

NEAR EAST



日本特集

COLLECTORS ISSUE

JAPAN-BEIRUT

ISSEY MIYAKE

JUERGEN TELLER

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& YANIS VAROUFAKIS

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IT'S NOT BECAUSE
SPRING IS TOO
BEAUTIFUL
THAT WE'LL NOT
WRITE WHAT
HAPPENS IN THE
DARK¹

DAVID ADJAYE interviewed by SOFIA LEMOS

David Adjaye was born in Dar es Salaam, TANZANIA, in 1966, to GHANAIAN parents serving as diplomats. By the time David was nine, he had lived in DAR ES SALAAM, KAMPALA, NAIROBI, CAIRO, BEIRUT, ACCRA, and JEDDAH. In the 1980s, David's father took a post at the Ghanaian Embassy in LONDON, where the Adjaye family settled in the northwest suburb of HAMPSTEAD.

With an unconventional architectural training, he gained experience at different offices before earning his architectural degree at London South Bank University after which he started work at the office of a young DAVID CHIPPERFIELD, whose formalist designs were starting to spread across the museum scene in ENGLAND and EUROPE. He then left England to work with EDUARDO SOUTO DE MOURA in Portugal. Souto de Moura, a Pritzker Prize Laureate known for his balance of MATERIALITY and MINIMALISM, contextual designs and elements of artisan craftsmanship, mentored him before he returned to London to gain a master's degree in architecture at the ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART.

A large part of this time, the early 1990s, was put to use socialising with the YBAs, and CRUISING EUROPE and the MIDDLE EAST to study and draw the monuments of ANTIQUITY and MODERNISM.

In the early 2000s he went on to establish his own studio, ADJAYE ASSOCIATES.

SO FIA LEMOS W.E.B. Du Bois, a remarkable historian and civil rights activist, offered us a crucial insight: that one is not only able to learn about the world while intensively learning about one's own local and immediate conditions, but one cannot learn about the world otherwise. Perhaps we can begin with your impulse to travel and collect images, either in sketches or photographs: where do you think this drive comes from?

DAVID ADJAYE In many ways, it comes from growing up in a vast diversity of contexts. I was forced from a very early age to negotiate a wide variety of ethnicities, religions, and cultural constructions. By the time I was 13, I thought that that was normal, and that was how the world was. So this became intrinsic to my approach to the world and, by extension, to design, which always seeks to be highly sensitive to the cultural framework of different peoples. It is why I am fascinated by cosmopolitan metropolitan cities, or places where differences are being negotiated all the time. I cannot conceive of approaching design from any other angle other than beginning with an investigation into context. Unpacking cultural nuance is a foundational element of all of my designs and is at the heart of my practice. And I firmly believe this must emerge from lived experience and real engagement.

SL The contexts of creation, viewing, and reception of your designs are noticeably wide. How has the transnational circulation of ideas across borders of people influenced your designs?

DA The world's history has been shaped by the movement of ideas, the process of which has always been laden with power hierarchies. Our current climate of transnational movement has put these hierarchies in a more volatile state of flux, raising questions of ownership and authenticity that circumscribe the power dynamics of place in new ways. Thus, as an architect, I see my work as not simply about facilitating or promoting the movement of ideas, which is inevitable and constant. Rather, my buildings, particularly my public projects, are about creating forums for ideas to flow between groups of equal standing. They are designed as places where ideas can be engaged with, considered, and reshaped through open dialogues between collaborative publics.

SL You recently worked with curator Okwui Enwezor on the design of the 56th Venice Biennale (2015), and sustain a long-term collaboration with the Turner Prize-winning painter Chris Ofili, among other contemporary visual artists.

DA I do not draw a distinction between the world of art and architecture. For me, design has to work practically, but also emotionally and intellectually. I have always sought to cross creative platforms, collaborating with artists and designers from different disciplines, and focusing on the creative discourse surrounding the act of making things. It is the dialogue — the cultural intersection that excites me. Perhaps it is this instinct that has been recognised by the art world, and which makes collaborating with artists and curators so engaging. Art visualises very important things that are happening in the culture. The visual arts are usually the first to manifest the happenings in some kind of form or gesture. I find that really stimulating. We help each other: when things shift in architecture, it influences art; and when things shift in art, it informs architecture in a very immediate way. Technology also has an impact, but art gives us the language that we move forward with.

SL What are the challenges and opportunities that these on-going conversations with artists and curators afford to the museums you are effectively building?

DA All collaborations are strenuous, even more so with artists and curators, because they are so critically engaged. They really understand what is at stake. But I do not see the process as one of compromise: collaboration is truly about the act of making [things] together. It is through navigating the limits that you arrive at something interesting. So, looking at the negotiation process as productive rather than reductive



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'HISTORY HAS BEEN SHAPED BY THE MOVEMENT OF IDEAS, THE PROCESS OF WHICH HAS ALWAYS BEEN LADEN WITH POWER HIERARCHIES. OUR CURRENT CLIMATE OF TRANSNATIONAL MOVEMENT HAS PUT THESE HIERARCHIES IN A MORE VOLATILE STATE OF FLUX, RAISING QUESTIONS OF OWNERSHIP AND AUTHENTICITY THAT CIRCUMSCRIBE THE POWER DYNAMICS OF PLACE IN NEW WAYS.'



Photography JUERGEN TELLER

has been critical for me. Each building is a site of contention; you must be willing to defend the contest, while being open to how that contest might end up being expressed.

SL The museum, inasmuch as it acts as a container of histories and desires, creates an in-built backdrop for our relationship to art and to architecture, but also to history. What is the role of the museum today?

DA As a civic building, the role of the museum is to provide access to a collective consciousness while offering the chance for dialogue between different generations and social groupings. The simple act of building forces engagement — you can't ignore it. Things always happen from that and the question is how we celebrate it or deny it. It is important not to be hampered or intimidated by the idea of difference — but rather to seek to be open and even speculative about the possibilities it offers.

SL Collector Tony Salamé's private museum, the Aishti Foundation, has recently caused some controversy due its portrait of art as a luxury commodity. The exhibition space is shared with a shopping mall, and a number of galleries even have a privileged view over the retail shops. What informed your design of this museum?

DA This aspect of the project really excited me from the start. It presented an opportunity to design a building that would integrate different typological conditions — or 'urban systems'. The concept is the democratisation of art by juxtaposing it with fashion and leisure. The spaces are distinct, yet with flexibility to be integrated. Socially, it is a new urban system — a new social and cultural condition that resonates with the increasing fluidity of relationships and information in our cities. In this sense, the building suggests a whole new urban paradigm.

As for the luxury element, I think the project is more complex than that. There is a longer-term vision for the site, which will encompass mixed-use development. The hope is that the building will anchor a new community, and access to the building will in time be more spontaneous. The creation of the promenade along the seafront is a critical part of this plan — instead of making a generic boulevard, I wanted to make something that was responsive to the Mediterranean, and confronts this landscape. The impact of the water against the edge creates a kind of undulating force, suggesting a playful landscape that references the ocean, and the fragility of being by the ocean. As a result, the site area is covered in a very deliberate, dramatic tile, to really signify this idea of a public pleasure space. The idea is that the waterfront area becomes a kind of signature destination that will invite the people of Beirut. For me, this is very much about bringing art to public space and offering a new kind of engagement.

SL You spent time in Beirut as a child. What is it like to return to that city, and what differences do you see in the organisation of public space?

DA Beirut remains an incredible city with a vibrant artistic culture. I remember when I was a kid, my parents would talk about Beirut as an incredible riviera on the waterfront. The area is now very much an industrial zone. Creating a new public space for the people of Beirut to enjoy the seafront, to reclaim some of that lost space, was very important to me. The materiality of the Aishti Foundation building was inspired in part by the red tile roofed villas that distinguished the Jal el Dib area in the 1970s. It was a part of the city that was well known for its red tile stucco buildings. It was something that I wanted to evoke because these days it's nearly gone.

SL You pointed out elsewhere, that local materials create craftsmanship just as they may create local architecture. What is the role that site-specific research plays in your designs?

DA Research is vastly important to my practice. I have a research team whom I send to a site before I even begin sketching. They engage in a rigorous examination of the cultural, historical, and geographic specificities of the context of my projects. Their findings become the starting point of the project — the interpretation of identity, history, and memory in my buildings is rooted in this research, and these elements are the essential drivers for the form and the materiality of the building.



SL In the interplay between materials and design, particularly in the Smithsonian's NMAAHC in Washington, D.C., and in the Aishti Foundation in Lebanon, the built space seems to become responsive to a certain historical sedimentation. Is it important for you to make a narrative "present"? What role do semiotic elements play in this?

DA Narratives are vastly important. They define the relevance of a project in a given place and time. The emotional context of a place is circulated through cultural rituals, through recognisable symbols and forms. It is these specificities, the soft nuances of place, that are often disregarded, that can engage communities on an emotional level. You have to have empathy for this relationship. I am always searching for the essence of those representational systems, which I'm interested in recalibrating within twenty-first-century mechanisms. They can be captured through historically significant materials, or through culturally relevant forms. Once you unearth these, you can then begin to layer the various elements in ways that offer something both innovative and emotionally resonant.

SL I opened this interview by citing an excerpt of the poem "The unfinished business of my / childhood" by Etel Adnan, a Lebanese visual artist and poet. Her weaving of historical fact, literary narrative, and political critique seems akin to your open-ended rather than prescriptive architectural statements. What is the unfinished business of architecture?

DA My practice absolutely believes that architecture is the physical act of social change, and the manifestation of it. I believe in architecture as a social force that actually makes good. And one that edifies communities. To be socially edifying, and socially liberating, it's an emancipatory form. And in that, having a politic which has to do with bringing people up, the politics of progression, of the progression of people. That is really the core of my work. When it doesn't have that, I don't really do it, or I'm just not interested, I don't feel it's what architecture should be about. That's why my work is predominantly in the cultural, educational, and civic sector.

Projects and commissions: NOBEL PEACE CENTRE in Oslo, WHITECHAPEL IDEA STORE, London(both 2005), MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, Denver (2007), SUGAR HILL HOUSING PROJECT (2015), the new STUDIO MUSEUM (on-going), Harlem, New York, and SMITHSONIAN'S NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE (2016), Washington, D.C. One of ADJAYE'S largest projects to date is the rehabilitation of downtown Msheireb in Doha, which follows the design of the AISHTI FOUNDATION (2015) in Lebanon, Beirut.

