

# **The East End's own Pompidou Centre; Architect David Adjaye has designed a bold, beautiful building for Whitechapel that perfectly marries form and function**

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Evening Standard (London) p. 35

Sep 27, 2005

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A SHINY, coloured cube rises above the weathered huddle of an old city, a storey above its neighbours, the first major work of ambitious young architects.

An external escalator lifts people from the pavement up to a panorama of rooftops. A glamorous house of culture abandons the old language of porticoes and pediments, and declares its intention to be open to the people.

This was the Pompidou Centre in Paris in 1976, otherwise known as the Beaubourg; but it could also be applied, 30 years later, to the new Idea Store in Whitechapel High Street designed by David Adjaye.

The Pompidou Centre reverberated around the world, and became Paris's biggest tourist attraction. The Idea Store, which is essentially a public library, won't quite do that, but it is a big event for London. It is rare enough that new buildings are created for the purpose of public access to knowledge and culture, rarer that their architecture rises above the mundane, rarer still that they are designed by an architect who is under 40.

The concept behind the Idea Store, a phrase coined by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, is that dusty old-fashioned libraries don't attract enough users, especially those who would be least inclined to enter them in the first place, so the new buildings should draw people in and grab their attention in the way that shops do, and they should be placed in shopping areas, so that you can slip into one as easily as you would a supermarket.

They should also have extra facilities such as dance studios and therapy rooms, as well as books.

Tower Hamlets has seven Idea Stores planned, five revamps of existing buildings and, so far, two new buildings, both designed by Adjaye. His first, in Crisp Street, Poplar, opened last year; the second, the 12 million Pounds Whitechapel Idea Store, standing between a street market and a Sainsbury's, is the biggest and most conspicuous of the series.

Adjaye, 39, is the Lord Foster of the thirty something generation, with a reputation made in the glamorous worlds of art and fashion. His name has

been in the news of late for the space he created to house Chris Ofili's paintings, titled *The Upper Room*, which have just opened at Tate Britain; and the Whitechapel Gallery is dedicating an exhibition to his work early next year, an unprecedented honour for an architect of his age (the Whitechapel's last architecture show was of Mies van der Rohe, one of the all-time greats).

Not all of Adjaye's clients have been entirely satisfied - Janet Street-Porter went into print with her moans about a house he designed for her in Clerkenwell - and there are others of his generation equally talented, but less garlanded with commissions and media coverage. But his star keeps rising, not least because, as well as having the required contemporary cool, his designs are also delightful and inventive.

The Idea Store concept could have been excruciating, a monument to trendy rebranding at the cost of true learning, or a crass attempt to sell Shakespeare as you would a cabbage, potentially made worse by the fact that the new Whitechapel building replaces the much-loved and recently closed Whitechapel Library, the perfect embodiment of high-minded ideals of learning and knowledge, and refuge for generations of free thinkers and writers.

DAVID Adjaye, however, says that "we were never literally going to be a Tesco", and his building doesn't feel like one, although he does admit that the sheen of his building is, like that of a shop, deliberately aspirational.

"This is an environment where opaque buildings are seen as negative, as a sign of poverty. I wanted the Idea Store to be architecture that people drive into town for; or like a mall, clean and glass and glossy."

It half looks like an émigré from the City, a mile to the west, or Canary Wharf, a fragment of a megabank that lost its way.

Where it departs from malls and banks is in the grit that Adjaye plays off against the gloss. Beneath its external veil it is a more workmanlike building in concrete and rough timber, with specially designed plywood shelves and reading tables.

It also offers views out to its chaotic, ugly-beautiful surroundings. The horizontal and vertical layers of the city are revealed, from ornamental facades on the main streets to crumbling brick backs, and from Tube trains snaking out of their holes below, to the Blade Runner spectacle of the London Hospital's helicopter ambulance clattering above the streets and houses.

The building's signature is its stripes of green and blue glass, inspired by the striped awnings of the same colours on the market stalls that crowd the pavement on Whitechapel High Street. It is a simple enough device, but it is the thing that tells you that this is not any old glass box. The stripes also give a lift to the views out, colouring the brown townscape with the hues of grass and sky.

The new Idea Store both sets itself apart from its surroundings and embraces them. It is clearly something special, a world apart and a construction different from any other nearby, but it also aims to draw the life of the street into it, through the escalator that lands straight on to the pavement, and through the use of both glamorous and workaday materials.

Thanks to the technology of swipe cards, security no longer demands that a library have one entrance - this has several.

A perfectionist could find fault, as some of the details are on the clumsy side, giving a slightly thrown-together feeling. But for the most part it is a triumphant realisation of the ideals behind the Idea Stores, made possible by Adjaye's ideas, Tower Hamlets' ambitions and the experience of the building's engineers, Arup.

It is accessible, not patronising, crowd-pleasing but not dumb, glamorous but not glib. It is not an abstract essay in architectural aesthetics, but a smart response to what the building is, where it is and who it is for.

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