



DESIGN TIES

Left, Richard Eagleton (left) and Alexander Diaz Andersson, two of the founders of Fabrica México

Opposite, the collection showcased in the company HQ in Mexico City. From left, 'Droid' night table, 'Roos' desk, 'Agnes Mk2' chair, 'Arachnid' chair, all by Telharmonium for Fabrica México

Mexico has produced some internationally known star players of art and architecture, but its design scene has been largely ignored. From the 1940s to the 1960s, the likes of American-born Don Shoemaker, Cuban-born Mexicophile Clara Porset and designer Arturo Pani developed a Mexican modernism, but their work rarely made it across the border—the best-travelled piece of modern Mexican design remains the (unsigned) 'Acapulco' chair. And while Mexico City's Roma and Condesa neighbourhoods harbour decent young talent breaking through on a local level, modern Mexican design is still making limited inroads further afield (excepting Emiliano Godoy's brand Pirwi). Yet Mexico is one of the world's most prolific furniture manufacturers,

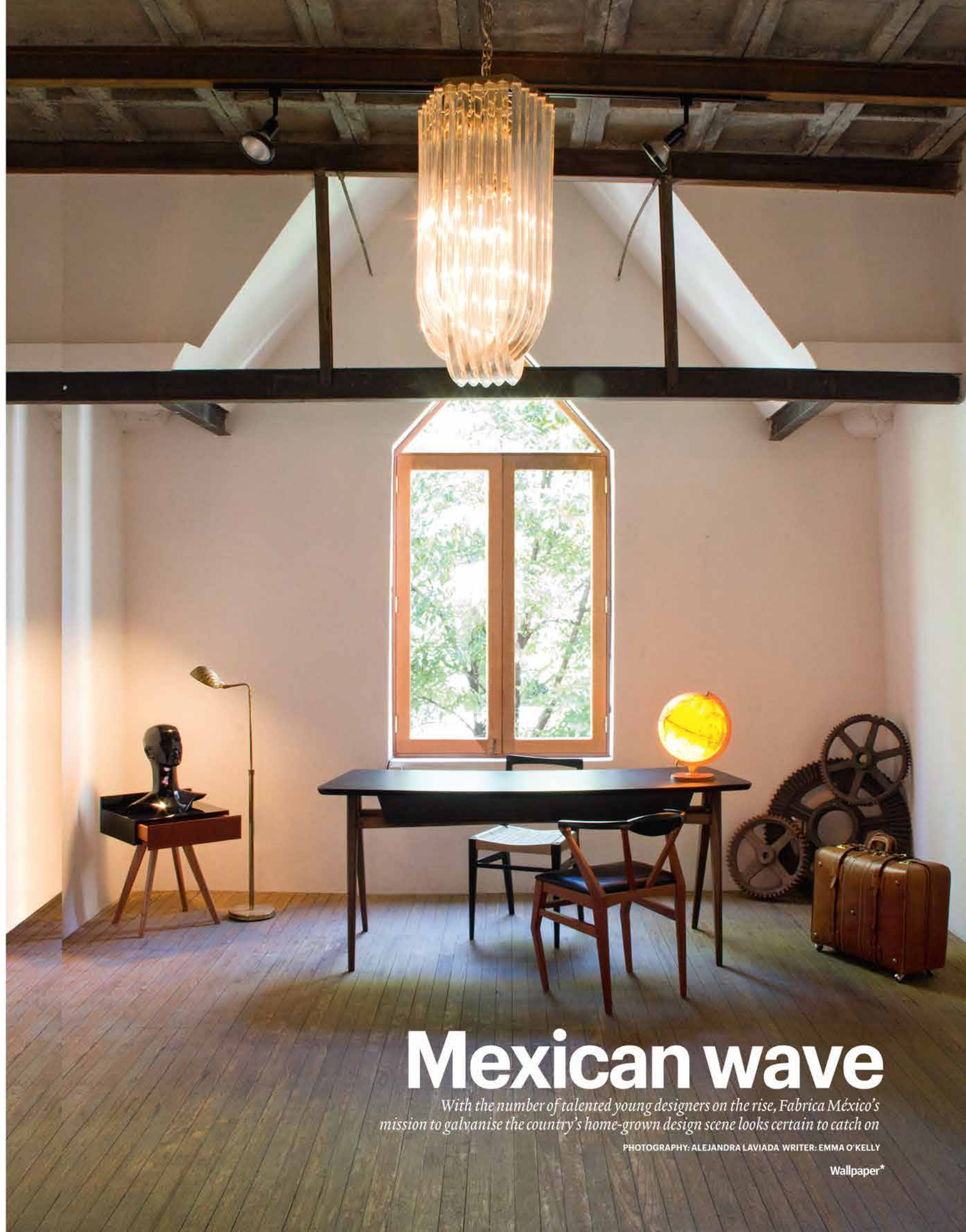
a sweatshop-style producer, exporting 96 per cent of its furniture to the US (70 per cent of which is for offices). Rustic pine beds, dressers and chests abound at online outlets such as Direct from Mexico and Million Dollar Rustic, but high-end pieces by midcentury makers are fewer and farther between. Its recent history is one of quantity, not quality. Scratch beneath the surface though, and it's clear that changes are afoot. Young urban Mexicans leaving their parents' houses to set up home want something more hip than a pine Yucatán rocker.

Enter Richard Eagleton, a Brit who fell in love with Mexico and spotted an opportunity. After 20 years in sales and marketing, he moved to the US with The Rug Company in 2012. He visited Mexico a few times and couldn't help but notice that it was 'rammed full of amazing designers'.

So he decided to move there with limited Spanish and nowhere to live. Sporting a bow tie and briefcase and riding a bicycle, he quickly made an impression on the design circuit, and before long met Alexander Diaz Andersson, a half-Swedish, half-Mexican designer who for four years had been running his own furniture company, Telharmonium, making high-end pieces for mainly private clients.

Andersson in turn introduced him to Norman Müller Vergara, an entrepreneur with a degree in industrial design. All three shared the belief it was Mexico's moment and Fabrica México was born.

Together, they are a force to be reckoned with. Although he was born in Sweden, Andersson knows the Mexican furniture business well. His Mexican mother ran a store near Malmö selling typical rustic pine pieces, and in 2004 >>



Mexican wave

With the number of talented young designers on the rise, Fabrica México's mission to galvanise the country's home-grown design scene looks certain to catch on

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moved to Yucatán to develop Ikea's upholstery division for the US market. After completing his studies in Sweden and Madrid, Andersson followed her, and settled in Mérida in the Yucatán. 'I had this romantic idea of living somewhere hot, like Ernest Hemingway, and opening my own shop,' he says. 'But Mérida has some way to go in terms of valuing design, so I focused on developing furniture instead,' he says.

In 2009, he left for Mexico City and Telharmonium was born. Today the company consists of seven people and has produced around 70 pieces as well as interiors for bars and shops. After the US crash in 2008, his mother's business closed down, and she now runs production at the factory 50 minutes from Mexico City where Telharmonium, and now Fabrica México, produce all their pieces.

Eagleton, meanwhile, who studied product design at Central Saint Martins in London, has a detailed knowledge of sales and export markets, particularly in the US. 'At the top end of the US market, around 90 per cent of products are either recommended by or sold directly to interior designers and architects. In the UK and Mexico, it's around 60 per cent. We need to mobilise the middle classes into falling in love with home-grown design.' Idealistic soundbites, though,

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do not translate into a viable business without a plan. Müller Vergara is an industrial design graduate from Centro university in Mexico City, who has a mission to incubate the country's emergent design scene. This year he is setting up a digital studio, providing young designers with free tools and space in which to realise their designs (while also giving Fabrica México access to grass-root talent).

'Since Luis Barragán, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, Mexico hasn't produced anything original,' says Müller Vergara. 'Instead we have been appropriating other cultures. But Mexico has access routes to pretty much everywhere, and has the ability to be a high-end manufacturer.'

As well as snapping up the best young designers, Fabrica México is launching 'Sólo Una Pieza', a campaign urging Mexicans to select 'Just One Piece' of local design when they are buying for the home. 'We think it's a stronger call to action than 'Hecho en México' which has become rather hackneyed,' says Eagleton. 'We hope it will encourage people to choose Mexican products.'

Fabrica México HQ is located in an elegant, turn-of-the-century, three-storey building in the district of Cuauhtémoc, sharing the space with Telharmonium and Rococo design, which sells fanciful upholstered chairs and sofas. This summer, both studios are collaborating on a collection designed by Andersson and upholstered with Rococo's signature patterns.

In the autumn, another collaboration with FOAM, a young duo founded in 2011 by Omar Ramos and Alejandro Grande, will see the launch of a range of outdoor furniture under the Fabrica México brand. Every collection is made in the same factory using locally sourced materials, such as mahogany and cedar, and upholstery from Mérida. (The only material they import is leather, from Sweden, for its quality.) Initially Fabrica México will focus on furniture and lighting, but in the future it will produce collections with craftsmen from regional areas of expertise – ceramicists from Puebla and textile designers from Chiapas and Oaxaca.

The country's first design gallery, Galería Mexicana de Diseño, was founded 23 years ago by Carmen Cordera Lascurain. She is the doyenne of the design scene, and has over the years promoted hundreds of Mexican designers. Lascurain recently held an open-call competition for Mexican designers to exhibit at Design Days Dubai, which Fabrica México won.

'Fabrica México is the perfect example of how a classic business model can improve innovation and design,' she says. 'Local designers are becoming really professional, considering concept carefully. We can be more selective about how we promote the Mexican scene globally these days.'

Andersson adds: 'Mexico is a very fertile place, a land of possibility. We have the designers.

We just need to go from no belief to self-belief.' ★

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TOP DRAWER

Top, FOAM duo Omar Ramos (left) and Alejandro Grande with their solid-walnut 'Intervalos' cabinet, for Fabrica México
Above, the 'V' desk in solid mahogany, by Telharmonium for Fabrica México