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Seminar on Furniture and Joinery Industries

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The Profession of Furniture Designer in Colombia<sup>1/</sup>

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Nowadays there are many furniture industries in Colombia. Most of them are producing office and domestic furniture, the other are concerned with special products like school furniture, kitchen cabinets, just to mention two examples. On the other hand there are many furniture workshops run by very skilled carpenters working on a contract basis.

The demand for industrially produced and hand-made furniture has been increasing considerable year after year.

The furniture industries in Colombia began as small craft workshops.

Their production was based on products being copied from models imported from developed countries. Those models were mainly reproductions of classical 18th and 19th century styles.

At the same time native furniture was produced based on local needs without any intellectual influence.

At that time the carpenters acted not only as craftsmen but also as designers.

The need for furniture followed the growth of cities and the increase of population, and, of course, people were looking for better quality, different styles and new applications.

Thus, the furniture market was increasing and industrialists worked hard to improve their industries in every aspect.

Around the 1950's, when the modern furniture boom occurred around the world people became aware of it and wanted to get more modern pieces for their houses.

At the same time the public demanded more up to date interiors and architects and designers were looking around for those pieces they wanted to introduce.

By this time industrialists went abroad to get new ideas in Europe and the United States. They brought some information and sometimes models and licences to produce them.

In the 1960's some foreign companies were established in Colombia due to the big demand for new furniture. Some architects were in contact with these companies and began doing small jobs in designing.

Interior design activity needed to look for new furniture and there was the necessity to produce them.

A very important point to mention is that wood was popular as a raw material for furniture production as it was available and it gave a more personal character to the products.

By the end of the 1960's the need for furniture designers emerged clearly, though there was still considerable copying of foreign models.

At the beginning of the 1970's, some three design schools were established in Colombia. All of them were dealing with industrial design and of course furniture design was one of the topics as it was one of our primary needs in the design field.

The O. P. B. school of Design is presently running a design project in cooperation with industry. It could be mentioned as being the first experiment of its kind. The project consists of the design and development of some furniture pieces based on marketing demands. Students are trying to apply the theoretical elements they have been taught at the school in their projects.

The project is conducted by professional designers who at the same time have their own practice which makes the project more practical.

This particular case is a clear demonstration of design demand by industry.

In the real practice though there are few industrial or furniture designers in Colombia, the activity has been increasing and what is very important is that industry has been relying more and more on local designers.

One of the promotion activities of the design profession has been carried out by PROEXPO which is our governmental office to promote exports. As a result, Colombian furniture are being now exported to both the American and European markets.

Now that our industries have attained a very good level of quality, they are trying to be more involved in new ideas. One of the examples is the special finishing in local veneering elements taken from local natural products.

This has been a great success in the international markets. Designers are trying to improve and give different solutions to the utilization of these materials.

From the point of view of the design profession there has been established, about four years ago, the Colombian Society of Designers grouping the different design disciplines existing in the country.

The aim of the society is to promote the profession, to inform people about their activities, to establish the rules concerning fees, full and part time design, employment and so on. They are very successful in doing these tasks.

What is needed or recommended now is that students finishing their studies try to go to the U. S. A. or European countries to have a more close contact with general design. This can be done by special post graduate courses, short term seminars, international meetings, conferences, exhibitions, etc.

For example, the UNIDO Seminar on Furniture and Joinery Industries is of great importance to Colombia from the design point of view. Apart from the technical aspect the quality of the products in Finland is very high and it encourages participants to take care of design of furniture and its production in their own countries.

What is very important to us is to try developing our own characteristic design for our own consumers. As it has occurred elsewhere, it will catch the attention of other countries that want to buy our products.

Of course, the technical and material aspects are decisive factors to obtain that quality that makes our products to have a national character.

Another project which is being carried out in cooperation with industry is the "Colombian Furniture Project". Its main aim is to identify or locate what form means.

In this project much attention is given to our real needs, availability of materials and production methods.

We are hoping that through creating our own design language we can be better located in the international markets. By "own language" we do not mean to give the furniture additional ornamentation but to create a system having in mind all the recommended principles of wood working methods.

Compared with European countries, our design activity is very well oriented and very competitive. What we need now is to increase the promotion of this discipline.

At the moment there are various projects to invite some international designers to a short seminar on design to make people and students more conscious of the design processes and results.

The future aim in academic and professional terms will be to separate furniture design from industrial design as the former is getting more and more specialized and the possibilities of work for people specialized in this discipline demand more and more skill to be competent.

Besides wood technology in furniture production is not as complicated as that of metal based industries, and it makes it more easy for design students and professionals to be involved in this field.

Although copying is not a creative or original activity, it has developed a good technology and we have now very good quality of finished products.

If, in the past, we have been able to copy and adapt very well, we create our own products and that is our aim for the next decade.

I think that the designer role is among the main activities in successful furniture production.



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