

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**CALEB
NEGASH:**

This is the Nexus, brought to you by the African American Design Nexus, an initiative from the Frances Loeb Library at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. The Design Nexus seeks to gather African-American designers to showcase their craft, explore different geographies of design practice, and inspire design institutions to adopt new approaches towards elevating Black designers.

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:**

Hi, everybody. I'm Tara Oluwafemi.

**CALEB
NEGASH:**

And I'm Caleb Negash.

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:**

We are Master of Architecture students at the GSD. The Nexus podcast it's 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, on the intersection between race and design.

**CALEB
NEGASH:**

Today, we'll be speaking to Aisha Densmore-Bey, an architect, designer, filmmaker, and artist based in the Boston area. Aisha is a Doctor of Design candidate at the GSD, focusing on issues around how artists can combat gentrification and build up communities. She is a 2012 recipient of the American Institute of Architects Associates Award, author and illustrator of the children's book, *Who Made My Stuff?: Miles Learns About Design*, and writer, producer, director, of the award-winning film short, *Room*. Her professional practice specializes in architecture, interiors, lighting design, graphic design, film, and art. Aisha, Thank you for joining us.

**AISHA
DENSMORE-BEY:**

Hi, Caleb. Hi, Tara. Thank you for having me.

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:**

Aisha, you were inspired to write your own children's book by *Young Frank, Architect*, the MoMA's first children's book illustrated by Frank Viva. The story and yours follow young children exploring the world of design. However, your book seeks to create representation for children of color in this space. Can you describe the process of developing your book and the issues you attempt to address through this work?

**AISHA
DENSMORE-BEY:**

Let me give you a bit of backstory on the process of the children's book. In about 2014, I was at the Boston Society of Architects, and I saw the book, *Young Frank, Architect*, on the desk of my friend, Polly, who is now the Director of Programs there. And when reading the book, for anyone who doesn't know what the book is about, it's about a young child named Frank who wants to be an architect, and he lives with his grandfather, and his father, grandfather's name is Frank as well. And like most architects, young Frank gets frustrated and doesn't want to be an architect anymore.

And so what his grandfather decides to do is take him to the Museum of Modern Art to just kind of have an excursion, to get out of the house. And what they find is in the collection, there are so many other architects by the name of Frank, so obviously, Frank Gehry, Frank Lloyd Wright. And I loved the book. And when I completed reading it, two things stuck out. Number one, that this was an adorable book, so I actually-- I

by the name of Frank, so obviously, Frank Gehry, Frank Lloyd Wright. And I loved the book. And when I completed reading it, two things stuck out. Number one, that this was an adorable book, so I actually-- I encourage people to buy it. But also, what stuck out to me was that where was that for a child of color? You know, where this child Frank saw himself in a collection of a world renowned museum, and where is that for African-American children, Indigenous children, where is that?

But I also realized that in that moment, I was much more similar to young Frank than maybe other people. Like, my experience in architecture has been pretty privileged in that my uncle was an architect, and he also was an engineer and a developer. And he passed away before I was born, but I knew there was someone like me who did architecture, and architecture was never something that I didn't think I could do. And so when I looked at it and couldn't, on the top of my head, name a children's book, especially in the design sphere, that kind of had that, I said, OK, well, all right. I guess I've got to make one.

So I sat on it for a while. And about-- I think it was in 2015-- I went to grad school at Parsons. That's when I was going to grad school, but I was also writing a book, but I wasn't writing *Who Made My Stuff?* I was actually writing a different children's book, one that was based more on my experience or what I would perceive my experience would be. It's written now, I just need to find an illustrator and a publisher. And it's called *Mia Creates Her Favorite Place*. It is about a little girl who decides to-- with her uncle architect-- renovate a derelict candy store in her neighborhood, in time for her 11th birthday party. So that's what I'm sitting on now.

And so, I wrote the book kind of sitting on it for a few years. And then still not seeing the children's design book space evolve, so I said well, something has to go out there. And so I thought up *Miles* and said, OK, well this will be something quick that I can do. And it wasn't as quick as I thought, but that's kind of where the concept of *Who Made My Stuff?: Miles Learns About Design*, how that happened.

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:**

So I have another question for you. The book, *Young Frank, Architect* basically follows young Frank as he is taking everyday objects and kind of transforming them into furniture, and into little towers, and all sorts of things. And in the book, his grandfather tells him, that's really not how you make architecture. And it's interesting that by the end of the book, they come back home together and they start to explore with objects in their house, how to create architecture, thinking about how architects like Frank Gehry and Frank Lloyd Wright make architecture that doesn't look like what you see every day. So how can we cultivate and validate the desire for children to engage with design through play, and especially children of color? And I don't know if you have any personal experience with that, thinking about how you were familiar with your own uncle who had that kind of legacy left behind for you.

**AISHA
DENSMORE-BEY:**

Thinking about it, one of the objectives of me writing the book and showing *Miles* kind of navigating his neighborhood with his architect mother is showing all of the touch points of design in that, you know, walking through his neighborhood, walking through the park on his way home from school, understanding that there were people behind the design of the park, design of where the pathways are, or the trees, understanding that it was a landscape architect who laid out those plans. Or whether it is someone looking at the billboards, in the signage in your neighborhood, and understanding that there was someone behind that and there was

actually thought behind that, or you know, his house that was designed by his architect mother.

So understanding all the little touch points is really, I think, one way to encourage children just to understand that everything you touch is designed, and also make sure that they have the agency of understanding, well, if someone created that and I don't like it, and I don't like how it feels or looks, well then, I have agency to change that in my neighborhood. Or I don't like the way my shoes feel on my feet, how can I design something better or I can change that? You know, it's really about making sure that children had agency and making sure that they understood that there were touch points and that there were people who designed all of their favorite things, whether it be toys, whether it be sneakers, whether it be your favorite pajamas, just understanding that.

And then also, you know, within this book, it was really important for me to show the family and show the different people in the neighborhood, so that the neighborhoods look more like the world and more like the neighborhood a lot of children experience, but then also understanding my experience in architecture school, where there were a lot of people who were enrolled in the program. And there's a high matriculation rate in architecture school, but some of the people who are in the program were creative but what they understood at the end of it, once they left the program, is that they really weren't meant to be architects. They were meant to be something else. They were meant to be graphic designers or sneaker designers. I can't tell you how many people, you know, designers in the field who I've met, a lot of designers of color, that said, oh, I started out in architecture, but-- that kind of thing.

And so I think for me, it's just really important to show children that there are options and that there is someone behind everything that is designed, and all of their touch points. And I think my experience was typical for some architects, but atypical in that, like I said before, I had my uncle or I knew about my uncle who was in design and who was multifaceted. And my mother, she saw his process. And so then she was very prepared when I came along and when I started showing similar patterns to what he had. You know, I was very interested in art, and making things, and creativity. And so she knew what that was. And so she kind of knew how to prepare me.

I wrote the book, obviously, for children. But I also wrote the book for parents, so that if you see your child being very creative and loving to design sneakers or to draw sneakers, you know, a few years down the line, you won't think, you can't make money with that. You can't do that. You need to get a real job. You know, you can understand. Oh, someone actually does design sneakers or does design footwear. And that is actually a valid career and that there is a future in that. So actually, just making sure that the parents as well know that all of these things and all of these touch points in your community that someone is behind.

Because a lot of times, people don't think about design until something doesn't work. But if things work seamlessly or if experiences are pleasant, you may not really internalize that there was thought behind this. You know, it just works, and so you don't think about it. But you know, if something doesn't work, then that's when people usually kind of think about what the mistakes were, who did that. So—

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:**

So I am one of those students who is in architecture school, who is planning to use the skills you get from it and apply it to so many other disciplines. And listening to one of your other interviews on Revision Path, you were talking about how it's an easier transition to go from architecture to, like, interior design than to go from interior design to architecture. And I feel like a lot of people tend to go to architecture school because it gives you so many tools to work on so many different scales, that you can really apply it to so many different disciplines.

So you talk about how some of your influences are polymaths like Arthur Jafa, Virgil Abloh, Tom Ford, Charles and Ray Eames. Like, Virgil Abloh, Tom Ford, those are also some of my other favorites because they did go to architecture school and they just went into fashion, and Tom Ford makes films. So in what ways have these designers' processes and their own designs influenced your practice?

**AISHA
DENSMORE-BEY:**

I'm really glad that you asked that question. I actually love when people ask me that question. I think number one, for me, having a curious mind is like, one of the sexiest and the most impressive things that a human can have. And so what I really appreciate about Arthur Jafa, he went to Howard and studied architecture, and then-- and I think he studied film at the same time, I think with Haile Gerima, when he was at Howard. But I really just enjoy someone with a curious mind and someone who is able to have a certain perspective and bring it across the board, whether it is through architecture or-- and film.

And I didn't even know, and I'm almost ashamed to admit, but I'm doing on a podcast so everybody will know. I didn't even realize that Arthur Jafa was the cinematographer for the film, Daughters of the Dust, which is an incredibly seminal and beautiful film by Julie Dash. I didn't know that he did that until very recently. But just understanding that curiosity, and also, I think being polymathic to me also translates to freedom-- freedom to take your creativity to wherever it leads you. And I think looking at like, Virgil Abloh, looking at Tom Ford, and Charles and Ray Eames, they did everything.

I mean, Charles and his wife, they-- you know, she was a painter, and they did furniture, and they did architecture, and they did fabric design, and kind of all of these things. And so I strongly believe in the Maya Angelou quote that you can't use up creativity. It's kind of like the more you have, the more you create, the more you use, the more you have. And that's obviously not the strong quote, but you get it. For me, to look at how Tom Ford has a particular perspective in fashion, but you see that similar perspective in how he makes movies. His precision, I think his clothing is very precise. He would describe himself as very precise. And when you see that in his movies, they're also very precise. And so in Virgil Abloh, the same way you can see his perspective from his clothing lines to his collaborations. I really appreciate when someone has a very strong vision and they're able to bring it across different platforms.

**CALEB
NEGASH:**

Yeah. So listeners might be familiar with Jafa's work on Daughters of the Dust through Beyonce's visual album, Lemonade, which has really heavily referenced that film, which is something I always think about. I also didn't know that Arthur Jafa worked on that film, so thanks for the tip. And I think that really speaks to the

way that works of art and design can have these really far-reaching impacts. And that's why we love *Who Made My Stuff?*, which as you describe, kind of generates awareness that everything in our world has been designed.

And I like the way that you describe the book also as almost a primer for the question, you know, what is design, for a lot of people who might not be familiar. And so we see designing the book itself as another manifestation of that. And I really appreciate the insight you shared about the process of getting the book made. And *Young Frank, Architect*, published in 2013. *Who Made My Stuff?* comes out 2018. As somebody who's not really familiar with book publishing, I mean, that seems like a pretty quick turnaround for conceiving of an idea and then sort of bringing it to fruition, especially in the context of architecture and design, so where, as you know, projects can stretch on a lot longer than that. So had you gone through publishing prior to that experience, and what experience did you bring to the process as an architect and a designer?

**AISHA
DENSMORE-BEY:**

Yes. So the book was published in 2018, and I think I actually started writing it in the winter of 2018, so maybe like in January. So to answer one of your questions, no, I had never published a book before. To be honest, outside of reading *Young Frank, Architect* and having that immediate gut reaction that where is that kind of experience reflected in children's books for children of color, I never even thought about publishing or putting out a book. And so I think one thing that I enjoy about my particular practice is that I try to do a bunch of different things. I try and explore a lot of different things. And so for me, in the way my mind works, I say OK, somebody did it.

And so learning with architecture, you know, you learn from the macro to the micro and learning from large scale all the way down. And so for me, doing the book project, to me, it was almost like an extension of graphic design. And it really wasn't that hard, except for the fact of me trying to lay out all the pages and all of that, but it really wasn't that challenging. I just tried to think of it within the context of almost like a cartoon set, or something like that, within architecture.

So I think, like you said also, that things take a lot longer than what you may think. I thought that I could kind of push the book out within a month, and obviously, that didn't happen. So I think what I was able to kind of take from, like, architecture practice and from other design practices is number one, just patience-- patience in learning the process, but also grabbing all of my experience with graphic design and you know, other things, and just trying to incorporate it into the process of creating the book. Also learning new programs-- for a lot of my career, I use Photoshop in kind of like one distinct way, but in the process of the children's book, kind of learning and seeing the program in a totally different way. So kind of using those processes and grabbing all of those processes from my life as an architect and putting it into that.

**CALEB
NEGASH:**

So Aisha, your book certainly has a kind of universal appeal. I definitely want every kid in the world to have a copy of it. But it also has a really unique and important message, mainly because of the specificity of being a Black story and featuring a lot of Black characters, communities. So could you talk a little bit more about the book and the characters in it? I mean, maybe were there specific people in your life or out in the world that you based them on?

**AISHA
DENSMORE-BEY:**

So it was really intentional about the characters in the book. I was very intentional about number one, how Miles' mother and father looked. I wanted to make sure that appearances, especially Black hair, is continuously criticized, maligned. So I wanted to make sure that his mother had natural hair. I wanted to show a father that has locks. You know, unfortunately, locks are still stigmatized. And so I wanted to show a loving husband and a doting father with locks as part of the story.

I wanted to make sure that the neighborhood in the world that I created was actually the world that I personally lived in or that I try and live in, and that there were people of all different races, of all different abilities, different cultures. And so I wanted to make sure that there was a Muslim couple, especially a woman in a hijab. And what I also find-- and this is kind of me going on a bit of a soapbox-- but just in general pop culture, whether it is on television or whatever, when you see women-- I mean, I think it's getting better-- but when you see a sister's in a hijab, it's very serious. You really don't see as much joy.

That's not what I see when I walk out into the world. I see women in the hijab shopping and basically having the regular human experience. And so I wanted to kind of show a multi-ethnic, multifaceted kind of a world. And I

even had to-- you know, I think we all have biases, obviously-- I even had to check myself within the process because in doing the first kind of drawings of the book, it wasn't until later when I looked, when I was kind of reviewing, and I looked and I said, everyone in this book is below 50. You know, and I had to go, OK, so what are you, I'm like some kind of ageist? There was no one who was in a wheelchair. That's just not the world we live in.

And so I wanted to be very intentional. And obviously, it's not perfect. I couldn't represent everyone. Just to try and show the world that I actually navigate every day, I wanted that to be reflected in the process, also just to normalize people who may look different than we are. But I also wanted to highlight, you know, Miles' neighborhood that he actually lives in. He lives right down the street from a Latinx Art Center. There are Sikhs in the book, little things like that. I just wanted to make sure that Miles' world is beautiful and rich, as we all claim we're trying to achieve.

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:**

I really appreciate your approach to being more representative of everyday life. I find that something that's often lacking in architecture, and I think it's something that is really becoming more apparent, is a lot of the scale figures and representations we do, and a lot of our drawings, tend to be white, able-bodied people, often young. And that's something that I know there's websites like Nonscandinavia and places like that that go around and they search for different kinds of representation, so you can put them in your drawings.

And it's really incredible when you start realizing how much of your projects are really just following the typical representation that we see, and not actually showing the world we live in, right? Why are we representing architecture that lives in a weird utopia that does not represent our world? And every time they do show projects where they're developing in a quote, unquote "urban neighborhood," they'll always just put like a

bunch of break-dancers and, like, graffiti or something. It's so very bizarre. So I appreciate that you're really starting young to get these ideas of this is the real world of design, and these are the real people that live in these buildings, and how can we start to represent those from such a young age that it is ingrained in our minds that every representation of space really needs to represent the world.

You know, and it is becoming infinitely more involved with different cultures and people from all over, because we are in a more digital era, where the gaps between people is getting a lot smaller. So why are we always representing those things? And it is because architecture does tend to be a predominantly white, male profession. It's kind of on us now to bring forth that representation and to show ourselves, but not only ourselves, but the people we've grown up with. So I really appreciate that your project is doing that.

**AISHA
DENSMORE-BEY:**

Thank you. Thank you. You're really kind. Thank you.

**CALEB
NEGASH:**

And on a related note, I love that you mentioned the word, "joy," and normalizing joyful representations of Black people of all stripes, including all the intersections of disability, age, faith, all of that. And I think, you know, a lot of us designers of color and especially Black designers, we kind of feel tasked often to make work that's quote, unquote, "about race," or about justice, or about something. And so I see that as a responsibility and it's something I'm very proud to fight for, right? But at the same time, it can be a real burden. It can lead to people getting pigeonholed. You don't get fully appreciated in your capacity as a designer. You know, this extends to institutions, right, where faculty, let's say, of color or Black faculty are tasked with leading diversity initiatives, et cetera. And I think, you know, I really love the way that your book strikes a balance between those two modes, right, of expressing yourself as a Black designer.

**AISHA
DENSMORE-BEY:**

Yes. Exactly. Thank you, Caleb. That's kind of the perspective that I have. I just learned something really kind of recent about myself, the way I navigate the world, and how I navigate stress, especially in the time that we're in, is that I kind of need beauty. I need art. I need all of that in order to almost lessen the effects of the negativity and the stress. That's how my practice operates. I think-- I won't say I straddle the line, but I feel that there's a very strong push for me to engage in social issues. But also, like you said, I find it's really important to engage in social issues. But at the same time, I find that it's hard to always be expected to be in that space.

And I think the burden can also come from ourselves, in that you feel, like you said, it's your responsibility to always kind of bring up these issues. But what about levity? You know, as humans, we need to be able to not think about kind of like all of this weight that is constantly upon us, as people of color. And so my practice, in addition to addressing some social issues, it's also for me, an extension of art, which is an extension of joy and me being able to navigate the world through beauty and all of that.

So I think we really need to be kinder to ourselves and not always expect that we should have to carry, as you said, the burden of always pushing, whether it's social equity, racial equity, economic equity, that our practice is. And I think that's why I enjoy people like Arthur Jafa, or Virgil Abloh, or whatever, that their practices are

not solely about social issues, that they are able to kind of navigate those spaces and navigate the world, where it's not always tied to one thing, that there's a very clear perspective, but it's a varied perspective as well.

**CALEB
NEGASH:**

Your film, Room, will be featured in the Roxbury Film Festival this year. So Room, we're slightly familiar with it. And we know that it's about an architect-artist couple, in which the architect is tasked with kind of an ethical dilemma about designing a prison. So could you tell us a little bit more about the project?

**AISHA
DENSMORE-BEY:**

Room came about, and it's funny because we were talking about social justice, and really, that movie-- like, I didn't set out to create a movie about social justice, or ethics, or anything else like that. Really, I started the movie, for a very simple fact, is that I was a member of the Sundance Institute, and I purchased a membership so that I could get easy access to tickets. And when I couldn't get access to tickets because, of course, it's Sundance, and so when I still wasn't able to get tickets that I wanted to during the festival, I said, well, I have to use my membership for something. Screw it. I'm making a movie.

So in order to save \$65, I wound up spending thousands [LAUGHS] on this movie. But when I decided to write the story, it kind of evolved from a place of what would happen if a frustrated architect was stuck in a room for a weekend. And then I started thinking, OK, well why would the architect be in a room? Obviously, there's a million and one reasons why people visit hotel rooms. But then I started thinking, OK, well, maybe it's a couple, like there needed to be some kind of push back on this kind of evolution that this architect would have at the end. And I still didn't know what that evolution would be. But then I thought, OK, well, it will be a couple.

Then the story just started to evolve into well, why is this person frustrated, and what are some dilemmas that an architect can go through? And then the idea of designing prisons came to me. I wrote the script, and then a little while later, about-- it was actually in March in 2019-- I decided that I was going to make the film, make a film, at the end of January, so it was really like February 2019. So I started writing and all of that, and then in March of 2019, what I did was just kind of posed a question on Facebook, and I ask a lot of my architect friends, what do you feel about designing prisons? No judgment here. I just want to hear perspectives. I just wanted to see if the idea of the architect designing a prison and what those kind of ethical dilemmas would be, if that concept even had any legs.

And so I got very, very mixed opinions. Some people were fine with it, some people weren't, some people had very strong opinions about it. And thinking about it in the context of what's happening right now, some of those opinions may change in a year from now. Some of those opinions may change again, but some people weren't comfortable with expressing their opinion publicly, and so they DM-ed me or they texted me. But I can't tell you how many people actually did text me, even though I said it had nothing to do with my practice. I wasn't about to design a prison, I just wanted to know what people were thinking.

So many people were like, Aisha, really, are you going to design a prison? What you doing? That's not right.

You know how many Black people-- And I'm going, I just want to know your opinion, like, really. So after I got so many different opinions about it, and perspectives, then that's when I said OK, well, this idea, you know then, actually has legs. If there was kind of like a unified perspective, then I probably would have changed the screenplay a bit. But since it was something that people were so passionate about, I said OK, this is a valid story that I should move forward with.

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:**

So I think this is a question that I really started thinking about recently, when people were talking about who's going to build Trump's wall. I actually hadn't really thought about the people who design prisons and things like that, as people who live in my era. I don't know why. I never thought of it that way. And then I started seeing all these articles about people being, like, this is the construction company that's going to provide the materials. Don't ever work with them. This is the architecture firm that's saying that they're going to do this and that. And it was really, really bizarre to me because I was like, oh, my goodness. I forgot there are people who are alive now who think it's a good idea to do this.

But then, you know, I started to see like, other responses like, well, how can you be an ethical designer of a prison? Maybe you can think about it the way that they design prisons in like, I think, Scandinavia, where they're more like rehab centers, right? You need the good people to come in and fight and go, well, you can't make a cell that small. You know, or I was thinking about all the people who are detained at the border. There were architects who had to build those, right, and people supplying stuff for that. So for a long time, and I still agree, don't buy stuff from Wayfair, because they provided a lot of the beds and stuff in those terrible detention centers and all of that.

So it's the thing where you have to kind of research more and get more knowledge about where all your supplies are coming from, and who's building what, and I can't work for this company because they did that. And you know, I think there's a lot of people I know, they're like well, I need a job and like, every company has a bad side, and how can you change it unless you're within the organization, or any of that. So I'm just wondering what your thoughts are on how can we be more ethical designers, and is it really on the role of architects to be doing that, or who's in charge? Is it the fault of the person who asked us to make these things? Do we even have a say? What can the AIA do about this? And so what are some of your thoughts on that?

**AISHA
DENSMORE-BEY:**

Strangely enough-- and my response kind of has two parts-- in that when thinking about ethics and thinking about the kind of projects that you want to pursue, I have very strong feelings about it, as far as, you know, on how I want to proceed. But ethics, to me, is really nebulous, in the fact that there's a spectrum. So just as many people who opposed the idea of the wall and opposed, basically, this fascist regime that we're in, there were people like you said, who were fine with it. And I think that ethics is based, obviously, in the individual. And so throughout history, there have been many architects and designers who have participated in some of the most human atrocities ever, and they were fine with it. Or if they weren't fine with it, they still proceeded with the work.

And so that's where I think, when you talk about architecture or talk about design and ethics, that on the one

part, it's kind of hard for me to talk about. You know, I still think that is really nebulous, because it really-- the ethics sits with the individual. But then also part of me says, well, really ethics is who do we want to be as a society? Forget about architecture and design, and put it-- you know, who do we want to be as citizens, architects and designers as citizens first? So what kind of world do we want to leave to our children? What kind of world do we want to live in? And so if we want to be a society, like you said, that thinks about prisons as far as rehabilitation and as far as care, and love, and really thinking about the whole human being, well then, OK, then those are the kind of projects that we'll be able to develop.

If we want to have a society that thinks about healthy buildings. and healthy places, and green space, and art, and developing the holistic human, well then, there's going to be a certain perspective in that and there's going to be more opportunities to design that. Architects are just a microcosm of larger society. And so what's really, what kind of society do we want to be. And trying to kind of navigate that, I was really pleased after the AIA's misstep, when they basically said-- and I'm paraphrasing, but it was kind of like-- we'll be willing to support infrastructure projects, wink, wink, nudge, nudge-- at least that's the way it landed, you know, with a lot of people. I was really pleased that there was such a backlash and there was such a response.

If we want to have a society that thinks about healthy buildings. and healthy places, and green space, and art, and developing the holistic human, well then, there's going to be a certain perspective in that and there's going to be more opportunities to design that. Architects are just a microcosm of larger society. And so what's really,

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And I think that was one of the ways that architecture and design, as we can speak of, not again, not as designers, but as human beings, and trying to figure out what kind of world do we want to live in. Do we want to be complicit in harming people, or do we want to live in a world that's more harmonious, that's more loving, that's more gentle, that is more equitable? And so there are so many architects and designers who operate in that space. And so I'm not trying to be elusive. Ethics is nebulous in that it's a spectrum, and you just really have to figure out where you sit as a human being, but also at the same time, understanding that our ethics are determined by who we want to be as a society and what kind of world do we want to live in.

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:**

Yeah. I find it very interesting, you know, when you think about periods of time in architecture that we still study in school. So you know, there is always an ideal behind it. There's like the period of fascist architecture, and sometimes, they try to teach it to us very separated kind of from the people who are affected by it or were affected by it. And it's the same thing, you know, when you think about brutalism. And I do think that brutalism is like an interesting time period, just because the ideas behind it, especially in a lot of civic architecture, is that these government's buildings are going to be lasting forever. They are always very large scales, when you think about the proportions of people in relation to the scales of the building, they always try to make

them larger than life, to seem like you are a small part of a large government system.

So even when you think about Boston City Hall, you know, it's not meant to be something that is scary and daunting, but that is what happens with a lot of brutalist architecture. The underlying message is that this building will last forever. This government is going to last forever, and you know, we are in power, and it's very strong, and it's very sturdy, and it's unshakable. So when we think about architects designing a lot of things, I think often, they forget about the people and they really think about, well, what's the idea I'm trying to convey, and often it's power.

You know, it's something we even talked about at my undergrad. It was originally intended to be a school for men, and it was up until the '80s. So when you would see the architecture, there are ways that it's meant to make you feel minuscule, and it's not meant to be quote, unquote, "feminine." The campus is meant to make other people feel like outsiders. So it's a very interesting thing when you think about it, that architects do have the power to create certain effects. And often, they want to create that effect. And there's almost a sense of personal association with these projects because they're like, my project is now also lasting longer than my life and your life. My project is a testament to me, and also, these power structures, and they're really tying themselves to it.

I mean, we also-- we've talked about how Philip Johnson was very blatant about being a Nazi, and yet we still study him, and we try to separate his politics. But when you think about modernism, it was meant to be a style that you can just place in any country, and it's fine. It doesn't need context. And it's a very Western idea that whatever culture you have can be erased by this building. So I think that we really have this issue in architecture, where we have so much power, but then whenever the blame falls on us, we try to act very much like, oh, it's not in my hands. That's not my fault, you know. Yeah, I agree. It's a weird thing to kind of grapple with, where it's like, where are the limitations of my power, but also knowing that you do have the power, and how do you deal with that. And you decide how people feel in the space and how they move in the space.

**AISHA
DENSMORE-BEY:**

You basically summed up kind of the reason why I decided to go into architecture. Some people go into architecture because of the technical aspects, or because of, you know, they're fascinated with construction or whatever. For me, I approach architecture, basically, on a sensory level, in very much how do you feel in the space, what does that space do for you spiritually. You know, there are definitely certain types of architecture and certain typologies that I naturally gravitate toward. And so very much so, I think with architecture, trying to understand the harmful effects, and all of it comes from a certain perspective.

So the things that we think are beneficial today, you know, unfortunately, it takes a long time in architecture to understand your mistakes and understand the ramifications of your mistakes. And when you're talking about brutalism, you know, a lot of people even now espouse the positive points-- or what they feel are the positive points-- of brutalism, while some people think that it's cold and it's imposing, and what does that say about what kind of values are we placing in our architecture. Like I said before, architecture is basically a reflection

of all of the values that we have. And so, and values change, unfortunately, over time. It can be for the positive or on the negative side.

And so I definitely agree with you in that it's this weird tension of the architect having power and having a platform, but also understanding that we're part of a larger system, and that we're not designing in a vacuum. Developers, city planners, government, they have a perspective and that's a lot of times what we may respond to in our buildings or what we incorporate in our buildings, whether we are very conscious of it or not. And then there are architects who are able to either protest or also espouse and push forward different ideas. We have power, but I almost want to say that architects don't have as much power as we'd like to think we have.

And I know that's a hard thing to say, because this is the GSD. Architects are incredibly powerful, but we're a reflection, and we respond to larger issues. And it's very rare that we're able to, as architects, just put things out into the world that we're not responding to something else that we're not part of, that is not a reaction to something else.

**CALEB
NEGASH:**

It's a great point you make, you know, because I think this whole conversation has been around this ethical dilemma about incarceration, right, that architects have, and designers in general. And so it seems to me, right, that there's two camps. There's people who are for boycotting any kind of design work related to incarceration or detainment, and then maybe amelioration might be a name for the other camp, which is you know, people saying let's stay in the fight, let's take those jobs, and design these places to be more quote, unquote, "humane." I really struggle with people who are in the latter camp because I think, like you mentioned, architects are one part of a huge, huge system and network of people that are working on these kinds of projects, on any project, especially something as complex and huge as a prison.

And so the architects, first of all, who are going to try and break the status quo, let's say, on a project like that, first of all, they're probably less likely to get the job, right? These are things that are going to those huge engineering developer firms, right? And second of all, let's say an architect does get a job like that, you know, your agency is going to be limited. And in many ways, you know, that the sort of oppression of the system might end up being reproduced anyway, you know, despite your efforts.

So and I just love the question you ask, which is what kind of world do we want to live in, right, which is the question that I think all architects are tasked with thinking about, given the fact that we're making things and putting things out into the world. And that really brings to mind Deanna Van Buren, who gave the keynote address at last year's Black in Design conference. And she talked about her work on restorative justice centers that totally reframe this idea about crime, and you know, reject punitive models, and instead they work towards figuring out what harm has been done and then repairing that. And so that, to me, is something sort of a step towards what you talk about, which is what can we as architects and designers do to imagine and sort of put forth ideas about a different kind of world without prisons altogether, so I love that.

**AISHA
DENSMORE-BEY:**

I'm glad you mentioned Deanna Van Buren, because-- and I still have yet to see her Black in Design keynote, but I did see her Ted Talk, and that influenced part of the script for Room. During one of the scenes, the character, Zayna, who's the architect, she mentions restorative justice design. And I wanted to actually bring that up in the film, and not so much in the context of that's what she's suggesting the prison should be, but I just wanted to bring that up, so that someone would be able to remember that term and kind of look it up later.

But when you mentioned the idea of an architect trying to kind of change the system from within, it's a very interesting conundrum, because either you can say, well, no-- and that was basically kind of like the breadth of the responses that I got when I put it out on Facebook. It was like the three major responses was no, I would not

do this under any circumstance. Two, well, there are going to be prisons and, you know, laws are still going to be broken, so they're still necessary. And three, I would take the project, but the paradigm would have to be changed in some way. I would have to basically incorporate in the design process healthy spaces, whether it be libraries, or meditative spaces, or things like that. So those were the responses that I received.

And it is, depending on what kind of world and what kind of society we want to live in, and hopefully, things are changing right now, but the American justice system has been punitive, you know? And so, you know, for a long time, we've had this kind of thought process that we need to build more prisons, you know? Obviously, this country incarcerates more people, especially people of color, than any other country in the world. And so if it was going to be done, and you may not have the decision-making power, how do you start to turn that? How do you start to slowly change that process?

Because it's not going to be an overnight thing, unfortunately. It's not going to be something that is instantaneous. So you can either say, well, I will do this, but in some way, I want to be part of the solution, which is more nuanced. Like, I think for me, even though I-- well, full disclosure, when I was in my 20s, I worked with an architecture firm that designed a prison project. They designed casinos, they designed a lot of different things. And I think I was on the project for like, two weeks or something, but back then, I really didn't think about it, not in the way that I would think about it now. But you can, like, I definitely wouldn't help design a prison project now. But that's my own personal ethics, but I do not fault people who decide well, this is the situation. I'm presented with this particular challenge. How do I start to change the process? How do I start to kind of tick away, carve away, at the existing paradigm? And I think the solution is more complex than just a simple yes or no.

**CALEB
NEGASH:**

Aisha, thank you so much for joining us. This has been really illustrative. And everybody, check out Who Made My Stuff?: Miles Learns About Design.

**AISHA
DENSMORE-BEY:**

Tara and Caleb, thank you so much. Thank you for having me. I had a good time.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:**

I'm 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.

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