

On Alara
By Allyn Gaestel
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Everything about the Alara store is distinct; it looks like no other building in Lagos. The outer walls are burnt red and cutout with triangles and squares. Inner walls are painted black. Shelves are angular metal sculptures and rooms are delineated with patterned screens. The building rises above its neighbors in a boxy celebration of loud, solid, geometry and layers.

Alara is a beacon for African luxury. It promotes a bombastic self love that is desperately needed in the aesthetic identity crisis dominant in Lagos. Street fashion here is flooded with Chinese imports, climatically incongruent, unbreathable polyester and weak mimicry of western suits and blouses. The architecture is similar. Contemporary Lagosian buildings for the most part pretend to be elsewhere; new neighborhoods imitate American suburbia, lavish mansions are overwhelmed with imported marble and Corinthian columns. The designer wares for sale in Alara, on the other hand, are a mix between contemporary African designers — many of whom transmute traditional patterning and artisanal techniques into fresh creations — and the ostentatious, bright international designers that fit with the Nigerian penchant for glamour. This neo-African aesthetic is often poached in the international realm, it inspires global fashion and aesthetic, but it is rarely credited. Instead Africa is flattened, simplified and faded into a backdrop. Alara resists all of this. The founder and owner, Reni Folawiyo, is an activist for a celebratory aesthetic. Architecturally, the building takes more from the patterning of the clothes, the bold prints, swirled threading and complex textures than it does from the confused architectural landscape in Lagos. The building is like a magnificent gift box for the goods inside.

The architecture reaches down and back to history and tradition to push forward something entirely new. This is a typical process for Alara's world-renowned architect David Adjaye. His most formidable recent work is the National Museum of African American Culture and History (NMAACH) in Washington, DC. The building is dark bronze, and shaped, Adjaye says, like a Yoruba corona, in a reference to the West African region where much of the diaspora originated. The building is also bold and geometric, it has busy patterning on the layered façade, the bronze latticework forms a shell over the building.

The building is beautiful in itself, but when you zoom out you realize how radical it is. It is the only building among the 19 Smithsonian's that is not white marble. It is dark. It looks different. And it is regal. Both NMAACH and Alara

are actively promoting the philosophy that black culture and aesthetic can be royal, luxurious and important. In the midst of DC, a city that is literally square—square buildings, square blocks, square suits, square thinking—and with racial tension bursting it at the seams, the building drops with a massive splash.

In Lagos, Alara also looks “other”. “I don’t think its a building that’s taken from the context of the environment,” said Papa Omotayo, an architect in Lagos, “I feel like it is something that just landed here, even though its intention is to take from what we know. The problem with architecture like that is in the same way that it’s trying to make a statement about authenticity, the sheer nature of its purpose is it’s segregating. That’s where the conflict is.”

Alara’s front gate is as imposing as any gate in Lagos, but it looks different. It is comprised of heavy, dark grey columns spaced far enough apart to have a line of vision through them, but thin enough that no one could walk through them. The columns are tall enough to be impossible to climb over, smooth enough to have no foothold. But they do not have the jagged broken glass or the snarled barbed wire typical of gates in Lagos. Adjaye has expressed regret at the aggressive parceling of African cities, and has worked during his career to place excellent architecture in neglected communities. It is clear that with Alara he met the need of the client in creating an exclusive, aspirational sculpture, but he also nods toward broader accessibility. Vendors who drop their bicycle-carts in front of the store to wipe brows dripping with sweat could never dream of entering. But they can look and see through the gate, to see that this building is noteworthy and intriguing. “It’s not dismissive, its not like ‘you may not get this, piss off,’” said Omotayo. “It’s like ‘you may not get this, but I’m being interesting for you.’ So it’s for the curious, that’s what I love about it.”

Alara’s interior is centered on a staircase; the experience of being in the store is one of a constant itchiness to ascend. The ascension is a moment of showcase, there are platforms for posing, and opportunities to gaze down at those watching you climb. But there is also anxiety, you don’t want to trip or fall, and the feeling is almost magnetic, and distracting. The point is to get to the top, then you finally do and you look back to see what you have surmounted, realizing you missed half of the store on the way up. This upward draw reflects the mentality of the clientele Alara serves. As a luxury store it is created for the top tier of Nigeria’s social hierarchy. In so being it is a beacon also of exclusivity and inaccessibility. Adjaye has several projects ongoing on the continent: he is building a cancer hospital in Rwanda, a slave memorial in

Ghana, a residential tower in South Africa and an office building in Uganda. In Nigeria where governmental neglect has led to hyper privatization and a capitalist dystopia with a tiny elite, it is fitting that the city's most globally relevant architecture project—determined, as architecture is, by commission and so by funding—would be something as frivolous as a luxury boutique.

It is perhaps unfair to critique Alara for being luxurious, since that is precisely what it is trying to be. We could say that it is a successful building, full stop, because it meets the need of its client. It is an important building, because it advances the conversation of its surroundings. It elevates local building techniques, asserting that terrazzo tile floors, which were common in midcentury Nigerian architecture, can be glamorous. It has been celebrated by the global architectural press, inspired local designers and asserted a new Afro-positive aesthetic. And yet to stay zoomed in and ignore the social reality that Alara exists in and forwards is simplistic. While the NMAACH shouts, “we are here and we are part of history” Alara shouts “we are here and we are fancy.” And the “we” in Alara is a tiny social circle. Alara is one of the finest buildings situated in one of Lagos' wealthiest neighborhoods. When you zoom out you realize how tiny the islands are in the city, and how deeply life here contrasts with the vast majority of the country.

Effective architecture listens and reflects. Radical architecture asserts. A truly important piece of architecture does both, as Adjaye does here. Alara fits precisely with the needs of the people it is built for; it manifests the taste and experience of a niche Lagosian fashionable elite. The unease the building elicits is equally a physical and emotional manifestation of the feeling of social stratification.