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ROOTS REVIVAL

Designer Matteo Fogale
puts his native Uruguay
in the London spotlight





Roots of the matter

*Uruguayan-born designer Matteo Fogale
is bringing a collective exploration of the
design culture of his birthplace to London*

*Words by Elisaveta Marinova
Photography by Alun Callender*

Culture is an intricate web of ideas, traditions, values and social behaviour that humans have been spinning since time immemorial. It is a deep-seated and impalpable thing with roots intertwined around design like ivy stems around a tree, and with an influence that has been a driving factor in the fields of arts, fashion, jewellery, architecture, design and many more.

From the symbolism of colour, through to the materiality of a chair, to the roof shape of a building, design is the portrait of a country's culture. But what happens to it in a cross-cultural country like Uruguay, and how does it compare to another nation's design language? The answer lies within the work of Uruguayan-born, London-based designer and maker Matteo Fogale, whose exhibition, *Hilos Invisibles* (Invisible Threads), sees the work and sketches of one of Uruguay's most prominent architects transformed into a high-grade furniture collection displayed at the Aram Gallery.

The architect who inspired this ambitious endeavour is José Vilamajó Echaniz. And though his name might ring a bell for having

featured among the board of design consultants for the construction of the United Nations headquarters alongside architecture legends such as Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer, Vilamajó remains widely unknown outside his native country.

To raise awareness and understanding of his contribution to architecture, culture and society in the area, the British Council gave UK-based creatives the opportunity to explore his work during a four-week residency in late 2017. Fogale came out on top with a decidedly refreshing concept. "My proposal was to research his work, but in particular, to take that research, and whatever I find in those archives, and turn that information into a collection of furniture."

While Fogale's initial plan was to design something himself, it was on studying Vilamajó's work that he was inspired by the collaboration behind the UN headquarters' design. "I liked the idea of this collaborative workshop; all these architects from around the world coming together, working on a project. So, what if I made this into a collaborative project?"

And so, Fogale surrounded himself with seven Montevideo-based practices: Carolina



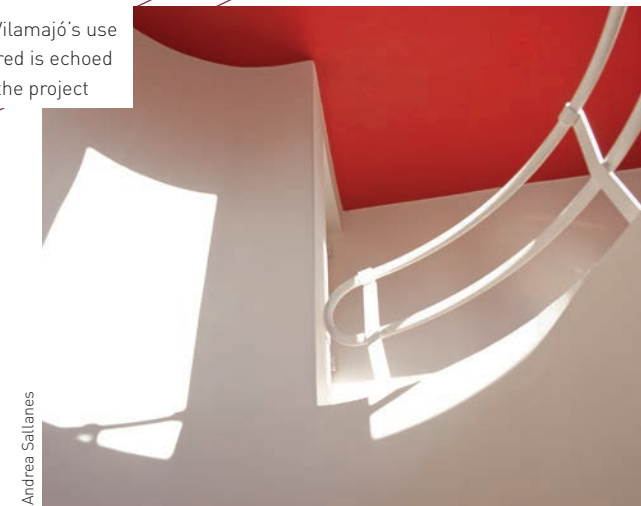
↑ Fogale with the designers at the Vilamajó house

Andrea Sellanes



↑ Fogale with the Medianera lamps, designed with Claro

→ Vilamajó's use of red is echoed in the project



Andrea Sellanes

Palombo Piriz, Claudio Sibille, Claro, Menini-Nicola, Muar, Studio Diario and Rafael Antía – all of whom he had met at DesignJunction 2017 at a country stand coordinated by Uruguay XXI, an agency that helps promote Uruguayan export and the Uruguayan Design Chamber (CDU).

"I liked the way they were showing together. They were independent designers but they had to team up," says Fogale, who not only co-designed the final products but also curated the whole process – from selecting drawings

"I liked the idea of a collaborative workshop working on a project"

from the Vilamajó archive and pairing each one with the right studio, through to building a holistic collection of seven different furniture pieces, to drawing up the exhibition layout itself.

Fogale organised a creative workshop in Museum Casa Vilamajó – the house built by Vilamajó for his family in 1930 – where the eight-strong ad hoc collective would "sit and sketch ideas together" in a captivating multicultural exercise. He explains: "I didn't want to influence their decision. Coming from Europe, maybe I have a different perspective, but I was hoping the same would happen from their side. I see a little bit of myself there, but I also see a lot of influence from the studios." ☺



seating island for Bloomberg’s much-vaunted headquarters), he is now on a mission to promote his motherland’s design language.

“It’s a very important project personally, because I wanted to reconnect with my country, my hometown,” he says. “Four, five years ago, I tried to go back, but there was really not much design happening. I kept thinking ‘what can I do to help promote design in Uruguay, or help export anything?’ In the last five years, there are a lot more design studios doing things, the production and quality are nice, they’re going away from making for the local market, they’re trying to think outside the box and expand to Europe. My goal is to help promote that and give Uruguay a push. I’m hoping to be more present.”

Fogale also points out that the cliché image you and I might have of exotic South American countries like Uruguay is ill-informed. And although there is a distinct difference in the way a native sees their own country compared to a foreigner’s portrayal, Fogale certainly makes a point: “Uruguay is a South American country, but it’s very much European. We have very little heritage from our indigenous people. We lost everything with the Spanish coming.”

What the country has lost or gained from its colonial era isn’t up for debate here, and whether Western influence has been a blessing or a curse is almost an irrelevant question. The fact remains that, at present day, Uruguay is an uneven blend, and designers like Fogale are helping tip the scales back.

That Fogale sees himself in this endeavour is no surprise. Based in Blackhorse Workshops – a public venue designed by Assemble and located in Walthamstow, east London, which offers workshop facilities for skills ranging from wood-turning to metalworking and basic DIY – his presence in London’s first Borough of Culture for 2019 (this month’s *RegiOn*, p97) is fitting, and designers like him may well have been ancillary participants in the borough’s winning bid.

Born in Montevideo, Fogale moved to Italy in 2001, studied at the Art School Leonardo da Vinci, then Art and Design at IUAV University of Venice, then relocated to London in 2009. After commissions with the likes of Patricia Urquiola and Barber & Osgerby plus several collaborations with designer Laetitia de Allegri (most notably, for this publication, a delightful

↑ Carolina Palombo Píriz’s Tutura chair in front of a Vilamajó sketch

→ The Tutura chair uses rustic local materials such as totora leaf



↑ Marble and concrete mix at the Vilamajó house in Montevideo

“What Uruguay has is design influenced by Europe but it has that strange twist, because it’s also influenced by the surroundings,” he says. “It doesn’t have a lot of ego. So I went there and said [to the designers]: don’t worry too much about being on trend, take what you have here and use it in a non-traditional way.”

Fogale calls the workshops he held at the Vilamajó house a “creative exercise of designing something that has a story”, which seems appropriate. The Rama bookshelf by Claudio Sibille is inspired by the plan view of a table inside Vilamajó’s Confiteria La Americana, while the design of Rafael Antia’s MCV tables drew inspiration from a detail on

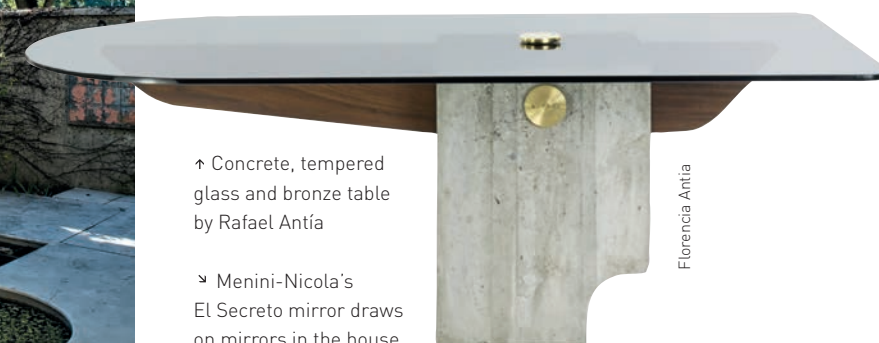
“What Uruguay has is design influenced by Europe but it has that strange twist”

the facade of Vilamajó’s 1953 Faculty of Engineering at Montevideo’s University of the Republic, which featured a grid of small protruding concrete blocks that were indented at the bottom to avoid rainwater stains on the building facade.

“The lamp was probably the most difficult one,” says Fogale. Designed in collaboration with Claro, the final trio of Medianera lamps shows no sign of struggle. Instead, they exude craftsmanship and a mid-1990s-infused elegance. As Fogale explains: “The form dictated the design a lot in this piece.” Taking cue from Vilamajó, who often used decorative

elements on buildings for sunlight to animate the facades, the designers built the light so that the beak-shaped shade would move and cast different shadows. Made out of different tints of marble from local stonemasonry supplier Laviere Vitacca, and powder-coated metal of matching colours, the lamps showcase the designers’ ambitions to use locally sourced materials.

In the same vein, Studio Diario’s Plinto bench is made of local leather. “We thought it would be nice to do it in velvet, but velvet is an imported fabric,” says Fogale. “We thought, how can we use leather in a different way? So we used it inside out. It’s basically suede.” The real showstopper however is the mobile steel rod side table, which can slide over and along the bench, allowing for one or more users to share the surface. Biased though I may be, I can’t help but picture this in the reception space of our offices, but the primary goal of these pieces was never commercial. “My approach to design is not ☹️



↑ Concrete, tempered glass and bronze table by Rafael Antia

↳ Menini-Nicola’s El Secreto mirror draws on mirrors in the house

Florencia Antia



Florencia Antia



→ Studio Diario’s Plinto bench in local leather with sliding steel side table

Florencia Antia

very practical,” Fogale jests. “The very function of design is to give an emotion, to give something unexpected.”

Maybe there is no such thing as selfless design, and maybe those are the expectant words of someone who wishes otherwise, but if anyone has come close to matching this profile, that would be Fogale, whose carefully curated work may have just put Julio Vilamajó and Uruguayan design on the British map, and beyond.

After Hilos Invisibles closes on October 27, the designers hope to take the show somewhere else like Paris or Milan. “I want to be able to produce more of them,” says Fogale,

“The very function of design is to give an emotion, to give something unexpected”

whose secret wish is to see them in places like Adorno – a digital gallery where every collection takes after a different city. “I would really like to see a Uruguay collection there,” he says, omitting to highlight that some of his previous work is already featured there, in the London collection, curated by Max Fraser.

Incidentally, Adorno may well be the epitome of cross-cultural design, and Fogale himself isn’t far from qualifying. Having experienced several design languages first hand, he is well placed to identify the nuances



↑ Muar’s Americana dresser is displayed with the sketch that inspired it

← Gold pillars in the Vilamajó house are reflected in the exhibition design

that set each country apart. “Italy is the country of big production, where the factories are based. London is the DIY city, where designers make their own things. It’s that small-batch production approach, where designers make more unique pieces. Uruguay has that – it’s not Brazil, which is the Italy of South America. Uruguay has the chance to be the London of America, not in terms of size, but you have this ‘get it done’ spirit.”

When asked about which British architect he would do a similar exercise with, Fogale ponders for a second and says, “Ernö Goldfinger, of course.” A Hungarian-born architect, who studied in Paris and spent the remainder of his career in the UK – it seems like a perfect fit. ▣

María José Castellés