



Serpentine Pavilion 2020 designed by Counterspace, design render, exterior view. Picture: © Counterspace

THE PAVILION COMMISSION

A globally prestigious architecture project goes to a small Joburg studio, writes **Graham Wood**

The architecture world was taken by surprise this month when the commission for the Serpentine Pavilion, one of the world's most prestigious platforms for architecture, went to an unknown little studio in Johannesburg, Counterspace. Counterspace might be small, but this is a big deal. With this commission it, Joburg, SA and Africa will come under the world spotlight.

Counterspace was established in 2015. Its three directors, Sumayya Vally, Sarah de Villiers and Amina Kaskar, are all 30 years old this year, making them the youngest architects to date to be invited to design the pavilion.

The commission to design and build a temporary structure in London's Kensington Gardens on the lawns of the Serpentine Gallery as part of its summer programme has gone to some of the world's most famous architects while they have been at the height of their powers. They include the likes of Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry and Bjarke Ingels.

To be fair, over the past few years the emphasis has been on lesser known or mid-career talents. It's also the 20th anniversary of the pavilion, so an opportunity to ring the changes.

"The commission is something I've been aware of since my first year of architecture school [2008]," says Vally, the lead architect on the project. "It's become something I watch out for every year. Particularly watching from here in South Africa, the pavilion commission and what it represents is important – a realm of ideas and of speculation, a platform to ask new questions of architectural practice."

What's interesting about the choice of Counterspace is that it doesn't even specialise in buildings as such – it is a multidisciplinary practice best known for research, experimental ideas, exhibitions and academic work, often collaborating with other practices in a way that falls outside the narrow definition of architecture as built form.

Inside architecture circles – or circles



Amina Kaskar, Sumayya Vally and Sarah de Villiers. Picture: Justice Mukhelli © Counterspace

within circles – the talents of Counterspace have been known and respected for some time. Thomas Chapman is principal at Local Studio, a Joburg practice that has worked with Counterspace on a number of occasions, commissioning research and exhibitions. "It was obvious that it was going to blow up at some point," he says. "It was just a case of when and how."

Chapman has collaborated with some very high-profile international architects, including Norwegian firm Snohetta, which

redesigned New York's Times Square. "You just know you're dealing with another league," he says.

Similarly, Threshen Govender of Urbanworks, an architecture, urbanism and research practice that has shared offices with Counterspace, says: "I think they are almost peerless in the way they approach their work." Their work, he says, transcends the usual boundaries and categories.

Professor Lesley Lokko, who founded the Graduate School of Architecture at the



The swooping Serpentine Pavilion, one of many projects by Zaha Hadid Architects. Picture: Supplied

University of Johannesburg was a mentor to Vally. She's now dean of architecture at the City College of New York, and an adviser to the selection panel for the Serpentine Pavilion. "Having worked so closely with both Vally and De Villiers over the past five years, it's a moment of almost indescribable pride," she says.

"In many ways, it's a commission that suits young practices – those who haven't yet had the opportunity to translate their ideas into form – or established practices, for whom the pavilion is a kind of signature, born out of a well-established and known architectural language," says Lokko.

"Counterspace don't yet have a signature: that's the beauty of winning a commission this early on in their careers. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to 'write' their architectural language on a global scale and – in the age of social media – to experience the lightning speed at which their ideas spread, reaching audiences that they don't even know exist."

She says the choice of Counterspace represents a seminal moment for local architecture, and a chance for local and international architects to gain a better understanding of South African, and more specifically Joburg, architecture in a global context.

"Counterspace are emblematic of the bind that many young African architects find themselves in: trying to explore what these questions of urbanisation, informality, inequity and – particular to South Africa – historical spatial injustices, to questions of imagination, speculation, Afrofuturism, interdisciplinarity mean, both for themselves and others, and yet having to constantly explain what they do. Questions like: How is what you do 'architecture'?; what are you trying to say as 'architects'?; why don't you build buildings?; what is 'African' about what you do, and how can three young women under the age of 30 possibly have the experience and know-how to run a successful practice?"

Vally says her studio is inspired by Joburg and is essentially "trying to find and make design languages for and from Africa. I've approached the commission with the

same ethos as something in Joburg – looking out for the inspiration in the fabric of the city and the lives of people in it. For me, this design was not about showcasing my design style or aesthetic; it was really important for me that the project is, as much as it can be, about truly sharing this platform with a greater story."

Counterspace's design for the pavilion tries to capture some of the movement and impermanence at the heart of what they do best – research, movement studies, community engagement and the like. They've tried to think of it as an event rather than an object.

The design is an assembly of shapes or imprints taken from existing architecture in specific places around London, particularly those associated with memory and care for migrant communities such as Brixton, Hoxton, Hackney, Whitechapel, Edgware Road, Peckham, Ealing, North Kensington. It will include moveable small parts that will be taken to various areas in London for events, then returned to the pavilion so that it gathers the residue of new associations over the course of the summer.

"I found the cultural and urban diversity in London interesting," says Vally. "It's a sum of so many histories, socioeconomic forces, and stories. It's a living record of where we've come from and a constantly evolving renegotiation and reimagining of the current moment."

Lokko (who is Scots-Ghanaian, educated in the UK and has worked in SA, the UK, Ghana, the US and more) says: "There's an assumption, made mostly by South Africans, that their situation is



Frank Gehry's internal view of seating area. Picture: via Getty Images



Serpentine Pavilion by Bjarke Ingels Group, with the Serpentine Gallery in the background. Picture: Andy Stagg via Getty Images

unique; it's not. Questions of race, class, gender, power, inequity and injustice are everywhere.

"What's special about this commission is that Counterspace are confident enough to use their own histories and experiences to look – with compassion as well as criticality – elsewhere. Turning their lens, which has been shaped by a specific context, onto 'other' places and situations affords them (and those who occupy their work) the possibility to see themselves and others differently. That's the real gift, I think: the ability in a project like this to look both ways. For once, South African architects are not shaped by other people's understanding of apartheid, limited as it usually is, but by their ability to use that experience to look critically elsewhere. The fact that three young women have done it is life-changing for a whole generation of African architects. This is an important moment – and commission – for everyone."