



Mi Casa Es Su Casa

A DIFFERENT TAKE ON CREATIVITY DRIVES A TRAILBLAZING BUSINESS AND EMPOWERS ITS EMPLOYEES

On a sunny Wednesday morning in Barcelona, Spain, employees at La Casa de Carlota's design studio are prepping for a creative workshop. Jordi Giró, a design intern, rolls a 12-foot length of brown craft paper across the floor's grey ceramic tiles. On the paper sit 12 brushes, their handles speckled in the same primary paint colors housed in the shallow, plastic bins that sit nearby.

"We're going to draw feet with our feet," Giró announces to the workers assembled for the workshop.

Group members nod and roll their pants halfway up their calves. Some grip the brushes between their toes, dip them in paint, and stroke outlines of feet onto the paper. Others cover the bottoms of their own feet with paint and use them like wood blocks, stamping footprints on the craft paper.

Photographers circle the group, which includes La Casa de Carlota employees — some with Down syndrome and autism. Photos are taken of the footprints and the feet, both painted and real.



Photo courtesy of La Casa de Carlota

Later the same afternoon, a team of designers from the design studio will study the morning's creations, looking for elements they could apply to some of the firm's real-world design projects.

It's all part of what company founder José María Batalla calls "a small and delicious chaos" that typifies the firm's approach to the creative process — one that relies heavily on the unique vision brought to the company by employees with Down syndrome and autism.

"My team is special," Batalla says, who founded La Casa de Carlota in **2013**. "Not only are there are plenty of different talents, the atmosphere and the way we work are very different and full of happiness. We see this come through in every creation we make."

FILTER-FREE CREATIVITY

The vision for La Casa de Carlota starting taking shape in 2012, when Batalla, then Vice President of one of the world's largest global communications groups headquartered in Spain, was tasked with managing a life-changing pro bono project, "Fish Don't Get Wet," which explained Down syndrome to school children in Barcelona.

Batalla knew the audience for this particular campaign was very specific, so he recruited a team of children, including some with Down syndrome, to draw the characters, which he then turned into an animated film.

While working on the project, Batalla watched the children with Down syndrome approach the creative process without any filters. Their creations, he explains, come directly from their imaginations onto paper. They aren't hindered by typical design rules, conventions, or limits. For example, some kids will paint a sun green if they want, even if they know it's yellow. Also, if an object is three-dimensional, they will try to capture the dimensions on paper, which gives their drawings a very special quality.



Gaby Castano says people can choose to see their creations as work produced by disabled people or as beautiful artwork created by talented artists who also have a disability. Photo by Anna Oset Vilanova, Courtesy of La Casa de Carlota

People without disabilities replace this childlike quality with logic, realism, and order as they age. Yet people with Down syndrome keep drawing like children all their life, Batalla says. They never lose their naivety and freshness.

The branding and advertising guru recalled a famous Picasso quote: “When you learn to paint like the Renaissance painters, it can take you some years. Painting like children takes you all your life.” Batalla wondered if he could find a way to convert this way of thinking and seeing into a work methodology that might shake up the creative processes of an entire design studio.

As he pondered how to approach this new project, he found himself in his company’s break room. He struck up a conversation with Raul, a young man with Down syndrome who worked in the mailroom. During the exchange, he asked Raul if he enjoyed his job sorting mail. Raul’s answer was quick and definitive: “No.” He really wanted to be a creative director and create television advertisements, he said, just like Batalla did.

“I thought about it for days,” Batalla says. “No one had asked Raul if he really wanted to do this job. We thought that he was happy.”

That break room conversation provided the spark Batalla needed to see an even bigger picture. He had been looking for a way to harness a different kind of creativity, but what if he could, at the same time, also empower those who possessed a unique creative vision?



Photo courtesy of La Casa de Carlota

To do this, Batalla set out to create a new kind of design studio, a place where art students, designers, and art directors could work alongside and collaborate with people with autism and Down syndrome who shared their passion for art.

He had reason to have high hopes after watching how children with and without disabilities worked easily, and creatively, together.

“All I had to do was take the risk and try,” he says. “So we took the risk, and we tried.”

‘OPEN MINDS NEED OPEN SPACES’

A year later, Batalla opened the doors to his creative experiment. La Casa de Carlota design studio took shape inside a tiny Barcelona studio.

“There was the idea that people with and without disabilities could work together, but we didn’t want to make false promises to families that the project was going to grow and become something great,” he says.

Soon the firm found itself stifled by the small space, and the company moved to a new space in El Poblenou. The neighborhood, once an Industrial Revolution epicenter, was filled with old textile factories that had housed artists, migrants, and people with nowhere else to go. The combination of affordable rents and large, open workspaces lured artists like Batalla to the culturally vibrant neighborhood bordering the Mediterranean Sea.



Creative Director Inge Nouws works with Gaby Castano, a designer with autism, who says La Casa de Carlota's magic is in the relationships he's formed, not just art. Photo courtesy of La Casa de Carlota

"We came here because art can't be closed inside four walls," he says. "Open minds need open spaces to work."

On the studio's white concrete walls, black frames showcase art created by studio employees along with the resulting products they inspired, from T-shirts and aprons to advertising posters. Shelves offer a sampling of the company's three-dimensional products, which include wine bottles and red tinfoil chocolate boxes.

Sergi Capell, La Casa de Carlota managing director and founding partner, explains that clients may hire the firm to design a logo, for example, but along the way designers often discover a surprise, such as different typography or design detail, that can be incorporated into a suite of professional products.

Capell points to Gaby Castano, a 19-year-old employee who has autism—and a talent for handwriting a unique typography. La Casa de Carlota uses his handwriting "font" for almost all its advertising campaigns, including the annual holiday box for a major chocolatier.

"When I saw the box with my design and held it in my hand, I was very emotional and excited," Castano says.

Carlo Pradeiro, a designer with Downs Syndrome, has a compulsion to repeat dots and stripes on pieces of paper. While that behavior might raise eyebrows in another workplace, at La Casa de Carlota, it serves as inspiration. Pradeiro's dots and stripes, for example, have become signature design elements for a major wine brand's corporate identity.

Along the way, Creative Director Inge Nouws helps direct La Casa's creative process.

"I like to propose things I've never tried before," says the mastermind behind the "using feet to paint feet" workshop. She wants designers to experience how it feels to paint holding the brushes with their toes and the unexpected and pleasing results such an exercise can produce, she says.



Designers, students, and visiting artists take part in creative exercises designed to untether their imaginations from conventional thinking or design. Photo by Anna Oset Vilanova, Courtesy of La Casa de Carlota

Other projects are similarly innovative. For a festival celebrating world-renowned food artist Ferran Adria, the team illustrated the event's theme, "A Day at the Opera," with fruits and vegetables as musical instruments, such as a pumpkin flute, a strawberry guitar, and an orange accordion.

Nouws' favorites—a kiwi drum and a lemon accordion—will be scanned and turned into professional graphic images.

"The success of La Casa de Carlota comes from the way we combine the surrealist and naive talents of the designers with disabilities, the ambitious and sassy talents of inexperienced design students, and the well-experienced design professionals," Batalla says. "What results is an explosive, creative cocktail."

A SUCCESSFUL EQUATION

As much as Batalla appreciates the impact La Casa has on its employees and the design community, he's very clear that his business is just that — a business. Making people feel better is a happy byproduct of what he sees as a boundary-pushing approach to design.

La Casa de Carlota's initial challenge was demonstrating to companies and brands that they were a full-service design studio that could create work that would help brands succeed. They are not a charitable organization providing occupational workshops or job training. Although their creative team includes people with disabilities, the focus is on every team member's abilities.

Finding the right mix of talents is a painstaking process, Batalla explains. La Casa coordinates with Aura Fundació, a foundation that serves with people with disabilities, especially Down syndrome, to help identify potential employees. But that's only part of the process.

"If we have only people with disabilities, it's not a professional studio," Batalla says. "This is a real enterprise. The people with disabilities are paid a normal, professional wage. And the studio is paid from companies who value our work."

Batalla maintains that balance allows the studio to offer clients surprising, fresh, and innovative design solutions for their brands.

“Talent, imagination, effort, and art are values that overcome the mainstream limits of the human condition,” he says. “And if we manage to make it work as a lucrative business, then it’s perfect, too.”



Photo by Anna Oset Vilanova, Courtesy of La Casa de Carlota

SMASHING STEREOTYPES

Batalla’s design studio has successfully seen his vision of harnessing a different type of creativity come to fruition. His other goal, that of empowering those with Down syndrome and autism, has also found traction as La Casa de Carlota becomes more successful.

Batalla recalls a recent conversation with Quim Jané, a designer with Down syndrome, who was hired after successfully completed an internship at the studio. During a meeting, he offhandedly asked Jane if he was proud of being part of the La Casa de Carlota team.

“He looked at me and told me very seriously, ‘I am happy because I am no longer a boy with Down syndrome. I am a designer,’” Batalla says.

The self-confidence that employees like Jané gain has a ripple effect within the community.

“When people ask, ‘Where is your child or your sibling?’ the parents can say, ‘My child is at work,’ and the siblings can say, ‘My brother is OK. He is out in the world doing things and making things.’ It gives the families hope,” Batalla explains.

It also gives design professionals, and students who want to enter the field, new perspectives on their craft and the world. Alex Diaz, who has worked at La Casa for two years, says, while in design school, all designers learned the same way of thinking and to follow the trends. Working with the designers with disabilities taught him to accept thousands of different ideas and use unfamiliar material in new and refreshing ways, he says.

“This has affected me at a personal level, too,” Diaz says. “This experience is huge. It’s changed me as a designer and also as a person.”

Mireia Pascual, a student at the design school Bau, Centro Universitario de Diseno de Barcelona, admits that she felt frightened when she started her internship at the company. She had never worked alongside people with disabilities, and

she worried if she'd be accepted. Would she fit in?



Photo by Anna Oset Vilanova, Courtesy of La Casa de Carlota

Fellow student intern Cristina Peiró Bonet felt the same. But their fears dissipated as they worked in welcoming, friendly, and mixed teams and immersed themselves in creating beautiful designs.

Pascual explains that her time at La Casa has not only improved her design skills, it has also added depth to them. She now sees the humanity reflected in design, she says. “You see a poster, and you know there are a lot of stories it — different points of view. You see projects that have life.”


Bonet says that watching her design peers at La Casa has expanded her ideas of what is possible in her own art. “The designers with disabilities don’t worry about perfection,” she says. “They don’t get stuck in their head. They are liberated.”



In the hands of senior designers, artwork or design elements from exploratory workshops become the faces of major brands. Photo by Anna Oset Vilanova, Courtesy of La Casa de Carlota

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