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infinite possibilities



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dots in the ocean

Covered with colorful disks, an addition to the National Center for Handcraft, Art and Design in Mindelo, Cape Verde, by Ramos Castellano Arquitectos gives the island nation a jubilant cultural icon



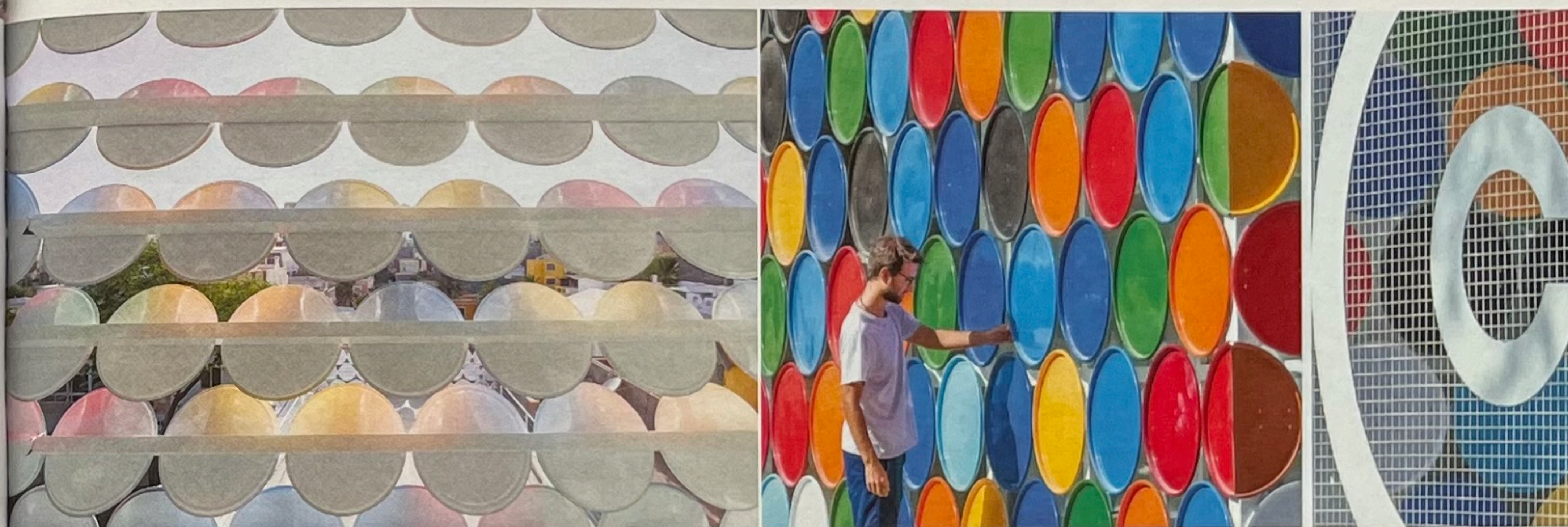
At about \$3 per piece, lids from the steel barrels in which many products are shipped to Cape Verde, an archipelago of 10 volcanic islands off West Africa, were the mother of invention for an addition to the National Center for Handcraft, Art and Design (CNAD). Scores of the multicolored lids, configured into a brise-soleil, populate three sides of the addition, which is in Mindelo, the largest town on the island of São Vicente. The adjustable screen blocks the tropical sun while admitting cooling ocean breezes inside.

More than a functional sunshade, the polka-dot carapace has become a national icon. It also displays, almost like a billboard, the ingenuity, cultural relevance, and ecological thrift regularly practiced by Ramos Castellano Arquitectos. "Everything that comes onto the island arrives in a container or a barrel," co-principal Moreno Castellano says. "So we made the addition a container for culture, art, and craft by using a material that's important for our country."

Working with local labor, Castellano and co-principal Eloisa Ramos produce homegrown designs that are no less sophisticated for often being built from recycled materials, even scrap. At the modest end of the architectural food chain, the firm punches way beyond its weight, achieving a grass-roots architecture of international stature remarkable for its authenticity, invention, and can-do spirit. Castellano, who is also an artist, professes to use architecture and art "as a social revolutionary tool."

Trained in Portugal, where Ramos, a native of Mindelo, and Castellano, a native of Sardinia, met in architecture school, the young architects focus their design literacy on solutions as simple as cross ventilation. Their budgets for eco hotels and walk-up apartments built on in-fill urban lots are, characteristically, slim to meager. But they make the most out of the least as a matter of conviction, and practice financial ecology by avoiding a dependency on imported technologies and materials, preferring, for instance, not to order HVAC systems from Europe, which would rely on parts bought at punishing exchange rates.

The architects employed local workshops, most within walking or biking distance of their office, to sand, polish, and spray-paint the lids and fabricate the steel armature for the brise-soleil, which opens and closes like a louver. Speaking of their simple, "common sense" building strategies in an island culture, Ramos says, "Materials are our helpers. They allow us to do what we do where we practice." What is considered "precious" is a matter of judgment, she continues, and lowly materials like the barrels are treasurable since ➤



Previous spread: Painted lids from the steel barrels in which products are shipped to Cape Verde, an archipelago off West Africa, form a brise-soleil for an addition to the National Center for Handcraft, Art and Design in Mindelo by Ramos Castellano Arquitectos.

Opposite top: The firm also renovated the center's original building, a colonial-era house that sits in front of the addition. **Opposite bottom:** A walkway runs between the brise-soleil and the building facade.

Top, from left: The disks are attached to horizontal elements that pivot individually, allowing for multiple degrees of visual and solar permeability. The recycled lids, all 2 feet in diameter, were sanded, polished, and spray-painted by local craftspeople. **Bottom:** The ground-floor gallery is outfitted with temporary display scaffolding for an exhibition of Cape Verdean art.



they enabled a practical, affordable, visually effective solution transformed into a cultural symbol.

The CNAD commission involved remodeling and restoring a gracious, 5,000-square-foot colonial-era house located on a prominent square. For the addition, Ramos and Castellano conceived a narrow, five-story building that sits on the footprint of a demolished shed in the adjoining backyard lot. Comprising basement archives, two floors of tall galleries, a third-floor library, a workshop and artist's residence on the fourth level, and offices on the top, the 11,500-square-foot structure is only one-room deep—a mere 22 feet wide, ➤

All the furniture and built-ins in the third-floor library are custom and locally manufactured, a practice Ramos Castellano follows in all its projects.



"Our philosophy is to keep structures light, to find a

balance with nature, and integrate buildings into the ecosystem"



The space between the addition and the old building has been transformed into a patiolike plaza that also links the streets running on either side of CNAD. ➔



including the brise-soleil, down its entire 109-foot length. The architects recast the backyard as a patiolike public square linking the old and new buildings and functioning as the museum entry.

The 24-inch-diameter barrel lids served as a module on which the dimensions of the concrete-frame building are based. Ramos and Castellano avoided using concrete block—so ubiquitous in “emerging” world construction—because “fabricators often remove sand from beaches,” Castellano explains. “Architecture can amount to a strong force and our philosophy is to keep structures light, to find a balance with nature, and integrate buildings into the ecosystem.”

Ramos Castellano designed almost all the center’s furniture, including tables, seating, and shelving in the library, and had it manufactured by neighborhood craftspeople. A steel barrel (cost: \$5) was split open to create the flat planes of the multicolor reception desk; with its faded lettering and rusty patina, the construction resembles a Robert Rauschenberg assemblage. The brise-soleil not only allows air to flow through windows punched in the rear wall but also casts rotating patterns on the polished concrete floors, turning them into kinetic art. The lids generate music, too: The architects invited Vasco Martins, a Cape Verdean composer of the John Cage persuasion, into the project, and he ascribed a note to each disk based on its color, creating a sound work of chance and accident. “Music and architecture have a synesthetic relationship; they share a sense of space,” Castellano observes.

Could this little museum’s joyous architectural music prove to be Cape Verde’s siren song? “We wanted to achieve a Bilbao Effect,” Castellano acknowledges, “to demonstrate that even on this small island in the middle of the Atlantic, you can build things that spread around the world, to counter the feeling that only the most developed countries with the most developed economies can generate amazing architecture.” Francis Kéré did it with his Gando primary school in Burkina Faso, at the very heart of Africa; Ramos and Castellano’s CNAD addition may well do the same for this tiny nation some 400 miles off the great continent’s coast. 🇨🇵

PROJECT TEAM

ZICO LOPES; BRUNO KENNY; EDOARDO MENEGHIN; MARVIN DELGADO; DANIL SILVA; MARCO DOS ANJOS; RAMOS CASTELLANO ARQUITECTOS. LOS PROJECT: LIGHTING CONSULTANT: ILIDIO ALEXANDRE; STRUCTURAL ENGINEER.

PRODUCT SOURCES

THROUGHOUT LINEA LIGHT: TRACK LIGHTING. SITA: LID PAINT.



Opposite top: Sunlight filtering through the brise-soleil projects animated patterns on the polished concrete flooring. **Opposite bottom:** Thanks to the addition’s exterior, the building has become an icon in the town and for the nation.

Top, from left: Located on a prominent town square, the center’s two buildings are quite different yet create a convincing ensemble. The artist’s residence and workshop on the fourth floor includes built-in sleeping pods and access to the exterior walkway via a wall of sliding doors. **Bottom:** An exhibition of works by the late Cape Verdean artist Alex da Silva graces the second-floor gallery.

