

The Arango Design Store: Furnishing Modernism in Miami

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The story of the Arango Design store is the story of Miami as an open frontier and an international crossroad for modernist design during the mid-twentieth century. Jorge Arango, a Colombian architect who espoused modernist idealism, and Judith Wolpert, a native Miamian and pragmatist, opened an innovative new store dedicated to goods of contemporary design in 1959. Miami at the time was regarded among the design cognoscenti more as the capital of kitsch¹, than a beacon of progressive design. But to a relatively small and enlightened group in the vanguard of design, the shop represented a moment of arrival. The Arango store, dedicated to offering a wide range of furniture and utilitarian objects for everyday living, was the first to bring contemporary design into the homes and everyday lives of Floridians.

The Arango store was a unique retail enterprise in that it did not respond to actual market demand as much as it sought to introduce the world of design to its customers. The Arangos, were more than just a shop proprietors. They had adopted the enthusiastic zeal of crusaders spreading the "good news" of modern design as a means to improve the quality of life. The Arango Design store provided an outlet for Miamians to discover the world of modern design as a total aesthetic experience: to surround oneself with beautiful things that are also functional, and incorporate contemporary design into everyday life. This mission was an extension of Jorge Arango's formative experience as part of the modern avant-garde in his homeland of Colombia. For him the store was one of the tools by which his modern ideas were promulgated.²

The new design paradigm of the mid-twentieth century, which had gained prominence throughout the

world, was becoming more of a complete aesthetic experience involving all the senses, rather than merely a design style. It used the visual and tactile as the means to engage. This design philosophy sought to reinvent every aspect of the man-made environment from artifacts to cities. The problem for the Arango's, who had lived in South America and California before settling in Miami, was that there was no local source for contemporary goods to appropriately furnish homes of modern design.³ From 1959 through the 60s, the Arango store was the only source for finding everyday things of contemporary design: a teapot, a toothbrush, a stapler, or an elegant lamp. The array of items, ranging from fabrics and women's attire by *Marimekko* to furniture by Eames, *Orrefors* crystal and tableware and *Aarikka* jewelry, shared a unique blend of beauty, utility, and functionality. The Arangos were partisans of the modernist ideal that function was an essential component of good design. For Judith Arango, who would eventually become the prominent force behind the store, a beautifully designed water pitcher or a simple spoon was, in her estimation, a failure if it also functioned poorly. The utilitarian object had to be elegant, simple, *and* functional in order to be elevated to the level whereby it would enrich our lives.⁴

That is what the Arangos hoped to achieve, to reach not only the core design community in South Florida but the uninitiated general public as well, to bring them items they need for their daily routines, created by the best designers in the world, who crafted them into beautiful objects to use as well as to look at. Eschewing fashionable trends the Arango's scrupulously selected pieces in the 1950s and 1960s that are still available, considered classics of contemporary design into the 21st

century. Some of pieces, including works of Arne Jacobsen, Alvar Aalto, and others, can also be found in the permanent collections of modern art museums throughout the world.

To effectively present the Arango's philosophy of good design for everyday objects to the mass public, the store was located in downtown Miami, in that area of Biscayne Boulevard that was the city's first suburban retail thoroughfare. The store was popular with architects and designers, and fascinated local socialites, who found strikingly designed objects from around the world in an almost museum-like setting. It also attracted students in the arts and design, who were recruited from the University of Miami to work in sales, as they were completing their degrees.

In 1964, the store moved to the Dadeland Mall where it increased its exposure. The intention to locate in popular commercial districts, apart from being a sensible business decision, reflected their desire to make modern objects available to a broader customer base. Retail establishments of the time did not carry designer objects. Most, if not all, designer objects and furniture of that period were available only through the design trades, inaccessible to the general public. By situating their store in the mall, the Arango's became pioneers.

People unfamiliar with its theme and with its products discovered the store and visited it out of curiosity. "It was a place of elegant surprises," noted one observer who discovered the store by chance as a youth, and now visits it regularly with his own child. "The kind of place where, even at 8 or 9 [years old], you could wander around alone in, looking at things that were initially puzzling, and then resolved themselves into...a tea kettle. Or a jewelry box. There were lamps and art, napkin rings and puzzles. None of these things *tchotchkes*. It was all high quality design."⁵

UNDER THE INFLUENCE: THE NORTH-SOUTH CONNECTION

The commitment of the Arangos to promote modern design in Miami can be traced to their experience in Jorge Arango's homeland of Colombia, where the two first met in the early 1950s. At that time Miami had already become the tropical

gateway to the United States for Latin Americans. It was an attractive sunny destination with an open, light atmosphere and easy access to American products. And it was the closest American city to South America, making it a mere 8-hour flight from the Andean highland city of Bogotá (a short journey in the days before jet travel) with a just a single stop in Barranquilla.

Jorge Arango was, during the 1940s and 50s, a leading proponent of the modern movement in Colombia. Educated as an architect in Chile, he visited the United States in 1943-44 where he studied for a semester at the Harvard Graduate School of Design under Walter Gropius. He also toured the United States to study the Tennessee Valley Authority of the New Deal. The comprehensive nature of the TVA, encompassing conservation, public utility regulation, regional planning, agricultural development, and the social and economic improvement of the "Forgotten Americans," greatly impressed Arango.⁶ During this time he met with notable architects and designers including Charles Eames, Eero Saarinen, and Frank Lloyd Wright. These were formative experiences for Arango who subsequently entered into private practice designing few, albeit exceptional, examples of modern work in Bogotá and Cali.⁷ He served as president of the Colombian Society of Architects from 1946-47 during which time he led that organization's efforts to actively promote an agenda for modernization in Colombia.

Jorge expressed his passion for modernist work by founding an influential journal *PROA* in 1946, along with Carlos Martínez and Manuel de Ven-gochea. The magazine, organized to divulge the modernist creed, promoted modernity in all facets of design. In the early 1950s, as the director of the National Buildings Section of the Ministry of Public Works, Jorge administered commissions with Le Corbusier, Josep Lluís Sert, and Paul Weiner to develop regulating plans and projects for cities across Colombia, putting their modernist ideals into practice. Arango also co-authored with Carlos Martínez the first publication to survey the modern movement in Colombia, *Arquitectura en Colombia*, in 1951.⁸ Modernism in Colombia was seen by its proponents as a way to bring progress, clarity and order to a world they perceived to be disorganized and backward.⁹ Jorge, seeking an opportunity to expand his modernist crusade, eventually set his

sights northward.

Judith was the daughter of George Wolpert who owned a retail furniture store in Miami. After graduating from Wellesley College with a degree in philosophy she worked for the U.S. Information Agency as an English teacher in Bogotá, where she became attracted to its ardent intellectual atmosphere. It is there she met and later married Jorge Arango. Surrounded by the principal players of the modern movement in Colombia during these years, with whom she shared an appreciation for the modern sense of aesthetic, she adopted the passionate propagandist spirit of modernism which aimed at transforming the whole human environment as a means to improve lives.

The couple lived in Bogotá, Berkeley, and Caracas before moving to Judith's hometown of Miami, which was geographically closest to South America, and where they sensed the opportunity to act on their modernist ideas.¹⁰ Jorge designed and built their first house in Coconut Grove. Seeking to furnish their new home with modern furniture and house wares which could not be found locally, they not only sought sources for bringing these items to Miami, they subsequently turned their project into a business enterprise, and launched their landmark Arango Design.¹¹

THE STORE AS AN EXPEDIENT OF MODERNISM IN MIAMI

Once in Miami, the Arangos continued to surround themselves with primary players of the modern design movement. The Arangos themselves represented a tentative merger of passionate idealism with calculated pragmatism. They were civic activists, frequently publishing, sponsoring lectures and exhibits as a means to educate. They attracted a network of friends including accomplished local designers Rufus Nims, and Lester Pancoast, as well as internationally recognized figures such as Roberto Burle Marx, Massimo and Lella Vignelli, and Florence Knoll Bassett, who later designed an exhibition for the non-profit organization Judith would establish in 1977, the Arango Design Foundation.

The store had become for the Arangos a means to achieve the expansion of modernism in Miami. While it functioned as a retail store, its displays

went beyond visual merchandising and took on the curatorial characteristics of a didactic museum. "I remember going to the store with my father on Sundays, when it was closed," recalls the Arango's son, Richard. "It was a lesson in aesthetics: we would happily stare at objects on a shelf for 10 minutes at a time and then move one a little bit." A view through the storefront at Arango Design had the dual effect of a window and a mirror, both displaying and reflecting modernism in Miami. The store, and its promotional activities aimed at raising public awareness about contemporary design, garnered international attention. The uniqueness of the enterprise was connected to the peculiarity of Miami as a kind of international crossroad as the profile of the city developed beyond that of merely a tourist destination in the tropics.

While local designers such as Igor Polivitsky, Lawrence Murray Dixon, and others, advanced various ideas and interpretations of modern design the influence brought by the infusion of immigrants from Latin America would eventually contribute in a pivotal way to Miami's distinctive character. During the 1940s and 1950s, a period of explosive growth in South Florida, an anglo-american perspective dominated the cultural framework of the region, its architecture and urban form. It was during this formative period that the international perspective introduced through the Arango store played a significant role in bringing international design to Miami, and Miami into the consciousness of the players of that movement.

While Jorge continued to pursue his ideals through his practice of architecture, his numerous writings, and utopian books, it was Judith who eventually became the dominant force behind the Arango Design store. Advocating the best of contemporary design in common objects, a manifestation of modernism in everyday life, had become her life mission. She held competitions and sponsored exhibitions as a means to educate and cultivate an appreciation for design. Judith kept the store changing and evolving while maintaining a constant adherence to the original vision of making the modern aesthetic accessible and affordable, without diluting the clarity with which good design can be judged. The constancy of design quality the store carried was, in essence, an appeal for the aesthetic experience of modernism. At the Arango Design store, as in Miami, this experience was situated at the intersec-

tion of a passionate idealism with the pragmatic sensibility of contemporary design. For Arango, and Miami, the transformative prospect of modernism was a project yet to be completed.

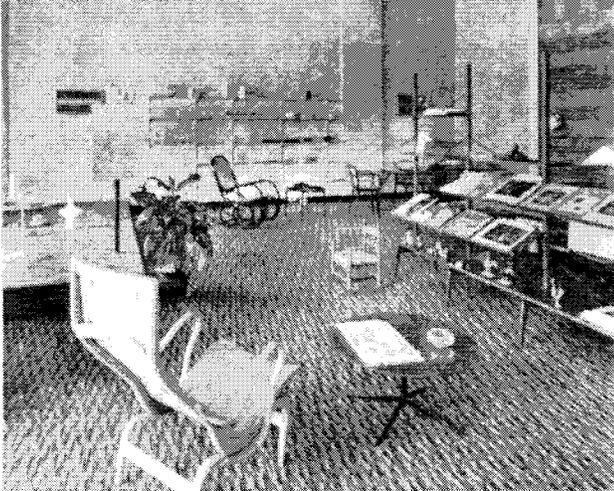


Photo [59 Arango Inc BiscBlvd.tif]
Credit: Arango Design Inc.

The first Arango store on Biscayne Boulevard in 1959. Miami was so unaccustomed to contemporary design that visitors could not immediately understand what kind of place it was and the store attracted few customers.



Photo [Corbusier in Bogota.tif]
Credit: Jorge Arango archive
Corbusier with his Colombian hosts in Bogotá.

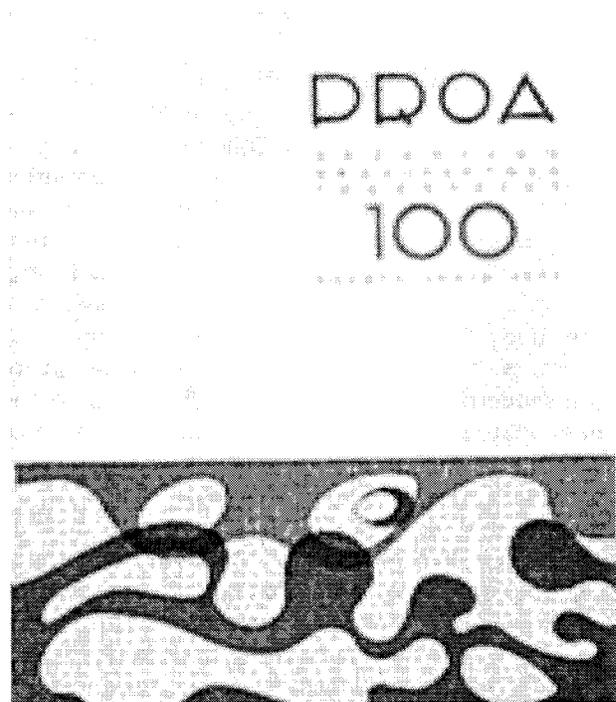


Photo [PROA1.tif]
Credit: Jorge Arango archive
With its first issue launched in 1946, the journal named PROA, an acronym for promoting architecture also means 'prow' in Spanish, published all facets of modern design in Colombia.



Photo [Arango Dadeland Int 1.tif]
Credit: Jorge Arango archive
The move to Dadeland Mall increased public exposure to contemporary design, introducing Miami to modern European designer merchandise, and attracting international attention.



Photo [Arango Dadeland Front.tif]
 Credit: Jorge Arango archive
 The storefront at Arango Design had the dual effect of window and a mirror, displaying and reflecting modernism in Miami.

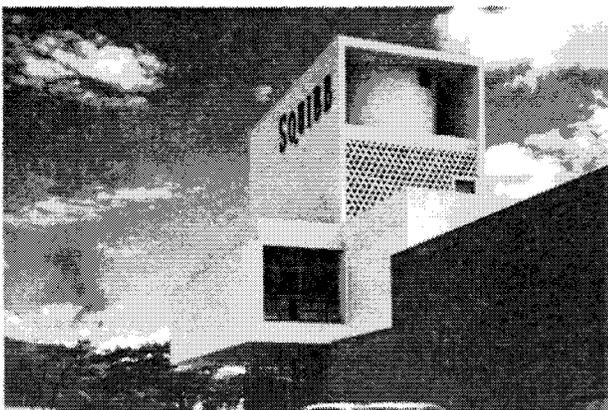


Photo [Squibb Palmira CO 1956.tif]
 Credit: Jorge Arango archive
 Modernism was synonymous with progress. The Squibb factory and management offices in Cali, Colombia, designed by Jorge Arango.

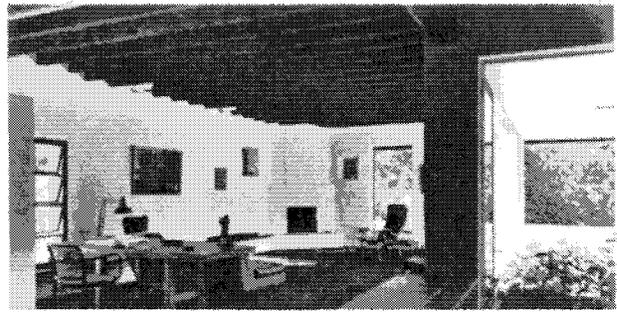


Photo [Arango House Alex Georges 481A5.tif]
 Credit: Photo by Alexandre George, Arango archive
 The Arango home in Coconut Grove.

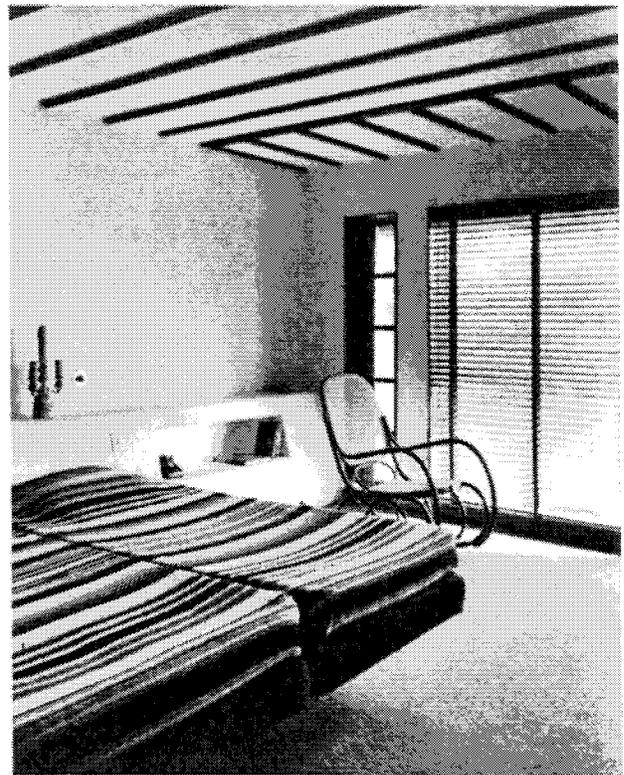


Photo [Arango House BR Alex Georges 481A12.tif]
 Credit: Photo by Alexandre George, Arango archive
 The Arango home was a merger of the rustic latin-american country house with the clean lines of modernity.

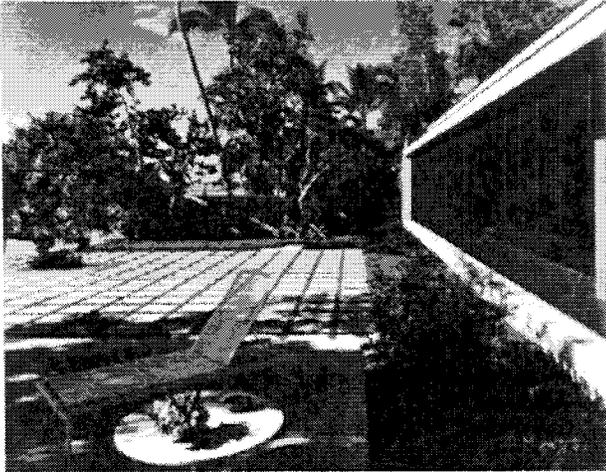


Photo [May Res Alex Georges 726A3.tif]
Credit: Photo by Alexandre George, Arango archive
May residence, waterfront terrace in Miami Beach.

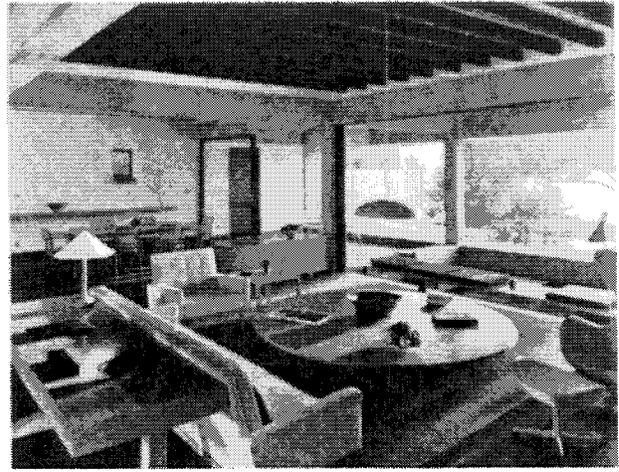


Photo [May Res Alex Georges 726A11.tif]
Credit: Photo by Alexandre George, Arango archive
May residence interior, Miami Beach.

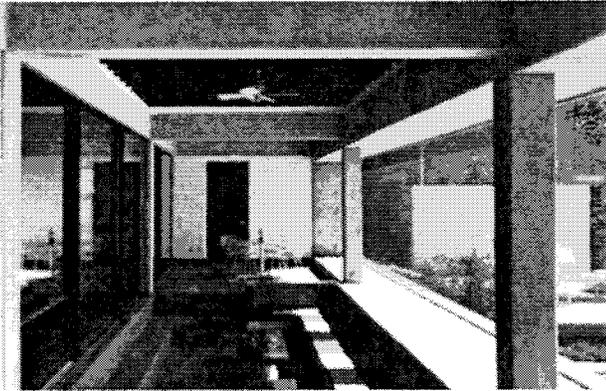


Photo [May Res Alex Georges 726A17.tif]
Credit: Photo by Alexandre George, Arango archive
May residence, porch fronting Biscayne Bay in Miami Beach.



Photo [May Res Alex Georges 726 4.tif]
Credit: Photo by Alexandre George, Arango archive
Entrance to the May residence in Miami Beach.

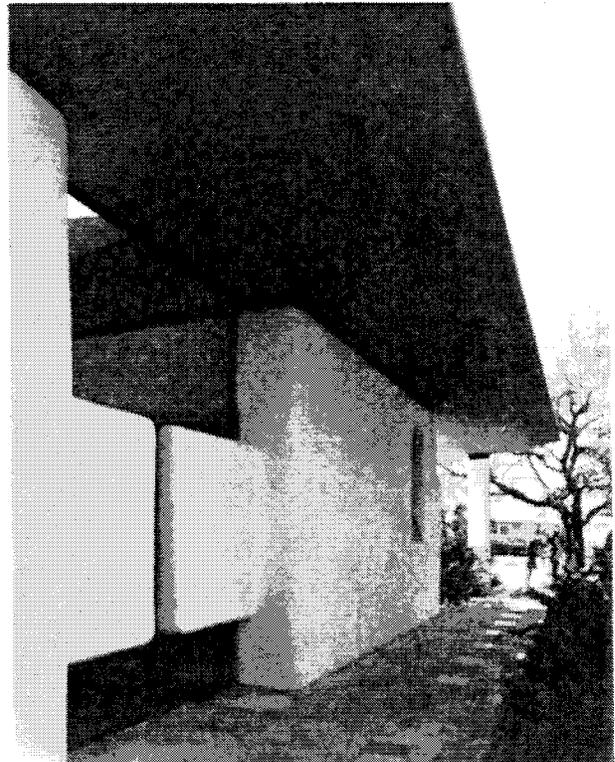


Photo [Steinsnyder Alex Georges 178B5.tif]
Credit: Photo by Alexandre George, Arango archive
Steinsnyder residence, North Miami.



Photo [Steinsnyder Alex Georges 178B7.tif]
 Credit: Photo by Alexandre George, Arango archive
 Steinsnyder residence interior.



Photo [Neal Residence Arango.tif]
 Credit: Arango archive
 Neal residence on Devon Road in Coconut Grove.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Rodriguez, Rodrigo. Correspondence. 22 October 2003.
- ² Arango, Jorge. Interview with the author. 12 December 2004.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Arango, Judith. Interview with the author. 14 September 2000.
- ⁵ Fishman, Carles. "Appreciating Arango." *FC NOW: The Fast Company* weblog. Category: Design. 8 September 2003, 11.44 am.
- ⁶ "South American is studying TVA," *Chattanooga Times*. 14 March 1944.
- ⁷ Arango, Richard. Interview with the author. 22 September 2004.
- ⁸ Fonseca, Lorenzo. "Homenaje al arquitecto Jorge Arango" (Homage to Jorge Arango architect.) Diego Amaral and Rodolfo Ullua, eds. *XVII Bienal Colombiana de Arquitectura*. Bogotá: *Sociedad Colombiana de Arquitectos*. 2002. (pp. 248, 249)
- ⁹ Saldarriaga, Alberto. *Arquitectura colombiana en el siglo XX: edificaciones en busca de ciudad*. *Credencial Historia*. No. 114. Bogotá. June 1999.
- ¹⁰ Arango, Jorge. Ibid.
- ¹¹ Arango, Richard. Ibid.