

SOFT architecture

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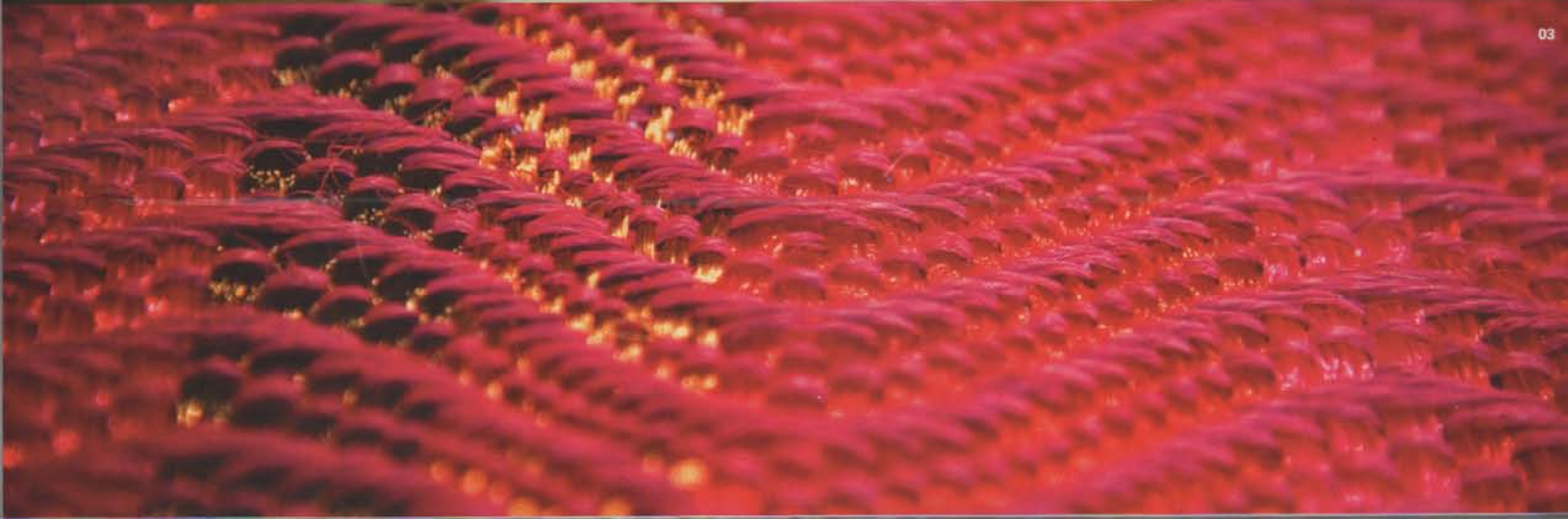


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Under the direction of Jorge Lizarazo, Colombian weaving workshop Hechizoo is taking traditional skills into the 21st century. **Ros Weaver** hunts for the magic formula that has made these incredible textiles into interior couture for the stars



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Hechizo means 'magic spell' in Spanish, and you can feel the magic when Jorge Lizarazo talks about his weaving workshop Hechizoo. Everything about it is extraordinary. You certainly wouldn't expect to find the world's most innovative artisanal flatwoven rugs and textiles in a suburb of Bogotá, but this is where the magic takes place. A converted warehouse has become a calm and airy space filled with looms and incredible shimmering carpets, diaphanous metallic curtains and intricately woven screens and meshes. It's no surprise to learn that Lizarazo trained as an architect. The textiles fit the open-plan building that serves as both atelier and showroom as if they were part of its fabric.

Sorcerer's apprentice

How, I wanted to know, did Lizarazo begin this enterprise?

"I don't call it an enterprise," he corrects me. "We prefer to be called a workshop, a laboratory, even. It started with one master weaver who taught me. When I came back to Colombia from working as an architect in France, I began designing interiors; but I couldn't find the textiles I wanted, so I started to design them myself. The woman who made them for me said, 'You always get me to make a lot of samples. I suggest you start to make your own.' She introduced me to someone who could teach me. This was the masterweaver Gerardo Ardila, who sadly passed away last year."

Lizarazo began his apprenticeship fifteen years ago in a rooftop shanty of the makeshift kind used in urban Latin America for drying laundry. "As soon as I saw the first sample I said: 'This will be my life.'"

Thus enthusiasm became passion, and the workshop grew. It moved to central Bogotá

before its present home in the 20 de Julio district. "The first three people who worked with me began calling in friends to help," says Lizarazo. "All the people who now work here are connected – the only qualifications they need are patience, and we need to be able to trust them. Between 50 and 60 people work here at the moment on vertical and horizontal looms. They are all untrained. We have three or four master weavers, and everyone trains each other, bringing in a variety of skills and experience."

Architecture is the discipline that Lizarazo brings very strongly into the mix. He sees textiles not only as an integral part of a building but as a kind of architecture in their own right: 'soft architecture', with the warp as columns and the weft as beams holding the structure together. He stubbornly adheres to the two principles he established when he embraced textiles: that he would be courageous, and that he would "never reinvent [techniques], but simply copy or invent". Invention has been key to this process, both in his working practice and his exploration of materials and techniques.

"Gerardo always said I was very stubborn," Lizarazo says. It's probably this stubbornness that has led him to produce work of such startling originality, refusing as he does to follow accepted forms.

I remark that he must be a very good weaver by now.

"I think I've lost it. I don't have time now, except when I'm in a really bad temper. It's the only thing that calms me down."

The workshop seems to be a real melting pot of skills and traditions, taking ancient crafts forward into the 21st century. "There are 32 *departamentos* in Colombia, and we have people from more than fifteen. We are doing a kind

01 Jorge Lizarazo

02 Hechizoo textile, detail

03 Hechizoo textile, detail

04 View of the Hechizoo workshop



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of résumé of traditions. We don't have a long history as an independent country. We used to be a colony, not known for its textiles but for its gold. Peru is known for its great Inca textiles, but I think they have lost their traditions – they haven't been used in a contemporary way. We try to recover our real traditions. We travel the world observing, but not for inspiration. We're not looking to copy [designs]; we do it in order not to repeat what we find."

There is a lot of experimentation with materials. Some of Hechizoo's most stunning pieces are not only intricately woven, but made of mixed fibres juxtaposing shiny and dull, translucent and solid, to almost surreal effect.

"When I began weaving I used metal. I have tried to avoid using it, but it's in our DNA and you can't deny what you are made of. We have also used at least 1,400 different materials. We often use *fique* (a traditional pre-Columbian fibre used for hammocks), *cumare* (a South American palm fibre) and cotton as well as crystals, nylon filaments, silk and organza. It is possible to weave anything."

Star quality

This is the magic: Lizarazo weaves his country, its natural resources, its people, the intricacies of its emotions, its past and its aspirations. The enthusiasm apparent in the work of Hechizoo weavers has infected the New York Museum of Arts and Design, which has acquired pieces for its permanent collection.

Despite commissions from architects and hotels in Colombia, Brazil and Mexico, Lizarazo initially had difficulty finding a market for Hechizoo rugs and textiles outside South America. "At first I went to Europe because I thought people there would appreciate our work.



08

I was wrong." He had better luck in the US: "I had a lot of appointments, but nobody would see me. Eventually I met Cristina Grajales (the New York gallerist), who loved our work, and she has kept me busy for more than ten years." Busy producing rugs, screens and curtains for Brad Pitt, jeweller Harry Winston and architect to the stars Peter Marino, amongst others.

Grajales is indeed a keen promoter of Hechizoo product. "I love that Jorge has taken an ancient tradition and, through his experimentation with techniques and materials, has brought it into the 21st century," she says. "His training as an architect has informed his perspective on textiles, and he continues to view them as architecture. His atelier is a magical place, filled with looms,

05 Hechizoo textile detail

06 Hand finishing an intricately flatwoven rug in the workshop

07 Hechizoo textile detail

08 Hechizoo weaver Jerónimo with copper threads on a loom

weavers, plants, birds and dogs. I admire his passion and curiosity, and I treasure his friendship and genius."

Lizarazo clearly derives pleasure from his commissions, which include those for Dior and Chanel stores as well as private interiors. He approaches them much as he would an architectural project.

"I enjoy meeting clients, getting to know them and interpreting their needs. I like to know about the life of a client (I don't want to say 'style' because that's a thing that changes often), so I can be loyal to an idea."

But it's loyalty to a new Colombian textile tradition that makes the magic of Hechizoo.

www.hechizoo.com