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Designing for COMMUNITY Resilience



Casa Celestina, a new project by RamosCastellano Arquitectos, featuring irregularly placed windows with vibrant shutters, communicates the duo's take on Cape Verde's vernacular.

“The social element of our architecture is the most important for us”



From their base in a remote chain of mid-Atlantic islands, Cape Verde's Eloisa Ramos and Moreno Castellano create joyful, sensitive buildings as supportive of people as they are reflective of place

INTERVIEW _Evan Pavka PHOTOS _Sergio Pirrone



ABOVE: The chromatic apertures of Casa Celestina, a four-storey mixed-used complex in a pedestrian streetscape in Mindelo, are inspired by the tones of nearby single-storey homes.

LEFT: The spartan 29-square-metre apartments within (six in total, with a 60-square-metre "loft" on top) are fitted with custom furnishings designed by the firm.

An archipelago of 10 volcanic isles, Cape Verde sits at the confluence of Africa, Europe and South America. It's here, at the edge of continents, that architects Eloisa Ramos (a native of Santo Antão, in the northern part of the chain) and Moreno Castellano (who hails from Sardinia in Italy) create their distinctive work. From a museum clad in reclaimed oil drums to a hotel incorporating recycled metal cans, adaptation has become a hallmark if not a necessity of their practice as it negotiates a scarcity of resources while consciously employing its work as an economic generator that supports local industries. Since establishing RamosCastellano Arquitectos 15 years ago, the duo has developed a distinct handling of space and materiality, one that addresses the particular challenges of building in the region alongside environmental and social concerns. And, as they recently told *Azure* from their studio in the port city of Mindelo, on the island of São Vicente, they have done so while situating their inhabitants and the surrounding community firmly at the centre of their work.

You both were educated in Portugal, have practised in Italy and America and are currently based in Cape Verde — all of which are incredibly unique contexts. What are the challenges and opportunities of working where you are now?

Eloisa Ramos: Cape Verde is a small yet poor country. It's beautiful here but, as you can imagine, there are challenges. Due to our position, it's not easy to find materials. People have had to develop a sense of survival and other skills. Because of this, you can find very good artisans here, something that you don't find anymore in other places around the world. Since we don't have big stores, we had to begin designing furniture ourselves, and then our interiors as well.

Moreno Castellano: We try to do our best in this challenging field. This lack of resources allowed us to develop simple methods in architecture. With many of the materials used, we develop their applications until reaching the best quality or methodology.

Do considerations of vernacular design, the nation's colonial history or the area's typologies factor into your work? Or are you interested in moving beyond that?

MC: There are some things that are invariable, that do not change with time. This is what we try to see in the vernacular. What are the things that still remain valid, that we can still use? Taking out all the archetypes, we use languages or forms from other times because they continue to work, not to simply recall the past.

In the Terra Lodge eco-hotel, for example, there is a pixelation of the facade that feels very contemporary. But we arrived at this solution through other ways, from the *mastrabiya* that comes from North Africa; you have this influence in Cape Verde. We incorporated the typology into one of our first projects, *Appartamenti Paz* in 2009, which is both an artist's residence and our home. And we applied a similar strategy in the new four-storey mixed-use development Casa Celestina; it's a grid of open and closed squares — and we magnified some to provide views to the outside.

ER: We try to fit within the time we are living and our architecture tries to present a contemporary vision of these existing elements.

MC: We know the history, but we live contemporary. And maybe more than contemporary — shaping the future we would like to lead.

Living in such a small place, is the economic impact of your buildings — their construction and the labour involved — part of your design process?

MC: The social element of our architecture is very important. Maybe it's the

most important for us. Most of our clients come from abroad and so do their funds. Our strategy is to keep the money on the island, focusing on how we can distribute it throughout the economy. When we choose a material or we choose a solution, it's more important to employ, for instance, five people for one year than to give the money to a single company. By working with artisans, we are injecting that money into the market.

There is also a different notion of life here. For example, sometimes people do not have access to hot water and often even having water is something special. They have to walk maybe a kilometre or for half an hour to get it. So these things change your priorities, your vision. When you are working on a project, for instance, a builder may not make the floor perfect. If you destroy that imperfection, perhaps that means they will not be able to bring food home that day. So you accept this flaw in your architecture because the result of this mistake is more important than the shape of your project.

ER: We try to build solutions and, in a way, it's about these important things in life. The funny thing is that, now, we can see the changes in the neighbourhood near the Terra Lodge. People are painting houses and opening little stores. Five years ago you could not even imagine those things there.

Over the years, the way you practise in Cape Verde — the scarcity of resources and the almost requisite adaptation — has also evolved. Early on, your projects were primarily residences. But, since then, you've worked on a number of resort hotels, a public museum and multi-unit complexes. What informed this shift?

MC: Before 2008, you had a lot of investors that came here to build vacation homes. These were our first clients. But the market is constantly changing. Following the economic crisis and with the current pandemic, it's a very peculiar place.

ER: Early on, we had very few clients.

MC: Still we have very few clients.

Completed in 2017, Terra Lodge encapsulates the studio's unique approach. Recycled materials (such as the flattened cans used for the hotel's entrance, not shown) were incorporated throughout, while handmade elements (from floors to furniture) were used to support local artisans and leverage the project's economic impact.

ER: Because we had these visions for architecture and the way that we wanted to make buildings, we kept on this path. We were waiting for the right clients and commissions, which, in a way, allowed us to filter our work. We knew that we didn't want to do commercial architecture in a commercial way. So, slowly and steadily, we built our way to the work we wanted to produce.

Your studio is now in its second decade. Have you settled on an approach or a philosophy?

ER: Since the beginning, we had a vision and a way of thinking. Our studio is dynamic from this point of view because we are constantly adapting in time. It's not yesterday or tomorrow; it's now. So, we are trying to adapt to the current set of challenges.

We are doing our architecture in a natural way, putting all this together: the environment, the location, the people. We try to create bridges, in a way, and connection, sometimes through beauty or by adding something more to a certain place. But always balancing the situation in order to create harmony.





Terra Lodge's generous patios (above) offer unparalleled vistas of the surrounding landscape. The "pixellated" wood facade was informed by the architects' interest in the *mashrabiya*s — Islamic screens native to North Africa — they first explored in the 2009 residence Appartamenti Paz (left).

MC: Our architectural language is something that came naturally. When we started here in Cape Verde, it was not easy. It was difficult to get Internet at home; there were no architecture publications or magazines. When Charles Darwin arrived in the Galápagos Islands, he found tortoises that were different from the others because they remained isolated for a long time. When I think about our architecture, I see it sometimes like this — connected to everything but developing and evolving in its own way.

Where possible, we are trying to adapt our buildings to the environment and establish equilibrium where there was none before. We also want to subvert the image of African countries as poor nations with sad people and bad environments. We try to reverse this, try to transmit the happy aspects of life on the island and show that vibrancy. Architecture is about people; it's not about materials or technologies alone. It's very important for us to transmit how people live in this place.

ER: And to show the joy that you can find here — in people, in the light. We are inspired by all these things, but at the centre are people, the community. Spaces without people are nothing. **AZ**
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