



Whitechapel Idea Store,
London, Adjaye
Associates, 2005.

Making PUBLIC BUILDINGS

DAVID ADJAYE AT ARTPACE.

By Stephen Fox

A traveling show, organized in 2006

by the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London and devoted to public buildings by the London architect David Adjaye, was brought to San Antonio by Artpace as its final 2008 exhibition. It coincided with Adjaye's initiation of design for the Linda Pace Foundation in San Antonio. Linda Pace was the founder of Artpace. An artist, art collector, and former co-owner of the Pace Foods Company, she died in 2007 shortly after commissioning Adjaye to design a building to house her personal collection.

David Adjaye is a charismatic personality, as Houston audiences discovered when he spoke in RDA's "New Directions in Museum and Exhibition Design" lecture series in October 2005. If his articulate diction registers as British, his openness and enthusiasm seem almost American. Adjaye's father was a Ghanaian diplomat, which meant that Adjaye had an international upbringing in Africa, the Islamic world, and London, where he attended London South Bank University in the late 1980s and the Royal College of Art in the early 1990s. Adjaye has had a studio in London since 1994; he now has offices in Berlin and New York as well. Adjaye Associates have completed three buildings in the United States: Pitch Black (2006), an artists' space in Brooklyn; the MCA (Museum of Contemporary Art) in Denver (2007); and the LN House (2008), also in Denver. They were recently chosen to design the Smithsonian's National Museum of African-American History and Culture in Washington D.C.

"David Adjaye: Making Public Buildings" was installed in Artpace's windowless second-floor gallery. A table-height platform occupied the center of the big gallery. On it were displayed eight of Adjaye's designs for public buildings. For each project, a large-scale detailed model was accompanied by smaller-scaled study models, a site plan, a visual diagram explaining the architect's conception, an axonometric drawing, floor plans, samples of finish materials, and an artifact of African origin materially analogous to Adjaye's architectural conception. On two of the gallery's four walls, color photographs of the completed buildings were hung in columns above horizontal bands of smaller photos. The other two walls were used for projected and video images. A musical score composed by the architect's brother, Peter Adjaye, played continuously.

The exhibition followed the didactic model for architectural exhibitions associated with Renzo Piano. The emphasis was on the design process rather than on completed buildings. The design of the platform and the table-mounted display panels occupying a perimeter band subtly conveyed the rational process of analysis and presentation through which Adjaye Associates typically work out the design of their buildings, whose skewed, swelling shapes and provocative exterior surfaces may at first glance seem whimsical and impulsive.

Photographs of African capital cities, which Adjaye showed at a 2007 exhibition at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University and which were displayed at Artpace as continuous projected images

ADJAYE'S RESISTANCE
TAKES THE
FORM OF
wit
RATHER THAN MILITANCY.



ABOVE: View of model of Fairfield Road Housing in London, 2008.
LEFT: View of model of Nobel Peace Center in Oslo, 2005.



box), Adjaye's buildings pursue this approach with disarmingly exuberant cheerfulness. Hirsch sees this facet of Adjaye's buildings as indicating his affinity for "opportunism, superficiality, ruse, narration, and appropriation." These may not seem like complimentary observations, but taken literally, they incisively

name the attributes that make Adjaye's buildings so compelling.

Of the eight buildings in the exhibition, the Idea Store branch libraries are symptomatic of what makes Adjaye's work so attractive. Both are in Tower Hamlets, the most racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse immigrant working-class borough in London. Both reimagine the branch library as a

"store," where the usual library access to books and other media is combined with continuing education classrooms, plus an existing retail center in the two-story Chrisp Street building, and performance and health therapy spaces, in the five-story Whitechapel Road building. In both buildings, program loosely occupies loftlike interiors. Adjaye's diagrams demonstrate how he and his associates deformed the boxlike program containers they shaped so that the buildings deflect to external and internal pressures, especially in bounding adjacent public open space. Rather than trying to annex the open space through design intervention, Adjaye Associates faced the Idea Stores with transparent glass curtain walls, producing visual continuity between inside and outside. The curtain walls are almost banal, but by interspersing the transparent or opaque panels with thin vertical stripes of blue and green vision glass, the architects made the boxes radiant from inside and outside. Similarly, their use of laminated wood joists and vertical fins inset behind the curtain walls, as well as fiberboard panels—extremely economical, off-the-shelf materials—make the interiors feel spontaneous, noninstitutional, and modern. Materially and volumetrically as well as programmatically, the Idea Stores liberate space in their dense urban neighborhoods. They play off more solemn buildings around them to construct spaces of informality, where social difference is the norm, where new layers of urban continuity are inserted with a light hand, and where new forms of community can be socially constructed without being architecturally prescribed. In this pair of buildings, the applicability of the catalogue's subtitle—Specificity (in response to site and program) Customization (of standardized building materials) Imbrication (insertion into a bigger whole)—to Adjaye Associates' practice becomes clear.

The exhibition and catalogue illuminate the sensibility and imagination that attracted Linda Pace to David Adjaye and his work. As Adjaye's designs for the Pace Foundation building, adjacent to Chris Park at South Flores and Camp Streets, take shape, count on a new spark of energy and mischief to light up the south edge of downtown San Antonio. ✨

without explanatory text, had an immediacy that the architecture component lacked. This was not due to any curatorial flaw in installing the exhibition, but because understanding the process of architectural design is ultimately less emotionally gratifying than walking around and through, and enjoying, an inspiring work of architecture.

The exhibition catalogue edited by Peter Allison contains the same array of interpretive images as the exhibition. Short introductory essays by Saskia Sassen, Okwui Enwezor, and Nikolaus Hirsch probe the public dimension of Adjaye's work. Each criticizes the complacency with which the phenomenon of the "public" is invoked today during an era of eroding civil liberties, police profiling of those who stand out as different, and fearful anxiety over perceived threats to middle-class privilege posed by "others." Each essayist sees in Adjaye's public buildings a resistance to this fear-fueled oppression.

Adjaye's resistance takes the form of wit rather than militancy. His buildings don't conform to their programs and sites: they deform in response to them. They appear to have been creased, folded, bent, mashed, twisted, wracked, and punched. If this terminology suggests a Koolhaas-like approach (i.e., the paranoid-critical method + delirium = a deranged

View of exhibition "David Adjaye: Making Public Buildings."

