

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

Designed and delivered by lead designer Sir David Adjaye OBE and lead architect Philip Freelon, together with their architectural team Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup, the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) is located in a symbolically prime position on Washington DC's National Mall. It is the only national museum devoted exclusively to the documentation of African American life, history, and culture. The museum has about 3 000 objects on display from its collection of nearly 40 000. Its inaugural exhibitions have been conceived to help transform visitors' understanding of American history and culture and to invite people to participate in changing definitions of American citizenship, liberty and equality. Since opening on 24 September 2016, the Museum has welcomed about 1.5 million visitors from near and far. Occupying a prominent five-acre location next to the Washington Monument, the nearly 400 000-square-foot Museum is devoted exclusively to exploring, documenting and showcasing the African American story and its impact on American and world history. The prominence of the Museum means that the contributions of African American people can no longer be contested.

IN THIS PUBLIC CONVERSATION WITH ZAHIRA ASMAL, SIR DAVID ADJAYE OBE WILL TALK ABOUT THE MAKING OF THE MUSEUM, AND THE DIVERSE NARRATIVES AND CULTURES THAT INSPIRE HIS WORK.

THIS DISCUSSION INAUGURATES THE WORK OF THE SEE PROJECT PRODUCED BY THE CITY.

The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it... History is literally present in all that we do.

James Baldwin



Photo: Ed Reeve

SIR DAVID ADJAYE OBE is the principal and founder of Adjaye Associates. Born in Tanzania to Ghanaian parents, his broadly ranging influences, ingenious use of materials and sculptural ability have established him as an architect with an artist's sensibility and vision. His largest project to date, the \$540-million Smithsonian Institute National Museum of African American History and Culture, opened on the National Mall in Washington DC in September 2016 and was named Cultural Event of the Year by the *New York Times*. Earlier this year, he was recognised as one of the 100 most influential people of the year by *Time* magazine.



ZAHIRA ASMAL is a researcher, publisher and activist. Asmal worked with Sir David Adjaye OBE on his book, *African Metropolitan Architecture*, and the accompanying exhibition *Urban Africa*. Her most recent publication, *Movement*, looks at the social, spatial, political, economic and cultural movements that have shaped South Africa's big cities. In collaboration with the Johannesburg Development Agency, Asmal initiated a place-making project in 2013, which reimagines under-used and abandoned spaces at Park Station, said to be Africa's busiest transport node. Her current project, *See*, explores contested urban histories, equal representation in the memorialisation of history and the construction of resilient postcolonial urban identities. Asmal serves as advisor to the Africa Architecture Awards.

THE CITY

HERITAGE, MEMORY & MAKING PLACE

SIR DAVID ADJAYE OBE
IN CONVERSATION WITH ZAHIRA ASMAL
FRIDAY | 1 SEPTEMBER 2017 | 5 – 7PM
HIDDINGHALL | UCT
31 ORANGE STREET | GARDENS

Photo: Brad Feinknopf

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ORGANISED BY THE CITY AND CO-HOSTED BY THE INSTITUTE FOR CREATIVE ARTS,
WITH SUPPORT FROM THE US CONSULATE GENERAL IN CAPE TOWN



THE CITY

Founded by Zahira Asmal in 2010 and working out of Cape Town, The City celebrates diversity and debate on a cross-continental scale. Harnessing a global network of visionary urban designers, thinkers and communicators, we develop innovative solutions to social, cultural and spatial challenges.

Our work is amorphous, curious, and celebrates multiplicity.

Experiences

The City curates interactive experiences (exhibitions, urban tours and academic studios) that bring personal and collective stories to life.

Publications

Through deft intersectional publications, The City shares vital information with audiences across the private, public and civic spheres. In addition to books, zines and digital media, we present research-based papers at seminars globally.

Connections

The City brokers strategic connections to activate targeted media campaigns, professional profiles and transnational connectivity.

Motivated by the belief that imagination is the key to a shared future, The City puts ingenuity to work in the built environment through research, publishing, and critical and inclusive engagement. From architecture to design, culture, heritage and society, our focus is the making of cities.

The City is a space for all. www.thecityagency.co.za

In colonised cities across the world, extensive work went into preparing a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate – ‘cleansing’ public space of time and history so that the colonisers could construct their own orders, references and visual cultures. The See project aims to bring social, cultural and representational equity to the built landscapes and public iconography of the city. We need to make the shift from the outdated fixity of the colonial city, which is diminishing and damaging, to a more resilient, agile and adaptable creole city based on mixedness and mixing. Outdated ideologies of racial purity and uniqueness are a toxic dead end. Our strength lies not only in diversity but also in transgressive hybridity – fusion and translation of existing forms and representations.

see¹ |se|

1 verb (**sees, seeing**; past **saw**; past participle **seen**)
perceive with the eyes; discern visually: *I see you.*

2 discern or deduce mentally after reflection or from information; understand: *Now is the time; wake up and see. See other histories entangled in the already well-known colonial accounts of history.*

3 [Afrikaans | noun] expanse of salt water that covers most of the earth's surface and surrounds its land masses: **See** *the sea that carried diverse peoples to the Cape. See all the people that have migrated to Cape Town from various parts of Africa, Asia and Europe.*

Our core intention is to widen the scope and range of our knowledge about the contributions that various individuals and visionary groups of people have made to the texture of Cape Town's cultures. See is aimed at wresting Cape Town's creole spirit from apartheid's enduring spatial legacies. The project is driven by an endeavour to document and disseminate marginalised histories and memories to make a more vital, inclusive city. We want to share information about who contemporary Capetonians are and where they come from so that we can meet each other in a place of greater respect and knowing. We need to remember diverse pasts, recall heterodox inheritances; no single narrative constitutes the truth of our shared and separate histories.

Asmal extended this invitation to Adjaye as the work of See deals with the same topics of visibility, acknowledgement and celebration that he engaged with as designer of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). As NMAAHC Founding Director Lonnie Bunch has said: 'The African American experience is the lens through which we understand what it is to be an American.' Asmal wishes to develop the See project along similar lines, celebrating the achievements and future possibilities of the people who've contributed to the hybrid identity and culture of Cape Town.

The work See produces is aimed not only at advancing discourse in Cape Town but serving as a reference for other postcolonial cities grappling with contested histories and the cultural and social identities arising out of them. The research material and insights developed will be shared at sites of high visibility and transit, echoing the prominence of the NMAAHC on Washington DC's National Mall among other national memorials and monuments.

See resists Cape Town's undesirable status as one of the most segregated cities – not just in South Africa, but also in the world. The overall aim of the See project is to make Cape Town a more resilient city through inclusivity and equity.

* <http://www.statssa.gov.za/>

PARTNERS | SEE

Consulate General of the Netherlands in Cape Town

'The Netherlands Consulate General is excited to work with Zahira Asmal on her new proposed project, as it ambitiously seeks to address the colonial and apartheid heritages, especially the influences they had on the development of Cape Town. The aim of the project is not to dwell on the traumatic details, but rather to bring the controversies and difficulties to the fore in order to understand our shared history. Once we have a better understanding of our shared history, we will be able to better facilitate an understanding of this heritage with the ultimate aim of better informed and inclusive societies.'

– Bonnie Horbach, *Consul General of the Netherlands in Cape Town*

Institute for Creative Arts (ICA) is an interdisciplinary institute in the University of Cape Town's Humanities Faculty that facilitates new collaborative research projects, particularly in the Creative and Performing Arts. 'In embracing more urgently the decolonisation project, our universities are searching for approaches that locate theory beyond the recognisable and predictable enclaves. Our focus is being challenged as is our curriculum and the kinds of students we are ushering into the world. The challenges of a society that has not embraced fully the catastrophe of climate change nor the social and political implications of intense migration patterns, also beg to be met by scholarship that is theoretically rigorous but that is, crucially, inspired by diverse methodologies.'

– Jay Pather, *Director, Institute for Creative Arts*

'I have spent recent years researching other postcolonial and creole cities, linking their stories. The creole spirit and attitude is at the sensual core of cities like Salvador and New Orleans, informing their culture, architecture and even tourism. It is proudly embraced. The work that See produces will not only develop Cape Town's discourse but serve as a reference for many postcolonial cities grappling with matters of contested histories and the subsequent cultural and social identities arising out of them.'

– Zahira Asmal

SEE

The City has embarked on a new project, titled *See*, focused on history, memory and the making of place in contemporary Cape Town. See is aimed at moving scholarly information in archives and museums, and dialogues that have emerged out of recent social justice struggles, into the mainstream. All cultures are not regarded and commemorated equally in Cape Town. Protests on campuses and across the city turned violent in their demands not just for more equitable service delivery, but also for greater visibility and presence in the built life of the city.

While conducting research for *Movement: Cape Town* (The City, 2015), Zahira Asmal noted responses from black and brown residents who expressed that they frequently feel ignored or unacknowledged in Cape Town. And in instances when they don't feel invisible, they attested to feeling hyper-visible or exoticised – singled out on the basis of difference. Considering that this group of people constitutes 84,3% of Cape Town's population* it is alarming that the majority of the city's residents attest to feeling invisible or unrepresented. That such oppression is routinely shrugged off or deemed normal signals an urgent need to explore the generative potential in the mixed, creole aspects of contemporary life in Cape Town

Inspired by the decolonial actions of the Rhodes Must Fall movement, the conscientising street art of Tokolos Stencil and Burning Museum, and the activism of Ndifuna Ukwazi's Reclaim the City campaign, Asmal initiated the See project to draw urgent attention to the identities, memories and histories that inform the evolving social, spatial and cultural realities of Cape Town.

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