



Julia van Wilpe in Costa Rica: Exploring her career through her personal archive Julia van Wilpe en Costa Rica: Exploración inicial de su trayectoria a partir de su acervo personal

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ABSTRACT This article examines the career of architect Julia van Wilpe (Germany, 1942), who developed her career in Costa Rica through her personal archive, understood as a device for preserving, remembering and structuring narratives about her professional practice. The qualitative research combined documentary review, semi-structured interviews, and archive analysis, initially identifying three main categories: childhood and personal memories, university training materials, and documentation of built and unbuilt projects. The findings show that the archive functions as a mechanism of the architect's agency over her history, reflecting a tacit curatorial process that intertwines memory, forgetting, and the construction of disciplinary narratives. The article concludes by highlighting the importance of consolidating a disciplinary archive that preserves, systematizes, and expands research possibilities on van Wilpe and other underrepresented women architects in Costa Rica and the region.

RESUMEN El presente artículo examina la trayectoria de la arquitecta Julia van Wilpe (Alemania, 1942), quien desarrolló su carrera en Costa Rica a partir de su acervo personal, entendido como un dispositivo para preservar, recordar y estructurar narrativas sobre su propia práctica profesional. La investigación cualitativa combinó revisión documental, entrevistas semiestructuradas y análisis del acervo de la arquitecta, identificando inicialmente tres categorías principales: recuerdos de infancia y vida personal, materiales de formación universitaria y documentación de proyectos construidos como no edificadas. Los hallazgos muestran que el acervo opera como un mecanismo de agencia de la arquitecta sobre su historia, reflejando un proceso curatorial tácito que articula memoria, olvido y construcción de narrativas disciplinarias. El artículo concluye señalando la importancia de consolidar un archivo disciplinar que preserve, sistematice y amplíe las posibilidades de investigación sobre van Wilpe y otras arquitectas menos visibilizadas en Costa Rica y la región.

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1. Introduction

Over the past five years, both in Costa Rica and in other regions of the world, architectural archives have emerged as the central focus of various research and disciplinary outreach projects. Global studies describe and examine these archives as devices for the production of knowledge, meaning they drive the study of the discipline and promote specific ways of understanding it, as well as information systems governed by multiple power structures (López Uribe, 2020). Some of these works even address issues related to “absent, silent, or rendered invisible archives, as well as archival policies and even the role of communication in architectural archives” (Gilsanz Díaz, 2024, p. 24).

For their part, local research has focused on highlighting specific archives, describing their development processes, and examining their general characteristics and the types of documents they contain (Durán Segura et al., 2024). Furthermore, they have sought to highlight the careers of specific architects and the work they have done regarding architectural archives and the contextualization of their contents (Escuela de Arquitectura, 2024; Sanou Alfaro, 2024). Other efforts have focused on exploring private collections and outlining possible ways to organize their components into specialized thematic archives (Monge Cortés and Picado-García, 2022).

Against this local and global backdrop, the research project *Julia van Wilpe: Six Decades of Practice in Costa Rica* was launched in 2024. Its overall purpose was to study the extensive and diverse career of the German architect Julia Lettow Sprengel (1942)—later known as Julia van Wilpe—from her arrival in the country in 1964 to the present¹. In its initial phase, the study focused on examining her built architectural work and how van Wilpe had addressed the relationship between her buildings and their respective immediate surroundings, particularly her approaches to factors such as climate, topography, and vegetation.

Some previous studies had characterized van Wilpe as an architect interested both in “seeking an architecture that was specific to this place” (van Wilpe, 2021, p. 38) and in “developing a tropical architecture in harmony with its surroundings, adapting to local conditions and inspired by her love and respect for nature” (Quesada Avendaño, 2022, p. 64). Based on these narratives, projects such as *Parque Montaña Sol* (1975), *Casa Kors* (1988), *Planificación Ecológica Playa Grande* (1989), *Hotel Monteverde Lodge* (1990), *Fabrica Fructa S.A.* (2006), and *Casa del Sol* (2006) became the most widely publicized works through local books, magazines, and newspapers, emerging as key references in her professional career, both in terms of design and discourse.

However, as the research progressed, it became evident that the emphasis placed on these projects and approaches—along with factors such as the need to “make a name for herself in a man’s world” (Quesada Avendaño, 2022, p. 65), given that during the 1970s most architecture professionals in Costa Rica “were men trained at international universities” (Pérez Saborío, 2025, p. 44)—led to the marginalization of other dimensions of her career. Among these are her disciplinary training in Germany, lesser-known design practices, her teaching work at the Autonomous University of Central America (UACA), her environmental activism, and her ties to the local architectural community.

Alongside this preliminary finding, van Wilpe revealed an element that had not been previously documented: his private collection (Figure 1). Following this discovery, this collection—which brought together materials of various kinds, such as architectural plans, sketches, models, books, photographs, slides, academic papers, newspaper and magazine clippings, records of unbuilt projects, and personal documents relating to multiple chapters of his life—became a fundamental tool for this research.

To historicize van Wilpe’s complex career in Costa Rica, this article structures its analysis of the systematization of her collection—as the subject of study in this work—into four sections. The first part outlines the methodology employed and describes the key concepts of the process. The second presents a set of biographical aspects of the architect—essential data for comprehensively understanding both her collection and her documentation and organization of her professional practices. The third details the main findings of the work with van Wilpe’s collection, in order to outline criteria for its future organization into an archive of the architect. The fourth section offers conclusions and observations on the role of the collection in constructing narratives specific to the architect’s career, as well as recommendations to continue the work of reading, systematizing, and professionally presenting the collection and its eventual consolidation into an archive on Julia van Wilpe.

2. Methods: Architectural collections and archives

The study used a qualitative approach to historicize Julia van Wilpe’s career in Costa Rica, drawing on documentary and testimonial sources. Specifically, the methodological procedure of this article—which stems from the project *Julia van Wilpe: Six Decades of Work in Costa Rica*—was organized into three phases: initial collection of information on van

¹ In 1964, Julia Lettow Sprengel married mechanical engineer Derk van Wilpe von Malchus (Netherlands, 1937); from that point on, Lettow Sprengel took her husband’s surname and became officially known as Julia van Wilpe.



Figure 1: Collection of architect Julia van Wilpe. Van Wilpe House, Montaña del Sol Park, Costa Rica. (2025)

Wilpe; generation of new documentary materials and evidence to guide the historical interpretation of her work; and, exploration of her personal collection based on materials developed in preparation for the eventual creation of an archive on the architect.

In the first stage, a review of references already published about the architect across various media and platforms was conducted. It was found that van Wilpe's career has been documented locally and internationally in the following ways: in trade magazines—such as *Habitar*, *Su Casa*, and *Estilos & Casas*—in newspapers—such as *La República*, *La Nación*, *La Prensa*, *Libra Costa Rica Aktuell*, and *The Tico Times*—at professional events and their respective records—such as the *1st Costa Rican Architecture and Urbanism Biennial* (1992), the *2nd Costa Rican Architecture and Urbanism Biennial* (1994), and the *8th Pan-American Biennial in Quito* (1992); in which she was also awarded prizes—; in curated exhibitions—such as *A Project of Trends: 30 Years of Architecture Biennales in Costa Rica* (2022) at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MADC)—; and in published books—such as *Approaches to the Tropical. A Brief Account of Contemporary Architecture in Costa Rica. Volume 1* (2021) and *Women Architects of Costa Rica, Their Visions and Contributions* (2022)—. Although this review established a preliminary frame of reference, it also highlights the lack of systematic historiographical studies of her entire career.

Once the previous stage was completed, the process of gathering data began, in collaboration with architect van Wilpe, to comprehensively examine her career; specifically, with the intention of delving into aspects such as her architectural training, design practices, teaching work, and professional association involvement. Initially, the open-ended semi-structured interview (Hammer and Wildavsky, 1990) was defined as the primary data collection technique; understood as a “tool for acquiring knowledge, and the oral archives derived from it as primary sources” (Gilsanz-Díaz et al., 2024, p. 42). Thus, a series of interviews with the architect was designed to take place in 2025, in both virtual and in-person formats, as a strategy to document the least-documented aspects of her career.

During the first of these conversations, when asked about projects she had carried out in Nosara, Guanacaste, in the 1970s, van Wilpe replied: “Yes, there are some photos around here. I never throw anything away, absolutely nothing. There are boxes of old photos there” (J. van Wilpe, personal communication, January 17, 2025). This statement revealed the existence of a vast and previously unknown personal archive, consisting of plans, photographs, and various unpublished documents.

At the same time, with the discovery of van Wilpe's collection—which she keeps at her residence—it became clear that the architect uses it as a tool to

recall and access her own memory, her personal and professional history. In this phase, it was crucial to investigate both the dynamics and functions of collections and archives, and their relationship to the work of architects. Thus, it was concluded that in this case the collection drives the act of remembering—understood as “a vital human activity [that] defines our ties to the past, and the ways in which we remember define us in the present” (Guasch, 2005, p. 158)—and, in doing so, “restores the necessary past-present dialogues” (Guasch, 2005, p. 158).

This encounter necessitated a reformulation of the originally proposed methodological design. From that point on, the interviews served a threefold purpose in the research: 1) To generate oral testimonies from van Wilpe, as well as from colleagues, that could be used as a primary source for the work²; 2) To identify points of access to the architect's personal archive; 3) To outline guidelines for the review, description, and analysis of said archive.

The study then proceeded to develop between two types of complementary records. On the one hand, the personal archive compiled by van Wilpe over several decades, and, on the other hand, a second archive, created by the research project, consisting of interviews, field notes, records of the review of the first archive, and the digitization of some of its components. Thus, it was concluded that the articulation between both collections would be key to outlining initial premises capable of structuring an archive on the architect's complex career.

This dual structure raised the need to conceptually clarify the distinction between collection and archive, which is central to the positioning of the work. As stated by Luna Rodríguez (2020):

The selection of the archive's collection occurs gradually. It is a process through which the author chooses what they consider valuable and preserves it. What remains of this selection of content responds—consciously or not—to a narrative proposed by the author for subsequent analysis, which is why the archive acquires the capacity to generate a discourse: the collection is the language through which the author formulates a message that is preserved over time by means of the objects that make up the archive (p. 45).

In this sense, van Wilpe's archive is a tacit exercise in self-curation, in which the architect herself shapes an image of her career and guides the interpretation of her work. As Selda Banci notes, “the materials in the architects' archives also define the research conducted on them” (Banci, 2020, p. 29).

Thus, recognizing that archives are sources of information that preserve historical truth (Banci, 2020), and that “they have the capacity to reflect, through their holdings, the social, cultural, and economic context” (Luna Rodríguez, 2020, p. 45), the eventual creation of an archive on van Wilpe

² Under this premise, interviews were conducted with architects who interacted with van Wilpe in various ways—whether as his students while he taught at UACA, as professional colleagues with whom he shared design processes and/or union struggles, or as others from whom he learned to navigate life in a country different from his country of origin; specifically, Álvaro Rojas Quirós (Costa Rica, 1949), Eugenia Solís Umaña (Costa Rica, 1953), Franz Beer Chavarrín (Costa Rica, 1937), Gloria González García (Costa Rica, 1959), Mauren Coto Alfaro (Costa Rica, 1973), and Víctor Cañas Collado (Costa Rica, 1947). These conversations were recorded, organized, annotated, and published in the document titled *Julia [Lettow Sprengel]: Shared and Annotated Dialogues* (Picado-García and Mora Valenciano, 2026a).

was conceived as a structured and organized way to connect its own collection with other disciplinary fields. In essence, as a “dynamic knowledge system (...) related both to the logics of information, systematization, and preservation (...) and to its value as an instrument for the construction of memories, whether historical, collective, or individual” (Ebeling and Günzel, 2009 in Ortiz Wallner, 2015, p. 130). Consequently, for this study, van Wilpe’s personal collection is treated as the raw material, while the archive is viewed as its organized and systematized result, guided by the findings of the interviews conducted within the framework of this work.

In this study, the exploration of van Wilpe’s collection made it possible to begin identifying not only the volume and diversity of the preserved material but also the—implicit—criteria through which the architect has narrated her own career. This laid the groundwork for outlining an initial proposal for organizing this material into an archive on van Wilpe, which will guide readings and future research on her extensive and multifaceted professional and personal life.

3. Julia van Wilpe and her collection

Julia Lettow Sprengel was born on February 10, 1942, in Bremen, in northwestern Germany. The daughter of sculptor Johann Kurt Lettow Bremer and fashion designer Rebecka Meyer-Sprengel, she grew up in an environment she recalls as “stimulating and creative,” though deeply marked by “misery, cold, and hunger”—characteristics of a country immersed in the wartime context of World War II (van Wilpe, 2025). This period and the scarcity she experienced during it, according to van Wilpe, shaped her relationship with objects, and even her way of documenting and preserving her own work and history.

In 1961, he enrolled at the *Technische Hochschule Hannover* (Hannover University of Applied Sciences and Arts), where he began his studies in architecture (Figure 2). During his training, as he recounted, he took complementary courses in writing, drawing, sculpture, geometry, and spatial representation, among others, which enriched and broadened his approach to the discipline and influenced the way he documented his learning processes (J. van Wilpe, personal communication, March 21, 2025). Some of the graphic exercises he produced now constitute a substantial part of the materials in his collection.

During that period, he met Derk van Wilpe von Malchus, a mechanical engineering student at the same university. The two traveled to Costa Rica in 1964, and in 1965 they were married³. Over the following decade, they lived in different regions of the country, developing projects of various types and scales (Figure 3), while raising their children. These early experiences, marked by a process of understanding and adapting to the country’s environmental, social, and cultural conditions, were documented through sketches and various documents that she would keep in her personal collection.

In 1975 she returned to Germany to complete her university studies, and in 1977 she earned the degree of *Diplom-Ingenieur Fachrichtung Architektur*. A year later she returned to Costa Rica and began the process of joining the Federated College of Engineers and Architects (CFIA).

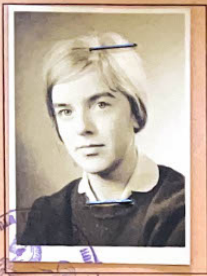
His return involved bringing with him the first part of what would later become his personal collection: graphic, color, geometry, and volumetric exercises; perspective and figure studies; academic assignments; as well as documents related to his early design projects. These materials, essential for the professional registration process, constituted not only evidence of her training but also a collection of testimonies regarding the particularities with which she began to delve into the practice of architecture and its relationship to other fields. Over time, this collection was gathered at *Casa van Wilpe* (1983), in a room specially equipped for its safekeeping.

Regarding this move and its significance, the architect recounts:

When I arrived in Costa Rica, I had to bring many things from Germany, such as watercolors or paintings (...) so I took the opportunity [to] make some wooden boxes—actually, my parents helped with this—and we packed all my university work into them, with the aim of being able to use them here for my professional registration. Because I not only had to take exams but also present my university work in order to apply for the recognition of my degree (J. van Wilpe, personal communication, March 21, 2025).

³ Regarding Derk van Wilpe’s family ties and his relationship with Costa Rica, architect van Wilpe notes the following:

Otto von Schroeter, an ancestor of Derk van Wilpe von Malchus, arrived in Costa Rica from Germany around 1860; von Schroeter married the daughter of the U.S. ambassador to Costa Rica—who was also of German origin and bore the surname Riotte. From this union was born Derk’s grandmother, Lilly von Schröter. (...) The von Schröter family owned numerous coffee plantations on the central plateau and were among the first exporters of coffee to England. Although his grandmother was born in Costa Rica, for reasons that have not yet been determined, Derk van Wilpe and his mother, Petra von Malchus, were not born in the country but in Berlin, though he was raised in the Netherlands because his father, Gerard van Wilpe, was of Dutch origin. However, following World War II, the family returned to Costa Rica. Later, Derk was sent to Germany to pursue his university studies, during which time he met Julia Lettow Sprengel (J. van Wilpe, personal communication, March 2, 2026).



Eigenhändige Unterschrift des Buchinhabers

Julia Lettow

DES STUDENTEN

Familienname: LETTOW

Vorname: JULIA

Geburtsdag: 10. 2. 1942

Geburtsort: BREMEN

Kreis oder Provinz: BREMEN

Staatsangehörigkeit: DEUTSCH

Heimatanschrift: BREMEN - OBERNEULAND
AM QUERKAMP 59

SCHULBILDUNG DES STUDENTEN

Reifezeugnis des KIPPENBERG - GYMNASIUMS

zu BREMEN

vom 22. 2. 1961

Ergänzungsprüfungen: _____

Sonstige Vorbildung: _____

ZUR BEACHTUNG!

Das Studienbuch gilt für die gesamte Studienzeit des Inhabers. Das Buch ist der alleinige Studiennachweis bei der Meldung zu den Prüfungen. Es ist also eine wichtige Urkunde, die sorgfältig zu verwahren ist. Die Ausstellung einer Zweitschrift des Studienbuches ist mit Zeitaufwand und erheblichen Kosten verknüpft.

Figure 2: Julia van Wilpe's college transcript (1961). Julia van Wilpe Collection (2025)



PROJECT DEVELOPERS

THE TWO PRINCIPAL UNNER DEVELOPERS OF THE PROJECT ARE DERK VAN WILPE AND JULIA VAN WILPE.

DERK VAN WILPE

MR. VAN WILPE IS 51 YEARS OLD. HIS FATHER IS FROM HOLLAND AND HIS MOTHER BELONGS TO ONE OF THE OLDES TGERMAN FAMILIES RESIDING IN COSTA RICA SINCE 1850. HIS GREAT GREAT GRANDFATHER WAS THE FIRST U.S. AMBASSADOR TO COSTA RICA DURING THE 1860'S.

DERK VAN WILPE STUDIED MECHANICAL ENGINEERING AND GRADUATED FROM THE TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY OF HANNOVER, WEST GERMANY IN 1962.

IN 1964 HE MARRIED JULIA, WHOM HE HAD MET AT THE UNIVERSITY. THEY HAVE TWO SONS, NOW 21 AND 23 YEARS OLD.

MR. VAN WILPE HAS GAINED AN EXTREMELY GREAT RANGE OF EXPERIENCE FROM PROJECTS HE HAS DIRECTED IN COSTA RICA.

FROM 1962 TO 1964 HE MANAGED HIS FAMILY'S COFFEE FARM AND HIS OWN 4000 ACRE CATTLE RANCH IN SARAPIQUI.

IN 1964 HE ESTABLISHED HIS OWN ROAD BUILDING COMPANY WILPETRAC S.A. (ADJOINING HISTORY OF WILPETRAC S.A.) WHICH IS STILL ACTIVE.

FROM 1965 UNTIL 1967 MR. VAN WILPE MANAGED A SUGAR MILL IN GRECIA, COSTA RICA. DURING THIS TIME HE REBUILT AND MODERNIZED THE SUGAR MILL CONVERTING THE MILL IN TO THE MOST EFFICIENT IN COSTA RICA ATAINING UP TO THE PRESENT TIME THE HIGHEST SUGAR YIELD OF POUNDS SUGAR PER TON OF CANE DURING HIS TENURE.

THE YEARS 1968 TO 1971 FOUND MR. VAN WILPE CONSTRUCTING A WOOD PROCESSING PLANT, WHICH INCLUDED A LARGE SAWMILL AND THE BIGGEST DRY KILN INSTALLATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA, USED FOR THE MANUFACTURE OF FURNITURE PARTS AND MOULDINGS.

FROM 1972 UNTIL 1974 DERK AND HIS WIFE JULIA OWNED A CONSTRUCTION COMPANY WHICH BUILT FIFTEEN LUXURY HOMES AT THE NOSARA BEACH PROJECT IN GUANACASTE. DURING THIS PROJECT THEY GAINED VALUABLE EXPERIENCE BECAUSE OF THE DIFFICULT AND ADVERSE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH THIS PROJECT WAS COMPLETED. AT THAT TIME THERE WAS NO ROAD TO NOSARA AND ALL THE BUILDING MATERIALS HAD TO BE BROUGHT IN BY BOAT AND THE CARGO LANDED ON THE BEACH.

SINCE 1974 MR. VAN WILPE HAS SUCCESSFULLY DEVELOPED SEVERAL RESIDENCIAL PROJECTS AND HAS COMPLETED HIS OWN PROJECT, PARQUE MONTARA DEL SOL. WHICH REPRESENTS AN INVESTMENT UPWARDS OF \$2,500,000.-.

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TELEX WILPE 3022 C.R.



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Figure 3: Resume of Julia van Wilpe and Derk van Wilpe in the unpublished document Hotel Club: Montaña del Sol (1990). Julia van Wilpe Collection (2025)

Since then, the collection she has been gathering—and continues to expand—has taken shape at different moments in her life, eventually forming a heterogeneous body of work that encompasses materials linked both to her personal history and to her academic training and her multiple approaches to professional practice. In essence, this collection, the result of decades of practice, travel, and conscious accumulation, offers a unique window into how the architect has documented, organized, and articulated her own career over time.

4. Findings: “I never throw anything away”

During the research process, Julia van Wilpe reiterated that “she has kept things her whole life, [and that] she has never been able to throw anything away” (J. van Wilpe, personal communication, March 21, 2025). She links this practice to the social and political context of her childhood, marked by war and scarcity. From that time on, she began to keep photographs, objects, and personal documents that would allow her to record, preserve, and narrate her own life story (Figure 4). In this regard, she recalls:

I was born during World War II, and personally I didn't suffer the effects of the war, but my parents did. So, in the postwar period, there was a shortage of everything; we went hungry, we had no shoes, we had no clothes, so everything had value. (...) That's how I was raised, and it's still like that. I think twice before throwing anything away. But in this specific case, we're talking about blueprints, projects, studies, from college, and as you saw, I have my student work here with me—I saved it, I brought it from Germany, all packed in a box shipped by boat—because it is part of my history, of my thinking, of who I am, what shaped me, what gave me values, so for this reason I keep it (J. van Wilpe, personal communication, March 21, 2025).

This testimony helps define the first category of van Wilpe's collection: materials linked to her personal life and the ways in which these experiences intertwine with her professional development.

The second category pertains to his years of formal training. Regarding this period, van Wilpe notes that it had specific emphases that influenced both his approach to architectural design and his subsequent teaching practice. In this section of his collection, he preserves architectural plans and drawings that reveal a teaching style marked—as he indicates—by ideas derived from the Bauhaus, particularly in terms of volumetrics, formal languages, construction systems, and the selection of materials (Figure 5)⁴. He also preserves topography exercises (Figure 6), which he considers essential for understanding the characteristics of the sites where he has designed his buildings, with the aim of making his interventions “as non-destructive as possible” (J. van Wilpe, personal communication, March 21, 2025).

The documents bring together insights on lighting, temperature and humidity control, and their integration into architectural objects; some even include notes from his professors, whom he remembers for their rigor and their respectful, dignified, and gentle yet critical manner⁵. This section also includes books fundamental to his education, such as *Tropenbau: Building in the Tropics* (1969) by Georg Lippsmeier (Figure 7), and *Housing and Buildings in Warm and Tropical Zones* (1977) by Otto H. Koenigsberger, T. G. Ingersoll, Alan Mayhew, and Steven Vajk Szokolay—works he later incorporated into his teaching practice (G. González García, personal communication, 2025; J. van Wilpe, personal communication, February 14, 2025)⁶.

The third category brings together documentation on built projects that received little publicity, such as the *Nevermann House* (1985) (Figure 8), and on unbuilt proposals, including the *Hotel Club: Montaña del Sol* (ca. 1987–1990) (Figure 9). These materials allow us to identify architectural projects developed over time, as well as networks of collaboration with other architecture professionals⁷.

This section has also served as a systematic record of the architect's design practice in Costa Rica and as a resource for learning and reflecting on her own work and the relationship between architecture and the local context.

■ 4. Regarding architect Julia van Wilpe's professional training, which began in 1961 and concluded in 1977 after she returned to Germany following her time in Costa Rica—specifically regarding the period when she began her architectural studies—van Wilpe recalls the following:

[When she began her studies.] Germany was deeply marked by the consequences of the postwar period, and the country was immersed in a process of rapid reconstruction, essentially in functional terms. Low-quality housing complexes were built, with no regard for architecture. (...) Few architects remained, and those who did were either very old or very young. During that time, the construction of new roads was also promoted, and an urban model centered on the automobile rather than on people took hold (J. van Wilpe, personal communication, March 3, 2026).

However, when he resumed his studies in the mid-1970s, van Wilpe noticed a significant shift:

When I returned to the University (...) the approach was completely different. Germany was now a very prosperous country, experiencing a massive economic boom. Now, quality and aesthetics in architecture and construction mattered. [She also recalls that] many architects went to work abroad, in countries in Africa, and interest in climate-appropriate design began (J. van Wilpe, personal communication, March 3, 2026).

In essence, according to the architect herself, the program she studied in changed significantly from the time she entered until she graduated, specifically regarding the incorporation of topics related to “aesthetic quality and spatial and material luxury in the execution and design of private and public spaces” and, in conjunction with these, “topics such as responsibility for the well-being of developing countries in Africa and the East emerged” (J. van Wilpe, personal communication, March 3, 2026).

■ 5. It is worth noting that these terms have been used to refer to Julia van Wilpe's teaching style during her years at UACA; indeed, her pedagogical approach has been described as “gentle” (F. Beer Chaverri, personal communication, June 9, 2025; M. Coto Alfaro, personal communication, May 8, 2025; G. González García, personal communication, 2025; Á. Rojas Quirós, personal communication, May 5, 2025). This characterization is currently being studied as part of the research interests of the project from which this article stems.

■ 6. Regarding these references, although van Wilpe has not previously specified whether he knew of people or projects with similar approaches or interests in Costa Rica or the region, the following should be noted. In the following decades, “Koenigsberger traveled to Costa Rica between April 14 and May 4, 1970, to offer his opinion on the needs of the future School of Architecture [EAQ]” at the University of Costa Rica (Solano-Meza, 2019, p. 164). In this regard, according to Solano-Meza, the “meeting between the three Costa Ricans [—Rafael “Felo” García, Jorge Bertheau, and Edgar Brenes, coordinators of the School during its early years in 1971—] and Otto H. Koenigsberger likely constitutes one of the events that profoundly shaped the direction the school took during its first years of operation” (Solano-Meza, 2019, p. 164). Likewise, students at the EAQ during those early years recall that their first exposure to topics such as tropical architecture, ecosystems, and the climates characteristic of the intertropical convergence zone, among others, came through Koenigsberger's books (Solís Umaña, 2022, p. 6).

■ 7. Regarding these collaborative experiences, it was found that architect Víctor Cañas Collado had worked alongside van Wilpe on a project; regarding that experience, Cañas Collado noted: “It was a very enriching experience working with Julia; she is an open person who communicates easily, so we both contributed, and the project emerged from a consensus of ideas. I had never done anything like that in my professional career” (V. Cañas Collado, personal communication, May 9, 2025).



Figure 4: Photographs from Julia van Wilpe's childhood (1950), Julia van Wilpe Collection (2025)



Figure 5: Architectural design exercises developed by Julia van Wilpe (1963). Julia van Wilpe Collection (2025)

In fact, architects such as Franz Beer Chaverri consider that “the evolution is very clear in her works. (...) I think that in every project she undertakes, she draws on the experience of the previous one” (F. Beer Chaverri, personal communication, June 9, 2025); which, under the aforementioned premise, can be linked to the extensive and rigorous documentation of her work that van Wilpe preserves.

Furthermore, according to van Wilpe, she has sought to incorporate the influence of Costa Rican reality into her works—particularly the climate, building traditions, and, among other things, nature—aspects that are documented in the materials she herself has preserved. Her collection on this subject includes press clippings related to her work and books used in her teaching, which complement the documentation of her designed work.

Based on this collection, an archive on van Wilpe could initially be structured around three sections: memories of her childhood and personal life; materials from her university education; and documentation of projects built and/or not built in Costa Rica. These categories even allow us to begin to develop narratives about other deeply intertwined dimensions of her career, linked to her teaching practice, her work as an environmental activist, and her role in local professional associations. In this regard, Luna Rodríguez notes that the archives of architects often contain “items that at the time carried everyday content, such as correspondence or personal photographs, as well as objects that held greater significance within the architect’s architectural output” (Luna Rodríguez, 2020, p. 45), which, in turn, “facilitate the creation of new stories and encourage the preservation of documents and objects of both an individual and collective nature” (Durán Segura et al., 2024, p. 67).

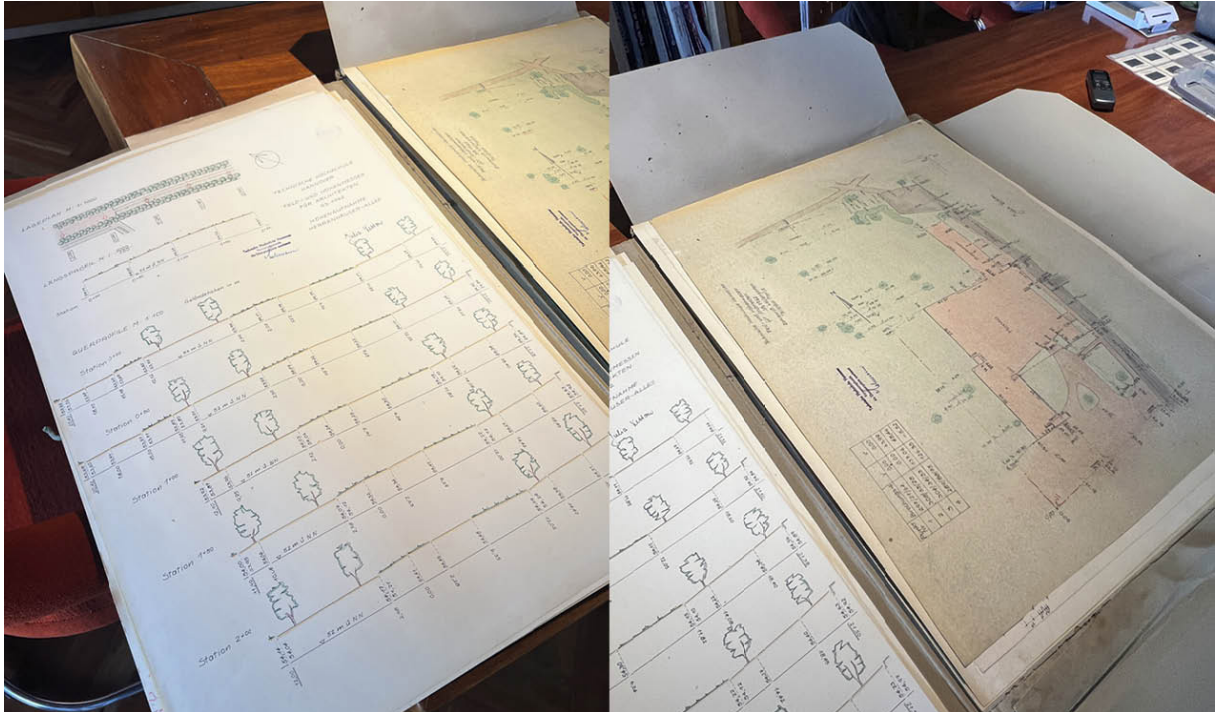


Figure 6: Topography exercises developed by Julia van Wilpe (1963). Acervo Julia van Wilpe Collection (2025)

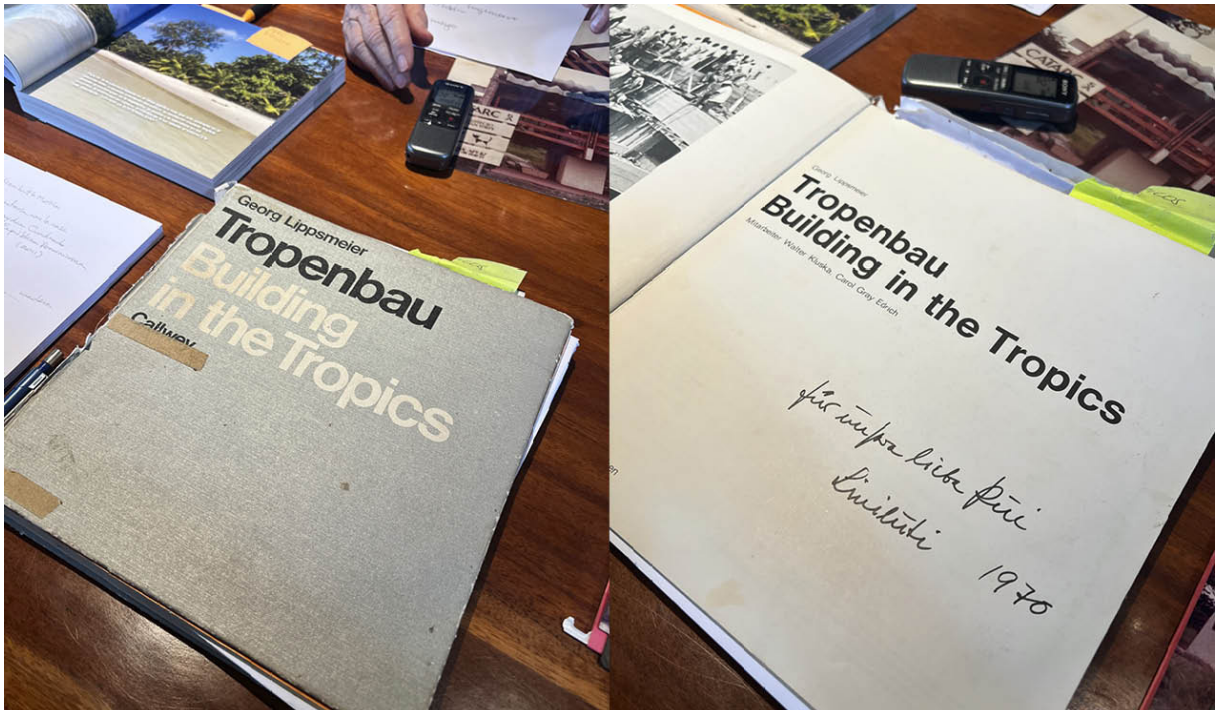


Figure 7: Book used by Julia van Wilpe (1970). Julia van Wilpe Collection (2025)



Figure 8: Photographs of Casa Nevermann (1985). Julia van Wilpe Collection (2025)

5. Discussion and conclusions

Seven main conclusions emerge from this research.

First, Julia van Wilpe's archive constitutes a fundamental tool through which the architect, from the present, accesses her personal and professional trajectory. In essence, this archive functions as a device for remembering, allowing her to reconstruct her past and construct narratives about it. However, it should be noted that this study represents only an initial approach to this collection; therefore, future research may focus on the process of consolidating a broader and more rigorous archive of her work and career, based on her personal collection and the collection developed as part of this project.

Second, the collection grants van Wilpe a significant degree of agency over her own history, since, by remaining in her residence, she is the one who safeguards, preserves, and manages it. The guided tour led by the architect proved decisive for the analysis; in this vein, the semi-structured interview played a central role in understanding how the collection functions and in outlining initial criteria for structuring an archive based on these materials. The resulting materials—interviews with van Wilpe as well as with Solís Umaña, González García, Coto Alfaro, Rojas Quirós, Cañas Collado, and Beer Chaverri, the digitization of documents, and other notes and records—constitute a second collection that engages with the architect's, creates tension with it, and adds complexity to its narratives.

Third, drawing on the argument put forth by Díaz-García (2024), "no archive is innocent, for memory and forgetting alike converge within its collection, both determined by the selective power of those who

construct, curate, and disseminate them" (p. 27). In this sense, van Wilpe's collection reveals a tacit personal curatorial process through which the architect has selected, organized, and defined the ways in which her career can be interpreted and disseminated.

Fourth, the partial opening of this collection and its dissemination from external perspectives have given rise to three significant developments: first, the raising of questions about how to approach a previously restricted collection and how to structure a public archive based on it; second, a deeper understanding of his career, situated within multiple disciplinary contexts, both local and international; and, third, it has spurred a questioning of canonized local historical narratives, particularly regarding the need to encourage a "revision of the disciplinary canon" (Lara et al., 2023, p. 3).

Fifth, although certain aspects of van Wilpe's work could be superficially linked to a Eurocentric canonical narrative—due to his training in Germany and the historical period in which he is situated—his career has remained on the margins of the dominant disciplinary canon in Costa Rica. In this sense, it is pertinent to examine it through the lens of Kirsty's (2020) observation that "The canon in architectural history has been predominantly constructed around the image of individual White men, of solo Avant-garde architects within modernity who are projected as custodians of architectural movements" (p. 24). Van Wilpe's work—marked by a systematic focus on climate, vegetation, and the interrelationships between architecture and the environment—not only distances itself from that hegemonic model but also offers material to question and expand it.



Figure 9: Drawings of *Hotel Club: Montaña del Sol*, designed by architect Julia van Wilpe in collaboration with architect Víctor Cañas Collado (ca. 1987–1990). Julia van Wilpe Collection (2025)

Precisely, her work allows us to “develop our own tools to understand and question our regional work and thought” (Lara et al., 2023, p. 4), situating his contribution outside the heroic and androcentric tradition that has historically shaped the disciplinary canon.

Sixth, it should be noted that both this specific work and the research project from which it stems seek to highlight the value of oral testimony—and its recording—as a means of historical-architectural inquiry, through which it is possible to access contexts, moments, and situated perspectives on specific topics. In this case, the interview “does not aim to limit itself to a monographic reconstruction of Julia van Wilpe, (...) [but rather, it becomes a means to] get to know and recognize her (...) by situating her trajectory within specific local and even regional narratives” (Picado-García and Mora Valenciano, 2026b, p. 5). In this vein, this research is part of an effort to propose “a model of architectural research more attentive to the humanity of narratives. (...) [In which] The spoken word, especially that which emerges from dialogue, not only illuminates new interpretations: it broadens the horizon of what we consider legitimate to document” (Durán Segura, 2026, p. 33). From this perspective, “orality, quite rightly, is also an archive: a living, unstable, open archive, capable of holding memories that have not yet found a place on paper, but which are already transforming the way we think about and practice architecture” (Durán Segura, 2026, p. 33).

Finally, the need arises to critically reflect on the role of private architectural collections in the construction of a local and regional disciplinary history. These collections can be understood as spaces of resistance and as means for the reconfiguration and expansion of historical narratives of architecture in Costa Rica. Consequently, it is essential to continue exploring Julia van Wilpe’s collection and its eventual consolidation into an archive on the architect, in order to situate her career more precisely within the local context and contribute to the revision and rewriting of canonical architectural historiography, taking into account not only her personal life but also her teaching work and the entirety of her designed work.

At the same time, it is pertinent to continue examining the role of disciplinary archives and their characteristics in relation to the architectural narratives produced in Costa Rica from the second half of the 20th century to the present.

It should be emphasized that the study presented here constitutes a first approach to Julia van Wilpe's collection; within this framework, future research could delve deeper into its analysis from a local perspective, incorporating approaches linked to feminist archives, marginalized female architects, and architectural practices considered minor (Kirsty, 2020). Likewise, it will be necessary to undertake fundamental tasks such as quantifying the total number of items comprising the collection, the detailed and systematic classification of the materials—according to format, condition, document type, year, and other archival criteria—as well as the characterization and evaluation of the space where it is currently housed. The absence of this information constitutes one of the main limitations affecting its preservation and study today. In relation to these methodological considerations, it is pertinent to consider the work carried out by Dardel-Coronado and Rossetti-Krauss, whose study of the documentary collection of architect José Vial Armstrong (Chile, 1926–1983) offers a useful framework for classifying and examining architectural collections. This proposal not only provides a basis for understanding architectural trajectories situated in specific contexts but, in the case addressed here, opens the possibility of delineating new categories of analysis linked to the history of architecture in Costa Rica and the region, based on the consolidation of disciplinary archives (Dardel-Coronado and Rossetti-Krauss, 2024).

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