

# Designing Cuba

Design is gaining ground in Cuba in a variety of sectors of the economy

Yisel Martínez García  
Photos: Courtesy of the interviewee

• THEY say we interact with more than 2,000 objects every day. The number could be even higher, just look around. Design is everywhere. It gives products value, identity, and seeks to make life easier.

"There is no way to develop a country if design is not taken into consideration," insists Gisela Herrero García, head of the National Design Office (Ondi). She notes that the profession has always existed in Cuba, but like all processes it has had its ups and downs.

In the 20th century, for example, graphics took center stage. Cuban posters had their golden age, recognized within and beyond the country's borders. In the 1980s, a public policy for design was promoted, consistent with the need for prosperity and sustainability in Cuba. The National Design Office was established, and later the Advanced Institute of Design (ISDI), the institution responsible for training professionals in the field.

While the economic crisis of the 90s required putting a hold on everything that had been accomplished, design became known as a tool to alleviate the situation, and allowed Cuba to make good use of its productions. Thus, sectors like pharmaceuticals and tourism began to utilize design, allowing for a recovery in this professional activity, which assumed an important responsibility in development.

"The most important centers within the scientific pole took the lead in their graphic design demands. The use of spaces, clothing for the workforce, the wrapping of products, and the visual aspect of their sale, made design a fundamental tool for these and other industries.

"Talk about corporate identity is emerging in the country. Tourism, as the driving force of the economy, needs to identify new hotels, differentiate chains. And think coherently, about the spaces, the gear, and uniforms of those who work in these places," Herrero explained.

## LOADING ZONES

Becoming everyday, with the passage of time, design is finding its place in the non-state sector of the economy, in fields of work that range from graphic to industrial design.

"Anyone who has set up a restaurant or decided to start a business is looking to differentiate themselves. Be it visually, with a name, a symbol, furnishings, offers, and all these elements together. Fertile ground has been found that has provided designers openings," Herrero noted.

The industry is recovering, and one notable area is textile garments, the specialist reported, noting that many clothing designers are thinking about attire for men, women, children, and older adults, as important to identity.

"There are increasingly more people trained and working to have national products in Cuban wardrobes. We must dress more like our colors, like the context in which we live everyday, and there should be no differences," she adds.

Design, as value added, dignifies the visual world, and that of objects. Guiding creation implies responsibility. Herrero, as a receptor of images, is concerned about how we are seeing ourselves.

"In a media and communications scene like the current one, contents must be offered with better visuals, with a vision of the times, with contemporary discourse and codes. We must construct a solid image, one that looks more like us as a nation. We must be more proactive. Design has this value and we must communicate it in a cup of coffee, a chair, a garment. Everything carries ideology."

## CHALLENGES

"Design must be increasingly incorporated into different sectors of the economy, in industry, in culture, politics. At times I have the impression that this is not happening at the pace we need, but I believe that it is a positive sign that designers are present on all development teams," Herrero said.



Fashion show.



14th Design Week.



The "Design in every direction" campaign launched by Ondi.

Everyday, more young people graduate from the academy. At the close of May, Ondi had 2,400 designers listed in its National Registry, a number which allows the country to utilize these professionals well.

But achieving quality results also means working as a team and collaborating across fields. Economic issues are key to understanding the major role design plays in executing a project.

"There is no way to design without the economy. Design adds value to products and services. This is something that many people still don't understand. It is an investment, not a cost. We talk about paying for design when we should be investing in design. This turn-around, seeing it from the other side, could be very important to promoting development.

"Improvements for the country must be generated with this activity. It must be promoted in industry, in culture, in all areas where a space must be opened up.

Design must be responsible to the environment, to the culture it defends, and identify the value of the Cuban project," asserted Herrero.

Design in Cuba is looking to gain new ground everyday.



Gisela Herrero García, head of the National Design Office, Ondi.

Achieving its application at the massive, industrial level is the only way it can make a decisive contribution to the country's development. •