

# AFRIKADAA

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AFRO DESIGN & CONTEMPORARY ARTS

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**E-MOTIONAL**

# IFEANYI OGANWU

## SHAPING MATTER

By Olivia Anan  
Photos: Gilles Pernet



*Born in Nigeria, Ifeanyi Oganwu was trained as an architect at top schools in Chicago, London and New York. His unique approach to experimenting with materials has garnered attention at renowned international design shows such as Design Miami and Milan Design Week. For this issue, the young designer who once caught the eye of John Ronan and Zaha Hadid sat with us to talk a bit about his ongoing and future projects.*

### **How did you come to architecture and then to design?**

I grew up in my father's architecture and urban planning practice, so you could say I came into architecture from a very young age. My interest for design came from my training in architecture, which placed a huge emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches to viewing, discussing and conceiving the facets of our built environment.

### **Tell us a little more about your recent projects. When I met you in Paris for the Designer's Days, several of your designs, among which the Contoured Crater desk and side table, the Ren table and the Tootsie rug were exhibited at the Galerie Armel Soyer. What's the story behind each of these pieces?**

My first solo show entitled, "Look Mum, No Hands" held at [Galerie Armel Soyer](#) was a great opportunity to present the ideas and concepts driving my practice. The works selected for the show investigated the relationship between materiality and topology; craft and engineering; architecture and design. With the works in marble – Ren table and Tootsie rug, I explored adaptability, lightness and transformability, themes not usually associated with the heaviness of marble. Ren is a dynamic form extracted from a single block of marble, whereas Tootsie consists of a constellation of marble tiles that are combined into a rug. Lastly, with the Contoured Crater desk, fifty plates of birch plywood were stacked in a gravity-defying manner, as if stretched between the brushed steel writing surface and the mirror-polished base of steel which anchors the work and reflects the ascent.

### **Paris, London or Miami?**

I'm yet to exhibit in London but that's about to change with the forthcoming [PAD London](#) art and design fair taking place in October at Berkeley Square. My Dutch gallery [Priveekollektie](#), who already introduced the Bulgy mirror/console at Design Miami/Basel, will

be able to present it with a new audience; the work will also travel again to Miami in December.



Bulgy © Ifeanyi Oganwu  
Priveekollektie Miami Basel 2013  
Photo: Ian Scigliuzzi

### **What is your personal approach to design? And if you should name 3 rules when working on a project, what would they be?**

I don't really have a formula but I tend to approach most projects by reducing the design challenge to its essence, that way

the work speaks for itself with the utmost conceptual clarity.

### **How important for you is the commercial part of design? Right now, your work is only available in very limited editions, so will you consider mass production in the future?**

I'm very open to creating work for mass production and look forward to the opportunity to do so with the right partners.

### **Africa and Design: Do you think the continent is ready for design as an industry? How do you think we could adapt the international design model to fit African populations' consumption behavior, and to give the continent's designers an opportunity to reach the local market?**

Design has a role to play at many levels of the continent's development; I believe that South Africa is making the push in the right direction with [Indaba](#) and other initiatives.

### **Do you follow the work of fellow designers from Africa and the diaspora? Who / whose work inspires you?**

While showing work with [Perimeter](#) over the last year plus, I had the privilege and delight to be shown with David Adjaye and Cheick Diallo. In April I did a show with [AAF gallery](#) Lagos entitled Designing Africa: Appropriating Culture, Mediums and Meanings, the exhibition brought together an exciting range of young practitioners from both art and design, further probing their blurred boundaries.

### **And without considerations of nationality, period or background, which designer**

***/architect would you say has had a major influence on your work? Would you identify yourself as part of a specific architectural/design movement?***

My past experience working with John Ronan Architects, Zaha Hadid Architects, AKT II Structural Engineers, and collaborating with fashion designer Hussein Chalayan, have been influential to my development. I wouldn't say that I'm part of a specific movement but my work is aligned with digital design and fabrication.

***Let's be a bit critical about Africa : What are the continent's biggest architectural woes and wins, in your opinion? Which project would you give a prize to and which one deserves a shame award?***

Coming from Nigeria I can only speak of my firsthand experience because I haven't travelled extensively on the continent. The main issue I find has to do with poor urban planning and the implementation of zoning laws. I find many state and federal levels of government to be ill-equipped in addressing the planning issues that need to be addressed before we initiate the conversation about what's happening at the building scale.

On a different note, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture highlights architectural gems in the continent, raising their public interest from the international community.

***What are your thoughts on architecture/design and education in Africa? How do you think we could improve the training young students in the field receive, beyond better equipment and facilities? Any schools you***

***think are doing great? Any advice for aspiring young architects and designers?***

For the design of outdoor displays for LagosPhoto Festival 2013 taking place in late October, I served as a facilitator at a summer workshop organized by the African Artists' Foundation, where I acted as a creative mentor for architecture students from the University of Lagos and design students from Yaba College of Technology. Together with the Lagos State Government, the AAF have initiated a special program – Capacity Development Integration, with the aim of offering students a way to work experimentally outside both institutional and commercial settings. The program is at early stages so I look forward to its maturity.

***You like experimenting with materials: wood, marble, industrial materials... What materials inspire you for African design today and tomorrow? For the world?***

For the workshop we looked at wood, bamboo, rope and other sustainable materials readily accessible in Lagos, I'm usually inspired by the performative aspects of a material ranging from structure to its appearance or texture.

***As an architect, what would your own dream home be like?***

A dream home would be a large and simple space with great views, lots of wonderful furnishings and beautiful art on the walls. I love the thought of being surrounded with inspiring works that can both challenge and enlighten.

***Tell us a little about your future projects...***

Currently working on an expansive collection entitled Dirty Dozen, where I'm exploring relationships between affective qualities of cinematic space and design. Varying in complexity and materiality, the collection will be a conclusion of sorts on the areas of research that have run through most of the projects thus far.

***Your dream ?***

It would be great to work on a tower or bridge, perhaps a hybrid tower/bridge... I find the challenge of combining every aspect of these typologies towards a technically sound end result stimulating.

From Left to Right:  
Tootsie  
Full Circle/Splice  
Splice © Ifeanyi Oganwu

Opposite Page:  
CCD © Ifeanyi

