

DAVID ADJAYE

DENVER

By Lori Salmon

In *Making Public Buildings*, David Adjaye's first solo architecture exhibition in North America, built structures are given new visibility or simply treated as excuses for imagining urban landscapes in a manner that recalls Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, 1974—"Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions" [Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver; March 11-May 23, 2008]. Born in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, the esteemed British architect is known for buildings - including the award winning Idea Store at London's Whitechapel and Denver's new Museum of Contemporary Art - that flesh out the often-concealed semiotics of their environment, conjure panoramic views as if they were designed for the passing viewer, and enlist the symbolism of materials. In this exhibition, Adjaye rewrites history to highlight people's interconnectedness over their differences. He also weaves together various examples of intercultural exchange, aiming to move beyond localisms towards universalism as a political strategy.

The title block on the architect's model discloses that *Wakefield Market Hall*, 2005-2007, in Britain's West Yorkshire takes its inspiration from various sun-shaded areas of Mali. Similar to a forest of irregular sized tree trunks, a steel frame, reminiscent of branches, supports a large flat roof that connects three distinct halls. Two open spaces make up a public square and a service yard where light flickers during the day. Made of the same earthlike materials, each hall is nevertheless proportioned differently. Moving between these areas, the passerby is uncertain as to what will come next in the endless mall. A tension quickly emerges between collective cultural identity and individual concerns.

One of the other models included in *Making Public Buildings* is the *Nobel Peace Center* in Oslo, Norway, 2002-2005, modeled after the traditional Dogon wattle-and-daub round house. The Oslo exhibition and archival institute showcases the Nobel peace prize and the work of its many laureates. In an effort to preserve the thousand-year-old Malian idea of habitation as structural integration into the community, Adjaye unites an existing building with new structures to heighten the visitor's perception and trigger stored-up memories. This social space does not necessarily aim to erase difference, but will actualize exchange and debate, providing a spatial frame of reference for the laureates' takes on peace. One of the many highlights of this edifice is the interior Café de la Paix, featuring a mural commissioned from Chris Ofili, *Earth Minor Major in Yellow and Green*, whose brightly colored converging fractals offer a view of airplane routes from space.

The exhibition also includes digital slide shows and short films with original scores by Peter Adjaye, the architect's brother. These projections juxtapose diverse locations where people's lives unfold in shared space, responding directly to their surroundings – including villages, ancient religious sites, and markets in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, Bamako, Mali, Accra, Ghana, and Dakar, Senegal – with the architect's own personal snapshots of similar locations, inevitably invoking the power and place of memory and the nostalgia for all things lost or forgotten. Adjaye's knack for the re-contextualization of history uniquely allows him to consider a given locale's geographical and historical specificities while inserting it in contemporary architectural vernacular. In the exhibition, the translation of these sites into materials, images and environments condenses each building's connection to subjectivity and to life.