[MUSIC PLAYING]

DARIEN CARR: Hey, everybody.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: I'm Tara Oluwafemi.

DARIEN CARR: And I'm Darien Carr. And we are Masters of Architecture students at the GSD.*The Nexus* is produced in conjunction with a commitment by the Frances Loeb Library to acquire and create an open-access bibliography of various media suggested by the community, at the intersection between race and design.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Lesley Lokko graduated from the Bartlett School of Architecture University College, London, with the BSE Arc in 1992 and an MArch in 1995. And went on to earn a PhD in architecture from the University of London in 2007.

In 2004, she published her first novel,*Sundowners,* a Guardian top 40 bestseller. Following up with 11 more novels. Lokko has taught architecture all over the globe. In partnership with the University of Johannesburg, she established the Graduate School of architecture in 2014, and became the director of school.

She is currently founder and director of the African Futures Institute in Accra, Ghana. In 2021 she was appointed as the curator of the 18th Venice Biennale of Architecture, set to open in 2023. Thank you so much for joining us.

DARIEN CARR: Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast.

LESLEY LOKKO: Thanks for the invitation.

DARIEN CARR: So we wanted to start with the African Futures Institute. We have some specific questions about that. But for our listeners, could you speak a bit about the process of what you hope to accomplish and what you hope to make with that?

LESLEY LOKKO: Sure. I don't know if people will know but I started a school of architecture in Johannesburg, it was the Graduate School of Architecture.

DARIEN CARR: Yes.

LESLEY LOKKO: Ran that for about five years, and it was started from scratch. And in retrospect, I now understand that that was a kind of pilot project for the African Futures Institute. And it's an institute, not a school of architecture. It's located in Accra.

And it has two main-- or actually three main prongs. One is a public event platform, which is to do with speakers, guest lectures, talks, films, symposia, and so on. The other is a teaching program which we will start in 2024, partly because of the Biennale appointment. It's kind of thrown the schedule out a little bit. And a research agenda. And the idea is, really, to bring into existence a new generation of African and diaspora architects and practitioners. So, yeah.

DARIEN CARR: Yeah, amazing, thank you. We had a quote about it. And we were looking at the About section and how it starts with the series of what if questions. What if a new school of architecture suddenly emerged from a new and unexpected place?

What if Africa and the African diaspora held the key to overcoming so many contemporary challenges of race, environmental justice, and new forms of urbanism? It's interesting for us to consider the what if nature of the African Future Institute. What has been your relationship to that question over time? Especially in connection to your practice as a writer.

So for me, your transition to fiction writing is heavily connected to what we as architects do. To what extent is architecture utopian pursuit? And what's your relationship between utopia and fiction? Especially in relation to the what if nature of the institute.

LESLEY LOKKO: I think-- I study something else before I studied architecture, actually two degrees when I started and stopped and did I degree in sociology. And one of the things that was really formative for me about architecture was the nature of the proposition in architecture. It's not enough to be critical or to study something, you have to propose something.

And so there's something in the nature of the discipline that's very what if, because every act of design is a kind of proposition to make something better, in a way. And fiction for me was a way of exploring the same issues that I've always been interested in architecture.

But 30 years ago, I think, questions of race and identity were very much seen as peripheral and marginal to the pursuit of architectural or knowledge. So fiction became a kind of safe space in a way where I could explore those ideas through the medium of writing. But also writing is a form of representation.

And I think one of the things that's really interesting about architecture is that unlike doctors, lawyers-- doctors practice on human bodies, lawyers use language, architects use a kind of intermediary medium, which is representation. Architects don't actually build buildings, they build representations.

So the nature of writing as a form of representation is very interesting to me. And when I came back into architecture after 10, 12 years of fiction writing, suddenly the territory had opened up a little bit more. And especially in Africa where you could use forms of performance, where you could use oral histories, we could use film, we could use different media.

And that suddenly seemed to open up new territory. And which is why I think the new directions and where this discipline will go are going to come from a place like Africa, which isn't burdened in quite the same way with the traditions, the traditional canon. So there's a kind of explorative space there that's super interesting.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Yeah. It's shocking to me, actually, because my thesis this year has turned into almost like an Afrofuturist sci-fi story. And I often say, like, I don't like poetry, I'm not a writer. And my whole thesis now has become me writing short stories and poetry. And somehow it's within sci-fi and fiction that you can really find ways to represent Blackness in the future of architecture.

And Darien and I, as we were forming these questions, we're going back and forth of, well, is architecture always a utopian pursuit? Are we always creating a utopia? And what exactly are you doing as an architect?

And so then we decided that as architects, we tend to design with an invented narrative, and we set the stage for people to become actors in artworks. That's the fundamental basis. So then considering the constructed projected futures in architectural production, how do we design for subjectivity in multiple points of view?

And we're still not sure about that, honestly. And we're wondering if that's something that you've been considering. Like, how do you do that? Or when you're designing, do you always have a specific point of view or a specific subject?

LESLEY LOKKO: I'm not sure I completely understand the question, but I'm going to answer what I think you're asking. And I think in any creative pursuit, you're always addressing someone. I can't remember who wrote it but, for the religiously devout you're addressing God, for the politically active you're addressing the masses. There's always a voice to whom you speak.

And I think certainly when I started studying architecture, I realized very, very quickly that I was actually addressing simultaneously both myself and who I thought I was representing. So as a designer I had, I guess, a kind of double consciousness about what I was doing. Because I was aware that whatever I proposed would be seen through the lens of my race, first and foremost.

So I was never just a student doing a project, I was a Black student doing a project. And that Blackness meant something to people around me, but it meant something different to me. So I think I realized very early on that my role was kind of the translator.

So it was the translator between what I thought I was representing, what my own experiences and my history were, and an audience to whom I was speaking who had no understanding of that.

And for me it opened up this territory-- I don't know if this is answering your question completely-- but it opened up this territory where I understood architecture as a, kind of, performance. But it was very hard to perform my Blackness at the same time as I was exploring it. So I was having to explain what I was doing, at the same time I was not sure what I was doing.

And that tension for me has stayed in 30 years of practice. And what I finally come to understand, I think, is that the responsibility of the school is to take the burden of explanation off the students so that they are free to explore.

And that when you want to bring new knowledge into the world, which I think is the job of the university, you have to be prepared to invent and support the conditions that allow new knowledge to be formed.

And this is particularly around issues of race because race is such a stand-in for so many other things that actually have nothing to do with race. That double consciousness, I mean, long history of people talking about it, that act of looking, being looked at, looking being looked at I think it's very particular to Africans and diasporans. And I see it as a very powerful tool, a very powerful subjectivity, yeah.

DARIEN CARR: Yeah. I guess one question as students in design school-- and I personally relate to what you just said about exploring something while simultaneously trying to figure out what it is. It's definitely hard.

But I think when it comes in-- for my subjectivity it's the act of being a responsible translator, and trying to figure out what that responsibility means or what-- I don't want to say mechanisms because it sounds too formulated-- but what steps one can take to be a translator. And how being a translator in the context of educational institution, how that context complicates or simplifies it.

And also I think this kind of ties to a conversation we had about the complexity of post-colonial context. And how to best consider the relationship between projecting new futures, like we're talking about, and then the act of remembering and memory is coming in one.

And maybe that's a good thing but the act of remembering the past and the notion of responsibility as translators, but in relation to projection and memory, is something that I'm curious what your thoughts are about.

LESLEY LOKKO: Again, I'm not 100% sure I completely understand the question. But I think what's very particular about the United States, which is very different in other parts of the world, is that the act of remembering it's a political act. It's about trying to claim back something that has been suppressed in favor of another narrative, that allows the society to move forward.

So of all the cultural conditions I've experienced, the United States is the most aspirational in terms of looking to the future. It's a very forward moving kind of culture. It's all about what we are going to become.

And the tension between that utopic idea of free enterprise, meritocracy, you work hard, anybody can make it, you can, in a sense, forget about who you were, this is the chance to remake yourself, et cetera, is a really powerful narrative.

But simultaneously, there's another truth here, which is that future was at someone else's expense. But recognizing the cost of that will derail the kind of utopic projection. So in some senses, at all costs, it has to be contained. And what you see I think happening increasingly over the past 10, five, and two years ago is the thrust of that other story breaking through the surface of this mythology.

And I think it's a very tense situation because if you look at it authentically, you will understand that one narrative will undo the other. And then the question is, well, can the wider society afford that? Because if that utopic projection is not what holds us together, what will?

And what I found here is that partly because of that tension, the fear of actually naming what's going on, language in the US is used very, very differently. It's partly why I struggle often to understand what the questions are.

Because it's wrapped up in a kind of language that neutralizes what we're really talking about. So you sort of have to talk in code around issues. And to me, creativity absolutely insists that you don't speak in code because you have to be authentic. And that tension I've never managed to figure out how to navigate it here.

DARIEN CARR: Yeah, wow, I appreciate that point. Like, the question I was just asking, if I'm being specific, I'm thinking about a Toni Morrison essay where she wrote about the school as a place of-- it can only do good work if it acknowledges the harm that it has done before.

And I was doing the very point that you were just bringing up in kind of trying to talk about this idea, but let's talk about it in using less precise language. But, I mean, it's really-- thinking about the educational institution and thinking about the harm that the education institution has done, even though the intentionality is good sometimes. And, yeah, I don't know, I'm curious about that point.

LESLEY LOKKO: I mean, I think if someone were to ask me, what is the most powerful or most valuable lesson I learned in the five years that I was in South Africa. If they were to ask me, what is it that you think students learned and what did the school do? I would say it instilled confidence.

For me that was beyond training, beyond skills, beyond tools, beyond all of that. It was the formation of a kind of confidence. But confidence is a really interesting concept because in order to be confident, you also have to acknowledge doubt. For me that's the borderline between confidence and arrogance. And the ability of Black students to hold simultaneously confidence and doubt is very much a condition of their own existence.

And that ability is a very, very powerful creative force. It's quite a long winded way of saying that the very tension between harm and privilege in the US one tends to think about it as a reparations conversation, that this harm been done so someone must either pay for the harm, whether financially, morally, or whatever way, in order for the harm to be resolved.

But I think that that relationship between harm and privilege is actually a very productive space. And it's very difficult for an institution like a university to be able to hold those two contradictory positions.

But what I think is amazing about architecture as a discipline is that architecture is all about contradiction. It's about teaching you how to hold incompatible truths, in a sense, in the same space or to create the structure for it.

So when you were talking, for example, about Afrofuturism, I mean, I think it is a structure that allows you to hold trauma and aspiration and hope and fear. Afrofuturism is simply the armature, it's not the goal. And I think the job, if you like, of the school is to provide multiple amateurs for us to be able to safely explore these conditions, yeah.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Yeah, I think that's another reason why-- another one of our questions was a little probably confusing, because we were trying to get to a way of being-- a lot of conversations about when we're like, OK, the school should start teaching more things about Black people or marginalized groups, other people. Well, what about us? Or something like that.

So we're, like, how can we be more subjective? Or how can we teach multiple points of view? Or how can we do this? Because at any point when you are prioritizing one, you are neglecting another, or that is what people always think.

But it's like you're not neglecting another, you are just holding multiple points of view. But I feel like in the US it's been such a struggle for so long to do because people are like, well, we'll be disappearing, or something like that.

LESLEY LOKKO: But it's also very specific, I think, to a very competitive culture. It's one of the conundrums for me about the United States, but it's also one of the magnetic draws about it, that all the contradictions are here.

And so in a broader extremely competitive society, that nature of pitting yourself one against the other, my interest group, your interest group, my pain, your pain, it's part of a much broader conversation. And that attitude towards one's narrative, one's identity, one's place in the world is the kind of superstructure of capitalism filters down into that.

But I think I learned as a student out of necessity-- I didn't understand it at the time as a tactic, but I've later come to understand it was a very powerful tactic-- was that sometimes the way to talk about something, to create that safe space to explore is to talk about something through analogy.

So you don't come to the issue directly, you come to the issue sideways or from the bottom or from the top or you cut through. And there's something about the way architects think that was the very useful for me to be able to say, you think that I'm talking about this, so that other thing that the audience or the person that you're addressing thinks it is, creates a kind of generosity. So they're not on the defensive because they don't recognize it as an attack.

And in that space, I can start to explore things that would otherwise be too painful or too traumatic in a very particular way. And I don't just mean hurtful, I mean also when you acknowledge trauma, to create something, you have to move beyond the act or the traumatic event. That there has to be a space of, I guess, healing in a way, but a possibility to move beyond it.

And sometimes coming at something through analogy or sideways, that buffer gives you the creator the space to process what you're looking at, what you're reading, what you're feeling, in order to break through to new ground.

I guess I think that's what the school ought to do, is to provide, through whatever means, that space of safety, which can also encompass danger and failure and accidents. And I think professional degrees, particularly like architecture, are often about the absence of those things because they're seen as unprofessional.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: I was reading about Namwali Serpell has done a lot of research on this-- he was a freedom fighter but then he also started a space program in Africa. But it was like almost a satirical space program. And I was watching his videos because they were like just hilarious. But they were meant to be super satirical because he was like, we're training to go to space.

And he would write letters to Russia and the US, and to anybody who was doing the space race at that time, to be like, oh, I don't care which side funds us, just somebody give us money to go to space. And their trainings would be like floating down the river in a barrel.

But it was through that excessive satire that he was trying to make a point about colonialism and about you guys are literally trying to go to the moon and our country is currently at war and fighting for freedom. And we're currently struggling for power.

But the weird thing is that he was becoming famous on the world stage as trying to become an astronaut. But what he was known for in this country was being like a radical, and protesting, and all of these things.

And it's these weird interesting parallels where in order to get visibility-- it's almost like the Sun Ra method or something. It's like in order to get people to see beyond the basic issues of colonialism, we almost have to take it to an absurd level of futuristic sci-fi, fiction, metaphor for them to get it.

And then, of course, the people who don't get it, I'm like, you really can't see beyond yourself. And we were talking about this how sometimes I struggle thinking about do I want to stay in architecture almost? Because the architecture education that we've been given--

It's like-- I feel like some of my classmates-- or I will be developing a fiction and they'll be like, what is this? And I'm like, you're not seeing beyond what is being presented here, you're just seeing the objects. But there are metaphors and stories that are trying to get to a higher point here. And I talking about this with Darien about how sometimes I'm like, should I just shift to art? Or something like that, or design. But then--

LESLEY LOKKO: See, I think the conversation for a long time has somehow been that Africa, Blackness, otherness, is too complex, it's too chaotic, it's too disorganized, it's too poor, it's too corrupt. There's some intrinsic lack in those conditions that render it useless to architecture.

So here we have a discipline that's it's robust, it's strong, it has long history, President Cannon trajectory. And suddenly there's this other thing, class, race, whatever it is. And the discipline can't extract anything from it, it's too inferior.

And throughout my studies, and then later when I started teaching, one question would surface all the time with work. That I was doing or work, that my students were doing, which was, is it architecture? Is it architecture? Is it architecture? And oftentimes people will be looking at work, and the conversation would move away from the work itself to the question of whether it was or it wasn't architecture.

And after some time I began to realize that actually architecture is the issue, not Blackness or Africa or diaspora or race or any of those other, for me, really rich interesting creative topics. It was that the discipline itself was not sophisticated enough to be able to use these conditions. It was afraid of them.

So that dynamic between architecture and what I call otherness, the response for 20, 25 years seemed to me to only exacerbate the vulnerability and the insecurity of the discipline. And so the way forward for many people, students, graduates, practitioners like myself was to move out of the discipline.

So in a huff I left architecture and I went to fiction writing. And I was a fiction writer for 12 years because I thought I can't force this discipline. I've pushed as hard as I can, it's not admitting what I think is important or what I know, let me go somewhere else.

And somehow that space of being away from it for whatever, it was 10, 12 years, gave me enough distance from it. So that when I came back to it the second time, I came back at it stronger. I came back at it thinking, OK, let's roll up our sleeves and let's tussle here because you've beaten me once, you're not going to do it a second time.

And that coincided in South Africa with the student protests in 2015 and 2016. And suddenly there was this word, decolonisation, decolonizing the curriculum, that became another kind of amateur in the same way that I think Afrofuturism is an armature.

And it was a very clever move, because decolonisation was a broad enough theme, but also specific enough that the university-- and by the university I mean the broader academy-- was suddenly under attack. And in that space of attack and defense, suddenly architecture became quite important. Because we were talking about space, we were talking about form, we were talking about material conditions, we were talking about structures.

And suddenly the metaphor, if you, like or the analogy of decolonizing the curriculum for me was the key to open the door. And at that point I thought, OK, now we've won, now these issues are in the belly of the beast.

And I think, fast forward to 2020, Black Lives Matter, done it on a global scale. So for me there's no going back now. We have to acknowledge, OK, architecture, you've got to deal with this. But deal with it creatively, productively. Don't deal with it defensively.

DARIEN CARR: Yeah. I guess, how does dealing with that change based on the context meaning? I'm curious about what decolonizing the curriculum means in the context of America or in the context of South Africa where there are some similarities with the histories, but a lot of differences.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Versus like also Ghana versus also England.

LESLEY LOKKO: When I first started teaching in the US in I think it was 1997, it was the first time I'd ever heard the phrase a design problem. Like, I can literally didn't know what it was. And I said to the student, what do you mean?

And he said, what's the design problem for this semester? And to me the word design and problem were like diametrically opposed. I don't see architecture as a series of problems and design is the tool that fixes them, that's not how I read it.

And I realized-- I mean, again to go back to the idea of language, in the UK the skill of the tutor is to set the brief. So what the student was calling a design problem was what I would call a brief. But a brief is very open ended. You can set a fiction within a brief in almost any direction.

It's very difficult to set a design problem outside of the parameters of problem solving. And so for me, that first act of inviting something from the student was taken away by this relationship of here's the problem, what are your tools to solve it? And I think I've never understood architecture in that way.

I'm not saying that there are not challenges in architecture, of course they are. But somehow the training of someone to become the kind of professional who can tackle both things that are known, but at the same time put forward ideas about things that are not yet known, just seems to me to be really the most magical part of this discipline.

And that narrow interpretation-- for me it was narrow, and I'm sure people would beg to differ-- but the narrowness of that relationship, which was very transactional for me, here's a problem, here's a solution.

That relationship between transaction and what I would call transformation, which is closer to translation, it's closer to specification, it's closer to imagination, I think it's also a byproduct of an incredibly competitive capitalist economy. And you can't get away from that. Yeah.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Well, I guess, a couple of thoughts. The first is, I actually do remember a couple of years ago when we had brought up to the GSD-- we really need to diversify our curriculum for the architecture program, we really need to. And they were like, yeah, yeah, yeah, we hear you. And we were like, especially if we're the top in the world, like, one of the top in the world, we need to.

And they were like, yes, but you need to remember this is a school in the West. And the counter from us students was, OK, but if we want to keep being top in the world we have to be broad. And they were like, mm. And we were like-- it was this weird thing where they were like, to justify why they didn't need to be covering other cultures, they were like, but we are in the West.

And we were like, no, because your students-- you're trying to pull students from all over the world. So if you're going to educate people from all over the world, you can't educate them here and then send them back out teaching them about the same people.

So it's just so confusing to me sometimes when it's that issue of defensiveness where it's like you can't be defensive, you need to acknowledge it. So the school has been doing a lot better about it. And I really do appreciate that. But sometimes I'm like, man, I don't know.

And on the show we've been talking to several Black women, and I'm always, like, I don't know if I'd be a licensed architect. Everybody hears me complain about it all the time, bla, bla, bla. And I think it is part of issue where I'm like the hubris that goes into being an architect, the design problem issue, the steps they make you take, the hoops they make you jump through, and then they don't pay you enough. It's a rich person's thing, basically, to do.

And then often the kind of architects that are praised are the ones that are not necessarily doing work that's actually benefiting people. So even the way that we're taught at school, it seems to be like the urban Planning Program, they're the ones that actually know about communities.

And they're the ones that while we're in school here, they are actually engaged with local communities. And us in architecture, we will be doing projects based on the most-- in the middle of nowhere projects with the most in the middle of nowhere brief prompt things that are not actually benefiting anyone in any way.

How have you gone about-- when you were formalizing your own briefs or coming up with your own ideas for architectural knowledge, what were some of the fundamentals that you considered to avoid these ideas of hubris. And to be a bit more engaged with actual people, while also, like you said earlier, allowing people to explore who they are.

And giving students this room to develop their own confidence and skills, because there are certain skills that we do need to learn. And keeping students excited about the future of architecture, without making them feel like they're just going to enter the field and be another cog in the architecture world machine.

LESLEY LOKKO: Good question. I mean, I'm going to answer it, I think, in a go around about way. So this morning I was reading about the proposed cease fire in Ukraine. And there was one sentence in the description, which was that they were attempting to hold talks with no preconditions. And the absence of a precondition seemed to be the basis on which Russia and Ukraine could potentially talk.

And we clearly know one side has no intention of coming into a dialogue with no preconditions, in a sense the preconditions are the reasons for the invasion. And it reminded me of when we set up the GSA, I was somehow adamant that there would be no preconditions to what students could, should do.

In other words, we had to construct a kind of space that was completely open. And by that I mean when I see students in the US, and to a certain extent in the UK, not in Africa but let's say in the diaspora, there are hundreds of euphemisms that are swirling around, benefiting the people, engaging community, uplifting, empowerment.

There's a kind of rhetoric around how an architect should think, make, do. And it seems to me that that rhetoric has become a kind of precondition which enables everyone, again, to act through this smoke screen.

But the real question of the history of race, the history of exploitation, extraction, oppression, trauma, is somehow neutralized in these terms. And I'm speaking very slowly because I'm trying to think my way through the response.

And I suppose I see these terms equity, diversity, social justice, inclusion, I see those as kinds of unhelpful preconditions. Because they deny Black students the possibility for the same freedom that other students have to take material, matter, ideas, and transform those ideas in their own authentic voices. That they're always having to speak somehow in another language.

And I think I was very clear when we set up the GSA, that we were not going to do that. So there was no precondition, there was no preconditioned interest, there was no preconditioned concept, no preconditioned perspective, that the students came to.

And it was partly because of the space created by the Decolonizing the Curriculum movement where we were able to say to the students, here in this space for the next year, two years, three years, we are collectively going to figure out what new canon can be. And there were no preconditions to it.

And that space was, I think, very unusual. It's too soon to tell whether, in inverted commas, it worked. Architecture is a long trajectory. You plant a seed here, you might not see the results for another generation.

But I do think that these questions that we're talking about, these are two, three generation gestation. For some people that's too long to wait, you want change now. But I can almost guarantee that if you don't start somewhere with this process, in 50 years time, we are likely to be in exactly the same place.

And someone was saying to me, I think was yesterday the day before, the conversations that African-Americans had in the US in the 60s are the same conversations we're having today. On the one hand, this is about race and about identity. But on another level, it's about all of us.

And I've said it's so often, I mean, the whole framework of decolonization, which, yes, it's linked to the colonial but it's also linked to much more. This is a gift. This is a gift to canon, it only enriches it. So the fear and the defensiveness, I have to accept that that's out of someone else's insecurity. And that's never a good place to make decisions.

DARIEN CARR: Thank you for sharing that.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: --That's a very insightful, yeah.

DARIEN CARR: I want to think through what you just shared and what you just offered in relation to the profession of architecture. And to the point about licensure, to the point about the institutional barriers that architects face outside of school, and the difficulties that come with practicing architecture.

As I was listening, I was hearing what I understood as articulating the school as a place to shelter the student, and a shelter to hold as they develop and bring those ideas into the world. But I think for me a lot of the existential energy always comes from, well, what happens after school?

How can I continue pursuing these ideas? If I do my thesis, what do I do after that? Am I just going to get a job, I'm going to have time to explore these issues and tend to them? Because it does take a lot of energy that I'm not quite sure how to work in a professional context. So I'm really interested what do you think the relationship between the school is and the profession, in light of conversations we've been having.

LESLEY LOKKO: I mean, for the longest time it has seemed to me, both as a student and as a, let's say, a younger faculty member, a tutor, or whatever. For a long time it seemed to me as if the school was a haven away from the real world. Like, that was the dynamic.

And that somehow when you finished, you would be let out into the real world. And what you would find there would be very different from what was inside. And then I would say in the last 10 years, it's been increasingly clear that the real world is more complex, richer, more inventive, than the narrative that I was sold as a student about what the real world would be.

And the way I'm going to explain that more clearly is not to talk about architecture for a second. But when I was a fiction writer, there was always a kind of nervous tension about the number of Black characters in my novel, because my reading audience was largely European.

And so my publishers we're not too many. They were projecting what they thought the reading public could take. In 10 years of writing fiction, I don't think a fan ever wrote to me to complain about there being too many African or Black characters. Like, it just didn't even figure.

And, actually, a lot of the emails I used to get or the Instagram messages or whatever, were about people saying they didn't realize, until maybe they'd ended the book, that this character was from Mali. For them it was not the first lens through which they read the character.

And I remember thinking, the reading public is actually much more sophisticated than the publishers believe it to be. Which is to do with things very real, things like risk. When a publisher signs you up and pays you money to write a book, there's a risk element because they've got to earn back that. So the kind of economy of publishing also creates a kind of environment.

Fast forward to architecture schools. And I think what's been really interesting in the last 10 years is that suddenly the speed and complexity of the world outside seems to offer, I think, architects a chance to be relevant in a way that they've been fighting their lack of relevance over the past, let's say, 20 years now.

People have been taking chunks out of the architectural profession. Project managers, quantity surveyors, IT, whatever it is. And suddenly here we are in this really complex fast moving, very-- a world full of contradictions. And this training, which I still maintain is one of the most powerful imaginative forms of training, suddenly can produce people who can deal with that.

But they may not be practicing or licensed architects. I see what we call design thinking as being increasingly relevant to all kinds of fields. And so the narrowness, I think, of the way we think of architects, I think the times are going to change that.

So to go back to the very first question you asked me, which is what if a new school emerged in a place that everybody didn't expect it, I think it's partly because the conditions in Africa are exacerbated.

They are faster, more volatile, more complex than many conditions here, simply because of the infrastructure, let's say, in the global North that manages to keep a lid on many things. But, for example, in the pandemic, during COVID, in Ghana we don't really have a health service, per se, we don't have an integrated public transport service, we don't have welfare. But people just managed.

They are so resilient, they are so used to figuring out stuff for themselves that COVID was just another thing that you dealt with. I would fly into New York or London, the whole city is collapsing, with all of this infrastructure. So suddenly this relationship between your lived experience and your ability to withstand volatility seemed to be a really important component of what the 22nd century is going to be.

And I think here we're clinging-- I mean, I'll probably be shot for saying this-- but I think we're clinging to an idea of a profession that exist in some ways. But actually there are so many more opportunities for architects to practice, that have nothing to do with putting a building together.

And that, I think, is-- I want to say to students who are very, very fearful about what's going to happen when I hand in my thesis and I go off to do the licensing exam. And I've been dealing with all of these rich, inventive, imaginative, things. And suddenly there's no space for it in corporate practice.

I feel like saying to them, well, then don't look at corporate practice, that's not where your professional future lies. But that's a slow burn. It's going to take a long time to also to have the economy around that that can sustain new forms of practice. But I would say that is your generation's battle.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Yeah, I feel like a lot of my classmates have been shocked to hear when I'm like, oh, I'm not going to architecture firm. And they're like, what? And I'm like, I'm looking at tech other design stuff ever since I came here I called the GSD art school for non artists to me. Because I'm like, it's art school and I couldn't pick a medium, so then I did every media.

Well, every form of media, and all that stuff. And I'm, like, you learn art on every scale, from like the micro to the macro and all of that. And I think that we are so capable to do so much as architects.

And then I get so shocked, honestly sometimes, when I have seen some of my classmates producing the same style of project from year one til now. And it was interesting because one of my friends and I we were talking the other day, and he said that he brought this up in a meeting. He thinks that the awards they tend to give out are like best this, or like nicest whatever.

And he's like, I think it should really be people who are like most improved or most whatever because we were like, we've seen too many people come in with a set of skills and then leave with that same set of skills, and produce the same white model with the same thing that just looks like the same whatever.

And he was also saying that there was some survey or something that had said that apparently Harvard students, like in general, especially Harvard undergrads, are the least improved students because Harvard is already getting the best of the best, or something. So by the time they graduate, they're actually not learning more because they are already smart. So it's almost like the school is wasting the good professors.

Like, no, literally, the smart people on smart people. And I know it almost feels that way sometimes when I'm like, we learn so many skills here guys and I'm just seeing you doing the same thing and making the same thing. And then, why are you here if you're not expanding your skills?

But, I mean, some people know the trajectory they want to do in architecture. But there are other people that I'm like, you could do so much, you're doing so many cool things, why do you think you need to go to an architecture firm? And I see some of my classmates going, yeah, no, I want to do fashion, I want to do this or that.

And I find it so interesting that so many people come from undergrads, where they did diverse stuff, into architecture. But then they get to architecture school and then they think they need to stay in architecture. And I don't know what about the field does that. Where it's almost like it creates a weird elitism that makes you think that I must now be a starchitect or something.

LESLEY LOKKO: But I think there's many, many other factors that play, particularly in the US. And I found the US the most difficult structure to teach in. And for really, no pun intended, concrete reasons. And one is the cost of education, which when I went to architecture school, I was paid by the British government to go to school. I went to university, I was paid to go to university.

And it's not the case now, but it meant that I had a different relationship to my education in general, I saw it differently. It wasn't an investment in quite the same way. The second is the fragmentation of the curriculum. The US curriculum is a mystery to me. The talk of credits and core and electives. And I literally just can't wrap my head around it. I need a spreadsheet to understand the path.

The relationship between undergraduate and graduate is also a little bit foreign to me. In the UK, if you study-- and I studied sociology-- in order to study architecture you can't go in at the graduate level, you go back to year one. Now, you can do that in a country where you're not paying for your education, you're not paying twice, but there was no schism in a sense, between undergraduate and graduate in quite the same way there is here. There's a different kind of dynamic.

And we didn't have semesters, so I stayed in the same unit for two years, both in the first degree and in the second degree. Which meant that I had time to really develop a body of work. So I wasn't saving everything up for that thesis year where suddenly you can do what you want. Actually, there you start thesis almost from year one because your education is geared to what you're interested in.

Not completely, because you still have to acquire skills, and so on. But the notion that I would have to slog through this other stuff in order to get to the real stuff, that wasn't in that curriculum. And the other last point was that I was always taught by two people.

So in the curriculum in the UK and what we replicated in South Africa was that the students understood from the get go that the production of knowledge was a dialogue. It was first and foremost a dialogue between two people who led the group of students, and then it was a dialogue between them and the students.

We found that about 15 students, an odd number, was the optimum number of students that could be held by two people. At 12 or 13, there wasn't quite enough critical mass, and about 16, 17 it became a little bit too big. And so there was a kind of laboratory like condition where we knew if we follow that, we would get good results.

And it seemed to me, in the question of decolonization, what was the kind of imperative there, if you wanted change, you had to be prepared to structurally change everything about the way you teach in order to get the result that you claim to want.

So, again, the school had to literally put its money where its mouth was. If this is the paradigm and this is the end result, the school now has to figure out-- and architects are smart people. We can design structures. The curriculum for me was a design challenge. How do we structure this thing in order to get this output?

When I came to the US, the conversation was the complete reverse. Here is the curriculum, here is the structure, you do not tamper with it, but I still want this. For me this was an impossibility. So it's, I don't know, half a dozen, whatever the expression is, you go on doing the same thing over and over again and you expect a different result. I think they call that madness.

And I think that's kind of where we are. But universities are bureaucracies, their armies. I mean, it's very difficult for a very large institution to suddenly just switch. The tenure system, the investment, all of that, they are real constraints.

So my question in a way now is well, OK, if architecture realizes that there's a possibility for a different kind or different form of practice or a different form of training or a different form of thinking, is the University going to be the place that produces it?

And if it is not, what is the potential role of collaborations between other spaces? So that the structure and the kind of might of the University can encourage or support or empower other spaces, other places where different kinds of knowledge can be produced. So I think, for me personally, this is a very exciting time because I think a lot is up for grabs.

DARIEN CARR: Yeah, I'm relating to a lot of things during this conversation. And just sharing one way I've responded to going through a curriculum, and kind of not necessarily feeling like I would do it that way. Kind of, dealing with that distortion or that distance from my experience and the curriculum's experience. But just thinking through the power of intentionality--

LESLEY LOKKO: What does that mean? I'm never sure what intentionality means. What is that--

DARIEN CARR: Like, so I guess the best-- so there's this DJ I really like-- I'm answering it in a roundabout right here. His name is Benji B. He has a show that I really like and listen to most weeks. I once listened to a podcast with him and he said that intentionality is a frequency when he's constructing a DJ set.

And what he meant by that is that when you're making a DJ set, if you put time in to set a playlist of songs, and it comes out, it's something you could hear. And I think in the context of school, I found that I have a different relationship in a different kind of engagement with the curriculum, depending on the type of intentionality I put into it.

So, for example, I've had periods where I am going through a curriculum, and I'm stressed, I'm just busy. And I end up not having the connection I want with my work verse another form of presence with my work, which has another form of engagement with the work. And realizing that I have the power to change my intentionality and the relationship with the work, but I don't have the power to change what's being asked of me to relate with the work.

That's just something I wanted to share as someone who's going through this. And there's not a particular question, but one question I do have is in engaging with the structures. How do we bring the energy of this conversation into other spaces? Because, for example, for me, architecture doesn't necessarily have to end in a building, and I understand that. But oftentimes I'm engaging with spaces, and that's not the consensus of the room.

And sometimes it's hard to open up that conversation and have dialogue in the kind of way we're talking now. And how you've addressed that or if you've learned how to do that in your career, and bringing your ideas into the space where you might not be at the same page with other people.

LESLEY LOKKO: Sure. It's a really good question. I mean, when I started studying at the Bartlett's, I started in 1989, I went to the first year. And it was what we call the old Bartlett. So this was before Sir Peter Cook arrived. And it was kind of-- we didn't do any design in first year. Design was something that was reserved for when you were smart enough to go into second year.

And it was a lot of history and endless precedent studies, and I think those things that you call survey courses. That was what the curriculum was. And then we heard Peter Cook was coming. None of us knew who he was. And there was a lot of buzz and excitement about it. And then suddenly, boom, he arrived and the unit system arrived.

And I remember when I went into second year, the first day of the year, there were I think six units in undergraduates, well, the three year degree. We walked into this hall, and two people got up and said, we're interested in the relationship between Walkmans and the city, OK.

And then another two people got up and said, we love the idea of nanotechnology and architecture. And then somebody else came up and said, I'm interested in Afrofuturism, whatever it was. So we all sat there with this ballot sheet. And we were asked to choose which unit we'd go into. And everybody sat and looked at each other.

And you didn't really know enough to know whether nanotechnology or Walkman, or whatever it was. So you sort of made decisions about what you were going to do for the rest of the year on a gut feeling. And as soon as you entered into the unit, very quickly you went on a field trip.

And that experience of going away from your home location with 12 or 15, or whatever it was, other people and your two tutors, and you went out to how to drink with them in the evening, and it became a kind of social experience, was the basis of the trust that had to be built between the tutors and the students, but also between students and students.

And that trust was the foundation that carried you through the year of exploration. And nobody was sure what was coming. You know, nobody knew it had to be a white model and the plans and sections. Like, it was very, very open.

At one level the openness was terrifying because you're being asked to produce something that you don't even know how to produce. And I remember Peter Cook said a couple of things in that first year that stayed with me throughout my teaching career.

He said, architects synthesize information, primarily that's what you. So I don't ever want the experience of an architecture student in the school to be unsympathetic. I don't ever want to hear a student say, I'm in module 74721, and then I'm going to go to studio 62625. There should be a seamless experience.

So even though there were things that kind of look like modules, I could never tell you what the name of my class was. I simply knew I was in the unit. The second thing he used to say is you will learn 50% of what you know from your tutors, and 50% from each other. So get to know your each other because they will be your learning peer.

And, again, what the school had to do was provide the environment in which we could learn from one another. And that meant, for example, having a shared space in which you worked in your unit. It meant having at regular moments, crossovers with other units so that you didn't become this kind of isolated arrogant bubble.

It was a very sophisticated way of designing an environment that would produce the good result. But it also meant, for example, that I could come to the unit with an obsession about race, which had never been dealt with in the Bartlett before, ever.

But the school was a generous and confident enough place that their response was, bring it on. You want to spend a year thinking about the relationship between race and architecture, be our guest, off you go. And the person who taught me, my unit to tutor, didn't know-- an English guy didn't the first thing about it, but his generosity allowed he and I to create something together.

And that formative experience has been what I have tried to do in the schools in which I have taught ever since. And it eventually led me to the conclusion I can't do this within an existing institution because all of your energy goes towards trying to change the existing institution. I need to get out and make a different kind of institution.

And that just happened to be my way of doing it because I had an alternative career as a fiction writer, and in that sense I was not as dependent on the system as I might otherwise have been. I don't have any children, I don't have dependents, I have two passports, I can move.

So there were a bunch of very, very specific conditions that allowed me to do that. And I don't say that this is the way for everybody. But I think I recognized, when you try to change an institution, you've got to be clear about the battle you're going to take on. And increasingly, universities, partly to do with their cost, to do with their size, to do with their history, you have to be really dedicated to fighting that kind of institutional battle. And I just ran out of steam.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: That actually goes into another question that we worry about and wonder about sometimes, is how do we, especially as Black designers, also just even Black students, take care of our mental health. And I feel like mental health is like the word that everybody uses now.

But we put so much of ourselves into our work. And even through my thesis, I tell everyone theses has been cathartic because when I cry and I'm working on my thesis it's because I'm motivated. It's like, I'll be discovering other Black designers from the past, and they're so motivational that I'll be like crying, like, this is such beautiful work. I hope someone discovers my work 50 years from now, and I'm like, great.

Versus in the past if I was crying, it was like a mental breakdown. But I'm like, how do we check ourselves to know our levels? And no one were being existential in a good way and existential in a bad way.

And just keep ourselves in check because these are things our other classmates don't have to do. And how have you been able to check in with yourself? Because any time when you do have to check in with yourself, it takes strength to do that. Knowing you've had enough.

LESLEY LOKKO: Great question. I think when I started architecture school, it was the first time I realized that the thing I was studying was not a performance that would get me a job, set me up for the rest of my life. I think it was the first time I realized that it's something of who I am is what I'm working on.

And the knowledge that discipline was a mouthpiece for talking about bigger things, it took me a while to get that. And it happened when I went to work in South Africa as an architect in between the first three-year degree and then the second master's level.

And I worked in a Township in Namibia. And one of my first jobs was to go into a Township house and put in a toilet and a bathroom. And the Township house-- it's called the-- I think it's the NE52. It's like a child's model of a drawing. There's like a child's drawing of a house. A rectangle, two windows door, that's it.

So I'm going in and talking to the grandmother who lived there. And I said, we don't want to mess with the plumbing, so the best thing would be to put it in a bathroom extension close to where you have the existing plumbing. And she looked to me she said, what plumbing? And I said, where's your bathroom? And she said, it's in the yard.

And the model, the housing model in the Township was that you had four of those kind of child's rectangle houses, and then a communal pit latrine. And I remember thinking for the first time, wow, some architect designed that layout, some architects sat down and drew a plan for that house and decided that 15 people could live in two rooms, and then share a pit latrine.

Like it was the first time I think I'd realized that architecture had a political-- I don't know-- gender, or whatever. And that moment was like a Eureka moment, because I thought, OK, if an architect has studied and trained and gotten all the tools, and they can still go and produce that, what could I produce that's not that? Like, it was a big moment.

And then when I came back to the Bartlett and I was really clear I'm going to tackle issues of race and identity because these are issues that propel me in the world, they're questions I have about the world, somehow this discipline is going to deal with them in some way.

By the end of it, I was exhausted, like completely drained. But the knowledge that this wasn't just about me was a kind of energy, which is kind of counterintuitive because at one level architecture is all about you. It's individual, what do you think? What are your design tools? What is your idea?

But it was the beginning of an understanding that there was me and then there was something else. And I think to go back to that idea of a double consciousness, it was the energy that allowed me-- it fed me, I think, in moments where I felt so depleted.

When I started going into university administration, I was the dean for a while, I realized that arena didn't feed me at all. So teaching gives you something back. Especially students, they bring something. Administration brought me nothing.

So my decision to-- and I said this publicly-- it was an act of self-preservation. Because if I had stayed in that environment in which I gave, gave, gave and got nothing back, I would die. For me it was that simple.

So I don't know if it was a question of mental health, per se, but it was a kind of recognition that the change arena, if that's the space you're in, requires a lot. And you have to figure out in that arena what's going to give you back something, because you can't continuously give. You will give until there's nothing of you.

So for students, I think, the understanding that this is not your fight alone, this is not your individual response, this is a kind of collective generational, larger movement. And it's not only about Blackness, I mean, in some senses this is about all of us. I think is a really important aspect of it.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Thank you.

DARIEN CARR: Thank you. It's so rare to be able to have a conversation like this face to face.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Yeah, especially face to face now, yeah.

DARIEN CARR: I'm really grateful.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: In closing, do you have anything to challenge us the future generation of Black architects Black designers? Or just designers in general.

LESLEY LOKKO: Yeah, I mean, I used to say this to students in South Africa that to be angry is only the first step. In some senses, it's the easy step. You have to move beyond that. So not to forget that anger can open a door, but it can also quickly close it.

So for this generation, what's going to be the mechanism that allows you to keep that door open, to keep dialogue flowing-- and sounds so corny-- but to keep hope alive. Because I think one of the really pernicious things about anger is it can eat you.

And in the end, the source of your anger, whether it's the institution, the academy, the man who-- whoever that source is, it will rumble on whether you're angry or not. So it's a double burden, but that is your burden, to figure out how to find a way through this.

And I think the question of should I give up architecture or should I do something else or do fashion, I think for me that's somehow the easy bit. The difficult bit is to change architecture, that's the beast that needs changing.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Very true.

LESLEY LOKKO: So don't give up.

DARIEN CARR: Yeah.

LESLEY LOKKO: That's what I'm saying.

DARIEN CARR: And I guess-- and even if you don't do architecture, you're still doing architecture. But it's important to claim that--

LESLEY LOKKO: There was a great organization-- I mean, this is really about 20 years old and I mean it no longer exists. I think it was called quitters.org. And I think it was started by some Dutch students.

But it is so long since I actually heard this so I could be completely making it up. But, I mean, the thing did exist. And it was a website that was dedicated to people who had studied architecture, but had gone on to do much more interesting things. And the list was long.

DARIEN CARR: That's awesome.

LESLEY LOKKO: Fantastic. And I just thought, quitters.org, that was fantastic.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: My favorite thing is telling every time somebody, an actor or whoever comes up on screen, I was going, they studied architecture. And my family just goes, enough. And I go, just saying.

LESLEY LOKKO: There's a great article, I think it's in the *New Yorker* about Virgil Abloh--

DARIEN CARR: Rest in peace.

LESLEY LOKKO: Yeah, RIP in deed. But it was about how his core discipline was architecture. And that was the kind of foundational knowledge that he went into music and to fashion. And it was a great article. And he never stopped being an architect, which was great.

DARIEN CARR: That's deep. Awesome.

LESLEY LOKKO: Thank you.

DARIEN CARR: Thank you so much.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: It's a pleasure to have you. It's was great. Very, very interesting conversation. I'm Tara Oluwafemi.

DARIEN CARR: And I'm Darien Carr.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: And you've been listening to the *Nexus,* a product of the African-American Design Nexus at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Today's episode was produced and edited by Maggie Janik. And we would like to thank DJ Eway for our theme music. To learn more about the African-American Design Nexus, visit us online at aadn@gsd.harvard.edu.