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Q + A

Adriana Siso - A Pioneer in Contemporary Design
Interview by Zane Fischer, Photograph by Karen Kuehn

Cutting-edge artist and designer Adriana Siso explains the importance of space and being a local and global leader in constructing buildings out of cargo containers.

You were born in Venezuela. How did you end up in Santa Fe?

I came to Santa Fe in 1989. I had been living in Florida and, after visiting, I found myself attracted to the Southwest—the climate, the cultures—and I became entranced with all of it.

And how did you develop your business, originally called InStock?

My background is in fine arts, and for me, there is a place where design and fine art really merge. About six years ago, I was living at The Lofts on Cerrillos Road. I had this modern, crisp room, and the furniture I had didn't work, so I got rid of it all. In trying to figure out new furniture, I ended up with some extra classic modern pieces. I put them up for sale, and when people came to see them and entered this clean, elegant space, it really clicked: The setting and the design of the pieces were cohesive, and the response to the way everything was placed was so positive—my home developed into a showroom for contemporary modern furniture.

But now you're planning to move into a building of your own construction.

I came up against some limitations of what I could do in that space. Almost on a whim, I called the Railyard Community Corporation, and we were directed to the Baca Street part of the city's Railyard property. At the time, the focus was on the north Railyard, by SITE Santa Fe. No one was really thinking about Baca yet. But the land is less expensive to lease, and there was the opportunity to build exactly what I wanted.

Which, it turns out, is a building made of steel cargo containers, like the ones you see on freight ships and trains.

Yes. In wondering how the space could be clean, efficient, and have a unique presence, I came across a shipping-container building by chance—something online—and I was very excited by this ready-

made box, conceptually, as a building block to put together the kind of structure that I wanted. When I showed it to the Railyard committee, they loved it—it ties in thematically to the project, and adds a sort of distinct flavor to the Railyard. I started working with architect Gerry Chavez, who had worked in L.A. with Frank Gehry and is into anything modular. We've been through about 20 versions and some big tangents, but we've finally got it simplified and to a place where it makes sense.

Cargo-container buildings are still very rare—you're one of the few designers in the world working with them—and they sometimes run into permitting trouble.

That's been no problem. The basic premise is already cleared with the city. I'm buying the boxes from an outfit in Albuquerque, and they've done a lot of applications, primarily with the military, so the engineering is solid and they have the data to show that the building can meet the codes. Everyone is interested in the project rather than intimidated by it.

What's the name of your new business?

Molecule. I think it relates to the use of the container as a unit that forms a whole, and is sort of a fundamental, biological worldview that feels pertinent to me. Hopefully we will break ground soon and complete the building by the end of the fall.

How do you feel about the collision of contemporary design and architecture with Santa Fe style?

I don't think it's a collision. I think we're seeing an evolution. Especially with the influence of architects like Ricardo Legorreta, we're able to see that the expanded wall, the broader palette, and a clean-line, minimal sensibility really work here, and have always been here. And as far as furniture and design, it's important for people to get away from the feeling that everything has to be Spanish Colonial—it's important to remember contrast, and to use it for creating engaging spaces.

Is there a serious design community in Santa Fe?

I think the talent is here, the intellect is here, and the historical references are here to bring a rich, distinctive aesthetic to the table. We have the tools and we have a very creative, entrepreneurial culture. If we are going to support diversity here—as there is always a claim that we do—I think it's important to represent that through design, through architecture, through willingness.