

Lagos store brings modern African luxury to Nigeria's rich

LAGOS - Take a sought-after architect, add the king of "new Africa cuisine" and a smattering of famous designers, and you get a concept-store in Lagos that seeks to bring modern African luxury to Nigeria's ultra-rich...



Image credit: AFP

Photographer: Emmanuel Arewa

The chaotic, cosmopolitan metropolis has largely failed to cater for its mega-rich minority despite a big appetite for high-end shopping and eating in a country that houses 11 of Africa's 50 biggest fortunes, according to Forbes magazine.

So, Reni Folawiyo, a businesswoman married to one of the 11 - multi-millionaire Tunde Folawiyo - decided to create Alara, a four-storey building housing a mix of African fashion, design and art and a selection of work by Western designers, complete with a gourmet restaurant.

Nestled in the heart of Lagos, the store does not attract droves of shoppers in a country where the vast majority still lives on less than \$2 a day, but it already has its share of discreet regulars who rarely leave the building empty-handed.

The price tags are in dollars and often count several zeroes, aimed at customers who are used to travelling far and wide and shopping abroad.

But while they can afford items in New York and Paris luxury stores, these don't necessarily always cater for the tastes of African women or their body shape.

"We like colour, we're dramatic, adornment is our way of expression," says Folawiyo.

Enter Alara, which she says is geared towards "the flamboyance of the Africans", from the retro, multi-coloured dresses by Italian-Haitian designer Stella Jean, futuristic glasses by Kenya's Cyrus Kabiru to the python bags made by Nigeria's Zashadu.

The store also has a personal shopping service on offer to cater for customers' varying needs.

"We are specific in terms of our bodies. We don't necessarily fit into a sort of international mould, in terms of the size and shape," says Folawiyo.

The building itself - an imposing black and orange-ochre bloc whose square, openwork patterns bring to mind Nigeria's traditional Adire textile - was designed by David Adjaye.

The store is the first major work on African soil by the British architect of Ghanaian origin, who is also behind Washington's National Museum of African American History and Culture, among others.

It's a first for Nigerian designer Duro Olowu too, who grew up in Lagos but now spends his time between London and New York.

The man who counts US First Lady Michelle Obama among his customers had initially refused to have his creations sold in Lagos, but was so taken by Alara that he allowed the store to showcase them.

"Lagos was seen as a mishmash of badly presented things," Olowu says of the 20-million-strong heaving city better known for its giant traffic jams and poor infrastructure.

"I wanted my clothes to be stocked somewhere that represented everything I believed in. And Alara is stylish but also cultural.

"This store is also a place where young people can walk in and be inspired," he added.

Fashion aside, a gourmet restaurant is also due to open soon on the ground floor.

The menu will be drawn up by Senegalese chef Pierre Thiam, one of the biggest names in contemporary African cuisine who owns several restaurants in New York.

Like Olowu, this is his first collaboration in Africa, which he left in 1989 but still remains his main source of inspiration.

On the menu, dishes that blend African street food with Western classics such as millet and peanut lamb risotto, quail grilled with suya spices typical of northern Nigeria, hibiscus tart served with palm leaf, coconut and lime flavoured ice cream.

"I wanted this place to be a cultural reawakening, bringing what we've known as Africans into the new world," says Folawiyo.

Source: AFP