

The Future is Now

The Engineering Craft of Ifeanyi Oganwu

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Photos by Galerie Armel Soyer

Designers are influenced and inspired by a variety of objet d'art, including fashion, architecture, interior and furniture design. However, it is the rare breed that actually works and excels in each of these creative pursuits. Ifeanyi Oganwu is one of them.

Ifeanyi Oganwu is the founder of one of London's coolest design practices, Expand Design. The practice specializes in architecture and furniture design - investigating the correlation between history, base materials and opportunities presented by state-of-the-art fabrication techniques. Through an exploration of various manufacturing processes and digital design tools, the studio works on projects that unearth unidentified typologies that are inspired by the past, grounded in the present, and on a journey to a new aesthetic domain. Expand's minimalist, futuristic vision draws on a modernist ethos informed by Ifeanyi's training as an architectural engineer.

As an artist and designer of Nigerian origin, he is also a world citizen who seeks inspiration from diverse sources across the globe. These wide-ranging influences vary from the residual undercurrents of Miesian modernism, to his experience working in some of the most prestigious design studios, including the offices of John Ronan Architects, Chicago; Zaha Hadid Architects, London; and a collaboration with the fashion design studio of Hussein Chalayan.

Using his studio, Ifeanyi creates unique pieces of furniture, that are as much works of art as they are rigorous investigations into manufacturing and engineering processes. His approach to furniture design is multi-faceted, whereby ideas are refined into viable concepts through an iterative method that synthesizes topology with structural investigations. His work involves creative collaborations with material specialists who take the work through prototype development. The final material of each design drives the selection of specialized manufacturing. For instance, his bench 'Full Circle' or his office chair and desk suite, 'Double Agent', were made in the UK by experts in fiberglass and composite work for the automotive and aeronautic sectors, while his table, Ren, originated from a single block of white Carrara marble that was milled and later hand finished by Italian

artisans. In addition, the mirror polished and hand-formed aluminium assembly of Splice was executed in the UK by car-body specialists and perhaps best exemplifies Oganwu's fascination with digital design and engineering.

Recently, we had a chance to talk briefly to Ifeanyi about his fascination with art, culture and technology and its influence on his work.

Ifeanyi, you have a truly unique background. You have Nigerian origins, you were educated in the United States and you've worked in various places across the world. You are also an engineer, an architect and an artist all at once. How has your multidisciplinary training and your multicultural background influenced you approach to design if any at all?

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach allows me to think transversely while bringing multiple points of view from my international perspective to the table. Both are proving to be invaluable assets in our ever shrinking global village.

You started your design practice 'Expand Design' in 2008, a few years after graduating from college and after a series of collaborations and jobs with some rather high profile design houses and architects. Can you tell us a bit more about the unique mission of your own practice and the vision for your firm?

I've learned a lot from my various experiences, especially in engineering where applying research to everyday practice was encouraged. As I've maintained this approach, projects originate from an experimental spirit at the studio, which I started in 2008 on a part time basis, until the 'No More Play' collection was launched in 2010. During that period, I was able to complete the Zebra table and carry out design and fabrication of the first collection. Many parts of the studio's practice remain interconnected in the sense that new projects at times present an opportunity to extend groups of research, like in the marble projects or Splice series for instance. I've also cultivated an ecosystem where tangential trajectories can be explored.

As you know, this issue of Luxe Noir magazine is dedicated to exploring notions of craftsmanship and the process of creating. As a designer, you are known for producing highly sculptural, engineered pieces of furniture that push the limits of the manufacturing process, of materials and of course, form. Your finished pieces are as much design statements in and of themselves, as they are a running commentary on materiality and the process of making. How has digital design and new technology influenced and facilitated your work and creative process?

The relationships between digital design and emerging manufacturing technologies are central to the output

of the studio. I've observed their transformative potential throughout my academic and professional experiences, and would argue that a practice like mine would be very different were it to exist fifteen to twenty years ago. During project development, digital design tools allow me to materialize data resulting from relationships choreographed between form, structure and function. A long time ago digital tools were merely representational agents whereas they are now more generative leading to quicker turnaround times with prototypes or mock-ups.

You have an impressive portfolio of really outstanding pieces of work - from the elegantly curved Splice, to the impressive Double Agent desk and of course, the exquisitely detailed Contoured Crater desk. Out of all your projects, what has proven to be your biggest design challenge and why?

Each project brings a unique set of challenges as the scales and materials vary. The design considerations for Contoured Crater desk led to a gravity defying structure, whereas Splice explored the structural plasticity of metal over a compact volume. In both projects there is a singular approach to material, which unravels something new. More recently I'm exploring wearable structures at a smaller scale and challenged by the attention to detail demanded by working at that scale. As the studio evolves, it's also challenging to even out the progressive complexity of the projects with simplified outcomes.

Famed curator, Okwui Enwezor has in the past spoken of the process of making as having some political utility. He calls it "a renegade practice, a form of investigating new tropes, new concepts and new industries." His comments were made in the context of the Vitra Design Museum's excellent exhibit, "Making Africa - A Continent of Contemporary Design" - an exhibit which you were part of. As someone whose work is very much about pushing the boundaries of design, do you see your work as having some political utility?

Okwui's comment was made in relation to developing alternatives to mass production and in not being complicit in generating waste. From this point of view, you could say the political utility within my work addresses sustainability and material economy which are central to the design of the marble projects or the Crater desk for instance. In Crater, the resulting offcuts extracted

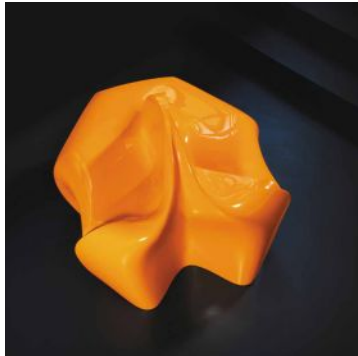
from its core are assembled to create another multifunctional construct, thus keeping waste to a minimum. Additionally, I'm experimenting with recycled silver on the collection of wearable structures which I'm excited about and look forward to sharing soon. I also make a point to seek local expertise when making projects. As a result, I've been able to work with teams in the UK, Italy, France and recently in China where I was commissioned to participate at the Bi-City Biennale in Shenzhen. ■

Ifeanyi Oganwu is represented by Gallery Armel Soyer in Paris and his works have been widely exhibited in Europe as well as the US, Nigeria and China. In 2015/2016, the Vitra Design Museum included his Splice stool in the travelling exhibition 'Making Africa, A Continent of Contemporary Design' which will visit Guggenheim Bilbao and the Centre of Contemporary Culture in Barcelona.



Splice stool, 2012. Aluminium.

Splice intersects the worlds of handcraft and digital design methodologies, assembling 6 primary aluminium panels that are hand-formed over a CNC-milled 3D template. The resulting surfaces and curvatures create a broad range of distinct reflective zones and distortions over a very compact volume. The design is characterised by a sweeping form that embraces the user positioned on its concave elevation. Apertures lighten and distinguish the construction, contrasting a highly reflective exterior, to the vacuity of its interior. Holes take effect as handles and improve resonance by reducing vibrations usually associated with metal.



Full circle bench, 2010. Composite material.

Full Circle arouses curiosities and invites multiple modes of habitation as an abstracted daybed or bench. It is a multi-user design with a sweeping form that has emerged from an exploration of the space between two common chairs using advanced modelling processes. While the overall volume is devoid of ninety-degree angles, gently curved surfaces are accentuated throughout. A central mane bifurcates into a sensuous back support that re-embraces the overall form and consequently generates a continuity between seat and bulbous base.



Milky splice, 2012. Composite material.

Milky Splice, on the same foundation of Splice, is characterised by pearlescent swells of color originating from the interplay of light and surface curvature, revealing subtle shades of red, purple and white. The outcome is a rich constellation of color maps across a very compact volume.

Bulgy Inverted explores the question of adaptability by proposing a reversal of Ifeanyi's original wall-mounted console, Bulgy. Here, the relationship between the draped curved surface and the striated planar sheets drive the overall form of the freestanding construct. Ifeanyi Oganwu took inspiration from Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater House in Pennsylvania.

Bulgy Inverted Bookshelf, 2014. Stainless steel.



Ren defies the distinction between tabletop and base. It varies in thickness and is marked by unexpected twists, bulges and detailing on the underside.

Ren is sculpted from a single block of exquisite white Carrara marble using cutting-edge CNC milling technology and is hand-finished by artisans who use time-honoured processes unique to the Carrara region.

Ren table, 2010. Carrara marble.



An extraordinary iteration of a traditional office chair and desk, Double Agent Suite is designed to streamline the work flow of a 21st century executive. Expansive yet intimate, the desk blends winged work surfaces by means of a fluid landscape that is interrupted by a raised central hub and cavity. The accompanying chair proposes a seamless part to the whole relationship with disparate elements fused into a continuous volume.

Agent double desk, 2011. Composite material.

