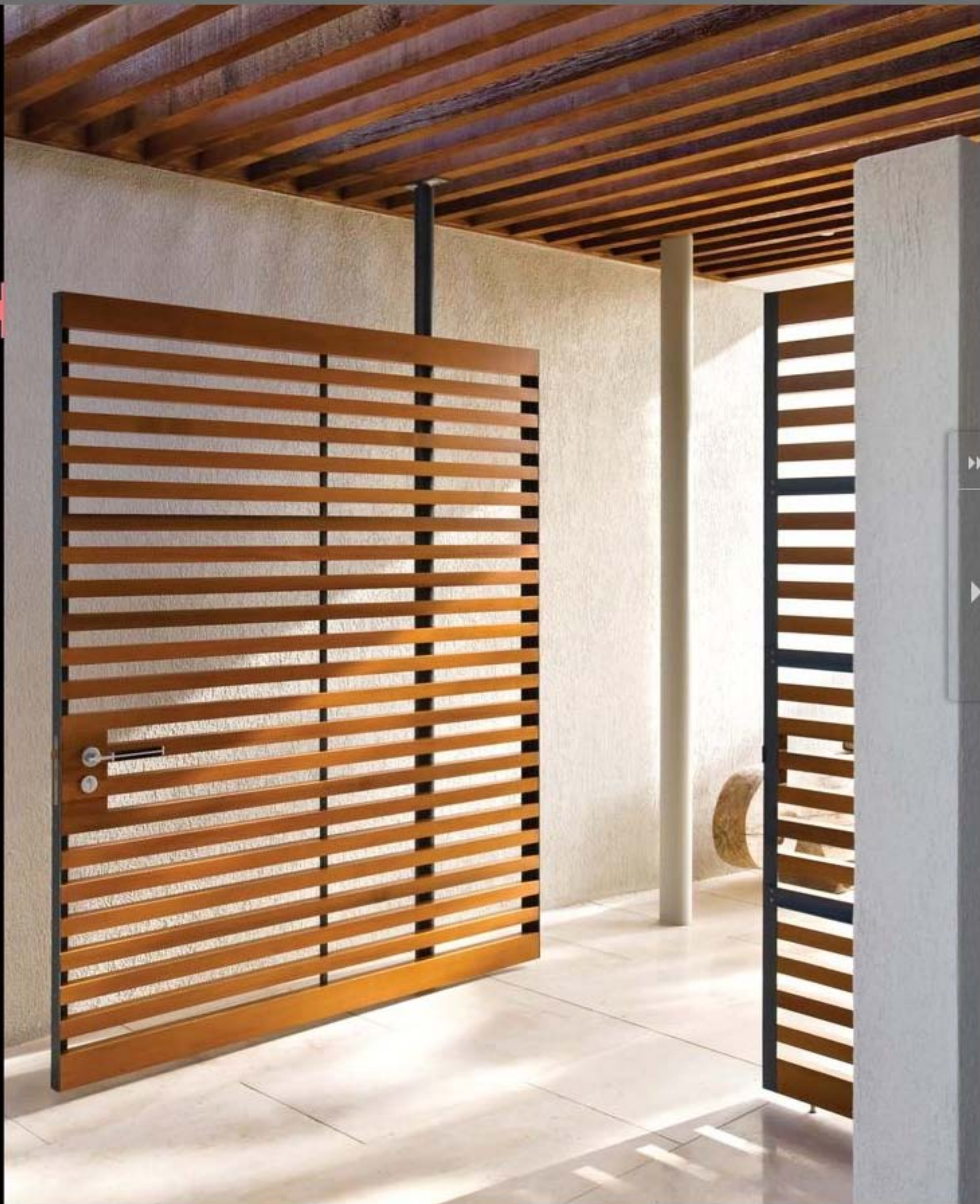


Tropic

FLORIDA LIVING & DESIGN

MARCH, 2017



This photo, taken soon after the building's completion, shows the angled glass panels that mirrored the angle of the base of the signage pylon. These windows were replaced with windows at a 90° angle in 2007, but could easily be restored.



BY 1959, WHEN ASKED TO DESIGN a Castro Convertibles Showroom for owner Bernard Castro, Charles McKirahan, the wunderkind architect, was already a major name in South Florida design circles. Barely 40 years of age, McKirahan had completed dozens of projects, including the Coral Ridge Yacht Club, the Coral Ridge Country Club, the Castaways hotel in Miami Beach and was busy with construction on Fort Lauderdale's 1st beach highrise, the seafoam green Birch Tower.

In the optimistic 50s, spanking new Fort Lauderdale was a modernist's paradise, and McKirahan found himself at the center of a perfect storm. Just as Dinah Shore was singing to Post-War American audiences to "See the USA in your Chevrolet," little Bernadette Castro had become an early T.V. icon in New York unfolding one of her father's signature Castro convertible sofas in her nightgown.

By the late 50s, Castro was a burgeoning enterprise and the family – like so many others – drove to Florida. "My father fell in love with Fort Lauderdale," Castro told us, "Dad had worked so hard up north until the late

The architect had a bravura style that often threw caution to the wind in favor of visual excitement. What could have been a bland showroom took became vibrant with windows canted at an 80° angle to match the bottom line of the hourglass-shaped pylon.

1950s. He only discovered Florida around that time." An early Florida retirement was the plan, but, according to his daughter, he loved his work too much. "He had intended to retire, but was really too young," said Castro, "So he extended the Castro Convertibles business to Florida. Well, all the New Yorkers who were down here thought Castro had gone national!"

Bernard Castro built the family a home on the ocean at 2300 North Atlantic Boulevard, a home Bernadette believes was designed by McKirahan as well. "I think dad hired McKirahan to do the showroom at about the same



Bernadette Castro, the daughter made famous by appearances on early commercials for Castro Convertibles, appeared on television with Milton Berle, Jackie Gleason and is seen here as a guest on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson in the early 1960s.

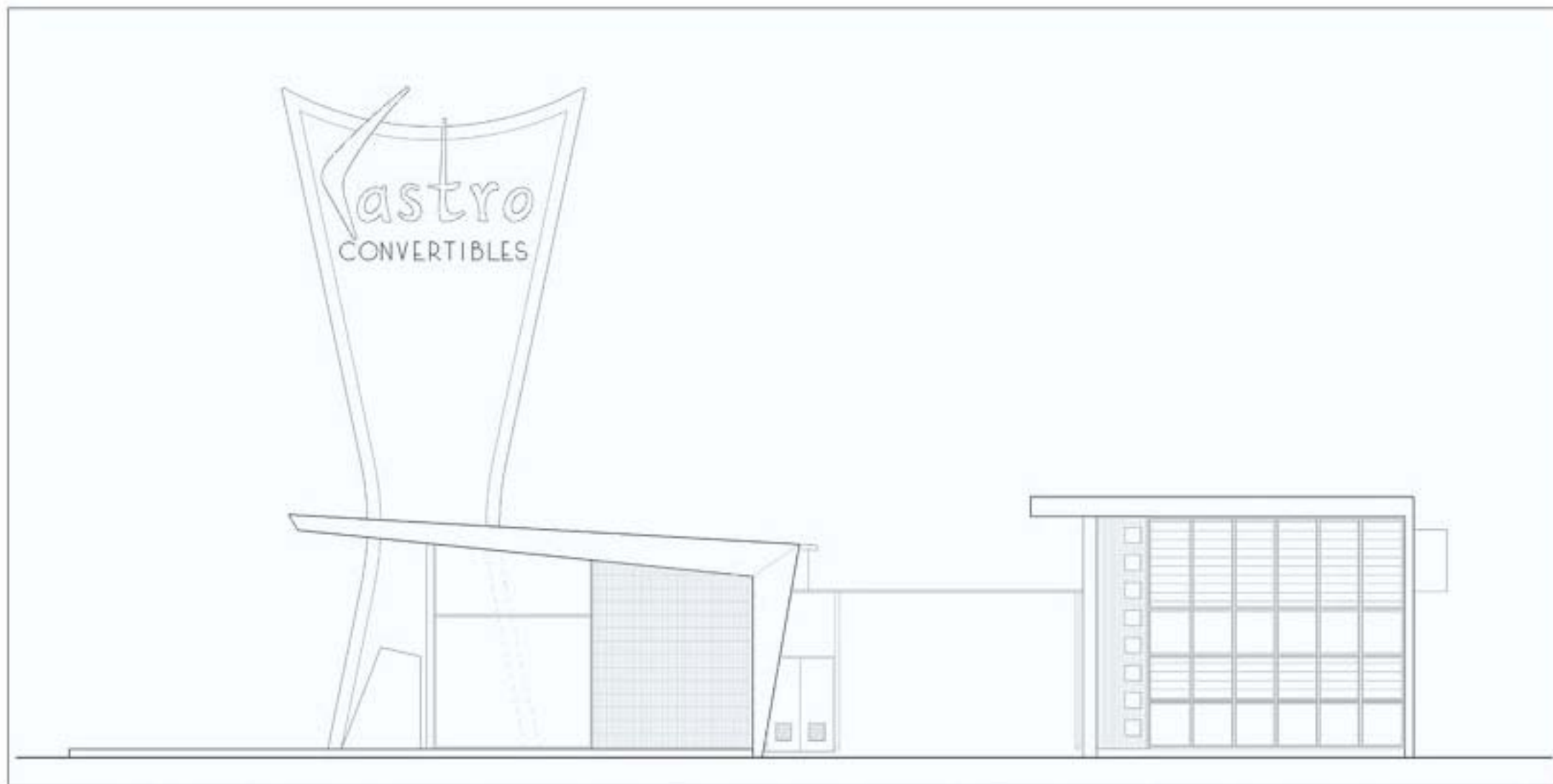
Photo Castro Convertibles

time. It was really his pride and joy. In the rear he had a large penthouse apartment built with a huge terrace. It was quite beautiful with imported Italian tile floors. My father really worked most often in that penthouse apartment behind the store.

As for the showroom's cutting edge design, while Castro recalls a wonderful relationship between her father and the architect, she says creation of the final product was not the easiest for McKirahan.

"My father, I think, was not an easy client for Chuck, as they used to call him," says Castro, "Because, even though dad loved his work, he had his own design ideas. I mean, he left Italy when he was 15, but was smart enough to retain one of the best up and coming architects." One of the items high on Bernard Castro's list is the building's enormous, hourglass-shaped signage pylon.

"That signage was absolutely my father's input," Castro explains, "You



McKirahan's South elevation showed the hourglass signage and specified stainless steel and glass mosaic cladding. The swash typeface is in the architect's signature style.

see, you have to remember that, at the time, Federal Highway was not a major thoroughfare, and my dad was a firm believer in signage. When he had first started, decades earlier, my father had very little money. His first \$400 was put into signage. Eventually, we had that giant sign in New York's Times Square."

McKirahan specified everything on the final drawings, from stainless steel cladding for the fascia, to elongated, C-shaped door handles and glass mosaic tile. He used a stylized lettering for the Castro logo, similar to that used on the Birch Tower and the Bayview Building.

McKirahan was a stickler for detail, and on the original elevation drawings for the structure, he details materials from the stainless steel cladding on the north and south fascia, glass mosaic tile surfacing for the north and south walls and elongated, C-shaped handles for the two front doors. McKirahan chose a modified swash-style lettering for the Castro logo,

similar to that used on the Birch Tower and the Bayview Building projects of the same year.

The architect had a bravura style that often threw caution to the wind in favor of visual excitement. What could have been a bland showroom became vibrant with windows canted at an 80-degree angle to match the bottom line of the hourglass-shaped pylon. The repeated square motif by the front entrance echoes that used in McKirahan's design for the tiny Patton Insurance building on NE 4th Avenue, finished in 1958. All of these items added up to a showstopper. According to Castro, this would have certainly been in keeping with what her dad wanted for his Florida flagship. "He wanted cars to see this building!"

When asked about her father's choice of an architect who was known for an innovative form of Modernism, Bernadette explains, "This was a big project and a significant investment at the time. My father was NOT afraid of change. He truly wanted to make a statement." ■