

# Mexi-futurism: The transitorial path between tradition and innovation.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a dissertation about the development of design in Mexico from the point of view of the approaches that its actors have had over time in the search and definition of a regional and authentic identity. The narrative examines the influence of different contextual variables and focuses its attention on the historical dichotomy still in force, between the vernacular cultural heritage and the valuation and appropriation of foreign elements; between the approach to the value of tradition and the promise of innovation as a goal, platform on which the foundations of advanced design emerge.

*Keywords:* Mexican Design, Design Futures, Advanced Design Cultures.

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## INTRODUCTION

To understand the evolution of design in Mexico, it is necessary to consider the complexity of the context in which it has been developed, since each of the contextual variables that surround it has influenced the definition of its identity. A great protagonist in this scene has been the wealth of cultural and artistic heritage present in the region that, in the hands of social, technological, and economic factors, have delineated and shaped their expressive discourse.

In this sense, this document addresses the issue of the transitory route between tradition and innovation and does so from the perspective of design and its processes. For this, literature is reviewed, case studies are presented and comparative analyzes are made. The purpose of this inquiry is to stimulate reflection on the characterization of Mexican design and how it has been defined over time in a syncretic process, reconciling different knowledge and practices that encompass an integrated set, the capital of artistic expressions and the search for innovation.

## 1. DESIGN FUTURES AND THE ADVANCED DESIGN NOTION IN CONTEMPORARY DESIGN.

The idea of Design is rooted in the idea of future, since it is an activity that connects actual situations with future possibilities, Holt in 1990 described how the orientation to the future

is one of the three main characteristics that define design processes (the other two are analysis and iteration) and he explained how design is able to create “visionary” processes because it leads with un-defined problems, problems that sometimes are vaguely clear; in order to deal with the undefinition (on uncertainty) design uses methods and processes that produce visions, visions that are installed in the future; design is part of the disciplines that go forward into the possibilities of what still do not exist, and it does this by getting into processes that links the present (actual situations) and the future (possibilities and opportunities).

The visionary processes of Holt are part of multiple ways to describe how design and future are related, historically many authors have approached this relation demonstrating that design is a discipline that creates knowledge about the future, either for their methodological practices of problem solving or because its exploratory capacity to create new narratives; for instance, Norman (2008) mentioned this anticipatory activity of design as a way to produce future solutions.

In design research the idea of future in design has a remarkable presence, that could have a certain parallelism with the future studies disciplines but there has not been a clear link of scientific discussion between both (Formia, 2017); it is a very recent trend the scientific dialogue between design futures and future studies, and that has been happening under the umbrella of the “anticipation” notion, a notion described by Poli (2010) as plural vision of the future disciplines that are oriented to generate the future in the present; in the plural vision of anticipation, many disciplines entwine their knowledges and anticipate the future to come, design is part of this multi-disciplinary understanding. The relation between anticipatory studies and design future practices has been led under the notion of the advanced design cultures, that put light on the dialogue between design futures and future studies proposing that there is a certain body of practices in design that are “advanced” because they emphasize (or highlight) the traditional presence of futures in design.

The notion of design cultures has been used by Heskett (2002) to assume that the design practices are very diverse and its approaches are always evolving, the diversity of design as the design cultures and pointed out this diversity as part of the nature of design, a nature that has historically accompanied the discipline. Some of these cultures are the already mentioned “advanced design cultures”, a set of practices that are particularly connected with the anticipatory orientation of design because their processes are oriented to the long term, if design practices are by nature related to the future, advanced design practices are oriented to a broader future, the longer term that could be years, or even decades. Celi (2015) define

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“advanced design as a practice that imagines future perspectives by envisioning future products and processes”, on her seminal book of advanced design she also describes how these practices are very consolidated in some industrial sectors, such as the automotive, electronic products and fashion that are very used to develop processes of anticipation, processes that conceptualize new solutions for scenarios that are distant of our actual context.

Companies (and design agencies) more and more embrace advanced design practices because its motivation to not only create products for the actual market, but because the driver to develop innovation portfolios for the following years, in order to develop this portfolios design has been moved to a territory that develop not only solutions but opportunities for innovation, opportunities for the future that can be represented with visions, processes or prototypes (Iñiguez et al, 2014).

In spite of advanced design is now very common in some sectors, and many companies have their own particular advanced design departments dedicated to this activity, and more and more practitioners and agencies are adopting the anticipation as an activity in a regular basis, there is still a lack of documentation of these cultures (Celi, 2015). The work of documentation and research of the advanced design phenomenon (and the design futures practices) during the last decade has been located mainly observing cases from the developed world, practices from countries that have a more mature design culture or “central” as Bonsiepe (1985) defined some decades ago, either because these developed regions own many of the global brands that have adopted the advanced design practices, or because there is a very well established communication apparatus for practices and designers in this “central” territories.

This paper adds to the understanding on how developing countries (or non-central regions) have been approaching and adopting the advanced design processes by studying Mexico, giving light to some of the cases that could be representative and describe how designers, companies and territories appropriate the long term view as part of their innovation practices.

## **2. MEXICAN DESIGN IDENTITY: SYNCRETISM AND THE HISTORIC DIALOGUE BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL MODELS AND LOCAL PRODUCTION.**

The historical design framework in Mexico, and throughout Latin America, has been conditioned by the fusion and assimilation of different elements in a cultural process in which traditions, doctrines and practices have intermingled deriving into a cultural product

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totally new and authentic. In that sense, Mexican design they could be identified as a clearly syncretistic style with its own features.

The mixture and co-participation of cultural forms that remain together and in coexistence generating a result are called syncretism, this abstract but real characteristic distinguishes the most representative works of Latin American contemporary art. (Villalobos, 2006 P. 393)

This Mexican identity is made up of different historical moments in which indigenous or vernacular values have been reinvented in the hands of economic, technological, political and social development processes generating new representations and new products.

For example, (comments Comisarenco 2006 p.40) the effects of the industrial revolution affected handicrafts and the volume of consumer goods' production. However, the shortage of some products and the high cost of others offered the necessary conditions for the maintenance of the production of popular handicrafts, which was consolidated during the 19th century.

In fact, the country roots have an important rich and diverse artisanal artistic heritage. It is enough to go around the museums of the history of popular art, to observe the plurality of manifestations in a magnificent showcase of origins, traditions and artistic abilities, use of materials, techniques, languages, speeches and contents that denote the moment of its creation.

In this sense, making a successive route to great leaps, multiple key moments in the definition of design identity in Mexico stand out, to name a few examples, the economic growth of the 1877-1880 Porfirian era that supported by an import model of technologies paradoxically, stimulated the invention of new machinery with local schemes rooted in the knowledge and practices of the region.

On the other hand, it is worth mentioning the influence of the Bauhaus in the guidelines of the first Mexican schools, as well as in the end, the influence of the international style, followed by the modernity of the 1950s, in the framework of discussions about of the nationalist tradition in art.

In this context (comments Eder, 2001 p. 349) it is worth noting the ambivalent attitude towards the foreigner that reigned during the years of cultural nationalism; the definitions of what is or is not Mexican marked limits to the integration of ideas, attitudes or legacies in various fields of culture.

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A time in which the popular crafts value as a symbol of the hybrid identity of the country, was recognized as the necessary starting point to promote an original Mexican design. (Comisarenco, 2006 p. 142.)

On the other hand, events such as Mexico 1968, the first Olympics held in Latin America, culturally unleashed great influence on the development of responses, readings and interpretations of “the Mexican” within a socially difficult time when days before the inauguration of this event, the country had witnessed the killing of Tlatelolco.

Later in the 80s, technological advances marked the uninterrupted route of communications and the adoption of the know-how in the business sector, that’s how it grows from the 90s, the interest of design schools in promoting discipline, with a model that was implemented in parallel in European countries.

As a common factor of the aforementioned events, stands out the paradigm of the contrast of a territory that dialogues between the duality of the value of foreign elements as a reference and the appreciation and recognition of a vernacular cultural heritage with high cultural power. In addition, is that, in a rich in traditions and biodiversity millenary culture, this dichotomy continues to exist today and somehow defines the particular design practices. In this sense, in the presence of overlapping extreme contrasts, there are currently two polarized perspectives in design practices in Mexico:

On the one hand, there is tradition, defined as the use of regional cultural values, knowledge of heritage and resources incorporated in the design processes: at first glance, this would encompass the aesthetics; symbolism and rituals of the territory, but it would also include the local industry and the particular way of understanding and managing design practice. On the other hand of an imaginary axis we could find innovation, explained as the new way that some industries and professionals understand design as a catalyst to add value, not only in terms of products but also in terms of territory. (Arias e Iñiguez, 2012 p. 234).

In this regard, it is important to consider in advance that today, when the dynamics of the industrialized world propose to look back at artisanal processes for sustainability issues, there seems to be an area of opportunity for the reinvention and recognition of this self-style in Mexico in a territory where artisan processes abound and remain in force.

This declaration of a cultural syncretism stipulated by the historical dialogue between international models and local production is, in short, Mexican Design Identity distinction, mixing and assimilation that currently determines value, preservation and reinvention in terms of cultural wealth of discipline.

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### 3. METHODOLOGY

The approach to this paper was carried out through a qualitative approach, using induction to answer the questions and objectives presented in the research. The methodological structure to achieve this result contemplated the following stages of development: search and collection of information and documentary and bibliographic review; analysis of the information; variable identification; Case presentation and comparative analysis.

### 4. MEXI-FUTURISMOS: 3 CASE STUDIES. PROJECTS IN THE DIALOGUE AND THE TENSIONS OF THE CONTEXT.

The line of development of this paper is oriented on the discussion of the thematic contrasts present in the opposite configurations that delineate the definition of the identity of Mexican design. On the one hand, there is tradition or cultural richness, defined as the use of regional values, heritage, and elements that have fed the design process over time relevant aspects about “the aesthetics, symbolism and rituals of the territory , but also the local industry and the particular way of understanding and managing the design practice ” (Arias, 2012 p. 234).

On the other hand, there is the theme of innovation or its search path, explained as a way in which the sector approaches the generation of value, the perspective of the future or the avenues of development. The three case studies presented below, Robokumbia, Furnituremakers dreams and Laboratory for the City, represent some examples of the commented contrast or dichotomy characteristic of syncretism in Mexico. Showing the tensions between the global (foreign influences and design practices in the companies or institutions) that has developed over the years in the territory: speculations between local culture and disruptive technologies; Local businesses and global agencies collaboration and Government leading multidisciplinary practices for Territorial Development.

#### 4.1. Robokumbia

Speculations between local culture and disruptive technologiesThe Robokumbia project is a series of products that embodied how mexican traditional identity could dialogue with new technologies, raises a way to deal with the global and the local in terms of identity because merges traditional music and instruments with global technologies, but it also present a second tension that is how disruptive technologies are adopted in mexican society with a very high speed since Mexico is a territory that has many high the global companies and a market that very fast adopt technology products, and in the same time is a society where the traditional values are more and more appraised.

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RoboKumbia explores which aesthetics could make the tensions mentioned dialogue, and it does it thru the idea of prototyping and creating tangible products for the representation of possibilities. The process of creating the products are in the field of an advanced design culture called speculative design, defined by Dunne and Raby (2013) as an emerging practice of design that creates products for the debate, products that are vehicles for discussion of what kind of future people want.

RoboKumbia is an Academic Project designed by Studio José de la O for the Industrial Design School at Tecnológico de Monterrey. The objective of the project is to speculate how technology would look like if it's conceived on a Mexican-Urban context. Each team of students found inspiration on everyday things to build a robot that would work sync with others as a musical band. Each robot plays an instrument just as a band would do, percussions, marimba, bass guitar and a synth. The song that this Voltron-like robot plays is named La Sampuesana, the first Cumbia song played in México (Studio José de la O, 2019).

The result of this project is a series of five products that produces traditional music that was originally composed in a vernacular way, but in this case is produced and played technologically, triggering how the future aesthetic in mexican landscape could be.

RoboKumbia has been a very successful project selected for different design shows such as the Salone Satellite 2019 in Milan, Italy, or the Global Grad Show in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 2019. (Fig. 1)



**Fig. 1. Robokumbia (Studio José de la O, 2019).**

#### **4.2. Furnituremakers dreams: Local businesses and global agencies collaboration.**

Afamjal is currently considered the business institution of the most important furniture sector in the country. Founded in 1979, it is the organizer of the International Furniture Expo

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in its winter and summer editions and Tecno Mueble Internacional, the largest trade fairs in the sector in Latin America and is the leader of the most recognized national furniture design competition in Mexico, Di furniture whose bet is innovation.

Each year, this organization convenes professionals and students with the objective of promoting and developing Mexican design and talent as a positioning and strengthening strategy for the furniture industry, both nationally and internationally.

This introduction aims to give context to an important organization within the productive sector of Mexico, which for more than 40 years has strengthened a Know How within the panorama of the syncretism determined between the local and the foreign.

As a result, the organization shows its interest working with universities and consulting companies in search of the definition of that future that promises success in the whole of innovation.

Particularly as a training partner, it has participated in several projects at the Tecnológico de Monterrey that range from line design, through strategic design studies and an integrated semester called "Territory, habitat and product: innovation guided by design"

Last semester, we worked on three main lines:

*The Feasible, viable and possible. The designer as a guide to innovation.*

From the systemic analysis of the international, national context, the business sector, the company's value chain, the technical possibilities of the company, as well as the trends, utopias, futures and other variables, the students generated a specific diagnosis of the innovation pathways and the necessary projects that will generate value for the company.

*New ways of living. The designer as a transformer of meanings in complex scenarios.*

This challenge was intended to study new forms and emerging lifestyles that shape the habitat, imply new needs and condition the constitutive elements of living space. For this, the students make an user, documentary and field research in the context of using the furniture produced by the company (work, school, etc.) in this way by implementing concurrent design models and integrating psychoanalytic psychology concepts, they determine referential patterns and new meanings immersed in the ways of living, that can be used as key concepts for the development of new products that guarantee the improvement of the quality of life of future users.

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*New products for emerging users. The designer as project and business manager.*

In this challenge, the students developed a new product in its entirety, considering all aspects of the value chain and its commercialization and contribution to the furniture sector, an important sector of the region's economy.

As a result of this alliance, a report of guidelines to establish a strategic innovation plan based on design processes was delivered in each case. In this regard, some of the general conclusions were the following:

1. It is important to use the know-how of companies as strength.
2. It is substantial to establish research practices linked to design.
3. It is necessary to create an anticipatory practice by monitoring and recording changes and trends in Mexican lifestyles.
4. The detection of new needs will lead to new typologies.
5. It is essential to use technological advances to make production more efficient.
6. It is essential to establish a plan for companies to enter the landscape of sustainable development objectives, particularly in response to objective 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production modalities.

Consumption and sustainable production consist of promoting the efficient use of resources and energy, the construction of infrastructures that will not harm the environment, the improvement of access to basic services and the creation of ecological jobs, fairly paid and with good Labor conditions. All this translates into a better quality of life for all and, in addition, helps to achieve general development plans that reduce economic, environmental and social costs, increase competitiveness and reduce poverty.

The most important conclusion of this process was the incorporation of the designer into the organization beyond its problem-solving functions towards a design culture in the company in which it participates as a problem finding. Likewise, the organization hires researches to understand what the main opportunities are for its manufacturing partners, as well as to identify existing risks from other furniture manufacturers in the rest of the world. There are worth mentioning two studies presented publicly in which some following lines of action are suggested:

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- Focus on expanding its business abroad, its augmented reality technological capabilities and its multipurpose furniture offerings.
- Address the macro market trends.
- Establish a route of technological transition or resource optimization.
- Address market changes.
- Opening to new international markets.

As can be seen in all of AFAMJAL's initiatives, there is a remarkable interest in seeking the paths to innovation and preparing for the future by detecting risks and areas of opportunity.

In the first study conducted by the students of Tecnológico de Monterrey, strategic design and advanced design practices stand out. A look from the discipline to understand systemically and from the culture of design, all the elements that affect the development of the organization to find innovation portfolios.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the consultants, the focus is on trends and short- and medium-term strategies. It is a meaningful vision with business data that can be undertaken on the basis of market and technology movements, proposals from Local businesses led by global collaboration agencies that do not incorporate design as an important element in the anticipatory formula.

#### **4.3. Anticipatory Governance for CDMX: Artificial Intelligence: Government leading multidisciplinary practices for Territorial Development.**

Anticipatory Governance for CMDX is a project that created a strategic path that could allow Mexico City take advantage of the opportunities and mitigate the risks of the public use of learning algorithms for the city (Laboratorio para la Ciudad, 2019).

This project was on the territory of anticipation since it included the idea of the long term by developing future scenarios on how artificial intelligence and machine learning could be part of the tools for future governance, and not just the tools, it also developed new ideas on how this technologies could be part of the public issues.

Laboratorio para la Ciudad exist from 2013 to 2018 and was part of the Mexico City government, it was an experimental laboratory that put together citizens, academia, civil society and government in dialogue for the reflection and projects of creative territorial

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transformation. It has been the first government lab in latinamerica and the first one in a megalopolis (according to United Nations, Mexico City has almost 22 millions of inhabitants).

This project was leaded by Laboratorio para la Ciudad with the participation of several experts that put togheter the knowledge from different fields from the following institutions: Action Foresight, Sociedad Mexicana de Inteligencia Artificial, Tecnológico de Monterrey, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Anheuser Busch InBev, IBM, Krieger, Datank, Deep Dive, Klustera, Quark Labs, AI Nerds, SEICITI and C Minds.

Using collaborative processes, the project went thru two components:

- Exploratory session with the Artificial Intelligence ecosystem in Mexico City, regards the expectatives, opportunities and riks of the AI in democracy.
- Co-creative session of future visions for the artificial intelligence in Mexico City (Laboratorio para la Ciudad, 2019).

At the end of the processes the product is series of reflections and proposals that includes a strategic path for the introduction and assimilation of the mentioned technologies into the day by day governance of the city. The path includes following milestones:

- 2018: Training and strengthening: first steps, strengthening of the artificial intelligence ecosystem, collaborative processes for the AI discussion and the principles of the Mexico City Constitution.
- 2024: Experimentation Stage: a consolidated and developed data culture, the governmental information is in open data and the values are established distributedly
- 2030: Consolidation: a shared definition of artificial intelligence where the local and the national are related
- 2050: Horizon: Mexico City is a referent global referent on artificial intelligence, with a consolidated ecosystem (Laboratorio para la Ciudad, 2019).

This project leaves a documentation of the processes and results that can be instruments for the public awareness and debate, and the documentation is also a provocation that can continue the exploration and research on how the selected problematic could evolve in the years to come.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The long term is more and more a territory of practice in Design, the so called Advanced Design Cultures are getting assimilated in different sectors, such as the three cases that are presented, where studios and academia, companies and government (among other actors) are integrating processes where the idea of design regards the solving problem applied to an actual issue, is moved to an opportunity finding activity that problematize not the present but future scenarios for social and technological wellbeing.

Developing countries are living the assimilation of advanced design cultures also, but with their own transitorial condition and trajectories of adoption, in the case of Mexico, is characterized for the velocity of assimilation, as a developing country it has been developing an entrepreneurial motivation, there are more and more innovation actors trying to be in the state of the art of practices (and anticipation is one of that practices). The trajjetories of adoption pass from different tensions that the case studies presented exemplify:

- Between the local and the global: Mexico as a territory that is located (even geographically) at the border of the cross cultural dialogues in the Latin culture, during the past decade many of the economical strategies has been to allocate global companies in the territory, these conditions create a platform for cultural dialogues (and design culture) and design practices in academia and organizations are including that condition. The case studies presented exemplify how, in the case of Robokumbia, future speculation literally deals with traditional values (culture and aesthetics) with global trends such as Artificial Intelligence, Furnituremakers Dreams and Anticipatory Governance for CDMX both integrate global and local experts with the aim of exploring processes of anticipation that can be effective for the local.
- Between the short term and the long term: in the case studies presented, the design processes are a continuum that links the “traditional” design practices that are oriented to act and produce on the present to the practices that create proposals for the future; this is not always the case in other territories where the practices can be very defined (even organizationally) on which are the temporal horizon of the projects. The case of Robokumbia is and speculation regards the future, but its products are a synthesis that can be contextualized in the present, Furnituremakers Dreams connects the analysis of the present design actions with strategic long term opportunities, and in the case of Anticipatory Governance for CDMX, the all project went thru steps from the present (2018) to the future scenarios (2050).

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- Between the individual and the collective expertise: the three cases presented show how the practices and processes include many actors in order to be successful and the integration of many knowledges, not only from different disciplines (that is very usual in advanced design processes) but expertise that come from different entities and institutions. The case of Robokumbia is a collaboration between Jose de la O together with the students of a university Tecnológico de Monterrey, Furnituremakers Dreams includes the companies from the furniture sector together with university and international agencies, and in the case of Anticipatory Governance sum academia, companies, agencies and government.

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