A decade ago, David Adjaye, a London-based architect born in Dar Es Salaam to a Ghanaian diplomat family, began journeying to various African cities in search of first-hand knowledge about how the continent's diverse metropolitan spaces are constituted. The digital camera, rather than the sketchbook, became an indispensable aid to seeing the 53 cities he visited. In particular, the democratic rawness of the digital image appealed; 'I wanted the experience to have the kind of naivety of anybody landing in the city,' he says of the anti-iconic images made on his personally directed research trips. ‘This is not David Adjaye finding you the best buildings and saying these are the gems.’

Sean O'Toole chatted with the architect at a Johannesburg showing of his photographs, hosted by dealer Monna Mokoena at his suburban-modernist Gallery Momo in September 2010. The conversation, which begins with the architect's decision to use photography to record his research, culminates in a digression on the ethical limitations of architecture and the utopian impulse.

My first question is, I suppose, process orientated. I'm interested in how architects learn, not formally, but experientially. I have two questions in this respect, the first a collegial one. Rem Koolhaas seems to understand architecture, I think, through writing. Robert Venturi and Paul Virilio photographed places and buildings. Le Corb used the pencil. Why photography?

I guess for me I would say specifically digital photography because it is not photography in the traditional sense. I was at no point interested in becoming a seminal photographer of content. I started to use digital photography at the end of the 1990s. In a way it started to supersede the way I used my sketchbook as a student, which was documentation, learning – the thinking eye. With the advent and shrinking of digital technology into a pocket-sized phenomenon, I realised that I could be much more fluid about the things that I was looking at, which I was recording in my mind experientially and reflecting on when I worked; I could actually document and reflect literally through digital photography. In the late 1990s I was taking a lot of photographs of what I do generally, and it was around this point that I decided to visit the countries I grew up in.

I didn’t want to make emphatic shots; I wanted to document without affecting the viewer or the thing I was viewing as much as possible. I was trying to capture what my eye was feeling and seeing. I wanted to do what I call snapped - really fast photography – almost like an espionage agent. [Laughs] Snapping away like crazy. That for me became very interesting: it had a spontaneity about it, which captured the things that struck my eye as I travelled around cities and towns. That became the format. In my own work, I love the format, because digital photography allows you to be very disposable – I could take ten images of the same thing, five different zoom points, and then choose three that I thought were really nice. I love that freedom: I'll shoot it now and check it out later.
It is the experience of photography now, the finger flicking through the iPhone album. Exactly. That became a way of documenting the continent, but also a way of me documenting the continent without the gravitas of me having to say, ‘I am embarking on this epic journey to photograph Africa.’ I was not interested the 19th-century romantic version of: ‘Here, this is what the continent looks like.’ Rather, it was: ‘Here is my snapshot diary. In fact, this is my snapshot diary of things that I like as an architect of the built environment.’ And instead of it just being about the things I like, I thought, ‘Let me systematically look at all the typologies that I experience.’

The history of the camera is about establishing relationships and typologies. Correct, so it was a natural bedfellow. In a way, the way I think and work with architecture is experience and imagery. I am very influenced by experience and imagery. The camera is a natural vehicle for me to use as the device I negotiate with.

Did it entirely replace the sketchbook? For this trip, completely. I found myself being redundant whenever I brought my pencil out. The moment was lost and my hand couldn’t capture it enough. So it has actually flipped my whole experience of my sketchbook, because my sketchbook really is a vehicle for conveying what’s coming out of my head, my outputs onto paper rather than my experiences in the world, which is a bit of shame.

In terms of that distinction between the visual and verbal, I’m interested if you ever made annotations while travelling? I did. I have a diary of every city, and I would always make sure I wrote my journal before I left that city so that it was an immediate reflection of that city. The diary also took the form of me really trying to describe back to myself, experientially, what I felt the trip had shown me, and what the different groups or typologies told me about the place. It allowed me to create essays on each city, which I would look at and work out the groupings, about the way certain places have certain characteristics. My own writings reveal those connections without me being a priori in doing that.

Let’s talk about African urbanity, which constitutes the nub of your project here. Correct.
Let me repeat that phrase, ‘African urbanity’. It chafes against the notions of Africa the un-peopled expanse, Africa the wild, Africa the slum, Africa the contingent state, Africa the irrational.

Correct. The project is really fuelled by those statements you’ve just made, and hearing those, not just in popular circles where I’d expect a certain ignorance from people who are not travelled, but in academic and political circles. I became absolutely frustrated. I was born in a metropolitan city; I was born in a cosmopolitan condition among different groups of Africans, Indians and Chinese – that is my beginnings, and it was in metropolitan skylines. I was like: ‘I don’t know what Africa you guys think you are dealing with’, but the Africa I was born in had towers, was very metropolitan; we knew different cultures and religions – this is how I started my project. I am really perplexed by this dilemma of the dual images, one being projected from the West, and the one that actually exists. Of course, there is poverty and all these things, but at the same time there is this notion of the city and urbanity. I felt the only way I could systematically deal with this was to literally demonstrate it. I used to deal with it in talks, but it needed demonstration.

The first exhibition that started to make that change was at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design, where I just showed 13 cities strictly as architectural places. I didn’t show any bucolic, picturesque image. In a way, my aggression in using the digital camera is against the picturesque, which tends to happen when you point at a landscape – you start to compose. I didn’t want that, to fall into the trap of making beautiful urban pictures. I wanted to say, ‘You know what, if you stick your camera out the window, this is what you’re going to get. It is there, it is not made up for you to consume as though it is a certain fragment. It is everywhere.

So, in a way, the 13 cities that I showed at Harvard was great; it is one of the best schools in the world and none of these students know anything about Africa. It’s absurd. They know everything about Vietnam, Japan, everything about everywhere but Africa. It was amazing to see the to-ing and fro-ing. Ouagadougou was the big find. ‘There’s a city called Ouagadougou?’ Yes, and there’s a country called Burkina Faso – it’s probably one of the most literate countries in Africa. It was amazing to have dialogue and show that these countries have connections and links to the world; they are not isolated places. That was a good conversation and it made me realise this has to be more than just a show, followed by a disappearance. I wanted to systematically do this and make a book out of this. But it took 10 years. [Laughs] I really didn’t plan the timing of it, but it is impossible to do this sort of stuff.

You repeatedly use the word typologies. Africa is a small word for a big continent. From your findings, what ties urban patterns in Africa? Conversely, what distinguishes Lagos from Cape Town, Kigali from Luanda, Maputo from Bamako, Johannesburg from Tangiers?

On reflection of the whole journey, I started to understand that if you look at the metropolitan centres and capitals as just individual phenomena – what I call population density and GDP – you miss how to understand the nuances between them. I realised the way to understand the differences was to understand the geography a little more precisely. We’ve become so ingrained with the notion of the political map that we have forgotten the geographical map of Africa, which is actually profound. It is one of the most dramatic geological layerings...

Those movements from brown to green...

Yes, it is extraordinary – it is almost like a bar graph. I think all the other continental plates collide so they have funny distortions. But this one is a bar graph of stripes of terrain. When you start to see the capital centres that are in these terrains, you start to see these incredible connections. You start to understand Tripoli in relation to Algiers; you start to understand Luanda in relationship to Cape Town and Durban. You start to see these salient qualities
appearing when you look at Central Africa that start to make sense. You realise that the geography is inflecting very much; sometimes it inflects so much on the architecture that it forces the architecture to create a response, which gets interpreted culturally in different places – but it is exactly the same response.

It is either an architecture of layering, of screening; or it is an architecture of eaves, different projecting eaves; or it is an architecture of cellular dimensions with miniature perforations; or it is an architecture of coastal bucolic respite; or it is mountain cellular systems, which create small micro-climates (I am talking about the mountain cities). I only started to see this after a reflection on the whole thing. If you want to understand a specific idea about an African city, you have to move away from understanding them in terms of their densities and their capita, in other words their modernity, and look at them in terms of their geography. Because, even though we might think geography is not there, because modernity puts a blanket over geography – it is such a thin layer – geography and geology is the salient quality.

**Has that proposition been met or treated as provocative?**

Some people have found it provocative; some people have found it problematic, but I truly believe that a didactic approach is one that is satisfying to me. [Laughs] I find myself fraught and caught in the quagmires if I deal with things politically or even economically. I find a more didactic approach to the physical evidence of place is a much more searing truth, which hurts sometimes, but actually allows you to wake up out of the fiction of modernity. Also, I think the disconnect that cities make from each other becomes flattened. ‘What are you talking about? You are a mountain city.’ Namibia is like Ethiopia, actually. And that is how you have to understand it.

**One of the narratives of Johannesburg is of the combat city, a medieval fortress city. Another narrative of post-apartheid South Africa is the big reconnect, with Africa. I wonder, in your experience of coming here, what are Johannesburg’s salient features and how does Johannesburg connect with other cities you’ve travelled to on the continent?**

Johannesburg is really interesting because it is a city that is a matrix, an insular matrix to begin with; it was about a network and making a commercial centre which was about its national boundary. But Johannesburg, more than Cape Town, has become the cosmopolitan city of South Africa – everybody comes here, business is conducted here. So, in a way, the matrix of Johannesburg is quite interesting. There is the very particular vernacular typology of the way in which people live, and you can see it from the informal right through to the formal, but it has this modernity which is the infrastructure of the downtown, which allows for a certain flexibility to work globally. It works globally through a recognition, so the typology is loose enough to make it easy to connect. But, at the same time, as you move out of what I call the part of the city that negotiates with the outside world – in terms of an international-style sense of modernity – it becomes very specific very quickly. Even if you recognise the modernity, it’s absolutely, precisely articulated in way that is not articulated anywhere else. So you know the code, but you don’t know the rules. [Laughs] I find it really interesting. It is a beautiful way of understanding how even the ubiquity of modernity has to play with a context. Johannesburg has enough in it that it invites you in and allows you to explore very easily.

**Salif Keita has a song in which he draws these loose distinctions between cities. He compares Johannesburg and Dakar to New York. Would you see the connection?**

Dakar and Johannesburg have very metropolitan natures, in a way that is very explicit and vibrant. Other cities have different groups and make ups, but in a way the groups are much more entrenched. I sense from Johannesburg and Dakar that they are very transient groups: they
come in for very short periods of time, and can easily live in the city, which is probably what he means by the New York phenomenon. New York is the city *par excellence* where anyone can come in for six months, two or 10 or 20 years, and feel really comfortable, like a New Yorker. I think Johannesburg probably has that quality, although I haven’t lived here. I would imagine it has that quality. I know people from Africa come to Johannesburg and feel very comfortable, are able to operate very quickly, much quicker than in Cape Town or anywhere else.

Dakar is the same. It is really interesting because it is not really that big, but because of its coastal nature and the way Francophone cities are designed, it has this incredible generosity about it. You feel really convivial in that city, and I don’t understand why. I keep going to it and I love it to death, the coast. But actually, it is not that big, but somehow it has this conviviality of being absolutely cosmopolitan, which underscores its nature. It gives it this grandness, which you could almost say it doesn’t really deserve. [Laughs] Anyway, I love Senegal.

One last question on the subject of making your photos: Looking is a raw, unmediated activity – pure experience in a way; still, reading can direct your looking, make you see differently. **Who were you reading while travelling and doing this project?**

It is going to sound absolutely absurd, but I made this very conscious effort not to read about Africa whilst I was experiencing it. Whenever I came to a country for the first time, I would do it alone; I would never come with friends, and I would never try to make any connections with somebody there who would guide me. I did that once or twice, and I realised very quickly that my version of the city was their version of the city. Now, it is very hard to avoid that, because in the end they are all edits, but I wanted to somehow make the experience as ubiquitous as possible, as in I wanted the experience to have the kind of naivety of anybody landing in the city. It was important to me because it was about demonstrating that these are not privileged views or moments, these are not curated views through a certain intellectual trajectory; I am not interested in that, even though I am, but central to the idea of this work is you landing and just experiencing the city. This is not David Adjaye finding you the best buildings and saying these are the gems.

People were really scared for me at times. I said: ‘Other people are going there, and I should not have to feel I have to mediate my journey because of a perception.’ Somehow it always worked. You get into a little bit of trouble, but you find your way out of it; it all became part of the experience of my journal, actually. As I got halfway through, friends asked if they could come. I realised that they wanted to hijack my experience of travelling, but that would then have also collapsed my journey, because then I would start to curate their journey for them. So, in a way, the whole thing was trying to jettison as much as possible, including any kind of readings.

However, I was coming up to speed with how geographers think about landscape, so I became very interested in geography during these 10 years, in a way that I wasn’t before. I wanted to understand how the language is built, how the conversations are made, and how different terminology comes out of the phenomenon. Geography is fascinating, I loved geography at school but I just dropped it, and then I realised it is absolutely amazing.

**Your display strategy is one of collage and is very anti-iconic.**

Exactly, it is a body of parts. I was criticised for making everything look the same. [Laughs] Well, is that a criticism? I just pointed a camera: those are the images. If your perception is that everything looks the same to your eyes, then you’re reading something. We are talking about a continent, and how could I possibly, emphatically, make representations that somehow give a sense of the whole continent. When I did the show in London, people said it was overwhelming. Well yes, it is a continent. My job is not to fail – I wanted to fail at giving a singular image. If I
succeeded in giving a single image, I would have really screwed up. I would have made it bite-
size. My job was not to make it easy for the viewer, my job is to allow you to understand the vast
cavity of knowledge that you don’t have in your system. In a way the show is that provocation.

In terms of entering the images as they are displayed, there is no A to Z then, you simply plunge in?
The way I have designed the exhibition for Gallery Momo is very specific: you walk in and
are faced with the two polemics – the political and geographical map. That is the centre, and I
really want people to reflect on that. And then what I’ve done is zone the show [53 box-framed
collage portraits] into six areas: desert, savannah and so on. The geography metaphor drives
the city conditions and their groupings. The reduction I make is that there are six geographies,
and within these geographies there are these capitals. Now start to look at them, try to see, with
your own eyes, what you can in these capitals. Each frame is a city, and I’ve taken about a dozen
images, which go from the most formal civic structures to the most informal. I took as much
as 500 images in each city, so these are a slice of key moments. Each country is in a frame with
a typology of parts. I didn’t want to wallpaper the whole space, which is what we did at the
Design Museum in London, which was a kaleidoscopic collage of information where you had to
come in close to see where the edits were.

You once said, in the context of New York, that the ‘home is something that becomes an emotional
incubator and resuscitator’. Given the recurrence of the slum image, which has become a sort of
visual shorthand for Africa, is this statement true of the spaces you encountered in Africa?
Very much. For me the journey was an emotional journey, absolutely; it was a very large intake
of breath. It was about filling all the kind of romantic cavities in my mind about the continent
that I wanted to dispel. I wanted to dispel the romantic cavities away, to fill them with tangible
moments that gave me clues to what those places might be in my own memories.

It is interesting that you used the word romance. I lived in Japan for two years, a country that
is also belaboured by an exotic image. What was interesting living there was realising how
complicit the Japanese are in manufacturing these images.
They produce that romance. The Japanese are the best agents! I lived in Japan as well, for just
over a year, and I came away thinking, this is the most amazing country. If you photograph
the built environment of Japan, it is actually a complete mishmash. There are these little, tiny
moments, which suddenly become the image of the entire place, to the point that you can do
an amnesia in your mind where you think that all the other stuff is irrelevant and those little
moments represent everything. I thought it was kind of divine that they managed to make this
incredible illusion of their place, that when you enter Japan the myth is more present in your
mind than the reality of the country. I think that is a big lesson for Africa, actually. Africa needs
to move more to understanding how it wants to project itself in the world, rather than just
allowing it to happen.

You were born in Dar es Salaam, travelled extensively with your father who was a diplomat,
and came to London when you were 13. Again, I want to quiz you about your experience of
architecture. Did the southern side of the Thames River, with its distinctive and grim modernist
architecture – I think particularly of Elephant & Castle and the North Peckham Estate, where
the Nigerian schoolboy Damilola Taylor was murdered in November 2000 – did any of this
ever filter into your looking?
You know, my career started in London specifically because of the disconnect between the reality
of the place and the projection of London as a Victorian picturesque city. My argument always
was that this picturesque is false, and that the lived experience of most people was not the
Victorian landscape. There are beautiful moments, of course, Putney, Hampstead, but this is not
London for me. My argument in my work was that difference is what makes London unique, and its ability to absorb many types of modernities, and by default, many types of cultures. Because of its ability to make or manifest many modernities – I mean many typologies and many types of living – it is flexible enough to absorb a lot of people. That’s what makes London unique. To deny that quality in the search for the regional vernacular (London or English architecture) is painful and fictional. It frustrated me, and in a way my work was against that position. It was about the reality of what the differences were.

_Much like your Idea Store library project in the multi-racial London borough of Tower Hamlets._

[The first library, a rectilinear glass structure with minimal barriers to entry, was opened in 2004 at Chrisp Street, East London.]

Half the profession hates me because they thought I’d committed the ultimate sacrilege: I’d given up the high mantel of architecture as this pedimented Victorian chamber, or the modernist inheritor of this chamber and adopted instead a much more loose glass building. ‘What the hell was I doing? Populism with colour as a motif of a civic infrastructure?’ Now they’re doing this everywhere, even with office buildings. [Laughs] First they shoot me down, and then it becomes the fashionable thing. But that is what London is good at: it absorbs. But there is this disconnect, even today. I think if you ask English people what their city is, they will deny those areas you mentioned earlier. The best music and theatre comes from those disconnects, and I argue that the best architecture comes from those disconnects too. It is actually what makes London relevant, in a way that Rome can never be; Rome struggles because it is too uniform, in a way that Paris also struggles because it is too uniform.

_You spoke earlier of travelling to an Africa that was in many ways misunderstood. If we rewind a decade, to when you were working in parts of London that are notionally misunderstood, do you think some of that experience, of going into Tower Hamlets, for example, was helpful?_ Completely. In my childhood, when I was teenager in London, we went to parties in Harlesden, Willesden and Brixton – that’s what teenagers did. We toured in cars at night through all the council estates. That’s where the best sound systems were. My real experience of the city was negotiating these fields. By the time it came to working on Tower Hamlets, it was so obvious to me. Other architects were talking about the difficulty of these people; they asked if I would do it in public consultation. I said absolutely. It is very simple: it is about aspiration and respect. Do it properly and watch them respond. I was actually enthralled by the ability to make something for that community. When they said that there were 15 languages spoken in Tower Hamlets, I said great. It is about negotiating a matrix that is loose enough to accommodate diversity. It is not about projecting an image onto a group about what you think they should be. I think a great metropolitan city nurtures and allows difference to occur.

Of course, in any metropolitan condition there is a process of assimilation, that’s fine, but at the same time, I think a really strong metropolitan condition allows for a uniqueness to be born, which informs the host group about their identity (because it reflects against it). I think teenagers are really great at that. When the Afro-Caribbean community came to England, there was a kind of distancing, but two generations later The Clash is born. But that is Englishness: it absorbs and mutates and learns. The idea of allowing different cultural identities to have a presence is something that I think is critically important, not in any vague political sense – I’m not really that interested in multiculturalism as a word – but rather the way difference can nurture and accelerate notions of what the metropolitan is. Already now the notion of the metropolitan is so sophisticated. I don’t know anybody that’s on pulse with the complexity of the negotiation that’s occurring between citizens and the way in which we relate to each other. And, for that matter, the way architecture is operating. We are still 50 years behind.
The whole Blair era tried to capture this sense of a new optimistic Britain and particularly co-opted architecture to create this fiction of the new. I think of the Dome, the Eye – all this new leisure architecture. What were you thinking during this period?

When I was a student modern architecture only existed in interiors in London. There was nothing that appeared externally, and when it happened it was like the coming of Christ. Young architects ran to the buildings: ‘Oh my god, you have a white wall with a corner window!’ [Laughs] We relished at the Holy Grail of these little fragments. What Blair was brilliant at, like any true visionary, was to understand that he could marshal architecture as an image of his political idea. And we [architects] are the most gullible pawns of this, which picks up on the issue of ethics and morality, because implicit in architecture is the idea of inventing the new identity of the state or the commissioner. We’re makers par excellence.

Isn’t this why Albert Speer’s name will forever be remembered?

Albert Speer is greater than Hitler, in a way, because he becomes a canon figure who makes physical that ideology, in a way that Mussolini’s architects didn’t. This is the kind of flaw of architecture, when you talk about morality, because architecture implicitly … Like a painter is compelled to paint his feelings of the time or condition he is in, an architect is compelled to make form of the time he is in, irrespective of what it needs.

In 2007, you told New York Magazine: ‘My job is not to judge… Architects are good at building. They are not good at politics.’ What ethical or moral considerations confront an architect? Or rather, when do you have to judge?

The history of architecture is full of injustice, from the pyramids right through. It is about the destruction of vast resources, the abuse of people’s lives to make monuments to ideas. The history of the subject is fundamentally flawed, ethically. Now we come into an age where that sort of ability to ignore that position is no longer tenable because we live in a fragile world economically, socially and culturally. It is very hard for dictators to now do things in secret. It used to be possible, 50 years ago. The idea that the product in architecture is the only thing is becoming more and more difficult to justify; that beauty, which is what we seek, is becoming difficult to attain if it is by any means necessary.

So we start to construct certain kinds of moralities. One is the morality of resource, the green movement – it is a way to somehow find a meaning and measure for why we do what we do, because what we do is the most abusive thing on the planet. Carbon emissions aside, building architecture is the most destructive thing on the planet. Another morality occurs as we negotiate the notion of the many having power. That is a morality occurring in the world, which some people call democracy. The notion that you make for the few becomes problematic, more and more; it is ethically difficult to justify. It is also difficult to radicalise the architecture and make it relevant when it is serving the few.

Do you work for the government of Kazakhstan, Angola? It’s a huge debate. Rem Koolhaas is at the pinnacle of that debate: you go build the Chinese state’s propaganda machine [Central China Television Headquarters Building in Beijing] as the ultimate propaganda machine against everything that is in the morality, thereby throwing the whole conversation into turmoil. I think the resource morality we’re solving, we’re finding a way to deal with it, but the social morality not: we don’t have enough language and not enough political science to negotiate with. This isn’t about sanctions. Architecture is the most nuanced creature, where sometimes building creates new positions to occur. I would argue that CCTV in China radically shifts China’s own image of itself in terms of how it positions itself to the West. It is by default now linked, even if it thinks the building is its own monument.
The black and white view, which is the Cold War strategy, the American strategy of polarising ethics, I think becomes more complicated. I prefer a complicated engagement, if I am honest, rather than a black and white standoff between the good and bad guy. It is too simplistic and not solvable in the end.

So you would build in Luanda, to simplify?
I would work in Luanda, but I would work in Luanda specifically to create an architecture that contributes to a social change agenda. The language of architecture can explicitly talk about social agendas, which is what is brilliant about it. Somehow, that language is not fully understood in terms of the power it really has, what it says to a civilisation about what citizenship is. There is a lot of power that can be had in using architecture to shift political ideas that say that they are moving one way but are in fact moving another. The early fascist period in Italy is a classical example: Mussolini thought he was getting one thing but got another thing entirely, then realised and clamped down on it. I am always for using architecture as, what I call, a special forces strategy – get it in there, let smart architects build in the strangest places. If you are building architecture, not just making a building, you are actually messing with and recoding the notion of the social and the citizen, by default.

Even on the block scale?
Even on the block scale, even on a fragment: one artefact correctly articulated in a context can shift the dynamic. I’ve seen it happen, and I’m a firm believer. The dilemma is that when you let architecture become building and science in your mind, then you loose the whole plot. We can objectively say that we need housing for people, so we just build, creating a roof and wall – but actually, no.

It is true. When Monna Mokoena opened this gallery, it surprised many people because of the expectations of his race and age. The architecture threw all the set assumptions out the window. This is the power of architecture, when it works at its best. It has nothing to do with scale; it is about the opportunity and translation.

I’m going to end with a series of questions that take things down to the domestic scale. You’ve created homes for Damon Albarn, Jake Chapman, and Sue Webster and Tim Noble, among others. The artist as client: what are the pros and cons of this?
At the beginning, I was never really interested in houses. I was interested in artists, and the only projects I could get from artists were homes or doing shows. I was only interested in that because some of the most inspirational projects from the history of architecture were about cultural operators and architects, translating something that was different to the pervasive norm. I am very suspicious of the architect coming in and being the only agent that translates a cultural moment, and then hands it over to a client. I think that is a complete myth. The most revolutionary architecture came from incredible dual moments; and it always came from cultural thinkers. For me, I became very fascinated by artists because I felt artists, especially at that Blairite moment, became very empowered. They were front-page news suddenly. I found that really fascinating, because actually these are the guys talking about the cultural image

There is a fabulous reciprocity between art and architecture. I think of that wonderful Steve McQueen film where he re-enacts a Buster Keaton scene, of the house collapsing on a standing figure and surviving because he is positioned where the window is [Deadpan, 1997, 16mm black and white film.]
It is brilliant.
What do you think accounts for this reciprocal fascination?
I think we are both producers. We produce content in the world that has to be deconstructed and dealt with. I think we are emphatic poles of this game of production. Artists are just as fascinated by what we produce in the world, and make images that respond. There is a kind of voyeurism across the divide between us, which is interesting, because we give each other meaning. For me, artists and architects are funny twins who validate each other by their very existence. I take great nourishment from going into the thinking space of an artist. I found all the artists I work with take great nourishment from coming into the thinking space of an architect. I was shocked the first time I realised this.

You are a working architect with a practice that spans multiple continents; you have staff and overheads, all that stuff. What is the feedback loop between a research project such as this and what you do professionally?
I need an enquiry for my work, I think the minute I loose the enquiry I will stop doing architecture. This Africa project has been deeply instructive and reflective for me in the way it informs my new work, like the new Skolkovo Moscow School of Management. People said it was completely different and asked what was going on. It is not different, but it does draw on this other reflection that I am now making. There is a whole new body of work that has a whole different figure to the old work. The old work talks about being hidden and revealed, the idea of eminence, and disappearance and loss, it talks about all those issues, which is the London-European condition of the diaspora. This new project talks about a different notion of how you exist in the world, the idea of urbanity, the position of form. It is all to do with the way I have been looking in the past 10 years. Sometimes there are literal connections, which freak me out. I see certain things that I've been drawing which are actually things I’ve seen.

There is a glorious paradox, in a sense, where you have gone to what is nominally still the most ‘degenerate’ architectural space, and then draw on your findings and insert them into the new Versailles, which is what Moscow is.
I know, and in a way it is delicious. I am very interested in transformation. The creative process, for me, is about transformation, so somehow to completely ingest that which everyone thinks is completely off-the-table is profoundly delicious. To reconstitute a new modernity from that is, for me, just the best. That is my project, if you want to define what I do.

It is very optimistic. Should an architect be optimistic?
If an architect isn’t optimistic then there is a fundamental problem. By our very nature, because we make things, we have to be the image of optimism. We have to be almost naively optimistic.

How does one distinguish optimism from utopianism?
There is not much difference. We are, I’m afraid, the gatekeepers of the notion. In everything we strive for, we strive for utopia. We create these things as drawings, and when they’re drawings they’re already utopic – the promise is held in the drawing. They fail whenever they become buildings, they fail, but the drive is always striving to make it, I wouldn’t say perfect, but to make it perfect-like, to make it utopic. But, for me, architecture is the beautiful story of failed utopias, which I love very much. I love that architecture keeps trying.