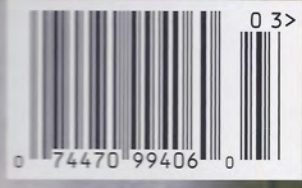


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An architect invokes Caribbean sensibilities in her award-winning designs in the United States.

Margaret McEvoy meets
Diane Taitt

Photography courtesy GTM Architects

CARIBBEAN CURVES

ARCHITECT DIANE TAITT HAS successfully married her Trinidadian roots to years of experience in design. After a long journey that has garnered her six architectural awards and landed her as partner in one of Washington DC's top architecture firms (GTM Architects) Taitt is still filled with that one thing that school, money and even time can't buy — passion.

Her co-workers say she has a signature style. Fluidity, texture, and colour — that's Diane. Like the award-winning space she designed for the firm Creative Associates, a not for profit international organisation providing educational intervention in war-torn countries. Taitt designed a centralised, curvaceous volume of open space carved through two floors. It is abstractly reminiscent of seascapes and waters of the world. The connecting stairwell at the central core is wrapped in elliptical



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forms, recognisable universal forms, symbolic of hope, unity and oneness. Taitt explained, "The sculptural space helps foster a sense of community and employee ownership of the corporate mission. A neutral palette of white, glass, concrete and stainless steel imbue a minimalist material language, absent of decoration, yet rich in architectural and sculptural form." Taitt said "the grounding experience is a journey within a shell".

Or take the EYA Realtors office that strongly features the colours of the sun and the earth. The colours of mangoes, ginger, pear and linen were used. This contemporary, chic, urban, open-floor plan invites visitors into the storefront space. Various work areas were defined by dynamic changes in floor materials and patterns, sculptural forms and floating soffits. Taitt made a conscious departure from the typical floor to ceiling traditional office layout, creating a blur between open and closed areas, private and public spaces.

When asked how growing up in Trinidad contributes to her aesthetic sense, she replied, "A lot. It's all about the sensory experience, and not at all a literal kind of thing. I always approach design as a journey, a sensory movement through space and time. My childhood experiences—like feeling the grass beneath my bare feet, feeling the sand between my toes, watching the sun rise with my father on Store Bay beach in Tobago, watching silvery fish dancing in the early morning light, smelling aromatic fruit and flowers the intangible transference of experience, and the essence of a Caribbean land and a people—make me the designer I am today."

Her love of light and wanting to "bring the outside in" is evident in one of her recent projects—the YMCA in Fort Washington, Maryland.

Getting to know the client and getting inside their heads about what they want is key for Taitt. "My approach is holistic,



soup to nuts. I sit with the client, really listen to their goals and their mission statement. In this case, the Y's mission statement was "to build strong kids, strong families and strong communities"—a tall order for any design team. But when the 35,000 square feet of a former supermarket were finally gutted, Taitt and her team relished the opportunity to work on "a blank canvas".

They began the task of rebranding the YMCA. "I wanted to create a child care area that would inspire, delight, excite, and stimulate parents and children alike. I chose to use custom designed graphics integrated into the space, playful peekaboo windows, three-dimensional walls and bright colours."

Above left: The YMCA's mission statement is on a 17-foot high entrance wall

Above: The juice bar at the YMCA is wrapped in resin panels with inlaid bamboo

Right: Children meander along three-dimensional walls, peer through peekaboo windows and marvel at ceiling graphics





The wellness area featuring layers of visual transparency, pale blue exposed structure, and whimsical design elements that include 30-foot floating canopies make for a hip, contemporary, inviting community space.

The end result won accolades from the professional community. Brian Libby, writing in *Architecture Week*, described the success. "Not only does the parade of squares and circles in yellow, blue, red and green add fun to the interior, but it also seems to represent the continuous stream of people from all cultures who come to YMCAs—or perhaps not quite like this one."

From the oval-shaped windows to the water wall to the child-height views into the gym, to the custom graphic design elements, Taitt says she put everything she had into the project. Attention to detail went into everything from the juice bar (wrapped in bamboo-inlaid fibreglass panels) to the graphics in the childcare centre. When asked if that was her favourite project, she smiled and said, "My next project is my favourite."



Above left: Visual transparency and neutral palette of white, glass and stainless steel imbue a minimalist material language

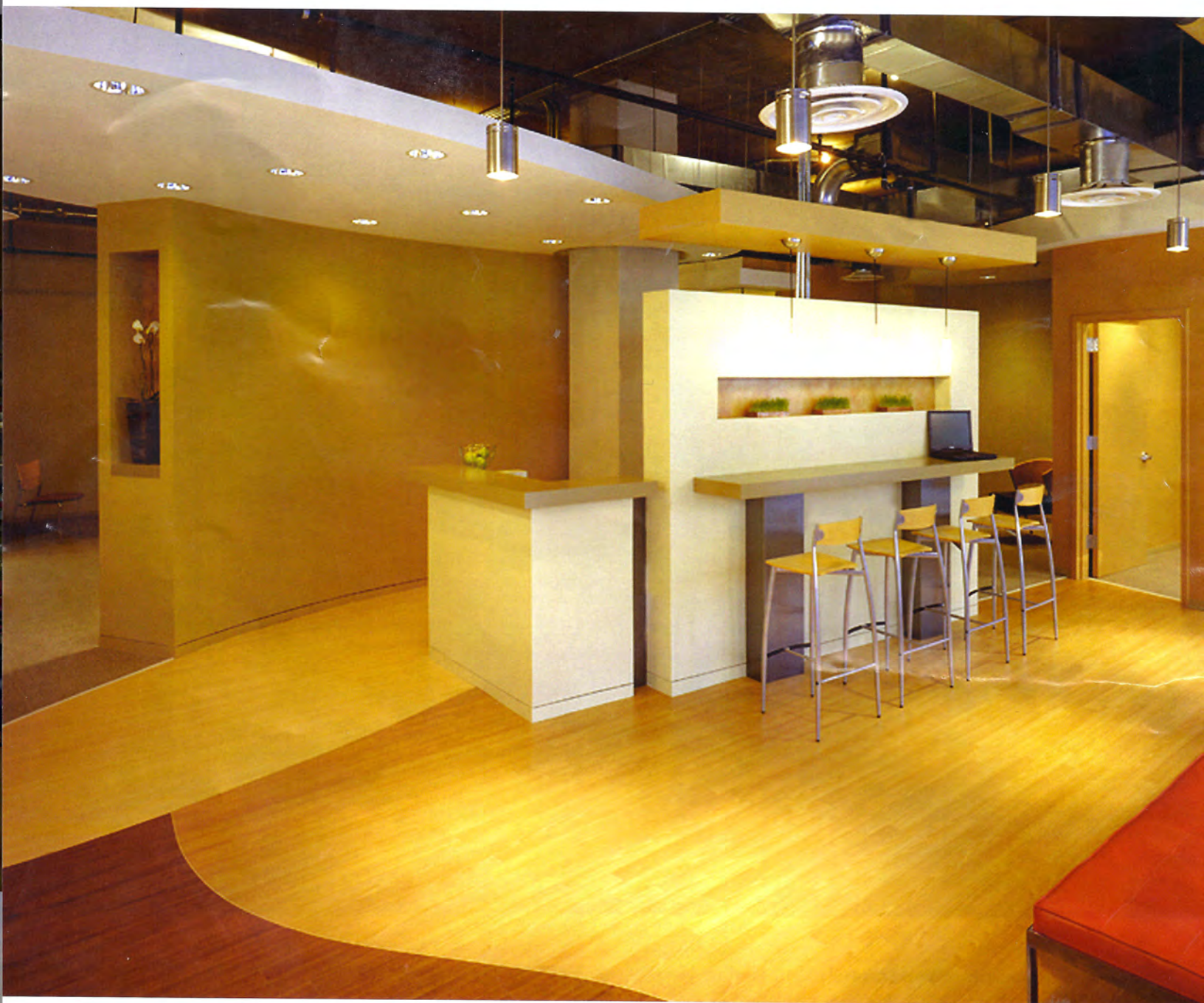
Left: Red and black curved graphics wall at child care entrance

Above: Office of GTM Architects, winner of the American Society of Interior Designers Award

Her passion for art began in her Bishop Anstey High school years in Trinidad, but it was an island scholarship after A' levels that landed her in the field of architecture. At the Pratt Institute in New York, Taitt says a whole new world opened up for her. After working several years in New York City, she became disillusioned with architecture and got an MBA. She struggled for years to find her place, in the professional world. But her spirit was too free for corporate America, so she eventually made it back to architecture, this time armed with the understanding of how the business side works, and the conviction to be true to herself.

Now almost two decades after leaving Trinidad, she is able to freely express her creativity and bring that "Trini style" to the highest level of design. Taitt believes that the only boundaries in life are the ones we allow to bind us. She travelled extensively through college and after, to Japan, North Africa, Europe and South America. That cultural experience and her West Indian roots cemented her design aesthetic.

"When I meet clients, I don't push my Caribbean roots down their throat. It is infused in me. Where we come from absolutely influences our work.... With the Trinidad style, the way we walk, the way we talk, it's there—we sexy! My designs all have the Caribbean aesthetic—the curves of our mountains, our landscape, our colours." Taitt has not put her expertise to work "at home" yet but she longs to see more "contemporary vernacular" design in Trinidad, in architecture, interior design and furniture design. "In Tobago and the country there is no fear of colour. I love that! There is no such thing as not matching; all colours exist harmoniously in Nature, so who are we to decide that pink and orange don't match, or that we



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Whenever she wants the "ultimate inspiration colour palette," Taitt refers to Nature, the greatest artist and designer of all times. "The sea world is one of my favourite inspirations, just an incredible burst of colour. I am always impressed no matter how many times I see the beautiful patterns on the fish or the coral reefs."

Without a doubt, it is her roots that have sustained her through years of design projects in New York and Washington, DC. She is grateful for the love and support of her husband

and partner, Richard Chandleur, and her daughter, her aromatic flower, Ylang Ylang. Does she want her daughter to be an architect? "I want her to do whatever she wants to do, but just do it with passion."

Her dream for the future is to connect more to "home," to Trinidad. And plans are already underway to get her new company up and running.

De Space Designs will fulfill her long-held desire to introduce a line of West Indian furniture and still keep strong alliances with the design community in Washington. Given her track record, De Space can't be far off. M