

Salsa Comes Home to the World

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Latin arts have exploded onto the design scene, with varied design elements that show that people are embracing Latin design around the globe and across cultures. Why has today's modern, fast-paced world suddenly embraced the Latin culture in design? I think it is because it satisfies a cultural need.

Latin arts include architecture, interior design, film, art, music, fashion and even cuisine. From food and music to bright-colored textiles and sweet trellised patios, we are seeing Latin influences in every residential tract development; on TV and the radio; and in print ads. The mix of elements from many Latin cultures amounts to a kind of design salsa – rich, spicy and you just can't get enough of it! In fact, according to Wordsmyth, an online dictionary, salsa is defined as:

1. a spicy sauce made with chili peppers and tomatoes, used in Latin American cuisine.
2. Latin American dance music combining Afro-Cuban and Puerto Rican elements with jazz, rock, and blues, and played at a fast tempo.

The increasing popularity and importance of Latin design elements across cultures and across disciplines cannot be underestimated. According to Hispanic Business Magazine's April 2003 issue, the female Hispanic labor force will grow from 5.7 million in 1998 to 8.5 million in 2008. This 48% increase is the largest among any female ethnic group in America. Most of these women are Mexican-American and between the ages of 41 and 50. I would say that is a lot of buying power, enough to make the global economy take notice, create and market products for this group.

You can see this influence in the marketplace everywhere: Fannie Mae has a Minority Families home buying program. Jennifer Lopez, Ricky Martin and Marc Antony led a revolution in the music business over the last five years. On the big screen we have Cameron Diaz and Gina Torres and Freddy Prinze Jr. George Torres stars in a new sitcom about a Latino family – and this is just pop culture!

When I talk about Latin culture, I cannot address all of the varied countries considered "Latin" and their many contributions to the salsa of Latin design. The diversity of Latin countries and regions is immense. Most of my personal exposure comes from Mexico, and travel to Guadalajara, Puerto Vallarta, Manzanillo, Cabo, Cancun, Argentina, and the Caribbean. However, my background in architecture gives me the knowledge to see aspects of design across history, and many of those design aspects are present in today's Latin influences. I will focus mainly on the history of Latin design in the Americas following Spanish exploration.

My discussion includes a review of my personal history as it relates to the reemergence of Latin culture in America, as well as a review of the history of Latin influences in architecture and design.

I have highlighted the impact of Latin design elements in our modern culture by discussing today's cultural climate and how a salsa approach to design can restore and revitalize important aspects of our lives, no matter what culture we are from.

Personal History:

As recently as my mother's generation, Latin heritage was something to be hidden and not something to be proud of. This concealed the focus of many wonderful aspects of Latin heritage, including the importance of family and living a balanced life – taking the time to enjoy family, friends, food and the sunshine. The evolution of my career path as an architect and interior designer also parallels the evolution of Latin influences in today's design world.

For years I did not know I was of Mexican heritage. My mother was born to a Mexican mother of Spanish and Portuguese descent and an Irish farmer. Mom grew up on a ranch in Sacramento in the 1950's. Sacramento was an agricultural city with many migrant field workers.

At that time and place, you didn't mention your ethnic back ground if you could hide it.

My mother is blue eyed and fair skinned, and could not wait to change her name from Margarita to Marty when she was 18. Her focus was on trying to be the Irish Socialite, not Mexican.

When I was a child we lived in Portland, Oregon, and Mexican restaurants were scarce. Yet, my mother could make great enchiladas, and she often sent my dad and me to a Mexican restaurant down by the river to get hand made tortillas and salsa. On one of those trips, Dad explained how mom felt ashamed of her Mexican heritage because she was discriminated against as a child and teen.

She had a degree in economics and had no intention of having her successful climb of the corporate world hindered. Mom retired at 60 with many accolades: she was a lobbyist for women's rights, VP of her division at work, lectured and taught, worked on steering committees for a number of organizations, loves football, and still makes a mean pan of enchiladas, yet being Mexican is not part of her persona.

My mother's story is not much different from the stories of many other people whose cultural back-ground was a source of ridicule. It seems like every suppressed culture gets its day in America. We had the hippie generation, the black power movement, the Pacific Rim takeover and now the Latin wave. But, there is much more to it – the idea of salsa in the design world is not just a trend of the moment.

History of Spanish influences on America:

We need to trace the development of today's Latin influences in design. Although there is not enough time for a complete history lesson, I want to show the evolution that created the vertical presence we now call home in America.

As an architect, I have studied the periods and elements of design from pagan times to the present. I have always been attracted to Romanesque and Spanish architecture with their classical design themes and U-shaped villas with simple vernacular materials of stone, wood and stucco.

These materials were readily available in the New World and the techniques of construction easily translated to create an adapted style reminiscent of Spain. As the Spanish explorers and missionary agents of the Church of Spain penetrated the Gulf and Pacific regions, this distinct style became known as Spanish Colonial architecture.

The invasion began as far back as the early 1500's with Coronado, Cortez and the Franciscans conquering land in Florida, New Mexico, Texas, Arizona and California. With them they brought the tools and skilled labor to create churches and communities. These structures were built in their motherland style of architecture. The popularity of this building style grew with the spread of Christianity, and so did the towns that supported the missionary community.

The mood and design elements of these Spanish colonies flourished as the native populations were introduced to silver and iron making, ornamental carving and crafts like tile making to support the building industry. Each sector has over time created its own provincial expression, distinct styles that, although similar, are materially different and rich.

The eastern settlements of Florida from 1565 to the present created lavishly styled buildings with many European ornamentations. The raw materials of coral and shells were used for the plastering material and gave the buildings a sandy finish. Because Florida was closer and more cosmopolitan than the West, the buildings are more true to the style of structures in Spain.

The middle states – Texas, Arizona and New Mexico – were inhabited by Indians from 1540 to 1690 and there was a rough adobe craftsmanship established along with bricks and mortar that created the style we now call Santa Fe. These pueblo buildings were much simpler than the more refined Spanish revival buildings that came later in California.

The first mission in San Diego was not settled until 1769 and over time the Spanish Colonial style in Southern California was refined. With modern tools and the emergence of the local arts of textiles, pottery, iron, silver and stone carvings, the designs were more expressive and detailed. By the 1920's and '30's the popularity of this style swept the state and created a new vitality in housing and civic buildings. This period is characterized as the Mediterranean Revival as Moorish influences trickled across the sea and cultivated another interest in lands far and away.

You do not have to squint to see the commonalities between these geographic and chronologically diverse sectors.

Latin Design Elements:

After tracing the history of Latin influences on architecture and design in North America, we explore the common design elements that we see every day, all around us and which draw each of us to this romantic image of far and away lands where present and past can coincide. See the table to the right for a list of some of the everyday design elements that originated in Latin architecture.

In addition to architectural details, a design salsa has taken the world of color by storm. For so long, the color of choice has been white. There is nothing wrong with white and it still is a favorite of mine. But as Mexico heated up this last decade, Latin colors abound, turning seemingly boring housing projects into places full of life. Once again a new breed of design is emerging where the colors of the earth have appeared in architecture and interior design. Rich gold, olive, reds and blues like the sun and sea are present in most all Spanish Revival design today. We see many new fabrics and art pulling the colors together to bring about vitality in the room. Hand crafted ironworks, decorative tiles and pottery can be seen everywhere from antique stores to Wal-Mart.

It seems perfectly appropriate in a southern climate with indigenous materials that the sunny Spanish-Colonial revival is back in fashion. The fundamental simplicity of the style of architecture allows the price conscious developer to embrace and develop a delightfully varied domestic architecture.

Cultural Impact of Salsa as a Design Approach

In the modern world a mingling of these design forms has brought about a new love for a lifestyle and culture that once was. Latin design elements have been embraced because the modern creation of a design salsa satisfies a need across cultures for a reconnection to family, faith, and other important aspects signified by the presence of Latin design forms.

Our lives have become so shattered, scattered and disconnected. We all have cell phones, faxes, e-mails – yet people still get so uptight when you are not reachable at one of your eleven phone numbers! Today's world leaves so little time to relax and watch the flowers grow or even time to plant some. I have flowers sitting on my porch that died two weeks ago, and I haven't had the time to replant! Today's world is a global marketplace with everyone working in real time, 24 hours a day.

We have lost touch with our families and faith. Our food is 'fast' and made of cardboard. We created isolating towers to live in, boxes with no color. Our kids don't come home and share their day; they too are off running as fast as they can. When was the last time you took a moment and kissed your mom?

Somehow the world needs this love affair with salsa. We need to have some peace. Where does half of America go on vacation? Mexico. Why? To sit on their butts, in the sand with a fresh lime cocktail and no worries about mañana. Bringing Latin design elements into our world and celebrating the salsa of design satisfies our need to slow things down and enjoy life.

It is no wonder to me we are drawn to the romantic sounds of Latin music and spicy salsa. The Latin culture is about family, faith, simplicity and style, a very self-expressed group of people and nations. The current prevalence of Latin design gives people from any culture in today's modern world a way to embrace these important cultural aspects.