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Groundbreaker

National Centre for Art, Crafts and Design _Mindelo, Cabo Verde

_Ramos Castellano Arquitectos

An open courtyard connected to the city's main square links CNAD's original facility to its new addition, which is clad in 2,532 barrel lids with colours that correspond to notes in a piece of music.

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Inner Circle

AN ART CENTRE SHOWCASES COMMUNITY — BOTH IN ITS COLLECTION AND IN ITS COLLABORATIVE DESIGN CONCEPT

WORDS _Tapiwa Matsinde
PHOTOS _Sergio Pirrone

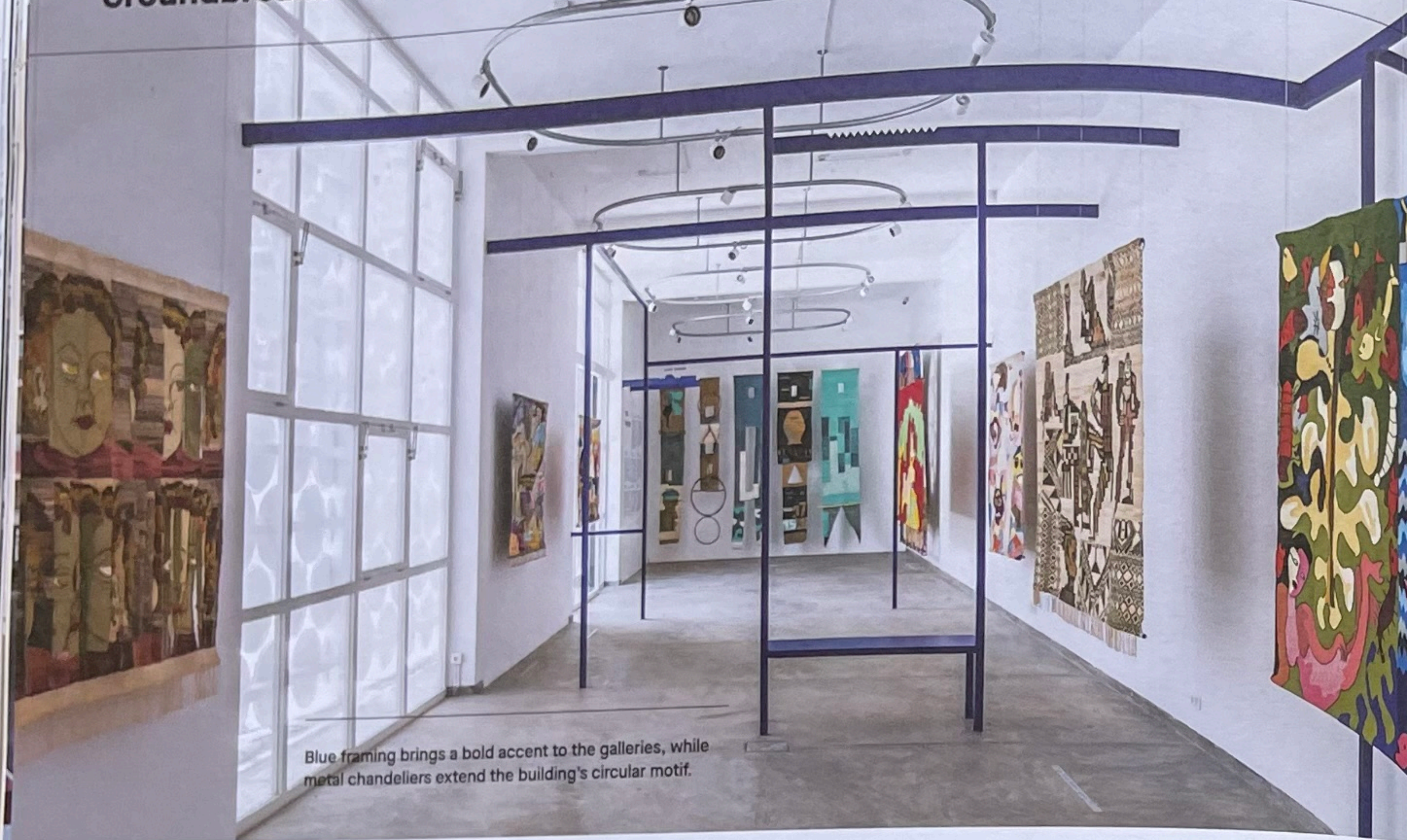
Cultural buildings are often works of art in their own right, and the new addition to the National Centre for Art, Crafts and Design (CNAD) in Mindelo, Cabo Verde, is no exception. Not only does its colourful mosaic make for a pointillism-like composition, it also doubles as a reflection of the strong collective effort behind the project, which ultimately engaged everyone from metalworkers to music composers.

Back in 1977, renowned artist Manuel Figueira co-founded CNAD's predecessor institution as a place to study, preserve and celebrate the ancestral handicrafts of his homeland: a 10-island (and five-islet) archipelago off the West African coast that had gained independence from Portugal just two years earlier. The National Craft Centre — which later evolved into CNAD — operated out of a historic colonial house in Mindelo, considered the country's cultural capital, for four decades before it commissioned a restoration and significant expansion in 2019.

Local studio Ramos Castellano Arquitectos made for a natural hire. Founders Eloisa Ramos and Moreno Castellano approach architecture as a tool for social change, seeking to engage as many artisans as possible in their work — both to aid in wealth distribution and to facilitate two-way learning. Attuned to the challenges of building on a small island, the pair set out to demonstrate that relying on local skills and resources — coupled with a modest budget of \$1.32 million — need not hinder a world-class vision.

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Groundbreaker _ National Centre for Art, Crafts and Design _ Mindelo, Cabo Verde _ Ramos Castellano Arquitectos



Blue framing brings a bold accent to the galleries, while metal chandeliers extend the building's circular motif.



ABOVE: CNAD's new addition rises behind its original building, a newly restored colonial house that now holds the gallery's permanent exhibitions.

"It's a space that the city had been asking for," Castellano says of the concept that he and Ramos developed for their client. "Cabo Verde has always been politically and culturally avant-garde and acted as a bridge between different cultures. So our idea was to make somewhere that would also act as a bridge — for connecting and exchanging ideas." Newly restored to its former glory, CNAD's original *casa* now houses the institution's permanent exhibitions, while its neighbouring five-storey addition introduces two contemporary galleries plus offices, workshops, a research centre with a library and live-in suites for artist residencies.

The design of this new addition channels Mindelo's vibrant creative spirit into a colourful screen comprising 2,532 barrel caps. The choice was both practical and symbolic. In addition to being Cabo Verde's cultural hub, Mindelo is also the main port for São Vicente, and most of the island's goods arrive to the city in steel drums — many of which then go on to provide material for the tin homes seen along the edge of town. Here, they are celebrated as a symbol of civic identity. The building's vibrant colour scheme is another thoughtful homage. Inspired by Cabo Verde's musical heritage, Ramos Castellano painted each cap with one of 15 colours that correspond to the notes in a piece by local composer Vasco Martins.

Photovoltaic panels on the roof supply power for the elevator (and lighting come nighttime), but otherwise, the project embraces what Ramos calls "well-engineered but low-tech solutions." The facade acts as a second skin that allows occupants to tilt the building's barrel caps like blinds, modulating daylight and airflow to create cross-ventilation and avoid the need for air conditioning. (The all-white interior, which includes handcrafted furniture designed by Ramos Castellano, also helps.)

True to the architects' vision, the project's construction process engaged local craftspeople for everything from welding metal to pouring concrete. "Craft-led builds are a learning process," Ramos admits. "This kind of exchange between architects and artisans requires patience — both to understand the perceptions and to shift the ways of doing things from how they've always been done." While this meant maintaining an on-site presence to ensure high standards, Ramos says, it was equally important that the building stay true to the nature of craft. "You can see the hand of the artisan," she says of the end result. "You see all the imperfections." Come nighttime, the building glows like a lighthouse — a true beacon calling out to the talented creative community that contributed to it. ramosc Castellano.com



An access corridor between the exterior mosaic screen and an internal glass facade allows CHAD's barrel caps to be tilted for daylight and airflow.