

There are many ways to define what makes a city desirable. Dozens of livability indexes have forged their own metrics of evaluating a city's green spaces, its recreational options, and its ease of movement, among others. Yet for José Selgas and Lucía Cano—the duo behind the firm—what really matters is the presence of nature. They share the belief that we have a profound need to connect with nature, and by doing so, we will be happier and healthier as a result.

“If you want to measure a city for its value, just count the amount of trees that have been planted,” quips Selgas. “They are not just beneficial, they are fundamental.” There are three major advantages of integrating more nature in our cities: doing so can slow the rate of climate change, ameliorate air pollution, and improve our mental health and well-being, factors that the firm is acutely aware of. In recent years, SelgasCano has constructed a diverse array of experimental and color-friendly projects, each characterized by an emphasis on the natural environment. Distinguished by strong chromatics and large-scale undulating forms, their ventures fuse a rare spirit with a diligent study of materiality. Modern firms have seldom experimented so cleverly with flora, color, and cutting-edge materials. Yet the studio self-identifies more modestly: “We see ourselves as gardeners as much as architects, in the sense that we want to respect the nature that exists in a place. If it doesn't exist, we want to add more; the rest we really don't care about.”

In an architectural era dominated by concrete structures and glass high-rises, SelgasCano is poking holes in the status-quo. “The question needs to be, ‘how are you not implementing nature everywhere?’ We keep building and building, and we are destroying the natural world. It will disappear, so there is no other option,” Selgas warns. In addition to proximity to nature, SelgasCano recognizes that color is vital to human experience. Established in 1998, the firm has become recognized worldwide thanks to a catalog of successful projects in Spain: from Factoría Joven, an other-worldly playground, skate park, and recreation center sheltered beneath a bulging orange roof in Mérida, to the El Batel Auditorium and Convention Center in Cartagena—an ethereal complex clad in opalescent high-tech plastic with pops of traffic-cone orange throughout.

While constructing from plastic might seem counterproductive to creating sustainable, tectonic architecture, such purposeful contradictions inform much of the couple's work, as they investigate new methods of eco-conscious building. Compared with many natural products, Selgas asserts that some artificial materials like ETFE, the polymer sheeting used for the Cartagena auditorium's facade, actually use less energy to produce and install, “which is one of the best things we can do for nature.” The Plasencia Auditorium and Congress Center in the province of Cáceres is also made from ETFE; its faceted shape resembles that of a giant meteor. “It's like a UFO in the middle of a beautiful landscape,” Selgas describes. The translucent building and its colored ramps have been compared to Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer's Niterói Contemporary Art Museum in Rio de Janeiro, with its spaceship-esque structure, dramatic, cliff-edge position, and spiraling red ramp.

Yet beyond reimagined materiality and wildly imaginative forms, what draws SelgasCano's disparate projects together in likeness is their consideration for people—they promote well-being by encouraging people, young and old, to engage in pleasurable indoor and outdoor experiences. Schemes like the Mérida skate park have helped to shape the city's urban identity, not only in outcome but by involving local residents in the design and build.



*Previous pages:* Factoría Joven is designed to be a playground for teenagers. Its form is inspired by that of a Chinese dragon.

*Left:* Youth are able to skate, bike, and interact with Factoría Joven's curving forms.

*Top right:* The use of light-weight, low-cost materials in Factoría Joven creates a vibrant, colorful feel that SelgasCano is renowned for worldwide.

*Bottom right:* In a collaborative effort, locals contributed ideas and helped in the building process of Factoría Joven.

