

OFFICE FURNITURE DESIGN SET: *SINTEX* (1965-1977)
UNA SERIE DE MUEBLES DE OFICINA DE DISEÑO: *SINTEX* (1965-1977)

Aida Puente Toraño*
Universidad de Oviedo

Resumen: Litton Industries estableció una de sus múltiples divisiones empresariales en el Norte de España en 1965, llamada Litton-Cole. La corporación norteamericana escogió Asturias para emplazar su factoría destinada a la fabricación de mobiliario de oficina de componente metálico. La región ofrecía la necesaria base industrial para la manufacturación de este tipo de producto, así como mano de obra especializada procedente de la industria armamentística.

En el contexto de los años sesenta en España, el diseñador asturiano José Antonio Menéndez Hevia estaba encargado del diseño de numerosos bancos y otros establecimientos comerciales y públicos cuando se le encargó diseñar una serie de mobiliario de oficina para Cole Steel de España. Este era el nombre que recibió comercialmente la división. De esta forma, Menéndez Hevia diseñó un minucioso conjunto pensando en las necesidades del sector con más de veinte combinaciones posibles que fue comercializado bajo el nombre de *Sintex*.

La serie fue muy exitosa nivel nacional, especialmente destinada al amueblamiento de sucursales bancarias, pero también fue exportada a países como Italia. Miles de unidades se vendieron como parte de uno de los pocos productos de diseño españoles manufacturados en serie en aquel momento. La fábrica fue clausurada en 1977 y la serie fue olvidada en el habitual contexto anónimo del diseño industrial español.

Palabras clave: diseño; década de los sesenta; producción en serie; mobiliario de oficina metálico; bancos.

Abstract: Litton Industries decided to establish one of its divisions in Northern Spain in 1965 called Litton-Cole. They chose Asturias to set up a factory intended to manufacture office furniture with a metallic component. The region had the potential to develop this kind of product due to its industrial base. It was easy to be provided with materials like steel, but above all a specialized workforce from Asturias' Arms Industry.

In the context of Spanish sixties José Antonio Menéndez Hevia was in

charge of designing several banks and other public commercial establishments. Due to his connection with the Asturian banking sector, he had the opportunity to design office furniture set for Cole Steel. Cole Steel was the commercial name for the Asturian factory. Menéndez Hevia designed a very thorough set with almost twenty possible combinations that was commercialized under the name of *Sintex*.

The series was successful on a national scale and was aimed at furnishing bank branch offices, but it was also exported to countries like Italy. Thousands of units were sold as part of one of the few Spanish design products manufactured in series at that time. The factory was closed in 1977, but in the general background of Spanish industrial design this series was forgotten, being part of our usual anonymous design history.

Keywords: design; sixties; mass production; metallic office furniture; banks.

1. José Antonio Menéndez Hevia: an approach.

José Antonio Menéndez Hevia (Oviedo, 1938) is an Asturian designer, interior architect and specialized constructor. During his fifty year long career he has produced more than two thousand and five hundred works as well as countless items, mostly related to furniture. An article with a summary of his professional life has recently been published, showing his major works and biography. The article focuses on the main aspects of his design system, which is based on a combination of full construction services and a multidisciplinary offer.¹ A thesis on his contribution to the history of design in Spain is currently being carried out, and it will be submitted at the end of 2013.²

Menéndez Hevia started to study Architecture in 1957. His family encouraged him to study in Madrid –at that time, architects had a high social status in the Spanish society. However, he felt those studies did not offer him enough chances to learn more about the practical aspects of the profession, so he left Madrid a year later. After his stay in the Spanish capital he started a tour, visiting several artisanal and industrial workshops. During the time that he spent with the artisans, he was able to study how they worked very closely. This knowledge gained in the workshops proved to be vital for his career, because Menéndez Hevia became one of the few interior designers able to design and set up his own works. Menéndez Hevia was in charge of designing and constructing many establishments relating to our daily way of life.³ Due to the continued presence in the public facade of the interior design, he played an important role in the modernization of society's taste in Asturias, our region, as well as in the rest of Spain.

More importantly than the amount of works he produced was his revolutionary business concept. It is difficult to find a similar initiative by any other artist in Europe because Hevia's idea was not to create an architectural firm but a specialized construction company. The whole idea was to control the

market related to interior design within the public sphere. The company was known as DIHER, and was established in 1960. DIHER is acronym of “Decoración e interiorismo Hevia Rayón” (Decoration and Interior design Hevia Rayón). With DIHER, he was able to expand the concept of “turnkey”. He offered his customers a full service, from the location to the maintenance of the buildings, a fact that might help us explain his success in an environment traditionally taken up by architects.

The seventies were the peak years for the Spanish banks, which were expanding and reforming their image. Menéndez Hevia's working system, which involved integral services⁴, turned his enterprise into the top building firm at that time. At European level the quantity of his works is only compatible in scale to John Ryan Company.⁵ In 1970 –in order to aim to the global market and to expand his activities– Menéndez Hevia set up two new enterprises: Bureau70 and Concepto70. Concepto70 was a multidisciplinary laboratory inspired by Bauhaus spirit, combining the work of architects, engineers, decorators and sculptors among others. Bureau70 was in charge of commercializing design furniture and used to have a temporary exhibition that intended to show some objects of the most renowned European editors. The exhibit inside the shop was completed with a selection of contemporary art.

In 1985 Bureau70 included a design workshop in its activities, focusing on research and developing commercial items such as vehicles, benches and street furniture. At that time his sons and daughters were initiating their careers in the field of design. Five out of seven of them started working in the absolutely inspiring atmosphere that took place during the eighties and beginning of the nineties in the workshop of Bureau70. Carmen, Sebastian, Veronica, Cristina and Pablo Menéndez Salinas started their professional training with his father in order to create an authentic family saga committed to design. In 1989, Bureau70 received an award⁶ for the best furniture design store by *On Design*, a magazine that organized the national event every year.⁷

Throughout his entire career he combined the interior design with industrial design, being the author of many objects like the office furniture that we are going to see in this article. Menéndez Hevia's working philosophy was scrupulous. He used to pay attention to the smallest details while designing a public interior space. Due to this he produced a vast quantity of items. In 1965 he designed a revolutionary series called *Sintex*, which was based on a metallic desk combined with Formica (a material with endless possibilities because Menéndez Hevia also discovered how to produce post-formed curved pieces).⁸ It was manufactured by Cole Steel, an American division of Litton's company. At the same time, the demand for more efficient installation of the storefronts drove him to experiment with fiberglass. The experimentation with fiberglass drove him to make complete structures for storefronts, ready to be installed in just a few hours. The fiberglass pieces were very popular in many of his shop designs, due to their resistance and lightness.

In 1995 he became self-employed and decided to focus his work on the field of industrial design. Good examples of this stage of his career are the designs he

created for Ornalux.⁹ In 2003 Hevia met Nina Grønn, a Norwegian artist. He decided then to reduce his activity as entrepreneur to concentrate on his great passion: the artwork. For the last nine years they have worked together, producing more than three hundred abstract paintings. In recent years Menéndez Hevia has designed several exceptional works, such as the reform of the College of Mining Engineers of Asturias and the Casino of Gijón. In 2009 he was awarded as Member of Honor by the Association of Interior Designers, an acknowledgment for his entire career. 2012 remained as the year in which Menéndez Hevia and Nina Grønn were able to accomplish the goal of setting up a company, which was registered under the name *Virtual Art Factory*.

2. The *Sintex series*.

In 1965 José Antonio Menéndez Hevia combined interior design works (banks, shops, cafes, etc.) with industrial design of objects. Although traditionally Spanish interior design used to create specific items to furnish commercial establishments, it was still far during Spanish modernization¹⁰ from the great markets of editors and design works. The initiative to design a metallic office furniture set, which would be later called *Sintex*, came from an unusual order that Cole Steel de España S.A (a division of the American group Litton.¹¹) made to Menéndez Hevia in 1965.

The factory was located in Lugo de Llanera and was specialized in office supplies, specifically furniture.¹² As shown in the catalogues¹³ there was a diverse content of office materials, and except for some specific items, furniture materials were always metallic, one of the reasons to choose Asturias as the location for the factory.

The initiative to establish this division in Asturias had started in 1965¹⁴, but the factory actually opened on May, 9, 1966.¹⁵ Although Litton-Cole had an investment by March Bank (50% was Spanish capital), it is worth mentioning that it was the first factory established with North-American capital in the region, becoming one of the first multinational corporations dedicated to furniture that chose Spain for its production location. The factory had a surface of five thousand square meters but the whole facility was actually more than thirty thousand square meters, in view of its expected growth.

In the official inauguration, this ambitious company stated the need to promote its products to supply the Spanish market, the European market before Spain joined the EEC, and the African potential market due to its proximity.¹⁶ Self-sufficiency concerning supplies was very important since it was necessary to have a quick response to orders in the Spanish market.

Asturias was not considered a growth center,¹⁷ so it was not a priority concerning the establishment of this kind of industry, although there were not many processing industries in the region. Litton-Cole chose this region because it was very close to raw materials (steel produced in Avilés) and there were skilled workers coming from the arms industry. This meant that in very little time, they

could train experienced workers to deal with metals. The engineer-director of the Cole Steel factory, Eduardo Diz Mateo,¹⁸ and his employees, actually came from the Arms Factory in Trubia.

The establishment of this factory in Asturias meant a big change in the industrial scene, where the specialized workers started to work in intermediate levels of industry, in this case the complex world of manufacturing furniture. If this initiative had resulted in the establishment of other similar factories, Asturias would have become an innovative area for office furniture materials, as opposed to the traditional wood and wicker production located in Valencia.

Cole Steel produced all kinds of office furniture with a great diversity of products, as seen in their adverts in different issues of *Asturias Semanal* or *ABC* around 1968. Their advertising was very similar to that in North-America. The piece of furniture is schematically presented below the sentence “buying for selling”, highlighting the importance of investing in the good image of companies to improve their sales.

The proposal to design this set of office furniture was sparked by the relationship that Menéndez Hevia had at that time with the Bank of Asturias and the March Bank, since in 1964 Menéndez Hevia took his first steps in the interior design of banks thanks to the Bank of Langreo, later known as Bank of Asturias,¹⁹ with José Ramón Villa as director and also as managing director of Cole Steel España.

Sintex furniture meant a revolution because design pieces of furniture were produced in series. It was not a single, exclusive piece of furniture, although it was signed by the designer, so Menéndez Hevia exceptionally received a percentage of the *royalties*. The world of Spanish design, except for Cataluña, which supported its authors, is definitely based on anonymous design. Even in the industrial production of furniture of Menéndez Hevia in the sixties, seventies, until the middle of the eighties, this series was an exception.²⁰ This series was commercialized since the factory opened in 1966 until it was closed down in 1977 (year when *Sintex* series disappeared from the market).²¹ Thousands of units were sold, generating great economic benefits on the one hand (which was unusual), and filling the void in the scope of interior design in public places on the other hand.

Sintex takes its name from the word “sintético”, an aesthetic concept fostered by modernity's world, whose postulates match the ideals and actions of the Asturian designer. The *Sintex* design corresponds to a very early period in the production of Menéndez Hevia, although he already had lots of resources to design. He had outstanding skills thanks to his training in different industrial sites. An example of how well he managed industrial production was the fact that he adapted design to the manufacturing processes in this first stage of the start-up of the factory. Elements like the desk, for example, a priori involved difficulties in the manufacturing process, so it was necessary to establish a new chrome plating system piece by piece. The bucket was quite small; because it was reused from other industrial chains where it was not necessary to chrome large pieces at the same time, which was very important in the production of this kind

of furniture to achieve a uniform quality. Pieces were not assembled until they had been polished to optimize the process. Thanks to this innovative assembling system, the metallic frame looked a priori like a single piece. Those assembling elements were a kind of small nails that looked imperceptible once put together. In this way, they were able to produce quality pieces with a homogeneous structure. In order to create metallic structures for quality furniture, they included double side folding machines in the production process, achieving more efficient finishes for the tubular structure.²² This metallic structure is basically the most important feature of *Sintex*. It was almost a sculpture, keeping a complex balance between curves and counter-curves, for aesthetic and functional reasons. *Sintex* became the largest tubular structure in the Spanish market in the sixties.

Cole Steel España was an industry with little capacity. The production line was limited to the section of cut and pleating (the steel pipes came in previously manufactured), the chromium plating baths and the painting train. Menéndez Hevia achieved, limiting himself to the scarce industrial tools, the furniture production optimization. We should consider this aspect taking into account the immense wasteland that happened to be the industry related to metallic furniture in Spain. We should also take into consideration the few technological resources, which were very elementary. The only added value was design. The resources of the industrial secondary sector were still inefficient at that time which resulted in a great deal of manpower. At the beginning of the sixties the workforce was very economical which meant a low productivity cost due to the low salaries of the employees. Over the years, as the *Sintex* production improved, it was possible to rationalize the workforce in the assembly line.

We should highlight the great quality of the piece of this series, which can only be appreciated if we compare it with other contemporaneous pieces. The industry used at that time a welding process to join metallic components, although welding often implied shimmering spliced unions with metallic discolorations and rough finishes. That is why these kind of welded parts were designed to remain hidden. If we take, for instance, one of the editions of Le Corbusier of the sixties, like *LC7*, and turn it upside down, we will see how the legs are joined under the seat. In a *Sintex* desk, this type of welding process was unthinkable, because the whole structure was visible. Breuer also made furniture with this type of structures, very similar to those of *Sintex*. Even though he used the assembling process, he did it a little bit more roughly if we compare it with Menéndez Hevia's master solution. The fine work developed by Menéndez Hevia was based on joining pieces through the incorporation of an additional piece that actually joined the two concentric tubes.

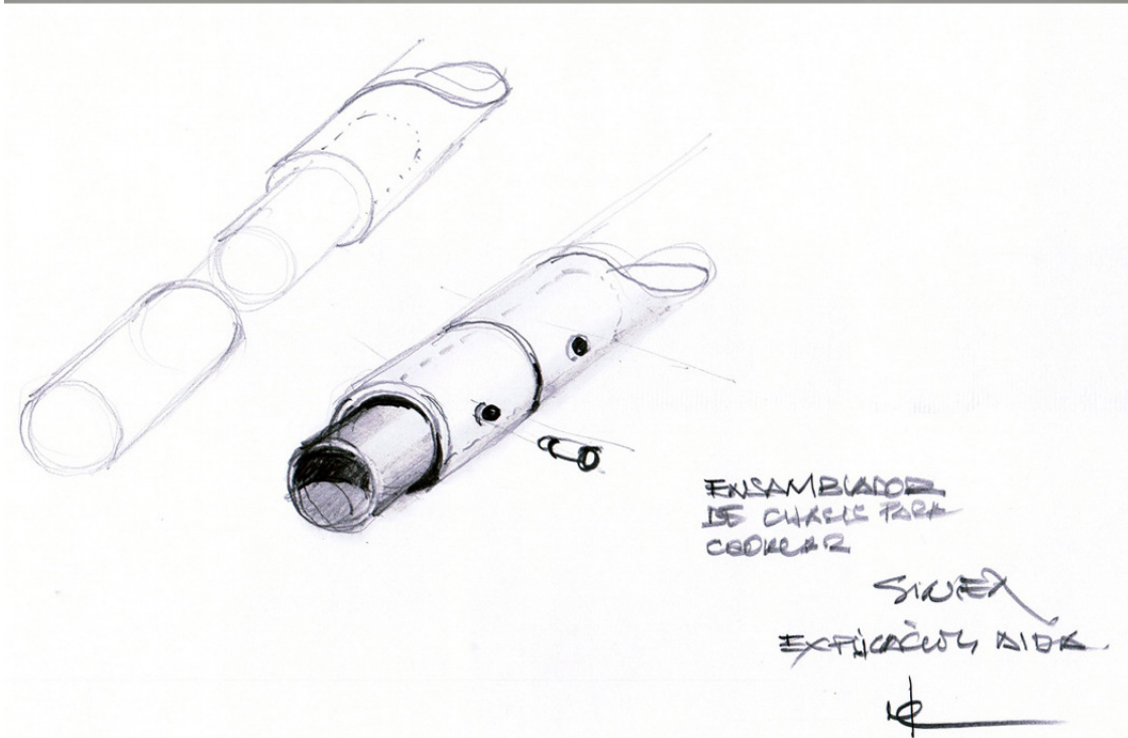


Fig. 1. *Sintex* desk detail where we can see the structure which makes it singular based on bended profile as special characteristic of its design. The sketch below shows how the tubes were assembled by a sophisticated system. The photograph was taken at industrial building owned by Alfredo Escandón (21st, May, 2013), an Asturian industrialist who had furnished his offices with *Sintex* in white and blue.

Although *Sintex* was initially oriented towards office furniture in general, its designs were basically devoted to banks, because it was an emerging market concerning interior design in Spain. The *Sintex* series was mainly used to furnish banks. Our country sold so many units that it even survived despite the loss of the North American investment, which was a great support in the export process. At the beginning of the seventies, the North-American investors sold their part to the Catalonian banking group,²³ which soon went into receivership. However, the factory remained active for another five years only supported by the *Sintex* series, with 100% Spanish capital.

The furniture of the *Sintex* series was made of chromed steel (tubes and flat strips) and Formica. With *Sintex* they intended to place modern and fresh furniture on the market, far from the traditional furniture pieces manufactured with iron and glass,²⁴ luxurious in excess, but also far from the classic wooden office furniture, which was bulky and snob. The objective was to create innovative and lighter furniture related to the modern times, and the idea of aesthetic quality.

Due to the materials used to manufacture the *Sintex* series, it meant an innovation process in the production of office furniture in our country. The materials used, undoubtedly contributed to produce lighter as well as durable and resistant pieces of furniture. Menéndez Hevia helped popularize Formica using it for the interior design of many commercial establishments, although he never used it for worktops. The possibility of curving Formica was not raised for *Sintex* series, even though it was a usual solution for the covering of architectonic elements in banks. On the other hand, this resource is being included in the new edition of this series that is currently in process. In addition, Formica was also a versatile material; *Sintex* could be manufactured in different colors: white, black, brown, blue and pistachio green, removing the color imitating wood, very common at that time. The possibility of having different colors increased its sales, and color was actually a relevant aspect of interior design during the sixties and seventies in Spain. The most successful combination of colors was brown and white, which Menéndez Hevia used to create a warmer environment.



Figs. 2. *Sintex* desk in white and brown. Banco Herrero's branch office, Vitoria, País Vasco (c.1975). In the foreground, Eero Saarinen's *Executive Chair*. Menéndez Hevia used Saarinen's chair to furnish every office of Banco Herrero since 1967. The image belongs to Menéndez Hevia's personal archive.

Menéndez Hevia regularly visited the main international furniture fairs,²⁵ as was mostly interested in the Italian furniture market located in Milan. His cultured perspective of design received additional inspiration from publications like *Ottagono*, *Abitare* or *Domus*.²⁶ This aesthetic model, closer to modernity and linked to the avant-garde was typical of architect's world, where Menéndez Hevia developed his initial training as a designer. There is no doubt that *Sintex* was, in some way, inspired aesthetically by Marcel Breuer and his mid-thirties office furniture.²⁷

Menéndez Hevia had an outstanding grasp of the Italian market. He observed that it had a wide range of metallic furniture, including the metallic office furniture created between 1957 and 1961 by G Banfi, L. Belgiojoso, E. Peressutti and E. N. Rogers. But as happened with Breuer's furniture, the Italian office furniture was relatively small and conceptually a lot lighter than *Sintex*, although it was not lighter as far as material was concerned. All the elements together turned this European office furniture into an excellent option for wide open office areas of large companies due to its functionality, but was rarely chosen to furnish individual professional offices in our country. It was a common liking in Spain to choose bulky pieces of furniture for personal working areas, always following a historicist style and made of wood. *Sintex*, somehow,

made it possible to reconcile these aspects of functionality and aesthetic quality, bridging the gap on furniture's Spanish market. *Sintex* was also an alternative to embellish metallic furniture,²⁸ which did not have aesthetic consideration in Spain. This way, *Sintex* was not only introduced in offices and banks, which was actually what it was created for, but it was also successful in the domestic sphere, because lots of men had their professional offices and even some clinics at home. It was quite a success, mainly for personal use and to furnish junior professional offices at the starting point of their careers.²⁹

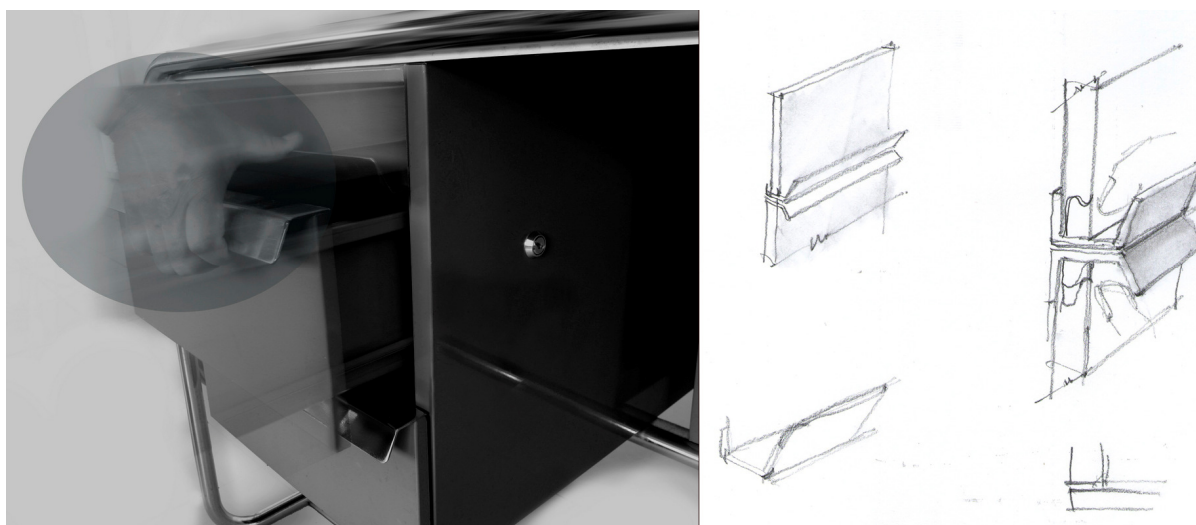


Fig. 3. The image on the left shows *Sintex* drawers system. The photograph was taken at industrial building owned by Alfredo Escandón (23rd, May, 2013). The image on the right shows the graphic explanation related to the way the pull handles system was conceived. The drawers could be opened simultaneously, avoiding getting fingers caught. The dimensions of the drawers vary according to different storage purposes. The sketch belongs to Menéndez Hevia's personal archive.

Sintex has also contributed to eradicate the masculine image associated to heavy and bulky furniture in professional offices. *Sintex* was a multipurpose design, aesthetically and functionally.³⁰ Its lightness and the possibility of being mounted in several positions turned it into an excellent option for areas with heavy use, like offices placed at wide diaphanous spaces to host many workers. Those kinds of open working areas flourished during the late sixties and the beginning of the seventies in Spain, when the banking system introduced some concepts imported from the Anglo-Saxon business world.³¹



Fig. 4. Banco Herrero's branch office, Bilbao, País Vasco (c.1973). *Sintex* furniture was connected by an additional return table, so all tables line up. The image belongs to Menéndez Hevia's personal archive.

The many versions of *Sintex* altered, somehow, the original designs. An example of this could be the changes made to *Sintex* office desk in order to cover the legs of banking female employees. During sixties in Spain, women started to work outside the home, above all in administrative jobs inside the banking sector. Women in Spain usually wore skirts all the time, but a banking dressing code made them mandatory at work. In the customer service sector certain positions or “improper” attitudes would not be welcomed or allowed. That was the main reason why Menéndez Hevia placed a front made of steel on the desks. This sort of front had different versions depending on the model, but as a rule, it was part of consultancy desks. It used to be placed in the middle, leaving room simultaneously for the legs of the employee and the customer.



Fig. 5. *Sintex* consultancy table. The picture shows the solution to hide the legs of female employees. In the background, *Sintex* shelves set in the wall. In the foreground, more office furniture characteristic of the decade of the seventies: Wilhelm Ritz's *Savings bank chair*. Banco Herrero's branch office, Raimundo Fernández Villaverde Street, Madrid (c.1967). The image belongs to Menéndez Hevia's personal archive.

Menéndez Hevia provided the banking system with a fresh and accessible image. *Sintex* was part of his design's discourse, as his philosophy went against that of the traditional furniture, except in a few cases.³² He considered, rightly, that there was no need at that moment to legitimize an expensive and elitist design. Following a coherent stylistic line he brought positions closer to the European modernity design trend, especially in interior decoration, that have always been underpinned by the idea that functionality and design quality are the matters. Nevertheless, Menéndez Hevia abandoned permanently the contemporary interior linked to the idea of cold design that was characteristic, also in Spain, at the beginning of technological progress on consumption side and construction boom. The functional furniture was not incompatible with a warm setting within interior design, but for him it should be combined with a friendly environment in order to create a sense of comfort and intimacy.³³ Furniture was the element that generated a sense of order, unifying the space through a system of use-control. He discovered that furniture to make a distinction between customer and employee, eliminating communication barriers and the feeling of intimidation.

Interior design settled in Spain by Menéndez Hevia revolutionized the banking scene. Through design related to banking sphere and linked to *Sintex*, Menéndez Hevia also added some concepts to furniture design taken from *Hay* system,³⁴ not very well known in Spain out of the banking sphere and whose implementation pioneered Banco Herrero. *Hay* system contributed to improve the working conditions, helping to make better use of the workforce. Its motto was summarized in the phrase: “A job for a person and a person for a job”. We are in a position to say exactly that with *Sintex*, Menéndez Hevia took a further step in the search for solutions that rallied to the concept of comfort within interior design, solving at the same time the emotional aspects that have an impact on productivity at work.



Fig. 6. *Sintex* desk and *Sintex* storage systems set in the wall. Banco Herrero's branch office, Bilbao, País Vasco (c.1973). The image belongs to Menéndez Hevia's personal archive

The first place furnished with *Sintex* was Banco de Alicante, in 1966. The bank belonged to Cole Steel's Spanish group of investors, thus opening the way for this furniture piece that has been systematically introduced in the private banking sector of our country³⁵ ever since. In addition, *Sintex* was exported mainly to Italy, and also to Kuwait and France, but to a lesser extent. Cole Steel was not interested in selling abroad because it already had enough orders on a national level. This is particularly relevant when considering the level of

productivity. At some point the series was exported to America,³⁶ but even though Litton had the rights required to reproduce *Sintex* designs in EE.UU, as an indication of the American taste in terms of office furniture, the idea was rejected, claiming that it was too modern and lacking robustness.³⁷ The reasons why *Sintex* was not exported on a massive scale rely on other aspects related to certain disinterest and the peripheral condition of our country at that time.

The Italian distributors did not have a special interest in commercializing foreign furniture, however Italy was a potential market. It was a purely esthetic matter, because *Sintex* furniture was light and had avant-garde look, perhaps closer to the preferences of Italian customer. However, *Sintex* had many qualities that made it a unique piece, because the metallic furniture from the sixties was big and heavy as we see, for instance, in other models like those manufactured by Stratford or Fichet. Carlos Villasuso, who was once Cole Steel's commercial director, explained how *Sintex* was welcomed in Italy: "Italy was immersed in a favorable situation; there was a sufficient demand of this kind of metallic office furniture while they were interested in placing some of their articles into our market."³⁸ *Sintex* was brought into the Italian market through an exchange of *H* office furniture collection. The series *H* was very simple, made completely of wood and commercialized mainly in black and white. Compared to *Sintex* this Italian series was less versatile, but some models had wheels. *Sintex* subsequently came to include wheels as well in elements as side furniture; as we may see at the drawer mobile file cabinet or the cart for architect's blueprints.



Fig. 7. *H* series, Cole Steel's furniture catalogue, 1970.

At a certain point, Kuwait's investors made a good offer. Carlos Villasuso travelled to the Spanish capital with the mediation of a furniture firm in to negotiate the initial export of *Sintex*,³⁹ he even travelled to Kuwait in 1968, but negotiations broke down when they realized that the real intention was to obtain the patent. There was a new attempt just a few months later, when they visited Asturias interested in contacting Menéndez Hevia, who had recently opened a furniture shop called Diher Mobiliario. Cole Steel was making excellent profits of *Sintex* so they couldn't afford to lose the licensing of design. Negotiations were concluded with a timely export.

Sintex furniture had a lightweight appearance but was strong enough to support the heavy office machinery. At that time the piece of furniture required a lot of space in order to accommodate typewriters and other heavy objects such as validating machines at banks. Even the traditional telephone made of bakelite took up a lot of room on desktops. *Sintex* emerged in the heat of the moment of the banking mechanization, and also had to adapt its tools. Nowadays, the design of office furniture must include elements which do not require much working surface.

Menéndez Hevia's designs were able to break into the market and come across strongly over time, taking the opportunity to cover an existing hole in the office interior design. *Sintex* was the best option to furnish offices and was chosen by many designers due to its many qualities, but the greatest consumer of *Sintex* was Menéndez Hevia himself. At that time, and taking into account the amount of private banking entities that hired him to build and design their offices, he was probably buying around fifty percent of the entire *Sintex* production.



Fig. 8. Banco Herrero's branch office, Pola de Siero, Asturias (c. 1975). *Sintex* double pedestal desk with additional drawer mobile file cabinet. The latter was used as an extra storage device. The carts could be hung with the same system as the additional return table. The solution was not new at all in this case, because it was also possible to find a similar system in Olivetti's office furniture. The image belongs to Menéndez Hevia's personal archive.

Sintex solved many of the issues that arose in banking interior design. The furnishing of bank branch offices was subject to the limitation of available space, which was partly occupied by fixed installations. *Sintex*, as multipurpose furniture, was able to be adapted without compromising the quality of design, but many substantial needs were continuously emerging within the banking interior design forcing Menéndez Hevia to produce some of the series elements on the go. The boom on banking sector and the need of a complete reform during decades of Spanish modernization made of *Sintex* the only furniture specifically designed to meet such demand. Something similar happened with Wilkhahn, a company specialized in office furniture, which found a gold mine on the banking sector.

Menéndez Hevia's series had a wide range of elements, unlike other European options, about twenty possible combinations. Some of the products included in *Sintex* were the shelves with filing cabinets, the desk (including versions like the desk with additional return table or desk pedestals placed at different positions), a kind of credenzas without bases that seem to be floating, or the small cart for architect's blueprints. The top-selling was the desk with additional return table, which was ideal for placing typewriters.⁴⁰ This model made it possible to assemble the desks forming a row or at an angle, which optimized all the available space. In that way it was possible to have more working places in the offices for less money. With this simple implementation, Menéndez Hevia was able to offer a wide range of costs, which implied a great demand of his products. However, this concept of "mecano" was absolutely unknown in the world of Spanish office furniture, where there had not been an optimization of mass production design in order to reduce the cost. Menéndez Hevia's assembling system made *Sintex* unique in the panorama of Spanish design, and was also highly appreciated because the set included things such as glass panels (opaque or transparent, even soundproof) used to enclose different areas within wide open offices. This glass panel was often used to demarcate areas inside bank branch offices, helping to separate the usual customer services from others that needed certain intimacy like the area for credits.

We must take into account that in the world of Spanish interior design it was quite difficult to find standard products, so it was necessary to find creative solutions specially conceived for interior spaces. Taking as a reference the decade of the sixties and the role of *Sintex* in the interior design, we might get a glimpse of the advent of modern times in Spain, when the criteria of many institutions started to change, giving for the first time an image of openness and customer proximity.

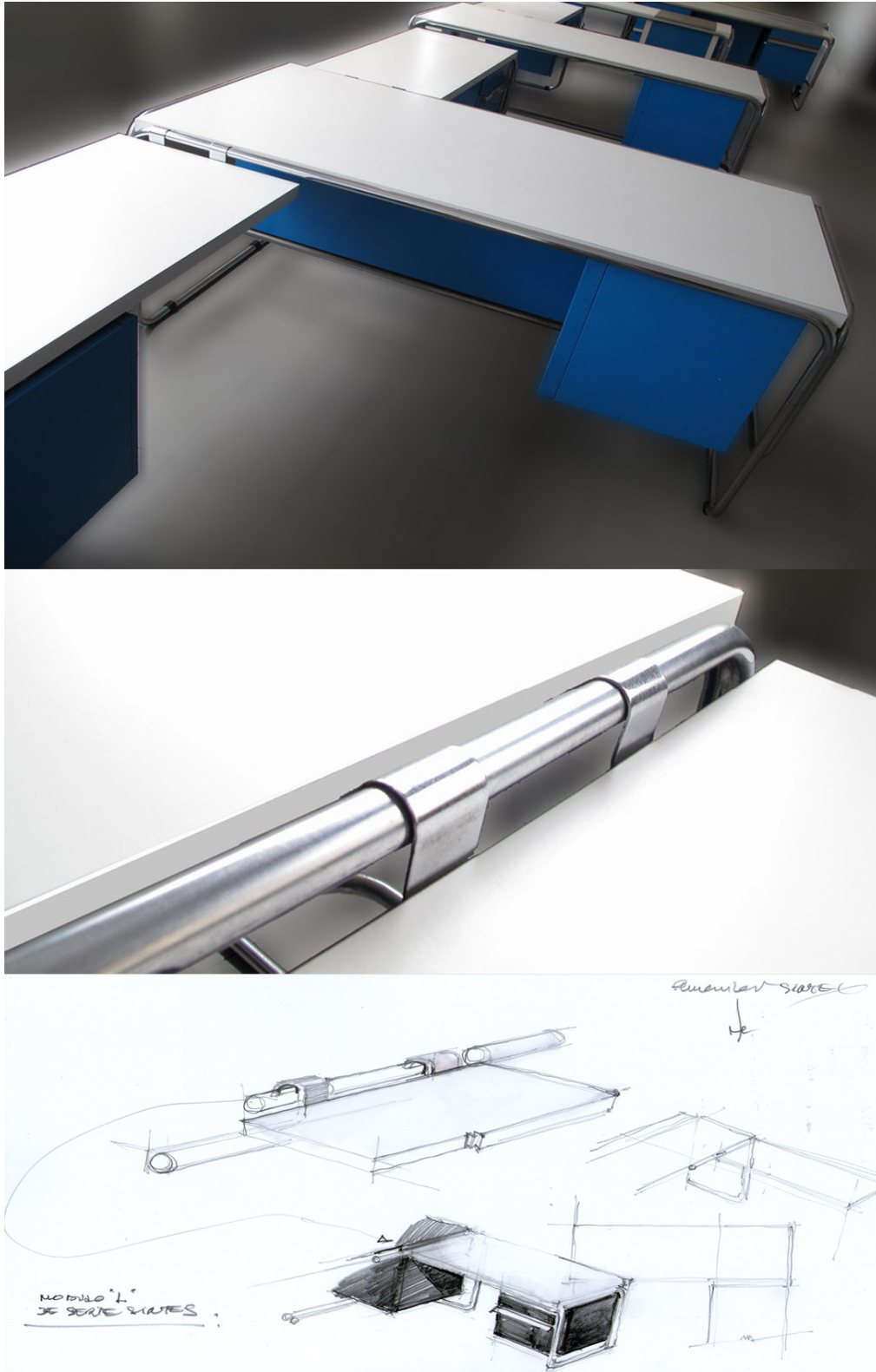


Fig. 9. Picture on top shows an example of the desk with additional return table. *Sintex* desks are put together in a row in order to save space. The person that was in charge of the section had an individual desk, showing the importance of hierarchies inside working areas. Menéndez Hevia thought about this possibility from the very beginning. The picture below shows in detail the assembling system, completed by the sketch on the right. The images belong to Menéndez Hevia's personal archive and the photographs were taken at industrial building owned by Alfredo Escandón (21st, May, 2013).

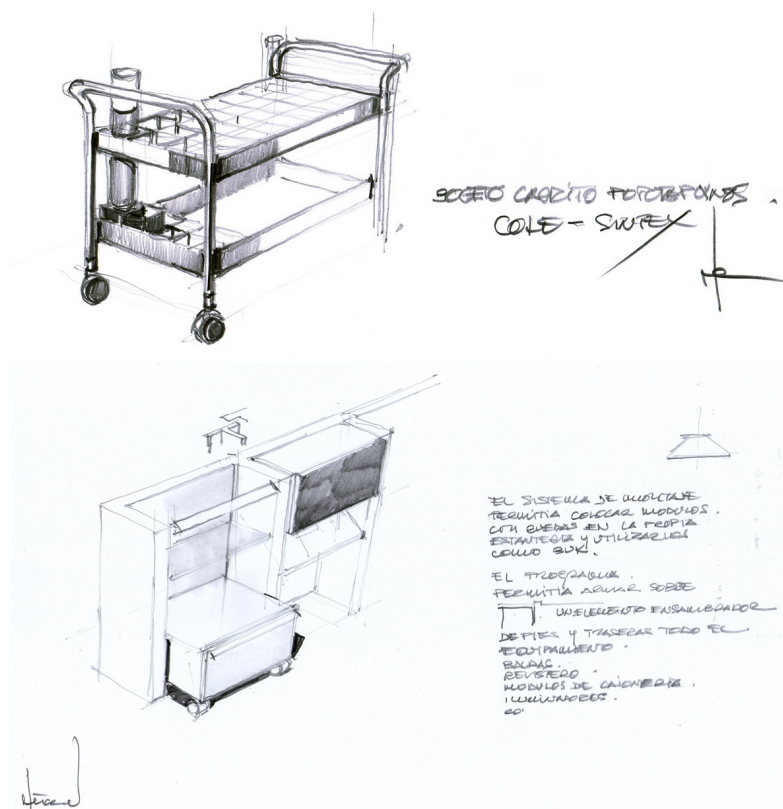


Fig. 10. Picture on top shows the cart designed for architect's blueprints. Picture below shows different *Sintex* shelves designed to be combined with additional storage devices. The designs belong to Menéndez Hevia's personal archive.



Fig. 11. *Sintex* glass panel at Banco Herrero's branch office, Bilbao, País Vasco (c.1973). The glass panel could be turned around and combined using only one pedestal. The image belongs to Menéndez Hevia's personal archive.

The original series had many items, but it was not possible to manufacture all of them. This was what happened to the boardroom table and the desk, specially designed for architects. There were practical limitations on production, so in order to be able to diversify the product they had to outsource many services to other industries. For example, to manufacture some ceramic accessories such as the pen stand, ashtray and tray for clips, they were forced to hire the services of earthenware factory of San Claudio.⁴¹ Even if these objects were only accessories of a main series of furniture, it was a success as products were sold individually. Some design pieces as the ashtray played a fundamental role in the history of the Spanish interior design, at that time smoking was not forbidden, neither to customers nor to employees.

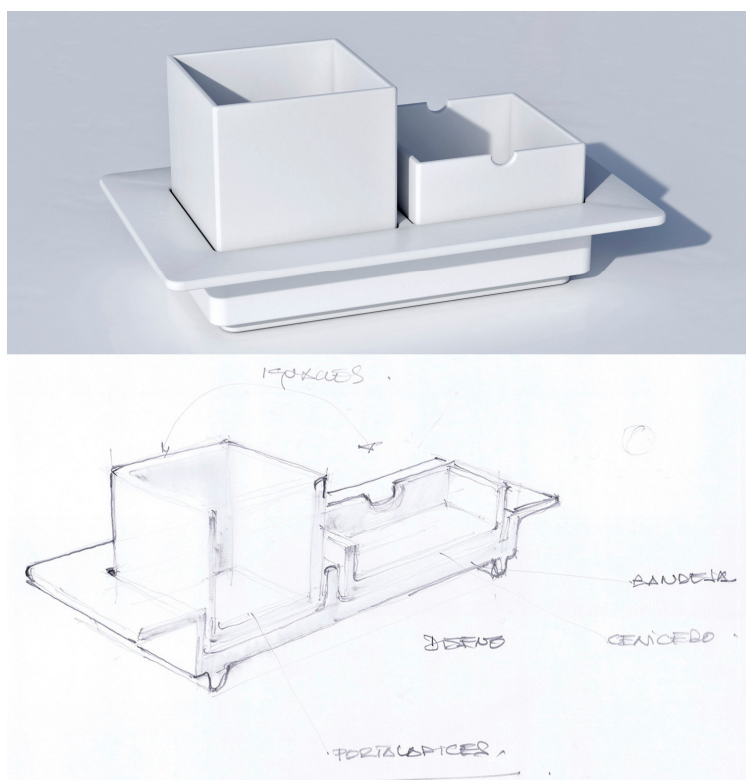


Fig. 12. A ceramic design of *Sintex* and a cross-section sketch. The images belong to Menéndez Hevia's personal archive.

Banco Herrero's branch office of Cuzco (c.1968), in Madrid, had a complete set of *Sintex*, and was even possible to see the rare option of credenzas without bases. Those storage unities were attached to the walls by electromagnets, a technology borrowed from the rail industry. The solution emphasized the feeling of an open line of sight, contributing also to the sensation of lightness. This sort of credenza was essential to store paper. It should be taken into account that back then, banks generated a considerable amount of paper and it was not possible to introduce common filing cabinets. The design of the shelves also had a practical reason, because it was easier to clean.

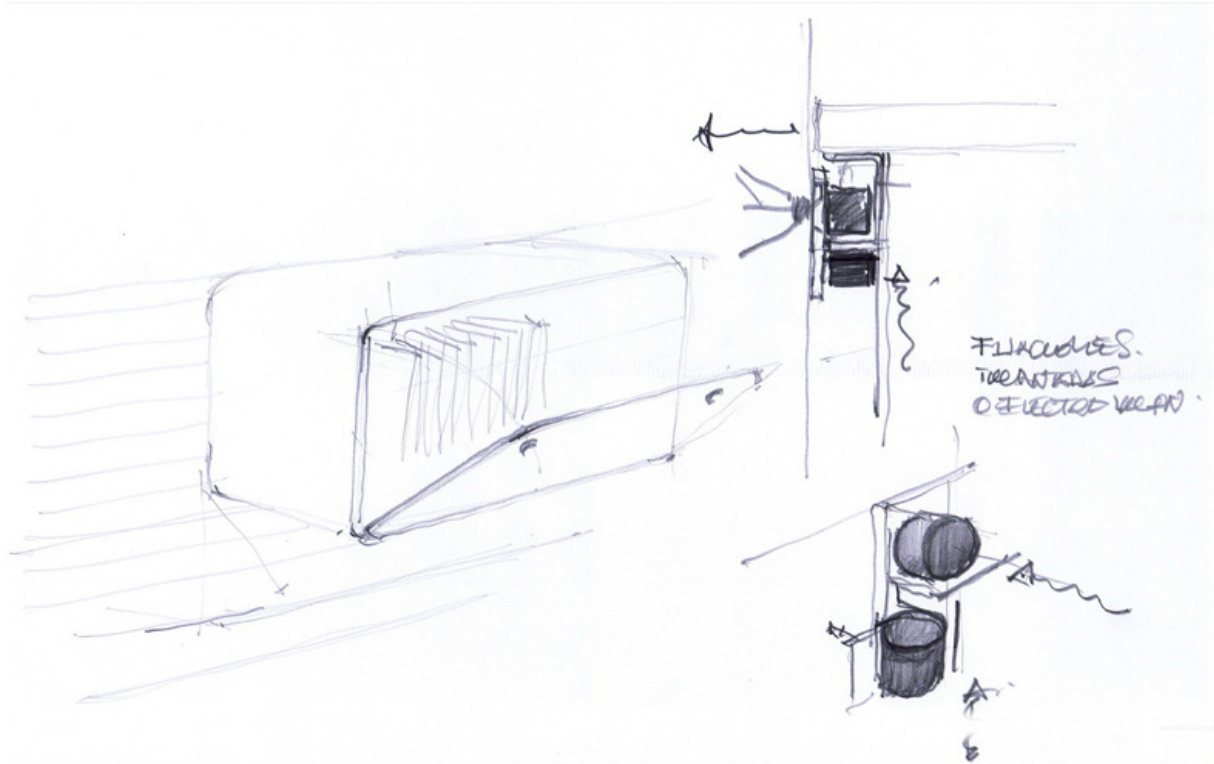


Fig. 13. The lower picture shows an example of *Sintex* credenzas at Banco Herrero's branch office of Cuzco, Madrid (c.1968). The picture on top is an explanatory sketch of electromagnet's system that made possible to fasten the credenzas to the wall. The images belong to Menéndez Hevia's personal archive.

The aesthetic profile of this work can only be related to modernity, an intellectual perspective linked to the historical avant-garde. But not always modernity was a clear inspiration for the interior design in our country. *Sintex* achieved its goal, exceeding the expectations, due to its neutral appearance. *Sintex's* success lays on the combination of Menéndez Hevia's know-how of consumption psychology.

As a design, *Sintex* furniture has been quite unnoticed, even though it sold more units than some of the most famous Spanish designs. Menéndez Hevia was not interested in exporting his designs as he was busy trying to cover with his specialized construction company the private banking sector. In terms of absolute numbers, he probably made more works than any other designer at that time. He never appeared to be worried about not having an international impact, even though he always wanted a better destiny to his creations. He worked hard to change the attitude of disregard of the industrial Spanish sphere towards design and he always made an effort to educate progressively the society's taste, reaching out different population groups through his commercial and public interiors.

The works by Menéndez Hevia were respected at that time, and many architects, engineers and builders were interested not only in the final result of his work, but also in the process. This might indicate the interest his works awoke in many, especially at professional level, reason why his working procedure soon started to be imitated. It is important to highlight that *Sintex* was original not only aesthetically, but also because of Menéndez Hevia's capacity to understand the product. *Sintex* was, in a way, the result of a craftsman's spirit, with all the care and precision, combined with a highly industrial approach.

NOTAS

¹ PUENTE TORAÑO, Aida, "José Antonio Menéndez Hevia: designer, interior architect and specialized constructor", *Decoración de interiores. Firmas, casas comerciales y diseño en Asturias 1880-1990*, Oviedo, Septem, 2011, pp.173-217.

² Furniture & decorative object's Market in Spain. Since the disentanglements to the democratic transition (MICINN-10-HAR2010-20397-C02-01) is a project coordinated by two independent groups related to different geographical areas (University of Oviedo and University of Málaga).

³ He designed and built banks, museums, art galleries, housing, offices, clinics, hotels, cafes, patisseries and tea rooms, pubs, discos, shopping centers and all kind of shops, even street furniture.

⁴ Menéndez Hevia and his working team were in charge of choosing the location, license processing, designing, building and furnishing, once work was done, they were also in charge of the maintenance of the interior.

⁵ John Ryan Company, Inc. is a construction company with specialty divisions in general contracting, to further information <http://www.johnryanco.com/>.

⁶ The award was called *Mogar 5x5*.

⁷ The documentation was taken from the dossier of the prize *Mogar 5x5* (1989). The event was organized by the magazine *On Diseño*. The magazine was founded in 1978, promoted by a group of professionals of independent views who were completely disassociated from the pressure groups that are so commonly found both in publishing and architecture's field. Their purpose was to fill this country's existing void in this kind of publications related to design. To further information: <http://www.ondiseno.com/>.

⁸ The first time he used this system was in the branch office of Banco Herrero located at Raimundo Villaverde Street, Madrid, 1967.

⁹ Ornalux was a Spanish lighting company which designs and manufactures its products entirely in Spain. Menéndez Hevia had designed for Ornalux a surface lighting family called *Lot*.

¹⁰ The period named as "Spanish modernization" goes from 1960's to 1990's decade.

¹¹ Cole-Steel Equipment Company had been selling typewriters since fifties. During 1960's Cole merged with Litton Industries. Litton Industries was a North American corporation with multiple divisions. Litton's division destined to manufacture furniture was called Litton-Cole, remaining Cole Steel de España S.A. as a commercial name for it.

¹² Carlos Villasuso, Wednesday, April 3rd, 2013.

¹³ The catalogue showing the products of Cole Steel is placed at the main Asturian Library as a part of an unorganized archive. Even though the information provided is not complete, it is possible to figure the variety of objects that had been manufactured. The catalogues were edited by Gráficas Summa in Oviedo, during 1970 y 1971.

¹⁴ Carlos Villasuso, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ "Inauguración de la fábrica de la Cole Steel en Llanera", *La Nueva España*, Oviedo, Tuesday, May 10th, 1966, pp. 7, 8 and front page.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ The growth centers in Spain were part of a National Economic Planning during 1964 to 1975. The policy gave every kind of benefits to install foreign enterprises in depressed areas of Spain.

¹⁸ Eduardo Diz Mateo was the Colonel at Trubia Armaments Factory.

¹⁹ The Bank of Langreo was founded in 1964. To further information: GARCIA RUIZ, Jose Luis and WAY, Carles, *Business History of Spain.: A regional approach in depth*, Madrid, Editorial Lid, 2006, p. 272.

²⁰ Other Spanish brands had also commercialized Hevia's design furniture such as Martínez Medina and González del Rey. They had never labeled any product with the name of the Asturian designer. José Antonio Menéndez Hevia, Friday, September 28th, 2012.

²¹ Carlos Villasuso, *op. cit.*

²² José Antonio Menéndez Hevia, Friday, March 15th, 2013.

²³ The production from that moment on was kept fully in Spanish hands.

²⁴ "Inauguración de la fábrica de la Cole Steel en Llanera", *op. cit.*

²⁵ Milan, Paris, Colonia, Antwerp or Copenhagen as well as famous commercial sites for furniture like Portobello in London, Montenapoleone in Milan, Rue Capucine in Paris or the center of Madrid city with furniture stores such as Muebles H, Darro, Casa & Jardín, Mobilia, Milán Muebles o Martinez Medina.

²⁶ He shared the same sources for design inspiration with the Spanish architects.

²⁷ Specifically, *Sintex* reminds to the model *S 285* (1935). But while the inspiration in Breuer's model can be seen in the structure made of chromed tubes, *Sintex* had many characteristics that help to differentiate it from other European furniture of that kind.

²⁸ Cole Steel furniture ad, *ABC*, Madrid, Tuesday, April 23rd, 1968, p. 94.

²⁹ Teresa Menéndez Hevia, Tuesday, August 23rd, 2011. Teresa is Menéndez Hevia's sister; she was on charge of the customer service of Bureau70, located in Marqués de Teverga Street, Oviedo.

³⁰ In Cole's furniture advertising the slogan says: "Who is the best salesman in my company? It is easy to answer ... Cole." *ABC*, *op. cit.* The banks were interested in this commercial strategy. They were trying to get more customers and during the period that we are considering for this article they were involved in the phenomenon of credits.

³¹ An office interior design concept that had its origin in the American business context.

³² At the headquarters of Banco Herrero in Madrid he had to make clear Herrero's family tradition. The evidence of tradition in the main buildings of the private banks in Spain was very common until the 21st century.

³³ The intimacy is a very important concept to understand the new dimension that Menéndez Hevia introduces within commercial interior design.

³⁴ The *hay* system was created during the middle fifties by Edward Hay. To further information: "Guide Chart

Profile Method of Job Evaluation”, www.haygroup.com, Friday, November 16th, 2012.

³⁵ José Antonio Menéndez Hevia had mainly worked for private banking sector, becoming one of the most successful interior designers in our country. He worked in designing and building for the banking sector since the mid-sixties to beginning of nineties. During that period the Spanish private banking sector was upgrading their bank branch offices.

³⁶ The company that Urbano Monasterio owned, a Spanish businessman established in Orlando, had furnished his offices with *Sintex*. This shows how *Sintex* could have had any kind of commercialization in America.

³⁷ Carlos Villasuso, *op. cit.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ The authorized distributor for Cole Steel Furniture in Madrid was Casaguillamet and Bureautechnik, *Abc*, Madrid, Tuesday, May 7th, 1978, p. 66. In Barcelona exclusive distributor was Menriver, *La Vanguardia Española*, Barcelona, Tuesday, October 6th, 1970, p. 20.

⁴⁰ Carlos Villasuso, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ The earthenware factory of San Claudio was established in 1901 (closed at 2003). The product was based on fine English pottery with mainly domestic use.

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