

Luxury, Tradition and Modernity: Nordic influences in Loewe stores

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Abstract

The paper addresses Loewe's image renewal based on the modernization of tradition as a luxury strategy, through the analysis of one commercial space designed by Carvajal: the Loewe Serrano Street store. Carvajal fused traditional craftsmanship with new modern forms referencing the work of architects and designers from northern Europe. This research shows the Nordic influences in this project through the study of three technical aspects: form-space, materials and design.

These issues have been analyzed by comparing the work of Carvajal with the work of architects and designers such as Alvar Aalto Nordic, Arne Jacobsen, Hans Wegner or Gunnar Asplund. Numerous similarities have been found such as curved spaces, the use of wood, similar forms applied to different designs... These common parameters show the real influence between Nordic architecture and Loewe spaces.

In addition, the consultation of the personal archive of the architect Javier Carvajal, as well as, the bibliographical sources of that moment —Spanish magazines *Nueva forma*, *Arquitectura* and *Hogar y arquitectura*— and other specific references of the research field —exhibition catalogs and monographies— is conducted. By doing so, this paper demonstrates how merging tradition with modern forms provided an image of exclusivity, luxury and innovation to Loewe, something the brand is recovering today.

Keywords

Loewe, tradition, modernity, nordic design, Javier Carvajal

Article Classification

Research paper

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1. Introduction

From the mid-1950s and due to the incorporation of Spain into the UN, the country began an invigorating period of growing foreign affairs. During these years there was a current of modernization in architectural forms, which allowed a renewal, at the same time and in parallel, to the country's image. It was a time of professional encounters from different fields that, supported by Spanish official institutions, positioned towards a new design and a new architecture that was able to compete with foreign creations. The exterior expansion marked the resounding success of Spanish artists outside the border. Architects, sculptors, painters, filmmakers and designers, after years of isolation, managed to join the discussions that had taken place in Europe after World War II (Martín, and Chocarro, 2007).

These years evidenced collaborations between professionals and Spanish companies seeking to renew their products and eager to embrace the new aesthetic and conceptual trends coming from abroad. Resulting from this framework, the first institution of Spanish design, the SEDIⁱ (Sociedad sobre Estudios del Diseño Industrial - Society for Industrial Design Studies), in an effort to outrun the irremediable crisis arising after the Civil War, was created in 1957. It was then, when the regime initiated its openness to international economic growth and with it the drive for modernization aesthetics in order to offer a new image of the countryⁱⁱ. This association was propelled by architects Carlos de Miguel, Luis Feduchi and Javier Carvajal, with the collaboration of manufacturing companies such as Loewe, Darro or Plata Menesesⁱⁱⁱ.

Supportive of the opening to foreign trade, the government began to encourage the participation of domestic products in foreign exhibitions, including the prestigious Milan Triennial^{iv}. From its origins in Monza in 1923 (Palazzo dell'Arte moving to Milan in 1933), the Triennials were mainly aimed to mark the imposition of the postulates of artistic and constructive renewal of what was at that time, so vaguely and hazily called "modern art". The Spanish proposals submitted to the three Triennials of the 50's obtained awards in one of their sections. In 1951 and 1954, installations by the architects José Antonio Coderch and Mo.Ga.Mo group led by Ramon Vazquez Molezún, picked up the Grand Prix (Villanueva, 2010).

Javier Carvajal and José María García de Paredes were appointed the conception of the Spanish pavilion in 1957. The architects represented an intrinsically Spanish installation inspired by the bullfighting arena. To achieve this endeavor Garcia de Paredes and Carvajal began collaboration with other professionals and businesses, including Loewe. The brand presented several leather and fur products for which they were awarded the Silver Medal, a series of black and white suitcases and briefcases^v.



Overview of Spanish Pavilion in the XI Milan Triennial. ABC. December 24, 1957.

In both the Spanish Pavilion for the XI Triennial and in the SEDI, Carvajal and Loewe demonstrated a desire for Spain's image renewal and for the adaptation to the proclaimed modernity. This collaboration was part of the set of relationships initiated in 1957 by Enrique Loewe Knapper and Javier Carvajal that, like other professionals and commercial houses, joined forces in order to change the image of their businesses, as well as their country's. Enrique Loewe allying with Carvajal revealed an interest in modernizing the company profile, giving their products a qualitative treatment that went beyond the derived of the object itself.

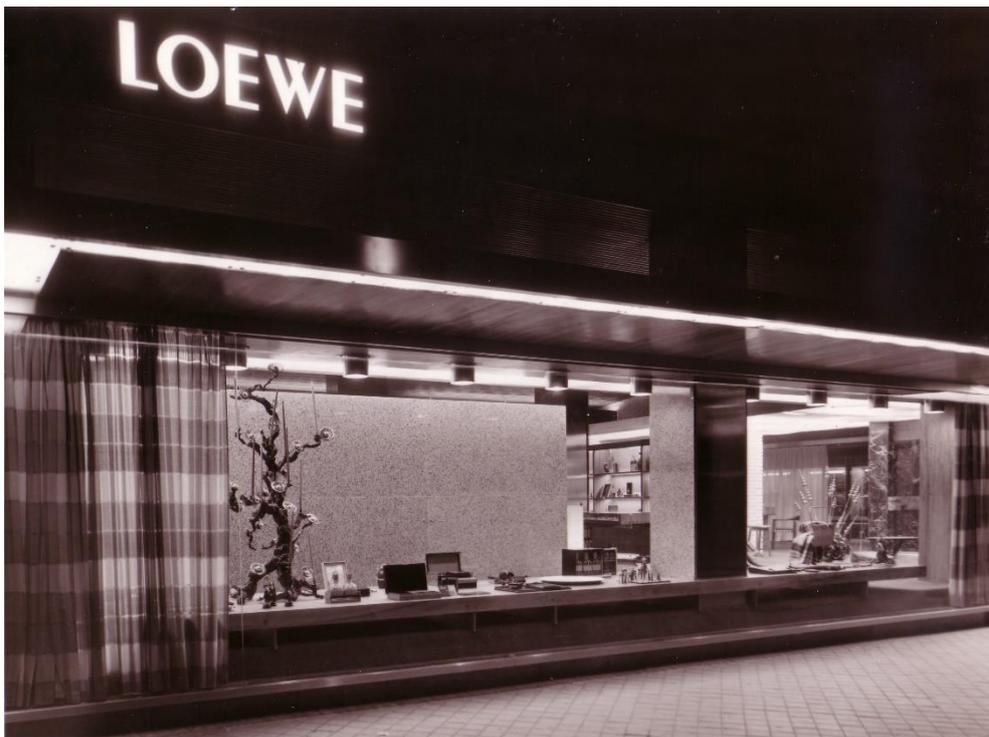
Furthermore, in order to differentiate themselves from other foreign companies that were part of the competition, Loewe needed to create a modern brand that kept its prestige and exclusivity keeping its association with Spanish connotations. In this context of transformation, the architect Javier Carvajal was able to comprehend what Loewe sought and gave the company a change through the design and renovation of stores, in accordance to the brand's new product.

Carvajal understood the value that craftsmanship had for the brand so he envisioned a combination of the artisan tradition of Loewe with new modern forms from abroad. To achieve this modernity, the architect took as a reference the work of architects and designers such as Alvar Aalto Nordic,

Arne Jacobsen, Hans Wegner or Gunnar Asplund. By doing this, the architect managed to associate the signature image of luxury and exclusivity through a 'modernized tradition'. Interestingly, Jonathan Anderson, Loewe's current creative director, has proposed a review of the firm, based on that carried out in the 50s, which retrieves the aesthetics of the Carvajal stores and, consequently, the Nordic influence.

After a thorough analysis of the articles in architectural magazines of the time, it can be confirmed that in the 1950s, the relations of the Spanish architects with the Finnish school were increasingly close. A year later Alvar Aalto, architect and furniture designer, gave lectures in Madrid and Barcelona. In 1960, Carlos de Miguel's magazine devoted a special issue to Aalto^{vi}. In addition, articles on architecture held in northern Europe starred many of the pages of magazines, inspiring other important architects of the time, as JACoderch or J.Carvajal himself, who referred to these sources, as can be confirmed in his archive and in the literature addressing his career (Anton, 2015).

However, not only personal documents of the architect indicate the influence Nordic architecture had on him, moreover his works designed for Loewe witness and evidence this inspiration, which enabled the firm's modernization that endures to this day. To carry out this study, an analysis of one of the projects undertaken by the architect for the firm was conducted: the Serrano shop. The selection of this architectural piece as an element of analysis is due to its prototypical character as it contains all the features applicable to other stores designed from 1959-1964 by Carvajal.



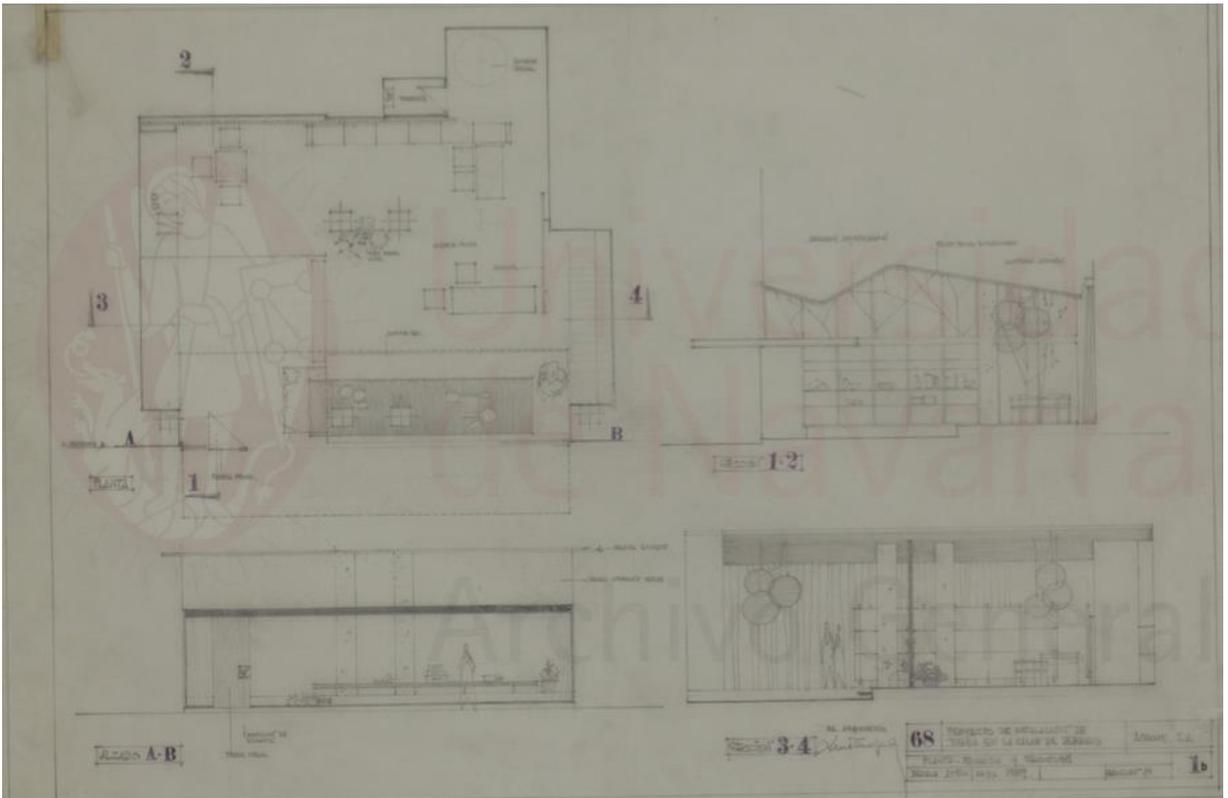
Window display Serrano store, Architect Javier Carvajal. 1960.

The present analysis is carried out through three aspects, form, material and design, common to many of his works designed for Loewe, and whose study illustrates the Nordic influence on these projects. The study aims to evidence how tradition merged with modern forms provided an image of exclusivity, luxury and innovation to Loewe that is currently being recovered.

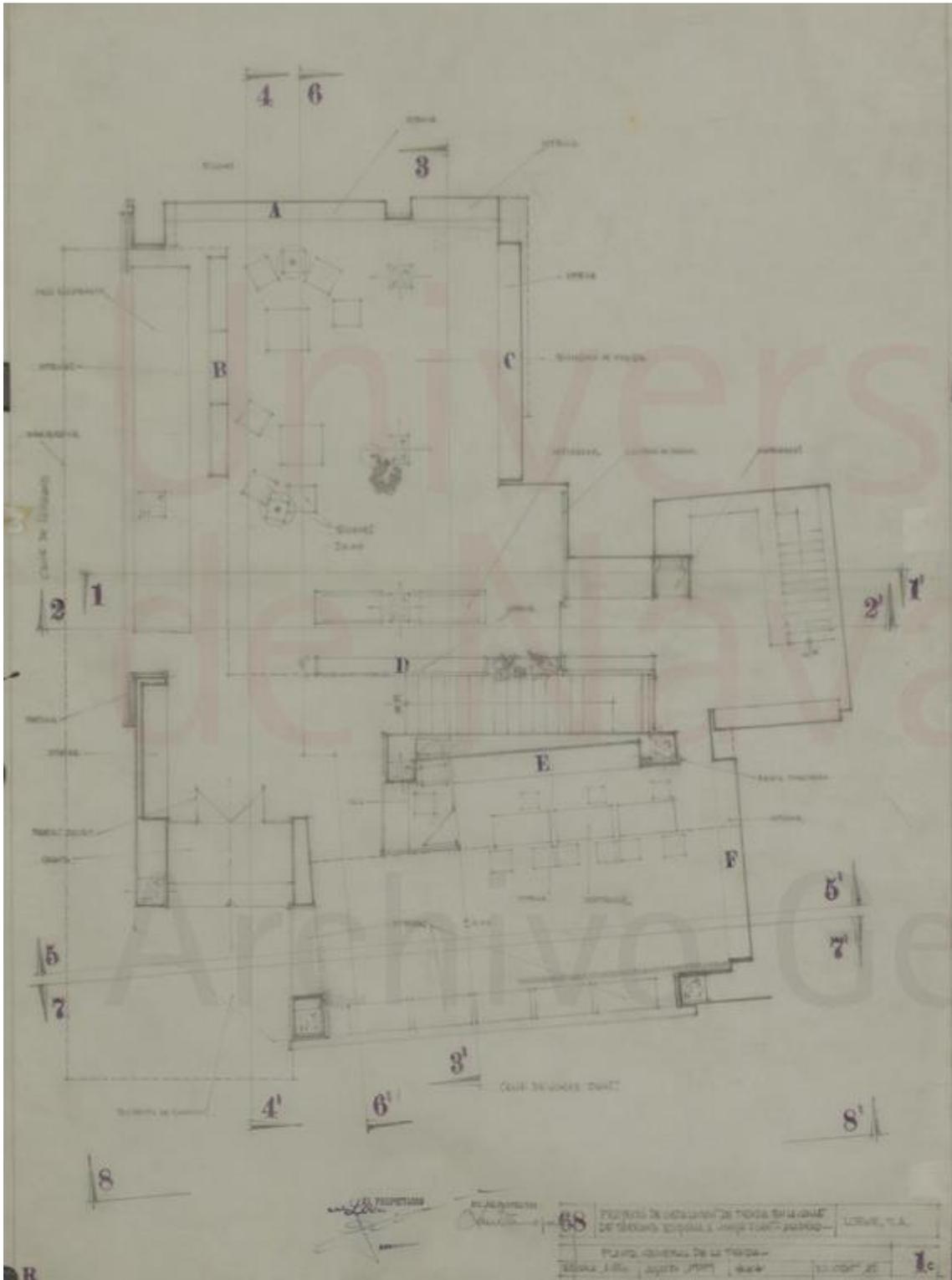
Form- space

Looking back at the project's evolution through the successive floor proposals designed by the architect for the Serrano shop results enlightening. The first plans are preserved in the archives of the School of Architecture of the University of Navarra dated May 1959. The development process goes from that date ending on August 1959 with the final version. On the first proposal he developed the initial sketches of the project. The floor had certain restrictions; it was a leased space from the Sudamérica at number 26 Serrano Street. For the interior design the architect had to adapt to the structure, the perimeter and the existing volumes for the refurbishment of the premises.

The sketches suffered several changes until the final draft was achieved. The first simplified design version of -May 1959-, indicates Carvajal was not using all the existing space between Serrano Street and Jorge Juan corner. He used up a small surface consisting of two perpendicular guidelines, leaving the adjacent room that would corner with Jorge Juan free. However, the plans dating from August 1959 incorporate the Jorge Juan corner as part of the project. The plant was changed uniting two separate plots of the he streets, occupying a larger area and designing the premises that would be created. The result was a geometrically complex floor plan that Carvajal was able to draw thanks to his graphic talent, and the plastic universe that he had acquired through the observation and study of other works such as those from northern Europe.



Sketch of the future Loewe shop at Sudamérica's leased space, Architect Javier Carvajal. May 1959. Source: University of Navarra General Archive . Signature: AGUN/207/Proyecto 68



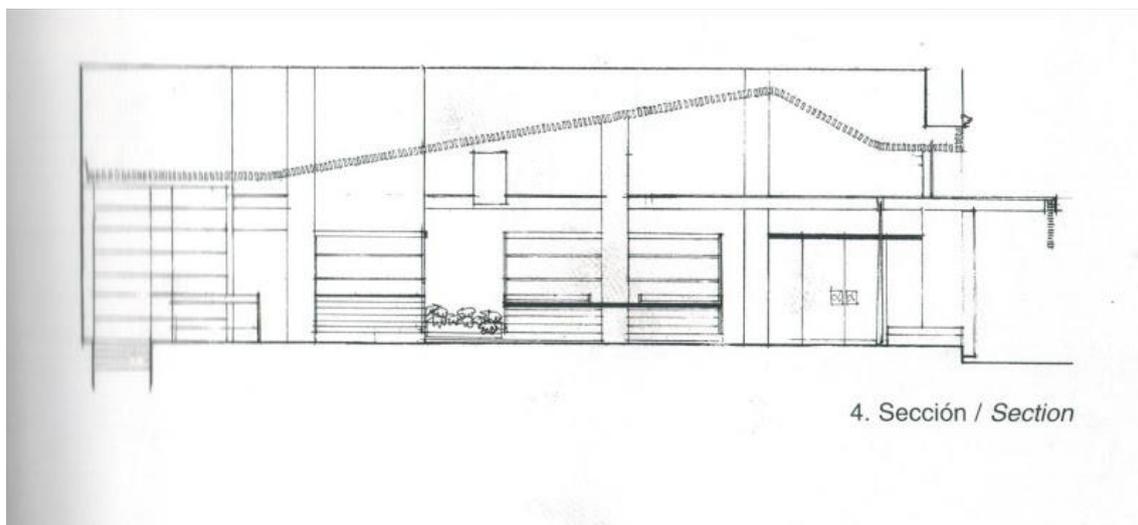
Loewe shop floor sketch, Serrano Street corner with Jorge Juan Street, Architect Javier Carvajal. August 1959. Source: University of Navarra General Archive. Signature: AGUN/207/Proyecto 68

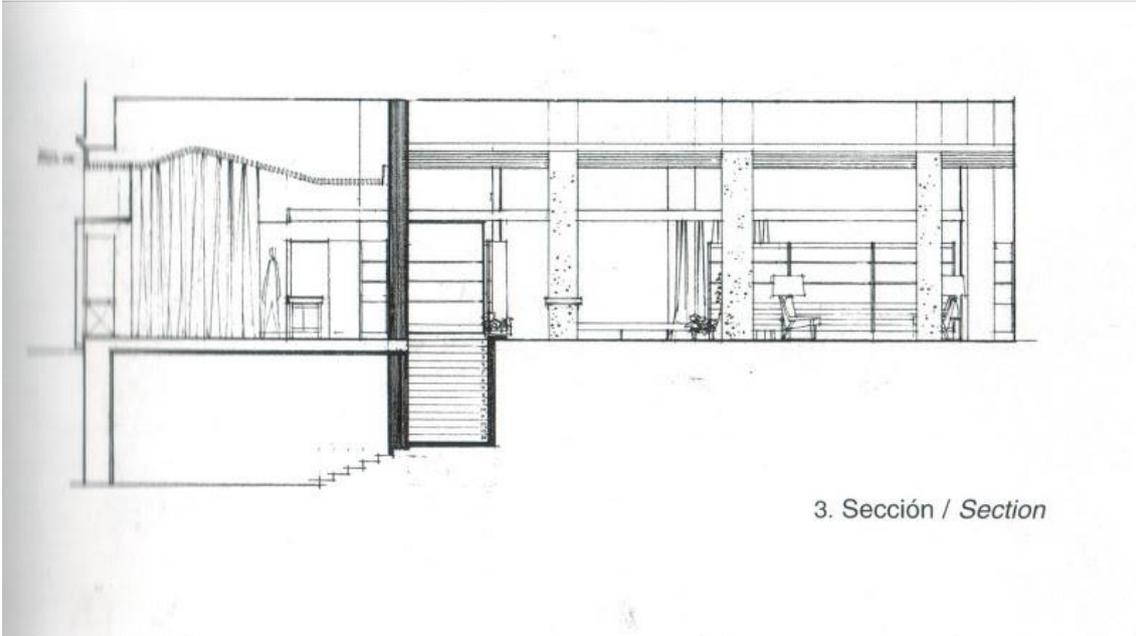
Carvajal designed a shop that not only completely changed the firm's store concept but the stereotype of luxury goods establishments as well. A totally unique space compared to those

created by his predecessor, Ferrer Bartolomé. It is remarkable to observe from his earliest sketches the Nordic architecture influence in what relates to space design. This establishment, of Scandinavian influence (Losada, 2012), was characterized by a rigorous order, in plan and section.

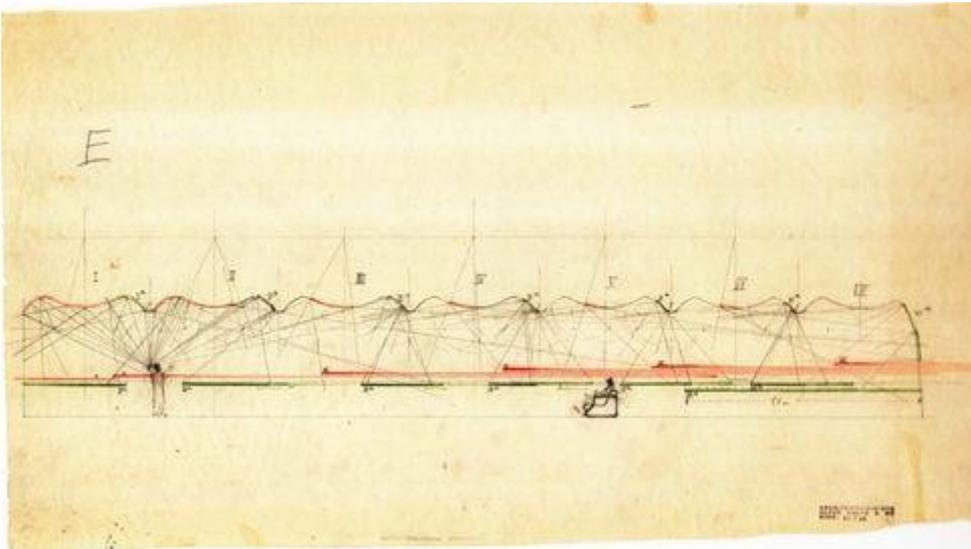
The architecture of the stores that are designed by the architect should respond, as stated by Vitruvius, to the function (must address the need and even provide comfort) and firmness (proper construction, a sturdy structure and other factors that ensure its preservation or durability) (Vitruvius, 1995), creating a space with a rigorous and disciplined order, implemented significantly from the plant and the section. But it is specifically through this view, from the section, in which the Scandinavian presence is palpable in the whole store, not only in space design, but in materials and furniture as well (Losada, 2012), as can be seen in the following sections.

The section, thus, becomes one of the indicators that establish a formal connection with Nordic architecture, specifically with Alvar Aalto. The uniqueness of sculptural form of the Serrano shop evokes a remembrance of the Viipuri Municipal Library project. Viipuri's fundamental and characteristic element is the undulating acoustic ceiling of its conference room (AAVV, 1948). Formed by wooden slats, this element's function was to allow good sound transmission to all points of the long room. Interestingly, a similar roof design was made by Carvajal, as can be seen in the section.





Serrano Street store sections, designed by Carvajal in 1959.



Viipuri Library sections by Alvar Aalto, built from 1927-1935.



A photograph of the Viipuri Library's Conference Room by Alvar Aalto, built from 1927-1935.

In Carvajal's words: "The influencing factors in the space value of architecture are the light and shadow layout, color, and even our own expectations determined by the space we just left" (AA.VV., 1960).

Consequently, in Carvajal's draft both the natural and artificial lighting of its stores was considered essential. While the artificial lighting in the Serrano shop was intended as light baths flowing through the walls, as in the Barcelona showroom, Carvajal once again turned to Aalto's Viipuri design. The interior of the loan and reading area designed by the Finnish architect, contains one of the most characteristic elements of the work: the circular skylights repeatedly arranged on the two roof planes, creating glare-free lighting at all reading points. Carvajal reproduces this technique in Barcelona, albeit with alterations. The architect creates through this illumination of larger diameter than the Viipuri skylights, more intimate spaces for purchase, enclosed by curtains, which equip the large exhibition space with great clarity through compound lighting cylinders composed of light and textile. Jacobsen also uses the same type of lights in the SAS Royal Hotel (Jacobsen, 2010).



Photograph of the Barcelona Showroom designed by Javier Carvajal.



Photograph of the Viipuri reading room by Alvar Aalto.

On the other hand, Carvajal develops a strategy to extend the Serrano shop space outward adopting inspiration from other international works, including those of Nordic style. As Ferrer Bartolomé, Carvajal gave particular importance to window displays, confiding on the integration between outer and interior space, and the establishment of connections with potential customers. This element had already gained prominence in previous Loewe stores, thanks to the design of José Pérez de Rozas (Bartolomé, 1940-1941). Its windows were characteristic because from the exterior one could not see the store interiors; the bottom of the window was covered with wood or curtains to give the interior a mysterious touch (Loewe store exhibition, 2014).

Thus, the main change introduced by Carvajal in the Serrano shop, and in the later establishments he designed for Loewe, was the window display. What the architect provided was a window display with a totally different approach, designed from architecture and for architecture, and that was the renewed image of the 60's (Anton, 2016). Carvajal projected permeable exhibition spaces that allowed an appreciation of the interior from the street, serving as a second display. He emphasized the window as a space for brand image communication, in which the link between exterior and interior space gained great significance as well as the connection that could be established with potential customers.

There were very few cases of commercial establishments who had used this concept in their displays, the vast majority separated the interior and exterior. This new insight leads to an experience that emphasized the exterior as a commercial showcase, and store as a prolongation of that public space. The window displays were becoming the protagonists and around them, revolved the entire architectural design of the stores.

Carvajal's window display acted as an interior claim on the street. Enrique Loewe, who began working in the family business at the time, remembers: "They had the windows displays open, there was continuity between interior and exterior ... The shop was a mystery, and he resolved it".

This idea of creating continuity between interior and exterior while introducing light was a resource used by modern architects. The use of the so-called 'new materials' provided new capabilities that architecture previously did not have. In this case the use of glass, as independent from the structure, allowed the creation of the extension effect for the space Carvajal designed for Loewe. Although there were many architects who implemented this strategy from Gropius in his Fagus factory, highlighting Arne Jacobsen with his Rodovre Town Hall of 1954-1956 or Munkegaard school, among others. Jacobsen used this effect on many of his projects, creating an indivisible link between the exterior and interior. His work is of great interest because as it will be discussed in the furniture section, it provided inspiration for the Spanish architect in this field as well.



Photograph of the Rodovre Town Hall, de Arne Jacobsen, 1954-1956

Material

Carvajal's project for Loewe's Serrano shop is characterized by the richness of the materials and nuanced space rationalism. Scandinavian influenced white painted brick for the blind cloths inside the establishment. Walnut coating the false ceiling battens whose curve resembled the architecture of Aalto, as aforementioned. Carpeted floors creating a warmer space. The colors can be seen in the images of *Forma* magazine, published by Loewe to present their products to its customers (AA.VV., 1963). Oranges, ochres, browns and greens give color to the interior space. Fronting the marble, were the glass and neutral tones found in the shop windows.

The use of brick in Loewe has a double meaning. On the one hand, the use of this material in Spain was very common and reflected the traditional character and craftsmanship the firm desired. But on the other hand, the use of brick was directly linked to Nordic architecture, especially with Alvar Aalto. If his work is carefully examined, many of his projects were built with this material (AAVV, 1948) the city of Säynätsalo, the Auditorium in Helsinki and, especially, home study and experimental house in Muuratsalo where the brick is painted white, like at Loewe, can be highlighted.



Studio home, Alvar Aalto in Helsinki, 1936



Experimental home in Muuratsalo, Alvar Aalto, 1952-1953.

On the other hand, wood becomes the second material that connects Carvajal's work for Loewe with Nordic architecture. Wood just like brick, marble or copper synchs with humans without being perceived as hostile. It is for this reason that it becomes an identifying element of Nordic architecture of the 50s (AAVV, 1948). Perceived therefore as a welcoming but also noble material, the user senses a pleasant ambiance. Following these parameters, Carvajal not only

created the roof with a structure with wooden slats as we have seen, but also all fixed and mobile furniture. This resource can be seen in many of the Nordic works of the period, both public and private, from both Aalto and Jacobsen.



Serrano shop interior, Architect Javier Carvajal. 1960.

Another element is fabric. Carvajal used curtains from ceiling to floor, not only in the showroom, as seen above, but also in stores. The aim was the same in both cases: to provide customer privacy if required. In the case of Serrano, for the main facade, on Serrano Street, the use of curtains, in a horizontal strip pattern, placed in front of the window, were used as a filter, to make the space more reserved if necessary. The curtains allowed observing without being seen, exhibiting part of the establishment's content and creating sense of mystery, insinuating without revealing its exact contents. This strategy was also used by Nordic architects on projects such as the Rodovre library or Jacobsen's SAS Royal Hotel, together with Aalto's Viipuri library.

Finally, marble appears in Carvajal's work as a backdrop. An abstract background of gray marble, which did not reach the ceiling, recessed and exempt regarding walnut board where the pieces were placed, it allowed a slight intuition of the establishment's interior without being fully accessible. Perhaps the best-known example in this respect is the German pavilion designed by Mies van der Rohe, but the Nordic architectural repertoire also offers examples such as the SAS Royal Hotel (Jacobsen, 2010).

Design

The store's interior design is particularly striking for its blatant modernity. The architect designed a sober commercial space, built with materials such as walnut wood for the interiors and black marble with steel, which accentuated the interior-exterior game. In the interior one can see the strict order and voluptuousness that the store will comprise. The richness of the materials and the nuanced space rationalism, create a small exhibition space for product contemplation. A net curtain to close the window when privacy from the street was desired, marble on select walls, a walnut wood door, or violet carpet covering the floor are some of the elements that characterize the space. In the sections, the ceiling curvature evoking Aalto and covered by a false ceiling lath can be perceived.

Carvajal's all-encompassing project included the establishment's design, but furniture design, lighting and even the label typography design as well. The architect himself designed the shop windows and display cabinets, with a modern spirit and constructive designing to every last detail. Indirect and fixated lighting in the window displays highlighting products juxtaposed with the extensive diffused lighting inside making it increasingly welcoming. For the facade sculptures the collaboration of José Luis Sánchez, with whom he would design the door handles and part of iron and bronze facades was pivotal. Among the furniture designs created by Carvajal the chair projected for the Serrano shop in 1959, is now historically recognized as the Loewe chair.

Built in walnut wood and leather straps by Biosca, this furniture piece condensed the firm's features, hinting the materials and craftsmanship of the house and through its forms, inspiring the modernity of its design and brand image project. This modernity clearly motivated by Nordic design, specifically from designer Hans Wegner and from his most iconic creation in 1949: the rounded chair or simply "the chair".

The pureness of this chair's design molded wood to its most minimum expression, a sculptural semicircle of variable section, which rests on four spindly legs with leather seat suspended between them, just as the Loewe chair did. The empty space between the seat back contributes to the elegance and form-economy, which results in great comfort. It is at this point when the most formal difference with Loewe chair occurs. Wegner's backup piece draws a more pronounced curve than that of Carvajal, which is much flatter.



Loewe Chair, Javier Carvajal, 1959



“The chair”, Hans Wegner, 1949

4. Conclusions

Carvajal’s drawings and documentation have been the main medium through which the compositional architectural design guidelines (form-space, material and design) and the influences of modern Nordic architecture have been drawn. This analysis aims to show the Nordic influences that determined Carvajal’s design strategies in obtaining the formal result of the Serrano establishment premises and its predecessors. Loewe stores were genuine plastic art test facilities in which Carvajal consolidated his way of understanding architecture through design and a wise management of assorted references (Anton, 2016).

Among these references, Nordic design that can be highlighted, as has been sustained in this analysis; depuration and purity, both in the selection of materials and color range (glass, walnut wood, painted white brick), as in the conception of the elements of space (furniture, lighting) (AAVV, 1960). Therefore, shedding light on these facts, it is possible to draw final conclusions

to recognizing and regarding the Nordic influence on the modernization project of Loewe through architecture and design.

Firstly, recognizing architect Javier Carvajal's valiancy who launched in search for a commercial establishment design away from the prevailing academic approaches of the time. The Loewe shop would become a pioneer in showcasing his commercial and design approach, it developed into the model that compiled the main features of the architect's creative proposal: openness to the exterior and modern interior design with tradition.

It is essential to highlight the architect's visionary character that allowed him to perceive the need to renovate the store with a commercially effective objective above all. In a time when commercial design began to emerge in Spain, Carvajal wanted Serrano to become Loewe's signature image. An idea that has come up today in the form of flagship stores, shops designed by leading architects and as a backdrop for products from top fashion brands.

On the other hand, the astuteness demonstrated with the selection of the sources that inspired the architecture of the commercial spaces for Loewe is of great value. Following this analysis, it can be said that many of the resources used in Nordic architecture materialize in the Serrano store. Through the study of the form-space, materials and design it is possible to detect common patterns between both architectures, connecting the works and their architects.

As seen, the works of architects such as Alvar Aalto, Arne Jacobsen, Hans Wegner and Gunnar Asplund share many similarities with the Serrano store. Some are listed below:

- The laminated roof drawing a sculptural curve.
- The use of natural or artificial lighting in circle shapes.
- The extension of the interior-exterior space and vice versa, through the window display.
- The use of brick as a traditional and modern element.
- The use of wood as a noble and welcoming feature.
- The use of textiles to provide privacy and filter light.
- The use of marble to provide space with a symbolic and luxurious value.
- The completion of interior design in wood.
- The similarity between Wegner's "the chair" and the Loewe chair.

These aspects and others not included in the list, show the connections arising in the origin and development of the project from the first sketches to its completion. The exquisite architecture and detailed image obtained when applying these parameters to their thirteen commercial establishments, is considered a refined packaging in which the firm's products are comprised. He

thus considered the importance of the issues described above (shape-space, material and design), through, which, as part of the luxury industry, appeal as part of an aspirational world to the customer. These aspects were essential in assigning value to the firm exclusive accessories.

Therefore, these ideas finally reflect the importance of the outstanding work done by Carvajal for Loewe's image renewal. The architect knew, that the firm's modernization should find its roots in tradition and be formally molded with references from the moment's modern culture, to be considered a form of luxury. In fact that modernity, whose patterns were taken from Nordic architecture and design, not only meant new and avant-garde but also was a sign of luxury and exclusivity.

At that time the general public did not appreciate the modernity of form, materials and designs. For that reason, these new aesthetic lines became the element of luxury, cultivated luxury, linked to the house of Loewe. On the other hand, tradition was present in the materials, while also maintaining the firm's own traditional character and the quality of their designs. Through these references Carvajal managed to develop and implement design guidelines of modern commercial premises in the field of luxury and exclusivity, thus projecting the image that has been distinctive Loewe until this day.

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ⁱThe formalization of design in Spain begins during mid-1950s, thanks to the favorable economic situation after the end of the autarky, in addition to the existence of a group of professionals who were aware of the importance of this discipline. It was the time SEDI (Society of Industrial Design Studies, Madrid, 1957) was promoted by the architects Carlos de Miguel, Luis Feduchi and Javier Carvajal. Its accomplishments are based mainly on the European experience, with World War II concluded; it resumes the path that was once truncated.

ⁱⁱ Both propagandistic and economic interests promoted this initiative. The strategy promoted by the government to revive the country's economy began with a strong commitment to craftsmanship, and would later become an unconditional support for the industry and by extension for industrial design.

ⁱⁱⁱ In parallel, the Barcelona Institute of Industrial Design (IDIB) in 1960 would be united with the FAD (Foment de les Arts Decoratives), forming the Adi / Fad was founded. According to many critics, 1957 would thus become the year that marks the 'official' birth of industrial design in Spain.

^{iv} Since the early 50's, Spain participated in various international competitions such as the Milan Triennial, 1951/1954/1957, the Berlin Interbau 1957, the 1958 Brussels exhibition or the Vienna exhibition of sacred art. In the field of design, the Milan Triennials were significantly important, especially for the recognition obtained by the Spanish pavilions. Cfr. Pansera, A., *Storia e cronaca della Triennale* (Milán: Longanesi & C, 1978); VILLANUEVA, María. Arquitecturas Móviles. In: Viajes en la transición de la arquitectura española hacia la modernidad, Actas Preliminares, School of Architecture, University of Navarra. Pamplona: University of Navarra, 2010. pp. 329-338.

^v Other winners were the Catalan ceramist Cumella who won the gold medal thanks to vessels and objects in stoneware incomparable quality, along with Clara Szabo, Spanish by adoption, who was also awarded the Silver Medal for its varied display of original fabrics weaved by hand.

^{vi} Number dedicated to Alvar Aalto, *Arquitectura*, nº 13, Madrid, 1960.