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FEBRUARY 2022

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A COMMON GROUND

BY SPENCER BAILEY

The \$41.7 million Winter Park Library and Events Center is Sir David Adjaye's fifth—and most ambitious—library design.

THE OPENING OF A GLEAMING NEW DAVID ADJAYE LIBRARY TURNS THE PAGE ON THE DARK PAST OF A TONY ENCLAVE, AT LONG LAST.

In the late 1800s, long before the creation of Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom, swashbuckling industrialists from the Northeast dreamed up an entirely different kind of park out of the lush land in central Florida. In search of a sunny place to spend the cold months, they settled on a majestic forest, resplendent with lakes among the trees, about eight miles from present day Orlando. The area was surveyed and mapped, and in 1887 Winter Park was born.

Today it's a city of 30,000 people, predominantly white and wealthy, brimming with signs that read, "It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood," a nod to Fred Rogers, a graduate of the local Rollins College. If the patina seems too good to be true, that's because it is. Built into its very foundation was a racist infrastructure, with side-of-the-tracks segregation. Now, the \$41.7 million, 52,000-square-foot Winter Park Library and Events Center, which opened recently, designed by the firm Adjaye Associates (which is most famous for the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, in Washington, DC), reckons with this complicated legacy. Though there was backlash to the project from locals who prefer the Mediterranean and Spanish Revival status quo, the firm's principal, the Ghanaian-British architect Sir David Adjaye, says he only aimed to cultivate a "common ground."

"What I wanted to do," Adjaye tells *T&C*, "was create a public place, first and foremost, that brought *everybody* together."

Russell Crader, an associate principal at the firm who oversaw the project, notes that even today there is an "implied gate" to Winter Park. In 1881, on the west side of what was then the South Florida Railroad, a plot called Hannibal Square was set up for the area's predominantly Black, low-wage domestic workforce, effectively establishing a divide that can still be felt in subtle, hushed-tone ways 140 years later. In the mid-1960s Interstate 4 was completed, further adding to racial segregation and uneven economic development. Situated on a 23-acre site that includes Martin Luther King Jr. Park, the new library and events center is poised to recalibrate the city toward the west. It also forms a monumental public landmark.

For Adjaye, it was the city's deep-seated divisions that compelled him to take on the venture. "Honestly," he tells me, "the reason I did it was because of these contradictions. The library is basically for the poor community, who have very little public infrastructure at their disposal."

In the 20th century there were actually two libraries in Winter Park: Hannibal Square, which opened in 1937 and catered primarily to African-Americans on the west side of town, and the Winter Park Library, which dates back to 1894 and was largely used by white residents to the east. Due to disrepair and poor funding, the former was folded into the latter in 1979. It's only today—more than 40 years later—that this bucolic hamlet has a library intentionally built for all.

"There's an imperative for people in positions like mine, especially white leaders, to make sure that the scaffolding of our culture is right," says Betsy Gardner Eckbert, CEO of the Winter Park Chamber of Commerce. "When we get that right, we actually can start nudging people into a different way of experiencing a community."

As with most of Adjaye's projects, the library and events center functions as what he would call a "climate moderator," the phrase being a reference to the British architects Alison and Peter Smithson.



Sir David Adjaye



The arched, rose-pigmented concrete structures are designed to withstand hurricanes while also bringing in natural light and providing sweeping views of the surrounding park through large windows.

"It's not work. It's not school. It's a place where you can go and *be*," says Sabrina Bernat, the library's executive director. Despite its sprawling size and heavy mass, the library and events center features a vaulted framework that elegantly inserts itself into its location, on a belvedere overlooking a lake. Inside the two-story library there's a flexible inner core with movable walls that includes an "imagination room," a "community room," a space for makers, a "memory lab," and an archive. At the center is a dramatic circular staircase, not unlike the one in Adjaye's Smithsonian museum.



In a region dominated by theme parks, Adjaye's bold three-building ensemble is a place of civic discourse, says library executive director Sabrina Bernat.

The project raised eyebrows among residents and city commissioners for its scale and cost. Funded by \$30 million in bonds approved by voters in 2016 (plus \$6 million in Orange County tourist development tax money, as well as by various private donations and grants), the center was stalled multiple times, once by an unsuccessful lawsuit filed by a group of residents (whom city officials effectively deemed hecklers) and a proposed stop-work order. Starting in 2014, there were well over 100 city commissioner meetings and work sessions about the project, with squabbles about cost and the most minute of details. “[Commissioners] fought this building tooth and nail,” Adjaye says. “I could not believe the level of resistance.” Bernat sees the situation slightly differently. “I always think of Leslie Knope from *Parks and Recreation*,” she says. “‘What I hear when I’m being yelled

at is people caring loudly at me.’ That’s a lot of what happened here. There are a lot of passionate people involved. Ultimately, it made it a better project.”

Adjaye’s library and events center would make an extraordinary addition to any city, but especially in central Florida, which is most famous for the clean-cut, hyper-streamlined Walt Disney World and Universal theme parks. Fittingly, his design will eliminate many of the physical restraints and space limitations of the previous library building. “Those shackles will be gone,” says city manager Randy Knight. A statement, one hopes, that also applies to the city.

For his part, Adjaye aspired to build nothing less than a lasting monument “built as a shining, very positive form that is meant to numb negativity.” In short, a civic palace—for the people. **T&C**