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Designer Ini Archibong Reveals Inspiration Behind His Forthcoming London Biennale Installation

His pavilion, conceived as a trio of sculptural structures at London's Somerset House, will serve as a platform for reflection on the African diaspora

By Stephen Wallis
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LEADING EDGE Designer Ini Archibong near his home on Switzerland's Lake Neuchâtel.
PHOTO: LUKAS WASSMANN

Stephen Wallis, "Designer Ini Archibong reveals inspiration behind his forthcoming London Biennale installation," *WSJ Magazine*, February 5, 2021.

For much of the past year, the pandemic has kept Ini Archibong cloistered at home. And he's never been busier. "I live my work anyway. I don't have a social life at all," says the American designer, 37, who recently moved to a lakeside flat in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, where he's been working with Brooklyn's UM Project to make his workspace into, he says, "an all-around cockpit."



His Venus light fixture with Friedman Benda. PHOTO: ANDREAS ZIMMERMANN

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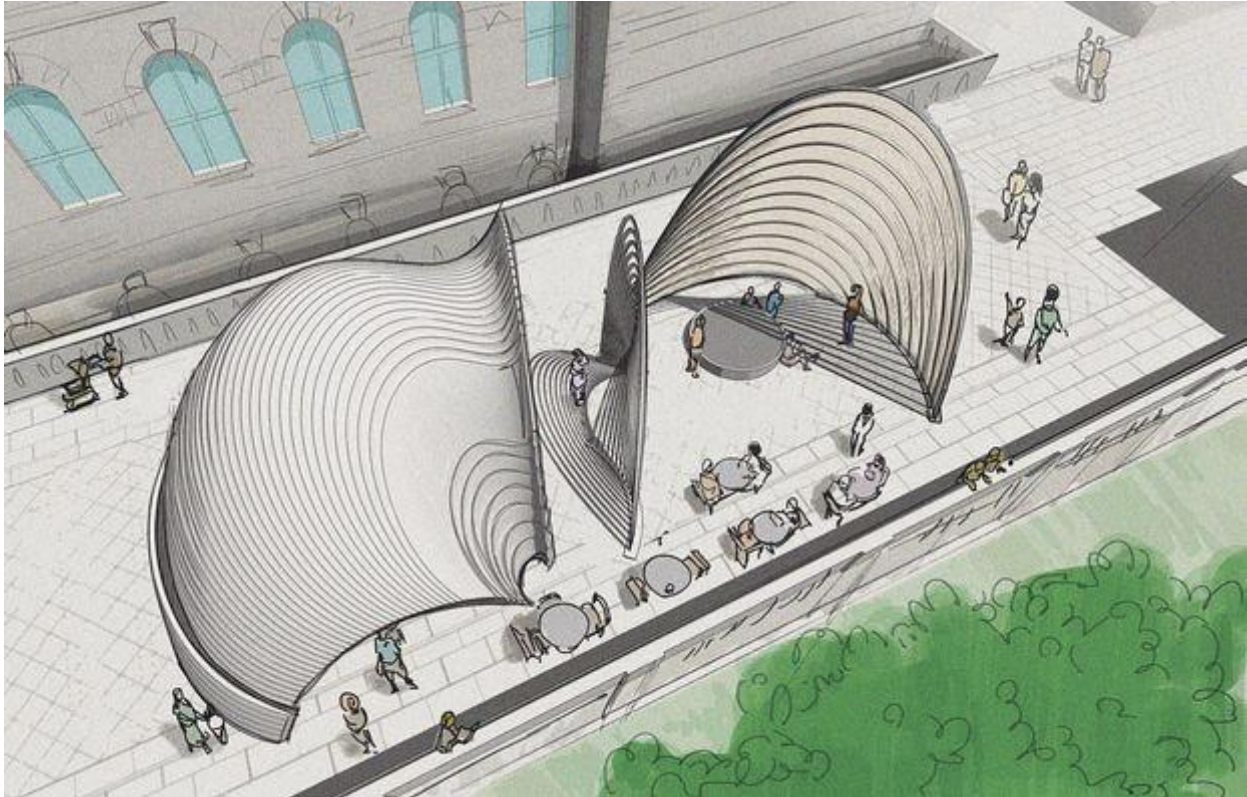
Archibong creates furnishings and objects that blend art deco luxury with a cosmic-futurist sensibility, drawing on myth, fantasy and his own history. Since launching his studio, Design by Ini, in 2010, he has become known for his collaborations with brands like Bernhardt Design, Hermès, Christofle and Sé. Archibong's latest ventures include a forthcoming chair for Knoll, an expanding role as a creative consultant for the Swiss tech company Logitech and a dozen or so original pieces for his first solo gallery show, with New York's Friedman Benda, slated for fall.



Archibong's furniture for Sé. PHOTO: BEN ANDERS

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Before that, Archibong will unveil the most ambitious undertaking of his career: the Pavilion of the African Diaspora for the London Design Biennale in June. The pavilion, conceived as a trio of sculptural structures to be installed on the River Terrace at Somerset House, will serve as a platform for reflection on the past, present and future of the African diaspora.



A rendering for the Pavilion of the African Diaspora.
PHOTO: JORI BROWN AND MAXWELL ENGELMANN FOR LMNO CREATIVE

“My intent with the pavilion was really to use the skills that I have to be of benefit to the multitude of people that represent the diaspora, a culture that has so often been marginalized, for them to express themselves,” says Archibong, who was born and raised in Pasadena, California, the son of Nigerian parents who came to the U.S. as college students. An émigré himself—Archibong has lived in Switzerland since 2014—the designer wants the pavilion to speak to the idea of being displaced from one’s homeland. “It’s just like any of my other designs,” he explains, “where I try to contextualize my own experience into kind of universals.”



Archibong's Galop d'Hermès watch design. PHOTO: JOEL VON ALLMEN

The plan, as Covid-19 restrictions allow, is to kick things off with a series of events in various cities, each hosted by a member of a council of advisers and supporters. Next month, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater artistic director Robert Battle is to preside over one in L.A. that will include a performance. Additional events are being planned for London, Washington, D.C., San Francisco and New York City.

Archibong proposed the idea to the biennial's artistic director, British artist and stage designer Es Devlin, in 2019. But without government support and with Archibong tied up with other commitments, the project stalled. Then Covid-19 forced the biennial's postponement from last September to this summer, and international protests for racial justice brought a greater sense of urgency to the project.

Archibong had begun working with Tamara N. Houston, the founder of Icon Mann, a network of Black men who use their influence "to positively change and impact Black male narratives and perceptions," says Houston. "Ini told me, 'We're going to design for the diaspora. I need you,' " says Houston, who agreed to come on board as managing partner.



A chair Archibong designed for Sé. PHOTO: CECIL MATHEWS

Archibong decided to make the pavilion the first project of his new creative studio, titled L.M.N.O., enlisting fellow graduates from Pasadena’s ArtCenter Jori Brown and Maxwell Engelmann as well as another designer, Ebony Lerandy. “All the kids that got in trouble in school,” Archibong jokes.

The design consists of a trio of structures: a 25-foot-high, conch shell–inspired canopy and two open structures, what Archibong calls the wave gate and the sail. The twisting forms, created with an algorithm based on catenary architectural elements, are intended to evoke “flowing water, flowing sound, emanating waves,” says Archibong, who is working with the architecture firm Perkins&Will and structural engineering specialists DIFK.

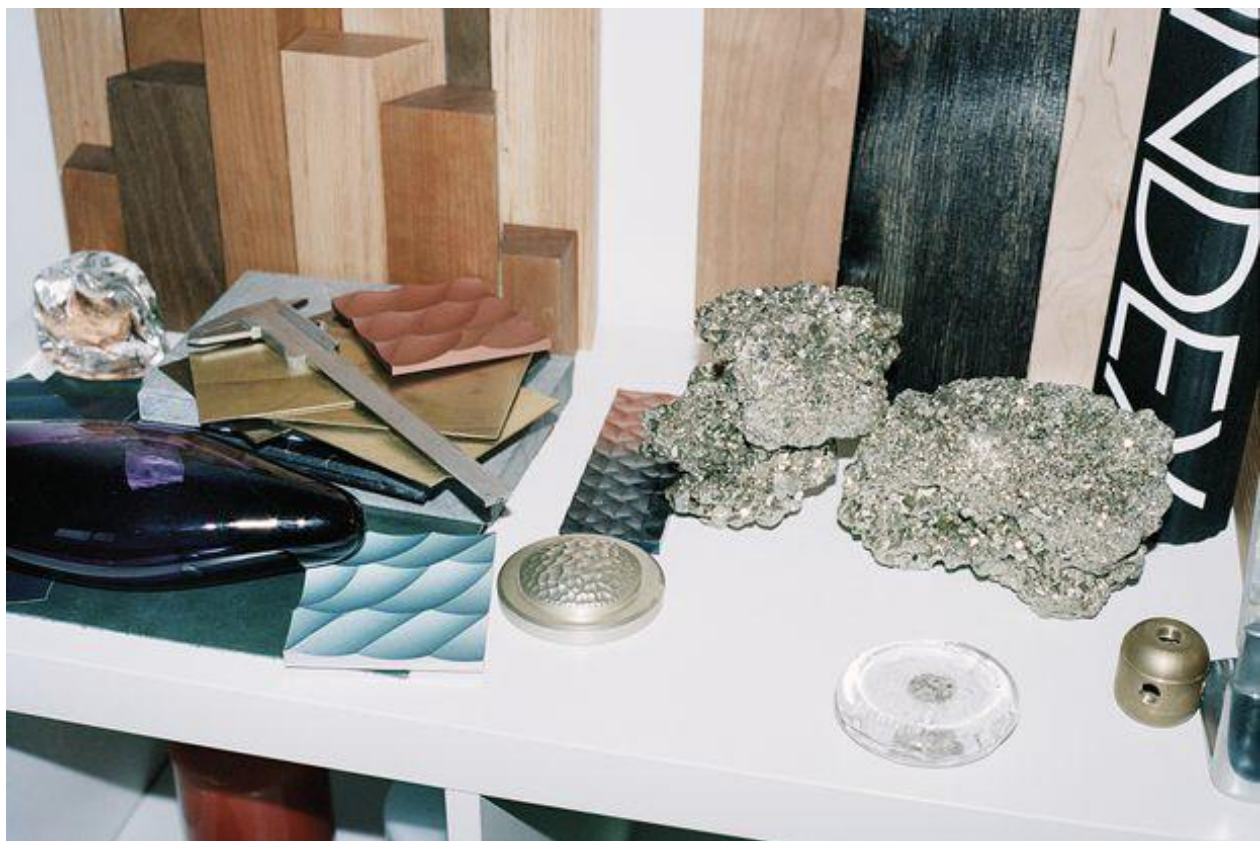
The shell’s opening is meant to represent the trumpeting of diaspora voices, which take material form in the wave gate. As the metaphorical sound waves continue on, they activate the billowing sail, a painful reminder of the history of slavery reimagined here, says the designer, “to become a thing that propels us forward.”

The key to the pavilion’s success, Archibong says, will be the programming. He and Houston are putting together a lineup of speakers to address topics relevant to the diaspora. “I’m also reaching out to some Black technologists to try to figure out if we can bring some kind of augmented reality educational experience,” says Archibong. And he’s expecting to offer culinary programming from people such as Jon Gray of Ghetto Gastro as well as streetwear drops.

To make all of this happen requires funding—upward of \$3 million, according to Houston—and a major early contribution came from Logitech. CEO and president Bracken Darrell says when he learned of the idea for the pavilion, his first thought was, “It’s so brilliant, why has it never been done? We immediately wanted to be part of it.”

And more money will be needed, if Archibong and Houston are to realize their plans to tour the pavilion after the biennial closes. The structure is being designed so that it can be disassembled and reassembled at other sites. Programming can be tailored for local audiences, be they in the U.S., Africa or the Middle East, though the core messages will remain the same. “The ideas of diaspora and of universal language are very important in Ini’s consciousness and in his work,” notes gallerist Marc Benda, of Friedman Benda. “His idea of community is sort of like an onion—it’s where you come from, where are you today and how all of that interconnects.”

Whether designing the pavilion or a chandelier, Archibong says his process is the same. “I am more or less just a vessel for something else,” he says. “There’s an intent on a spiritual level to create things that speak to higher truths for future generations.”



At Archibong’s Neuchâtel home. 3PHOTO: BEN ANDERS



Archibong's Theoracle installation at the Dallas Museum of Art. PHOTO: BEN ANDERS



A Pavilion of the African Diaspora rendering showing a panel discussion.

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