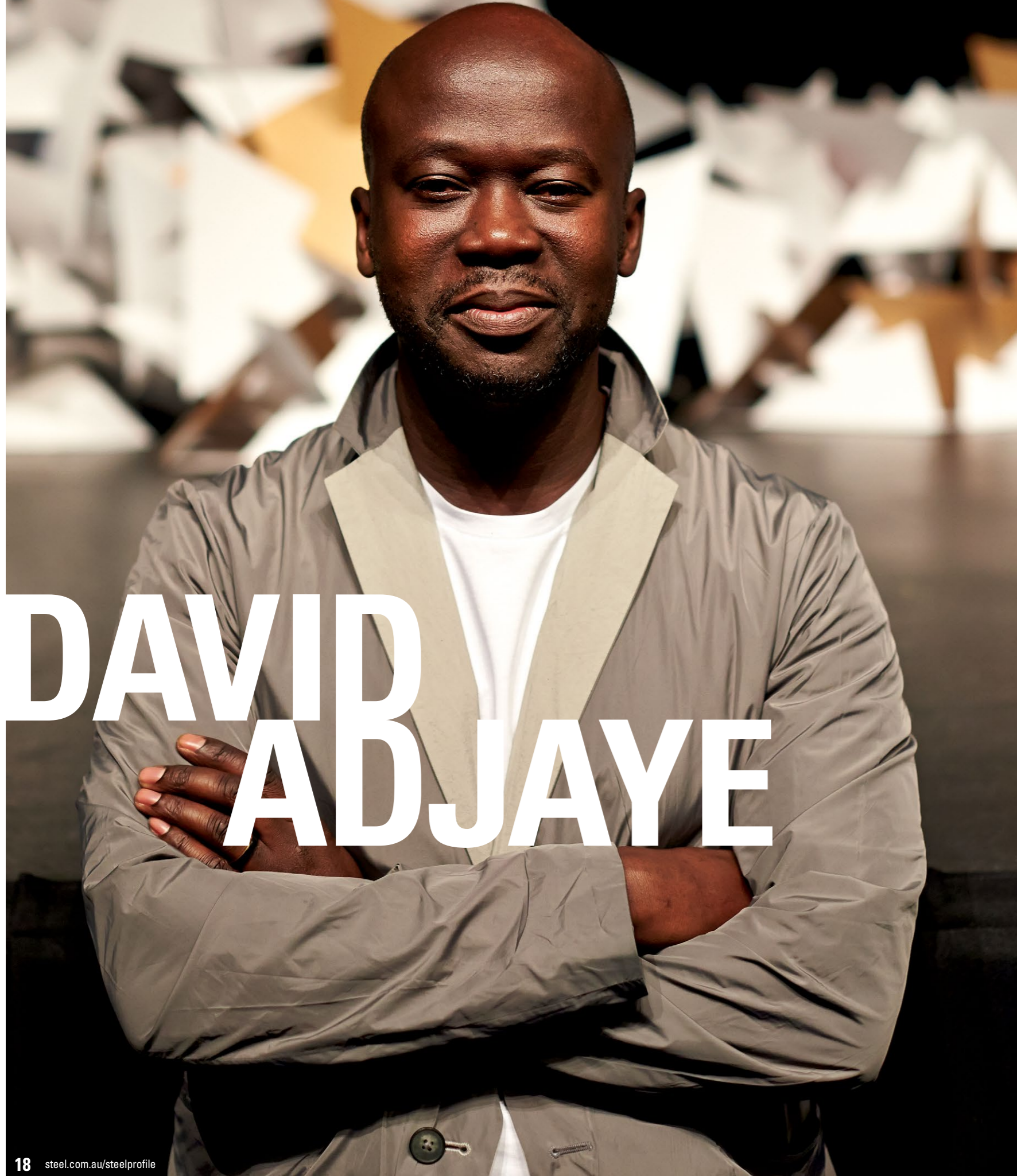


Curiosity about the world and its diverse people and places lies at the heart of David Adjaye's work, which appears on four continents and extends from the domestic to the monumental. *Steel Profile* met him in Perth. Words **Rachael Bernstone**
 Photography **Peter Bennetts (portrait)**

DAVID ADJAYE



As a child, David Adjaye quickly learned to appreciate, interrogate and seek out difference. Born to Ghanaian parents in Tanzania, he lived in 12 African countries – following the path of his diplomat father – until the age of 14 when the family moved to London. He studied architecture at London South Bank University and the Royal College of Art, and continued his engagement with the African continent after graduating, eventually visiting 53 major African cities over the course of a decade.

"I was visiting the continent almost every other month between 2000 and 2011, so a sort of double-world was happening," he recalls. The images he captured during those travels – of cities, buildings, people and landscapes – form the basis of his seven-volume book, *Adjaye Africa Architecture*, which divides the continent into six geographic zones. These zones generate similar approaches to architecture and building, irrespective of political and cultural differences, Adjaye says.

His accomplishment in completing this mammoth and unprecedented task demonstrates that Adjaye possesses an unusual ability to get to the nub of a place through analysis of its geography. Unlike other 'starchitects' – whose buildings often share a similar aesthetic and palette of materials no matter where they are in the world – Adjaye's projects are firmly rooted in the local.



ABOVE: The glass and steel curtain wall of Denver's Museum of Contemporary Art sits in stark contrast with the black weathering steel cladding of the also Adjaye-designed LN House next door (below)



"I'm fundamentally interested in the way that specificity-to-geography and climate can create meaning and reason in architecture," Adjaye says.

After graduating, Adjaye worked for Chassay Architects (1988-90), David Chipperfield Architects and Eduardo Souto de Moura Architects (both 1991) before partnering with William Russell to launch Adjaye & Russell in 1994. He then established his own firm – Adjaye Associates – in London in 2000. His practice began on a typical footing, starting with small-scale residential alterations and additions, and single-family houses.

One of these, for actor Ewan McGregor (2000) featured steel columns and beams that enabled Adjaye to create larger volumes to contrast with the smaller, segregated rooms of the original Victorian terrace.

"Steel work was very important in the early parts of my career when I was dealing with the existing city and trying to remodel and create contemporary life," he says. "That was about using steel to reinforce or create exoskeletons into masonry structures, to create new spans and new possibilities for contemporary life. Without steel, it would have been impossible to do any of that work."

Having undertaken several small public building projects in London, including the Stephen Lawrence Centre and two public libraries called Idea Stores, the scope and reach of the practice started to shift in 2004, when Adjaye won his first commission in the USA. The new Denver Museum of Contemporary Art is a modest 2320m² building over three storeys that hosts temporary exhibitions. It features naturally lit galleries bounded by steel-framed, double-glazed curtain walls, which accentuate permeability and transparency. They offer a stark contrast with the house he also designed next door – for MCA board



ADJAYE ASSOCIATES

member and donor Marc Falcone and his wife – which presents a windowless face to the street and is clad in black weathering steel.

“I’ve become quite obsessed with the materiality of metals, not just as skins but the performative nature of metals,” Adjaye says. “They have their own ecology, they oxidise and have their own power. I love cast metals or metals that have properties that naturally oxidise and patina.”

Adjaye’s success in winning overseas projects was cemented when his scheme for a new business school in Russia won a design competition. Where other entrants opted for campus-style accommodation, Adjaye proposed a single 150m-wide disc with ‘boxes’ and cantilevered ‘rods’ on top. Inspired by “the power of futurists, including historical Russian constructivist imagery”, he put the entire program of school, car park, hotel, gym and conference centre under one roof, to protect occupants from the six-month long winters with their sub-zero temperatures and deep snow cover.

“We won the Moscow School of Management in 2006, and it was our first big international competition,” Adjaye says. “It changed the office from small- and medium-scale to doing large projects around the world.”

Other global projects since then include the Nobel Peace Centre in Oslo (2005), the Arario Gallery in New York (2007) and post-Hurricane Katrina housing in New Orleans (2007). In February 2014, Adjaye’s Piety Street Bridge and Crescent Park projects were unveiled in the same city.

Piety Street Bridge is a curved pedestrian structure made from weathering steel that re-connects the neighbourhood to the Mississippi River, crossing railway tracks which prohibited access to the water’s edge for more than 100 years. The material selection

references the railway trucks and container ships that serve the port of New Orleans, a city “absolutely made by its river,” Adjaye says.

The weathering steel structure cost no more to build than a typical industrial bridge, but its poetic shape and rustic materials give it a transformative quality. “It’s a very simple form – it’s clipped together – but it creates this moment where, at the top, you look to the city, then the water, and it releases a view of the waterfront as you come down,” he adds. “Suddenly you are in this landscape that was once completely forbidden to residents.”

ABOVE: The National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington DC – due for completion in 2016 – is Adjaye Associates’ most important project to date

BELOW: The weathering steel ‘rainbow’ of the Piety Bridge in New Orleans, completed in February 2014, provides access to the waterfront for the first time in 100 years

OPPOSITE BELOW: Winning the competition to design the Moscow School of Management made Adjaye Associates a global architecture firm



ADJAYE ASSOCIATES

In Crescent Park, a series of weathering steel and cast red concrete pieces create a walkway, a jetty, benches and walls – all of which invite habitation of the space. “It’s a way to give back to the city using stuff that’s already there, to give people back their own collective memory and their own industrial past,” Adjaye says, “but also to create fiction and future, which I think is really important.”

Those are sentiments echoed in his biggest and most ambitious project to date: the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), currently under construction for the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC. Six years into an eight-year build, the museum is the last “palace of culture” within the city’s Pierre Charles L’Enfant masterplan dating from 1791. It sits alongside 23 other cultural institutions which Adjaye collectively calls “the great depository of the world’s civilisations”.

“Steelwork was very important in the early parts of my career. That was about using steel to create exoskeletons into masonry structures. Without steel, it would have been impossible to do any of that work”

With its brise soleil cladding – reworking the traditional cast iron screens of Washington DC – and crown-like form, the museum pays homage to the Yoruba people of West Africa, who were transported to America as the country’s first slaves.

“This is not a museum in the traditional sense of an archive, or an experience of phenomena,” Adjaye says. “This is a museum that’s trying to deal with – for the first time – the way in which history removes certain narratives from its trajectory. It achieves that by placing another narrative into it.

“The lens is about understanding what the United States is, so I became really excited by this project when we won it,” he adds. “And the building needed to signify a different narrative right from the outside.”

Rather than elevating the museum on a monumental plinth, like its Greco-Roman style neighbours, Adjaye buried its bulk underground. “The plinth is submerged with a cube on top, to make an urban room,” he says. “The steelwork is coming out of the ground now for the cube, which will contain the biggest exhibition space in Washington. You’ll be able to dive into the whole of African American history from 200 years in one room.”

Having worked all over the world, and on many building types, Adjaye deliberately sets himself apart from his peers who enjoy similar international standing. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with the term generic,” he says. “Sometimes buildings are just about making stuff that just has to happen, and that’s actually an amazing part of what we do. Sometimes there are moments when an element of innovation is required, but these approaches are totally equal.

“We’ve become obsessed with the avant garde as a signature of design,” he adds, “but it’s not really about that. It’s about understanding exactly what’s appropriate for each condition.

“As young architects trying to make the city, I think we believe that architecture is about trying to do stuff, but actually design gives us an opportunity to show restraint. It’s about: ‘How much can you not do?’. That’s the art of architecture.”

Speaking at the same conference in Perth, South African architect Jo Noero acknowledged the value of Adjaye’s travels through and curiosity about Africa. “David’s work is wonderful and the research he has done on the African city has been a shot in the arm for African architects,” Noero says. “It took someone who is not living in Africa to come with very clear eyes, and to write the books that you wrote, which have fundamentally shifted the way we think about African architecture. We are very grateful for that.”

In closing, Adjaye is asked whether he has a favourite place or project, or has found a building type or location more stimulating or thought-provoking than others, and he laughs. “If I was to say I prefer somewhere, I would flout my entire argument,” he explains. “I’m a great lover of the planet and all its diversity, so it’s continually about discovering new ways in which the planet has evolved to its geography that is fascinating.

“It’s why I love travelling, why I love going to new places,” he adds. “It’s not simply to just tour, but to really experience the kind of multiplicity of the way in which the planet has evolved, and people have evolved on it, and how they use it. So no, no favourites, just continually enjoying it.”

The world of contemporary architecture is richer for his incredible inquisitiveness and ability to translate his new knowledge into buildings that – wherever they are in the world – blend geography and location with cultural and historical meaning to create their own unique qualities. Through his intuitive understanding and analysis of place, the global architect David Adjaye creates buildings that provide local resonances for the people who experience them. SP



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