

# AFRICAN GENERATIONS\_THE POWER OF DESIGN

## **The Power of Design**

My friend and collaborator DK Osseo-Asare recently shared an Akan proverb with me, 'Se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi' - this roughly translates to: it is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten. This proverb in the Twi language of Southern and Central Ghana is about reaching into the past in order to gain knowledge for the future. He offered this as an approach to design and innovation and I'd like to relay it here, as a way of weaving together the wide and exciting array of designers included in this publication.

As leading authorities in design, the authors Mugendi M'Rithaa and Hisham Lahlou demonstrate the overwhelming extent to which craft traditions have enriched design practice today. They highlight the collaborative processes of textile designers such as Aissa Dione and Johanna Bramble, who work with Manjak weavers to produce fabrics for the fashion industry; as well as those of interior designers such as Steven Burks and Zouhair Ben Jannet, who work with basket makers to apply the technologies of coiled and plaited basketry to industrial products. They illustrate the ways in which architect David Adjaye studies the construction and patterning of delicate beadwork objects as the basis for large-scale built structure; and the lost-wax methods by which product designer Atang Tshikare creates his furniture translations of mythological concepts.

From interiors and furniture to textiles and ceramics, from glass and metalwork to graphics and product design, the objects and environments we encounter throughout this volume embody both continuity and innovation. I would like to propose that the *power of design* as it is perceived and presented across the coming pages is twofold: Firstly, design has the strength to restore and reconstitute memories by bringing craft knowledge into the present. Secondly, design has the capacity to help us to imagine alternative futures. As practitioners themselves, Mugendi M'Rithaa and Hisham Lahlou have shaped the following selection of fifty designers in such a way as to challenge our own assumptions about the world to come.

Here, the co- authors show us that while design's role is often to solve problems - that is, to make more beautiful products and more efficient processes - the purpose of design can also be to pose important questions. They call our attention to practitioners that challenge us to imagine our futures in different and

unexpected ways. Visual artist Osborne Macharia uses his 'Afrofictionalist' approach to create fantasy images that defiantly subvert African stereotypes; while architect Kunlé Adeyemi proposes an extension of the city of Lagos built upon water. Taken together, the designers in this volume present us with a vision of the future that is characterised and mobilised by craftsmanship and critical innovation.

In the words of Alioune Sall, Director of the African Futures Institute, "The future does not come by itself but has to be met and the conditions for its hatching have to be created" (Sall, 2003). These conditions that Sall refers to are the capacity to imaginatively explore long-term African futures without 'submitting to the dictatorship of urgencies and ...hardships', alongside a deep consideration for how society functions and how it *produces*. It is this ability to 'time travel' between the historic and the futuristic - to recognise the strengths of long-standing production techniques and to imagine the possibilities of new technologies materials - that characterises the territory of the designer.

As a Research Fellow in 'Global Design Practices' at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, I am deeply interested in design from/connected to the African continent - and conscious of the need to tell a geographically broader story of design today. Indeed, our current Eurocentric design canon was in part established here, as part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Albertopolis project in South Kensington. Recent efforts by 'global design historians' have gone some way to expand the remit and understandings within the design studies - however, there is work to be done. Accounts of design on the African continent - both contemporary and historical - remain relatively untold within the story of design.

Contemporary practice on the continent is increasingly showcased through exciting initiatives such as the Design Indaba in South Africa - now one of the essential conferences on the international design calendar; the Dak'Art Biennale in Senegal which exhibits not only arts with cultural roots in Africa, but new design talent as well; and online platforms such as African Digital Art which publishes extensive coverage on art, design and technology across the continent and beyond. Ambitious design education centres such as Ashesi University in Ghana, and the newly-launched African Design Centre in Rwanda aim to teach a new generation technical skills in software, design and professional practice.

In an attempt to contribute to the growing body of knowledge around contemporary design practice on the continent, I am part of a network of designers across Dakar, Accra, Nairobi, Kampala and Cape Town known as 'AfriDesignX'. Our aim is to document and connect makers across these cities working in the fields of video games, wearables and robotics. It was through this initiative that I first met Mugendi M'Rithaa. I've had the honour of hearing him talk

about design on many occasions. He communicates a vision for young designers that is an open invitation to participate in the field - "I participate, therefore I am - I design, therefore I am!".

This volume is an extension of this invitation. It offers insight into the techniques and design processes of a wide array of practitioners. It shows the ways in which they have galvanised craft technologies to 'boldly go where no designer has gone before!', paving the way for the next generation. In this way it acts as a rich resource for designers entering the field. Furthermore, it challenges the hierarchies and contested inter-relationships between the creative disciplines - employing 'design' as a catchall phrase to include artists, crafts workers and architects.

As we move towards the mid 21<sup>st</sup> Century, design takes on an increasingly important role in education, the creative industries and national economic policies across the globe. It is imperative that the history and future canon of the subject reflects global diversity and interdisciplinary. *African Generations\_The Strength of Design* offers a meaningful contribution to this end.

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