

American Design Stories: Pedro Barrail

SPOTLIGHT: AMERICA(S)

By: Wava CarpenterPhotography
November 20, 2020



Pedro Barrail holding a chair he designed, “tattooed” by members of Paraguay’s Pai Tavytera tribe. Photo © Pedro Barrail

In the American Design Stories series, we ask designers from across the Americas to share their insights on American design today, along with three images that represent their vision of American design.

We’re pleased to share our conversation with artist, designer, and architect Pedro Barrail. Inside his studio in Paraguay’s capital city of Asunción, Barrail creates handcrafted works that meld South American craft traditions with a contemporary approach, such as his ongoing collaboration with the native Paraguayan Pai Tavytera tribe, wherein wooden pieces are “tattooed” by burning nature-inspired illustrations into the surface. The resulting objects are conversations between different places and times—which is fitting for a maker who holds firmly to the notion that, in both art and life, there are “no boundaries allowed.”

What makes your American story unique?

In the ’80s I moved to the USA from Paraguay to pursue higher education. During that period I won my first design competition as a student, with entries very much influenced by Northern and European factors. Southern sensibilities were not on my radar, and my Northern path was blurring my vision. I wanted to belong—whatever that meant.

After finishing my Masters in Architecture & Urban Design at University of Miami, after 11 years studying and working, and with a wife and three kids, I returned

to Paraguay. With mixed feelings, we journeyed back to our original hemisphere with hopes and dreams. In my mind the Northern expression “going south” grated on me as we were literally going south.

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But after settling back in Paraguay and clearing away the northern fog, I began appreciating the rich heritage of my environment and the endless possibilities. Which made me also see the value of my North American experience as a way to focus on what is authentic and unique to one's existence.

What does "America" mean to you?

"America" means to find your voice and vision wherever you happen to be. To express your authentic self, thanks to your ability to recognize the value of your surroundings and make that voice and vision relevant. So America became an idea, not a place. No boundaries allowed.

What is an example of the worst of American design?

Objects designed for single use are the worst; mostly byproducts of the industrial revolution and North American ingenuity in search of comfort and convenience. That convenience should come with a high price to those still willing to produce and consume such objects and goods—to offset the damage created to sustain such lifestyles. Anything that is disposable and not durable is the worst and should be proscribed.

What are the most urgent topics that designers can and should address today?



Payaguá Series by Josefina Plá, Serigraphy, 1980. "These works on paper by Renaissance woman Josefina Plá encapsulate my idea of America," Barrail says, "in their depictions of indigenous emotions and customs, as seen by a European intellectual living in the heart of South America. Plá was a poet, a playwright, a painter, ceramist, journalist, and teacher. A trailblazer who melded Old and New world sensibilities to create an original one without boundaries. A true America." Image courtesy of Pedro Barrail



Barrail's El Anfiteatro, 2010. "An amphitheater built in steep terrain to enjoy the vistas of Lake Ypacaraí in San Bernardino, Paraguay," Barrail says, "It is a place to contemplate colors, sounds, and emotions; a place transformed with water to reveal a colorful scenario you can float on... influenced by the region and by Josef Albers's works, who, along with his brilliant partner Anni Albers, made their own America as a new, guiding beacon." Photo © Pedro Barrail

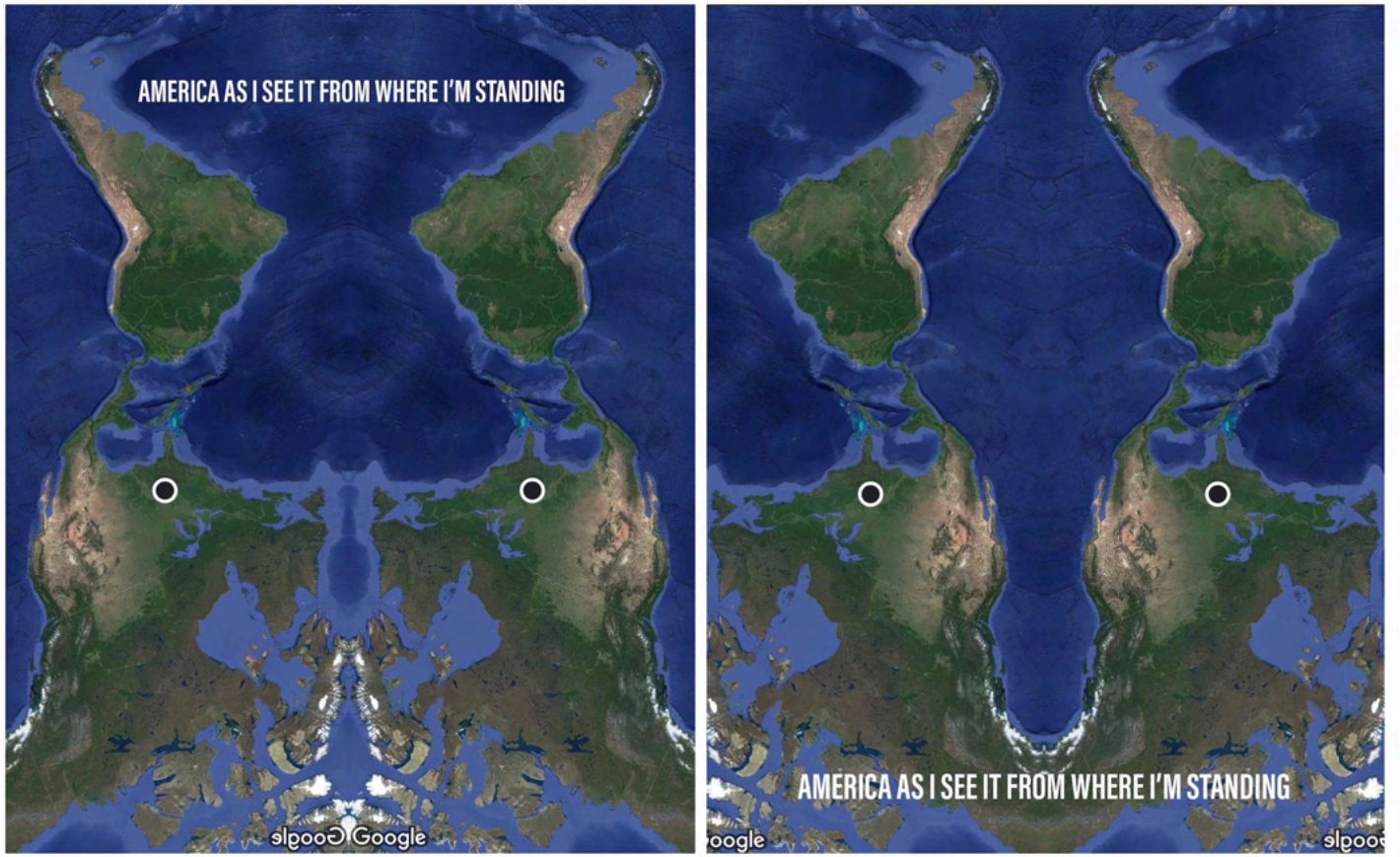
Waste and the production of non-durable, low quality goods are urgent matters. Wasteful packaging drives me mad. And we can't forget the millions of boxes delivered daily containing over-packaged junk. As Glenn Adamson reminds us in his book, *Fewer Better Things* is the way to go.

In the studio, we are currently reusing discarded cardboard boxes as formwork for a series of concrete furniture-slash-objects-slash-art filled with our non-organic trash as aggregate, for obvious reasons. Think of Rachel Whiteread, Roni Horn, and Carl Andre-type pieces. Just one attempt to offset the pernicious effects of overconsumption.

How have current crises figured into or impacted your studio's experience and approach?

Current crises have validated the studio's approach to repurpose and reclaim the excesses of consumer culture to produce design, architecture, and art. For example, a house constructed with stones excavated on the site, built mostly by local workers and materials, producing little waste. Or my participation in the Venice Biennale with my work "View of Point," which consisted of a large, tapestry-like image of the same room in which it was exhibited—like a self-portrait or opaque mirror, by which you looked back upon yourself. The featured image was actually a mosaic photograph, composed of 20,000 images from my travels, commenting on our mindless search for the next thrill—rather than being mindful of the now.

Something this pandemic has forced us to focus on are the essentials; we need to reassess our priorities.



“WHAT GOES UP?” Digital Art by Pedro Barrail, 2020, an edited GoogleMaps image. As Barrail explains, it is: “My view of America at the time of request of this interview.”

Do you have a personal mantra? What is it?

Ages ago I came across an illuminated sign in front of a mega church that stated: “THE MEANING OF LIFE IS TO ENJOY IT.” It was like an epiphany; I have been trying to live by those words ever since.

Where do you look for strength?

Nature is a constant source of strength in my life, a main reference for professional and personal answers. It is my go-to manual for mental and emotional clarity. And the occasional single-malt scotch or bourbon helps too!

Thank you, Pedro!

Pedro Barrail was born in 1964 in Asunción, Paraguay. He worked and studied in Miami from 1983 until 1994, where he received his Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in Fine Arts, Architecture, and Urban and Town Design from the University of Miami. Barrail’s hand-crafted pieces evoke the traditions of South America as well as contemporary furniture design. His works are part of private and public collections internationally.

Barrail has represented Paraguay in several international exhibitions, fairs, and Biennales, including the prestigious Biennale Di Venezia in 2013, where his work was part of the first official Paraguayan Pavilion. He is represented by Cristina Grajales Gallery.

Inspired by the 2020 Design Miami/ Podium theme America(s)—and all the complexities that go along with it, especially in this moment—Anna Carnick and Wava Carpenter of Anava Projects connected with a selection of outstanding designers with personal ties to the Americas to get their take on “American” design today. Their

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responses were insightful, inspiring, and diverse: From thoughts on the most pressing issues and challenges facing designers now, to hopes and suggestions for a more equitable future, and reflections on their own American design journeys to date. Each story is accompanied by images provided by the designer that embody what America(s) or American design means to them.