

NEW WAYS

## The AJ meets LionHeart – architecture's poet in residence

15 January, 2020 By [Ella Jessel](#)



*Ella Jessel* catches up with Rhael Cape, aka LionHeart, who has carved out a niche writing poetry for practices in what is often a cathartic creative exchange

Poet Rhael Cape, aka LionHeart, was on his way to a poetry show in east London three years ago when he passed a shopfront full of architectural models.

The pull of the window display at Michel Schranz Design + Architecture was too much for the former architecture student and he walked in and asked to speak to the owner, Michel Schranz.

'I don't want money from you,' he reassured Schranz. 'I want to talk to you and your staff about poetry and architecture.' It was an unusual request, but the architect agreed to give it a shot.

From this first stint at the Hackney-based practice in 2017, LionHeart continued to knock on doors. Today he has carved out his own niche as the UK architecture profession's very own poet in residence.

It's a journey that has taken him from PLP Architects to Belsize Architects, Squire & Partners and Grimshaw and as far as Japan where he has visited practices such as Kengo Kuma Architects, Junya Ishigami + Associates and Tezuka Architects.

A crowd of over a hundred gathered at central London's Building Centre at the end of last year to watch him perform a collection of poems born out of conversations with individual architects. This intimate and highly personal creative process has earned him the nickname the 'poet therapist'.

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The 32-year-old from Kentish Town, north London, has clearly tapped into something. So why do architects need a poet in residence? And what is a typical day in the life like for one?

We meet at Grimshaw's offices in Clerkenwell, where he has just finished a year-long residency. LionHeart swoops into the lobby in a whirlwind of warmth, showering the reception desk with hugs.

Poetry residencies, he explains as we settle in a glass-fronted basement meeting room, can take a variety of forms. His own approach is to interview architects one-on-one before going away and writing a [tailor-made poem](#) for each person he talks to, inspired by their discussion.

As a spoken word artist, LionHeart prefers to perform the poems to the practice, but if the company prefers he will simply email architects their personal poem once it is written, like a unique present.

'I'll ask them what interests or intrigues them about architecture, or what their favourite childhood building was, and from that alone a conversation will spiral,' he says. 'Many architects say that they have never been asked these questions.'



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*Source: Anthony Coleman*

His interview subjects often find themselves opening up unexpectedly about their emotions. 'A lot of people break down. Everyone is pent up, not just in architecture but in the work environment,' he explains.

Through this creative exchange, poetry almost becomes catharsis. Ahead of the interview, I canvassed views from my AJ colleagues as to what a resident poet might be. The general view seemed closer to a bard in an ivory tower, composing verse about the company or the profession. But LionHeart's human approach could not be more different.

'I'm not writing a poem that is a manifesto for the architecture firm,' he says, making the point that 'the firm exists because of every individual in here'.

He adds: 'The poems are about architecture but there are gems specifically for the person. One thing I have learned is how to thread meaning into something which doesn't say "this is the answer" and throws it into your face. It has to be welcomed like a form of seduction.'

How do architects react when they receive his poems? 'One woman emailed to tell me I had really "got" her,' he says. 'We're still talking now. She said the poem had helped her make a choice in life. After my first or second day at Grimshaw, someone emailed to say I made them love architecture again. That was great.'

I didn't realise how much poetry is needed in architecture

Staff at Grimshaw, which initially brought the poet in as part of its 'wellness week', say having a poet in residence 'far exceeded expectations'. Architect Matt Sawyer says LionHeart's work allowed staff to 'examine their professional and personal lives, resulting in a surprising shift in focus in what is important'.

It's unsurprising LionHeart is at home in the industry – both his grandfather and his father are architects and his dad was keen for him to follow in his footsteps. 'My dad said to me: I'm going to kick you out of the house unless you study architecture,' he recalls. 'He was a Rastafarian architect from Grenada and he worked his way up from the bottom, from carpenter, electrician, surveyor to architect.'

### **The Absence of Light**

*for Lisa Martinez (Grimshaw)*

Light bleeds through the dark recess of an incision,  
a terminal idea with a fading gradient  
carefully emerging as though an umbilical chord  
is wrapped around its potential.

Here, the architect prepares us for what hasn't fully  
bloomed: light is an eager actor in this theatrical performance,  
its part to play must be directed. Architects are playwrights of light,  
but master architects are playwrights of its absence.

They know we enter: an audience member  
expectations first, feet second,  
hoping for a suspension of disbelief  
only if the stage design of our curiosity, is fed  
to crave more. This illusion of absence  
Zumthor does this really well.

I like the way Luis Barragán or Frank Lloyd Wright frame,  
the way light is threaded, sewn and embroidered  
into the fabric of their buildings: a resonance  
curiously dripping through an expanse.

Remember, I came from cookie cutter suburbia  
so there's a monotony that wrecks  
in anything which feels like it's been here before,  
and hasn't found the beauty, in the application  
of its absence.

It was the ever-present lion imagery in his youth, a result of being raised a Rastafarian, that partially inspired his name, LionHeart, which he says he chose to represent his desire for 'autonomy and supremacy' over his heart.

Giving in to the pressure, he went to study architecture at the University of East London. He enjoyed the theory and some of the lectures but by the second year he felt as though he was just 'getting through ... They tried to teach us MicroStation in two weeks. By the third year it felt like there was like around 19 people left [down from hundreds at the start].'

During this difficult time, LionHeart says poetry was the one thing he could ‘grab hold of’. He had been writing poems since he was 18 or 19 – though he didn’t identify them as such at the time – as a release from difficult experiences at home and at school. ‘I didn’t have that safety net in a person so having a page became that person,’ he says.



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*Source: Anthony Coleman*

He first realised poetry could be a career when he jumped on stage at a poetry jazz night in Embankment and got a standing ovation. ‘I was like: this is what I want to do, I want to impact people in this way. Now I’ve been a poet for nine years.’

His dad seems to have come around, too. ‘I brought him to Grimshaw,’ says LionHeart, ‘and he was like OK, it makes sense now. As a parent you want to see your children survive. I think he respects me now because I didn’t just follow the crowd.’

In conversation, LionHeart’s curiosity is infectious and I count at least two high-fives during our interview, which overruns considerably. He takes his role as interview subject very seriously (‘Am I answering your question?’ he challenges himself, analysing his own responses). Schranz, who recalls their 2017 encounter as a ‘wondrous surprise’, describes him as possessing an ‘excess of positive energy and a very inquisitive mind’. His Twitter bio even carries the mantra ‘positive vibes’.

But he insists he hasn’t always been this ‘hyper-social person’. In the past, he struggled with depression, anxiety and selective mutism, a childhood anxiety disorder which makes communicating in social scenarios difficult.

‘There were dark periods where I wanted to hide away and didn’t leave my room for two months,’ he says. ‘In black Caribbean households, most things get resolved inside the house. It’s not really talked about. I now try and talk about it a lot because it dispels the stigma.’

Architecture was one of the things that helped, he explains – especially visiting buildings such as the Barbican, which he describes as having a ‘medicinal’ effect on his wellbeing. ‘I’m not sure about that word “medicinal”, but every time I went there I was getting better. I realised I need to be in spaces like this.’

I ask about his poetic influences. He mentions the US novelist James Baldwin and the author and poet Claudia Rankine among others and says he is also a self-confessed ‘TED Talk geek’. As for architects, he admires the ‘audacious’ Zaha Hadid as well as David Adjaye for the way he ‘conveys poetry in his work’.

He says he wants to see more architects from a diverse range of backgrounds. ‘There is a rich diversity of experience; we’re missing out.’

### **Legacy, Against the Test of Time**

*for Dani (Belsize Architects)*

1

Each brick has resisted being drained of water,  
just as our bodies have, until the time  
comes where the kiln of depression surmounts us.

Lovers of brick are linked somehow,  
with those of us who will burn,  
in order to build.

‘Buildings falling to pieces give me something  
new buildings can’t’, their shell echoes  
the life once lived.

‘A new building can’t tell you what has happened,  
because it’s just starting to tell its story’,  
timelessness, has an undeniably visible quality.

2

The oculus is where grandeur welcomes  
the effects of the world we often  
shelter away from, the rain visits

to return what the kiln of depression  
has divorced, the wind is a forced marriage,  
the trees bend by the knee

and knot ties to the sun. What I mean is...  
I love her is what I’m saying, like trees that bend  
with the wind without breaking spirit,

I withstand it all, like the pantheon.  
I just want to grow with her, bending,  
until I fall. Just one more year,

let my skin whisper all the weathering  
I’ve overcome to let our fragility tell you, we  
are still here.

What needs to be done to improve architecture's poor diversity? 'People aren't being considered, it's that easy. There's also a lack of understanding that as a black person going into a predominantly white space I'm already thinking about how I'm being perceived.'

'This is then controlling how I'm going to act depending on how confident I am as a person. I'm not saying if you have a black student you need a black lecturer; I'm saying there should be more sensitivity.' He says the industry needs to be more vocal about the issues, and challenge the existing infrastructures.

It is possible a poet in residence could be perceived as a corporate luxury. Perhaps, I suggest, architects need more help connecting with wider society than with themselves. LionHeart agrees architecture can often be an echo chamber and society needs to be brought into the design process more.

However he also insists emotions deserve a 'higher standing' than they are currently given. 'I put emotions first in every element of my life,' he says. 'I've noticed that within architecture there is a hyper sense of practicality.'

As for what is next for architecture's travelling poet, he says he has 'plenty of ambition' for working in architecture and is still in talks with Grimshaw about 'how they can use me differently'. A trip to their offices in Sydney could be on the cards, which he says would be 'impeccable', and he also has his weekly show on BBC Radio London.

What else he has learned about architecture from his years as a poet in residence? 'Everyone is suffering silently,' LionHeart says after a pause. He likens it to a certain culture or 'code of conduct' which isn't spoken about.

'Whether we're talking about interns not being paid or working long hours, there is so much people are going through. Some firms require you to leave your emotions at the door. I didn't realise how much poetry is needed in architecture.'