

“Making the Invisible Visible” Letting Libraries Reflect Community Light

BY VIRGINIA AVNIEL SPATZ

Architect David Adjaye discusses design at Dec. 16 DCPL reception.

“My practice has been to work with communities that have experienced a certain sense of invisibility, making things that were invisible, visible.” This is one of the philosophies architect David Adjaye (“a-JAY” approximates the correct pronunciation) will bring to his work east of the river, he said at a December DC Public Library reception. The award-winning architect – with offices in New York, London and Berlin – is paired with the local firm Wiencek and Associates to create new spaces for the Francis A. Gregory (Ward 7) and Washington Highlands (Ward 8) neighborhood libraries.

The content of the buildings, Adjaye says, is determined by the DCPL; it is up to the architect “to respond to community needs...interpret sensitivities of the community in the building. Does it act as an advocate for them? Enable them?”

“There’s a bit of ballgazing, too... this has to last for 50 years or more and so the idea of what ‘public’ means has to be a little wider than people sometimes think.”

Michael Wiencek – with two decades of experience in sustainable architecture in this area – says it is “exciting for a DC architect to be able to work with David Adjaye.” Adjaye’s projects include the Nobel Peace Centre in Oslo, Norway, and “Idea Store” libraries in England. In addition Wiencek says, “I am excited to be working on these projects east of the river,” where the firm has worked on projects such as Parkside and Mayfair Mansions.

Community Cheers and Concerns

Miles Steele, president of Friends of the Gregory Library, said he participated in the architect selection process and was thrilled with the result. “We had been promised a good library for a long time, but it didn’t happen until [Chief Librarian] Ginnie Cooper arrived. It’s wonderful the way she has come in and taken over....We know we’ll get the library that we want.”

Carolyn Lynch, treasurer of the Gregory friends group, said she was pleased that the Library presented different concepts, allowing for community input, rather than offering “cookie cutter” buildings. She notes concerns, however, about dedicated space for adult literacy and computer labs, as well as attention to the needs of seniors. “We want a library that is state-of-the-art, but also a place people can come in and be comfortable.”

Jackie Ward (ANC 8A06) said she remains concerned about materials chosen for the Anacostia Neighborhood Library – situated in Ward 7 but used by many residents of Wards 7 and 8. The glass and steel structure planned for the site, she says, “looks



like something that was dropped there.” She would like to see some changes in materials for Anacostia and hopes that the current planning cycle more carefully considers the surrounding neighborhood.

Outreach Struggles

The reception was intended “to introduce [the architects] to the people who live in the Washington Highlands and Francis A. Gregory communities,” Cooper said. Preparations included displays and models, an appetizer buffet, festive decorations and – most importantly – attendance by Michael Wiencek, David Adjaye and members of their staffs as well as library employees. The latter, however, outnumbered community participants.

Cooper blamed “scary weather” predictions for the lack of turnout. Others noted that outreach was late and limited: postcards to Friends of the Library groups and ANCs did not arrive in time for promotion to their constituents, the DCPL website never mentioned the event, relevant listservs received little information and the event was announced too late for print calendars. Moreover, the building’s front doors were locked with no sign directing community members arriving by foot to the entrance to the event.

DCPL continues to seek input on ways to better meet the community, Cooper says. Community

members have applauded recent outreach improvements; a lack of timely communication with ANCs and other affected organizations has been an ongoing complaint, however. In addition, members of some community organizations believe a desire to “protect their brand” has kept DCPL from considering beneficial collaborations.

Beyond simple communication issues, DCPL has pledged to improve the community process for the designs themselves. It is not clear how this will play out, however, with the project contract specifying limited times for engagement between the community and architects – two weeks in the (past) summer and an odd day here and there – while Adjaye says his firm has been “learning gently” all along and continues to participate in focus groups and other activities.

Continuing Input

For more details on opportunities for community input, contact Archie Williams, archie.williams@dc.gov or 202-727-1437.

Adjaye stresses that he wants to hear from community members with ideas about light, materials and other elements that will make the building represent the community. Contact him c/o Lisa Deanes, project manager for 21st Century Capital Projects: lisa.deanes@dc.gov or 202-727-5181. ★