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# IFEANYI OGANWU

## *Merging Architecture with Hi-Tech Designs*

By REMMY DIAGBARE

*Ifeanyi Oganwu studied architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago; the Architectural Association, London; and Columbia University, New York. He has worked for the offices of John Ronan Architects, Chicago; Zaha Hadid Architects, London; and has collaborated with the fashion design studio of Hussein Chalayan. In 2003 he joined the London based structural engineering practice of Adams Kara Taylor where he worked within their Parametric Applied Research Team to develop an integrated approach to explore and represent complex architectural scenarios. Throughout both his academic and professional pursuits, Ifeanyi has explored his fascination for art, architecture, culture and technology and consequently founded Expand Design Ltd in 2009.*



*Engaging in architecture and furniture design, Expand Design Ltd explores the correlation between history, base materials and opportunities presented by state-of-the-art fabrication techniques. Through "our projects, they unearth unidentified typologies that are inspired by the past, grounded in the present, and on a journey to a new aesthetic domain." In this interview with Allure Editor, Ifeanyi expounds on this theory. Enjoy!*

**YOUR WORK WAS RECENTLY FEATURED IN THE AUGUST EDITION OF VOGUE. HOW DID YOU COME TO BE IN SUCH A PRESTIGIOUS MAGAZINE?**

Last April, during the presentation of my collection at Milan Design Week, I welcomed an international crowd of press and industry professionals at my space in the Salone Satellite Exhibition, a showcase for emerging design talents. Vogue contacted me shortly afterwards, expressing interest in including my work in a feature for their August 2011 issue which highlighted nature and techno-inspired trends, observed throughout design week.

**PRECISELY, WHAT DO YOU DO AND HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN AT IT?**

I founded Expand Design in 2009, ten years after my first professional position as an intern in Chicago. Since then, I've worked on both architecture and design proposals that range in scale from a church in Lagos to a hand-held mobile device. Before founding Expand Design, I worked across several disciplines: from fashion design for Hussein Chalayan to architecture for John Ronan and Zaha Hadid Architects, and in structural engineering for the firm AKT.

**YOU SEEM TO BE DOING MORE DESIGNS THAN ARCHITECTURE? WHY DID YOU VEER AWAY FROM YOUR MAIN COURSE?**

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level to designing the buildings within it as well as specific elements of the building. In some cases, this feeds down to details as specific as furniture and fixtures. Some of the most iconic examples of 20th century design originated this way, and today's architects and designers are able to bring unique perspectives to a broad range of challenges in sectors such as transportation design, which is outside of our traditional scope of engagement.

**IS THERE A CORRELATION BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND THE KIND OF FURNITURE YOU DESIGN?**

The principles are very similar. Both architecture and design pay close attention to the transformation of materials and to the creation of structurally intelligent and sustainable forms in order to engage the users and create space and experience. My furniture is part of a larger environment which I'm building one collection at a time.

**FROM WHAT WAS FEATURED IN VOGUE, YOUR DESIGNS ARE SOMEWHAT FUTURISTIC. WHAT'S THE IDEA BEHIND THEM?**

My 2011 collection, Double Agent Suite, consists of a desk and chair. The desk is truly a remarkable creation and I was able to devote many months of work to its design and fabrication. One of the most striking aspects of the desk is that although it is expansive in scale, it is actually an intimate piece that invites interaction through its details, surface features and the introduction of various zones. The futuristic aesthetic is consistent throughout my collections because of the digital design processes and material treatments I utilize in their creation.

**HOW HAVE COMFORT AND COZINESS BEEN FACTORED INTO YOUR DESIGN, BECAUSE, THEY LOOK REALLY HI-TECH?**

Since my work invites and engages the user on many different levels, ergonomic parameters are significant considerations as exemplified in both my Full-Circle bench and Double-Agent chair. In the example of the desk, the dialogue between function, ergonomics and its surface features is precisely balanced to the limit. Thus far, my interests have driven me towards the high-tech spectrum, but I am not opposed to working with soft materials.

**WHAT INFLUENCES YOUR DESIGNS AND WHAT MATERIALS DO YOU WORK WITH?**

My works develop organically; meaning, I don't design with a specific end form in mind. Materials are, therefore, very dominant factors that drive the concept through to fruition. Each creation is also influenced by its function and a determination to re-imagine this within a contemporary context. I have worked with marble and custom fibre glass composites, and although, each material presents unique sets of challenges that I must work through from a design and manufacturing standpoint, the end results have been satisfying.

**WHO DO YOU DESIGN FOR, OR SIMPLY PUT, WHICH MARKET ARE YOU TARGETING?**

Design is universal and is consumed in many ways. My works are not necessarily pieces you would stumble upon in a traditional furniture shop. Rather, they are discoveries that have the potential to transform spaces and can set the overall mood of environments in which they are situated. These characteristics are valued by end users who connect with the works and have developed an appreciation for well-crafted designs that speak for today and offer a window into the future.

**DO YOU PLAN TO LAUNCH IN NIGERIA, OR YOUR DESIGNS ARE TOO HIGH-TECH FOR NIGERIAN CONSUMPTION?**

I am definitely keen on working with partners in Nigeria and will observe how the arts and cultural communities develop. I've met several Nigerian interior designers and clients during my exhibitions and they have all been extremely receptive towards my work.

It is exciting to think about the opportunities entailed in sharing my work with a Nigerian audience as well as being part of its arts and cultural landscape.

**HOW LONG AND HOW OFTEN DO YOU COME OUT WITH NEW DESIGNS? HOW MANY OF EACH DO YOU PRODUCE?**

Every year, I look forward to launching a new design collection that incorporates new skills, approaches and technologies. The designs are produced in small editions since the production processes are relatively complex. Some projects are developed over several years while I carry out research on production methods and materials, while others are conceived and developed within a shorter time frame.



Expand Design — Milan Exhibition 2011 -02



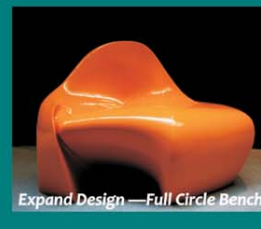
Expand Design — Milan Exhibition 2011 -01



Expand Design — Full Circle Bench



Expand Design — Ren Table



Expand Design — Full Circle Bench



Expand Design — Installation at Nhow Hotel, Milan



Expand Design — Double Agent Desk Suite



Expand Design — Double Agent Chair



Expand Design — Double Agent Desk



Expand Design — Double Agent Desk  
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**HOW DO YOU DO YOUR PRODUCTION, WHERE AND HOW DO YOU MARKET?**

During the production phase, I collaborate with a small number of specialists in the UK and Italy. Since there is a strong manufacturing tradition in the UK where I am based, I adapt technologies from the automotive industry to develop and produce new works, whereas in Italy, I work with marble specialists who combine the latest technologies with age-old handicraft. Over the last two years, I've launched my new collections at Milan Design Week, which is one of the biggest and most attended furniture fairs in the world.

I plan to participate in more events in Milan since the fair and its satellite events are incredible platforms to present work to a global audience. The Expand Design webpage is a good archive to discover the collections.

**WHAT HAS BEEN THE RECEPTION TO YOUR DESIGNS?**

The reception has been very positive and I've shared inspiring exchanges with renowned architects, designers and other creative professionals whose work I regard highly. I think it's important to have a cross-generational relationship with individuals in the design community and to interact with people who are completely new to it.

**WHAT INSPIRES YOU AND WHAT INFLUENCES YOUR DESIGNS?**

In addition to influences within the design community, I'm continually inspired by automotive design, contemporary art and sculptural forms. In each of these examples, materials are transformed to achieve different end results. I'm fascinated by art and its ability to enthrall the viewer, while in automotive design I'm fascinated by the correlation between aero-dynamics and material performance.

**YOU GREW UP IN NIGERIA. HOW DOES THAT BACKGROUND IMPACT ON WHAT YOU DO AND HOW YOU HAVE TURNED OUT?**

I was born in Nigeria and the starting point for my interest in architecture and design originated during my informal apprenticeship at my father's architectural practice. At 18, I began studies and later worked in the US and the UK so I've observed how architecture and design adapt to diverse conditions.

I've also observed a multiplicity of cultural traditions during my travels in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas. So, all of my experiences inform the way I respond to design and its challenges.

**WHO DO YOU SEE AS ICONIC IN YOUR FIELD AND WHY?**

I greatly admire the work of British architect, Zaha Hadid. She continually redefines what architecture can be in the 21st century and has designed cities, buildings, cars, and a broad range of products including furniture, jewellery and

footwear. In her 30-plus years in the field, she has created an entire universe of design.

**WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR PARENTS' ROLE IN ALL OF THESE AND WHAT DO THEY SAY TO YOU, WHEN THEY SEE YOUR WORK?**

My parents exposed me to architecture from a very young age. I have great childhood memories of spending part of my summer holidays in my dad's practice, observing the various stages of design and construction. Other parts of my holidays were spent with my mum who I accompanied during her travels to the US and UK, where I visited many popular buildings. Consequently, these experiences enabled me to be perceptive and drawn towards architecture. After exposing me to so much

looked up to individuals in each of my educational and professional experiences beginning from high school in Nigeria through to my studies in Art and Architecture programmes at Columbia University, the Architectural Association and IIT, Chicago.

**ARE YOU ALL WORK AND NO PLAY? HOW DO YOU RELAX?**

I haven't taken a holiday in many years so whenever I have any opportunity to slow down, I do enjoy visiting museums and galleries. I also enjoy taking a few hours off every week to have an engaging discussion with friends over a nice meal.

**WHAT ARE YOU PASSIONATE ABOUT, YOUR PHILOSOPHY AND PERSONAL STYLE?**

I'm very passionate about applying myself critically and offering new possibilities to my clients whilst engaging them on many levels. The curious nature of my works makes them experiential, so in essence the overall concept is not just about the physical object, but rather inter-weaving objects and space for an immersive encounter. With regards to my personal style, I tend to look for well-made bits and pieces with interesting details.

**HOW IMPORTANT IS FURNITURE TO STYLE AND IMAGE OR, WHAT IS THE CORRELATION?**

Furniture is a key element when building a cohesive image for a space. The factors to consider vary tremendously and are dependent on the particular context. From my personal experience, once a connection with the creative intent of a design is established, clients tend to seek pieces that fit well with their lifestyle or in the case of businesses, with their corporate image.



Ifeanyi Oganwu's designs in Vogue

My parents are proud when they see my work today. They are also very supportive and encourage me to go further.

**WHO IS YOUR ROLE MODEL?**

I am fortunate to have worked and studied with many brilliant people who have taught me so much along the way. It is hard to pin-point a single role model since I have

**WHAT FUTURE PLANS FOR EXPAND DESIGNS?**

At the moment, I'm working to complete a very exciting small project that is informed by research I began in 2009. In the future, I plan to seek out more diverse project types I find fascinating, such as bridges and towers where structure, material and form are forces that dictate the specificity of the end result.

