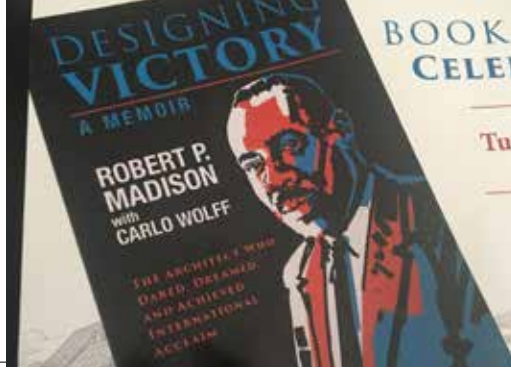


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Architect Robert P. Madison set to release memoir next week.

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THE REAL DEAL PRESS

Volume 4 / Issue 23 / March 31, 2019

Rebel with a Cause and a Vision

By **R. T. Andrews**
EDITOR

Malaz Elgemiabby sits high in the elevated storefront window of Fresh Brewed Coffee — a comfy side street coffee shop which functions as her de facto field office. From here she can see past, present and future.

For this article, we agreed to reference her by her Instagram tag, El Malaz, a neat play on her given name.

El Malaz translates roughly as “The Sanctuary,” aka The Ultimate Safe Space, aka Heaven. “I was,” she tells me, “named for a place.” Those who see naming as destiny will not be surprised that El Malaz, who was born in Khartoum, Sudan, in northern Africa, has grown up to be an architect, a designer of spaces.

Two dominant institutions that anchor the northern edge of Ohio City, just up the street from the West Side Market, frame her sightline on the gray and chilly Friday afternoon of our meeting.

To her left is Lutheran Hospital, now part of the Cleveland Clinic system. Diagonally across the street sits Riverview Tower, a Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority estate for seniors. Its 500 units present a fifteen-story exterior wall

of brick and glass that obscures what would otherwise be a compelling view across the Cuyahoga River of Cleveland’s downtown and Eastside.

Ohio City is synonymous with eclectic these days. In the course of a brisk walk along and just off its central West 25 Street artery, one can encounter the century-plus West Side Market, an abundance of trendy restaurants, craft breweries, neighborhood businesses, and new developments that more than murmur “gentrification.” There is also a seven-acre farm maintained by refugees, and two large public housing projects — the aforementioned Riverview for seniors, and the much larger Lakeview Estates, home to perhaps 1500 residents, that sit in isolation just north of the freeway that runs along Lake Erie. Other key neighborhood aspects include St. Ignatius High School and several bus lines that run close to the well-used RTA West 25th train station.

All of these neighborhood features, especially the CMHA estates, occupy a good portion of El Malaz’s fertile mind: she understands architecture to be a process and not just a project. She has been busy these past few months understanding this neighborhood, listening to its residents, understanding their concerns, earning their trust. She even became an Uber driver for



“When people don’t understand their role in what is happening around them, it leads to continuation of the situation.”

two weeks because she wanted to learn and understand how people experience their neighborhood.

El Malaz has been commissioned to design a new Welcome Center just north of Riverside Tower that all of Ohio City’s disparate parts can and will claim and use and share as an extension of their space. She is keen that the new center be a place where the entire community feels at home. With Ohio City’s extremes of income and complexity, that will be no small feat. While Riverside is probably CMHA’s most racially di-

verse estate, El Malaz is finding that Ohio City is segregated more along socioeconomic class measures than racial ones. She notes that less affluent residents, including those in the Lakeview estate, essentially have no communal space to call their own. While they may be welcome at any number of retail or commercial establishments, even the Dollar Store has a price.

Remarkably, the building that El Malaz and her team are charged with reimagining through her intensive community engagement

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Rebel with a Cause and a Vision

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process was Riverview's former community center long ago. It has been used as a storage facility for the past ten years.

The consequences of having no communal space are manifold. One result is not feeling fully at home in your own neighborhood. El Malaz notes that local meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous have to be held in Riverview's open public area, essentially rendering them A meetings instead of AA.

Notwithstanding the challenges of getting the community design process right, this is a dream assignment for El Malaz. Fifteen years ago she was a 15-year old starting collegiate medical studies in Khartoum, mostly to fulfill family expectations. Always more interested in community building, and possessing an independent streak — she was prosecuted as a teens for wearing trousers — she abandoned medical studies and ran away to London as soon as she turned 18. Once there, with relatively limited fluency in English, and having no family, friends or others to rely on, she doggedly made the rounds of higher education schools until she discovered a match at London Metropolitan University. There she found her calling, graduating four years later with a degree in interior architecture and design and, oh yes, the Best Portfolio Award for her class.

Free, female, Arab, and 21, El Malaz soon arrived on her third continent and began to practice architecture in Qatar. She married a fellow Sudanese she had met in medical school, gave birth to a son in 2013 and picked up a master's in fine arts from Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar.

Architecture as Social and Political Expression

Architecture for El Malaz has never been a sterile pursuit of sight lines and weight-bearing analysis. While her square business card quotes [Sir David Adjaye](#) — “For me architecture is a social act.” — it seems that her sense of community, her commitment to process, and her proclivity to direct action make architecture a social and political act.

Case in point. While in Qatar, El Malaz was contracted to design an orphanage for a client in Sudan, where decades of military rule and strife have devastated much of civil society. For El Malaz, what has been going on there has not so much been a civil war narrative as much of the international press has styled it, but an autocratic strongman waging active war against the people.

One consequence of the breakdown in Sudanese civilian society has been a sharp rise in orphans. Many are not orphans in the

traditional sense but babies abandoned in droves by their mothers. The circumstances of abandonment — newborns left in trash bins, on door steps, and other public places — meant that fully 50% of these babies died within a week of their discovery. Interrogating the situation, El Malaz questioned whether her commission should be to design a combination orphanage-funeral home.

She designed a research methodology to gain an understanding of the mothers who by their actions were producing orphans. “I abandoned things that were of value to me. I abandoned a respected art project. I abandoned my voice.” (She stopped talking for a week.)

This work led to her transformative project, “[The Orphanage of Things](#)”, a designed performance to create an understanding of the stigma and fear of abandonment. El Malaz came to understand that the vast majority of the abandoned babies had been born to unwed mothers who faced ostracism, public lashing, and even death by stoning if discovered. Public attitudes located blame for these children primarily with the mother, then with her family for failing to instill proper values, and then in descending order, to religion, society, and finally, *remarkably*, the father.

El Malaz staged a public performance designed to illustrate the problem. Leading government officials were invited, seated front and center and, along with every audience member, given an egg. No details of what was to occur were disclosed beforehand. The performance was so stark, startling and impactful that she had to leave the country before the eggs thrown at her onstage had time to dry.

A post performance survey showed a spectacular reversal. Fathers rose to the top of the list, followed by society. Attendees recognized that while girls had been schooled on proper behavior, society had never educated boys on their responsibilities. With one brilliant turn, El Malaz was able to demonstrate that the mothers of unborn children had been abandoned by their mates, their families and society long before they, in desperation, had left their newborns in public places.

“When people don't understand their role in what is happening around them,” El Malaz says, “it leads to continuation of the situation.”

As El Malaz discussed the situation in Sudan, and the growing rebellion against its longtime ruler, [Omer al-Bashir](#), she shared that she had friends who had been imprisoned by the government, and family members under surveillance and in jeopardy. Her father, she said — a local government leader

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THE **REAL DEAL**
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Publisher & Editor: R.T. Andrews

Layout & Design: Steve Aresmon Thomas

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The Real Deal Press

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QUOTE of the Week
“Politics is not the art of the possible. It consists in choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable.”

— John Kenneth Galbraith

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Rebel with a Cause and a Vision

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who has become increasingly outspoken in opposition — was an assassination target just last month.

But when asked if we should temper parts of her story to protect friends and family back home, El Malaz was emphatic that we should do the reverse. She shared that she had carried out a solo act of protest in San Diego, San Francisco releasing balloons carrying the likeness of a well-known political prisoner with the imprint “Free Me”. When she reprised the effort in Cleveland joined by the local Sudanese community in the release of hundreds of balloons, social media carried the message back to Khartoum, where the ensuing popular response led to a noticeable improvement in the political environment.

El Malaz says she plans to be in New York City this Saturday to join a demonstration against al-Bashir, the only national leader in the world facing outstanding warrants issued by

the International Criminal Court.

Not long after El Malaz’s work on the Abandonment project, she emigrated to the United States. This time she arrived with credentials, and the good fortune to meet Sandra Madison, the architect and CEO of Madison International, shortly after arriving in Cleveland. Ever since the firm was founded in 1954 — the first African American architectural firm in Ohio — it has had a reputation as a haven and support station for developing minority architects. El Malaz interned there for several months before moving on to R. L. Bowen Architects, where among other projects, she worked on municipal jails for Rocky River and Beachwood. Of course, she sought and incorporated community input into her design work.

Asked about the source of her activism, El Malaz cited her grandfather’s spirit. “He was a Sufi, a seeker

of truth.” And for her, leadership is made manifest in service. “Leadership is a community work.”

The Welcome Center appears to be just that, with community partners including CMHA, The Cleveland Clinic, The Cleveland Foundation, and LAND Studio.

El Malaz has worked hard to overcome the lack of trust in civic engagement and public policy processes she encountered in getting to know Ohio City residents. She says she learned that the four values almost unanimously prized for incorporation into the new center are Community, Inclusion, Diversity, and Dignity. Naturally, she is embarking with partners upon a project that will put disposable cameras in the hands of residents and send them out to return with images illustrating what dignity means to them.

Speaking of dignity, El Malaz would like to be able to visit her



family in Sudan, notwithstanding the risks to her personal safety. But she is unlikely to go. Sudan is on the travel ban put in place shortly after Donald Trump took office. El Malaz fears that should she leave, she might not be allowed to return.

That would be a severe loss to Cleveland and to what would seem to be a natural for her next commission: helping develop a community response to Cleveland’s lead crisis.

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This Week In Politics

East Cleveland's King Names the Elephant in the Room



By R. T. Andrews
EDITOR

East Cleveland Mayor Brandon King performed a public service in his State of the City speech yesterday that was rare for its candor.

Amidst the myriad rote thanks to dozens of people typical of these ceremonial quasi-official events, and the celebration of past successes and future expectations, King took time to name the city's biggest demon, and to announce its slaying and betrayal.

King acknowledged the city's continued status in fiscal emergency, a condition it has been in for about 26 of the past 30 years and from which King says the city should emerge in 2021. He expects the city's revenues would grow by a million dollars this year, a full ten percent increase over its

present \$10 million budget.

In discussing how the city sank back into fiscal emergency in 2013, King fingered not the city's troubled finances but its political culture.

King's remarks were spot on. This reporter remembers attending a council meeting last decade and being astounded at the visceral sensation he gained almost immediately of a mutual loathing between the executive and legislative branches. Subsequent visits confirmed that the mutual enmity was based not on any substantive policy matters but an underlying culture devoid of any element of respect and civility.

After King's talk, delivered before a SRO crowd of about 160 residents at the city's Salvation Army headquarters on Doan Ave., a longtime resident told me the city's political culture had been cancerous since the 1980s, when there was consideration on council for a standing fund in anticipation of suing the mayor.

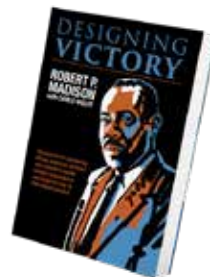
King's apparent success in improving the culture at city hall since he took office in December 2016 has been key in building relationships with the many external partners East Cleveland needs to rebound.

Community Bulletin Board

Detroit pastor keynotes National Action Network local chapter luncheon

Rev. Dr. Wendell Anthony, pastor of Fellowship Chapel in Detroit, and for the past 25 years president of the NAACP's largest local branch, will speak at the 19th annual empowerment luncheon of the National Action Network's local affiliate this Thursday, April 4. The luncheon will take place at Greater Abyssinia Baptist Church, 1161 East 105 St. [44108]. For tickets [\$25] or more information, call 216.374.0913.

Architect Robert Madison memoir out next month



The increasingly beloved architectural pioneer

Robert Madison will re-release his memoir, *Designing Victory*, next week. Madison, 95, became Ohio's first black registered architect in 1950 after graduating from Western Reserve University School of Architecture in 1948. Act 3 LLC of Cleveland Heights is publishing the book. For more information, [visit here](#).

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