



# THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

A knighted “starchitect” with a celeb-studded client list, Sir David Adjaye has business smarts in spades. He outlines his unique vision for organic growth and multifarious approach to creativity

Words Nick Scott

## CV

**Born** 1966 in Tanzania to Ghanaian parents. His brother is musician Peter Adjaye (aka AJ Kwame).

**Company** Adjaye Associates

**Founded** June 2000, London

**Recent projects** The Moscow School of Management, Skolkovo (2010); the Sugar Hill mixed-use social housing scheme in Harlem (2015); the Aishti Foundation retail and art complex in Beirut (2015); two libraries in Washington DC (2012), the Smithsonian Museum of African American History (2016); currently working on One Berkeley, Piccadilly and 5 Strand in London

**Art collaborations** *The Upper Room*, with Chris Ofili (2002); *Within Reach*, with Ofili, in the British pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2003); the Thyssen-Bornemisza Art for the 21st Century Pavilion, to show a projection by Olafur Eliasson, *Your Black Horizon*, at Venice Biennale (2005); work with curator Okwui Enwezor on the design of the 56th Venice Art Biennale (2015)

**Awards** OBE for services to architecture (2007); the Design Miami/Artist of the Year title (2011); the *Wall Street Journal* Innovator Award (2013); the 2016 Panerai London Design Medal; knighthood, services to architecture (2017)

The informal meeting area in Adjaye Associates' Marylebone premises, jauntily christened the Green Room, is divided from the rest of the open-plan office space by a ceiling-high, warehouse-style industrial shelf, stacked chaotically with various building materials: terracotta and ceramic tiles, pieces

of chipboard, blocks of timber, corrugated iron, latticed steel panels, fabric samples. The symbolism may not be intentional, but it's difficult not to see it as a kind of static installation; a nod to a love of eclecticism – of varying influences, forms and perspectives – that has been the wind in Sir David Adjaye's creative sails as long as he can recall.

His appreciation of variety began with a childhood spent, thanks to his father's job as a diplomat, moving between Africa, Saudi Arabia and Britain. “Without a doubt, my upbringing had an effect on how I see the world,” he says, settling into a chair, flanked by that artfully disordered shelf display and back-dropped by two vivid green prints by Isaac Julien – a friend of the firm and artistic collaborator. “Those formative years travelling with my parents through different regions, different cultures, different geographies had a profound impact on me. Early on, before I was even a teenager, I was aware that the world is very complex. I only realised in hindsight, talking to my dad, that he brought us up to be respectful of different contexts, to be aware of them, to engage with them as they are. That's always carried on as a philosophy of mine.”

Adjaye studied at the Royal College of Art, so that he could rub shoulders with designers and photographers as well as other architects. That heterogeneity continues to inform his work today – and it's paying dividends. Since founding Adjaye Associates in 2000, he has secured illustrious commissions including the Nobel Peace Centre in Oslo, the Idea Stores in London and his biggest project to date, the \$540m (£433m) Smithsonian National Museum

of African American History and Culture, on the National Mall in Washington DC, for which he beat Sir Norman Foster, among others, to the commission. The *New York Times* named its opening dedication, by Barack Obama, the Cultural Event of the Year in 2016.

Adjaye's business is now tri-continental (his New York practice is found above an old bank on Canal Street, and he has a third office in Ghana's capital, Accra), and past clients and collaborators include Ewan McGregor, Alexander McQueen and Brad Pitt, with whom he worked on replacement housing for victims of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. He's been a guest at Chequers, and accolades to date have included an OBE in 2007, followed by a knighthood in the 2017 Queen's New Year Honours list, both for services to architecture.

## Multiple perspectives

As for commercial success, Adjaye Associates weathered a stormy patch in the late 2000s, which reportedly saw the cancellation or postponement of four projects and forced it to enter into a company voluntary arrangement to stave off insolvency proceedings. Recently, though, it has been in rude health: global year-on-year turnover increased by 26 per cent up to last December, and it is on course to achieve its £8m target for this year.

Adjaye insists that his success comes down to the aforementioned philosophy of multiple perspectives: one that prompts him to employ teams of researchers – gender theorists, sociologists, academics – to dig into any potential site's historical nuances, and to make industry-related forecasts. “I call our researchers ‘the crystal ball team’,” he laughs. “They're not trying to predict the exact future, but they're trying to look into future trends, ideas that are out there that we should be aware of. Because being just sat in a room, in a bubble, you're disconnected. You need to be efficient but still understand the world.”

Could other sectors benefit from the same methodology? “Yes. I just think we live in such

a complicated world, such a multiverse ecology, that things are now not as straightforward as they were just 20 years ago. Since the birth of the internet, the world – everything from advertising to manufacturing to law to architecture – has shifted so significantly, that you need space to understand how to read and interpret it. It's no longer about engaging just via your eyes – there are things happening which are affecting substantially ways in which business is being done, sometimes from the bottom up, sometimes from the top down."

Stemming from all this, he says, is an inclination to respond, creatively, to what already exists, rather than leaving his mark, so to speak. "I really believe in the power of form and storytelling, and so I'm always trying to read a situation as it is, learn from it, and synthesise what I think is required for building there in the future," he says. "It's not that I don't believe in what I make having its own distinction – there's nothing like the Smithsonian – but it comes out of the context, the history, of where [the building] is: it comes out of reading and interpreting Washington, reading and interpreting America and so on."

Current projects include a 60-storey residential tower in Manhattan's old financial district – "This was the dock, the original gateway for both people and materials into the entire country, so I'm trying to make a tower that speaks to that world," he says – and a bold, commercial-slash-residential addition to London's urban fabric along the Strand. But you get the impression that the project Adjaye's most excited about is Hallmark House in Johannesburg. Over 11 years, from 1999 to 2010, Adjaye visited the capital city of every country in Africa ("except Mogadishu in Somalia," he says, "which was too dangerous because the CIA is employing a lot of African Americans as spies, and I could have been mistaken for one"). His travels there, he hopes, will inform various future projects which have a positive effect on the continent of his birth (Adjaye was born in Tanzania to Ghanaian parents).

Hence, the building in the South African city is something of a pet project. "Johannesburg is kind of a tragic city," he says. "It's kind of like Detroit, in the sense



Clockwise from main picture: Adjaye in New York, 2015; Hallmark House in Johannesburg; Ideas Store in Poplar, London; Smithsonian Museum of African American History in Washington DC



“ I grew internationally to give dividends back to my team’s involvement. We don’t want to make terrible pastiche-y buildings to make money – we want to do exciting, engaging things”

of having suffered from ‘white flight’. When apartheid collapsed, the white community ran to the suburbs and made gated communities in fear of mobs. It created a very divisive world, and a city designed for six million people was left vacant, left to fall and crumble, which is unspeakably tragic. We just thought this is ridiculous – the city needs to be reclaimed for all citizens.”

The project involves recycling an existing edifice. “We’ve turned it into a multi-use building – it’s a hotel, a business start-up hub, there’s retail, there’s a residential building, health and fitness. It’s a multiverse that allows both white and black South Africans to feel comfortable together, because it puts them in proximity to the CBD. Now, a lot of African investors are moving into this thing, which I didn’t expect. Everyone said we couldn’t do it – that we were building in an area that was too tough, had too many problems – but it sold out in the first few months.”

**Inclusive culture**

In a recent address in Toronto, Adjaye described gender equality in the architecture industry as being in a “regrettable” state. Today he doubles down on the remark, saying: “It’s more than regrettable – it’s regressive... neanderthal. I don’t understand it at all. There’s a complacency in saying, ‘Well, we’ll be more positive’. If you look at policies that create inclusion – or things like the civil rights movement – you have to actually do some work for [a new way of thinking] to normalise. If you wait for things to normalise on their own it’ll take a millennia or more. The natural instinct is to not break the habits and patterns, so you have to get yourself out of your comfort zone.”

Thus, at Adjaye Associates, he insists on a 50/50 gender split when it comes to personnel. “The gender-balance environment here is designed – by forcing it, you create an atmosphere resembling an image of the world you want,” he says. “Businesses have to do that. In the end, we’re creating a world for all human beings, so to get that inclusion, that equality, is critical.” Equal gender split, he adds, is both an end in itself and a means to another end. “It’s absolutely critical to a

healthy, positive and productive work environment. We have a great atmosphere [at Adjaye Associates] because of that balance. The different perspectives it brings when you diversify experience is so fantastic. I’m not just trying to be PC – it’s something I really believe in.”

Alongside inclusiveness – and, of course, eclecticism – the third pillar of his approach, Adjaye says, is to put creative integrity first. Asked what most facilitated his international success, he says: “When I started my career I just decided I didn’t want to be the kind of architect that repeats what we know, just for the financial return,” he says. “I’ve always refused to be bored. I always want to be inspired and challenged. So I naturally became a kind of wanderer because of my desire for a work agenda that would fulfil me. So I grew internationally not because of market strategy or positioning, but to fulfil a desire to create work that really gave dividends back to my team’s involvement, and also because I want work to have some kind of promise of fulfilment. I don’t want work to feel like I’m on a hamster wheel. My staff all want that too – it’s a broad consensus. No one here wants to make terrible pastiche-y buildings to make money – we want to do exciting, engaging things.”

It’s in keeping with these priorities that, asked how he retains such creative integrity when undergoing growth, Adjaye responds with questions of his own: “Growth as in more money, more market share? Or growth as in more fulfilment?” The former: “Growth for growth’s sake is very dangerous because [it is more likely to involve] contraction. I’ve experienced both, and contraction is brutal and devastating. So I think that people talk about growth very simplistically. For me it’s all about maintaining your edge, being able to offer better services. A business should have natural plateaus, rather than just being a machine that grows endlessly, infinitely. That’s the kind of model I practise.”

And is growth, of a healthy nature, on the cards for Adjaye Associates? “We’re about 100 strong now, balanced, and we’ll only grow when we have something that intrigues us, to reach out to, that we want to invest energy and resources in. When things grow organically, the connective

tissue and the way in which you carry out the work stay the same. If we grow because we’re saying ‘Look guys, we can do 10 skyscrapers instead of two if we get 30 more people’, we’re going to struggle. You will not be able to deliver the creative output – it’s simply a numbers game. You need a direct emotional relationship with a building as well as a technical one. Being able to express joy and delight comes from engagement and focus. Disengagement creates dull, horrible things – so I want my team to be thrilled with the idea of what they’re making and the buildings will turn out well.”

Of course, that doesn’t mean that profit is irrelevant for Adjaye: it’s an inevitable collateral effect, he says, of the approach he advocates. “The world is very, very sharp when it comes to looking at the stuff you do. If it’s not done earnestly, people smell that very quickly, so it has to be genuine.” With such high standards, it’s not surprising when Adjaye says that finding the right talent is “complex with architectural staff”. The universities at which he has taught, he says, have become natural feeders for lower-tier teams: “I’ve grown my team very organically. The people who lead the kind of key locations are those I’ve trained from day one.”

Adjaye describes his approach to braving economic adversity meanwhile, as being “very hare-and-tortoise”. What does he mean? “What I’ve learned now is that it’s about building up a war chest,” he says. “Capitalist economies tend to boom and bust endlessly, in cycles. To attain a comfortable situation, you need to have a war chest that can sustain you for three years. Put some aside, don’t burn all your energy, hold a pot. You will get one bust every decade in a normal economy: seven years saving, then the first year after bust is always the worst, then it’s two years of recovery.”

You get the impression that, as long as creativity doesn’t suffer the same boom-bust cycle, this extraordinary architect will always thrive. **D**

To watch David Adjaye discuss his career visit [bloomberg.com/news/videos/2016-11-04/architect-david-adjaye-charlie-rose](http://bloomberg.com/news/videos/2016-11-04/architect-david-adjaye-charlie-rose)

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