

FAVOURITE ROOM

The power of play

How two Spanish architects created a kid-centric living room

Moving to Vancouver from Madrid proved to be a minimal affair for architects Clotilde Orozco and Alejandro Sanguino. Aside from personal belongings, their daughter's handcrafted crib and their prized Isamu Noguchi lamp, it was a clean slate when it came to furnishing their two-bedroom basement rental in Strathcona. The family of three (which has since grown to four) immigrated to Canada a year and a half ago due to the Spanish financial crisis that had taken a toll on their profession. The tight budget left little money for new furniture, so they set out to create their own, adding another whimsical project for the portfolio of Abubilladesign, their design studio. "We decided it was an opportunity to do something different than what we had in Madrid, which was a regular house with tables and chairs," Sanguino says. "We wanted to build something where we could play with our daughter."

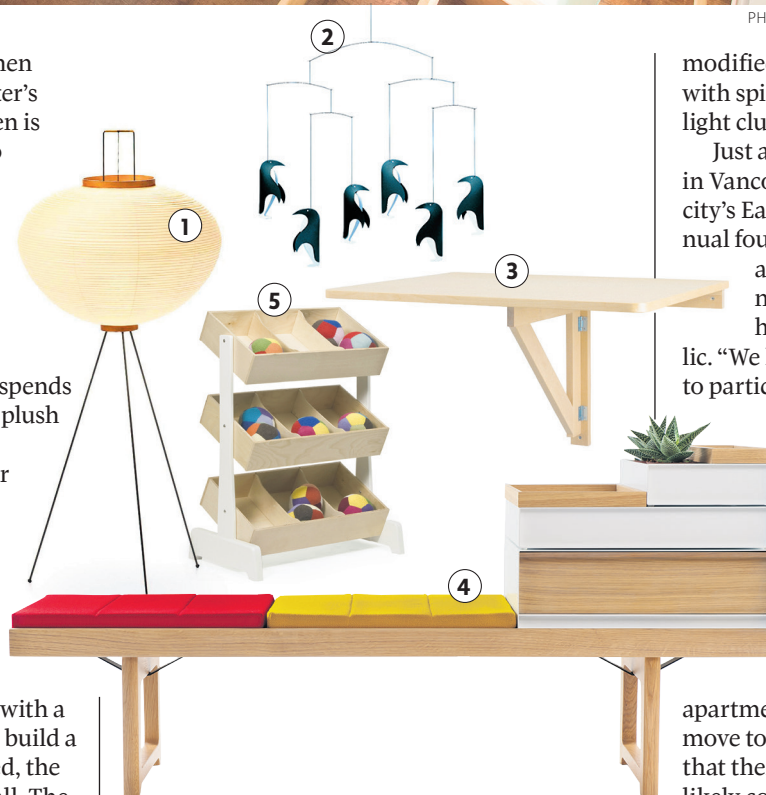
Inspired by a game of hopscotch, they imagined an elevated platform, with distinctive panels leading to the seating area. The pair headed to Home Depot for inexpensive plywood sheets and framing lumber. "To be honest, we used the cheapest materials we could find," Sanguino says. As luck would have it, the neighbouring restaurant was undergoing renovations and disposing of unwanted materials, allowing Sanguino to incorporate their glass panels into the composition. They weren't the only things the architect rescued from the alley: After stumbling upon an old office chair, he decided to integrate its rotating



PHOTO BY DARRYL DYCK FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

mechanism into the play kitchen he was building for his daughter's birthday. The slick little kitchen is complete with a tiny sink, two ranges made out of sculpted wire, and compartments for assorted food ingredients. "She's always playing. Usually, there are vegetables all over the place," he says.

The family, who recently welcomed a second daughter, spends quality time on the colourful, plush bench, reading or watching movies from a digital projector mounted above it. The couple also built matching yellow and orange stools, which they bring out when entertaining friends. "To be honest, in the beginning, we didn't think we would have many friends," Sanguino says with a laugh, "but we'll have to try to build a few more stools." When needed, the coffee table folds out of the wall. The one-legged table recalls a mid-century modern design by the late Spanish architect Alejandro de la Sota, one of their favourites. "It's not the same, but it's a similar idea," says Sanguino of the ingenious space-saving solution. Aside from their Noguchi floor lamp, the creative couple



modified store-bought pendant lights with spiral wire, to create sculptural light clusters.

Just a few weeks after their arrival in Vancouver, the pair attended the city's Eastside Culture Crawl, an annual four-day festival where artists and designers in the eclectic neighbourhood open their homes and studios to the public. "We loved it, and it gave us an idea to participate the following year," says Sanguino. Their almost entirely self-furnished home resulted in a couple of client commissions for Abubilladesign. The experience also made the new Vancouverites feel like a part of the community. For now, the couple is content in their modest

apartment. Down the line, if they move to a new place, Sanguino says that their built furniture will most likely come with them. "We are two in the team. I know that my wife will like to move it," he says. "I wouldn't mind going to another house and building something different. My wife is more attached to these things – and I understand." – ANYA GEORGIJEVIC

Special to The Globe and Mail

Get the look

1. Isamu Noguchi Akari floor lamp by Vitra, \$563 at GR Shop (www.grshop.com)
2. Flendsted Penguin Talk mobile, \$50 (U.S.) at the Guggenheim Store (www.guggenheimstore.org)
3. Norbo wall-mounted drop-leaf table, \$45 at Ikea (www.ikea.com)
4. Fjordfiesta Krobo Bench with cushions and boxes, starting at \$1,899 at The Modern Shop (www.themodernshop.ca)
5. Oeuf classic toy store, \$625 at Ella and Elliot (www.ellaandelliot.com)

EX MACHINA

Trying to repair the handmade Morgan is an existential experience

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» CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Years later, after I became a professional mechanic, I was enlisted by a friend who needed help with a 1950s Morgan he'd recently picked up. "It just needs a few tweaks," he assured me. "You'll be able to do it in a morning." Famous last words.

When I opened the door of my friend's Morgan, it came off in my hands. The hinges were mounted in a sub-frame carved from hardwood, and termites had taken up permanent residence. And that was only the beginning. I worked on the car on and off for six months, a process that involved carpentry, mechanical repair, a touch of sorcery (the Morgan's wiring seemed to be inhabited by demons), and some outright blacksmithing – I straightened a bent steel frame section by heating it with an acetylene torch while simultaneously pulling in it with a Come-Along winch that's normally used to haul heavy machinery or extract stuck Jeeps from mud bogs.

I loved the Morgan nonetheless. It had an ambience that defied description. At the end of each repair session, I stood at the side of the garage and stared at the car, savouring its timeless appeal. It was an existential experience: The Morgan was trying to return to the earth; I was trying to keep it from the grave. I soon realized that dealing with an old Morgan is like caring for an aging relative with a lingering, irreversible illness – no matter your skills, Mother Nature will have the final word.

Decades later, I went to the Morgan factory in Malvern, England. It was the coolest, most resonant industrial operation I have ever encountered. There were no robots, and no assembly line. Instead, teams of skilled artisans built the cars by hand. I watched in

amazement as a craftsman made a hood by feeding a sheet of steel through a pair of rollers, then trimming it with shears. The factory was a collection of brick buildings, and workers rolled the partially completed cars between them. The office of Peter Morgan, the son of the company's founder, was preserved exactly as it had been on the day he died in 2003, frozen in amber.

There are less than 200 employees at Morgan, and they only build about 500 cars per year. You can't buy a new one in Canada, because Morgan doesn't have the resources to meet our current automotive regulations, which stipulate features like electronic stability control, back-up cameras and crush zones.

Never mind. Driving a new Morgan is an experience. Although they all look

the same, the company actually builds two very different kinds of cars. One is the classic series, which maintains a set of mechanical traditions that reach back to the 1930s – a steel ladder frame, sliding-pillar front suspension and a four-cylinder engine. The classic Morgans have been updated, but only slightly. The ignition system is now solid-state, which is good news. Back in the day, Morgan electrics were made by the British firm Lucas, which gained infamy for flakey components and unpredictable failures (enthusiasts took to calling the firm "Lucas, Prince of Darkness"). The traditional carburetors are also gone, exorcised in favour of digital fuel injection, a mechanical concession that reminds me of putting modern faucets in the

bathroom of an Edwardian country estate.

The classic Morgan appeals to a particular constituency, dominated by older men who view the car through the sepia-tinted lens of memory. The classics are beautiful, but the company also offers the stunning Plus 8. Visually, the Plus 8 looks very similar to the car I drove back in high school. But under the skin, it's a high-tech machine, with a BMW V8 engine and a bonded aluminum chassis worthy of a Formula One car. Classic Morgans flex like wooden sailing ships. Not the Plus 8 – it has the structural stiffness of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Out on the road, a Plus 8 roadster provides an incredible experience. It has Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang period ambience, but it's a true supercar, with stunning acceleration, powerful brakes and world-class handling. It sits low. It rumbles. It reminds you of a bygone age, even though its technology is here and now. That's Morgan – the car that time forgot.



MOTORIZED MASTERPIECE The Morgan Plus 8 is a high-tech machine with looks that pay homage to its classic predecessor, which dates back to the 1930s.