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From Resort to Gallery: Nation Building in Clara Porset's Interior Spaces*

Del Resort a la Galería: la construcción de nación en los
espacios interiores de Clara Porset

De Resort a Galeria: Construção Nacional nos Espaços
Interiores de Clara Porset

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Abstract: Modern design in Latin America exists between technological utopia and artisanal memory. Often anachronistic, this tension has historically sponsored the use of unusual materials and unorthodox construction methods. This article critically analyzes key interior spaces designed by Cuban born Clara Porset in mid-century Mexico that interrogate traditional interior and exterior notions and question boundaries between public and private. By exploring both her posh and serene collective interior spaces within early Mexican resort hotels and her well-considered minimal furnishings for affordable housing units, we confirm that both kinds of projects call into question issues of class, gender, and nation building.

Keywords: modernity, interiors, craft, design, gender, indigenist, nation-building, architecture, material culture, industrial design, exhibition design, identity, Cuba, Mexico.

Resumen: El diseño moderno en Latinoamérica existe entre utopía tecnológica y memoria artesanal. Muchas veces incongruente, esta tensión históricamente ha promovido el uso de materiales inusuales y métodos de construcción poco ortodoxos. Este artículo analiza de forma crítica los espacios interiores claves que fueron diseñados por la cubana Clara Porset a mediados del siglo pasado en México y los cuales cuestionan las nociones tradicionales de interior y exterior y los límites entre lo público y lo privado. Mediante la exploración tanto de lo elegante como de lo sereno de aquellos espacios interiores y colectivos de los primeros centros vacacionales mexicanos así como del mobiliario esencial para unidades de vivienda asequible, confirmamos que ambos tipos de proyectos cuestionan temas de clase, género y construcción nacional.

Palabras clave: modernidad, interiores, artesanía, diseño, género, indigenista, construcción de nación, arquitectura, cultura material, diseño industrial, diseño de exhibiciones, identidad, Cuba, México.

Resumo: Na América Latina, o design moderno existe entre a utopia tecnológica e a memória artesanal. Frequentemente anacrônica, essa tensão historicamente tem promovido o uso de materiais não comuns e de métodos de construção pouco ortodoxos. Este artigo analisa criticamente os principais espaços interiores projetados pela cubana Clara Porset, no México a meados do século passado, que interrogam as noções tradicionais de interior e exterior e que questionam as fronteiras entre o público e o privado. Ao investigar os espaços interiores coletivos luxuosos e serenos nos primeiros hotéis resort do México o mobiliário minimalista adequado para unidades habitacionais econômicas, confirmamos que em ambos tipos de projetos Porset trata questões de classe, gênero e construção nacional.

Palavras-chave: arquitetura, artesanal, construção nacional, Cuba, cultura material, design, design expositivo, design industrial, gênero, identidade, indigenista, interiores, México, modernidade.

Scale is immaterial when considering the recurrence of sensory experience, representation, craft, and other common concerns in the design of urban, interior, and landscaped spaces. However, the passionate design and architecture debates that took place last century were generally framed solely in terms of function versus form or structure versus ornament. This tension mostly reinforces the kind of binary design thinking that pitches rationality against intuition, science against emotion, and rigor against seduction. Unsettlingly, these discussions also recall the oppositional construction of masculine versus feminine and the power structure implicit in industrialized versus developing worlds.

Navigating this duality, modern design in Latin America has typically sponsored the use of unusual materials as well as unorthodox construction methods due to the region's desire to embrace technological as well as artisanal realities. This is a fruitful context in which to analyze key interior spaces designed by Cuban born Clara Porset (1895-1981) in mid-century Mexico. Her choice of materials and construction techniques reveal a nationalistic bent in the context of an emergent industrialized society with a long and richly layered history such as the one we find in post-revolutionary Mexico.

In order to construct a context for her work, it is important to become re-acquainted with the origins of modern architecture in Mexico while interrogating the traditional historiographical breakdown of design into oppositional notions of function and form. The familiar contention between structure and ornament recalls not only the binary gender construction of male and female, but also the often antagonistic relationship between modern architecture originating in Europe and its articulation in Latin America.

As a practicing architect, I know the design process to be similar independent of scale. Technical knowledge, cultural sensitivity, facility with form, and material expertise are the four main considerations regardless of whether one is working with urban, landscape, architecture, interior, exhibit, furniture, object, or fashion design.

Modern Architecture in Mexico

Beginning in the sixteenth century, the production of buildings south of the Rio Grande has been dominated by European aesthetic sensibilities. These imported architectural concepts have typically erased, or at best hybridized, indigenous building practices. From the Baroque and the Neo-Classicism of Spain and Portugal, followed by a period of flirtation with French Art Deco, Art Nouveau, and Italian Rationalism, the culmination point of these influences was the arrival of modern architecture. Coined as the International Style, this universalizing movement aspired to be culture and location neutral because it was

promulgated on a future primarily concerned with speed of production and economy of materials. Any consideration related to history, culture, or locality was shunned by the International Style as nostalgic.

The development of modern architecture in Mexico follows a similar functionalist emphasis but deviates by considering cultural and climatic concerns to different degrees. Despite their extremely different architectural process and expressions, the production of the three leading modern architects in Mexico: Mario Pani, Enrique Yáñez, and Luis Barragán, can be characterized in four major ways:

- Scale and horizontal emphasis that recalls Mesoamerican sites
 - A porous relationship between interior and exterior spaces.
 - The search for artistic integration and a culturally appropriate Mexican language of modern architecture.
 - Being largely uninterested in the phenomenological development of interior spaces.

Clara Porset's design contribution becomes indispensable based on the last three categories. Barragán, Pani, and Yáñez were major supporters of her work and repeatedly invited her to collaborate on the interiors of their single and multi-family residential projects as well as the interior design of resorts, hospitals, and office spaces. By using form, light, and color her primary interest was to mine the possibilities of Interior Architecture as the "art of organizing closed spaces."¹

When exploring both her posh and serene collective interior spaces within early Mexican resort hotels and, at the other end of the class spectrum, Porset's well-considered minimal furnishings for affordable housing units; most every project calls into question issues of class, gender, and nation-building in vastly different ways. The daily realities of Mexico transforming from an agrarian to an industrialized society were mostly played out within the intimate settings of a family dwelling or the shared privileged spaces of a beach resort. In her 1931 seminal essay, Porset wrote:

The exterior (appearance) of a house today is a logical result of its interior so that the reasonable demands of the latter are completely satisfied because there is no need to make concessions to the façade. This renewal in the structural conception logically tends towards a new notion of interior space.²

Porset's interior spaces contest traditional notions of inside and outside, and transgress boundaries between the public and the private sphere. These constructed spaces for leisure and appearance-as Hannah Arendt might designate them-represent a stable, sophisticated, and seductive Mexico for export. An example may be the Hotel Pierre Marqués in Acapulco (fig. 1), where Barragán designed the landscape. Porset's outdoor furniture, structured from continuous steel tube and clad in woven wicker, brought a casual elegance and a sensual inhabitability to the spaces designed for social gatherings.



Figure 1
Hotel Pierre Marques, exterior
(Photo Lola Alvarez Bravo)



Figure 2
Muebles Bajo Costo MultiFamiliar, interior

Much less luxurious but equally thoughtful, the built-in home furnishings (fig. 2) Porset designed for Pani's 1080 unit affordable housing complex³ were meant to aid the transition of dislocated rural populations into Mexico City by supporting the creation of their new urban identities. Nation-building was taking place one cottage industry at a time in the interior spaces that naturally support production, such as the kitchen and the living room, which often double as a workshop.

Ultimately these ideas helped her concretize diverse furniture lines characterized by the seamless integration of industrial techniques and artisanal materials that were in perfect functional and aesthetic harmony. She received considerable international attention for these projects including winning the 1941 (New York) Museum of Modern Art organic design competition (fig. 3), alongside Eames and Saarinen, for her⁴ low-cost five-piece rural furniture made of pine, jute, and agave fiber as well as recognition at the 1957 Milano Triennial (fig. 4) for the outdoor spaces she designed at the aforementioned hotel.

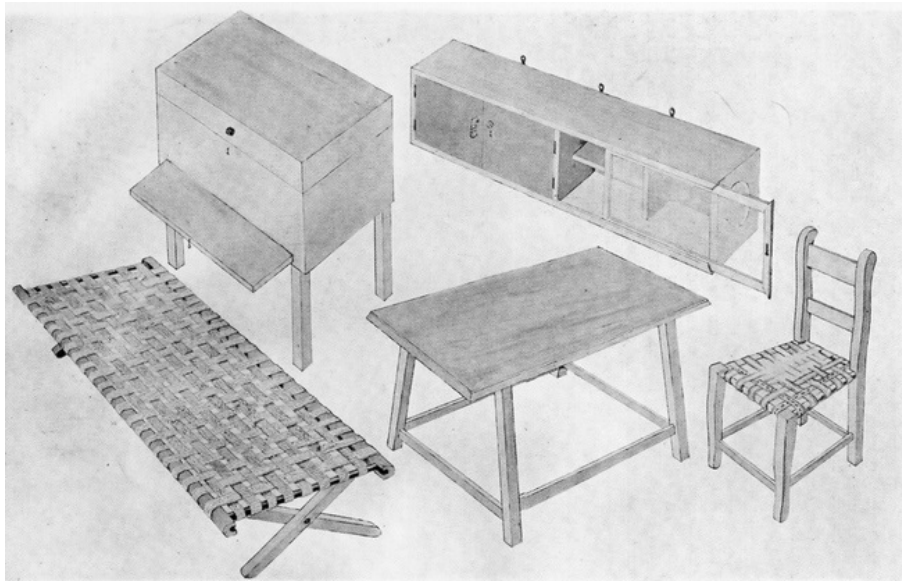


Figure 3

Dibujo muebles organic design New York MOMA, 1941

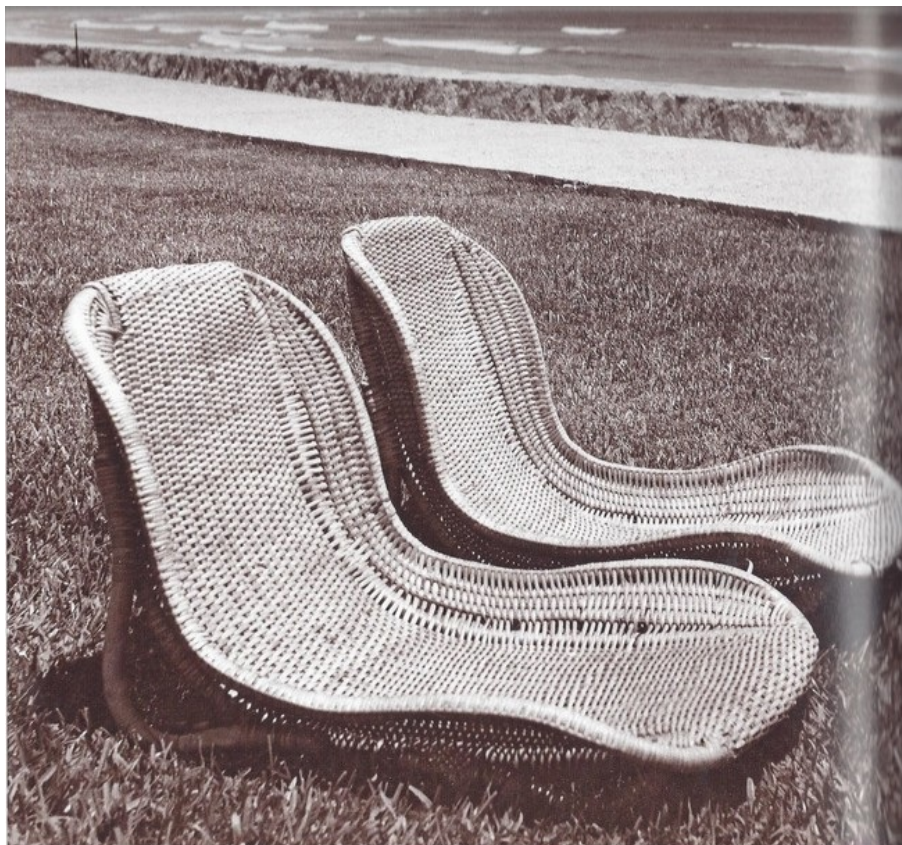


Figure 4

Sillas enviadas a la Milano Triennale, fotografiadas en el Hotel Pierre Marques en 1957
(Photo Lola Alvarez Bravo)

Nation Building

Through her husband and long-time collaborator Xavier Guerrero, who was a prominent Mexican muralist and painter, Porset was integrated into an avant-garde movement comprised of the most important Latin American intellectuals and artists of the time including Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Juan O’Gorman, David Alfaro Siqueiros, as well as Lola and Manuel Alvarez Bravo. Producing design work within an artistic collective environment that had strong nationalist and socialist politics, she interpreted the legacy of pre-Hispanic cultures that were celebrated by the avant-garde and promulgated by the national government as the new historical project aimed at re-writing the genesis of Mexico’s population.

Porset’s unflagging efforts to embrace modernity while exploring and advancing the indigenous artisanal techniques stem from an intellectual ambition to help design a modern future for her adopted country based on the Mexican vernacular. At times, she articulated this ambition as a response to the tropics and something that was environmentally sound based on material origin, availability and performance, and simply more appropriate given the economic realities of using local techniques and materials rather than importing them.

In 1953, Porset wrote a short article for the magazine *Espacios*, where she argued that modern design thinking needed to adapt to the tropics’ climatic demands. She described her design process as one inspired by the selection of native materials based on their ability to keep a cooler temperature than the average body at rest:

Climate considerably influences material choice. In the popular furniture from the warmest regions of Mexico-models of rationalism-we find a generalized use of fresh and light materials like reed grass (sugar) cane stick, clubrush, bamboo, open-weave canvas; and hides from cow, pig or deer...⁵

Two design precedents for her most popular modern chairs are intertwined with Mexican history: “Some of the chairs we design betray a research interest in the two original sources of Mexican culture: the Indian and the Spaniard that have been distant for centuries but that now are oriented towards a point of synthesis and convergence.”⁶

The first is a chair used prior to the arrival of Hernán Cortés that sits close to the ground in a very wide stance. This chair is widely known as the Icpalli, and it has been memorialized in Totonaca ceramic figurines (fig. 5). Porset identified one of these figurines within the Stavenhagen private collection and designed an upholstered wooden structure version for the architect Enrique Yáñez’s own living room (fig. 6). Brought to Mexico by the Spaniards and widely used during colonial times, the second precedent was originally known as the Butaca. It became so popular that it was gradually adopted into the local manufacturing culture and its name was transformed into the Butaque.



Figure 5
Escultura Totonaca propiedad del dr. Stavenhagen, ca. siglos V-VI CE

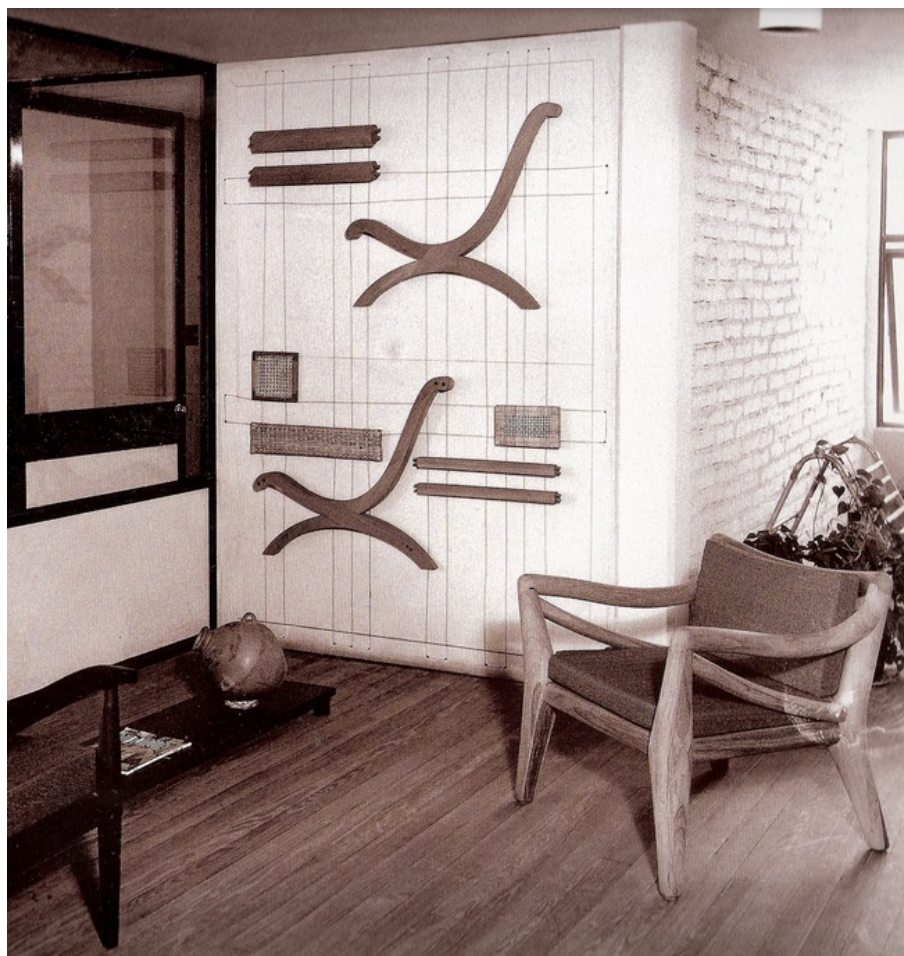


Figure 6

Despacho de Clara Porset en la calle Hamburgo, Ciudad de Mexico, s/f

Anthropological Commitment

The political climate in post-revolutionary Mexico provided fertile ground for Porset's design ideas that were inspired by her Bauhaus training at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. When Clara Porset first arrived in México in 1936 to teach at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), she was inspired by a country in which the nascent modernity was overwhelmed by a long, painful history of colonialism and the palpable exploitation and obliteration of native peoples.

In the catalogue for the exhibition of Mexican artisanal and mass produced household objects that she curated at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in 1952, Clara Porset writes about the relationship between industrial modernity and traditional craft:

During this time of technological transformation, it is important to infuse industry—that is the machine—with the extraordinary sensitivity of the Mexican, who over the millennia has created so many and such a variety of beautiful forms using manual techniques. Thus, creation passes from the hands of the craftsman to those of the industrial designer.⁷

Finally, she embodies the foundational relationship to culture and indigenous craft that modern Latin American design has exhibited from the onset. What sets Porset apart from her post-war national contemporaries is a preoccupation with the social and artistic patterns of indigenous communities and a desire to rescue and reinterpret their craft as a way to acknowledge their cultural contribution. There is a recurrent anthropological commitment in her design process: this is apparent in her in-situ sketches as well as her insistence on using local fibers and ancient weaving techniques in her modern furniture.

Resourceful Materiality: Industry Meets Craft

While the first urban centers in México-Tenochtitlán, Texcoco, and Tlacopan date back to the mid 1200s and early 1300s, large-scale industrialization did not fully take place until about 1925. This was largely due to the presence of an abundant and well-qualified manual labor force that did not require mechanized production processes.

While eager to explore the mass reproduction of her designs to make them accessible to the general public, Porset was also interested in a historical and cultural recuperation of popular materials that breathe, endure, and possess extraordinary textures. She chose woven palm, agave fiber and sisal for her furniture designs because of their environmental adaptability, cultural resonance, indigenous mythology, and ability to conjure a new way of thinking about industry based on craft. This is partly a response to concerns expressed a century earlier by William Morris and more contentious postulates of the Arts and Crafts movement.

Morris' main concept was that beauty should be part of everyone's daily life, not simply those who could afford it. This idea originated in England as a reaction to the industrial revolution at the dawn of the twentieth century, as it was believed that by implementing it, society could be greatly improved. The primary vehicles for Morris' ideal of truly integrated art and life were crafts such as furniture, glass, textiles, ceramics, and architecture. Morris' success in making the production of fine crafts once again valuable created a new way of thinking about, and a new respect for, the role of artisans in relation to the fine arts.

The Arts and Crafts Movement embraced makers and consumers from all social strata but was partial to the working class. Not only was the movement a return to valuing traditional arts and crafts, but it was also a radical critique of industrial capitalism, mass production, and mass culture that led many to believe values such as workmanship, craft, artistry, and creativity had been lost in the age of industrialization. Central to this critique were the ways in which the division of labor exploited the working class as disenfranchised workers and passive consumers instead of creative makers and skilled producers of culture. In other words, these reformers believed industrialization was to blame for many of the social ills that particularly affected the poor and disenfranchised at the turn of the twentieth century.

In the same previously mentioned article in *Espacios*, Porset denounced an inherent social prejudice in the traditional high cost associated with design, either hand-made or industrially manufactured. She could not hide her frustration regarding the Mexican working class:

The worker or employee-of slightly higher means than the lowest economic strata-has no recourse but to furnish their dwelling with items most frequently found in the (neighborhood open-air) market: industrial furniture of poor constructive quality and even worse taste, even if its cost is disproportionately high.⁸

Porset believed art and industry feed on each other, as this should be design's contribution to cultivated contemporary life. She predicted industrialists could change their mind not out of philanthropy but when they realize the profitable potential of well-conceived affordable mass-produced design.

Porset's project aspired to construct a Mexican industry built upon indigenous artisanal memory and not one that was simply derived from foreign industrial processes. Even though she did not express it in those terms, what Porset wanted to institute was a *transcultural*⁹ design production that could transform both the imported culture of industry and the values inherent in a national artisanal culture by mutual learning. She wanted to establish a forward-looking Mexican industry based on vernacular creative processes and methodologies that would result in a hybrid mode of design production.

Gender and Class

Porset felt strongly about highlighting the subtle but powerful difference between design and decoration. Conscious of the tendency to categorize textiles and fibers as decoration-because they are pliable, softer, and often more diaphanous than architecture-she was quick to note that the designers who use them show no less understanding of structure, material, and fabrication experimentation and therefore these softer materials qualify as design-worthy. Because textiles and fibers often occupy a more intimate and ephemeral spatial condition-such as screens, curtains, and hangings-they can act as either permanent walls or movable space dividers. Once again, historic as well as current screen production provides a bridge between the solid and the translucent and between the rigidity of the wall and the pliability of a textile. Contemporary culture celebrates and theorizes temporal and pop-up architecture and provides a useful foil for these arbitrary distinctions that betray a gender bias. I will further elaborate below.

In an online article in 2015 subtitled "Uneasy Gender Imbalance between Craft and Industrial Design", Alexandra Lange points out that there is a "continuing, uneasy, and gendered relationship between people who make things out of yarn, clay or cloth and people who make things out of glass, steel or plastic."¹⁰ Speaking about the wall text at the New

York Museum of Arts and Design's exhibition, *Pathmakers: Women in Art, Craft and Design, Mid-century and Today*, Lange stated that:

In the 1950s and 1960s, an era when painting, sculpture, and architecture were dominated by men, women had extensive impact in alternative materials such as textiles, ceramics and metals. The irony is that, while women were largely unwelcome in architecture and industrial design as practitioners, male architects and manufacturers found they couldn't live without them. Most of the highlighted mid-century designers worked with architects to bring nature, texture, and color to their hard-edged spaces, and several worked with manufacturers as designers and translators-for publicity purposes-of new styles and materials for a mass audience.¹¹

I would argue that craft is not necessarily as gendered in Latin America as it is in industrialized countries such as the United States. This is due in part to the relative lack of factory employment opportunities and the absence of labor organizing that enabled the wages that originally built the working and middle class in the United States. Additionally, Latin American crafts vary by locality and evolve with each generation. Traditionally craft knowledge is transferred within the family and practiced by men and women alike as, historically, its practice has been either a desirable alternative to working in the fields or, when migrating to urban centers, the only alternative income option. However, the presence of female weavers and potters working with fibers and clay is still significant due, in part, to the relationship with traditional housework. In both cases, it is hard to ignore the medium's connotations with femininity, domesticity, and the quotidian.

It is, therefore, doubly important that a female designer in the 1940's and 1950's took up the challenge of validating and exploring the possibility of a mechanized design production informed by the malleability and originality of craft. Porset's interiors were concerned with an understated minimalism that favored ideas of comfort and functionalism but were rich in materiality, texture, and color. Her demand for simplicity did not result from a resigned acceptance to challenging economic conditions, as her critics would have described it. Instead she believed people's search for simplicity stems from "a spiritual necessity; precisely because we are complex individuals."¹² She insisted on the contemporary need for peaceful and effortless spaces to counter the nerve wrecking and exhausting contemporary demands of life. Porset's spaces strived to be class and gender neutral as they were conceived with the deeply held belief that everyone deserves a thoughtfully designed and pleasantly agreeable room to call one's own.

Corporeal Awareness

The discourse of modern architecture and urban design superimposes ideas of a mechanized city dwelling over native flora and fauna. In the Western European tradition, building relates to nature as something in need of being indexed and redefined. The machine-obsessed universality

of the modern movement cannot afford for the unplanned to occur. It is the ultimate physical expression of the ongoing tension between humans and their natural surroundings. This stands in direct contrast to the post-modern feminine representation of temporality, cycle, and sensorial experience as well as women's presumed predisposition towards empathy, inclusiveness and flexibility.

It is difficult to assess if Porset's multi-disciplinary approach was born out of necessity as a foreign woman working in mid-century Mexico (fig. 7) or sheer predilection due to her Bauhaus formation. Working only in fields that are closely related to architecture-interior, industrial, and exhibit design (fig. 8) but not squarely within its strict limitations- was certainly an opportunistic decision. At the time, she could not have competed in a traditionally male profession; however and more importantly, working resourcefully around this reality allowed her to further other disciplines and to make a significant contribution to design education in Mexico by being one of the founding teachers at the UNAM School of Industrial Design starting in 1969.



Figure 7
Clara Porset y ebanista, ca. 1951-52.



Figure 8

Exhibicion en el Pabellón Mexicano, Milano Triennale, 1957

Porset's intelligent observation of people's daily lives follows the basic principle of modernity but precedes current theoretical interest in popular art and everyday design production. She conceived of furniture as being as integral to (interior) architecture as structure is; she also proposed changing the perception of furniture as isolated objects in favor of them creating a formal universe tied by material, structure, form, and experience, "From furniture it has become building."¹³ Furthermore, she referred to the horizontal lines prevalent in furniture as logical and calming, equally found in natural landscapes as well as in human and transportation movement. The horizontal development of comfortable furniture, coupled with the wall height necessary for cross ventilation, informed Porset's conception of interior spaces in the tropics as the ideal equilibrium between rationality, spirituality, and sensuality.

Could it be that Porset's interest in detail, texture, and color is a by-product of a heightened awareness of the body in space? Might it be directly related to her proclivity for creating spaces that engage the

senses? Her design work demonstrates an interest in iteration and detail and thus, her designs acknowledge cycle, climate, and ergonomics as well as highlight the fabrication process, the trial and error inherent in prototyping and in material assemblage.

Conclusion

Porset's contribution is unprecedented when we consider that throughout the history of twentieth century architecture and design - not unlike natural landscape and craft- Latin America has historically been feminized as derivative, naive, and nostalgic. By attempting to revolutionize industry, she was betting on mass-produced, thoughtfully designed, flexible, and adaptable furniture made of culturally resonant high-quality materials becoming affordable and attractive to the people that needed it most: the poor, the uneducated, and the rural masses moving to the city in search of opportunity.

Porset's interiors are not merely symbolic of those intentions, but they in fact give them form in spaces that enable art as an integral part of daily life. Without concessions for nostalgia, her spaces redefine the domestic realm threatened by modernity. We can clearly see these aspirations in the interiors she designed for the Miguel Alemán workers housing block, which is a prime example of the artistic integration that is so emblematic of Mexican modern architecture.

When contemplating her body of work, we may think about the categories of anthropological commitment, resourceful materiality, and corporeal awareness as instrumental in organizing Porset's efforts to enrich and reinvent modern spaces. Her design contributions dissect the mechanisms by which matter accommodates to and frames the body in space while engaging the collective realm and linking it to place and memory.

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Notes

- * The author critically analyzes the design work of Clara Porset in Mexico as a nation-building project that is both multi-disciplinary and post-modern in nature and that anticipated current theoretical concerns by almost half a century. Unless noted otherwise, author translated all original Spanish quotes on June 18th, 2018.
- 1 Porset Dumás, "La decoración interior contemporánea," 68. 2 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 3 The Presidente Miguel Alemán urban center was a government sponsored housing complex designed by architect Mario Pani in 1949.
- 4 At the time of this writing, I am investigating the specific degree to which Xavier Guerrero may have contributed to this competition entry.
- 5 Porset Dumás, "Diseño viviente," n. p. 6 *Ibid.*, n. p.
- 6 *Ibid.*, n. p.
- 7 Departamento de Arquitectura del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, "El arte en la vida diaria," 17.
- 8 Porset, Dumás, "Diseño viviente," n. p.
- 9 Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 97.
- 10 Lange, "Women were Unwelcome in Architecture." 11 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Porset Dumás, "La decoración interior," 72. 13 *Ibid.*, 77.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 77.