YINKA ILORI

PARABLES

FOR HAPPINESS

Large Print Guide
INTRODUCTION

What can design tell us about how to be happy? Yinka Ilori’s interdisciplinary work starts conversations and sparks joy. His practice weaves together a wide range of influences, drawing on his Nigerian heritage and the diverse north London community where he grew up. In Ilori’s hands, design becomes a rich canvas for the expression of identities.

For this display, the Design Museum has unpacked the ingredients of a diaspora visual language and has collaborated with Ilori to acquire new objects for our permanent collection. Dotted around this gallery, the new acquisitions add context to Ilori’s work and expand on the collection’s focus on the traditional canon of design.
Storytelling as shared inheritance is integral to Ilori’s process. Inspired by the Nigerian parables that his parents told to him as a child, he believes that design is about “trying to create a memory of something, so it lives and you can pass it on.”

Yet parables are more than just stories. They also ask us how we want to live together as a community. How should we act towards one another? How can we foster collective happiness? From Ilori’s playful chairs to his lively, welcoming public spaces, his work acknowledges the power of design to create a more inclusive society.
CONTENTS

1. Storytelling with Furniture 7
   a. Chairs

2. In the Studio 17
   a. Music
   b. Cultural Influences

3. Graphic Language 35
   a. Nigerian Fabrics
   b. Spaces

4. Architecture for All 53
   a. Multicultural London
   b. Play
1. Storytelling with Furniture

‘Vanity of vanities; all is vanity’

– Ecclesiastes 1:2-11 (Old Testament)

Furniture can be more than neutral or functional. Chairs and tables have lives and histories – for Yinka Ilori, they are “powerful objects that hold personal stories, secrets, emotions and sentiments.” Ilori seeks out these stories from used furniture and weaves them together with new stories, inspired by his own identity and his family’s Nigerian culture. These narratives give designed objects deeper, richer meanings. Ilori’s furniture is not just an exercise in aesthetic “vanity”; like the parables that filled his childhood, it asks us who we are and how we want to live.
CHAIRS

Chairs are deceptively simple objects that are central to our daily lives. Chairs can demand status and create hierarchy. They can spark conversation and foster intimacy. Ilori’s own designs playfully reanimate used chairs with new narratives by reconfiguring them, adding colour and pattern. The works on display here, by a variety of designers, were chosen by Ilori to encourage us to look at furniture in a new light.
As part of this display, Ilori chose a selection of chairs from the Design Museum’s collection. For Ilori, this assortment embodies the potential of design and examines new ways of making. From Jane Atfield’s explorations into recyclable materials to Thonet’s egalitarian chair, these designers all shared an interest in changing the course of design and opening up new perspectives.
RCP2 chair
Designed by Jane Atfield
Manufactured by Made of Waste
1993
Recycled high-density polyethylene board
Design Museum Collection

Armchair
Designed by Gerald Summers
Manufactured by The Makers of Simple Furniture
1934
Plywood
Design Museum Collection

No. 14 side chair
Designed by Michael Thonet
Manufactured by Gebrüder Thonet
1859
Beech, cane
Design Museum Collection

Red and blue chair
Designed by Gerrit Rietveld
Manufactured by Cassina
1918
Lacquered wood
Design Museum Collection
These stools are made from the same sheet metal used to build casings for electrical generators, commonly used in Nigeria to deal with regular power cuts. Like Ilori, contemporary designer Nifemi Marcus-Bello interprets Nigerian culture in often unexpected ways.

**Washington Skeleton Chair**

Designed by David Adjaye  
Manufactured and commissioned by Knoll  
2013  
Copper-plated aluminium  
Courtesy of Knoll

These stools are made from the same sheet metal used to build casings for electrical generators, commonly used in Nigeria to deal with regular power cuts. Like Ilori, contemporary designer Nifemi Marcus-Bello interprets Nigerian culture in often unexpected ways.

**LM Stool**

Designed by Nifemi Marcus-Bello  
Manufactured by nmbello Studio  
2018  
Sheet metal  
Design Museum Collection
This chair is one of Ilori’s most recent designs. His new series of chairs is an exercise in self-reflection: he aims to compare them with the chairs he designed over ten years ago, reflecting on both change and consistency in his own work.

**Untitled I**

Yinka Ilori
2022
FSC wood

Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection
Ilori’s interest in chairs has shaped his community collaborations. In 2017, his series of workshops in partnership with social enterprise Restoration Station helped each participant to restore a chair. The furniture created was then auctioned to raise funds for future workshops.

**Chair Workshop pamphlet**

Yinka Ilori for the 7th Athens Biennale – ECLIPSE 2021
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection

**Restoration Station x Yinka Ilori workshop**

Photography by Dan Weill 2017
Courtesy of Dan Weill

These model chairs are a form of three-dimensional autobiography. Each one tells a story about a different period in Ilori’s life. Some represent a particular individual he grew up with; some express a specific moment; and others explore his Nigerian heritage more broadly.
Italian designer Martino Gamper’s ‘100 chairs in 100 days’ project has been a major influence for Ilori because of its focus on reuse. Gamper took used chairs and transformed them into 100 new pieces – revitalising them with new stories, functions and personalities.

‘100 Chairs in 100 Days’ exhibition poster
Martino Gamper
Poster designed by Åbäke
2017
Courtesy of Åbäke

Chair Collection
Yinka Ilori
2003-2022
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection
2. IN

THE STUDIO

‘A single man cannot build a house’
– Nigerian parable

Yinka Ilori’s practice started as a solo endeavour in 2012 and his studio was founded in 2017. Today, it consists of a team of architects and designers who work together to create projects that blur the lines between many different forms of design. Nestled in an industrial estate in west London, the studio is an explosion of colour. Its energetic interior creates a powerful sense of immersion: Ilori observes that, “When people walk in here, they lose their breath... they step into a different world.” The space is arranged to encourage the team to share ideas, embodying the collaborative values also present in Ilori’s work.
Ilori’s studio invites conversation, creativity and flexibility. Its three sections – an office, an exhibition area and an archive/kitchen – are divided by sliding doors and curtains. Ilori and architect Sam Jacob developed the designs during the Covid-19 pandemic, sketching ideas together on Zoom.

**The kitchen area in Yinka Ilori’s studio**

Designed by Yinka Ilori and Sam Jacob  
Photograph by Lewis Khan  
2022  
Courtesy of Lewis Khan

**Objects on display in Yinka Ilori’s studio**

Designed by Yinka Ilori and Sam Jacob  
Photograph by Lewis Khan  
2022  
Courtesy of Lewis Khan
Ilori’s journey to becoming a designer has not been a linear path. Before setting up his practice, he worked at Marks & Spencer for almost eight years, dreaming about design while on the tills. Whenever he forgot his name badge, he would create his own temporary one.

**Yinka Ilori’s M&S name badge**

Yinka Ilori  
2003  
Plastic, paper  
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection

Ilori’s studio trousers are a colourful record of his many different projects. He has worn these trousers to paint in since 2012 – just before he set up his own practice in 2017.

**Studio trousers worn by Yinka Ilori**

Made by Nike  
2012 – ongoing  
Denim, metal hardware  
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection
Ilori was invited by former editor of British design and architecture magazine Icon, Priya Khanchandani, to design the front cover for the magazine’s ‘London and Londoners’ issue. Offering his own perspective on this multicultural city, Ilori’s accompanying interview articulates his belief that design should be for everyone.

**Cover of ICON magazine, issue 196**

Designed by Yinka Ilori  
October 2019  
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection

After the Covid-19 lockdowns in the UK, Ilori designed this cover for ES Magazine to celebrate London’s reopening in the following spring. The cover’s joyful colours signified the return of summer, social contact and shared public life.

**Sun and Trees**

Cover of ES Magazine, 9 April 2021  
Designed by Yinka Ilori  
2021  
Courtesy of the Design Museum
Music

Music, for Ilori, is a way to bring back memories and to dream. Growing up, music was a large part of his everyday life. His parents hosted parties regularly and would play West African music, resonant with memories of their family and friends back in Nigeria. This spirit lives on in Ilori’s studio, where he and his team take turns DJing while they work.
This dùndún, or talking drum, is Ilori’s own. Originating from West Africa, the dùndún mimics the patterns and rhythms of speech, enabling the player to tell parables and stories through the unique ‘voice’ of the drum.

**Mini dùndún (talking drum)**

Unknown maker  
Unknown date  
Leather, cotton  
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection

**Set of conga drums**

Gear4Music  
Unknown date  
Leather, wood, metal  
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection
Ilori listens to music genres such as Afrobeat, hip hop, R&B and grime. Nigerian artists like Fela Kuti, King Sunny Adé and Chief Commander Ebenezer Obey feature heavily on his playlists. Ilori says, “They often sing in parables, so I take these words and put them into an object.”

**Alagbon Close**

Fela Kuti and The Africa ’70  
Designed by Lemi Ghariokwu  
Produced by Jofabro Nigeria Ltd.  
1974  
Vinyl record  
Design Museum Collection

**Synchro Series**

King Sunny Adé And His African Beats  
Designed by Ibukunola Printers (Nig) Ltd.  
Produced by Sunny Alade, Nigeria  
1983  
Vinyl record  
Design Museum Collection
Boy in Da Corner

Dizzee Rascal
Designed by Ben Drury
Produced by XL Recordings
2003
CD
Design Museum Collection

The College Dropout

Kanye West
Designed by Eric Duvauchelle
Produced by Roc-A-Fella and Def Jam Records
2004
CD
Design Museum Collection

Home Sweet Home

Kano
Designed by Ben Sansbury
Produced by 679 Recordings
2005
CD
Design Museum Collection
Board Members

Chief Commander Ebenezer Obey
Produced by Decca (West Africa) Ltd.
2012
Vinyl record
Design Museum Collection
CULTURAL INFLUENCES

Alongside his own work, Ilori’s studio is peppered with objects that inspire him and his team. His Nigerian roots have been a significant influence on his work, as well as his experiences growing up on a multi-cultural estate in London. He fuses these elements to help him design objects that tell stories and are imbued with collective memory.
Scattered around Ilori’s childhood home were the Nigerian newspapers and magazines read by his parents. Influential publications such as The Trumpet, Drum and Ovation provided a platform for a new generation of creatives, who radically changed the way in which Black people were represented.

**DRUM magazine**
October 1967
Courtesy of Black Cultural Archives

**DRUM magazine**
June 1968
Courtesy of Black Cultural Archives

**DRUM magazine**
February 1969
Courtesy of Black Cultural Archives

**DRUM magazine**
July 1966
Courtesy of Black Cultural Archives

**DRUM magazine**
May 1960
Courtesy of Black Cultural Archives
Bridget Riley’s geometrical optical illusions provide inspiration for Ilori.

Bridget Riley: 
The Complete Series 1962 – 2020
Contributed to by Bridget Riley, Lynn MacRitchie, Craig Hartley, Robert Kudielka, Alexandra Tommasini and Rosa Gubay
Co-published by The Bridget Riley Art Foundation and Thames & Hudson
2020
Courtesy of the Design Museum

Ilori’s work features in this influential book on the work of African artists and designers. The book seeks to redefine African creativity and calls Western stereotypes and clichés into question.

Africa Rising: Fashion, Lifestyle and Design from Africa
Co-published by Design Indaba and Gestalten
2016
Courtesy of the Design Museum
Ilori’s Instagram account offers a glimpse into his inspirations. From artists and designers to films and books, as well as images from his own past and motivational quotes, his posts reveal his playful fusion of cultural influences and the infectious optimism that characterises his work.

Various posts from Yinka Ilori’s Instagram account

Yinka Ilori
2017 – ongoing
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection
3. Graphic Language

‘A smiling face dispels unhappiness’
– Nigerian parable

Bold, bright and distinctive, Yinka Ilori’s graphic language is instantly recognisable. His visual approach goes deeper than simply coloured surfaces, drawing on the motifs and meanings of West African textiles to blend his cultural heritage and influences with contemporary urban life. Ideas of community, welcome, celebration and dialogue are addressed through his use of graphics, patterns and colour, which are not just aesthetic but “a way of starting a conversation.” Ilori’s work also delves into research and ideas about happiness, asking: can design help us to live more joyful – and even healthier – lives?
Portrait of Yinka Ilori’s grandmother

Inca Jordan
c. 2018
Oil on canvas
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection

Aso-Oke fabric

Unknown maker
Unknown date
Loom-woven cotton
Courtesy of the Design Museum

‘The Oye’s’ (Tolu Oye, Kanyinsola Oye and Enoch Oye)

Photograph by Dotun Abeshinbioke
Creative Director: Tolu Oye
2019
Courtesy of Tolulope Oye
Nigerian Fabrics

Ilori’s first memories of pattern and colour come from the vibrant fabrics that his family wore to weddings and church services. He remembers his grandmother’s bold, bright outfits, affectionately nicknaming her “the real queen of colour.” The layers of stories and meanings within each pattern inform Ilori’s own work, bringing in often complex narratives of culture, history, trade and identity.
The Dutch fabric company Vlisco began designing wax printed fabrics in the late 19th century. Although the company has a complex colonial history that includes the use of violent practices and appropriation of indigenous artistic cultures, its long involvement in West Africa means that its fabrics remain readily available and popular there. The designs, which are often highly symbolic, are imbued with meanings and stories – not only those intended by the designers but also those created by the people who wear them.

*Vlisco fabrics hanging in Yinka Ilori’s studio*

Photograph by Mariell Amelia Lind Hansen
2019
Courtesy of The Modern House
This irreverent design features the sort of fan found commonly during hot African summers. It reminds Ilori of the stories his parents would tell him of life in Nigeria.

‘Table Fan’ fabric

Designed by Vlisco
c. 2020s
Wax printed cotton
Design Museum Collection

This now-iconic design was commissioned by a Portuguese trader in 1940. In order to display his wealth, he asked for a fabric depicting six spark plugs (or ‘bougies’), representing his six-cylinder car. The design has since been revised and reimagined in many ways.

‘Six Bougies’ fabric

Designed by Vlisco
c. 2020s
Wax printed cotton
Design Museum Collection
The jumping-horse motif has several different meanings across West Africa. In Côte d’Ivoire it expresses the rivalry between co-wives, whereas in Nigeria it is worn by women to show unity with other women.

‘Jumping Horse’ fabric (also known as ‘I Run Faster Than My Rival’)
Designed by Vlisco
c. 2020s
Wax printed cotton
Design Museum Collection

This pattern has many interpretations. Originally designed to look as if the background is being spray-painted, it has also been read as depicting perfume or insecticide. The fabric is often informally referred to by the names of popular brands, such as ‘Lover’s Spray’ or ‘Fly-Tox’, reflecting its ambiguous symbolism.

‘Fly-Tox’ fabric (Nigeria) / ‘Holy Ghost Fire’ (Nigeria) / ‘Lover’s Spray’ (Ghana) / ‘Parfum d’Álassane Ouattara’ (Côte d’Ivoire), ‘Baïgon’ (Côte d’Ivoire)
Designed by Vlisco
c. 2020s
Wax printed cotton
Design Museum Collection
These two patterns are Ilori’s favourite Vlisco designs. The dreamy pink pattern appeals to him because it looks like an abstract paradise, while the trumpet pattern evokes the joy of play.

**Abstract pink pattern fabric**

Designed by Vlisco  
c. 2020s  
Wax printed cotton  
Design Museum Collection

**Trumpet-patterned fabric**

Designed by Vlisco  
c. 2020s  
Wax printed cotton  
Design Museum Collection
Designing spaces that are lively and uplifting is an hugely important aspect of Ilori’s practice. His 2019 exhibition Types of Happiness explored a spectrum of 16 types of happiness that were shown to improve wellbeing, developed by researchers at Weill Cornell Medical College. This multifaceted view of happiness inspires Ilori’s spatial design. The urban environment becomes a canvas for creating moments of delight in a city that is often overwhelming and impersonal.
With its rainbow border and motifs drawn from Nigerian wax-printed textiles, this permanent mural was so popular that Ilori created limited-edition prints and flags based on the same design. Installed on a wall in Harrow, the mural invites a sense of communal ownership of public space.

‘Love Always Wins’ flag

Yinka Ilori, commissioned by Harrow Council and The London Mural Company
2021
Cotton, wood
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection

‘Love Always Wins’ mural,
Gordon Road, Harrow, London

Yinka Ilori, commissioned by Harrow Council and Accent London ltd.
Made by The London Mural Company
2021
Photograph by The London Mural Company
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori
Ilori’s billboard campaign was designed to keep up morale during the Covid-19 pandemic. These motivational posters, installed in prominent locations around London, saw awareness of Ilori’s work extend beyond the architecture and design community.

‘If You Can Dream Then Anything Is Possible’, Broadway Market, Hackney, London

Yinka Ilori, commissioned by Jack Arts
2021
Photograph by BUILDHOLLYWOOD
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori x BUILDHOLLYWOOD for Your Space or Mine

‘If You Can Dream Then Anything Is Possible’, Upper Clapton Road, London

Yinka Ilori, commissioned by Jack Arts
2021
Photograph by BUILDHOLLYWOOD
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori x BUILDHOLLYWOOD for Your Space or Mine
Inspired by the green spaces in London that offered him sanctuary during the Covid-19 lockdowns, Ilori created this mural to celebrate the many acts of kindness that were seen across the country during the pandemic.

‘This Is Human Kind’,
Ebor Street, Shoreditch, London

Yinka Ilori, commissioned by the British Red Cross 2021
Jack Arts/British Red Cross
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori
Enlivening pedestrian crossings and roads across London, Ilori’s designs for the 2021 London Design Festival transformed mundane streets into works of art. Ilori’s aim was to “make people smile and bring a sense of joy and positivity to their day.”

‘Bring London Together’, design for a pedestrian crossing, Tottenham Court Road, London

Yinka Ilori, commissioned by London Design Festival in collaboration with Camden Council and Bloomberg Philanthropies
2021
Photograph by Jason Alden
Courtesy of the Bloomberg Philanthropies Asphalt Art Initiative

Print of ‘Bring London Together’ design for a pedestrian crossing, Tottenham Court Road, London

Yinka Ilori, commissioned by London Design Festival in collaboration with Camden Council and Bloomberg Philanthropies
2021
Print on paper
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection
Ilori’s design for the 2021 Brit Awards uses colour and pattern to tell a complex story. A three-dimensional maze structure symbolises the complex paths that many creative-industry professionals navigated through the pandemic. In contrast, the soft shapes of the tablecloths express hope.

**2021 Brit Awards stage**
Yinka Ilori and Es Devlin commissioned by Brit Awards 2021
Photograph by John Marshall
Courtesy of JOHN MARSHALL/JM Enternational

**Tablecloths for the 2021 Brit Awards**
Yinka Ilori and Es Devlin commissioned by Brit Awards 2021
Cotton
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection
Sample section of the floor design for the 2021 Brit Awards

Yinka Ilori and Es Devlin commissioned by Brit Awards 2021
Fiberglass
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection
At the heart of Yinka Ilori’s work is his conviction that design should be for everybody. Since 2017, Ilori has turned his attention to designing in public spaces – recognising the importance of creating work “for people who don’t get access to art: who can’t afford to get the bus or train to a museum, or who don’t feel comfortable going to those places.” Ilori’s revitalised spaces bring design out into the world, inviting everyone to enjoy it.

‘Milk and honey have different colours, but they share the same house peacefully’
– Nigerian parable
Ilori grew up on the Marquess Estate in north London. This context shaped his belief in the importance of shared spaces and the use of design for social good. He describes the area as “rough” but inhabited by “every nationality: we were all like one family.”

1:500 architectural plan of Marquess Estate
Darbourne & Darke
1968
Courtesy of Islington Heritage Service, Islington Local History Centre

‘Housing, Marquess Road, Islington’
Published in Architectural Review
Photograph by Michael Reid and Sam Lambert
September 1974
Courtesy of Islington Heritage Service, Islington Local History Centre
Ilori’s perspective on the city he lives in is also a call to action: “London is such a diverse city,” he says, “but it’s not reflected in the buildings.” Applying his distinctive visual language across urban environments, he uses colour and a sense of play to make everyone feel welcome. His interventions invite us to revalue the underloved parts of this city.
Ilori’s designs often question the apparent insignificance of everyday spaces. Recalling his childhood memories of playing in the Essex Road laundrette, Ilori worked with children to create their own imaginary laundrette using Lego. The project highlights the important, and usually unacknowledged, role that laundrettes play in communities.

**Chair from ‘Laundrette of Dreams’**

Yinka Ilori  
2021  
Lego, MDF  
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection

**‘Laundrette of Dreams’**

Yinka Ilori in collaboration with students from St Jude and St Paul’s C of E Primary School  
2021  
Photographs by Mark Cocksedge  
Lego, timber, mixed materials  
Commissioned by Lego Group for their Rebuild the World campaign  
Courtesy of The LEGO Group
Essex Road Laundrette

Photographs by Joshua Blackburn for his Launderama series
2018
Courtesy of Joshua Blackburn

The Making of the ‘Laundrette of Dreams’ by Yinka Ilori

By Lego Group
Duration: 2 minutes, 3 seconds
Directed by Ben Woolf
Courtesy of The LEGO Group and Exposure
Next to the elegant Dulwich Picture Gallery, Ilori’s commission for the Dulwich Pavilion – titled the ‘Colour Palace’ – stood out with its popping colours and joyful appearance. Working with the architects Pricegore, Ilori drew on both European and African cultural traditions, from textile markets in Lagos and Ridley Road market in London to the Doge’s Palace in Venice. The pavilion’s exuberant design speaks to the vivid fusions of multicultural London.

‘Colour Palace’ installed at Dulwich Picture Gallery

Yinka Ilori and Pricegore, commissioned by Dulwich Picture Gallery and the London Festival of Architecture
Structural engineering by HRW
Made by RASKL
Photographs by Andy Stagg
Courtesy of @studiostagg

1:75 model of the ‘Colour Palace’

Yinka Ilori and Pricegore
Made by Pricegore
2019
Paper, brass, MDF, acrylic, paint
Courtesy of Pricegore
To encourage friends and communities to gather at the ‘Colour Palace’, Ilori drew inspiration from Francis Kéré’s 2017 Serpentine Pavilion. Kéré’s design references a tree in his hometown of Gando, Burkina Faso, that acts as the central meeting point for members of the community.

**Serpentine Pavilion**

Kéré Architecture: Diébédo Francis Kéré
Collaborators: AECOM, Stage One Creative Services Ltd., Goethe-Institut
2017
Steel canopy, wooden shading elements, prefabricated wooden block wall system
Photograph by Iwan Baan
© Kéré Architecture, Iwan Baan
Early sketches envisioning the ‘Colour Palace’ in situ and in use

Yinka Ilori and Pricegore
2019
Pencil on paper
Courtesy of Pricegore
After the ‘Colour Palace’ was disassembled, the timber lengths were distributed to local schools and community sites to be reused. School students followed flat-pack instructions created by the architects, alma-nac, to build their own planters out of the colourful wood.

**Planter construction manual**

Planter design developed by alma-nac with students of Dulwich Prep London
Instructions by alma-nac
2019
Courtesy of alma-nac

**Students at Dulwich Preparatory School, London constructing the ‘Pavilion Planters’**

2019
Photographs by Belinda Lawley
Courtesy of Belinda Lawley

**A ‘Pavilion Planter’ from Dulwich Prep London with original timber from the ‘Colour Palace’**

alma-nac with students of Dulwich Prep London
2019
Re-purposed timber
Courtesy of Dulwich Prep London
Ilori’s designs often transform unwelcoming areas into places where local communities can enjoy going about their daily lives. Working with south London residents and students, Ilori transformed this foreboding underpass into a space of safety, happiness and wellbeing.

‘Happy Street’

Yinka Ilori in collaboration with Wandsworth Council, residents, and students of St George’s Church of England Primary School
2019
Commissioned by Wandsworth Council as part of the London Festival of Architecture
Photographs by Luke O’Donovan
©Luke O’Donovan

Early balustrade prototype for ‘Happy Street’, which was not incorporated into the final design due to cost

Yinka Ilori
2019
Metal, lacquer paint
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection
Prototype of one of the 56 pattern-enamel panels installed for ‘Happy Street’, selected for their low cost and durability

Yinka Ilori
Made by A.J Wells & Sons Ltd
2019
Vitreous enamel

Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection
Congolese artist Bodys Isek Kingelez creates models of a utopian, fantastical future where cities are playful and inclusive – ideas that also resonate in Ilori’s work. Ilori selected this sculpture as an important new addition to the Design Museum’s collection.

**Kinshasa Label**

Bodys Isek Kingelez  
1989  
Cardboard, plastic, felt-tip pen, paper, graphite  
Made possible with the support of the ACE/V&A Purchase Grant Fund, the Art Fund and the Conran Foundation  
**Art Fund**
Ilori’s work demonstrates an appreciation for the value of play. He explains that spaces for play “are incredibly important in providing the freedom to be together, learn from each other, and build relationships and memories.” Ilori is inspired by projects that encourage imagination and creativity through unconventional, often abstract structures.
This traditional Nigerian game is played on a carved wooden board using seeds from the Nigerian ayo plant. Each player tries to win the seeds from their opponent by moving them across the board. Ilori has painted this ayo board with colours and patterns.

**Ayo board painted by Yinka Ilori**

Yinka Ilori  
Unknown date  
Wood, ayo plant seeds  
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection
Working closely with residents, Ilori transformed this neglected park in Dagenham into a rich, revitalised playground. Drawing inspiration from the flamingos that once inhabited the park, Ilori designed bouncy spring rockers and a circular seating area alongside structures that encourage children’s creativity.

_Yinka Ilori x Create London: ‘The Flamboyance of Flamingos’_

By Create London
Duration: 4 minutes, 26 seconds
Film by Yvonne Shelling
Sound by Lysader Black
Commissioned by Create London in partnership with the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham

_Children playing in ‘The Flamboyance of Flamingos’, Parsloes Park, Dagenham, London_

Yinka Ilori in collaboration with Becontree Forever, The London Mural Company and setWorks, co-commissioned by Create London and the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
2022
Photographs by John Nguyen
Courtesy of PA Media
Sketch of the playground equipment for ‘The Flamboyance of Flamingos’, Parsloes Park, Dagenham, London

Yinka Ilori
2021
Pencil on paper
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection

Flamingo-shaped bench

Yinka Ilori
2022
Timber, lacquer paint
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection
Basketball backboard from ‘The Flamboyance of Flamingos’, Parsloes Park, Dagenham, London

Yinka Ilori
2021
Courtesy of the Design Museum

Basketball backboard from ‘Be The Best You Can Be’ basketball court, Bank Street Park, Canary Wharf, London

Yinka Ilori
2021
Courtesy of the Design Museum

Ilori’s ‘The Flamboyance of Flamingos’ playground in Dagenham includes a brightly coloured basketball court. A competition invited local school children to design a basketball for the court. The winner, eight-year-old Eve, had her exuberant design realised as a printed ball.

Eve Ellis basketball

Yinka Ilori
2021
Rubber
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection
Ilori’s vividly coloured basketball court aims to bring liveliness and activity to the housing estate next to the towering skyscrapers in Canary Wharf. The slogan ‘Be The Best You Can Be’ encourages everyone to take part, no matter their level or ability.

‘Be The Best You Can Be’ basketball court, Bank Street Park, Canary Wharf, London

Yinka Ilori, commissioned by Canary Wharf Group
2021
Photograph by Camilla McGregor
Courtesy of Canary Wharf Group
As well as the music itself, Ilori draws inspiration from the covers of his favourite albums. The bright colours and geometric design of this Fela Kuti album are a visible influence on Ilori’s designs for play spaces.

Open and Close

Fela Kuti and The Africa ’70
Designed by Mamuli Okotie-Eboh and Kayode Ademola
Produced by EMI (Nigeria) Ltd.
1971
Vinyl record
Design Museum Collection
Ilori’s interest in imaginative playscapes drew him to this immersive installation by design collective Assemble and artist Simon Terill. The installation recreates Brutalist concrete playground structures out of foam, resulting in a humorous, unexpected take on an architectural style that is often presented as serious or formal.

‘The Brutalist Playground’ at The Edge gallery in Bath
Assemble and Simon Terill
2015
Photograph by Paul Blakemore
 Courtesy of Paul Blakemore

Designed by Philip Powell and Hidalgo Moya
1956
Photograph by John Donat
©John Donat, RIBA Library Photographs Collection
Isamu Noguchi’s abstract playgrounds are a source of inspiration for Ilori. Noguchi is particularly interested in the concept of non-directive play. In place of typical playground equipment, the structures actively invite interaction and use in creative ways.

Playground equipment for Ala Moana Park, Hawaii

Isamu Noguchi
1940
Photograph by F. S. Lincoln
© Penn State University Libraries / The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / ARS - DACS

The playground on the Marquess Estate provided a childhood haven for Ilori and his friends. Ilori remembers its unique importance for him. “I held my playground so high in my heart,” he says, “you would think all the objects were made out of gold.”

The playground in the Marquess Estate, Islington, London

Darbourne & Darke
c.1976
Photograph by Joshua Abbott for Modernism in Metropolitan project
Courtesy of Joshua Abbott
By furnishing this public square with sculptural forms that offer surfaces for skateboarding, Ilori reimagines an underutilised space as a place for play. The colourful, modular ‘skateable objects’, designed with Tony Hawk’s Skateboard Project, invite the local community to reanimate the square.

‘Block Cubes’, a limited-edition skatepark
Yinka Ilori, commissioned by Unique Design x Savannah 2021
Photographs by Boe Parries
Courtesy of Boe Parries

Ilori’s design process starts with pen and paper. He tends to sketch fluidly, exploring solutions and making mistakes along the way which help him to develop the design. He begins by sketching in pencil and adds colour later.

Sketch of the ‘skateable objects’ for ‘Block Cubes’ skatepark
Yinka Ilori
2021
Pencil on paper
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori’s personal collection
For this skatepark design in Roubaix, France, Ilori studied the way in which skateboarders move and flow between obstacles. He collaborated with the local skateboarding community to ensure that the design would be not only functional but fun.

‘COLORAMA’ skatepark

Yinka Ilori, commissioned by La Condition Publique, Roubaix, France 2020
Photographs by Maxime Dufour
Courtesy of Yinka Ilori
The Design Museum would like to give special thanks to: Yinka Ilori, Myrto Kozaki and Ilori’s whole studio

Images
Every reasonable attempt has been made to identify owners of copyright where possible

Share your photos with us using @designmuseum #Yinkallori #ParablesForHappiness
Acknowledgements

Head of Curatorial
Priya Khanchandani

Displays Curator
Esme Hawes

Assistant Curator
Lara Chapman

Exhibition Design/Graphic Design
Bamidele Awoyemi

Project Management
Jessica Taylor and Rebecca Gremmo

Head of Collections
Tom Wilson

Graphics Production
Displayways

Installation and build:
Rowan Newton, Max Pevsner and Lewk Wilmshurst