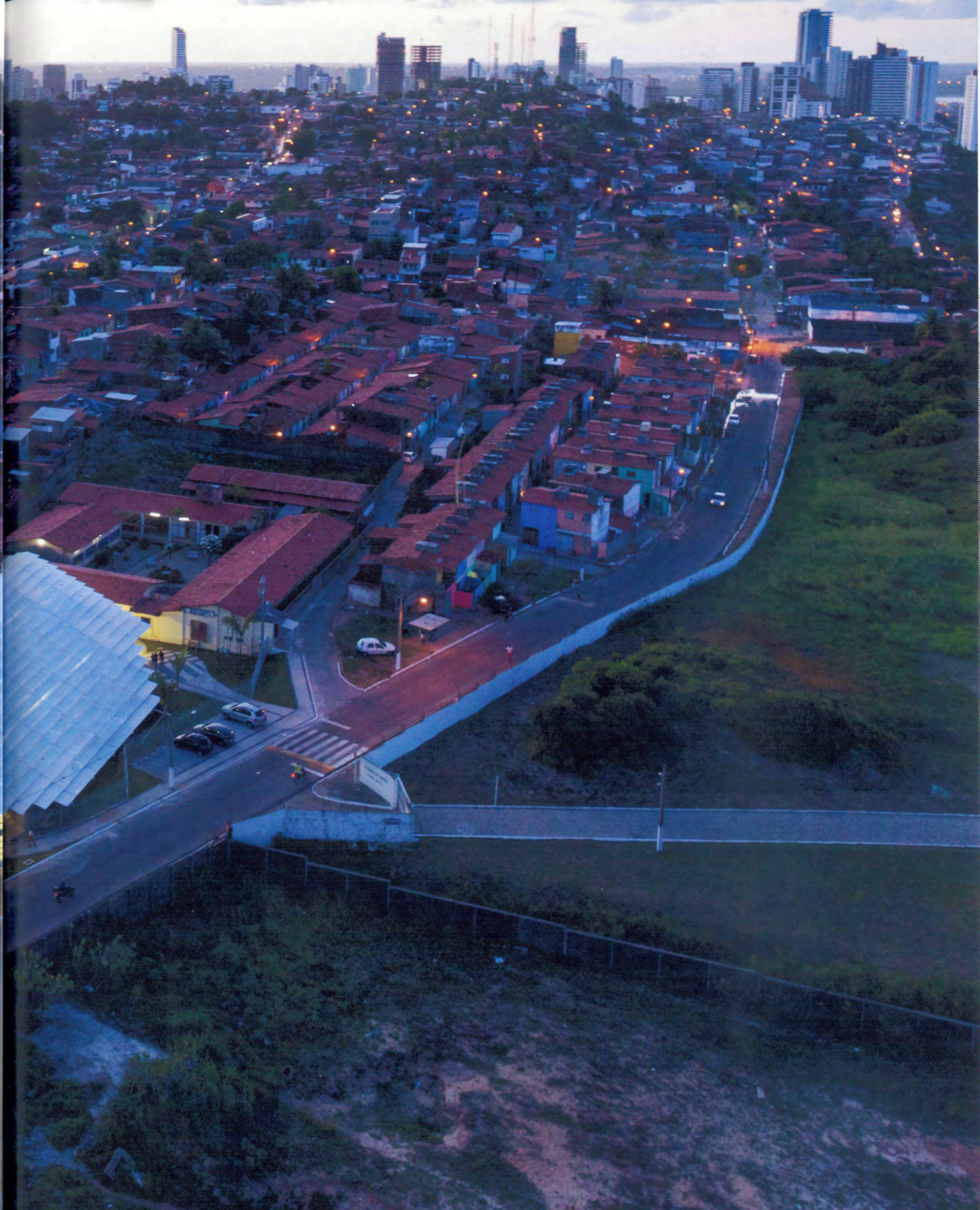




# SPORTING CHANGE

Embedded in a tough Brazilian favela, a new sports centre catalyses actions and ideas about social cohesion and civility

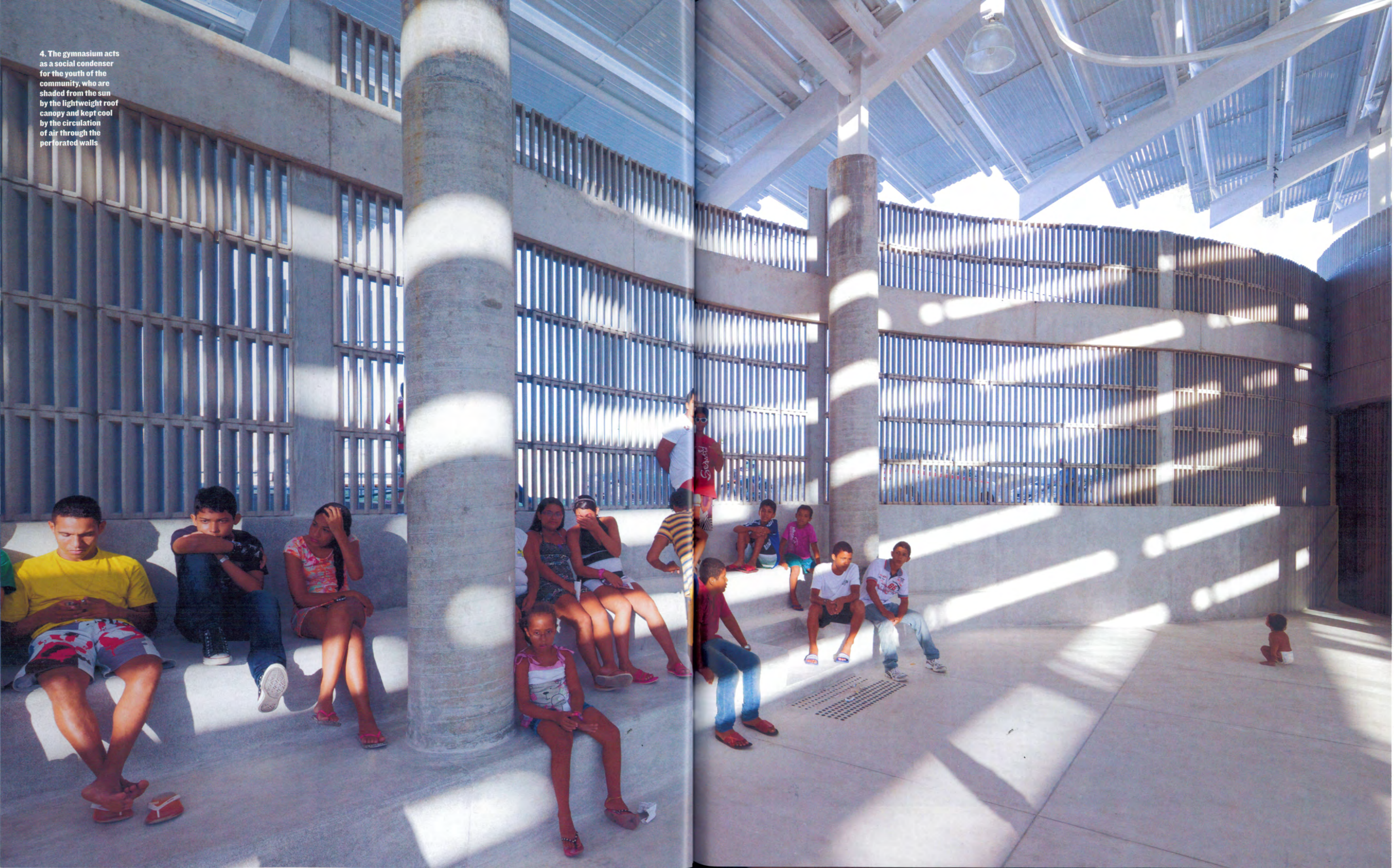
1. (Opening spread) & 2. The simple and elegant gymnasium – part of a wider urban proposal – is slotted among the ramshackle streets of the Mãe Luiza favela. The building has instilled a renewed sense of civic order and pride in the neighbourhood





3. Disaffected youths who first came to see the building toting guns, now leave them at home and come to play football or impress their peers with their latest break dancing routines. Natural sunlight and ventilation reduce energy requirements

4. The gymnasium acts as a social condenser for the youth of the community, who are shaded from the sun by the lightweight roof canopy and kept cool by the circulation of air through the perforated walls





location plan

REPORT

JONATHAN GLANCEY

The Portuguese founded Natal, or 'Christmas', on 25 December 1599. The architectural present they gave the new settlement on the Atlantic coast of north-east Brazil was a white, star-shaped castle – the Forte do Reis Magos – named after the Magi who brought gifts of gold, myrrh and frankincense to baby Jesus. Almost miraculously, the fort appears to rise from the sea on the fringe of the city that has boomed behind it in recent decades.

Today, a distinctive and decidedly white new building has appeared on the coast, not far from the 16th-century fort. A gift from 21st-century Europeans, the Arena do Morro has been designed in Switzerland, its aim not to bring arms, religious salvation and the exploitation of local minerals and labour to this tropical coast, but instead sport, culture and peace. In fact, one of its quietly understated purposes has been to discourage guns, toted here today not so much by Brazilian successors to Portuguese conquistadors, but by local young men and, in particular, by the gangs of Mãe Luíza, a low-lying favela set between the high-rise office blocks and popular beach hotels of downtown Natal and the Atlantic. Its presence is also designed to bring some new sense of civic order and public purpose to the ramshackle, red pantile-roofed streets and cobbled alleys of Mãe Luíza.

'Where there is the absence of public power', says Carlos Eduardo, Mayor of Natal,

'a parallel drug traffic power appears instead. To offer to an entire community new social opportunity, with sports and cultural activities, is to help safeguard the young generations from tragic influences that, unfortunately in today's Brazil, destroy thousands of lives.'

'What we've found', says Ascan Mergenthaler, the partner in charge of the Herzog & de Meuron-designed Arena do Morro, 'is that kids who first came to see the building carrying guns are now leaving their weapons at home and coming to play football in the evenings, or simply to hang out.'

Today, it is almost fashionable to talk of architects in countries like Brazil shedding off concerns for aesthetics as they take on the role of social activists. And, yet, what Herzog & de Meuron have done here, in the long shadow of the gleaming white 87-metre high Farol da Mãe Luíza lighthouse, is to shape a distinctive and attractive sports, cultural and social centre that marries considered looks and social purpose.

The long building, belonging to the local Escola Estadual Senador Dinarte Mariz as well as to the wider local community, is characterised by a sweeping white, slatted aluminium roof sailing closely above the rooftops of Mãe Luíza. Like the Forte do Reis Magos and the Farol da Mãe Luíza, its gleaming structure acts as a bright focal point in a city of indifferent modern towers and ramshackle streets. The roof reaches as low as two metres above the pavement before appearing to sail much higher over beach

Gymnasium, Natal, Brazil, Herzog & de Meuron

5. Local children, intrigued by the possibilities afforded by the building, look in on the action  
6. The oversailing slatted roof reaches out to the wider community. The wall of undulating concrete echoes oceanside dunes

Architect  
Herzog & de Meuron  
Photographs  
Iwan Baan



and sea as the site falls away. The building's plan follows the ocean boundary, tapering from north to south.

'It is both institutional', says Mergenthaler, 'with a civic presence from the street, and also very open and transparent. It's a friendly, welcoming building. So you can look in through the walls, which you could call permeable membranes, even though they're made of concrete. There's a constant play as you walk around the building of an inside-outside quality. Inside, there's a beautifully diffused quality of light, along with a constant breeze. It's a nice place to hang out in a hot and humid city and with no need for air conditioning. The acoustic is good, too, so the Arena has already become a place for music, dancing and partying as well as sports.'

Teaching, too. Under the long white roof, a central sports pitch flanked by seating for, nominally, 425 spectators, is surrounded by circular pavilions – like balls around a tennis court – kitted out as changing rooms, a teachers' room, public lavatories, and multi-purpose rooms that can be used for coaching sports, dance and martial arts and for teaching reading, writing and arithmetic.

'Yes, we did the design in Switzerland', says Mergenthaler, 'but the construction is local. We collaborated with architects, engineers and builders from Natal. When we were offered the commission by the Ameropa Foundation [a Swiss institution for development aid funded by the Ameropa grain and fertiliser supply company that has traded in Natal since the late 1950s; its Herzog & de

'The concrete walls here are special. Made from louvred blocks, they have been turned this way and that before being set in place to make the most of breeze, light and shadow'

Meuron-designed headquarters near Basel opened in 2001], we said fine, but we could only take on the project if we really knew what exactly the neighbourhood is, how it works and how we could look at the different ingredients of the favela and turn these into something new.'

The Arena was not to be a one-off 'Christmas present' dropped by Santa, in the guise of a Swiss foundation and its architects better known for such spectacular sports buildings as the Allianz Stadium, Munich, and the Bird's Nest Olympic stadium, Beijing. As Mergenthaler is keen to stress, Ameropa has been actively involved in Natal and Mãe Luíza for over 30 years: their view of development is for the long term.

Because of this, Herzog and de Meuron drew up a long-term plan for the structural development of Mãe Luíza, for new 'green' streets lined with trees and markets, and for a spine of new, low-cost and locally designed civic buildings to complement the Arena do Morro. The architects have worked pro bono.

'Of course, we would be happy to carry on our involvement in the neighbourhood and hope for this project to take the development

of Mãe Luíza further', says Mergenthaler, 'especially now that we have experience of how to design effectively for the climate. In fact, we hope that the type of structure we've developed with local engineers and builders will be used in other new buildings in Natal and perhaps elsewhere in Brazil.'

The concrete walls here are special. Made from louvred blocks, they have been turned this way and that before being set in place to make the most of breeze, light and shadow. They also allow different levels of transparency and opaqueness, or openness and privacy. And, at night, when the Arena is lit up, it glows like a gentle white beacon through and over the streets of the favela, a second lighthouse of sorts for Mãe Luíza, although serving culture and sports rather than cargo and shipping.

Even if, though, this beacon of attractive and low-cost new civic architecture is helping to reshape and refocus life in a favela in which drugs and guns have been so destructive, not even Swiss philanthropy and design can tame tropical climate and nature. In June, a landslide swept at least 25 houses from Mãe Luíza into the ocean. Others tumbled into a sinkhole. And in mid-July families were evacuated from the favela as floods hit Natal. There is clearly a long way to go, and yet what the Swiss Magi have brought is not just the gift of an intelligent, elegant and popular new building, but a long-term and realisable plan offering Mãe Luíza a chance to raise its collective sights above the cobbles, lighthouse-high.