There are programs that, due to their own nature, push buildings forward. A school of architecture, for instance, should not only fulfill its function but also embody the ideas discussed within, allow for new possibilities and serve as a model. In other words, it should transform itself into a demonstrative and pedagogical instrument. This structure makes the possibilities of building in wood clear, showing, with didactic clarity, the way in which it resists the vertical, horizontal and symbolic loads of an architecture school.

The new building for the School of Architecture at the Universidad Católica de Chile – the outcome of an open competition held in 2013 – is located on the southern edge of Lo Contador Campus neighboring the 18th-century Casona Lo Contador, currently a National Heritage Monument.

The building is a two-story laminated wood volume that rests on a rough concrete basis forming the first level. The wooden pillars and beams are modulated so as to simplify tasks of assemblage and transport; the dimensions of the floor’s boards are also optimized, without any need for cuts. The wooden structure is exposed and the building’s expression is the manifestation of how the load transference works.

The 21-meter span piece of wood suspended between supports leaves its west side cantilevered, constituting a new access atrium for the Campus.
The volume houses the offices for the School of Architecture’s professors, freeing the ground floor and its rooftop to deploy the programs that support the building’s public life: a covered plaza at street level protected from the rain and an auditorium on the upper floor that, opened towards the casona and the hill, is transformed into a viewpoint over treetops.

From its origins, the building seeks to be sustainable. That is why it is designed in wood, a renewable resource with a low carbon footprint. Its dry work assembly not only allows the reduction of construction time but also diminishes the impact of construction work on the neighborhood.

Although its program is mainly for private use, it is a building that due to its strong public vocation should promote and open new possibilities for wooden structures in Chile. Its most direct users, architecture
Elevación poniente
West elevation
E. / S. 1:250

Axonométrica de partes
Parts axonometric
S. E. / N. S.
EDIFICIO ESCUELA DE ARQUITECTURA
BUILDING FOR THE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

Arquitecto / Architect: Gonzalo Claro Riesco
Arquitecto asociado / Associate: Pablo Levine
Colaboradores / Collaborators: Rafaela Behrens, Sarah Kutz
Ubicación / Location: El Comendador 1936, Santiago de Chile, Chile
Cliente / Client: Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile
Cálculo estructural / Structural engineering: Juan Acevedo
Construcción / Construction: GHG S.A.
Instalación sanitaria / Mechanical engineering: Ruz Vukasovic y Cia Ltda.
Instalación eléctrica / Electrical system: Ingelmor Ltda.
Iluminación / Lighting: Paulina Sir
Paisajismo / Landscape: Paulina Courard

Eficiencia energética / Environmental project: Javier del Río
Materiales / Materials: MLE Madera Laminada Encolada / Glued laminated wood
Terminaciones / Finishings: MLE, gres porcelánico, mosaico de vidrio/
Glued laminated wood, porcelain stoneware, glass mosaic tile
Presupuesto / Cost: US$ 1,600 / m²
Superficie construida / Built area: 1,500 m²
Superficie de terreno / Site area: 700 m²
Año de proyecto / Project year: 2015
Año de construcción / Construction year: 2016
Fotografías / Photographs: Felipe Fontecilla
students, will be able to interact with a wooden building from the beginning of their education. At the same time, given it faces the street generating an unprecedented permeable connection between the Campus and the neighborhood, its indirect users (visitors, public to lectures, pedestrians and so on) can learn from the unexpected possibilities of wood. ARQ
Gonzalo Claro Riesco  
<gonzalo@gonzaloclaro.com>

Architect, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2004. Master in Architectural Theory and History, Universidad Politécnica de Cataluña, 2010. In 2011 established his architectural practice based in Santiago de Chile. Has developed projects involving different programs and scales, from furniture and objects to public buildings design. In 2015 is awarded first prize in the competition for the recently inaugurated Architecture School uc building at Lo Contador campus. He is currently associate professor at the School of Architecture uc, combining studio teaching tasks with the independent professional practice.
A knot involving a beam pole, its lower side, two diagonal braces, the framing of the floor they support and a windowsill; all built in a pale wood, whose grain is more conspicuous than its laminate. An architectural detail that is also a cultural node: it weaves structural solicitations, disciplinary discourse, manufacturing conditions and local myth. None of these determine the building yet they all spring from it with particular transparency. Through a specific use of wood – the fact that the knot is distinctly thick is not irrelevant here – we not only read material predilection but also ‘material conditions.’ Wood, a local commodity thickened to support a four-story institutional building and to resist fire, leaves us with a final image: a school in which wood was held as a flagship of idiosyncratic rationality is now supported, entirely, by wood.

A productive field turned national identity on the grounds of architectural discourse – either ‘benefitting from local conditions’ or ‘softening in cultural terms the political impact of national industry’ – makes this building an exemplary one. Such architectural stunt transpires ‘material conditions.’ The fact that in this particular case these conditions are literally material is mere coincidence. Neither better nor worse than usual, only more transparently, this building reflects – in the friction between the superficial warmness of wood and the thickness of its pieces – the weight of the conditions of production.

If none of this has to do with architecture, why then do we still witness this feat with skepticism? Did it have to be built in wood? The imperative of asking how things are and not how they could be, reduces a building to the work of an author. It is the designer’s skill, instead of the complex set of cultural relations woven in nuce in a building, the result of avoiding a materialism that questions itself about material conditions and not just about materiality. ARQ