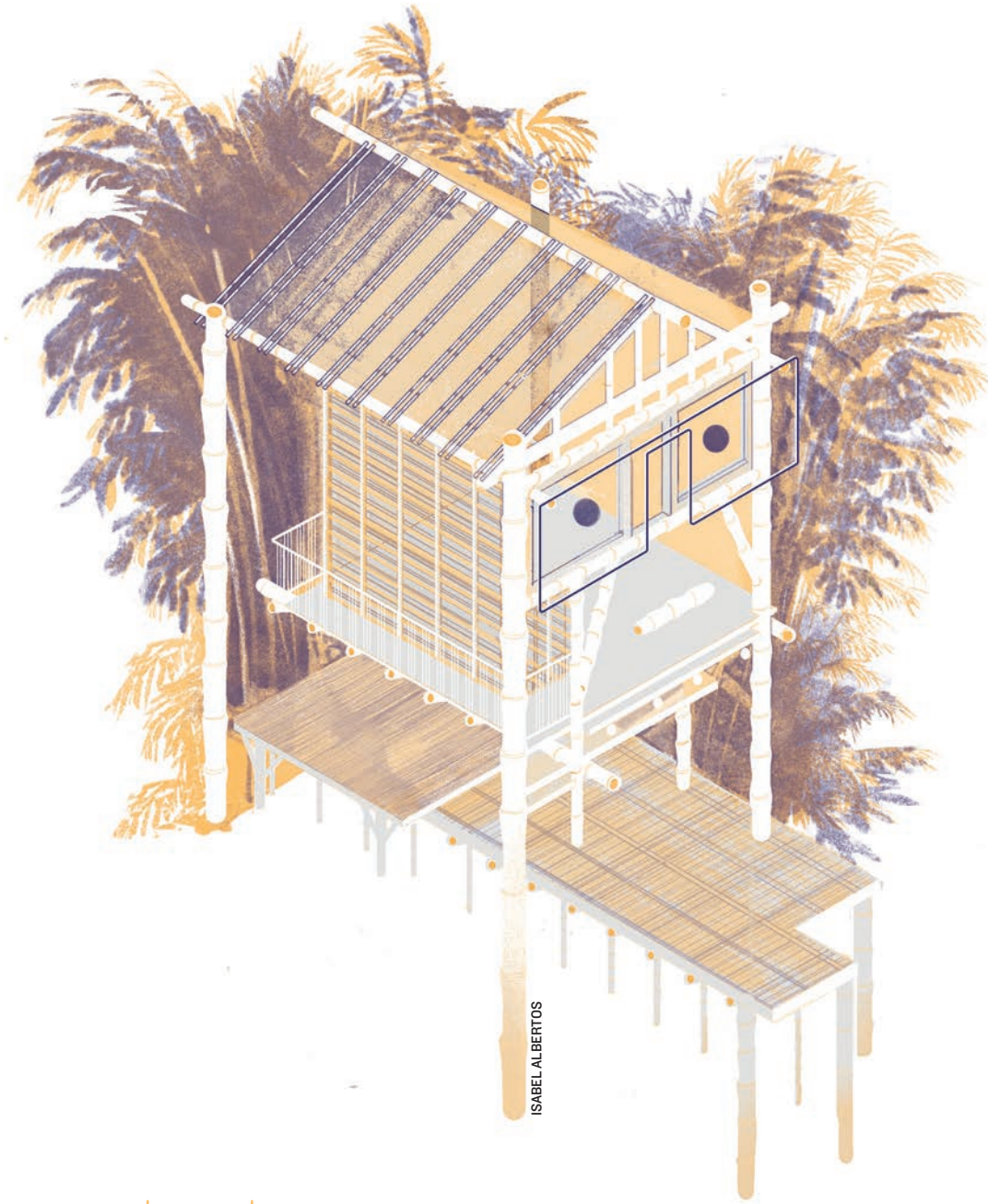


Dicken Castro's work spans a wide range of interests, and he was equally at ease in rural worlds and in corporate settings. Whether it was research, architecture or graphic design, he declared that he practised with 'the vehemence and dedication of a monk'



ISABEL ALBERTOS

Reputations

Dicken Castro

Despite a tension between vernacular interests and modernist aspirations, Castro's legacy highlights the potential of *guadua* as a versatile building material, writes *Catalina Mejía Moreno*



DICKEN CASTRO ARCHIVE

My first interest in *guadua* is pictorial,' admits Colombian architect and graphic designer Dicken (born Ricardo) Castro Duque (1922–2016). Used as a general term to speak of bamboo in Colombia, the *guadua* Castro refers to is *Guadua angustifolia*, a clumping species of narrow-leafed bamboo native to Central and South America. Called *taboca* in Brazil, *yariipa* in the Amazon, *guafa* in Venezuela and *bambou* in the French Antilles, it is renowned for its strength and has been used by people across the continent to build homes and fabricate everyday objects since before Spanish colonisation.

Yet Castro's interest and sensibility go beyond aesthetics. When he visited the Otún river with his sister in the early 1940s, he became fascinated by both the activities of the *guaqueros* (people who plunder graves or other archaeological sites) and the long-legged *guadua* structures. Observing and drawing the sophisticated structures found in rural Caldas, Risaralda and Quindío (regions in central Andean Colombia) he understood them to be 'more mobile, flexible, economic, and more in tune with our changing world'. Born in Medellín, the country's second biggest city, Castro acknowledged he could appreciate *guadua* constructions 'as something extraordinary and of interest' when, to the people from Caldas, Risaralda and Quindío, they are 'part of their everyday landscape, and do not deserve any consideration'.

Castro published *La Guadua* in 1966 to raise awareness about the material's long cultural history and its neglect by the initial processes of modernisation in the mid 20th century, when Colombian architects were favouring reinforced concrete. 'I do not intend to write a botanical treatise, nor do I consider *guadua* a solution to solve the housing crisis in the country,' he explained. Instead, he showed that *guadua* structures are economic, lightweight, require shallow foundations, and are easy to build and repair at great speed. Underlining the fact that people without any professional technical training or skills have been able to use the material to its optimal performance, he sought to test its potential and understand its socioeconomic implications at both architectural and urban scales. This commitment and duty of care exemplifies Castro's life work, and his attitude towards life itself.

Castro's interest in *guadua* was compatible with – and most likely informed – his ambitions to become an architect. Having enrolled at Bogotá's National University of Colombia in 1942, his time at architecture school was characterised by a modern agenda, heavily informed by the Bauhaus and driven by its postwar immigrant faculty, including Italian architect Bruno Violi and

German architect Leopoldo Rother. Freshly graduated from Bogotá, a Fulbright scholarship took Castro to the US in 1952, where he studied, and then taught, at the University of Oregon, worked in New York, and travelled across the country to Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago and elsewhere. The work of Frank Lloyd Wright, and the Usonian houses in particular, made a strong impression on him for their material richness, colours and tactility.

Upon his return to Colombia in 1954, Castro joined the architectural practice set up by Arturo Robledo and Hans Drews. The trio Robledo Drews y Castro (RDC) Arquitectos built mostly modernist low-density housing blocks out of concrete and industrial brick. Los Lagartos Club (1955) reveals their interest in a modernism that is rational and functional, with its own language and aesthetic; the Barrio Polo Club housing (1957) shows the influence of modern Nordic architecture, especially that of Alvar and Aino Aalto, which made its way into Colombia through accounts of European travel – including Drews', returning from Sweden – and publications such as *Revista Proa*. Interested in pursuing postgraduate studies on social housing and urban planning, as well as experiencing European architecture first-hand, Castro obtained a Bouwcentrum scholarship and went to Rotterdam, staying in the Netherlands after the course to work at the planning office in The Hague. He took the opportunity to travel, to northern Europe in particular, and see works by the Aaltos, Henry van der Velde, Gerrit Rietveld, Hans Scharoun, Gunnar Asplund and other famous architects of the time.

This trip to Europe also marked the end of his short-lived partnership with Robledo and Drews, but his modernist work in concrete continued. In 1960, upon his return to Colombia, Castro collaborated with Jacques Mosseri to design the monumental roof structure of the Plaza de Mercado de Paloquemao, a central market square in Bogotá, later followed by other public market squares, such as Plaza Restrepo (1967) and Plaza de Mercado Ciudad Kennedy (1968). That same year, he started teaching, and married Lía Jaramillo, with whom he had five children – including Lorenzo, who also became an architect.

For his growing family, he designed and built the minimal house La Casita (1963): a house of 4 by 4 metres that sleeps five, where everything has multiple functions. Beds turn into sofas, the fireplace is also a stove, and doors fold to be used as working surfaces. Castro described this weekend home as 'a refuge for my children's dreams and an idea for social housing, a second architectural thesis after having graduated'. This project, like his others in this period, uses exposed irregular bricks from the

chircales (landscapes of artisanal brick production) near Bogotá, and clay tiles on the roof. Of his extensive oeuvre it remains my favourite, for its lessons in architectural humility and sensibility.

In the 1960s, the use of exposed brick did not yet define Colombian architecture, as it does today. Castro turned to this material, so far used for exteriors, to highlight the labour it entailed and its distinct tactile qualities. He used it for several houses including his own, Casa Niquía (1967), and later the hotel and convention centre in Paipa (1980). On the same plot as La Casita, Niquía was the first modern house in Colombia to use brick in its interior, remarks the architect Cristina Albornoz, who is also Castro's daughter-in-law. This makes the home dark and textured, yet still modern. By bringing modernist ideals into dialogue with local and situated material and cultural practices, Castro's work escapes categorisations.

The tension between research and built work is evident, but unavoidable. Although Castro had first used *guadua* with Manuel F Samper in the late 1940s – as interior cladding covered in plaster render and white paint – designing *guadua* structures was not an option for architects in Colombia; not considered a legitimate modern construction material, it remained absent from any building code or seismic legislation until the 1990s. *Guadua* started to be used at scale in the central Andean region, where it grows, after it became the first and only alternative in the reconstruction of the area following the 1999 earthquake in Quindío.

From the early 1950s, Castro was invited to publish in journals such as *Bauwelt* and *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, and to lecture in Europe and the US. A decade later, his work was recognised at home; the second Colombian Architecture Biennale, in 1962, introduced a research award and gave him a special mention. The graphic design study he presented was then exhibited in Spain. International dissemination was important to help change *guadua*'s image of the 'wood of the poor', as it was then considered in Colombia. Although *guadua* architectures were common in geographies such as Southeast Asia, Castro was interested in the material's ties to the sites and cultural specificities of the Colombian Andean landscape.

When he started architecture school, Castro also enrolled at the Institute of Social Anthropology. Although he could not, as he had hoped, 'study *guaquería*', this field cultivated his interest in pre-Columbian cultures and archaeological practices, offering him an understanding of Colombia as a rich multicultural nation and informing both his architectural practice and prolific graphic design work. Without any formal training in graphics or communication,

he designed more than 400 logos during his life, for clients including Colombia's National Archive and the Museo La Tertulia, as well as a brilliant collection of stamps and the 200- and 1,000-pesos coins. These were some of his favourite designs because he found it 'meaningful to see them circulating from hand to hand'.

Castro stood against self-promotion and prioritised the publication of research over his own designs. In his view, singular works could not take precedence over the voice of everyday landscapes and popular culture. His illustrated *Pupo y las Palmeras*, a children's story with an ecological spirit around palm, speaks to this, while the second edition of *La Guadua* (published in 1985, almost 20 years after the first) reflects an evolution in his thinking, reinforcing a technical interest, with many detail drawings, and an emphasis on the material's potential to provide mass housing in the central Andean region. This shift came from a sense of urgency: an increase in poverty combined with a decrease in popular knowledge of *guadua* since the first edition.

Dreaming of a *guadua* museum, Castro tried to bring research and design together in a 1987 masterplan for the National Coffee Park, which included a landscape for different types of coffee plants, pathways, an ecosystem for the reproduction of the region's flora and fauna, a hotel and restaurant in local woods, and a *guaduario* designed in collaboration with *guadua* expert Jimena Londoño. He also imagined a *guadua* portico and a series of *guadua* totems to be installed at airports to promote the project. Adapted from Castro's proposal, the park was eventually inaugurated in 1995, and features a watch tower by Simón Vélez and Mauricio Villegas.

Today, people are more likely to have heard about *guadua*'s architectural deployment through the built work of Vélez, who arrived at *guadua*, three decades after Castro, with a postmodern reactionary attitude. Although familiar with Castro's work, Vélez is less concerned with *guadua*'s social, cultural and environmental implications. It was because he understood and valued the material that Castro was able to strip it of preconceptions and open the door for others to use it; he awakened an academic and professional interest in a material that is today considered part of Colombia's cultural heritage and included in its range of seismic-resistant structural materials (led by concrete and steel). Contemporary projects by Simón Hosie, Arquitectura Mixta, Daniel Joseph Feldman Mowerman, Iván Darío Quiñones Sánchez, Arquitectura Expandida, Ruta 4 Taller and others testify to this legacy. Castro's son Lorenzo talks about the layers of dust that have fallen over his father's *guadua* work: 'But who is willing to dust it is able to see it.'

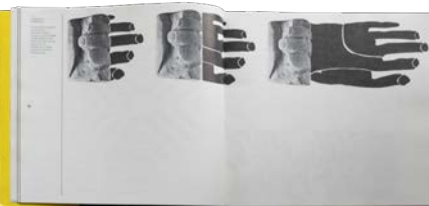


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DICKEN CASTRO ARCHIVE

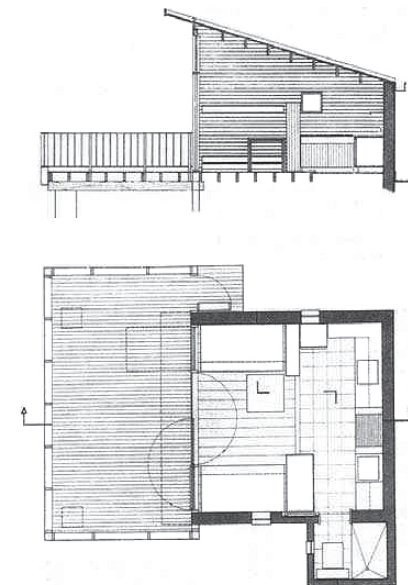
Resulting from years of conversations and field work evident in the sketches (opposite, bottom left) and photographs that give it its distinct character, *La Guadua* (above and top) features chapters on botanical classification, material versatility, construction applicability and urban structures. Although of a different register, Castro's monographic *Forma Viva, El Oficio del Diseño* is also infused with broader cultural interests (below and bottom)



HANS DREWS ARANGO



Castro was one of the first Colombian architects to use exposed bricks in interiors; his fascination with this material can be traced back to childhood visits to Medellín's Metropolitan Cathedral. Examples include his family refuge La Casita ('the small house', right and below right) and Casa Niquía (below), his family home, designed four years later on the same plot



DICKEN CASTRO ARCHIVE

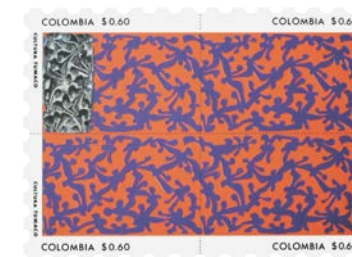


DICKEN CASTRO ARCHIVE

Castro's design practice ranged from modernist projects, including the Barrio Polo Club housing (top left), Paloquemao market (above left) and the sloping Los Eucaliptos housing (right) to graphics, stamps (below) and coins (above left). A version of his dream *guadua* museum eventually saw the light of day, with contributions by others, such as the watch tower by Vélez and Villegas (below right)



'Castro awakened an academic and professional interest in a material that is today considered part of Colombia's cultural heritage'



ALFREDO MAIQUEZ PHOTOGRAPHY / ALAMY

