

Design Miami



SPOTLIGHT: AMERICA(S)

American Design Stories: Reynold Rodriguez

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The San Juan designer reflects on the current state of American design—and society

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.

For our latest installment, we had the pleasure of speaking with [Reynold Rodriguez](#). Inside his San Juan studio, Rodriguez creates handmade furniture and lighting from plaster and salvaged wood, imbued with a distinct character that is at once familiar and curious; at turns romantic, humorous, and poetic.

What makes your American story unique?

All four of my grandparents were immigrants, Puerto Ricans that either lived or met in America during the 1930s. My parents were raised on the island, but later my father started his engineering career at Cape Canaveral while working for NASA during the Apollo missions. As far back as I can trace my modern family history, there has been an interwoven relationship to American culture.

What does “America” mean to you?

I was born and raised in Puerto Rico, but later completed my design studies at RISD in the 1990s. Growing up on the island, we learned English very early on and would visit family in North America during the summers. Personally, making a distinction between what it meant to be American and/ or Puerto Rican came later in my adolescence, with increased awareness of racial bias towards Latinos and the personal need to discover and connect with one's own roots. I grew up with the belief that being American meant the pursuit of freedom and equality.



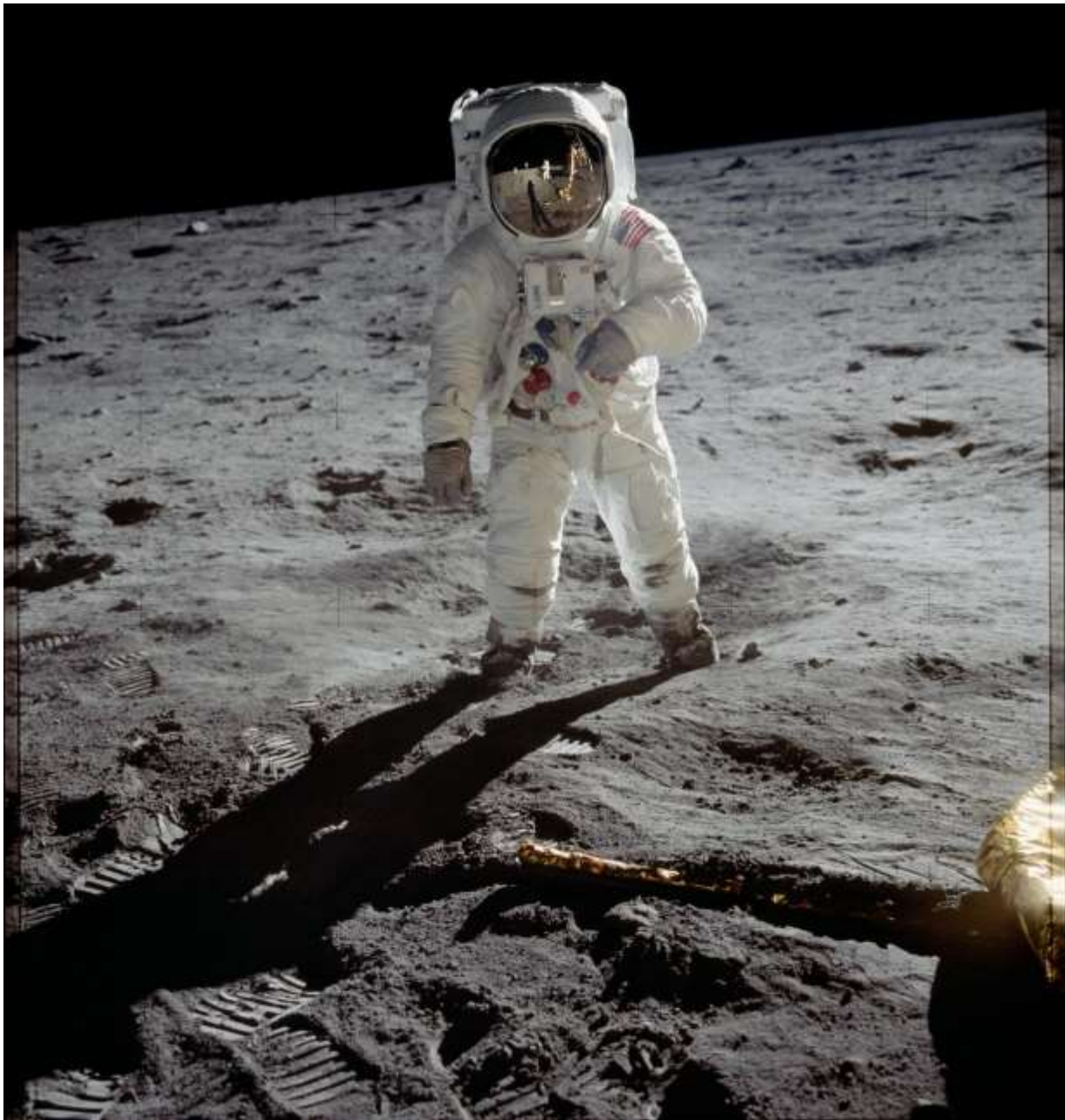
View of Mission Control Center on the first day of the Apollo 10 lunar orbit mission, May 18, 1969. Rodriguez says, "The Apollo missions bring back the memory of my father, who was part of this extraordinary endeavor, but more so exemplify the idea of America for me... The scale and ambition were enormous, the odds unimaginable, and yet, the spirit was one of absolute confidence that it was possible and necessary for America to achieve. And it did—in a way that would cement America's status as the leader of the free world for many years past the missions. I hope that it can be a beacon for America to return to." Photo © NASA

What does “American design” mean to you today?

My thoughts on the current identity of “American design” are closely related to the current state of American politics. Design is intricately tied to perceived aesthetics, so I feel like in America at the moment we are in an outward-looking period, rather than [looking in] toward ourselves. Not necessarily to other cultures exclusively, but more so towards a world where fantasy allows one to breathe, which has not been the case for some time in the realm of our current reality.

Does that notion of America or American design figure into your own work?

Based on this notion, my own reaction has been to allow my designs to envision a world that is slightly separated from the real one, if only ever so slightly. The forms are fluid and bold and play off of emotions that are strong and easily felt on the materials and the overall composition.



Astronaut Edwin Aldrin (aka Buzz) walks on the surface of the moon, July 20, 1969. Neil A. Armstrong, commander, took this photo with a 70mm lunar surface camera. While astronauts Armstrong and Aldrin descended in the Lunar Module "Eagle" to explore the Sea of Tranquility region of the moon, astronaut Michael Collins, command module pilot, remained with the Command and Service Modules (CSM) "Columbia" in lunar orbit. Photo © NASA

What identity obstacles do you face in your work?

Obstacles are difficulties we choose to validate over our own self-confidence. For example, there is a notion that one's design aesthetic should be dictated by your cultural heritage and be a colorful imprint of that. Surely there is an influence we relate to, but we can also transform that aesthetic based on whatever fills our mind's eye universally and make up our own language.

Where do you look for strength?

Family for sure, but mostly self-confidence. I trust the road I have traveled and the mountains I have climbed; that helps me sustain the strength required in moving forward and setting new goals.



Flight controllers celebrate the successful conclusion of the Apollo 11 lunar landing mission on July 24, 1969, at NASA's Mission Control Center in Houston. On July 20, Apollo 11 astronaut Neil Armstrong planted the first human foot on another world. With more than half a billion

people watching on television, he climbed down the ladder and proclaimed: "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind." Photo © NASA

To whom or what should the design community be paying attention right now?

As designers, we should be paying very close attention to the attitudes that shape our politics, because more important than which party holds power, political attitudes show who we are becoming as an evolved society, and also how we relate to each other on a human level. As creative personalities we typically focus on utopian visions of beautiful things, but it is also prudent to maintain the correct balance of truth if we are to achieve that beauty in a lasting state.

What are you most proud of in your work to date?

After graduating RISD, some could argue advancing as an artist would involve staying in North America or one of Europe's better-known design capitals. I could pursue better work opportunities and exposure there in comparison to an isolated Puerto Rico in the pre-Internet era. I decided, however, that I wanted to return to Puerto Rico and felt my career would eventually grow from there. It was a longshot that ended up offering me a very interesting career as designer and millwork fabricator to the trade, producing interiors for many local design clients before I was able to produce and show some of my own for an international audience. This process was part of a choice I made, and something I have had to defend against even myself at times. I feel extremely proud to have owned my decisions, but also to have made the effort required to succeed with bigger odds.

Thank you, Reynold! ☺

Reynold Rodriguez is an award-winning designer who specializes in the design and production of furniture, interiors and special projects. Rodriguez's work is included in the

2020 Design Miami/ Podium exhibition, America(s). A selection of his collectible design pieces are represented by Wexler Gallery.

Describing his San Juan studio, Rodriguez notes, “The growth of our design studio, a source of creativity and production, allows us to develop projects that combine new techniques and materials, giving us the opportunity to challenge traditional standards of industrial design in Puerto Rico.”

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 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.