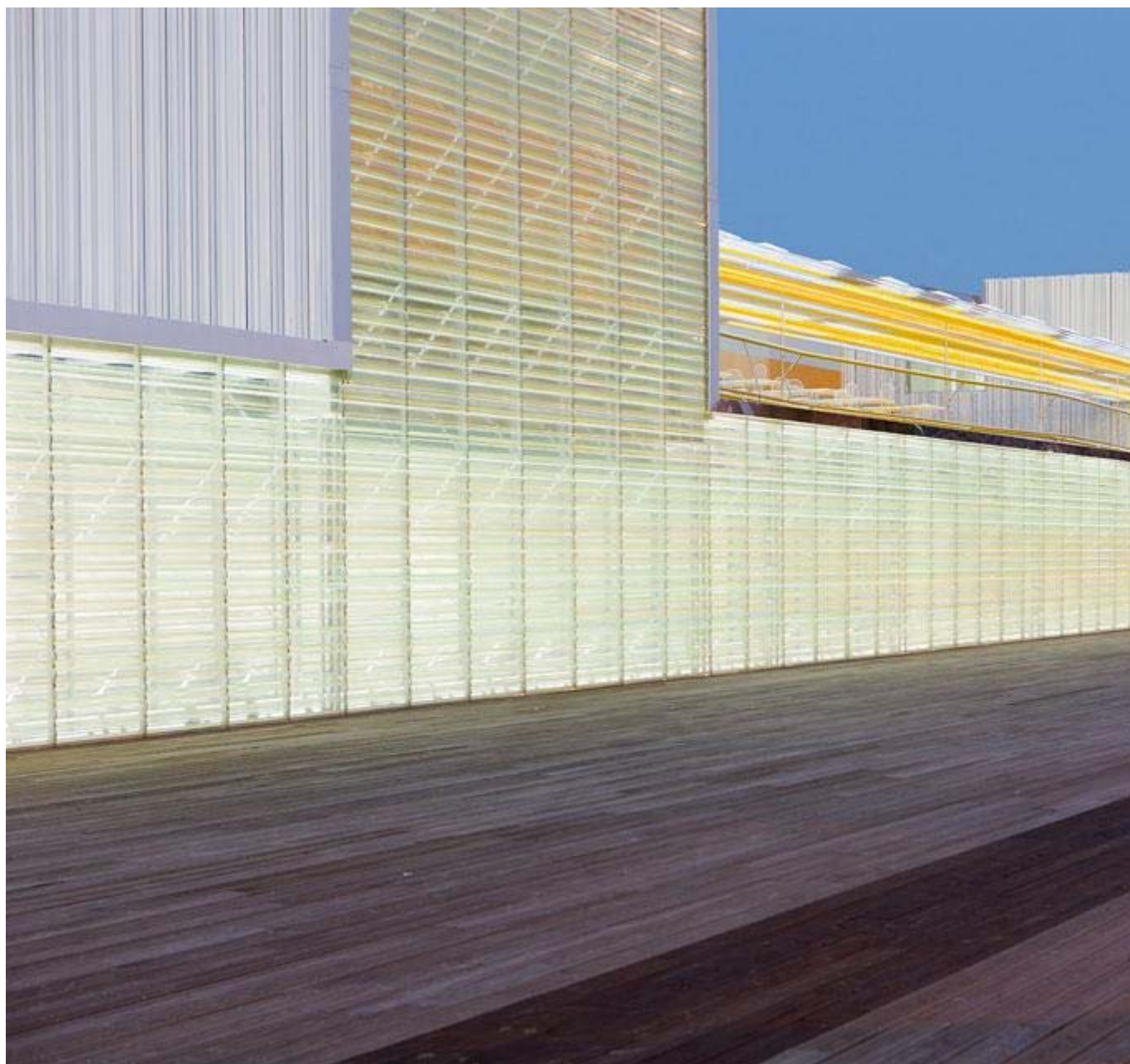


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A new glow in boomtown

- **Along the Cartagena waterfront, architects José Selgas and Lucía Cano light up an architectural antidote to the gloom of the Spanish real estate crisis.**

Published [10 January 2012](#)

[Architecture](#) / [Mario Ballesteros](#)

Photography [Iwan Baan](#)

Location [Cartagena](#)

DOMUS 954, José Selgas, Lucía Cano, selgascano

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

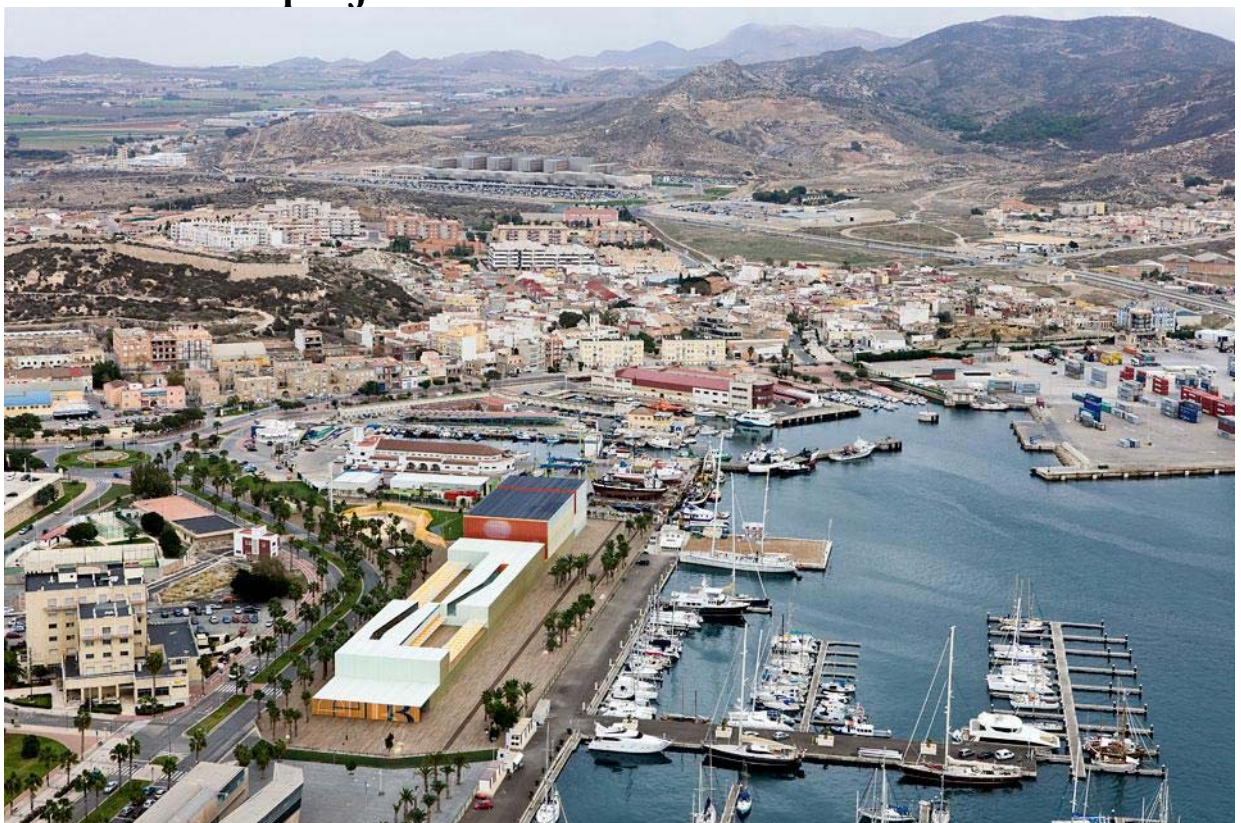
development schemes and hundreds of thousands of new housing projects made Murcia Spain's fastest-growing region in the early 2000s. Today all that has changed: residential construction dropped a whopping 82 per cent between 2008 and 2009, and Murcia now struggles with soaring unemployment and social 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.



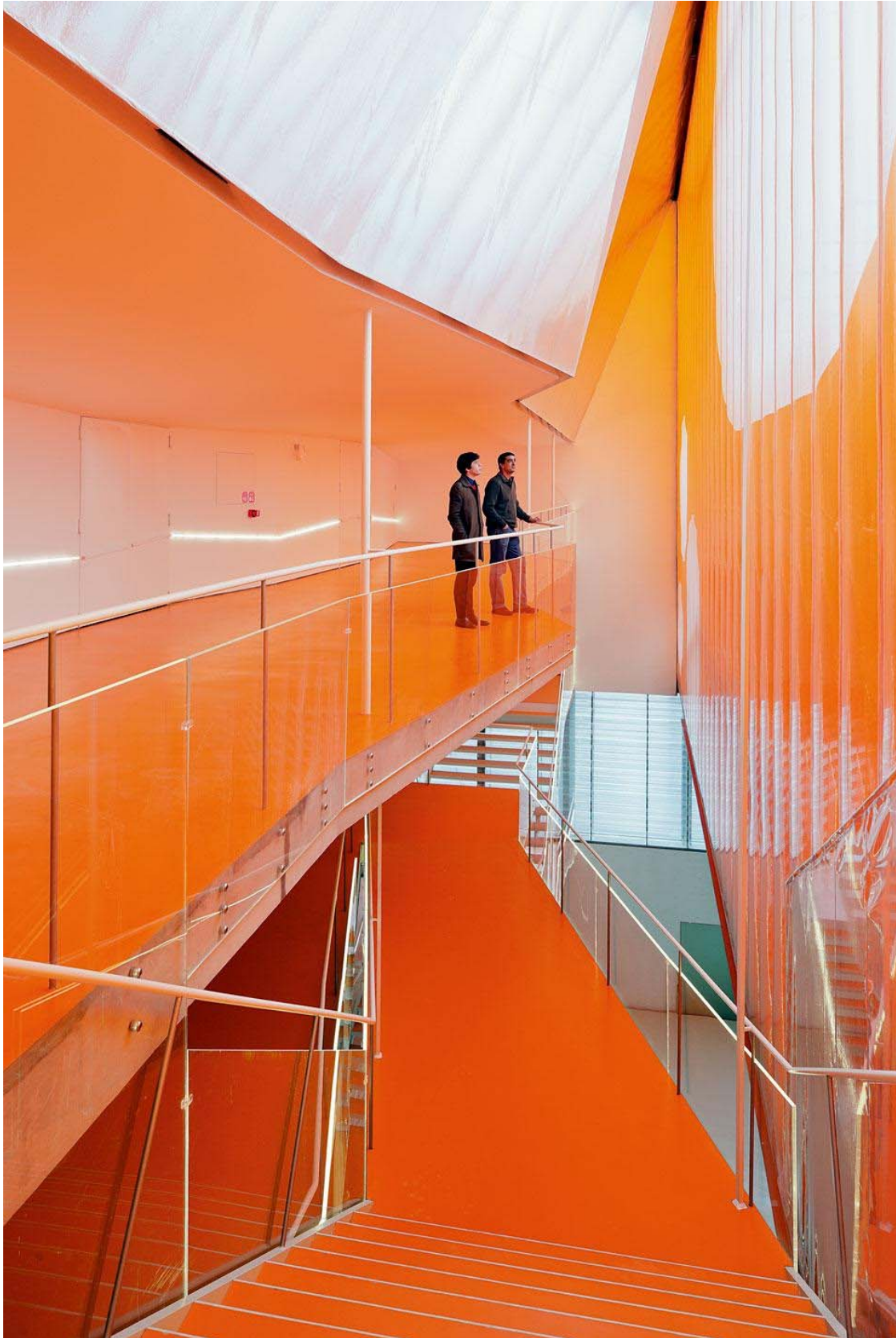
Sitting stark and unassuming at the end of the kilometre-long Paseo Alfonso XII seafront boulevard, the building blends into the burly scenery of the old shipping port.

**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.

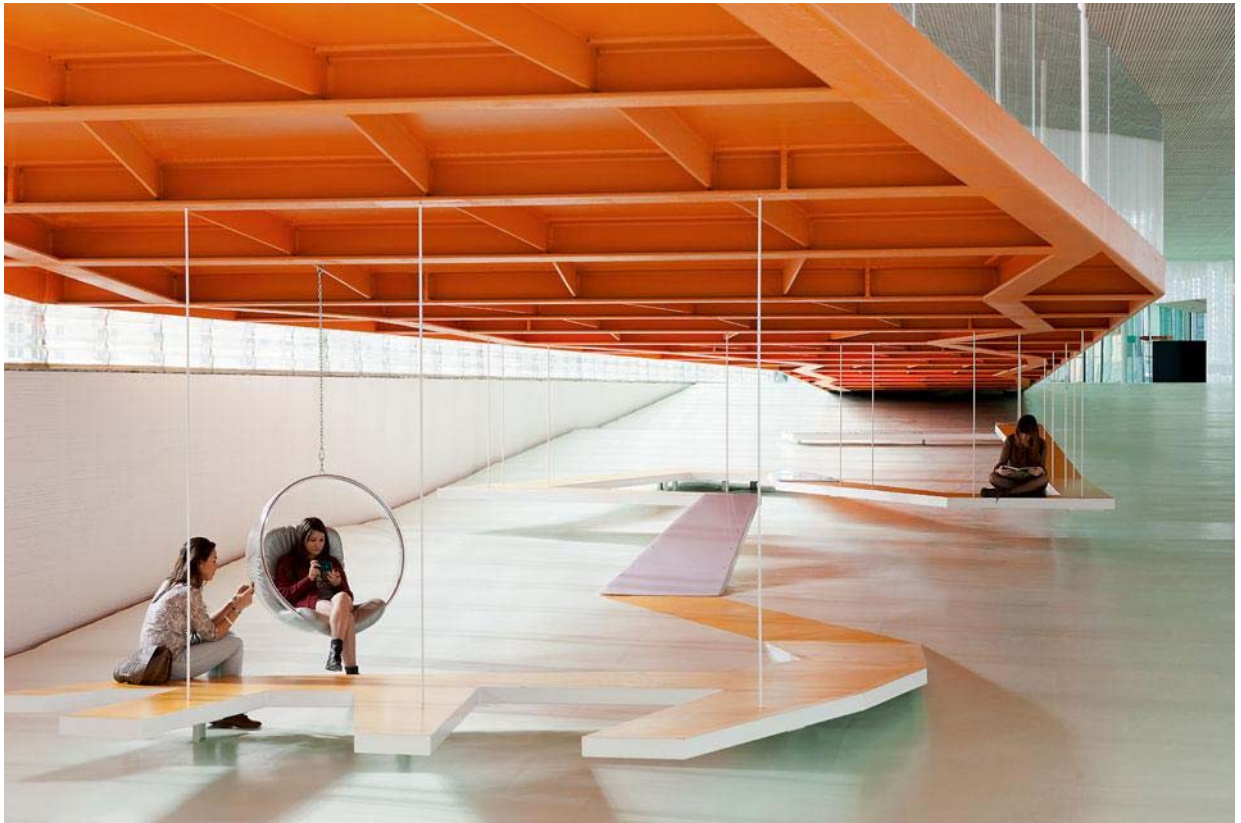
Instead of worrying about defining a personal style, the architects revisit and replay many of their signature technical processes and aesthetic concerns, producing unique results with each reiteration.



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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.



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.

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

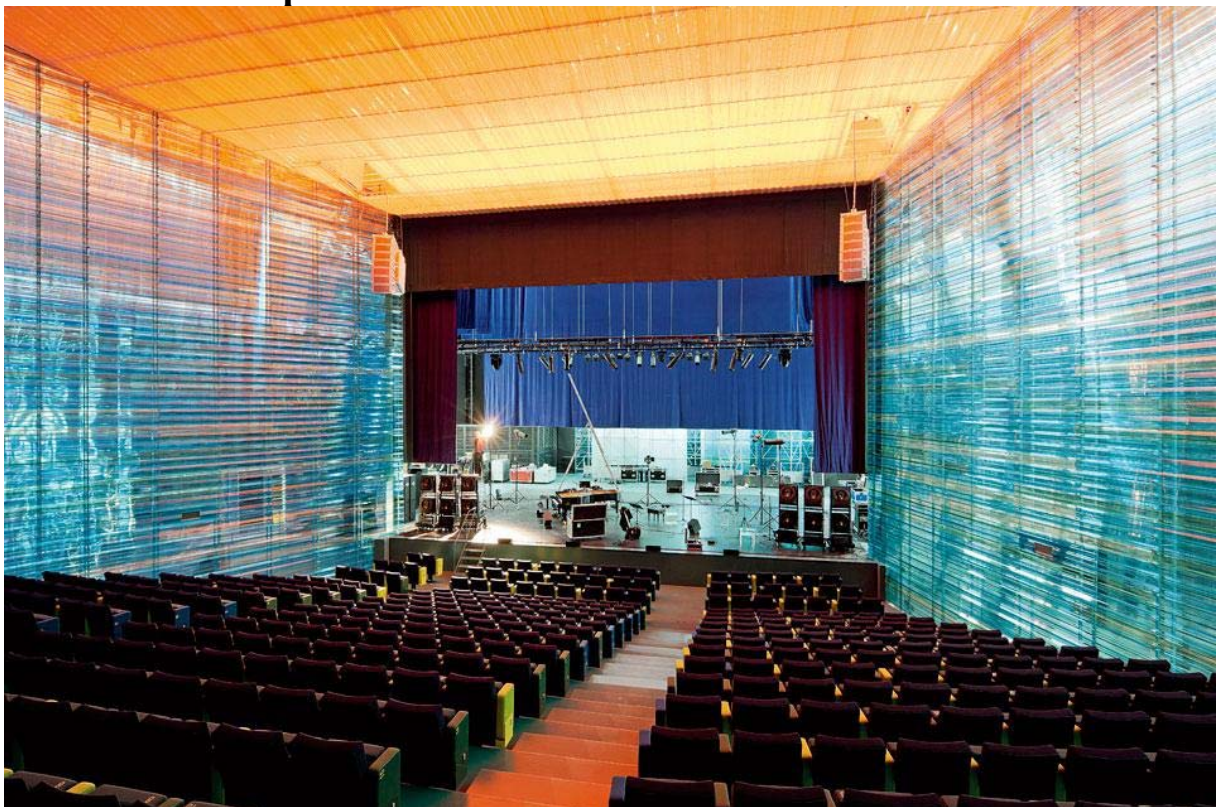
sheets anchored to a steel frame that create a soft, billowing intermediate facade. Once inside the auditorium, visitors are completely submerged in the atmosphere created by the underwater blues and greens of the translucent panels. All these polychrome hues, the sways from softness to hardness, the 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,

Rául 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

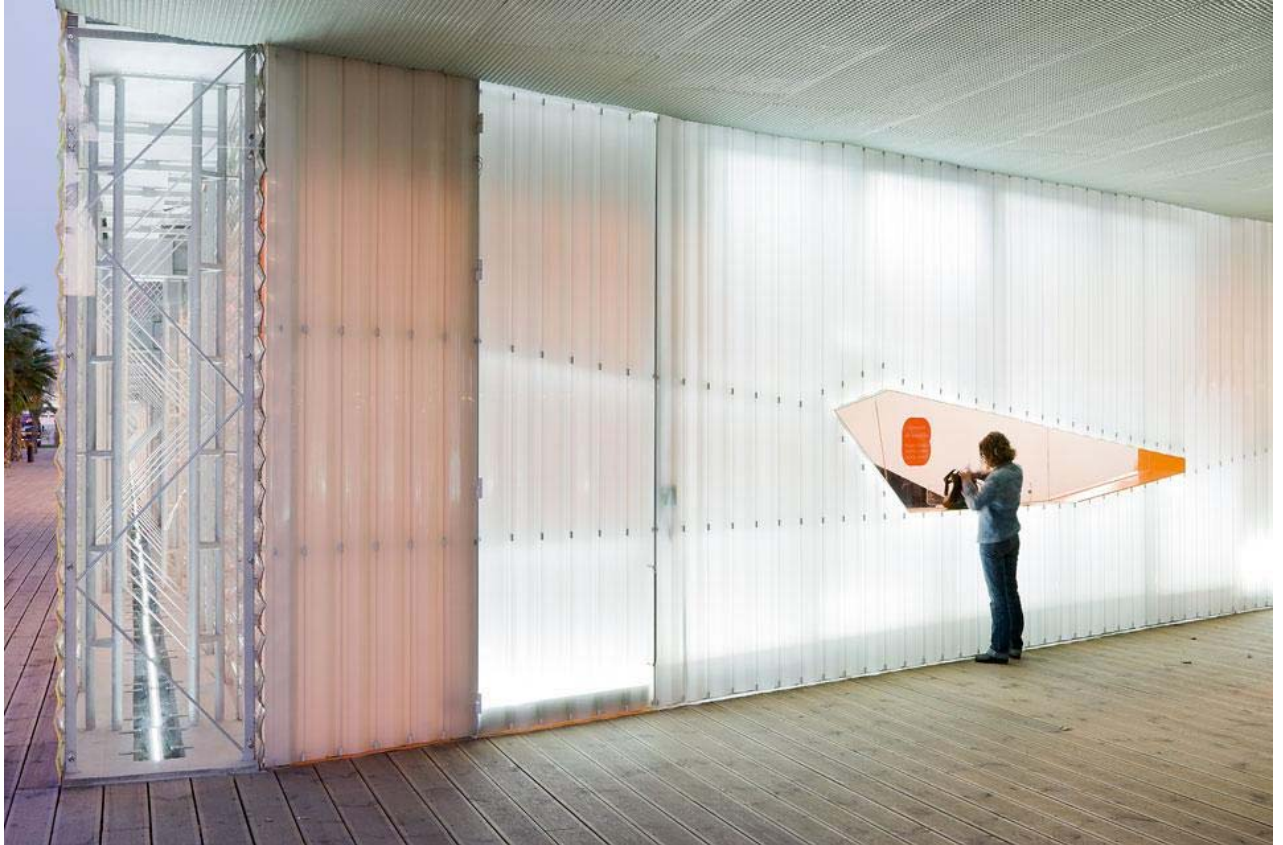
Floor Manufacturer:
PRIALPAS

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.

