



A New glow in boomtown low in boomtown—

Murcia, a region in Southern Spain on the Mediterranean coast, is a paradigm of the rise and collapse of *ladrillo* (Spanish for brick, but also a popular way of referring to the country's construction boom that went bust). More *ladrillo*, more crisis, people say now. Murcia had plenty of it: hundreds of public or private development schemes and hundreds of thousands of new housing projects made Murcia Spain's fastest-growing region in the early 2000s. Today all that has changed: residential construction dropped a whopping 82 per cent between 2008 and 2009, and Murcia now struggles with soaring unemployment and social unrest, water shortages and exposed cases of blatant corruption, scores of empty apartments, abandoned developments and roads

leading to nowhere.

Ladrillo has certainly left its imprint on Murcia. Everywhere you turn, there's brick. The narrow streets of its towns are clogged with anonymous apartment and office buildings, cheap brick facades in hues that range from brownish to puke-orange. Even the expansive openness of Murcia's arid terrain offers little to rest the eyes on apart from terracotta drab, only sporadically interrupted by white outlet malls, gleaming plastic tarps of factory farms, or rare green patches of grape vines, olive trees and orange groves.

Spain's real-estate debacle and Murcia's brand of *ladrillo*-driven development are only part of the backdrop for the latest project of Madrid-based architects selgascano: an 18,500-square-metre seaside auditorium and conference hall in the port city of Cartagena, Murcia. Almost a decade passed from when the architects won the commission until the building opened to the public in late 2011, after facing numerous budgetary, construction and political hurdles. The protracted construction period certainly might have had its drawbacks, but it also provided a rare occasion for the architects to stick to their usual gutsiness and painstaking attention to detail, regardless of the scale and the demands of the project.

José Selgas, Lucía Cano, selgascano

Location

Cartagena



↑Sitting stark and unassuming at the end of the kilometre-long Paseo Alfonso XII seafront boulevard, the building blends into the burly scenery of the old shipping port.

Cartagena—which is Murcia's second largest city—is visually and physically less oppressive than other parts of the province. Blessed with the typical breeziness of Mediterranean towns and the mishmash of stimuli one finds in any port city, Cartagena is dotted with remnants of its Carthaginian and Roman pasts, oceanic paraphernalia (including the hull-turned-monument of the first ever electric submarine, built in Spain in the late 1880s), the bulk of defensive and industrial naval infrastructures, the imposing ancient city walls and massive rusty figs. Selgascano obviously took many of their cues from this unique urban setting. Sitting stark and unassuming at the end of the kilometre-long Paseo Alfonso XII seafront boulevard, the building blends into the burly scenery of the old shipping port: containers, piers, pipes, cranes, drills, hulls, ropes and masts.



←The upper levels are drenched in a permanent sunset thanks to two 15x60-metre orange coloured ETFE sheets anchored to a steel frame that create a soft, billowing intermediate facade.

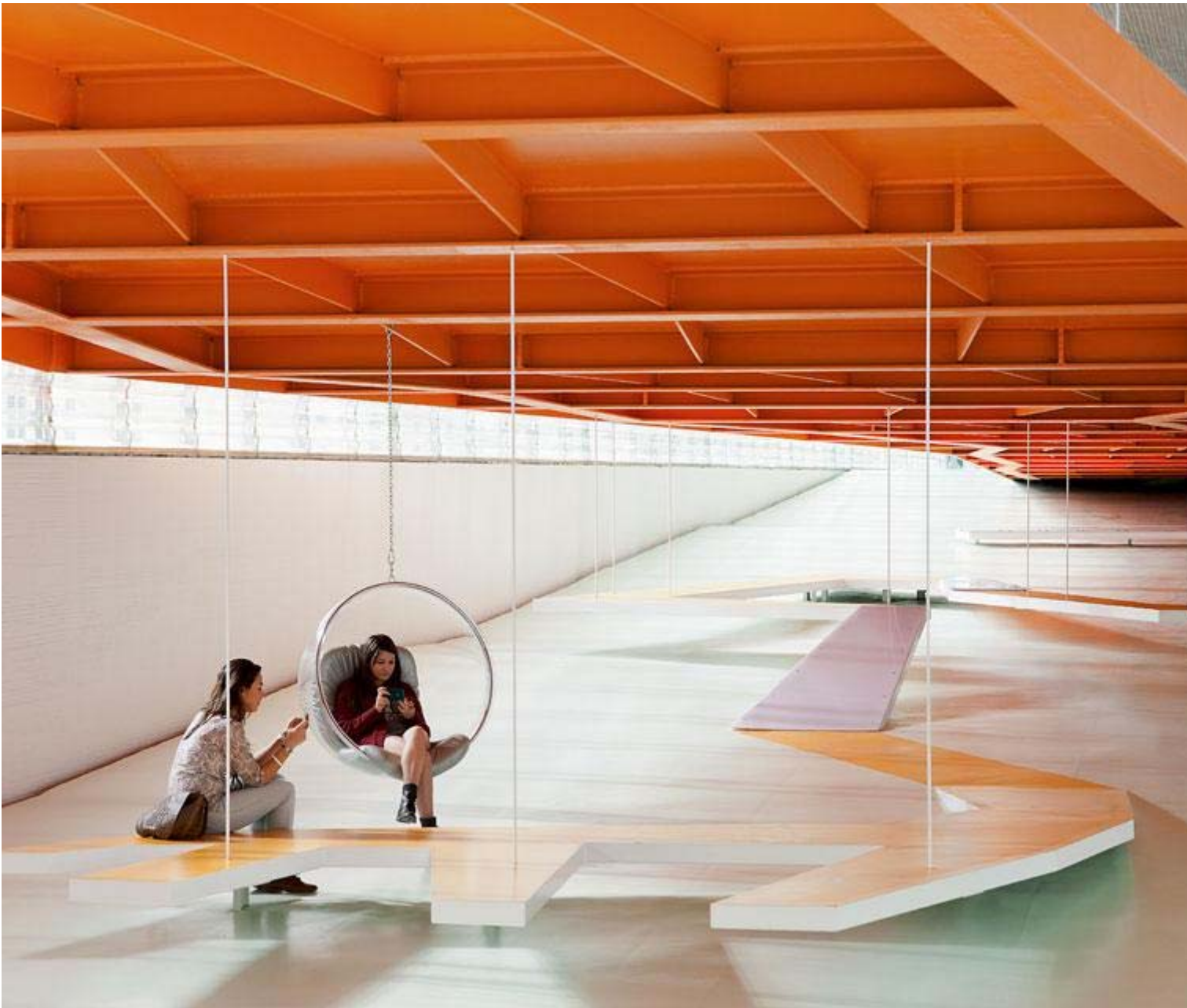
Approaching the building from the *paseo*, it seems deceptively petit, hiding behind its southern facade. A walk along either side of the building reveals its actual size. The double facade of translucent extruded polycarb panels exposes the building's metallic structure and adds to the game of transparencies and tonalities created by injecting tiny dabs of neon paint into each piece, with different colours and intensities. The landscaping plays along, with pinewood planks popping out of their sockets from the boardwalk to create benches, and streetlamps reminiscent of ancient diving helmets. The main auditorium is on the opposite extreme, a concrete box covered by coloured plastic tubes that dart out to create shading canopies over two large outdoor terraces. Both panels and tubes are laced with leds, and the entire building lights up from within like a giant glow-worm at night.

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The building's floor plan is practically dissociated from its envelope. Sinuous and playful, the main hall is designed to be experienced as a single, continuous progression: an extension of the seafront paseo. On the right, a suspended ramp winds its way up to the first and second floors, hovering over an illuminated bench that zigzags along as the building sinks below sea level. Take the left, and the hall dips unevenly further and further below the coastline, which is etched permanently by the light passing through the translucent facade panels. The same panels are painted white, backlit and switched vertically to create a central wall that shields the conference rooms and the smaller of the two auditoriums. You can practically slide down to the other end of the building on the smooth, slanted, pale-green rubber floors.



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At the end of the main hall, beyond the plexiglass staircases, the entrances to the large auditorium are sheltered by ridged, spongy, reef-like concrete walls. The upper levels are drenched in a permanent sunset thanks to two 15x60-metre orange-coloured ETFE sheets anchored to a steel frame that create a soft, billowing intermediate facade. Once inside the auditorium, visitors are completely submerged in the atmosphere created by the underwater blues and greens of the translucent panels. All these polychrome hues, the sways from softness to hardness, the curvature of the walls and uneven floors are sort of intoxicating, inducing a certain let-looseness on the part of the visitor.



↑The main amphitheatre of the congress centre is also clad with a plastic texture.

Unceremonious winks are sprinkled throughout the building: from the candy-coloured puffs in the seating lounges to the boxy 1970s' lighting fixtures pasted on the walls, to the bubbly round detailing of the dressing rooms and the carefree Kubrick-esque collection of future anterior upholstered chairs in the cafeteria, not to mention the trippy twisted neon signage and hall-of-mirrors mazes in the bathrooms, or the oversized hanging lamps reminiscent of inflatable beach balls. Everything comes together in rhythmic crescendos of colour and shine. A certain joy pervades the whole interior, in a way that remains true to the beach origins of the site—just like the exterior does to the butch straightforwardness of the port.



↑The architects envisaged the auditorium as “a place of aquatic music.”

Selgascano's approach to their Cartagena project is truly neoartisanal: they rely on locally sourced high-tech materials and low-tech, low-impact solutions, and assume a working philosophy of active reuse while lowering costs by investing heavily in ingenuity. Instead of worrying about defining a personal style, the architects revisit and replay many of their signature technical processes and aesthetic concerns, producing unique results with each reiteration. The design responds first and foremost to the site's conditions and character. It is constantly adapted on site to better suit them, through trial and error, instead of relying on "genius" and ego, or worse, on indecipherable calculations and solutions spewed by a machine hundreds of miles away. And it shows.



↑The convention center's main amphitheater.

This is pop architecture in the truest sense: architecture for the people. Architecture to be used, lived, enjoyed and occupied. Not a hint of white elephant. The project's square footage might be measured in the thousands, but there is not a single space here that overwhelms, that doesn't feel cosy and comfortable and user-friendly. Selgascano's conference centre perfectly suits the swagger of Cartagena and sticks it to the sheer brickness of Murcia. It thrives on the fundamental tension between the vision of the promoter, who works for profit, and the vision of the architect, who in this case, thankfully, works for the people. This is not an architecture of conciliation (which would be kitsch) but of soft resistance, an antidote to both the slatternly building habits of the boom and the inevitable gloom of the bust.

*Mario Ballesteros,
Critic and architectural editor*



↑The building, which on the outside appears as a defined volume, is eroded on the inside by irregular form.

Design Architects: selgascano (José Selgas, Lucía Cano)

Design Team: Lara Resco, Carlos Chacón, José de Villar, José Jaraiz, Lorena del Río, Blas Antón, Miguel San Millán, Julián Fernandez, Beatriz Quintana, Jaehoon Yook, Jeongwoo Choi, Laura Culiañez, Bárbara Bardín

Interior Design, Architect of Record: selgascano

Assistants: Antonio Mármol, Joaquín Cárceles, Raúl Jiménez

Site area: 5.628 mq

Total built area: 18.500 mq

Design phase: 2002

Construction: 2006—11/2011

Cost: 34.5 million €

Structural Engineering: FHECOR

Mechanical/Electrical/Plumbing Engineering: JG

Acoustic Engineering: ARAU ACUSTICA

Textile Engineering: LASTRA Y ZORRILLA

General Contractors: DRAGADOS, INTERSA

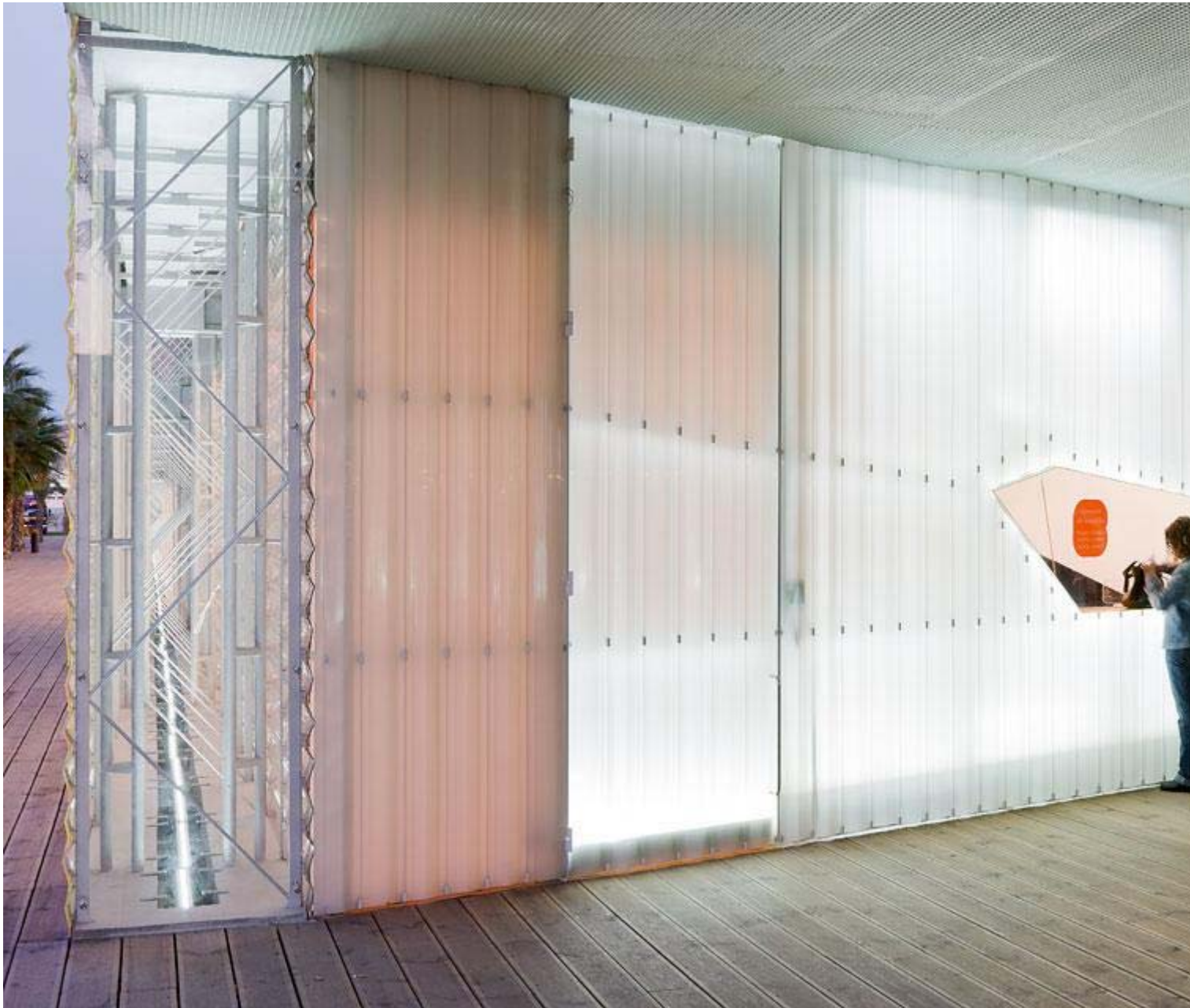
Plastic Manufacturers: POLIMERTECNIC, SABIC

Auditorium Seating: FIGUERAS

Floor Manufacturer: PRIALPAS

Lighting Manufacturers: IDEALUX, TALLERES ZAMORA

Wall Manufacturer: ATA AISLAMIENTOS TECNICOS AGROALIMENTARIOS



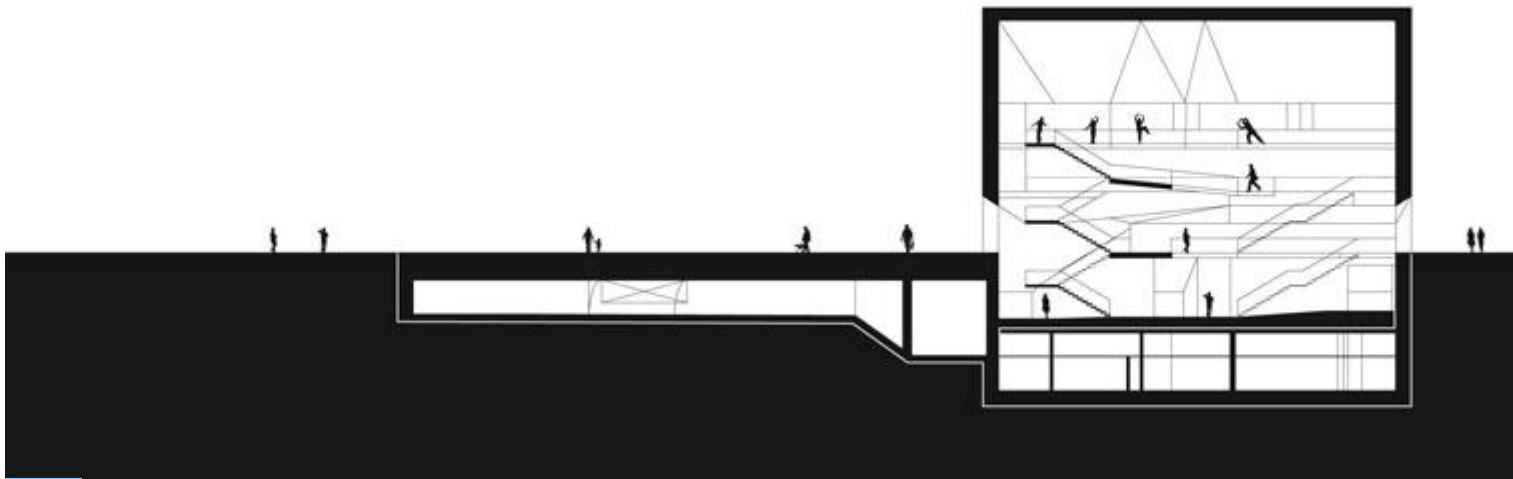
↑ A broken line cuts out the aperture of the reception desk in the translucent lateral front. In the foreground is the metal frame of the facades, wind-braced and clad with retro-illuminated plastic pipes.



↑The outside patio.

Gallery





Transverse section.

[Mario Ballesteros](#)