

# Meet Jayden Ali, the Maverick Architect Behind the V&A's 'Fashioning Masculinities' Exhibition

The grand halls of London's Victoria and Albert Museum have played host to plenty of the world's most agenda-setting fashion exhibitions over the years—but none quite like this year's blockbuster "[Fashioning Masculinities: The Art of Menswear](#)." With a timeline that includes the full sweep of Western civilization (and far beyond), the show draws links between the past and menswear's liberated present through a wildly inventive design scheme that revels in the curiosities and contradictions of men's clothing across the centuries.

While the idea for the exhibition was first germinated by curators by Claire Wilcox and Rosalind McKeever almost a decade ago, another collaborator helped bring their vision to life: the buzzy 33-year-old architect Jayden Ali, whose firm, J.A. Projects, was tapped to design the show in 2020. "The curators work on the show for so many years, and then somebody comes in who is going to have such a big impact on what it looks and feels like, so it can be quite a risky and vulnerable moment," Ali says.

Thankfully, the creative alchemy between Ali and the curators was immediate, beginning with their plans for the first room, "Undressed," which explores how the idealized physique of classical antiquity continues to inform menswear today. "Those first moments where you come into the gallery, it's about strength, but it's also about fragility," says Ali. "You've got the strength of these projected, enlarged, celebrated Black bodies alongside the strength of Apollo. And then you have the fragility of it—those bodies are all projected onto soft fabric, or there's the fact those statues in the V&A's collection are casts and they're not made out of marble, they're replicas. There's already a fragility in that sense of artifice."

This thoughtful, layered approach to design became Ali's signature in 2015, when as an architecture student he created a flexible learning space for an East London school catering to children with severe behavioral and emotional needs. Since then, his eclectic lineup of projects has included a community-housing scheme, curating cultural programs for a café and bar space, and directing documentaries; in the past two years alone, his practice has ballooned from Ali working alone to supporting a team of 10. Next up, Ali will be heading to the Biennale Architettura 2023 in Venice, where he is cocurating the British Pavilion with Meneesha Kellay, Joseph Henry, and Sumitra Upham.

What underpins everything Ali does is a social conscience (reflected even in how he manages his studio, where everyone on his team has a day off a week to pursue their varied creative interests outside of architecture) and a keen emphasis on harnessing the opportunities coming his way to serve the communities that will use the spaces most. "I think good architects are advocates," says Ali. "I think what you're trying to do is to paint a vision of the world that you think is better, and hopefully that's compelling enough for other people to buy into it and for it to shift the discourse somehow. What we're doing is trying to make sense of the world."

Here, Ali tells *Vogue* about his fascination with the evolving possibilities of the museum, his unorthodox approach to running an architecture practice, and the community-led approach he's taking to the British Pavilion in Venice next year.

***Vogue*: Designing the "Fashion Masculinities" exhibition feels like a very different project—on paper, at least—from what you'd worked on previously. Did it feel that way to you, or did the same skills apply?**

**Jayden Ali:** It did, but because we're a relatively new practice, it only takes a couple of projects to shift the balance one way or the other. You only need two or three education projects to be education-heavy, and you only need two cultural projects to be culture-heavy. I'm also pretty upfront with people that being approached for that project came after the murder of George Floyd, and there are not many Black architects around. I was concerned that we were getting asked to bid for a lot of stuff because they just wanted Black architects on the short list but didn't quite know *why* they wanted us. I asked Evonne Mackenzie, who is the head of design at the V&A, why they were approaching us, and she

mentioned our pitch for the British Pavilion in Venice in 2019, and a lot of the themes were the same.

I think if you asked me at the beginning of the process, I'd say [the exhibition] seemed like a very different project, but if you asked me now, I'd say it sits relatively comfortably in my work. We've done a couple of museum pitches recently: I've just written the architectural contribution for Theaster Gates's Serpentine Pavilion, I write for *Elephant magazine*, I teach at Central Saint Martins, and I also make films. So "Fashioning Masculinities" is really the outcome of all those things. It took someone with a little bit of nous—especially at that moment a year and a half ago—to recognize that and to give us the chance to put that in the world. But if you see "Fashioning Masculinities" within that trajectory of curation and museums and culture, then I think it's not so much of an anomaly.

**As a trained architect, what is it about exhibition design and working with museums that interests you?**

I think my interest in museums touches on a few things. I'm interested in public and public-facing architecture that contributes to society but is also a commentary on society—even if architecture is just a vessel to channel cultural output or the embedded culture of everyday life. That's why we're working on markets, that's why we're working on youth centers—these are places where cultural activity takes place. These aren't as formal as the museum context, but they're about the tone and cadence of everyday life, which is always rich with culture. And I think that's a really interesting place to work, in that gap between the more formal cultural outputs and the more informal cultural outputs. We're trying to process the world around us and package that into some form of design, and that's what exhibitions do in a really overt way. We're trying to make sense of the world, so here are a bunch of objects and artifacts that form an essay, if you like, and this is how we want to show them.

**Did you want to defy the conventions of the traditional exhibition format in any specific way with your design for "Fashioning Masculinities"?**

I mean, immediately upon receiving the brief, you obviously start thinking about the idea of challenging masculinity, but you have to think in the context in which you're working. The

V&A is not a conservative institution—I think that’s proven by them commissioning us—but it can be perceived that way. I think our role there was to be more explicit about some form of social commentary. Masculinity has always shifted over time and is still shifting into the future. One thing we wanted to do was start with the deconstructed Craig Green suit, which is a sort of sibling to the finale, where you’re presented with the full spectrum of expressions of masculinity—it’s almost like a Quentin Tarantino movie where you’re presented with the end first and then you go back to the beginning in the first room, which is about antiquity. But even when looking at that period of antiquity, it can’t be business as usual, which is why you have these overt representations of Black bodies, which I think is really important. Our ambition is to produce public architecture that better speaks to and for the people it serves. It’s about relating to their culture and allowing them to see themselves reflected in the design of these spaces in the museums, in their public institutions. What’s missing here, and what can we speak confidently about?

**An important part of J.A. Projects is how interdisciplinary the team is and that you give everyone a day off a week to continue their creative pursuits outside architecture. What about that approach has proven fruitful for you?**

It’s a funny thing, isn’t it? Because a lot of people deem that to be relatively radical, but I just think it’s a contemporary way of working. I think I just know the value of wearing multiple hats; I know the value of writing and trying to formulate thoughts in a slightly different space and how that can then influence your other work. And I think that is really important in architecture, mainly because it takes so long to produce anything. You can’t capture a musing in the way that you can with a poem or a radio show or a short film or a visual essay, so you have to engage with these types of media too. The city is built upon a combination of the material and the immaterial. All of the social fabric that exists to allow our cities to run, our political systems, our financial systems, all come from modes of belief—these collective imaginaries that allow things to get built and be financed. But you can’t grasp that stuff physically. I think what we’re seeking to do is to manage and manipulate all of the intangible bits of the city and marry them with the tangible or the physical. And I think you need space and time to do that. So it’s really important that people carve time outside of that to explore things that are interesting to them. What’s really important to you? How the hell are you making sense of the world you’ve inherited? How are you

processing that in order to project some alternative future? Where are the overlaps of what we're doing here? Can we bring this together somehow?

**J.A. Projects has obviously grown extremely rapidly. Is there an end goal in mind or a sweet spot in terms of size and working rhythm that would feel right to you?**

Everyone at a senior level tells me no, it is just this for the rest of your life now and you have to get on with it. *[Laughs.]* But I do think it would be good to have a few more people. We have 10 people at the moment, which is a lot for me to manage while also trying to retain some creative juice. You either want to be a bit smaller, which puts you in the kind of perilous world of really small fees, which makes it very difficult to stay that size, or you want to be a little bit bigger, which allows you to have a secondary level of management or at least have an associate—someone who's quite senior and can also run things. I think we should be 12 to 15, dependent on work. I think it would liberate me again to do the stuff that I'm good at. But I'm really thankful for the team because they are getting better every single day. In a new practice, I think it's really important to incubate a culture. I talk a lot about culture, and it has different meanings in different settings, but I don't think architecture is just about architecture. I think architecture is about the process of making, and you need time with people to do that. I'm really happy for the time that we've had because everyone in the practice has been contributing to the way in which we work over the past two, two-and-a-half years. It's been a steep learning curve for me and a steep learning curve for them, but I hope they're proud of the direction we're going in. We seem to be able to work on projects that we love, in places that inspire us, and with people that inspire us all the time. So long may that continue.

**Finally, you're deep in preparation for the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale next year. How much can you tell me about what you have planned?**

I can't necessarily say too much about Venice because the British Council will kill me. *[Laughs.]* But I suppose the backstory is that we're a group of friends that decided to bid for it together, and I think that's very different from a professionally put-together team trying to work things out along the way. We are genuinely concerned with and moved by the same things and have the same motivations, which is to address the duality of social justice and climate justice that is so important to our cities and the world in which we

operate. We all exist in museums or the cultural sphere, and we're concerned with how the objects in institutions are displayed and the narratives that are celebrated within them. We're interested in switching things up and ruffling feathers and making sure it's not business as usual.

Photos: Thomas Adank



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