

# NEW TERRITORIES IDEAS

Laboratories for Design, Craft  
and Art in Latin America



**Carolina Tinoco**  
Panton *Catucho*, from the RED (Redesign, Reinvent, Redeem)  
initiative, 2013-2014  
Polypropylene Panton chair, manual and mechanical carving  
18.5 x 20.5 x 33 in. (47 x 52 x 84 cm)  
Courtesy of a private collection  
Photo: Carolina Tinoco/Pancho Quilici



## The Ethical Dimensions of Design: A Cautionary Note from Latin America

Adriana Kertzer

Latin American designers and artists often reference social, political, and economic issues in their work and the descriptions that accompany their projects. Among the most obvious visual manifestations of socioeconomic inequality in the region are the squatter settlements that spring up along the hillsides and lowlands of many Latin American cities. *Favelas* and *ranchos* (slums) have become an increasingly common theme in design and art from Latin America and, not surprisingly, they are the focus of several works in the *New Territories* exhibition.

This trend echoes a global phenomenon: changes in attitudes toward subcultures. The rise of rap culture and “ghetto fabulous” style during the 1980s and 1990s in the United States, the growing recognition of graffiti as art, and the popularity of “cholo” culture in Brazil are just a few examples of how “sub” is now cool.<sup>1</sup> However, mainstream market-based focus on certain populations, social matters, and urban spaces can stylize and fetishize very real issues to the point of pure commodification. In other cases, these references reflect earnest engagement by makers with their subjects. While nuances are important, trends such as ghetto fabulous, *cholo*, and favelization<sup>2</sup> require a careful consideration of how poverty, disadvantage, and discrimination can be reconfigured as commercialized signifiers.

Allusions to Latin American slums in creative projects demand consideration of the ethics of design. Design often has political nuances since it reflects and influences power relations and human relationships. As such, projects that relate to slums reflect and influence existing hierarchies of power as well as interactions between individuals of different socioeconomic status. Objects are, by nature political, and can become even more politicized because of how and by whom they are produced, used, presented, branded, marketed, and consumed. Whether or not a designer intends an object to be political, their design may become politically activated in ways that deviate from the designer’s original intention.

Several objects in *New Territories* allude to Latin American slums, such as the chairs by Carolina Tinoco and Deborah Castillo, which make an explicit connection with the *ranchos* in Caracas, Venezuela.

In the case of *Panton Catucho* (2014), Tinoco manually and mechanically carved out a maquette of the *ranchos* along the contour of the chair (Fig. 1). Tinoco is an architect, designer, and artist who worked in different *ranchos* in Venezuela for more than ten years. Her chair was part of the Re(d) project, a collaboration with Deborah Castillo, which used design objects to reflect on certain social and cultural issues in Venezuelan society where, as the designers point out in their statement about the project, a majority of the population lives in areas affected by violence and poverty.

Another example is Eddie Figueroa Feliciano’s modular storage system *Zanco* (Fig. 2). Although the object does not visually reflect an obvious connection to the slums of Puerto Rico or elsewhere in Latin America, in his project description the designer states that his *Zanco* collection draws from the basic building system practiced in Puerto Rican and other Caribbean slums before mid-twentieth-century industrialization took hold in the region. Another project in *New Territories* bears a closer connection to its source: two videos by Projeto Morinho were filmed in the dorma created by a group of young residents-turned-artists in Pereira da Silva, a favela in Rio de Janeiro. They depict the role-playing games and storytelling the miniature favela was designed to stimulate (see page 216).

Designers, artists, and filmmakers have long engaged with primitivism and stereotypes to make their goods more desirable. I explored the different issues related to the use of references to *favelas* in *Favelization*, my book that discusses the ways in which specific producers of contemporary Brazilian culture capitalized on misappropriations of the favela in order to brand luxury items as “Brazilian.”<sup>3</sup> I used three case studies—the films *Waste Land* (2010) directed by Lucy Walker, Karen Harley and João Jardim, and *City of God* (2002) directed by Fernando Meirelles, shirts designed by Fernando and Humberto Campana for Lacoste, and the furniture by Bruno Jahara and David Elia—to demonstrate that the processes of interpretation, aestheticization, transcendence, and domination are part of the favelization phenomena.

Fig. 1 Carolina Tinoco  
*Panton Catucho*, 2013-2014  
(detail). From the ReD  
(Redesign, Reinvent, Rebeak)  
initiative, polypropylene  
Panton chair, manual and  
mechanical carving  
18.5 x 20.5 x 30 in.  
(47 x 52 x 84 cm)  
Courtesy of a private collection  
Photo: Carolina Tinoco/Panton  
Gullies



Fig. 2 Eddie Figueroa Feliciano  
*Zanco*, 2011 (detail)  
Oak, nylon mesh, 36 x 15 x 15 in.  
(91.4 x 38.1 x 38.1 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist



*New Territories* focuses on some of the same works, artists, designers, artisans, and themes that formed part of my study. The *Cooperativa de Trabalho Artesanal e de Costura da Rocinha* (Coopa-Roca), for example, a women’s cooperative in Rocinha (a favela in Rio de Janeiro), made some of the shirts that were part of the 2009 Campanas + Lacoste project. The favelas were mentioned extensively in this project’s marketing materials.<sup>4</sup> *New Territories* includes the chandelier *Come Rain, Come Shine* (2004), which was designed by Studio Tord Boontje, commissioned by Artecnica as part of its Design with Conscience Campaign, and handmade by Coopa-Roca. It is an example of the kinds of transnational partnerships the cooperative has engaged in over the years (see page 105).

Design da Gema’s *Stray Bullet* chair (Fig. 3) was also discussed at length in *Favelization* and is included in the exhibition alongside a table from the same series (Fig. 4). David Elia, Design da Gema’s founder and main designer, is a Monaco-based Brazilian designer who employs the tropes associated with favelization in descriptions of his furniture. In my book, I argued that Elia replicates a tactic deemed successful: blending strategic allusions to Brazil’s poverty and violence with fantasy and desire in the service of commerce. In *New Territories*, the chair and table are among other works that address the theme of violence in Latin America.

In my earlier writing, I focused on the particulars of favelization and Brazilian contemporary culture, and I drew on postmodern theory and historical examples to deepen my analysis, raising questions about the ethical conundrums associated with using the “other” and “primitive” in film, fashion, and design. I made no suggestions for avoiding the problematic aspects of favelization. However, *New Territories* includes numerous projects, from different Latin American countries, that

refer to social issues or collaborations with artisans in a manner that begins to illuminate what some best practices or strategies may be.<sup>5</sup> For example, certain projects identify each maker involved by name. The Oaxi-formia lamp project gives equal credit to each collaborator, whether an artisan from Oaxaca, or a student from the California College of the Arts, or the project director/designer Raúl Cabra. All are individually named (see pages 84–86).

Sometimes measured specificity is preferred as a sign of respect. In the credit line for *Robot Naturito* (2007), Alejandro Sarmiento and Luján Cambariere are given top billing followed by a statement: “in collaboration with an individual of the Instituto Correccional de Mujeres Nr. 3 de Ezeiza.” While it would not be appropriate to name the woman prisoner who worked on the object, the designers give as much information as they can about their Argentinian collaborator, in an appropriate show of respect (see pages 166–167).

Many projects engage with development issues without portraying them as charity. Liliانا Ovalle’s and Colectivo 1050’s collaboration on the black ceramic vessels in wooden frames in the *Sinkhole* series (2013) reflects a commitment by young designers to partner with craftspeople (see pages 94–95). During the project, they catalogued traditional practices and then created pieces that resonate with contemporary audiences. This is also the case with DFC and Glimpt, who engage craftspeople in Mexico and Peru, respectively, acknowledging their participation in terms of value, not altruism (see pages 87–90 and 113).<sup>6</sup> Marcella Echavarría, a branding, marketing, and sustainability consultant showcased in the video *Los ojos lo tocan* in this exhibition, describes her objective in clear economic terms, stating that she aims to “build sustainable bridges between artisans in developing communities and developed markets who buy their products



Fig. 3 Design da Gema (David Elia)  
*Stray Bullet* Chair, 2011 (detail)  
Polypropylene chair, stainless steel eyelets  
31.9 x 23.6 x 47.3 in.  
(81 x 60 x 120 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo: Robson Curvello



Fig. 4 Design da Gema (David Elia)  
*Bulletproof Side Table*, 2013 (detail)  
Polypropylene monobloc side table, used bullet shells, glass  
27.6 x 27.6 x 16.1 in.  
(70 x 70 x 41 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo: J.J. L’Heritier

for fair prices, creating what [she] hope[s] is a healthy symbiotic relationship which benefits all parties involved.” Echavarría’s language choice reflects an awareness that development, sustainability, and fair trade are not charity (see pages 182–183), and that these terms should not be used interchangeably.

The particular challenges as well as the successes seen in examples in *New Territories* clearly illustrates how artists, designers, market agents, and academics continue defining best practices that are useful to all participants. This can be a thorny undertaking and suggests a number of considerations that these agents might consider when presenting a project in a commercial or museum setting: What kind of attached value am I trying to create? What does a reference to *ranchos* or *favelas* add to my marketing and branding strategy? Have I accurately represented my professional and/or personal relationship with the individual artisans or the organization from a specific slum? Will this project affect the relative distribution of power, authority, and privilege in a community? The answers might not be simple. Yet in many cases, had different production, branding, and marketing choices been made, the answers to these questions would be different. For example, a chair in and of itself may not affect the power relations between different sectors of a country’s society, but the stories behind that chair—for examples, who produced it and where?—may serve to politicize the object and its design.

Discussions about references to Latin American slums in the context of design, craft, and art force us to question the representation and the creation of identity, value and storytelling—issues that are relevant when speaking about Latin American design in general. While many Latin American artists are celebrated in international museums and designated—perhaps to their chagrin—as an investment category in the art world, designers from Latin America still struggle to gain recognition in their countries of origin and abroad, in museums, and among collectors. The ways in which they distinguish themselves in the field and market their work reflect this struggle. At times the “benefit” of existing stereotypes can be usefully deployed, and simplistic references can be appealing and practical toward these ends. However, many designers and artisans are finding ways of citing specific communities and spaces when providing information about their work in a manner that is sensitive and nuanced. Marketing and branding often require stressing differences through the processes of dichotomizing, essentializing, and “other”-izing. The challenge is how to create design projects that receive international recognition and use storytelling about certain socioeconomic issues in a way that does not exacerbate stereotypes and unequal power relations. The debate about the ethical dimensions of design continues.

1) See Lynette E. Williams, “Heavy Metal: Decoding Hip-Hop Jewelry,” *MetalSmith* 27, no. 1 (2007). See South American *Cholo* (2014), a short documentary that examines Silo Puelo’s cultura chicana. [www.southamericancholo.com](http://www.southamericancholo.com)

2) Other authors identify this phenomenon using different terminology such as “favela factor,” “slum chic,” and “favela chic.” The word “favelization” has also been used in other contexts to describe, for example, the increased number

of favelas in a given region of the world and by the music group Afropunk as the name for one of its international tours. I use the term favelization not in relation to the general fascination with favelas among social scientists.

3) Adriana Kertzer, *Favelization: The Imaginary Brazil in Contemporary Film, Fashion and Design*, Design-File e-book 4 (New York: Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, 2014).

4) See *ibid.* For further discussion of theories of commodification, fetishization, and the use/craze of a primitive “other” in the process of defining national identity, as these issues relate to the collaboration with Coopa-Roca. See also “Campanas + LACOSTE,”

Lacoste website, accessed on July 18, 2013, <http://shop.lacoste.com/Campanas/b/6199301011>.

5) The scope of this essay is limited to exploring examples from *New Territories*. An in-depth discussion of best practices in the field of public-interest design should consider literature about socially responsible design, the methodologies used to qualify and quantify how design addresses issues faced by communities, and existing guidelines for engaging in community-

based design such as the Social Economic Environmental Design (SEED) metric.

6) *Mis Ojos Lo Tocarán (My Eyes Will Touch It)*, a 1994 audio slideshow on the work of Marcella Echavarría produced by Dia Felix Media, commissioned to MAD for *New Territories* in 2014, with musical score by Ava Mendoza.