

# Martín Domínguez

*December 26, 1897 — September 13, 1970*

Martín Domínguez was born in San Sebastian, Spain, in 1897, brought up in the Basque country, and was a longtime resident of Madrid and Havana before he came to Cornell as a visiting professor of architecture in 1960. He shared the experience of many of the architectural pioneers of his generation who were uprooted from their homeland by political circumstance: in his case this occurred twice. He was impeccably honest, indefatigably rational, morally fastidious; a critic of sanctimony and sham, as well as the intellectually slipshod. Yet he remained vivacious and was never deserted by his deep sense of the ludicrous. His esthetic interests were avant garde, his professional work was international in character and influence, but his spirit remained quintessentially Spanish. Thus his pride was natural, his distinction unaffected, and his dignity inherent.

Professor Domínguez brought unique qualities to Cornell's architecture Program based on his long experience as an outstanding practitioner. He was able to transmit in memorable fashion (in his second language) candid criticisms of his students' design work. His comments were expressed objectively and left the recipients inspired and eager to go ahead. His colleagues valued his concern for their collective good, his willingness to undertake thankless assignments, and the enthusiasm he radiated. All were delighted that he continued to give Cornell the benefit of his extraordinary talents long after reaching the normal retirement age. His unexpected death at the age of seventy-two deprived the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning of a dynamic spirit and one of the most distinguished practitioners ever to serve on its faculty.

His father determined early that Martín would follow the profession of his architect uncle. The boy began life drawing classes at seven and later supplemented his school program with evening classes at an arts and crafts school. At seventeen he went to Madrid, completing the course of the Escuela Superior de Arquitectura in 1922. He stayed at the lively "Residencia de Estudiantes" of the Institucion Libre de Enseñanza, an organization which experimented with new teaching methods and brought to its campus, as lecturers or guest professors, leading figures in science and the arts (including the architects Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier). Here Domínguez developed his belief that rivalry between technocrats and humanists is damaging to both and militates against the development of a generally acceptable philosophy or set of values. As he saw it, "Programs of studies should not be afflicted by that dichotomy between the scientific and the humanistic disciplines that burdens the modern world, presenting knowledge in a broken-up fashion menacing for liberal ideas. For the different disciplines remain

isolated in tightly closed containers; not only in thought, but in terms of language as well, each scientist, each artist or practitioner speaking his own dialect.

“For want of a philosophy capable of uniting all the different and often disparate parts, it becomes impossible to define a scale of values. This generates indifference towards the norms of behavior, and leads to a diffuse determinism which, by preventing us from distinguishing the good from the bad, brings us defenseless to the realm where force exercises its empire.”<sup>1</sup>

His involvement with the extraordinary intellectual and artistic ferment of the Madrid of 1924—which still retained the scale and intimacy of a small town—is reflected in the cafes, the haberdashery, the furniture, the bar, and the auto showroom designed in the first two years of his collaboration with Carlos Arniches. This association lasted until he left the country in 1936. During this period Martín Domínguez also devoted much time to discussions looking to the preparation of a new housing law for Spain. In addition to residences and hotel projects, Domínguez and Arniches produced twelve *Albergues de Carretara* for the Patronata Nacional de Turismo (1928), a kindergarten (1934), and a secondary school (1931), a series of building types for the tobacco industry (Centros de Fermentacion, Secaderos de Tobaco, Centros de Recogida for the Patronato para el Cultivo del Tobaco, 1935-1936), and a subway station (1933). For the latter, Eduardo Torroja was the engineer: two years later he was part of the team which produced the firm’s masterpiece, the Zarzuela racetrack complex. There the grand-stands are sheltered by scalloped reinforced concrete canopies with edges only two inches thick cantilevered forty-three feet from their supports.

Fascinated by the dynamic and esthetic impulses of the new as well as the old worlds, Martín Domínguez made his first trip to the United States in 1932-33, designing movie sets for Hollywood. After 1936 he continued this activity in Cuba, and his first major commission in Havana was the *Radiocentro* (1945-49), containing a movie house and office block, as well as radio and television stations. In 1951 he won first prize in the competition for the *Teatro Nacional*. In the meantime, he had designed three private houses for presidents of Cuba and married the charming Josefina Ruz. The other immediate survivors are his architect son, Martin, and two sisters in Spain.

From 1943 to 1948 his work was done in collaboration with Emilio del Junco and Miguel Gaston, and from 1948 to 1952 with Gaston alone. From 1952 until 1960 he was associated with Ernesto Gomez Sampera. The large scale of Domínguez’s major projects of the 1950s reflects the revival of building activity after the second World War, but their complexity, plasticity and structural daring recall the Madrid works of the mid-1950s. When it was

---

1 Felix Candela, address at Memorial Convocation for Martín Domínguez Esteban, Monday, October 19, 1970.  
Cornell University Faculty Memorial Statement <http://ecommons.library.cornell.edu/handle/1813/17813>

built in 1956, the thirty-nine-story F.O.C.S.A. was the tallest concrete structure in the western hemisphere. It is still a dominant landmark of the Havana skyline. Thirty floors were devoted to condominium apartments with cantilevered exterior access galleries. Occupying a slab structure built like an egg crate and bent in the middle, they overlook a garden atop a terrace structure. The latter contains stores at street level with offices above, and three levels of parking and a TV studio below ground. The whole is topped off by a five -story tower intended for duplex apartments and a bankers' club. The F.O.C.S.A. (Fomento de Obras y Construcciones S.A.) complex was the culmination of a series of important projects in Havana in which building elements for a variety of uses were combined on a restricted site in a sculptural manner. More restrained official projects such as the central Post Office and Ministry of Communications in Havana, and the Municipal Building for Marianao (both 1951), were developed in the same manner, with office slabs above horizontal terrace structures.

The architect also continued his efforts to develop better low-cost housing, devising in 1954 in association with Gaston and the engineer Bartolomé Bestard of the F.O.C.S.A., a prefabrication system of light precast concrete panels. After 1959 Domínguez concentrated on a series of low-cost concrete housing projects. Most interesting is the *Edificio Libertad* Tower, winning design in a competition for a high-rise structure with four hundred apartments. This fifty-story scheme was a work of extraordinary strength and vibrancy, a fitting and poetic capstone to the second phase of the architect's international career.

After he joined the staff of the Department of Architecture, Professor Domínguez was in demand as a consultant, traveling to Canada to advise on new urban commercial complexes, and, under official auspices, to South America to advise various governments and agencies on housing. For some years he also maintained an architectural office with Peter Cohen in Rochester, New York. Throughout his long and productive career as a Professional architect, Martín Domínguez retained an extraordinary ability to work with others and a determination to express in design the potential of twentieth-century technology, art, and social organization.

Many recall affectionately his beret and cape, his mustachios and sharp eye. Few completely understood his sense of affinity with King Philip II of Spain, the withdrawn emperor who built the *Escorial* and ended his life there. Like Philip II, Martín Domínguez died on the thirteenth of September. Death came to him in New York; he is buried in Spain.

*Colin Rowe, Frederick M. Wells, Stephen W. Jacobs*