

Design and the Accumulation of Cultural Value

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To encounter the global impact of Spanish design abroad, you need hardly go further than your local bar or café. There is a good chance you'll get to sit on a chair designed in the late-1960s by Joan Casas for the Barcelonese furniture manufacturer Indecasa. Whether the Monaco or the Barcino, or a copy of either, these rank among the most ubiquitous chair designs of our age. The Indecasa Barcino chair has sold over half a million worldwide. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. Twelve other companies – including eight in China – produce copies of this design. These humble products are little acknowledged for their Iberian provenance, but they mark an early point in Spain's modern design history.

The impact of this trajectory within Spain is far more complex than the simple act of sitting on a café seat, however. Since 1986 (the year of Spain's accession to the European Union, the year of Barcelona securing the Olympic Games for 1992, and the year of a triumphant showing at the Milan Furniture Fair by few hitherto little-known companies such as Punt Mobles and Amat), design has played an exponentially important role in the reworking of national, regional and urban identity, lifestyle, modus operandi and taste habits. The evidence for this is hard to describe in terms of specific design objects. Rather, it is about attitudinal change.

Design in Spain has been used for various place re-branding exercises. This has not necessarily been the result of any coordinated, programmatic campaign. Rather it has evolved and taken root through a range of locations, events and infrastructures. Tourism marketing, festivals and sporting events, new museums and galleries, public transport makeovers and utility privatizations have all given way to their aesthetic re-invention.

In Catalonia this process was particularly relentless and intense. For almost a decade from the mid-1980s onwards, a hegemonic aesthetic of 'modernity and technology' dominated anything new and Catalan. Its consistency and energy made Barcelona the most compelling location for the study of design culture in the world. Unlike Milan, New York or London, this was to be found not just in domestic and contract furniture, graphics or retail design. Instead it reached into the very fabric and consumer culture of the city. The idea that a nation or region can therefore consciously redesign itself is now taught in business schools and urban planning departments throughout the world using the example of Catalonia. Design-led urban regeneration through the renovation of public spaces was pioneered in Barcelona. The designer café-bar was invented there and is now a mainstay of European and American city-centres and their corporatised night-time entertainment (much of which's seating is supplied by Indecasa-designed chairs!).

The adoption of a more aesthetically-inflected consumer culture that linked these spaces in the imagination of its citizens and, in turn, reinforced this notion of Catalan modernity, was remarkable in its coherence. Although highly élitist in many ways, new Barcelona design touched into the everyday lives of people and was instrumental in changing aesthetic outlooks. While many of the new forms would start their public lives in expensive designer bars or classy furniture showrooms, they were rapidly translated into other formats such as urban fittings or TV soap opera sets. The net social effect of this was either a feeling of democratization as new design become more ubiquitous, or marginalization as it was seen as overly prescribed. Chairs, posters and lamps are therefore signifiers of a wider process of the production of aesthetic consent. But this process is not without its dangers. At times, it forced an almost compulsory modernity into the regions' visual content. It felt as if there was only one way to be Catalan, part of which was to adopt a rigid, hegemonic design style, either through its consumption or production. (In more recent years many younger product designers have challenged this aesthetic through provocative, anti-style objects. This tendency is not exclusive to Barcelona – it was partly instigated by Amsterdam's Droog Design. Tellingly, it has become an international style of the 'Diesel' generation that resists the strictures of specific local identities.)

This issue of taste as a signifier of modernity and cultural connoisseurship has ultimately impacted on the everyday economies of many Spaniards. Parts of Barcelona, but also Valencia, Madrid, Bilbao and Zaragoza have all been subject to the process of gentrification. Designed urban regeneration has made city-centre barrios increasingly desirable.

Property prices have consequently rocketed. And unless you are comfortably upper middle-class, buying or renting your home in such areas has become virtually prohibitive. Meanwhile, design is appropriated to become a decorative makeover in order to obscure social divisions. Naturally, this process is not exclusive to Spain – it is a global problem – and design is not solely to blame. But a mature design culture should be sufficiently engaged to have influence over planning in such scenarios and to propose responses.

The politics of design cuts in both directions. On the one hand, policy-makers have given enviable emphasis to the benefits of new architectural, design and other cultural interventions in regeneration. On the other hand, they have been highly reliant on the voluntarism and sense of agency on the part of designers. Environmentally, Spain benefits from two factors: great weather and rubbish television. The result is an incentive to get out of the house and attend design events, lectures, exhibitions, societies or evening classes. The high levels of citizen participation in this cultural infrastructure of Spanish design provide the basis on which its profession is propelled forwards. This exists despite, rather than because of, politicians. While politicians have helped facilitate some of the higher-profile manifestations of design action – Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the Barcelona Forum 2004, the Valencia Furniture Fair Competition spring to mind – the underpinning infrastructure of design for which they are responsible is far from optimum. In particular, the Spanish government's archaic education regulations do little to serve design, a vocation that is subject to constant re-invention. Government-ordained curricula has marginal relevance to modern-day demands in the design profession. Their rigidity seriously impedes the development innovative,

University-level courses and research centres that are required to face the new challenges of the 21st century. Design education to address pressures for sustainability, demographic change, the multicultural challenges of globalization or new technologies largely takes place outside the public sector in Spain. Therefore, in the present circumstances, this can only be market-led and demand-responsive rather than policy-driven and citizen-proactive.

The fact that the Barcino and Monaco chairs have been so extensively copied, following expiry of their legal protection in the 1980s, is testimony to their good design. In any case, the company cannot produce these chairs at the same cut-price levels as manufacturers in the Far East. Indecasa has therefore had to fall back on its own 'knowledge economy' to produce new, more upmarket designs – a typical feature of the developed world. Indeed, Spain's wider 'knowledge economy' has been driven and dragged in no small part by a cumulative process of design awareness. This is no longer solely focused on Barcelona as a designer hot-spot; it is far more widespread these days. For example, many small- and medium-

sized firms across the nation are still going through their own 'second industrial revolution' wherein new design products destined for niche markets are taking over from previous derivative or licensed outputs. In some of the Spain's industrial centres, such as Zaragoza, it couldn't be a better time for industrial designers to get established. They will have to accept a low wage – designers in Spain are only very rarely rich, and that is usually the result of some other business venture they get involved in. But interesting times lie ahead for them.

Very few Spanish designers have moved into large-scale, corporately-orientated multidisciplinary consultancy, unlike their British or American counterparts. Ultimately, I don't think it is because of a lack of opportunities – put this down either to enlightened stubbornness or a wilful lack of imagination. If Spanish design has one enduring strength, then, this is not in its artefacts. It is in its ability to conceive design primarily as a cultural practice rather than as a commercial enterprise. But as politicians, business analysts and sociologists increasingly claim, culture has an economic value.