



Design and Neoliberalism in Colombia Approaches from Furniture to Everyday Life (1980-2000)

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ABSTRACT: Colombia, a country shaped by influences and resistances. A particular territory struggling the imposed 'globalization' principles. Colombia seems exhausted, running an endless chase as a consequence of rushed and radical decisions, taken during the late 80's and early 90's by the Colombian State. Being part of an open economy model wasn't planned, the proposal of stages that could meet in a transitional way with the global political obligations, were missing. The globalization process proposes steadiness and uniformity, resulting in a transcultural phenomenon that affects social structures, where the disciplines of design and its artifacts had a homogeneous outcome, deteriorating the particular cultural diversity of each place. This article's purpose, is to consider the aspects carried by globalization process, having direct influence on Colombian material culture consolidation. Objects and artifacts, understood as a meaningful cultural outcome, manifest a set of differential concepts based on the local diversity, projected to be maximized with the insertion of design disciplines to the Colombian context. Material culture is a complex configuration of the physical world. It is experienced in public and private spaces, material world shapes everyday life, therefore the idea that objects, like furniture, carry a series of relations that can deceive particular ways of thinking, is the research interest. These characteristic features, are the construction of local dynamics enhanced with the passing of time, possibly experienced using products emerged in everyday life. In that aspect design, as a cultural agency responsible of the development of products and projects, is a component of local manifestations, it should help the consolidation of a stable identity through time. Then, it is pertinent to review the contributions made by design disciplines in the construction and divulgation of material culture in Colombia.

Keywords: Material culture. Design. Everyday life. Neoliberalism. Furniture. economy.

1 INTRODUCTION

Set the Industrial Design origins in Colombia has been issue on recent academic research interest, wherein systematic documentation deficit has blocked the necessary initial framework foundation that allows a thorough analysis to recognize the influence of design disciplines in the country. Connecting historical studies and reconstructing contextual circumstances, we can conclude that Industrial Design faced conflicting realities between global and local context, during its initial approaches to have active participation inside a local system of cultural, economic, politic and productive particularities.

An unresolved dualism that holds research questions, framing a guide in theory and practice aspects required to discern design disciplines in Colombia. Camacho Lotero (2014), Concerning this issue states that “the impact of local industrial design in Colombian society, is a subject worthy of deeper research studies, with necessary comprehensive revision of companies, designers and its production”, is then, a system analysis articulating network and connections, counting every element as an important piece, that shouldn't have a brief description.

The neoliberal model conjuncture, forced an immediate change in local dynamics established on the ISI (Import Substitution Industrialization) economic model. During a period of forty years, the Latin American region registered standard economy growth, having direct influence on the social context. This radical change, caused a deep impact on the material landscape, having negative effects due to an increase in product importation from the international market.

Understanding the concept of neoliberalism as a phenomenon experienced and lived by diverse entities, the aim is to develop a qualitative approach, following the phenomenological research structure. The choice was made, bearing in mind that this approach emphasize on the lived experience of persons, having a philosophical perspective in which “the reality of all object is only perceived within the meaning of

the experience of an individual” (CRESWELL, 2007); also, phenomenology allows a reading of those interrelations emerging from common or shared experiences from a variety of individuals.

To obtain the experiences of the neoliberal phenomenon, lived from diverse actors with a wide range of perspectives, some data was collected through a deep review of El Tiempo, one of the most traditional newspapers in Colombia, obtaining 1459 images with furniture content (news and advertising) and 50 printed news with the same topic. Also, relevant data was collected from interviews with people from the furniture industry, design academies and personal testimonies.

2 GENERAL CONTEXT – THE IDEAL OF NEOLIBERALISM

Nowadays, we confront a definition diversity respecting material culture, in this article we refer to it as a “set of human activities joined for a correspondence of a conscious purpose with utilitarian features, shaped in material objects”, following Stanislaw Gasiorowski’s definition (1936); definition that harmonizes with the approximation by Bronislaw Malinowski, founder of the functionalism branch of Social Anthropology, defining that “culture comprises inherited artifacts, goods, technical processes, ideas, habits, and values” allowing us to visualize how people’s ways of living were, at a specific and determined time of society. This is why we can deduce the relationships between knowledge, beliefs, customs, and practices, using the production or material products that arise and mediate these relations; concluding with precision the correspondence in the spiritual dimension and the material dimension.

From this perspective, the material (object) production, plays a key role if we consider it as a receiver or as a product of the cultural (spiritual) dimension; objects and technologies used to produce these artifacts, reflects ways of thinking

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and beliefs of those who make them, as well as how they become complex and evolve, incorporating new visions and transformations from the society to which they belong.

Additionally, Renato Barilli's approach to the concept of culture involves a two level connection: the material stratum that implies technical practices, instruments, and materials, and the ideal stratum, referring to "pre-visions" or future thoughts (ideal culture). We have here a cultural dimension, comprising those things that have not been achieved or performed, is a duality between the forecasts against what is done in a particular society. Visualizing the material culture concept, as the material and the ideal world link, the research purpose is, identify how the Colombian material landscape is being affected since the neoliberal model was forced into the local context, with tendencies going in an opposite direction to the contributions of civil society.

Noted by Professor Valcárcel (2006), to achieve the development objective in Latin America the focus is on two models, Modernization and Dependence, as northern – southern theories and debates, the first one imposes the neoliberal politic, as a strategy or 'model' that developing countries have to follow¹.

The modern movement postulates identify Colombia as a 'developing region country', due to socioeconomic distances and differences in comparison to those countries with strong economies and higher self-determination levels, the pejorative so-called difference between rich and poor countries. The global

[1] Recall the 10 principles of the economic reform proposed by John Williamson, former professor at Princeton University, considered to be undertaken by Latin America. This reform program, is known as the 'Washington Consensus', promoted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and United States Department of the Treasury in 1989.

paths trace economic models that benefit the ones formulating them, pictured as the modern resolution to the development ideal, pledging the answers to society growth and evolution, building a better future and Colombia is not isolated from this delusion.

The neoliberal model as a strategy in Colombia, received the name of 'Economic Openness' attempting to get closer to the people, the former president Cesar Gaviria inaugural speech used a resonant and catching phrase, "Welcome to the Future" (image 1), said to describe the political and economic process determining the neoliberal change of the Colombian economy in the 20th century last decade, hiding the constraints pressured by the international financial sector. The process caused social transformations and changes in Colombian economic and industrial model, having negative influences to Colombian Industrial Design introduction and positioning.

Image 1 - News heading for President Gaviria's inaugural speech – El Tiempo 1990



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In a complex period panorama, characterized by people transit and migration from rural areas to urban centers (mostly to five Colombian cities), a compounded material landscape shaped with foreign objects and products arriving massively, the rise of media, radio and television, and digital technologies appearing; workshops and artisanal crafts starting to disappear and the lack of a minimum scientific community organization, working in technological innovation matters, emerging locally as the answer to an autonomous development, based on knowledge.

3 NEOLIBERALISM, DESIGN AND INDUSTRY IN COLOMBIA

It is important to note, as Gui Bonsiepe and Silvia Fernández (2008) does in the preface of the book *Historia del Diseño en America Latina y el Caribe*², that Colombian design likewise Latin-American design, is assumed from the academic logic³, understanding it as a sub-discipline of architecture, even a second category discipline. So it isn't a strange perspective the one from the industrial sector, where the designer has instrumental or tangential labor, downgrading its potential to a simple "cosmetic" action added to products. This is also a reflection of the idea of 'project' in the industrial culture, a concept that hasn't had relevant importance in the development of products, as physical and communicational artifacts.

Bonsiepe (2004), remarks how the neoliberal model was installed in the regions of Latin America, affecting the achieving development through the "Import

[2] History of Design in Latin America and the Caribbean, just available in Spanish.

[3] As a discipline, in Colombia there has been a progressive / excessive increase in design teaching since the 70s, but largely isolated and disconnected from the industrial and entrepreneurial / economic dynamics of the country.

Substitution Industrialization (ISI) policy, a strong basis for the concretization of industrial design in some Latin American countries, with principles appearing today as anathema to the single- dimensional postures from the globalization model”, stating the diversity of challenges that the design disciplines have to face, due to those conditions imposed by global tendencies, in order to attain a real articulation in the industry and society.

Design, a nascent discipline in Colombia, had to confront the neoliberal model, in a context flooded with foreign products and the industry challenged to be modified and be competitive. Additionally, the academic position with pedagogical models and principles copied from the Eurocentric methods, based on ideas of a developing society with industrial maturity. Colombian design was surrounded with a distant reality from the academic ideals and far to be useful for the industrial context, promising homogenous and consolidated state countries, where standardization would fulfill the objective of a global stability, design was introduced “in a context marked by tradition, ideas of modernity, contemporary ideas aligned with the philosophies established in the Western world, we have there the first great contradiction” (FRANKY RODRÍGUEZ; ESPINOSA PARADA; SALCEDO OSPINA, 2012).

There is still a strong duality between standard and diverse, as mentioned by Norman (2012), the traditional role of technology and standardization as principles gathering human beings, improves interaction, communication and understanding. At the same time has a disturbing homogeneous appearance, underestimating the importance of cultural roots, rituals and customs. A critical clash determining identity and cultural crisis, “the emergency of social diversity, the restoring process of diversity, the statements about pluriculturalism and the quest to build intercultural societies, are the responses to globalization process and market and culture planetarization.”(GUERRERO ARIAS, 2002).

4 NEOLIBERALISM, DESIGN AND FURNITURE IN COLOMBIA

Illustrated by the panorama described above, an essential requirement emerges, research at a deeper level details the Colombian material landscape composition, in the second half of the 20th century; allowing a systematic review that provides the necessary inputs for events or product analysis and documentation, specifying the real impact and consequences caused by the neoliberal model implementation, simultaneously with design disciplines development, insertion and practice in Colombian context.

Understanding the material landscape, as a complex concept, this research focuses on the furniture industry, taking under consideration an industry that integrates objects, crafts, practices, and knowledge, situated on the domestic space. Furnishing has been present since human founding periods and society construction. It has features that manifest changes, transitions, influences and remains, transferred from beliefs and thinking processes determined by the context. These features are evidence to understand changes and transformations, determined by the establishment of the trade liberalization in Colombia.

Furniture, from Baudrillard's perspective, is a faithful image of a family era and social structures. It is studied as a domestic environment object that shapes individuals relationships and characterizes their lifestyle. (BAUDRILLARD, 2004). Important artifact configuring the material repertoire, propose models that represent a recurrent and particular way of life, not just the result of a cultural temporality. Also reflects technical processes, interpreted by the industry and applied to product development, establishing a dynamic and having impact over local scenario factors. Furniture is sometimes identified as a representation of the industrial and economic Colombian situation. From the academy, it is observed how space and furniture design, have the ability to communicate ideologies and clear messages about kinds of identities and social relationships that are to be played and valued Ledin and Machin (2018), in specific context and era.

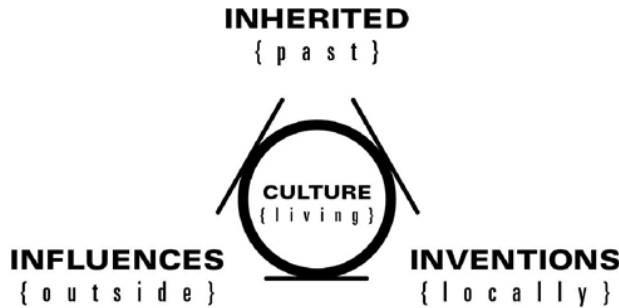
Approaching to Colombian furniture concept, is a method to find evidence concerning characteristic features, manifested continuously in products over time. Those particularities that are inherited, allowing tracking traces from previous eras. Some can show resistance signs, that won't be evident changes, transformations that can be read in gradual change, influences through those global models that were interpreted in the local context or imposition as those that burst radically into the material configuration. This is elucidated with a phenomenological approach, reading everyday life evidence and studying the context generated by the subject / object link, identified as vital components, a synergic relationship that assembles the surrounding world. The focus isn't declared on morphological, technical and aesthetic characteristics of the object, is the phenomenon where customs and everyday life habits raises and can't be isolated from the material aspect. So the research doesn't aim to separate cultural aspects from material aspects, studied as opposed phenomena for a long time based on the direct relationship with the intellectual and physical, but is based on the consideration that "materiality is an integral dimension of culture, so that there are dimensions of social existence that can't be understood without it" (TILLEY et al., 2013).

The research approximation basis to the Colombian furniture industry, relates to the components of the cultural construct proposed by Verhelst (1994) in 'Social Dimensions of Culture', describing culture as a living phenomenon, shaped by three elements connection, those inherited from the past, those influences from the outside and local inventions (innovations). These relationships are visualized in a triadic scheme (Figure 1-1), centering the culture as a continuous construction far from being a static entity, it's a living one receiving a condition of vitality due to the dynamics of the social, cultural, political, economic and social environment. The reflection isn't framed in global vs. local discussion, as a structured dual postulate, but in the study of each triad element to observe if in their relationships, are some of them influencing the others, or if they are in equilibrium condition.

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Figure 1 - Verhelst's Triadic Scheme



Font: Researchers own work

Study the elements inherited from the past as one of the triad foundations, lead us to research those documents that have reviewed the furnishing characteristics in specific eras in Colombia, this was an initial complication, due to the meticulous, structured and systematic documentation deficit and the weak Colombian memory consolidation , so the reviews compiled different sources, to relate them later. Colombian furniture industry, is a difficult sector where “except for seven (7) companies with between 350 and 500 employees each, the subsector is made up of small workshops of less than five employees, of a semi-industrial or artisanal nature” (OBSERVATORIO AGROCADENAS, 2004).

One of the most rigorous studies on design and furniture issues is the one made by Professor María Del Pilar López (2012), her academic research is about furniture and independence times in Colombia, compiled as an exhibition named ‘Más que Muebles... Diseño en Tiempos de Independencia’⁴, she reflects on

[4] More than Furniture... Design in independence times, just available in Spanish.

“four kinds of furniture recognized between 1780 and 1840. The New Kingdom of Granada furniture and a transition to the Republic 1780 - 1840; the Creole furniture with references to the Neoclassical marquetry and inlay 1810 - 1850; the furniture with references to the Spaniard Empire style 1810 - 1830 and the American Federal furniture 1800 - 1845⁵ , is extensive documentation that considers furniture from the end of the 18th century until the middle of the 19th century, providing an important historical antecedent the subsequent evolution of the furniture sector.

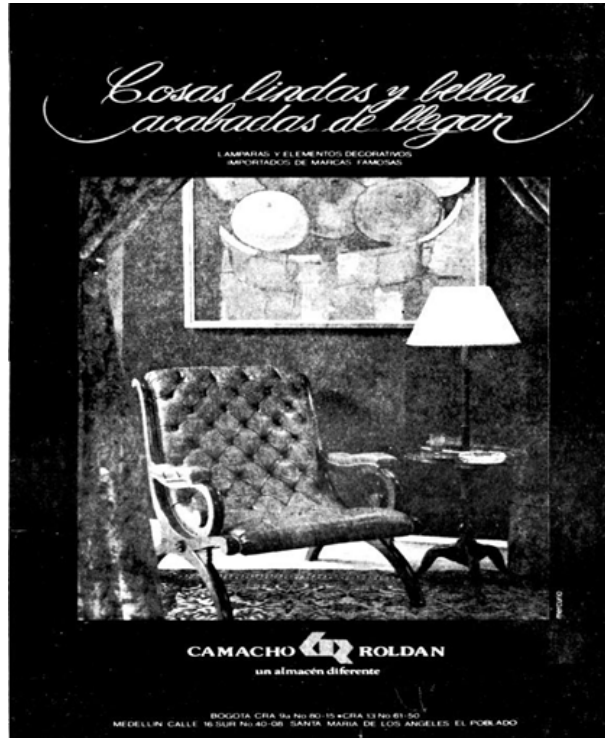
This background allows, to recognize in an evident way, the influence of “external” factors arising in furniture configuration from the colonial period on the Colombian context, so a first conclusion can be made in correspondence to the Colombian material environment, it has not been only permeated by the models of the modern era, but it has some recognizable traces from earlier periods. This can be seen in the use of furniture as a receptacle of representations of political and social structures, which were radically implemented as models that had no opposition and no correspondence with the Colombian reality of the time, imposing customs and habits. Professor López identifies in her study, features in the furniture, which can still be traced in the furniture developed later in the 20th century, so it is possible to recognize how, from the colonial period the Colombian material landscape begins to be configured, showing an imbalance between the “interest in the European, seeking to be recognized as equal” and what arose from local reality and needs.

[5] These are the name of different periods of colonial times in Colombia.

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Image 2 - Advertising from Camacho Roldán – El Tiempo 1980



Font: Researchers own work

A consolidation of Colombian primary industry occurred around 1930, on account of the Great Depression. In the beginning and middle of the 20th century, some Colombian furniture manufacturing companies are identified, being recognized in the national market. For example in Bogotá, Ervico, Fabrex (1934), Arctecto (1974) and in Medellín, Manufacturas Muñoz (1950), were acknowledged for its quality and sturdiness, having the adjective of 'furniture for all life', reason to offer lifetime maintenance (image 7). A couple of furniture companies were founded by foreigners like Muebles Biermann (Germany - 1938) and Muebles Hermes (Sweden - 1954), with particular morphological and manufacturing concepts inspired from European styles. On the other hand, Camacho Roldan (1900), a well-

known commercialization company, used to advertise its products imported from the international market (image 1), highlighting the importance of the origin of the products with phrases like “lamps and decorative objects, imported from famous brands” or “...fabulous fully imported sleeper sofa. In exclusive American (USA) fabrics.”

Image 3 - Article about Furniture Industry – El Tiempo 1983.



De acuerdo con las cifras de Acemuebles, existen en el país cerca de cinco mil empresas productoras de muebles entre fabricantes, carpinteros y ebanistas. El 70% de los fabricantes trabaja con procedimientos artesanales, lo cual significa que el operario realiza el proceso de fabricación de un mueble de principio a fin. El restante 30%, en cambio, trabaja en procesos seriados. (Foto Archivo EL TIEMPO).

Font: Researchers own work

From the context of the furniture sector in the twentieth century, it is not possible to forget, that also a large percentage of furniture manufacturing was carried out in small workshops, as referenced by El Tiempo newspaper (image 3). With the implementation of the neoliberal model in Colombia, a lot of those small companies and workshops mentioned disappeared. New ones emerge with a commercialization logic importing products and others stayed in the informal economy, acting as small industries. Both cases are isolated from the influence of Colombian design and pursuing international styles.

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Image 4 - Martek Advertising- El Tiempo 1985

MUEBLES Martek y... Domingos

La más completa línea de muebles escandinavos

Diseño

CAMA ESTERILLADA DE 190 x 1mt. \$14.900

MESA DE NOCHE ESTERILLADA \$ 6.900 SIN ESTERILLA \$5.800

Calidad y Precios

MESA TOSTIN 1.200 \$ 8.500 SILLA TOSTIN \$3.960

Estos y muchos mas

	DESDE:
CAMA SENCILLA ESCANDINAVA	\$ 7.650
CAMA DOBLE ESCANDINAVA	\$ 10.800
MESA DE NOCHE ESCANDINAVA	\$ 4.250
SALA MUBLEX	\$ 29.800
ESCRITORIO JUVENIL	\$ 6.000
MESA BETAMAX	\$ 5.900

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Making an attempt to connect like traceability, the colonial era left for the furniture industry, a

[...] series of artisan workshops making furniture for the churches and making copies of furniture models imported from Europe by the elite families. The job of making furniture was, therefore, passed from parents to children in a tradition lasted until the 20th century when the first Schools of Arts and Crafts and specialized workshops in the production of furniture were established, following the trends that were in vogue in Europe (ZULUAGA SALAZAR, 2014).

What happens here is an assimilation of techniques, most of them could be understood as elements of influence from abroad, added to the ideas of modernity trying to copy a North American and European lifestyle in Colombian society,

as shown in the image 4, a Colombian company called Martek, manufacturing traditional Scandinavian furniture. In this period, it is possible to continue the construction of the triad elements proposed by Thierry Verhelst (1994), outlined at the beginning of this chapter, as those influences from outside that are part of the construction of culture.

Image 5 - Kassani Furniture – Jorge Vergel Archive



Font: Researchers own work

Around the mid-1980s, the furniture industry experienced a division guided through specialization, with companies oriented only to design, manufacture and supply office furniture, for example Kassani (1984 – Image 5), Compumuebles (1984) and Oskada Arquimuebles (1987), working exclusively for the institutional market, with the significant ‘Action Office’ concept, acting as an international reference for modern office furnishing, following also the concept of High Tech. The design and manufacturing companies in this field, had to develop a high standard

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of specifications, to meet the requirements established by international standards, product test and specific conditions of every furnishing project.

Image 6 - BIMA Advertising – El Tiempo 1986



Font: Researchers own work

For domestic spaces furnishing, the industrial scene was a mix, conformed by small workshops, usually known as Carpentries and small or mid-size companies. For example BIMA (1981) was a company oriented to design and commercialization of home furniture, acting as an important showcase for emerging Colombian designers in the late-1980s; the concept was structured as a furniture store warehouse where families from Bogotá, had a full experience travelling to north limits of the city, to buy a modern metal bed frame, painted with a vivid red color (image 6). As a contrast, traditional furniture companies, like Ervico, developed products for domestic spaces, working also with office furniture (image 7), tried

to maintain the quality through quality solid wood, with the experience of skilled woodworkers, manufacturing furniture with traditional joinery techniques, migrating to particleboard as raw material and orthogonal lines as the morphological concept. Both companies didn't survive 1990s decade.

Image 7/8 - Ervico Advertising – El Tiempo 1985



Font: Researchers own work

5 CONCLUSIONS

The neoliberal model, nicknamed 'economic openness' in Colombia, was proposed as the 'entrance' of Colombia to the future and the modernity, in theory embracing principles of trade liberalization. Nowadays, the conclusion is that it wasn't successful, the model didn't act as an enhancer of the Colombian industry, because it was a forced move, a piece of obligatory advice proposed by international

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concerns. Not the IMF, nor the World Bank, not even the Colombian government had into account the facts of reality of the local context and industry, it was just a model 'from the outside', another colonial move bursting into the autonomy as modern saviors, willing to release local Latin-American economies from the cloistering; a false statement, guided by power and dominance, that needs to be reviewed critically, with the proposal of alternatives from a diverse thinking.

Latin-American and, of course, Colombian design needs a reinterpretation, like a rebirth process guided by a deep understanding of local diversity and contextual reality, not just as a 'decorative' tool, but discipline with a cultural impact. This is a time, to consider the impact of design disciplines in the local context, counting almost forty years of an academic establishment of design, it's important to realize its contributions. It is evident, that the emergence and insertion of design, happened in a difficult period, far from the ideal context, trying to declare some statements to a context filled with homogeneous products arriving from the international market, promising quality at low prices with the premise of owning more lets people have a better quality of life, a consumerist scheme. A lot of local industries couldn't compete inside these dynamics, causing early deaths in emerging industries, and a lost opportunity for Colombian designers to act.

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