier, n.d.)

5. AESTHETIC VALUES IN MEXICAN FURNITURE (findings and results)

In order to find the aesthetic values in Mexican furniture, an analysis of nine representative Mexican furniture products was made. The selected products are presented below:



Figure 2.

- a. Academia (Fraga, E., 1994, chair)
- b. Acapulco (Unknown author, 1950, chair)
- c. Arrullo (Hagerman, Ó., 1965, dining chair)
- d. Butaque (Porset, C., 1953, chair).
- e. Hielo (Pompa, D. in collaboration with Uriarte, 2015, pendant lamp)
- f. Knit (Godoy, E., 2004, chair)
- g. Maroma (Romero, D., 2008, bookcase)
- h. Pirueta (Pirueta Studio, 2009, table)
- i. Traditional Mexican chair. (Unknown author, n.d., chair).

The analysis performed is based on the “Eight steps to product semantics” by Reinhart Butter. The use of semantic is needed because: “The product’s message is formulated in a ‘language’ that we see, hear of feel. This language consists of signs. Signs are the subject of semiotics. Within product semiotics, this signs consist of forms, colours, sounds and so on- in other words, elements associate with aesthetics.” (Monö, 1997, p.21).

The process analysis that has been follow to have the outcome is represented in the next figure (Figure 3):



Figure 3. Process analysis

By doing a linkage between “visual thinking” –which is ‘holistic’ and oriented towards synthesis- and “verbal thinking” – which is analytical and implies discursive approach to design problems- (Muller, 2001, p.29), findings about aesthetic values in Mexican furniture have been concluded.

In order to present them, they are divided into two groups as Warell proposed about ‘a model of aesthetic perception of visual form’ (2001):

“a *sensuous, ‘non-interpretative’ mode*, denoting a primarily ‘experiential’ appreciation of the form, and a *semiotic, ‘interpretative’ mode*, denoting an appreciation based primarily on attribution of meaning to the form.”

5.1 THE TANGIBLE VALUES. About the form of the product. (Sensuous mode)

During the analysis one of the first outcomes was a list about concrete manifestations in

the products such as symmetry, proportion, direction, geometrical basis, rhythm, among others. The final findings about these manifestations are presented below:

Symmetry: all the analyzed products present symmetry in their vertical axis. (Figure 4. a))

Proportion: the correspondence between long and wide is in entire values: 1:1, 1:2, 1:3... (Figure 4. b))

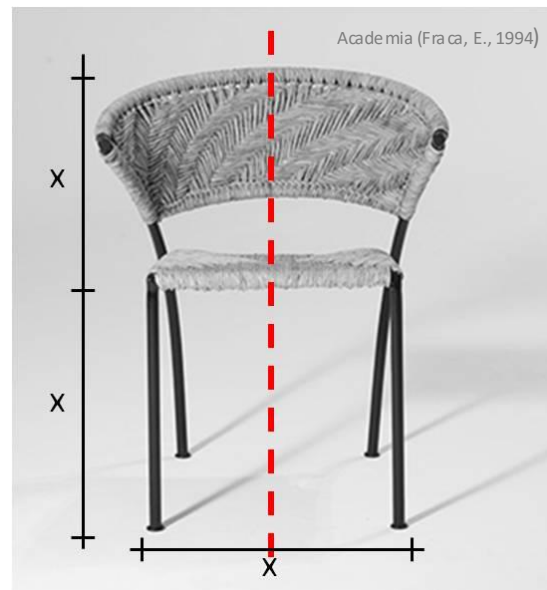


Figure 4. a) Symmetry vertical axis. b) proportion 1:2

Direction: tending to horizontality.

Geometrical basis: square, triangle and circle are present, but a dimensional transformation of these figures is repetitive in most of the products: additive transformation: a) square + arc or b) triangle + arc. (Figure 5)

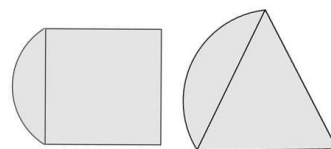


Figure 5. Geometrical basis

Rhythm: given by the texture and the repetition of the elements 1:1, 1:2, 1:3 (Figure 6)

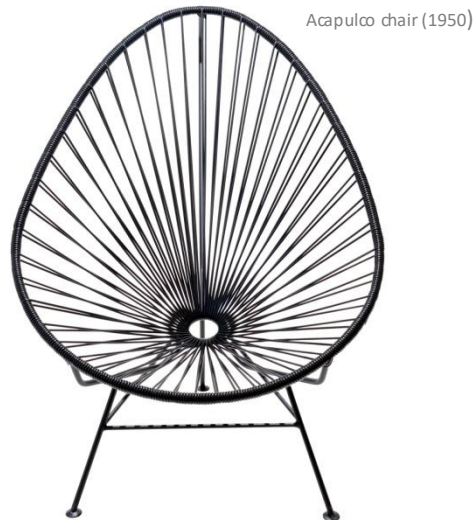


Figure 6. Rhythm and texture

Surfaces: 2 elements (materials, colors, textures,...) disposed in 3 parts (base-seat-back, foot-column-top,...)

Relation with the space: flat foot that lies on the floor.

Textures: broad variety, depends of the material and the function (Figure 6)

Graphics: floral motifs, patterns, ...

Colours: Warm tones. Use of contrast with cold tones or black.

Contrast: is the result of the relation between color-color, material-material, texture-texture, ...

Materials: Wood (pine, yucatan cedar, ayacahuite pine, tzalam, rosewood, ...), metal (steel, electrostatic painted steel), textiles and fibers (cotton, industrial cotton, palm leaf, bejuco, ixtle, ...), ceramic: (talavera poblana, glass)

Processes: they depend on the material. In general typical processes are used for metal and wood; but textile and fiber weave will

depend on the region where the product is made.

Details: chamfer on edges and corners. (Figure 7)



Figure 7. Chamfer and joins

Joins: do not hide the nature of the materials and process: they are evident. Most of the joins are assemblies. The use of metalware is limited. (Figure 7)

Finishes: natural, raw and rustic. Wood: sanded. Use of linseed oil or painting. Metal: electrostatic coating. Matte color / matte finish.

5.2 THE INTANGIBLE VALUES. About our perception of the product form. (Semiotic mode)

The guidelines and codes to argue the findings about the intangible values are given through the analysis, evaluation, reflection and deduction of the tangible values [see section 5.1 THE TANGIBLE VALUES. About the form of the product. (Sensuous mode)].

The outcome of the analysis gives us five intangible values that conduct Mexican furniture: home-made, gentleness, solidness, static, warmness. The nine analyzed products present the same tangible values in a greater or lesser extent, but for practical purposes the average of this measure is presented on Figure 8.

Home-made								
Gentle								
Solid								
Static								
Warm								
(value least to most)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Figure 8. Semantic differential summary

The aesthetics values that define Mexican furniture design are presented and explained below:

Home-made: “1. Made at home, rather than in a shop or factory.” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017). The use of wood and natural fibers, and also the natural, hand-made and non-perfect graphics and the austere and rustic finishes provide the “feeling” of a home-made product, even when is made by the industry.

Gentle: “1. Having or showing a mild, kind, or tender temperament or character. 2. Moderate in action, effect, or degree; not strong or violent.” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017). Chamfer on edges and corners, the warm colors and the natural materials give to the furniture the gentle essence. The use of curves and natural materials on the surfaces that will be in touch with the user talk about a non-strong or violent nature but about a kind welcome. (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Gentleness

Solid: “1. Firm and stable in shape; not liquid or fluid. 1.1 Strongly built or made of strong materials; not flimsy or slender.” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017). Materials as strong as wood and metal afford the solidness that the furniture has. The thickness –seeming or real- in the parts and the evident and strong joints produce the secure and safety feeling of a solid product.

Static: “1. Lacking in movement, action, or change, especially in an undesirable or uninteresting way.” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017). The flat and firm ending of the foot helps to this value: the product is not “floating”, it is secured and passive by lying on the floor. Besides, the horizontality provides it and “extra”-weight that produces the feeling of having it fixed to the floor.

Warm: “1. Of or at a fairly or comfortably high temperature. 2. Having or showing enthusiasm, affection, or kindness. 3. (of a colour) containing red, yellow, or orange tones.” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017). The use of curves, chamfer on edges and corners and the use of colors from yellow to different tones of brown as well as natural materials as wood or fibers bring the warm value to Mexican furniture.

5.3 Image of cultural diversity

According to the finding and results of the analysis, Mexican furniture has tangible and intangible values that guide its design –in a conscious or non-conscious way-. Nevertheless, there is a value in both -tangible and intangible values- which is not only added to the others but engage, attends and focuses them, provides them a unit: diversity.

Diversity is undeniable on the knitting of natural and non-natural fibers and the graphic decorations which diversify according to the region where the product has been done or designed. For example, the knitting of the seat of the *Arrullo* chair by Farca (1994) is different from the knitting on the back in the same chair (Figure 10). Even on the “traditional” chair, the knitted is very different from chair to chair as a result of the richness to find a solution to the same concern.



Figure 10. Sketch of knitted in Academia chair

Also, diversity is present in the materials. Proof of this is the “*Butaque*” chair by Porset (1953) which is modified by the materials available according to the region: in the north, leather was used while in the southwest natural fibers are more used (Figure 11): “In the exploration, she (Porset) found *Butaque*, a traditional seat in different versions according to each region. ...The seat material was replaced by ixtle and leather as well as being tested with various fiber fabrics where she also experimented with local woods, proportions and finishes.” (Glocal Magazine, 2016).



Figure 11. Diversity on the materials according to the region

Diversity in shape can be found on the distinctive, peculiar and particular shape of each product. Is the case of the “*Acapulco*” chair against the “*Butaque*” chair. Both are from the same lustrum, both have the same function -rest chair-; but they are really different in the way they solve the same concern. They are made with different materials; and the contrast between volume, color and texture is also particular from one to the other.

Diversity is even founded in the motive of the names of the product. For example, “*Pirueta*” table by Pirueta Studio (2009) and “*Maroma*” bookcase by Romero (2008). Both products have names of playful moves, but both are different apply to the products and they provide the concept and reason of the design.

6. DISCUSSION

The presented analysis and findings suggest an initial framework for understanding the relation between visual form –tangible values- and the resulting perceptions of product identity –intangible values- being “diversity” the value that conducts the others. As well as this, his study serves to indicate a potential approach for understanding how identity perceptions are linked to visual product in Mexican furniture design: “The analysis of

perceptual modes serves to understand how the variety of visual product design references contributes to the construction of product identity.” (Warell, 2015, p.2124).

Contrasting with the approach of this article, González (2002) affirms: “There is no identity in Mexican design. It is not distinguished because European and American influence has generated a lack of identity.”

However, some authors explain Mexican identity as a complex system and agree about cultural diversity as one of its main axis: “Mexican society is a mixture of cultures, roots, languages, customs ... Thus, the conception of the Mexican nation as culturally homogeneous has become inadequate.” (Sánchez,2010). As well as Sanchez argues, Arizpe (2011, p.70) confirms the approach of my article by corresponding: “The elements that defines the Mexican Identity are multiple and include countless tangible and intangible values: customs, gastronomy, family relationships, artistic manifestations, to mention only a few aspects.” Even though Arizpe emphasizes “originality” as the principal value in Mexican identity (2011, p. 70): “The identity of Mexicans is recognized for its originality. This originality was forged in the crucible of the Mesoamerican high cultures and in the dialogue with a great diversity of cultures of the world.” she constantly takes up the concept of diversity: “By definition, all identity is relational and multiple. Mexicans are, at the same time, natives of a town, neighborhood or city, carriers of an ethnic culture, (...) Each of these affiliations and attachments joins us to a great variety of groups and weaves our total identity.” (Arizpe, 2011, p.72)

In addition to this approach, some authors explain how both Mexican cultures and

international influence contribute to generate a national identity in Mexican design nowadays: “On one hand, there is the search for the Mexican essence in production and pre-cortesian aesthetics and on the other the desire of the international avant-gardes and tendencies.” (Restrepo, 2015, p.84).

7. CONCLUSION

“The fact that a useful object has its meta-product₂ ...and can be used to express personal values, status and identity is, of course, another obvious side of the picture. Thus the aesthetics of design can be said to be: the study of the effect of product gestalt on human sensations.

“As a result the aesthetics of design also comprises the study of the way in which human beings read and understand how to interpret the parts and the whole of a visual gestalt.”

(Monö, 1997, p.27)

The broad diversity in Mexican culture -such as music, food, clothes, traditions ...- and in Mexican nature –Mexico has about 200,000 different species (SEMARNAT, 2017)- results in a multicultural approach to understand and interpret the world.

In Design, this diversity provides a measureless variety of products: it allows designers to explore, clarify, figure out and tackle design issues to obtain remarkable design furniture. The different materials that are provided by the nature as well as the

₂Meta-product (Gr. *meta* prep. Beyond, after): all the interpretations and ideas ‘behind’ the physical product, such as prejudices, status, nostalgia, group affiliation and so on.” (Monö, 1997, p.20)

diverse techniques and processes that are involved in the production line—taught by the wisdom of people from each region—, open the possibilities of creating furniture with its own language and expression.

Home-made, gentleness, solidness, static and warmth are values that will be found in Mexican furniture expressed by the natural materials, warm colors, chamfer edges, evident join and the natural, raw and rustic finishes which in turn will express the values and identity of the Mexican people and thus, the way they understand and interpret the world.

8. FURTHER RESEARCH

To form a real national identity it is needed to have a broad approach where different cultures and design fields can be a part of it. This is why further research about aesthetic values in Mexican design is needed. To build an identity by including all the diverse knowledge and resources from each culture will produce a richer background to guide the way of the future generations of Mexican designers and to improve the course of the country.

By creating a strong identity, Mexico can continue growing in its knowledge and economy by collaborating with craftsman and small communities to be as great as its own diversity.

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Figure 1.

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Figure 2.

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Figure 6.

Rhythm and texture

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Figure 7.

Chamfer and joins

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Figure 9.

Gentleness

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Figure 11.

Diversity on the materials according to the region

- [40] a) Porset, C., (1953) *Butaque chair*. Available at: <http://glocal.mx/silla-butaque-clara-porset> [Accessed 07 Sep. 2017]
- [41] b) Porset, C., (1953) *Butaque chair*. Available at: <http://www.cubanartnews.org/es/news/cuba-rediscovers-clara-porset/3832> [Accessed 07 Sep. 2017]

APPENDIX 1

Products selected for the analysis:

- 1 *Academia*. Fracca, E., (1994), chair.
- 2 *Acapulco*. Unknown author (1950), chair.
- 3 *Arrullo*. Hagerman, Ó., (1965), dinning chair.
- 4 *Butaque*. Porset, C., (1953), chair.
- 5 *Hielo*. Pompa, D. in collaboration with Uriarte, (2015), pendant lamp.
- 6 *Knit*. Godoy, E., (2004), chair.
- 7 *Maroma*. Romero, D., (2008), bookcase.
- 8 *Pirueta*. Pirueta Studio, (2009), table.
- 9 *Traditional Mexican chair*. Unknown author, (1950), chair.