

Designed by Freehaus, The Africa Centre opens new Southwark home 'Embassy of optimism' celebrates pan-African culture



The Africa Centre. Photography by Taran Wilkhu.

Sixty years after it was first established in Covent Garden as a 'home from home' for Africans in London, this month The Africa Centre opens the doors to its new HQ – a dramatically retrofitted 1960s building in Southwark.

Leading the design team, London-based architects Freehaus have taken a nondescript 1960s office building and guided its transformation into 'the most welcoming cultural space in London' – a 21st-century institution that reflects the rich heritage and tremendous diversity of the African continent and diaspora.

FREEHAUS

The project has been championed by the GLA and developed with support from the Mayor of London's Good Growth Fund. The first four of the building's six floors will open officially on 20 June, encompassing a reception and pan-African restaurant Tatala on the ground floor, a bar lounge on the first, a multifunctional gallery and event space on the second, and kitchen storage in the basement. The top two floors – including a digital learning facility and an incubator for Afro-centric businesses – along with more extensive transformations to the building's exterior will launch in the second phase of the project, which is currently seeking funding.

A continent in a building

Chosen from a pool of more than 60 architects and appointed in 2019, Freehaus took on the multi-faceted challenge of intelligently representing the diverse cultures and heritages that make up modern Africa, while also creating a forward-looking space that maintained a connection to The Africa Centre's six-decade history.

"The key to the brief was for The Africa Centre's new headquarters to be unmistakably African. Given the breadth of diversity on the continent and among the diaspora, we were keen to avoid stereotypes and well-trodden aesthetic tropes. At the same time, we wanted to avoid continent-sweeping generalisations. 'Africa isn't a country' is a familiar response, often born of frustration at the dismissal understanding of the breadth in peoples, cultures and traditions that span the African continent. We wanted to turn this misnomer into a strength and envisage what an embassy for a continent might look like in the 21st century; a space that demonstrates what connects us and binds us to one another, while celebrating the dynamism of the continent."

– Jonathan Hagos, co-director, Freehaus

FREEHAUS



Jonathan Hagos, co-founder of Freehaus. Portrait by Taran Wilkhu.

To achieve this, Freehaus undertook an extensive research process in order to identify a series of overarching design departure points that reflected shared traditions across the African continent and global diaspora. Rather than focusing on particular motifs or patterns, Freehaus identified specific areas and themes, encompassing expressed thresholds, tactile surfaces, quality of light and practices of reuse and appropriation.

Key references for Freehaus included the work of David Adjaye in creating cultural institutions for Black and Afro-centric organisations, former Africa Centre trustee Chris Spring's book *African Art Close-up*, and *African Architecture Evolution and Transformation* by Nnamdi Elleh. In addition, the work of Burkinabé architect Francis Kéré and Atelier Masōmī's Hikma religious and secular complex in Dandaji, Niger, both served as strong departure points for Freehaus's architectural approach.

Informed by these, Freehaus chose eight themes to underpin a design direction, including themes with a focus on the collective, and on design approaches that exhibit reverence to ancestry and tradition. As well as steering Freehaus's approach, these themes were also adopted and developed by the project's other design collaborators – including interior designer Tola Ojuolape and brand designer, Mam'gobozi Design Factory.

FREEHAUS



Interior spaces at The Africa Centre, the bar (left) and the staircase beside the entrance (right). Photography by Taran Wilkhu.

The development of the building design was highly collaborative, speaking to the desire of both architect and client for the new headquarters to be informed by multiple voices and perspectives. The developing design was informed throughout by a programme of public conversations and events, including a London Design Festival discussion, and steered by an advisory group created by Freehaus to include staff, board members, young Africa Centre trustees, and users of The Africa Centre. Visits to comparable institutions, including cultural and arts spaces as well as members' clubs, helped to underpin their approach to core elements such as ethos, function and approach to welcome.

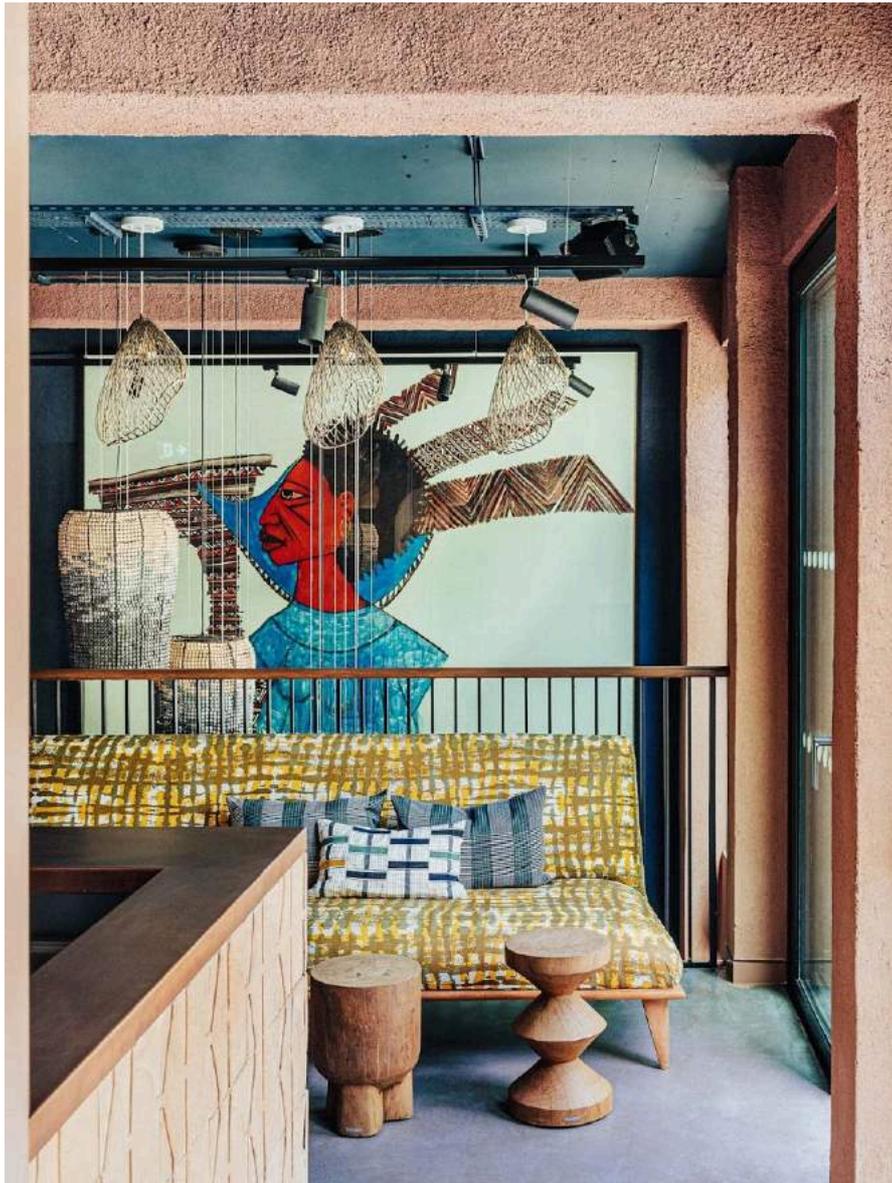
The overarching goal was to consider and communicate the ambassadorial role that The Africa Centre plays in representing and celebrating pan-African culture on the world stage – a forum for ideas, a platform for exchange and an embassy of optimism.

"The result of Freehaus' intuitive ability to capture the essence of what was a multi-layered and complex brief is a building which, on its various floors, will provide opportunities for learning, relaxing, eating and holding business

FREEHAUS

meetings, in equal measure, an environment which will be relaxed, welcoming and uniquely Pan-African.”

– Oba Nsugbe QC, SAN (Chair of The Africa Centre)



Originally painted on the wall of the Africa Centre's former base in Covent Garden, a 1987 mural by Mozambican artist and poet Malangatana Ngwenya has been painstakingly transported and restored in the centre's new home. Photography by Taran Wilkhu.

Structural and aesthetic transformation

One of the biggest challenges faced by The Africa Centre's design team was how to turn a modest 1960s 'background' structure into something expressive – a building with a strong presence and a clear identity.

Working with the existing grain of the building, Freehaus in close collaboration with structural engineers Price and Myers, have transformed Gunpowder House from office block to cultural institution, focusing on opening up the lower floors to create dynamic spaces, both in their depth and verticality.

With two new entrances on either side of the building, the ground floor is expressed as a permeable space, connecting the grander 'front' of the building at Great Suffolk Street, with the more informal 'rear' of the building, which in turn will connect with The Africa Centre's existing spaces in the adjacent railway arches. Intended to be a catalyst for a new African Quarter, this pedestrianised area to the rear of the building and overlooked by the first floor terrace, will be an extension of the vibrancy of the bars and restaurants of the Old Union Yard Arches beyond.



The Africa Centre's main entrance on Great Suffolk Street (left) and rear entrance via Union Yard Arches (right) could help to create a new African Quarter in Southwark. Photography by Taran Wilkhu.

New interiors, enriched by a gradient of natural clay plaster finishes, bespoke furniture and curated artworks, reference and celebrate the heritage of craft on the African continent while also championing contemporary talents.

The façade, previously a forgettable yellow brick, is now a striking statement black, with new expansive glazing opening it up to the outside world and extending an invitation to passers-by. Generous terraces to both elevations will allow visitors to 'occupy' the façades of the building and this will be further enhanced in the second phase of the centre's development, with the addition a large-scale, inhabitable, ornamental screen inspired by the mashrabiyya latticed architectural features found in northern Africa.

Sustainability and energy efficiency

Environmental impact has been a priority area for all stakeholders in the project. As a retrofit, The Africa Centre is inherently more carbon-efficient than a new build, and a raft of additional measures have been integrated into the fabric of the building to minimise impact and maximise energy performance.

From the outset, The Africa Centre has followed the environmental principles outlined by Julie's Bicycle, the London non-profit initiative that works with the arts and culture sector to tackle climate crisis and embed sustainable practices. Freehaus co-director Tom Bell brought his insights as a Passivhaus-certified architect to the project, ensuring the building's energy efficiency, supported by a range of low and zero-carbon strategies developed in conjunction with the project's MEP (mechanical, electrical and plumbing) engineer OR Consulting.

"As an industry we have a collective duty to chase every kg of carbon reduction we can because, collectively, the impact on us all will be significant. We must also recognize that sustainability isn't just carbon related. Building sustainable communities and promoting social value are equally important to society. The Africa Centre project has empowered Freehaus to provoke environment change, raise industry awareness and galvanise community values."

– Tom Bell, co-founder, Freehaus

FREEHAUS



Tom Bell, co-founder of Freehaus. Portrait by Ivan Jones.

Measures include extended glazing to optimise light, passive ventilation thanks to the co-opting of the central staircase as a thermal chimney, CO2 heat-recovery ventilation systems, and heat pumps to recover waste heat from kitchens and server rooms in order to provide hot water.

Low-energy LED lighting is fitted throughout; and even the signage has been developed to encourage visitors' efficient use of the centre. The selection of building materials and finishes prioritise high recycled content and low embodied carbon. Phase two of the works will see solar shading implemented on the east- and west-facing windows.



The Africa Centre's central stairwell. Photography by Taran Wilkhu.

Launch programme

The opening of the Africa Centre will be marked with a variety of events, including a formal launch in early June, and a dedicated design day bringing together Freehaus and the other project design teams to share the story of the centre's development. The opening exhibition in the second-floor gallery space will be the first solo show of Tanzanian visual artist Sungi Mlengeya, featuring monochromatic acrylic portraits exploring Blackness and womanhood.

For more information about Freehaus and The Africa Centre, including imagery, please contact freehaus@zetteler.co.uk.

Notes to editors

The Africa Centre is supported by Arts Council England and the Mayor of London's Good Growth Fund.

The Africa Centre

With a rich legacy stretching over six decades, The Africa Centre is a cultural hub to celebrate the diversity of Africa and its diaspora, by promoting creativity and innovation in African thought, art, culture, business and entrepreneurship. The centre's vision is of a contemporary 21st century Africa: vibrant, global and seated at the table.

africacentre.org.uk

@theafricacentre

Freehaus

Founded by Tom Bell and Jonathan Hagos, Freehaus is a diverse yet like-minded studio of architects who make accessible, honest and representative buildings. The places Freehaus designs are anchored to their location, and authentic to both their people and context. The practice's buildings are made to last: they are clearly configured, and in turn reconfigurable, to extend their social, environmental and heritage value. They are put together with care and economy, and refined through detail and craft.

The Freehaus studio is a safe place to play, where everyone has agency and responsibility is shared. The team are bound by mutual warmth, respect and curiosity and, as a free haus, their minds – and studio walls – are open, liberating them to specialise and evolve.

freehausdesign.com

@freehausdesign