



Chrissa Amuah

Chrissa Amuah is the Founder and Creative Director of AMWA Designs, an Adinkra-inspired luxury homeware and interiors brand. She is an MA graduate from the world-renowned Chelsea College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London.

Chrissa has described living with a sense of duality. Although born and raised in London, her heritage stems from Ghana, Togo and Benin; but it is from Ghana that she draws most of her design inspiration. Following an international debut at Milan Design Week 2015, Chrissa has gained global recognition with press features in Elle Décor Departures magazine and the FT's How To Spend It, to name a few.

In 2017, she established AFRICA BY DESIGN; a concept of love intended to showcase and celebrate the best of Africa's design talent. AFRICA BY DESIGN works to create international commercial opportunities for its featured designers. Since its launch, AFRICA BY DESIGN has exhibited in five cities across four continents.

In 2017, Chrissa was also recognised as a 'Rising Star' in the Black British Business Awards Consumer & Luxury Category.

Chrissa is often called upon as a guest speaker for design focused panel conversations. In March 2018, she was invited by the internationally distinguished auction house, Sotheby's, to moderate, 'African Art & Design: Beyond A Trend', a conversation exploring the significance of African art and design.

In August 2020 Chrissa Amuah was announced as a member of the Allgood Collective, as a brand ambassador for sustainable footwear brand, Allbirds.

In December 2020, Chrissa made her Design Miami/ debut in collaboration with, Lagos based architect and product designer, TosinOshinowo. Together they have been selected by luxury car brand, Lexus, to design its installation at Design Miami/ 2020. Design Miami/ is the global forum for design. Each fair brings together the most influential collectors, gallerists, designers, curators and critics from around the world in celebration of design culture and commerce. It is the premier venue for collecting, exhibiting, discussing and creating collectible design.

A selection of Chrissa's work feature in Designed by Women, a website organized by the Stewart Program for Modern Design. An objects-based travelling exhibition is also planned in collaboration with the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, tentatively scheduled for 2023-2024.

2021 will see the launch of A Sense of Duality, her collection with multi award winning, Bernhardt Design – one of America's largest and most highly reputed textile and furniture manufacturers.

Career highlights to date also include her collaboration with renowned architect, Alice Asafu-Adjaye, to represent Ghana for the London Design Biennale 2021. The London Design Biennale is a global gathering of the world's most ambitious and imaginative designers, curators and design institutes.

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Africa's Power in Solution Led Design

Chrissa Amuah

PULL QUOTE: 'Given the right information, human beings are adept to innovation and resourcefulness in a way that is all too often underestimated.'

As the global impact of Covid-19 became apparent, many of the world's eyes turned to Africa and predicted disaster.

The continent has historically bore the brunt of viruses and pandemics. With Ebola not too far in our distant memory, none could foresee its scope to manage such a crisis with its undermined medical infrastructures.

The virus' rapid contagion inspired a global public service announcement, 'Stop the Spread! Stay At Home'. A [video](#) posted by Seun Kuti (son of Fela) called attention to the idea that this was yet another example of Africa imposing on itself a Western methodology incompatible with its own socio-economic and cultural parameters.

On a continent of 54 Countries and 1500 to 2000 languages, the majority of its 1,336,943,499 population, earn their incomes from a daily cash economy. In an almost universal culture of compound living, social distancing becomes virtually impossible.

So what are Africa's alternative options?

The success of Africa's future, ultimately depends on it regaining its voice and confidence to design its own solutions to its problems. Given the right information, human beings are adept to innovation and resourcefulness in a way that is all too often underestimated.

Omar Degan, an architect from Somalia, works tirelessly to promote the beauty and historical context of Somalian design and its relevance to modern innovation. Particularly significant in a region, which has been overshadowed by many years of civil conflict and terrorism. In response to the Coronavirus pandemic, he and a group of medical and renewable energy experts, have been collaborating to design and build the first of many fully-equipped portable screening facilities; to help increase testing capacity in remote areas around the country, where people would otherwise not be able to afford it. It will be manned by volunteer nurses, who will collect Nasopharyngeal (NP) swabs to be sent to Somalia's Ministry of Health's main lab in Mogadishu for testing. Administrators will also help to distribute leaflets and explain the pandemic to the general public in their native languages.



In conversation last year, Degan said, “Design is hope. Design has the extraordinary power not only to unite, but to give a strong sense of belonging and pride. For too long the narrative of the continent has been dictated by a vision of pessimism and Eurocentrism. We live on a continent that’s self-belief is still thwarted. Its ability to create and be part of the new world avant-garde is severely handicapped. I believe that to undo this, design can be the key.” In the face of a global pandemic, never has this mindset been so urgent.

Designers, such as Funfere Koroye, an industrial designer based in Lagos, Nigeria, are evidence that the knowledge, talent and innovation is homegrown and exists across the continent. However, the biggest challenge that designers, such as Koroye, face is the lack of investment and perhaps more importantly, the macro support and desire of governance, to try the new and do things differently, “On a tech level, there is zero to no focus on this part of design across Africa. Bad supply chains, inconsistent electricity and no raw

products being processed, makes talk of local production just a funny conversation,” Koroye says.

“The existing giants of industry in Africa, need to pivot their mindsets so that manufacturing can grow. We have rich people who have the resource, space and marketing capacity, but at this point they need to look inwards to see how they can add real value by diversifying their portfolio and collaborating with local product designers and innovators,” Koroye concludes.

Koroye’s response to the potential impact of Covid-19 in Nigeria, was to create ‘Nupair’. “We noticed developing nations were struggling with flattening the Covid curve among healthcare professionals and essential workers, as well as patients.

Using personal funds and a small grant from the Nigerian Government, we developed an open-source product that could easily be deployed within a short time frame anywhere in the world,” Koroye explains.

‘Nupair’ is a kit of parts consisting of a modified Respirator, an off-the-shelf full-face mask, a custom (3D-printed) adapter, and an HME filter cartridge.

The primary benefit of the N99 mask is providing 360-degree protection and an airtight seal; while allowing for controlled intake and exhaust flow through the top of the mask.

The respirator also delivers 100% filtered oxygen from the environment through dual ports into the mask, which prevents fogging and carbon dioxide toxicity.



Effective design need not be complicated or even sophisticated. Does it work? Does it fix the problem and if so how can it be made to be more aesthetically pleasing? These should be the driving agendas. Africa and its people intimately know the truth of their needs. This is not to say that all imports of ideas are bad, however, the culture has to evolve from simply absorbing imposed ideas to generating and inspiring new and relevant strategies.

Degan says, “We must consider the reason why certain designs are imported. If the reason is that they are being imported because there is no trust in the African system or because in Africa there are no local alternatives, we have a big problem, a problem that we must resolve by trying to change the perception that the world has of the products made in Africa, by Africans.”

Omar Degan and the team leading the portable Covid-19 portable screening facility project, are just £3,000 shy of their target. Please

see their GoFund Me link [here](#), should you wish to see their progress and make a donation.

NOTES

Chrissa Amuah is the Founding Director of AFRICA BY DESIGN and Creative Director & Founder of AMWA Designs.

Omar Degan, CEO of DO Architects, Mogadishu

<http://www.degan-omar.com>

Covid-19 Screening Facility, Somalia, GoFund Me

FunfereKoroye

<https://www.instagram.com/funferekoroye/?hl=en>



JULIET KAVISHE

Juliet Kavishe is a Professional Interior Architect and alumna of the University of Pretoria, South Africa. Her education was further bolstered by a traineeship focusing on bridging the gap between spatial design and curatorship of artworks at New York's Guggenheim Museum.

Over the course of a career spanning 13 years and two continents, Juliet has worked as an Interior Architect on projects with a focus on high-end residential homes and commercial and corporate workspaces.

Her keen interest in education has afforded her the privilege to invigilate and moderate design exams from undergraduate to postgraduate level at various design institutions in South Africa for the past decade. Her passion for the promotion of her profession, particularly within a broader African context has led to various opportunities for Juliet to share her expertise in Interior Architecture, including a lecture in 2013 on sustainable design and

traditional African building practices at the World Policy Institute in New York and her call-up as Juror for the Caesarstone Student Design competition in 2019.

A self-proclaimed Afro-minimalist, she brought her personal ethos as an ambassador for the African Institute of the Design Profession (IID) in 2018 and contributed to the Pan Afrikan Design Institutes (PADI) panel discussions around the identity of "Afrikan Design" in February 2020. She has subsequently been appointed to be an interim board member and editor-in-chief of the PADI publications committee and has recently been appointed as one of the Directors of the IID.

Her upbringing in four countries on two continents and her extensive travels in later years have inspired Tanzanian-born Juliet to create spaces influenced by her global citizenship, some of which can be seen in publications such as SA Décor & Design, SA Home Owner, Designing Ways, Africanism, and Archdaily.

Her personal Design Motto is that Architecture or Design is achieved once you consider the complexities and interrelationships of human beings and their surroundings.

THE POWER OF DESIGN FOR ALL:

How inherently African design approaches are human centred and have been successfully portrayed in varying design disciplines in contemporary design.

By Juliet M. Kavishe (2021)

KEYWORDS

African Design: refers to the various forms of design from the African continent and its diaspora withing the context of the built environment, product, art, and fashion

Beliefs: faith or and trust within the context of differing religious practices

Culture: customs, religions, ideals, and social practices of a particular society

Genius Loci: the protective spirit of a place or the distinctive and cherished aspects of a place.

Objet d'art: small artistic or decorative items, usually a collectable or a certain value

Sankofa: to reflect on the past to build a successful future.

ABSTRACT

In interrogating successful design across the disciplines of Product, Interiors and Architecture on the African continent, it became clear that westernised framings of what successful design may look like have been quite misrepresentative (Broke-Utne 2002; Wiredu 1998). Whether a designer is based on the African continent and has a global client base, or based in Europe with an African context, what has been quite evident is that when the design is human centred, it is deemed successful.

This article discusses notable design cases in Africa be they traditional or contemporary to articulate the attributes of African Design that can inform design discourse that is solely rooted in the various human experiences be they cultural, belief systems, environmental, habitual, or societal exposure.

SPIRIT OF PLACE

***Genius Loci*¹⁴ is also known as the spirit of place that exists by virtue of the human experience, and what that means is that any space that is inhabited by humans creates a sense of *Genius Loci* which is the sense of place. For example, what makes the Guggenheim museum in New York, successful in enforcing its sense of place is enhanced due to the cyclical nature of the interiors and architecture. Frank Lloyd Wright was clear in how he wanted people to view the artworks and navigate the different gallery spaces. Whether one was ascending or descending the spiral ramp surrounding the museums lobby, the specific nature of movement, art display and transmission of light, unique to this museum,**

¹⁴*Genius Loci originates from Roman mythology and refers to the protective spirit of a place, however in the context of architecture, it was adopted to mean the distinctive and cherished aspects of a place.*

enforces your memory centre, your lived experiences whilst inhabiting that space, hence reinforcing the *genius loci* of the Guggenheim Museum successfully.

Another great example of this concept is when one goes dancing, and how we have been dancing on the African continent for years. What is at one moment a clearing, café, or sports field, is immediately converted into a dance floor when the music comes on, and the space is cleared and we all flood onto the makeshift dance floor. The spirit of that place changes by virtue of our presence there, moving our bodies in unison to the beat of a percussive instrument.

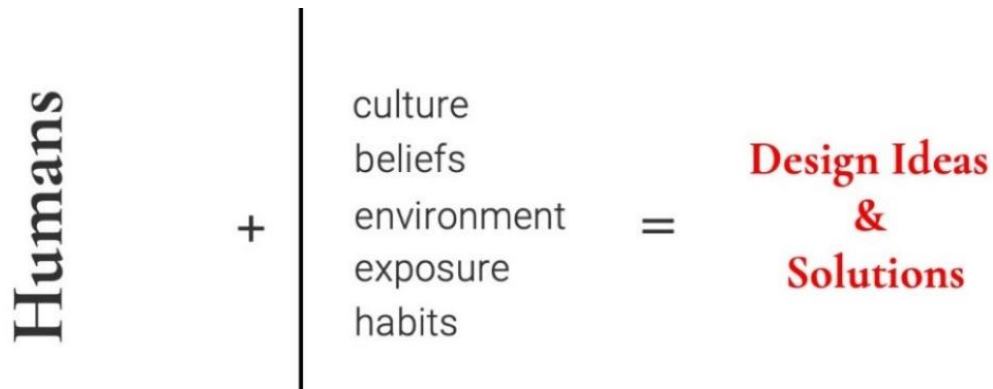


Image1. Infographic of the influences and considerations that lead to successful design solutions

In interrogating *Genius Loci*, one realizes and notes that the consideration of the needs of human beings is important when it comes to human centred design and solutions that are interrogating these five tenants being a consideration for the culture, beliefs be they traditional or religious, environment and context, exposure to different societal structures and habitats, can lead to successful design.

INTERIOR DESIGN

Belief and Culture

Human centred design has an influence in interior comfort through décor, light placement, interpretation, and utilization of spaces. One of the most underestimated design opportunities in interior spaces are staircases. For buildings that need a vertical transition other than an elevator or escalator, staircases can become a focal if not sculptural design element.

With all safety regulations considered with regards to tread depth and riser heights, balustrades allow us the designers to explore avenues of creativity. The modern minimalistic take of balustrades could be a simple glass pane. Whereas in most Swahili¹⁵ traditional homes in Zanzibar, despite different influences in design, limited variety of building materials and local craftsman skills balustrade designs are elaborately decorated with intricate carved coral or plasterwork (Sheriff, 2001), for example, taking Islamic geometry to create perforations in otherwise solid balustrade walls.

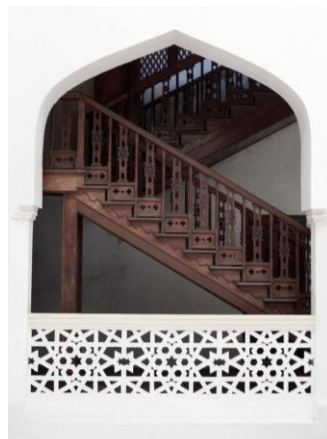


Image 2: Photograph of a Swahili Staircase by Zelda Green in Zanzibar 2011 (via www.500px.com)

¹⁵Swahili is the native language of the Swahili people. It is spoken in Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, some parts of Malawi, Somalia, Zambia, Mozambique, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, the Swahili people mainly reside in the island of Zanzibar.

What then happens when one combines the idea of transparency and cultural paternity? A product that marries the two by taking a traditional idea of a screen, modern use of mild steel sheeting and combining laser cutting methods to deliver a beautiful balustrade. This is human centred design with a consideration for culture.



Image 3& 4: Staircase at the Godden Cres House by Dorrington Architects & Associates, Auckland, New Zealand (via www.daa.co.nz)

PRODUCTS

Culture and Habits

Product and furniture design can oftentimes tow the line between functionality and *objet d'art* in space. Products affect us immediately in an interior space, be they décor, lighting, or utility. On the African continent, that which we deem as artifacts were everyday objects that had a specific utility.

The Oromo headrest from the Oromo tribe in Ethiopia and Akan stool from Ghana are similar in the basis of their design to serve an immediate function. They were both carried for the Kings and Queens of these tribes and in as much as they were adorned in jewels and carvings, their shape was derived from the ergonomic needs they needed to serve, resting one's head as they slept to not disturb the intricate hairstyle's worn at the time and a seat to rest on during travels and important events.



Image 5 & 6: The Oromo Headrest and Ashanti stool from The Bryce Holcombe Collection of African Decorative Art, Bequest of Bryce Holcombe, 1984 (via www.metmuseum.org)

The Ethiopian American product and industrial designer Jomo Tariku of Jomo furniture, drew inspiration from both historical artifacts and interrogated their form, function, and aesthetics to produce products that are culturally inspired and yet find a place in our modern homes. His choice of materiality, and the emphasis of his joints through tectonic resolution adds to the success of his Boraatii Stool and Ashanti Stool in the 21st century home.



Image 7 & 8: The Boraatii Stool and the Ashanti End table by Jomo Furniture (via www.jomofurniture.com)

The question we as designers should continuously ask ourselves is, can we create truly intuitive solutions for seemingly everyday challenges and needs be they handrails, handles, doorknobs, chairs, end tables or even baby carriers. Can we take what was deemed a

functional object in our various African cultures, aesthetic additions notwithstanding, and use them as a basis to solve our everyday needs?



Images 9&10: The Citi bike station in TriBeCa and the BMW 525i by Dr. Ester Mahlangu

Another great example of how traditional African aesthetics have been used successfully in a modern interpretation is the Ndebele¹⁶ artworks of Dr. Ester Mahlangu, a South African artist. The Ndebele paint their households with distinct abstract forms in bright colours off-set by a stark white and black background and Dr. Mahlangu has taken this aesthetic to the world, through her paintings and various collaborations with South African Tourism and Citi Bike in New York by painting a Citi Bike station in Tribeca at the corner of Franklin Street and West Broadway in 2017. (Levantesi, 2017). She was also the first African and female artist to paint a BMW Art Car in 1991. It was the BMW 525i. (Mun-Delsalle, 2019)

ARCHITECTURE

Environment, Exposure and Culture

Architecture tends to be driven by either form or function and a myriad of influences like aesthetics, context, and environment,

¹⁶*The Ndebele tribe and language have existed for over 185 years in Zimbabwe and South Africa and are popularly known for painting the outside of their homes in geometric patterns.*

however for the Maasai in East Africa, emphasis rests on the coexistence of people, land, and wildlife. (Algotsson & Davis, 1996) The Maasai¹⁷ Manyatta (homestead) is a form of dwelling that the Maasai inhabit in East Africa. Though seemingly primitive in materiality, every part of its construction is eco-friendly for it is sourced from the immediate environment. The Maasai dwell and migrate between southern Kenya and northern Tanzania which is characterised by a savannah climatic zone. The Manyatta is constructed using timber poles, interlaced with small branches which is then plastered with a mixture of water, mud and cow chip. The roof structure appears to blend with the walls and is covered in cow chip as well to repel the harmful tsetse flies common in these areas and ease rainwater off it.

The Maasai still live in Manyatta's to this day and what we can learn from them is how to use locally sourced materials to serve our dwelling needs, but also how the architecture's materiality is in tune with the environment it is placed in, that being quite warm during the day and cold at night and how the layered walls of the manyatta absorb the sun's rays during the day, providing a warm interior homestead at night.

¹⁷A Nilotic ethnic group inhabiting Central and Southern Kenya and Northern Tanzania

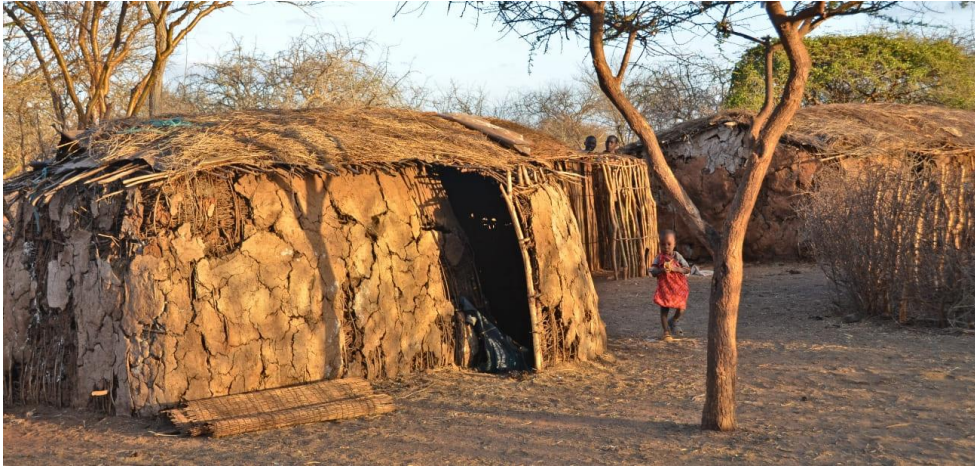


Image 11: A typical Maasai Manyatta (via www.kenyatourism.in/)

The nomadic lifestyle of the Maasai necessitate the temporary nature of their dwellings and after a season or two, the huts decompose and return to the earth, proving yet again that Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) from Africa can be referred to, to provide ecological solutions.

Another exemplary example is the Lideta¹⁸ Market completed in 2016 that was designed by the Barcelona based Architectural Studio Vilalta. Vilalta undertook the task to create a Shopping Centre in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, however they understood the local need for markets and the cultural significance of an open-air markets with a consideration for temperature, lighting, and ventilation, and created a mall that emulated and was influenced by this need. A market on the African continent is characterised by colour, sound, streams of light through temporary coverings, excitement, and open expression, and with this in mind, they created a building that served as a backdrop to house these daily activities.

What is also worth noting is how the punctuations of light that seep into the building were influenced by fractal geometric pattern known

¹⁸The Lideta Market was awarded the UNESCO Prix Versailles for the world's best shopping centre in 2019

as the Tibeb¹⁹ design pattern commonly seen along the hems in the traditional Ethiopian clothing. At night, with all the interior lights on, this pattern is further enounced serving as a structural beacon in Addis.



Images 12 & 13: A typical Tibeb pattern and a view of the Interior of the Lideta Market (via www.vilalta.studio/)

This design, however derived from a Spanish based studio, exemplifies how understanding one's local context, environment and culture can produce thoughtful and beautiful buildings that are environmentally sound and human centred in expression and utility.



Images 14 & 15: Day and night exterior view of the Lideta Market in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (via www.vilalta.studio/)

¹⁹**Tibeb** refers to the decoration or pattern which is handwoven with supplementary weft into the border of the traditional dresses worn by women and men in Ethiopia and Eritrea

CONCLUSION

***Sankofa* is a term derived from the Twi language in Ghana that means to reflect on the past to build a successful future. If one then reflects on how far we have come as a society when it comes to design and interrogate our various cultures, habits, beliefs, and environment, we will create better designs that are rooted in human needs. The spirit of Sankofa which emphasises that one should reflect on what has been done and achieved to do better in the future, can have another nuanced approach of African design through local design practitioners and thus reveal that the ideas of human-centred and hence successful design are inherently part of our cultural landscape. (Ambole, 2020)**

In conclusion, architecture or design is achieved once you consider the complexities and relationship of human beings and their surroundings and what this means is that we create successful designs once we truly interrogate what influences us as human beings and understand what those nuances stemmed in culture and beliefs contribute to the success of contextual design.

ENDNOTES

1. "Norberg-Schultz (1980) describes a space where life occurs to be places and as such have character hence the spirit of place". Norberg-Schulz, C.1980. *Genius loci: Towards a phenomenology of Architecture*. p 5
2. "Sheriff (2001) states that in as much as the Swahili homes appeared somewhat plain from the outside, the interiors were always intricately decorated" Sheriff, A. 2001. *Zanzibar Stone Town an Architectural Exploration*. p 15
3. "Algotsson & Davis (1996) mention that a Ndebele woman may paint the exterior of her home in a geometric pattern that is unique to her and her alone, resulting in an explosion of colour in the village" Algotsson, S & Davis, D. 1996. *The Spirit of African Design*. p 44
4. "Algotsson & Davis (1996) note that the Maasai seem to best embody the nomadic lifestyle of East Africa" Algotsson, S & Davis, D. 1996. *The Spirit of African Design*. p 18
5. "Prix-Versailles 2017 Special Prize Exterior winner under the Shopping Mall category" via <https://www.prix-versailles.com/2017-awards>
6. "D'Abbadie (1868), Stern (1852) and Plowden (1868) are the first to describe the ceremonial dresses as having a silk border, or Tibeb, woven in diamond shapes or checks". Tournerie, P. 1986. *Color and Dye Recipes of Ethiopia*. p. 6-7.

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