

ALREADY AN ART WORLD FAVORITE AND A STAR IN THE U.K., ARCHITECT **DAVID ADJAYE** IS NOW BRINGING HIS ENIGMATIC DESIGNS TO AMERICA.

By Jay Merrick

The more significant the projects by 40-year-old architect David Adjaye become, the less critics seem to agree about his reputation. Is he an architectural giant in the making, as some would argue, worthy of last fall's solo exhibition at London's Whitechapel gallery, where the only other architects ever shown were utterly totemic: Wren, Hawksmoor and Mies? Or is he simply a highly gifted interior designer who went supernova thanks to glitzy early residential projects for such art and fashion luminaries as Jake Chapman, Chris Ofili and Alexander McQueen? What, to paraphrase the title of Budd Schulberg's classic 1941 portrait of searing ambition, makes David run?

Next month's unveiling of the \$16 million Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, Adjaye's first major public project in the U.S., will surely fuel the debate. The 27,000-square-foot building is a characteristically restrained, if not chaste, rectilinear structure, clad in gray glass, whose key feature is an unusually long entrance corridor. The plain, enigmatic exterior is typical of the architect's style—he aims to draw us thoroughly into the interior spaces. "I wanted to create an exhibition experience where you have the sense of viewing art the way one uses a city, like browsing through an environment," says Adjaye. "Most museums take



ADJAYE HAS BEEN LABELED A MINIMALIST AND AN INTROVERT. BUT IN FACT, THE YOUNG ARCHITECT IS NOT YET BRANDABLE. PHOTO BY ADAM BROOMBERG AND OLIVER CHANARIN.

a generic approach to space, but I've tried to make specific, singular experiences inside. Visitors will have more intimacy with the works." The relative formal simplicity of the building is an intelligent response to an unprepossessing site in Denver. This particular urban context is no place for architectural fireworks.

But bravura, iconic architecture has never been on Adjaye's menu. Since his emergence onto the scene in the mid-1990s, critics have labeled him a minimalist, an architectural introvert and a postmodern obscurantist. Actually, he is none of those things ; he's not yet brandable.

Adjaye is regarded as young in a profession in which success, and actual finished buildings, tend to come later in one's career. In addition to the Denver project, other recent high-profile commissions include a recasting of the interior of the Nobel Peace Center, in Oslo, completed two years ago, and a new complex, still being designed, for the Moscow Business School. A version of Adjaye's Whitechapel exhibition is currently on view, through October 28, at the Studio Museum in Harlem (it will then travel to the MCA Denver and to the Arario Gallery, in Beijing).

This isn't the first time his work has been at the Studio Museum. In 2005 he teamed up with Chris Ofili on an installation of Ofili's drawings (the two have collaborated on other projects, including the artist's pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2003). Indeed, Adjaye has become an art world favorite, designing the exhibition area for London's Frieze art fair and partnering with Olafur Eliasson on his pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale. Then there are his private spaces for artists, including Tim Noble's and Sue Webster's Dirty House; its impenetrable exterior is painted with dark, graffiti-resistant paint and studded with mirrored-glass windows. Last year Adjaye completed his first commission in the U.S.: a studio for James Casebere and Lorna Simpson in an entire Brooklyn town house the outside of which is covered in slate-colored panels of polypropylene.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A RENDERING DEPICTING THE GLASS FAÇADE OF THE MCA DENVER, WHICH OPENS NEXT MONTH; THE PLAY OF LIGHT INSIDE OLAFUR ELIASSON'S 2005 VENICE BIENNALE PAVILION, DESIGNED BY ADJAYE, AND AN EXTERIOR VIEW OF THE PIECE; THE ARCHITECT AT HIS DESK IN HIS STUDIO; AN INTERIOR OF THE NEW DENVER MUSEUM, WHERE ADJAYE HOPES VISITORS WILL "HAVE MORE INTIMACY" WITH THE ARTWORKS.

The studio of Adjaye/Associates is in a Victorian lummock of a building on Penn Street, at the intersection of the London districts of Hoxton and De Beauvoir Town—once a genuinely tough, edgy swath of the East End that is now thick with hot young architects and their various vibes. (Adjaye started the firm in 2000; this fall he will open a New York office.) Setting the scene along this unfashionable stretch are congeries of disparate details; a minimarket; a pub; a weird aquarium light inside a furniture store; and an 11-story block of council flats, where satellite-TV dishes climb the walls like black morning glories. Inside the studio, the door opens to a long corridor—black painted floor, ditto one wall—leading to the reception desk. A chaotic ridge of abandoned building materials rests like sea wrack against a wall in the main design studio. Jammed up against the detritus is a skanky ghetto blaster from which issues a rippling sonic meditation by Philip Glass.

But just beyond that, the meeting room is tidy. There are half a dozen models and maquettes; one, which shows buildings on a large and undulating site, is for Adjaye's current Moscow project. The overriding sense here is of stillness that spreads outward, tidally, into the practice's three work spaces.

At the center of this involuted scene is Adjaye himself. He appears, as always, in near-black threads and, like Carl Sandburg's poetic fog, he comes quietly, on cat feet. He has the charm of a Gatsby, with a gaze that assures you he has precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you would wish to convey. His charisma is self-filtering and suggests unresolved movement—a gesture that stills itself, a reply that regresses into reconsideration.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: SIMPSON'S AND CASEBERE'S STUDIO, INSIDE AND OUT; THE HALLWAY OF ADJAYE'S OFFICE; DIRTY HOUSE, DESIGNED FOR ARTISTS TIM NOBLE AND SUE WEBSTER; AND RIVINGTON PLACE, HOME TO TWO LONDON ARTS VENUES, THE INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL VISUAL ARTS AND AUTOGRAPH APB.

"Time's arrow is fragmented," Adjaye tells me. "We're in a time where the nature of things is not about *things* but how we understand them. So architecture has to collapse. It's not about physical collapse; it's about notions of physicality. The scenographic is the perceptual mode of the 21st century."

I find this more insightful than the marketing jargon offered by Adjaye/Associates' Web site, which states that "his ingenious use of materials, bespoke design and ability to sculpt light have engendered high regard from the architectural community and the wider public." That makes him sound like a Savile Row tailor condescending to the masses. Yet neither Adjaye nor his work is condescending. He does indeed create scenographic perspectives of material, logical arrangements that are riven with interjections of light. Such quiet perceptual tensions were visible in his collaboration with Eliasson on the artist's Venice pavilion: a rectangular box with light entering through a slatted wall. To illuminate the interior of the Idea Store, a multibranch library in London (he's worked on two of its locations), Adjaye made playful arrangements of fluorescent tubes clustered together like electric eels.

"Architecture can go beyond the fact, or the perception," he says. Yet he wants nothing to do with "the violent surf of information" that so fascinates architecture's most fashionable intellectual, Rem Koolhaas; nor would Adjaye support Bernard Tschumi's passive proclamation that the best that architects could now hope for is simply "to influence the phenomena."

So far, perhaps, the polemical basis of Adjaye's architecture is more transgressive than the buildings themselves, which are essentially decorous. They reflect a personality and an aesthetic formed less by his rise through British state education than by the African milieu of his youth. He was born, in 1966, in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, to Ghanaian parents. Adjaye's father was a diplomat, and one of his first resonant



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: TWO INTERACTIVE INSTALLATIONS CONCEIVED BY ADJAYE FOR THE NOBEL PEACE CENTER IN OSLO; A DETAIL OF THE ARCHITECT AT WORK ON A SKETCH; THE ADJAYE-DESIGNED INTERIOR OF THE IDEA STORE, A LIBRARY IN WHITECHAPEL; AND THE EXTERIOR OF ANOTHER IDEA STORE BRANCH HE WORKED ON, ALSO IN LONDON.

memories is of the precisely ordered white housing blocks found in various tropical diplomatic districts in which he and his family lived (they settled in London in 1979). Adjaye attended the Royal College of Art, graduating in 1993, and it was there that he forged his ties with the art world. But it is the early scenes of domestic and architectural order, and their subsequent intersection with Western modernism and aesthetics, that inform his buildings as well as his thinking. "I was in a quandary," he says. "Was I going to uphold this modernist history, or was I trying to reboot and exist only in my own universe? It took me a long time to explain that matrix to myself."

These days Adjaye finds himself with a markedly expanded project list—six buildings "made or being made in the last three years"—assisted by more than 30 architects and support staff. When asked about his working method, he speaks of strategies tested and "forcing the DNA of an idea into a project. And if I can't get things started in the right way, they don't happen.

"Architecture is no longer about syntax," he continues, "but about collecting relationships. It's agglomerative. I think in terms of developing a body of work, not about individual buildings." This claim is supported by his current involvement in plans to develop low-cost housing in New Orleans and South Africa and in a mixed-use scheme in the *hutongs* ("alleyways") of Beijing, "a contextual urban project, which is unheard of in China," he explains. Moreover, these undertakings may redefine his reputation: They are not about luxury, or privacy; they're about simplicity, functionality and survival.

But Adjaye is certainly still comfortable among the art world A-list. He has been working on a residence for New York collector Adam Lindemann and his wife, Amalia Dayan. The architect is creating a cubic glass structure behind the original façade of Lindemann's town house, on Manhattan's Upper East Side, a development that had to be downscaled to accommodate the site's landmark status. Adjaye is "very successful in creating spaces in which to show art and in which my family could live," says Lindemann. "It's both a museum and a home. And I knew David would give me the greatest qualities of light."

Back in his studio, the light plays across a chaotic welter of objects scattered across his desk and images pinned to the wall. "There are some things here from my childhood, East African things," he says. Adjaye closes the studio door gently, but pointedly, and adds, "You must see my model makers." We leave the sediment of his past and approach the models of his future.