THE REAL THING

SOUTH AFRICAN DESIGN COMES OF AGE
Trevyn McGowan takes us on a tour of Miami

Architect David Adjaye on the National Museum of African-American History and Culture

Contemporary South African furniture design comes of age

The tree house that’s a floating architectural interpretation of a forest

SUV Renaissance: Bentley, Maserati, and even Rolls-Royce are going off road

Age your own cocktails with an oak bottle, the home mixologist’s latest gadget

Olympic swimmer Ryk Neethling shares his favourite things

ZAHIRA ASMAL
WRITER
What is the most important role of public architecture? Public architecture should create space that is inclusive of everyone. The biggest challenge to creating accessible local public spaces? The government: It lacks the political will. An architect who’s made a contribution to public architecture? I am a fan of Bjarke Ingels, I recently visited his Superkilen public park project in Copenhagen.

HENRIQUE ALEXA WILDING
PHOTOGRAPHER
Which item of furniture is overdue for a redesign? For me, it’s not about one item, but rather that we need to make things that are long lasting. The room in your house where you go to recharge? Again, it’s not about one room. I feel content in my home and garden, which recharge me with things that mean something to me. Your pet interior design hate? My pet hate is “matchy matchy”.

GRAHAM WOOD
WRITER
DESIGNING THE FUTURE, HONOURING THE PAST
The National Museum of African-American History and Culture is a career-defining project for architect David Adjaye

Text Zahira Asmal

The National Museum of African-American History and Culture occupies the last available site on the National Mall in Washington DC, and is an important landmark for the US. How has this project been defining for you? I feel incredibly proud. This is a monumental project, and, arguably, the defining project of my career. It’s very rare that architecture has a symbolic role, when there is a cultural moment that allows the symbolism in architecture to suddenly make sense. I think we are lucky enough to have one of those moments in this project.

How important are these places of remembrances and of story-telling in the landscape of a city — especially located on such a prominent location? Places have memories inherent in them, and those memories are incredibly powerful. They are resources for empowerment; as a practitioner I see it as my responsibility to understand and channel these memories of place through my work. The interpretation of this identity, history, and memory is rooted in research. The starting point is always to gain an understanding of these qualities and to use them as the essential drivers for the form and the materiality of the building. A useful parallel is the work I have done on library buildings — which have become community hubs for learning, interaction, and engagement, rather than repositories for books — and the architecture has facilitated and responded to this.

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The museums you have designed have never just been about housing artefacts. Your museums are experiences, centres for learning and doing. How did the vision for this museum and its collection influence your design and delivery of the project? Narrative is essential to my design process, and exploring the vision for this museum and its collection influence your design and delivery of the project. Narrative is essential to my design process, and exploring the vision for this museum and its collection influence your design and delivery of the project. The interpretation of this identity, history, and memory is rooted in research. The starting point is always to gain an understanding of these qualities and to use them as the essential drivers for the form and the materiality of the building. A useful parallel is the work I have done on library buildings — which have become community hubs for learning, interaction, and engagement, rather than repositories for books — and the architecture has facilitated and responded to this.

The museums you have designed have never just been about housing artefacts. This is a monumental project, and, arguably, the defining project of my career. It is part of my history, but it is not my specific history. So I felt I was able to empathise, but also to be objective.

You are the quintessential global citizen, having lived in different parts of the world, and with projects spanning four continents. How does life influence your practice? My entire life I have had access to a wide variety of ethnicities, religions, and cultural constructions. By the time I was 13, I thought that was normal. So this became intrinsic to my approach towards design, which always seeks to be sensitive to the cultural framework of different peoples. It is the reason that so much of my work occurs in cosmopolitan metropolitan cities, or places where differences are constantly being negotiated. I simply cannot conceive of approaching design other than beginning with an investigation into context.

You celebrated your 50th birthday over the September equinox. In architecture terms, life begins at 50. You have already achieved more than most architects at 50: where to from here? I feel incredibly proud. This is a monumental project, and, arguably, the defining project of my career. It’s very rare that architecture has a symbolic role, when there is a cultural moment that allows the symbolism in architecture to suddenly make sense. I think we are lucky enough to have one of those moments in this project.

How has the city challenged you? Johannesburg is the most cosmopolitan city I have visited in Africa. It’s a major challenge to work to undo that division. It requires a radical change in the operating mode from which you see the city. You have to be prepared to create new overlaps that do not make immediate visual sense, but actually make sense as an integration project.