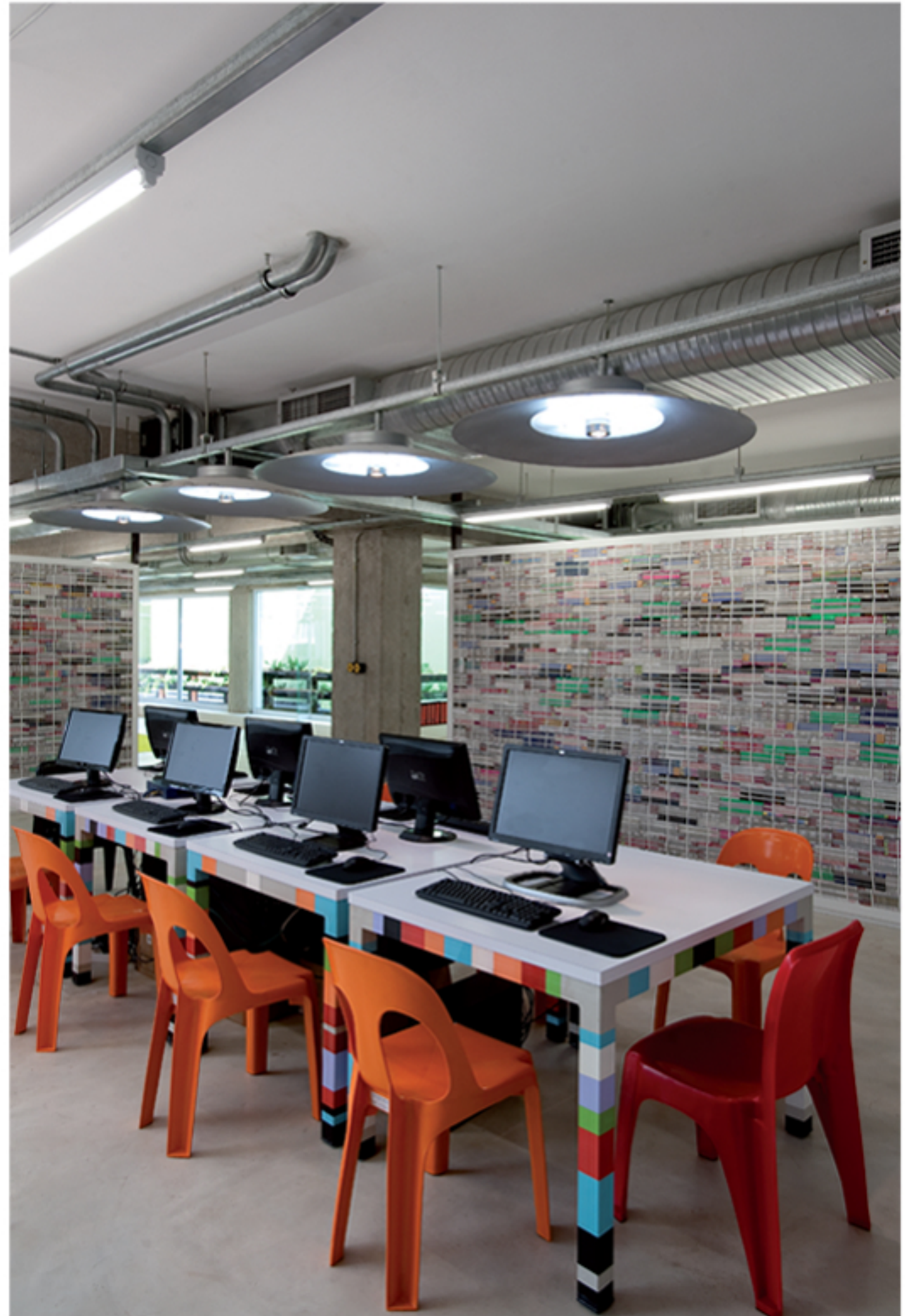


For once, power couple Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens didn't set off for the most exotic, hidden bits of the continent to create their signature style. They simply headed downtown to Braamfontein where an urban play place awaited.





awards, their safari-hive aesthetic has become something of a design legend and has enabled the husband-and-wife team to travel the globe, living on site and dreaming up grand projects from the benchmark North Island in the Seychelles to the Ngorongoro Crater Lodge in Tanzania. Not too long ago, the pair were asked by those in the know at South Point Development – whose *raison d'être* is urban redevelopment – to give design input and direction to their jigsaw of high-rise properties in Braamfontein. “We had focused on our buildings,” admits South Point CEO Rob Lowdon, “but we needed to invest in the public space. The brief was for a development plan, so we were looking at greater Braamfontein with Wits on one side and the Gautrain station on the other, with people moving between the two points.” The idea was to enable South Point – who offer modern, contemporary student accommodation – to create a core precinct; not just to uplift the area but to give presence



here are few local architects who summon up national pride as frequently as Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens. Winners of this year's Absolut VISA Designer of the Year Award and a slew of international



**THIS PAGE** The public bathrooms are a collective riot of colour with clever light boxes custom-designed to lead you to the right door. **OPPOSITE** Honest fluorescent lighting and bold primary colours add impact to the monochromatic bathrooms on every floor. **PREVIOUS SPREAD, RIGHT** The clean industrial aesthetic is reflected throughout – in reclaimed metal, bare concrete, floor-to-ceiling glass and the clever use of recycled materials. **PREVIOUS SPREAD, LEFT** Colour punctuates every storey of Southpoint's head office – even the boardroom table is painted in technicolour stripes to echo the spines of the magazine wall dividers.



to their youthful brand. “South Point had this great opportunity,” enthuses Silvio, “it just needed a heart.” On the surface, Silvio and Lesley's brief could not be more different from the barefoot luxury with which they're usually associated, but the pair insists that the project shares much with their existing body of work. “Most bush camps and islands we design are made up of components and, as such, have a village-community feel that comes from an urban design philosophy,” says Silvio. The plan for Braamfontein is to create a youthful citadel where the city centre becomes one's lounge. In order to achieve this ambitious goal, the first priority was to demolish an old property across the street from South Point's proposed new HQ to make way for a piazza. Now called The Grove, it is already the location of the sprawling entrance to the boutique Hotel Larumna, a coffee bar and a giant-sized television screen. A corner DJ



**THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** A meeting room is separated from the open-plan space by transparent sliding walls to create a private space that's still part of the buzz. The coffee bar on the ground floor is notable for its banks of lights, but it's the reclaimed timber bar, digitally printed with colour, that is truly amazing. Even the meeting rooms boast a pop of colour and a (retro-inspired) sense of humour. **OPPOSITE** Exposed services and raw concrete make for a contemporary space that can take a bit of rough.

booth and cool interactive retail spaces, plus a rooftop cinema and basketball courts are set to open later this year. As Lesley explains, creating familiarity and mixed-use areas is what makes a healthy city in which you can work, study and play.

Silvio picks up the thread: "Milan's Zona Tortona was our inspiration." It was originally an out-of-the-way (read: unfashionable) area of the style capital but now boasts a cosmopolitan design set and enviable tenants, like Giorgio Armani. "The idea is to fix the area but don't sanitise it. Zona Tortona is not perfect but the raw framework is modern and, like here, is very forgiving. We've been going to Milan for years and we've always said that someone has to take a downtown Joburg carcass and fill it like this. It's why we loved this project."

South Point's head-office building lies across Melle Street from The Grove. Retaining the original building's framework, Silvio and

Lesley stripped everything "It was already a tough, Modernist space with concrete beams that could take a bit of rough," Silvio explains. The team added to the industrial aesthetic by leaving the water pipes and metal air-con ducts exposed, but, as with all things attributed to this partnership, no detail was left to chance and the common or garden circular ducts usually found about town are slim-line oval shapes in this office.

The ground floor, which opens onto the road, the piazza and the side alley (finding new life as a spill-area from the lobby) is the student registration area, complete with a plethora of vivid orange chairs and a coffee bar that would look more at home in downtown Manhattan than the unfashionable side of Sandton.

"The ground floor is connected to the bigger picture and the outdoor buzz. It's a lobby that functions as part of the city. As a student, it's like hanging out in your

best friend's lounge – it's not perfect but it's comfortable, like a designer pair of jeans with all the holes."

Talk of youth and students is paramount. Leave the lobby area for higher ground and the same bright colours and brilliant young philosophy follows you like a celebrity lapdog. Reclaimed metal handrails in the stairwells lead you up to wildly primary bathrooms with honest fluorescent lighting and through doors into a studio-style office space flooded with natural light that spills through the floor-to-ceiling glass walls. Batches of colour cleverly demarcate the various departments whose communal workstations sit like islands in a sea of contrasting tones.

With a nod to Googleplex, walls of bound magazines separate private meeting areas from the open flow. Says Silvio: "The magazine walls are innovative and in the youthful spirit of South Point, but paper also absorbs sound so they're functional too." Naturally this wouldn't be all about interconnectedness if the enviable vistas didn't take in the city and, in particular, the piazza that is central to the concept of creating a university village.

Neither Silvio nor Lesley is a stranger to Braamfontein. Both are Wits University alumni who have lived, worked and designed together for almost two decades. The couple famously lived on their project sites for 10 years, submerging themselves into the genius loci and harnessing the talents of the local tradesmen. "Looking back it was the most fun," Silvio admits with a broad grin. "Working together, living together, designing together means common interests and common successes. As a concept it works because we are a family business."

"There are two parallels with family ties: there's the family connection to the African villagers and craftsmen and there's the connection with our own families. My family still craft furniture for us [Silvio's family owns Modellers of Antique Furniture and Classic Revivals] and Lesley's uncle creates ceramics [Carstens Ceramics]."

Today, living and working from their Westcliff retreat, the couple's three children have also been exposed to a living, breathing creative studio. "The kids do their homework in the studio and interact with the staff and play on the computers, so in an informal way they are exposed to a creative energy," says Silvio. "I'd be delighted if they wanted to become architects, but if they simply get to enjoy what they do every day and take away the energy and creativity and ethos for thinking outside their box, that's great too."

"I say keep it in the family!" **V**

• Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens Architects, 011 486 1525, adventarch@rweb.co.za