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The Architect's Work: David Adjaye Interview

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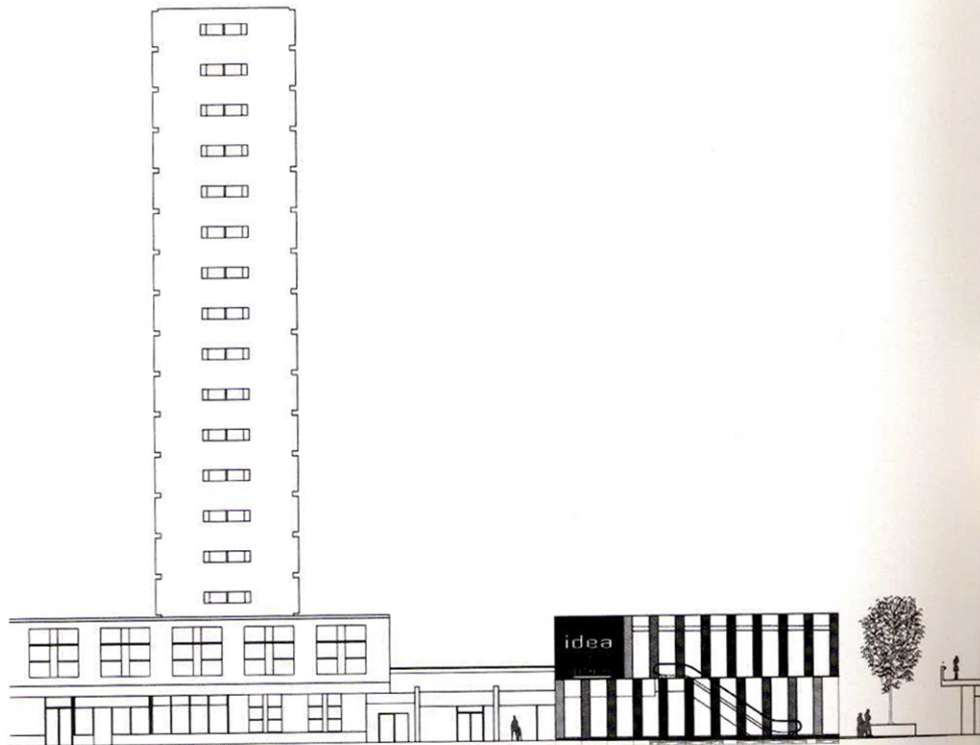
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THE ARCHITECT'S WORK: DAVID ADJAYE INTERVIEW

with Scott Ruff | March 21 2005

THE SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE:
The Architect's Work Series | April 18 – May 27 2005

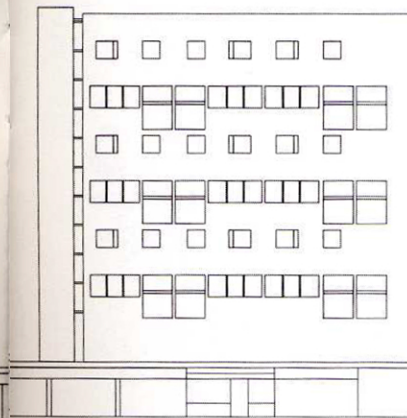


SCOTT RUFF *First I would like to thank you for accepting our invitation to participate in “The Architect’s Work”.*

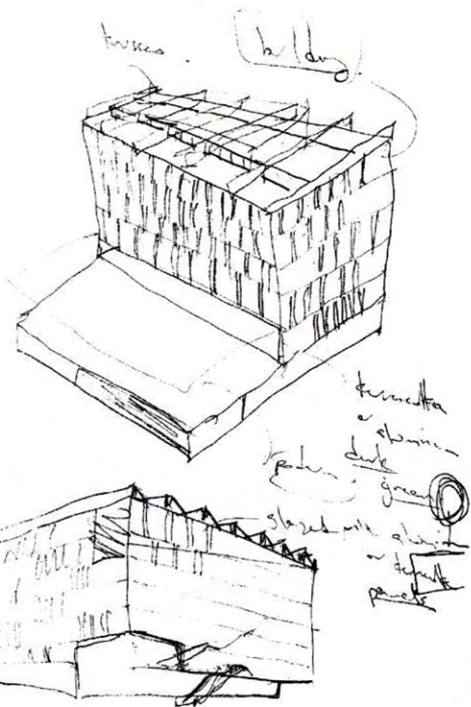
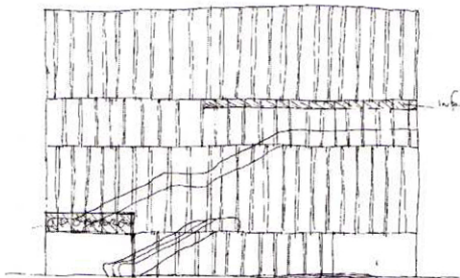
DAVID ADJAYE I enjoy engaging with students. This is part of what architecture is all about.

SR *As you know we are interested in, if not demystifying, at least offering a clue into the thought processes used to create works of architecture by the designers. So I suppose the first question is just that: What is your approach to starting a design? Do you start with conceptual material, program, site, a blending of information as you acquire it? What gets you going on your average project?*

DA I think for me the specificity of site is very important, I don’t mean that in any kind of romantic sense but it’s about the quality of the site and I mean most of my sites are generally, are urban sites that’s the sort of realm that I have been working in, I’ve only now just started to work in the open landscape that is a different game the same but saying it in a different way I like



IDEA STORE CHRISP STREET
SOUTH ELEVATION



MODEL AND STUDIES
FOR IDEA STORE
WHITECHAPEL ROAD

to see the city as a landscape, you know what I mean so any condition from a bathroom to a poverty is a landscape for me and my architecture is a kind of response to that landscape, and that landscape is really something which for me drives the way I conceive of and learn how to make my architecture. In this urban landscape of the city, I'm always trying to find qualities which can be brought to the foreground, which can be foregrounded in order to accentuate the particular qualities of an area, the particular qualities of a site, that specifically relates to the library project.

SR Do you work more through drawing, sketching, physical and or computer modeling?

DA I like to clarify my thoughts about my approach through sketching. Sketching is really the initial part of the project but it really is a thinking process to establish the sort of theoretical premise of what I'm going to want to develop more in model form. So it starts off very much in sketches and very quickly moves to quite large scale models and the models take the form of mapping the sort of physical phenomena of the site, the landscape I call it... Quite quickly setting up the parameters that I'm concerned with and then in a way there's an attenuation of the building to adjust to that context, quite quickly...it's a funny jump.

SR No, it's quite consistent actually.

SR In some of your previous interviews and/or articles written about you, the fact that you have a strongly art background is mentioned quite often, citing that as one of the main factors that distinguish your work from other contemporary architects.



EXISTING SITE OF
IDEA STORE CHRISP
STREET IN POPLAR,
EAST LONDON

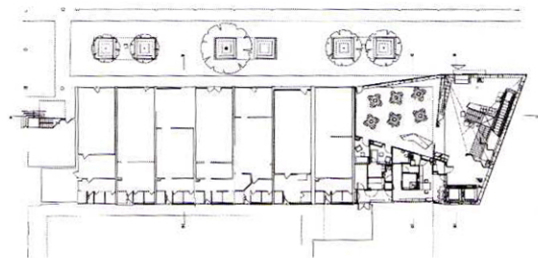
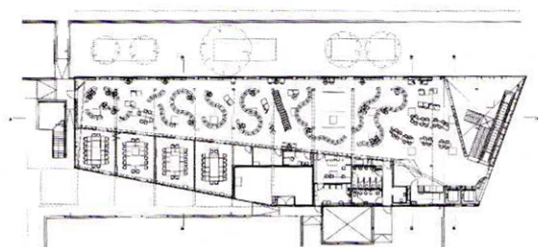
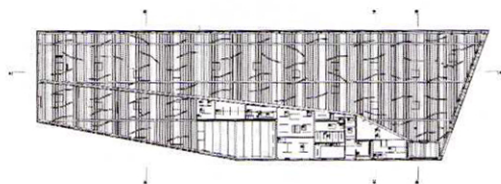
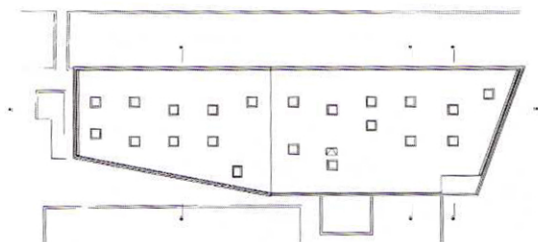
Do you believe that to be a truism for the way you approach architecture and space?

DA No, I'm very guarded about how I speak about my work and I'm speaking about it more clearly now than I was earlier in my career, because I just didn't want to be clear quite frankly, I avoided it. So in a way, I sent out my own disinformation about the process. I find it really problematic to talk about the specific processes because what I do is to definitely not work from a written theoretical position, which somehow articulates the work. I prefer to come from a kind of making the process of making and making somehow informing the business of form making and space making. So in a way to make a relationship to physicality in a co-authored way. So, there's an adjustment, between me and the thing, that always exists and happens...it's a strategy for me that I've deployed to make things, forms, objects, spaces...spaces can be highly abstract but they have to have a cognitive relationship to context in a way...that allows co-readings to occur, on different levels on many levels, with different viewers, from the lay public and professional. So that is a very clear, concise thing that is always happening in the work as a driver...I've only recently thought about telling people that...clearly...in a way because I've sort of been testing it...and wanting to see how successful it is.

SR *Your practice is, in terms of practices, very young.*

DA Yes, I've just started and I've been getting a lot of pressure to try and explain myself and I want to get on and do my work.

SR *So, that's quite understandable. That's why the question was formed in a sense... do you believe it to be true. Yes, that's very odd.*



from top
IDEA STORE CHRISP STREET
ROOF PLAN
REFLECTED CEILING PLAN
PODIUM FLOOR PLAN
GROUND FLOOR PLAN

DA I feel architecture is much more precise than that...a much more precise sort of engagement with the issue of building and the making of building. I just don't believe that makes me theoretical in that traditional sense. You don't have to have the long dissertation to somehow justify how you make a building.

SR *When asked to exhibit one work of your office, how and why did you choose to exhibit the library?*

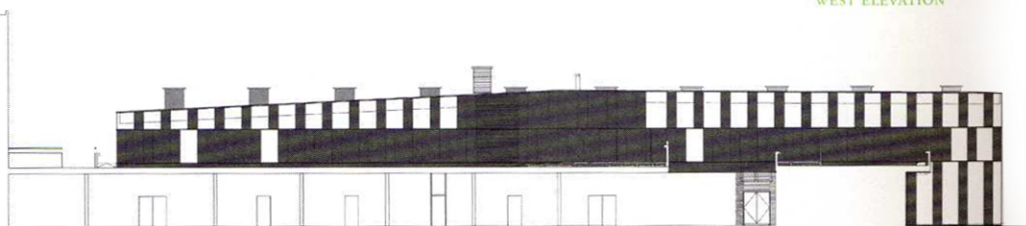
DA It's not just about making architecture fit a sort of society, but it's about architecture actually understanding that architecture has a social and political persona that has to become conscious rather than subconscious. In a way we choose to do specific pieces of work, which talk about different strata of society. I really wanted to do this project because it's basically in the middle of the most illiterate poorest part of London, one of the most illiterate parts of Europe. Which is shocking that there is, in the middle of London there is this incredible place, where you would think...because of the wealth in proximity to the City of London ... actually an incredible literacy problem specifically on the doorsteps of the City of London...I'm interested in the idea of the agency of architecture...and to make change...but I don't mean logistically...I firmly believe that there's another kind of architecture, which takes that as the premise...rather than the culture of architecture as the beginning premise.

SR *Yes, yes, I didn't realize that its location was in such a place.*

DA ...it's a dire place, which has been problematic for a long time. We just had the formal opening last week, one of the government officials, the Minister of Culture came and she just

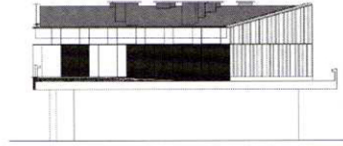


from top
VIEW FROM IDEA
STORE ROOF TOWARDS
CANARY WHARF
WEST ELEVATION

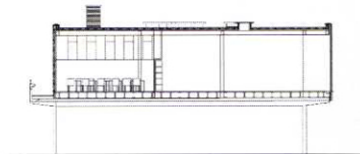
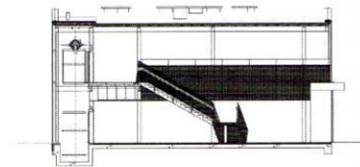


freaked...she found herself in a neighborhood she had reports on...this building has literally quadrupled the amount of members. It's become an essential piece of infrastructure which empowers a very poor neighborhood in a working class community to lift up their game...and to re-picture, revalue their own context...you can imagine it's a post-war kind of an English social housing, concrete landscape with dirty brown brick...which in another context is very beautiful. Somehow within the context of the poverty, the reality is just too harsh. I pushed the money to make a building...which aspired, because what you have from this place is this view of Canary Wharf, which is a shiny chrysalis city, which inflects upon this part of the East End as being this kind of slum, looking at and up against the glistening glass towers. Here they are in their concrete jungles and burnt out cars, drug use, gangs, kind of craziness...they become a "Suweto" sort of slum...looking at this fantastic tower.

DA The council, generally in these areas of high apparent intolerance...postures an architecture of defense...apparently put up a robust looking architecture, not robust in reality, and an opaque architecture, as a way of negotiating their own disconnect from the community. I deliberately chose to use the architecture plans which I don't normally ever use ... it's a kind of flip of my own self (*laughing*) an architecture of the commercial one which I completely criticize all the time. I wanted to appropriate the image of incredible beauty. It's really about the idea of glass as a very precious material into the community as a phenomena...So basically the building manifests itself as a completely glass building...it doesn't really need to be...but the glass becomes as extreme as the concrete



clockwise from left
 VIEW OF SHOPPING ARCADE
 IDEA STORE CHRISP STREET
 NORTH ELEVATION
 SECTION BB
 SECTION DD



they have. The point is that it starts to operate like a jewel... operates like a beacon in the opacity of the landscape which suddenly flips the whole image the landscape as they look to, it is a fabulous thing, it is right on their doorstep.

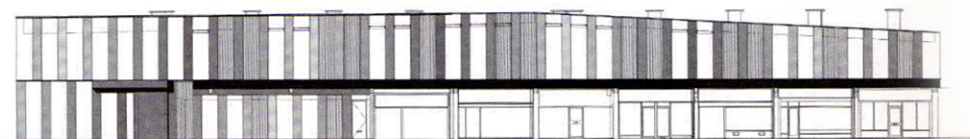
SR Yes, and they are part of that not something separate or other.

DA There were abandoned shops all around...and suddenly they were full, within six months they opened up Sundays, buzzing life suddenly occurring all around this building. It really is extraordinary how by just focusing on placing the building in a particular way transformed the place. I looked at the site very much as a kind of ruin...not a ruin to be critical, in a way that your big cities build among ruins...but as a land with a history...sort of like a classic continental European city ...but I like the idea of looking at London like that. Post-war architecture where one layers on top of that, but here you reveal both conditions. It's not about one being buried by the other.

I chose that site. I could have basically built this building right at the square, right in the front. I chose deliberately to inhabit a vacant site which was being used as a dumping ground to make a long linear attic storey to this shopping arcade and to have these two into some kind of dialogue with each other without criticizing the shopping arcade. I didn't want to repair the arcade. I didn't want to upgrade them, I just said, "Look, we're just sitting on top this one condition", the only condition is that it's just a layering and they each have a particular quality. It was a really difficult argument to have for a while...It's brilliant, but now I think everyone recognizes what has been achieved here. In this government report that just came out, they were



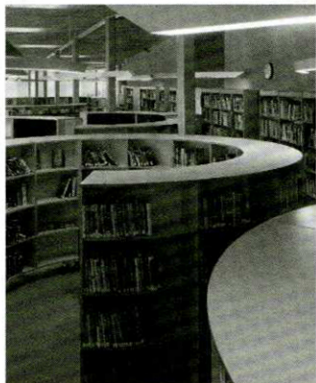
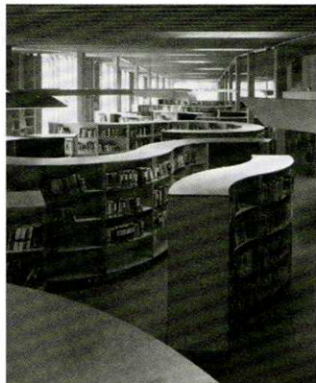
from top
EXTERIOR VIEW
OF IDEA STORE
ON MARKET DAY
EAST ELEVATION



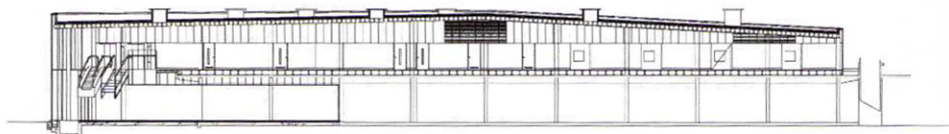
saying how exemplar this was, this kind of idea of understanding of public buildings within disenfranchised communities. I'm not trying to 'toot' my own trumpet, if it sounds like that I'm really sorry, it's just that I tend to be very passionate about the idea of transfiguration of places of...of places that...inherently have a kind of negative/positive territory. The architecture kind of mediates that...and can shift the image without necessarily being about big money or poor money...it's about the choices ...it's about the particular personality of the architecture and what it brings to the area.

SR *It doesn't sound like you're tooting your own horn; this is really great. It's exactly what I'm interested in knowing.*

DA I asked myself the question, what is the idea of the library ...now called the idea store? The building, the idea that the library, is the thing that it is accepted as a beautiful thing... is the idea that the library has, always at its center a fabulous reading room, the grand hall, the signature memory space and wouldn't it be interesting if you actually collapsed everything into one singular space as a phenomena of the whole thing. This is not about a university or academic place...it's a space of community...so really it was about as much about making a singular cell space but with enough spatial perspective quality to allow you to negotiate its vastness and within that...to then develop a secondary system...a drawing. I love very much a medieval painting of St. Jerome working in a gothic palace; *The Italian Painter*, and so the idea of a secondary element, which is the furniture, the fit out, is developed as a series of pieces of furniture which allow for quieter study...allow for books, allow for enclosure, allow for a kind of formats which



from top
IDEA STORE
INTERIOR VIEWS
SECTION AA



can allow for large groups or small groups to kind of form and to shift...The idea of library stacks into furniture components...you have an organic curl...and the curl as well as being like furniture, much more than sort of shelving, also acts as a kind of landscape. You then have a perspectival hall which then has this arrangement of fluid forms which can make rooms, chambers and an end study for people, to study or use computers...you get this kind of meander occurring in the library rather than regimented moving through stack numbers. You get this idea that the meander of those agendas redefines your own position within the environment... rather than having an efficient, minimum corridor of books, you have basically spaces to meander and stop, without disrupting the flow leisurely. That was very important to me and in a way of using the library also confirms the “privileging” that occurs when a person from a middle class background understands how to use the library and a person from a working class background that has never walked through a library can be frightened by one, they have to aspire. So the idea is that I wanted to reduce it, not in a dumbed-down way but to reduce the ability to constantly understand to operate within this space...whereby both groups...can access and play the game without using any kind of accepted modes of behavior or accepted modes of understanding.

SR Next, I have a question that is particular to my own research interest, aesthetic work in the contemporary African Diaspora. Do you feel any of your work is influenced by your cultural background and if so, how?

DA Absolutely, of course it's influenced by my background,



IDEA STORE
CHRISP STREET
EXTERIOR VIEW
AT DUSK

because I am my background. (*laughs*) I think there is a kind of post-colonial discourse within that question which assumes that the other or the person who comes from a different place has assimilated and therefore discarded. What is very clear is that the person that moves from one context to another they exist within the binary condition, almost like a bi-racial person. It's impossible to inject the cultural background that one has within this thing. To me, not only is it subconsciously operating, it's also consciously operating...the nuance and the idea of city as landscape and even construction in a way ultimately becomes landscape...kind of comes from the idea of looking at Cities of Djann and looking at the work Hassan Fathy in Southern Egypt, looking at the kind of hamlet constructions in Harare, a sense of understanding construction and space and also how to order and the idea of materiality and non-materiality... operates differently within different geographical conditions and how vast in a way...the geographical...condition of Africa, and the way it impacts the way things are made can be read as mistakes or can be read as conditions...social conditions of material, physical and political. And for me, I read it in a way...I'm not interested in a French 19th Century way of reading it as a kind of ethical good or bad, but much more about a way of kind of perceiving the different modes as different states, multiple existences of differences...which then can be learned from without actually making value judgments which then say that construction should be like this or construction should be like that, in a way getting more out of a situation which might be ignored.

Before I was 11 I had already been through nearly a dozen African countries so I, somehow, consciously or sub-consciously



IDEA STORE
CHRISP STREET
EXTERIOR VIEW
AT NIGHT

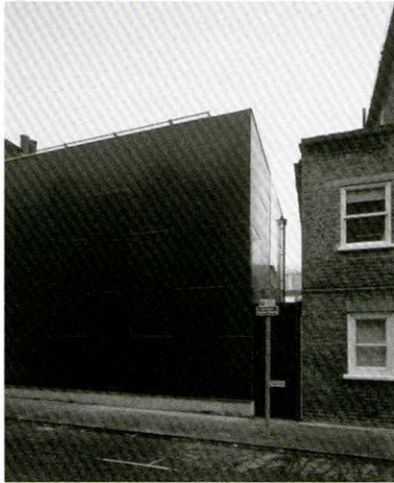
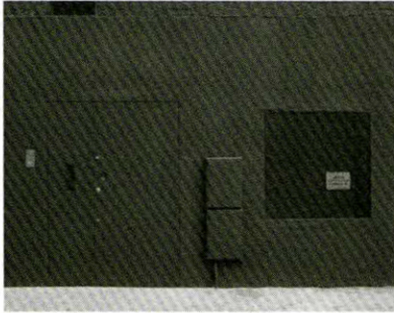
was completely bathed in this idea of negotiating African countries...and then bang I came to Europe...I thought I understood it all...everything was different it was a kind of flip...it was about this extraordinary perfection; this extraordinary order. All these things for me just played out as different kinds of equivalences depending on social and political ethics within a cultural play. I feel that I'm very interested in exploring that value the "valueless-ness", the value without judgment. I directly reference it in my work... like in *The Dirty House*, the idea of messy as a kind of bait as a kind of articulation...

SR *No, actually I think it's kind of clear in how you started to talk about The Idea Store and your approach to it and how you wanted to work with and also outside of the community and such project the community outside of itself as well. Even when I started to ask this question, I said, OK, I'm sure that that comes from your experiences of dwelling in Africa. Yes, so again, it's very tied to your understanding of African modalities.*

DA Yes, it comes from a cultural reading. I'm not interested in a kind of symbolic representational sort of appliqué...something that's valuable in a kitschy way.

SR *If I might even interject a little...some of the work I've seen of yours, I can begin to make relationships of visual effect and the materiality that seem to have certain connections to African aesthetics like in the library for instance that has an uncanny use of rhythm and play of bold colors that respond to subtle ways in the way light plays in London.*

DA Yes correct, actually shift direction of the light...there's



from top
DIRTY HOUSE FAÇADE
ELEKTRA HOUSE FAÇADE

an idea that light is a European phenomena of faintness... when actually...it's not...that's a kind of aesthetic, an idea of light...it's the reality.

SR *I know that you didn't want to make symbolic references but you can make a direct connection to kente cloth rhythm and pattern in the Idea Store surface.*

DA In the beginning I talked about that...It's very complimentary in a politically simplistic kind of way. I'm also nervous about the appropriation becoming a mistake because it's not about money...it's difficult to avoid.

SR *Yes, I understand it's not about consumption of culture, in a shallow manner, it goes much deeper than that. I also had another cultural reading of both the Elektra House and the Dirty House. The use of stark black surfaces make a subtle connection to the neighborhoods but they also have another set of social connotations...they have a connection to African aesthetic sensibilities. The elevations are similar to many African traditional earthen homes, stark...a result of the environment and also a response to that environment. Like the Idea Store they transform their immediate public realm.*

DA Yes, it's clear...the language has been being written for the past 30 years, but it hasn't been actually articulated in architecture...I'm very versed in that language because I've been reading it all my life.

SR *And honestly that's part of the reason that, we were interested in particular in having you present your work – to have that dialogue, to inform the discourse of architecture of such connections to African aesthetics in contemporary architecture.*

DAVID ADJAYE, educated in Africa and in London, is principal of the 40-person-strong Adjaye/Associates. He teaches at the Architectural Association in London.

SCOTT RUFF is Assistant Professor of Architecture at Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

This publication is produced in an edition of 1500 on the occasion of the exhibition, *Idea Store Chrisp Street* by Adjaye/Associates, as part of THE SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE: *The Architect's Work Series* April 18 – May 27 2005.

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