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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 with Bryan Lee Jr., design principle at Colloqate in New Orleans, a non-profit multidisciplinary design practice dedicated to expanding community access to design and creating spaces of racial, social, and cultural equity. Bryan is the founding organizer of the Design Justice Platform and organized the Design as Protest National Day of Action.

In addition to his prolific speaking, writing, and design work, Bryan has led two award-winning architecture and design programs for high school students through the Arts Council of New Orleans and the National Organization of Minority Architects. Bryan, thank you for joining us.

BRYAN LEE JR: Thank you for having me.

CALEB NEGASH: In our last episode, we got the chance to speak with De Nichols who is one of your co-organizers in the Designer's Protest Collective. So how did the idea to start this initiative come about?

BRYAN LEE JR: So designers protests in 2014 came about because we were beginning to recognize the necessary conversations that were happening around public space and the right to be free and liberated in public space that was being challenged by the murder of John Crawford, the murder of Mike Brown, the murder of Trayvon Martin and so on and so on and so on.

And so we wanted to make sure that the design community, which has such a prevailing responsibility for the built environment, was attuned and not just attuned but was affirmatively influencing the outcomes of communities that have historically been marginalized from shaping those spaces. And so Design as Protest came about with organizers activists community members here in New Orleans over five years ago.

And out of that became these kind of sets of trainings and workshops and organizing efforts that started to percolate outside of the boundaries of the city. And so as the most recent string of murders at the hands of the police came about, we got together with folks who have been in this movement and who had done this work in the past and decided that it was necessary to bring it back to the fore, but bring it back to the fore at a national scale and with direct action as its primary cause.

TARA OLUWAFEMI:

So your work is centered on design justice. How would you define this movement? And what is the history of the movement? I know that we've talked a little bit about it together, but I also am wondering how do you see your own work within that legacy.

BRYAN LEE JR:

It's a good question. I mean, we always stand on the shoulders of our forefathers and foremothers in this work. And I think movement work relies on the fact that we are learning and building off of the struggles and triumphs of our predecessors. And so I think both in activism and architecture, design justice finds a pathway that entangles those two conversations at a level that I think is necessary, not just in this moment but for the future of the profession.

And it's not just about architecture, but the built kind of professions in large need to be kind of vested in this. And that's what you see this current movement doing. So Design as Protest is anchored by the theory of design justice, as you mentioned. And really, that theory just says that we are forwarding a radical vision for racial, social, and cultural reparation to the process and outcomes of design. And it's extremely important to frame ourselves around the process and outcomes.

It's not simply about a manifested vision that has no bearing or connection to the communities that are being served. It actually has to do with how we work with community to build that radical vision. And it's not about the translation that we might have. It is much more about the translation that communities might have.

Because there's this instinct for us to through training or through policy or through just an egomaniacal expectation of ourselves, we want to often create things that are about us. And design justice will kind of eschew that core construct and make sure that we are centering our work on marginalized and disinherited communities, I think.

Secondarily, design justice seeks to challenge the privilege and power structures that use architecture and design as a means to maintain power and to sustain systems of oppression. So we really have to be careful within the movement to make sure that we are not upholding positions and systems of power but actively dismantling those in a way that allows us to, again, envision the radical visions of spaces that are just by their very nature.

So that's the kind of framework that we build into this. I don't see myself as an individual in relationship to anything. I think it is about the movement. It's about the kind of collective, and I think that is where I want to kind of personally maintain my relationship to this work.

If it becomes more about me than it is about the progress that we're seeking to make in the world, then it will ultimately die. And I think we want to make sure that that is not ever the responsibility of a single individual. It is always the responsibility of the collective of the masses to move this work forward. But I think it is important to recognize those moments along history's timeline that tell us about ourselves and tell us about what collective movements have looked like in the past, whether it's against civil rights movements or the like. It's also important for us to recognize where the injustices have laid themselves bare in society over that time.

And so I often look at a civil rights movement, whether it's the Poor People's Campaign and the Resurrection City, whether it's going back a little bit further, and we look at kind of constant argument that was brought to bear by Booker T. Washington and WEB Dubois between The Talented Tenth between education for the masses, this idea that one could educate their way out of struggle that was thwarted by Booker T. Washington, which we all know is not a truth.

But what did percolate out of that consciousness was this idea that we could build and sustain and hold Black spaces that ultimately serve to elevate Black communities. So whether the actual outcomes were aligned with the theory that Booker T. espoused is not necessarily the point.
The point is that one of the largest Black-built spaces we can point to in this country today is Tuskegee University. Booker T. Washington worked with Robert Taylor. He came from MIT and worked with students to build the bricks that built the spaces that built this University that serves so many Black youth. And so I think there's an important kind of set of lessons to learn from that effort.

In addition to that, Booker T. Washington helped to sustain the Rosenwald Schools of Julius Rosenwald that built over 5,300 schools across the South after reconstruction into Jim Crow and segregation. So there are these kind of foundational principles around community effort, around self-determination of place and space.

In addition, again, the other end of that particular spectrum when we talk about WEB Dubois, who was really a pioneer when it came to visualizing the incoherence of a system that perpetually oppressed Black people. And so looking at the Philadelphia Negro, looking at the visual infographics that were diagnosing a problem through the pre-conscribed labels of race and place revolutionized a lot of what we think of as planning today.

And so I think there are necessary moments along, again, foundational moments from 1881 to 1915 that really shaped the evolution of design justice as a practice. While it wasn't called design justice, it did anchor the work that we do today.

So just to kind of give you a few more moments on that timeline, even if we're thinking about folks like Jane Jacobs and the work that was done in the '40s, '50s, '60s, the work of Max Bond for the Architectural Renewal Committee of Harlem that really anchored all of the visions of place in the community itself rather than anchoring it in an individual.

It also opened up the idea that the process of thinking through design can lead to a manifest building, can lead to policy change, can lead to planning change. So it didn't have a direct output, a singular output. It had a multiplicity of outputs that made that work happen.

TARA OLUWAFEMI:

There's so much I want to respond to in that. That was incredible. Thank you. But I feel like two things I really want to say is one is a comment. It's like the whole Black capitalism thing, it's really taken over again. I think recently, everyone is like, yeah, the way to justice is by Black owned. And I'm like, I mean, yeah, support Black business, but, like, what? This is also capitalism. It's also part of the same system. What are we really doing?

Which leads me to my second question a little bit. So we're talking about how we need socialism and how in your design practice you go in and you are seeing what these communities need by really engaging with these communities. Can you talk a little bit about that? I feel like that's something that we aren't taught in school. We're always taught about context, but we're taught to look at the context. And then you go to the place where a day or two. You walk around. You take a couple photos. You do a little online research and then you know the whole context.

BRYAN LEE JR:

Yeah. I mean, I think there are two things in that that, again, we should shatter as preconceived notions. One is the fact that we have any capability of knowledge that will supersede the knowledge of people who are already in community. So our first principle in design justice is that we should honor the Grio.

And so honor the Grio fundamentally means that we have to look for the folks who-- we call them the miss Mary's, people who have been on the block since 1945 or 1955 and know how every crack in the street happened. They have been there so long that their knowledge of place A, will not be easily, again, surpassed, but will also not be easy to just extract in a single conversation or in a short set of kind of modules in which we bring students to a community center to hear Miss Mary talk.

Those are not the ways that we do this. It actually means that we have to amplify the voices of ethics and communities and establish storytellers as a part of the process. So there's a reduction of power that we have to get used to and a distribution of power that needs to be a part of our process from the top. That's one thing.

And then there's a recognition that there's a difference between outreach, engagement, and organizing. In part, we're able to do some of this work because we are already in community. There's a couple of things here. One is that there's a difference between neighborhood and community in that neighborhood is the geographic boundary of a place and community. It's the sociocultural boundaries of place. It's the people, the spirit. It's the thing that has an affinity to a geographic boundary but is not confined to that geographic boundary, which makes it alive in the first place but also makes it easily detached.

And so when you see emotions and notions to gentrifier it is a place, that is a displacement of community, never a displacement of neighborhood. So there's kind of like fine tuning our language around what it means to work in community. And so again, as I mentioned, when we recognize the difference between outreach, engagement, and organizing, we're talking about the first two being very extractive, outreach being kind of a connection point between folks that has no guarantee for a future relationship.

There's no guarantee that we collect this data and we bring it back to you. It's really just a way for us to either communicate a consideration that we already have or to extract data points that we do not have. Engagement

goes a step further and oftentimes explicitly seeks to extract data and have some sort of small feedback loop but always an effort to amplify the power of those who are doing the extraction.

Organizing builds power in with or community. It is secondary that we are looking to extract, or pull, or aggregate, or draw data from community. And this is important because the narratives, both qualitative and quantitative, that come from community are absolutely necessary in our process. But if we are able to reduce our own power and redistribute, then the wealth of knowledge that exists within communities becomes a part of the coalition that is working towards a particular project or working towards the larger plan of a neighborhood.

And so we have to reframe our mind around that. And this is in part why so many folks fight this so much is because it's not a thing that people are easily willed to do. They're not built to reduce any power because our system, whether it's of capitalism or kind of plutocracy, forces us to consume as much power as possible and hold on to it as long as possible.

And so all of the systems and institutions we built have been to perpetuate that system of extraction. And so we've got to reframe both our individual considerations but our institutional considerations around outreach or organizing. We always want to lean more towards organizing. We always want to leave a space better or maintain and be in a space for longer periods of time. So, yeah, I think it's necessary to have those definitions at the forefront of our work as we move forward.

CALEB NEGASH:

So I think one thing you've really identified succinctly is that design and especially architecture as a process is often working in this extractive mode, which is obviously set up by the framework of capitalism, I think. We think about ways even, as Tara alluded to, when we are allegedly engaging with the community, it is in this extractive mode and trying to pull things out to use in the so-called design process.

And I want to go back to what you talked about in terms of design justice being centered on both outcomes and the process. Because I think if we focus too much on outcomes, which is to say trying to get design and architecture that can rectify or repair a lot of the harm that's been done by design, which is obviously important, we risk ignoring the process. And I think in order to unlearn that extractive mode of designing and the ways that we're taught to engage with community, let's say, in design, that would require I think a total restructuring of the way that we're taught design in schools.

BRYAN LEE JR:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think fundamentally, we are taught to synthesize very specific information into our own creative outputs. And those outputs do not require additional feedback. And we work in silos. We are taught history from a Western pedagogical stance. And the outputs are very familiar because the inputs are very familiar.

And what's heartbreaking about it often is that even that little bit of space and creativity that is engendered during school gets squished into a set of policies and procedures that produces the same developer affordable housing box that you see across the country with the push-pull kind of windows. It is so devoid of usefulness when it comes to building, maintaining, and supporting power and communities, and it starts from a pedagogical lens.

We always talk about the fact that the continuum of power goes from pedagogy policies, procedures, practice, projects, and people. And the things we learn or the things we shape from a pedagogical stance get seep into our policies and procedures and ultimately shape how practice responds. And so we've got to really struggle with the conversations that continue to manifest the same outputs through the current systems of academia.

And so I think that's part of the reason that we, through the collective, have started to produce a project and anti-racist design school that is called Dark Matter University. And it was centrally focused on that idea that universities and schools are so encumbered with sustaining power and sustaining systems that have ultimately reproduced trauma, reproduced depression, reproduced systems of racism in the world that they will never really be able to fully pivot without an external force driving that. And so creating a design school that focuses on anti-racism for the purpose of liberation is really, we believe, the only way that we can drive change in this moment.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Can you talk a little bit about some of those architecture and design programs that you started for high school students? You're not just starting with university level. Is Dark Matter part of that? Or is Dark Matter post-high school? And what is the high school differences on all of that?

BRYAN LEE JR: Dark matter runs the gamut, but let me take a step back and I'll just kind of give you the framework for the work that we've done for both the Arts Council and for NOMA. In large part because when I left graduate school and stayed along the East Coast for a little while, I graduated right after the 2008 recession. So there were no jobs. There wasn't really anything to do.

So one of the things that really enlivened my time where there weren't jobs and we were trying to find work in whatever space we could was I started coaching high school football and baseball at the time and basketball for a couple games. But the point was really to kind of work with young people towards an output.
And I always ask this question to myself and then I started to kind of bring it up to others is, why do young people who are coached appreciate and know and acknowledge their coaches far more than they acknowledge or appreciate their teachers? What's the dynamic? Because the power is equivalent. And part of it is that the process of coaching one is in the same direction. We're all looking towards the same goal and the same output.

And so that really struck me as we started to kind of build on how I wanted to express myself relative to architectural education. And then in 2010, I worked with the organization currently under the name of University of Orange. They held a benchmarking project. And so we worked with YouthBuild Newark for a few weeks. And the students became these kind of collective powerhouse that started to build three different benches that supported and sat in community over that time they won the competition.

And what it revealed to me was really just how much we've been asked to do this throughout our history. We've been asked to take underresourced conditions and turn them into goal, turn them into spaces and places that community can hold and cherish and love. And it is, in part, again, the process of making and creating together for and with a community that creates that binding connection.

And so taking that experience with me to New Orleans a few years later, I was asked to start building on a program through the National Organization of Minority Architects that started in 2005 to introduce architecture design and planning to marginalize, disenfranchised, disinherited youth across the country.

And so I started in New Orleans to work with multiple people in coalition to start to build out this program. And so we really took the time to think about what the objectives of the project were. And so we came down to this kind of core concept that social justice should be driven into the design of architecture and planning. This is 2011, 2012.

And so we shaped this entire program to work in that fashion where we talked about personal space to neighborhood space to city space and what it meant to operate at different scales and whose opinion was relevant and viable at those various scales, who currently holds power and how can power be shifted. And so we built this entire program to accommodate that.

Over the course of the next 10 years, we've served over 12,000 students across the country, both in person and this year virtually. And the hope is that we continue to expand the connection to young people across the country in the effort to make sure that they understand their power and relationship to shaping their environments and our environments as we move forward. That in itself is the power in this work.

Whether they become architects or is not super relevant. The intention is to make sure that we create an environment in which they can start to shape that space and then fundamentally open up the pathways beyond the programs called Project Pipeline to support and sustain communities in perpetuity. I think that is a tremendous point that we need to bring to bear there.

So that information and that work helped drive a program that we ran at The Arts Council Youth Solutions, which also started to serve high school age range group that really started to take the kind of learnings that we put into Project Pipeline and started to give students the space and time and opportunity to actually build out some of these ideas that they were manifesting at the small scale.

And so those are the two programs, and they all influence. I mean, you get this-- as you start to learn from your past experiences that all influences your future. And so DMU is not a singular effort. It is an effort by many, many people. There are instigators and agitators and folks who have kind of bore the seeds of the work. But beyond that, there are folks who are running with it now that will share and open up more opportunities for folks as the program continues to expand and open up.

And so the intention of Dark Matter University is to make sure that we are forcing and pushing institutions to renegotiate and re-evaluate the way that they train designers of all disciplines and make sure that the process and the outputs are aligned with justice as their core outcome.

So in short to say, that DMU accounts for the entire spectrum. And it's not just about universities. It is not just about young people. It's not just about working in community. It is about all of that and doing it all through the lens of an anti-racist design justice liberatory framework.

TARA OLUWAFEMI:

Thank you. You're involved in so many things. I honestly-- every time I'm like, I have so many questions. But I think one thing that really stuck out to me was when you were talking about ingenuity in Black communities and how it's almost become the norm-- it has become the norm-- to work with as minimal resources as possible.

And that actually reminds me of a talk that I went to earlier. I think it was last year at the GSD. And it was Tatiana Bilbao talking about how when she designs in Mexico her resources are limited. She's a Mexican architect. But then she got put on to a project with a bunch of Swiss architects, and they were trying to make, I think, like expensive building that supplement housing for low-income people, so they brought in a bunch of different architects.

And the Swiss architects were like, we can't work with this budget. It's so little. And she was like, are you kidding me? This is probably the biggest budget I've ever been given. How can you not be creative with this? And I feel like it's sad that in a sense, having minimal resources has led to a different form of creativity. I'm wondering then how that also plays into ideas about sustainability and topics around that and a lot of the designs that you do? I mean, the benches that the students made were reclaimed materials. And a lot of times, when you don't have a lot of resources, you are trying to think of ways to reuse and all of that. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about that.

BRYAN LEE JR:

Yeah, I mean, it's tough because ultimately folks think through sustainability and resilience from the position of whiteness, which implies a longevity or a timeline that does not exist and has never really existed for those who have been oppressed in this country or across the world. The things that we build, the things that we have to create are often highly innovative and highly creative, but also at times have a shorter lifespan.

And that really has to do with the acute nature of one's decision-making and lifespan. I might create something that can sustain me until the next time that I have to make a decision or scaffold a decision for me, but I can't make decisions that are going to make 10-year impact or 20-year impact. I can't afford it. I don't have the resources.

So I think we have to, again, recognize the decision making and processing time for communities that have been historically disenfranchised. In our work, we actively make sure that the kind of community voice and driving voice of a process is so forwarded in the front end of any project that we do that it allows us to make more precise and more culturally adherent decisions.

So we think about the Paper Monuments Project or we think about projects that we did with Wild Seas with Black Lives Matter, these conversations are happening in large part so that we can make better decisions about the kind of function of space down the line. So when we talk about, again, how decisions are made, decisions have to then be made for us by way of those early conversations.

We often talk about the fact that everyone knows the term form follows function, but one of the driving forces for us is that foreign policy fiction. Form follows the narratives and stories that we tell ourselves. And again, in

large part because spaces have been underresourced so much so that that's what you have. You have the stories of place that shape and form the value of that place, whether it's aesthetic holds up to what the perceived value needs to be in a kind of white supremacist market, capitalist market, cis-hetero market, it has to realign our considerations of value.

And value in particular communities of color has been placed in spaces that do not align with what we view as aesthetically contributory from the kind of architecture world's perspective. So, yes, I think that's really the angle and the position that I take on this is that sustainability and resilience mean entirely different things for groups who have to make acute decisions that are often life or death, that are often hunger or satiated every day versus every week, every month, every year. So your creativity becomes different in relationship to that.

TARA OLUWAFEMI:

I agree. I think in a sense, the word sustainability and resilience, you're sustaining communities through your design, which are really important pillars. Thank you.

CALEB NEGASH:

I think you also draw a really important connection between the concept of sustainability and white supremacist capitalist ideology that kind of structures our thinking and our way of working. And I want to talk a little bit about how that, I think, really limits and restricts the possibility of change and how we really do need to confront that legacy. Because, again, on the topic of reuse and ingenuity, it makes me think a lot about the artist Thornton Dial, who passed away a few years ago.

And he was known for these found assemblages of usually metal scraps. And he had a history growing up in Alabama in the '30s and '40s, and he would see in front yards and in just in the community scraps of metal that were assembled. And that really inspired his thinking. And he was later a metal worker.

And I think he was so underappreciated in the work that he was making until later in his life and did eventually come to be appreciated within the art world only after having been recognized by a few collectors, Black collectors, who started to promote his work within the art world.

And I think the reason I'm interested in that is that I think this again starts to challenge the framework and the kind of rigid categories that are set up by the art world and, by extension, the design world like we were talking about the issues with the process. And I think that the disciplines that we have, there is this huge legacy of exclusion, not just in terms of literal exclusion of people, which is something that we are always working to address by means of representation and getting more Black and brown people in the field, which of course, we could question as a strategy for its focus on maybe individualism.

BRYAN LEE JR:

Yeah, we will.

CALEB NEGASH:

And we will. But it's not just that kind of exclusion that we have a history of but also a kind of categorical exclusion of what can be considered art and what can be considered design. And I think that's the way or one of the many ways that white supremacy actually restricts everybody, including white people. It kind of limits the horizon of what we can imagine and our creative ability.

BRYAN LEE JR: I mean, it's so important to kind of dig into that a little bit because there are many tenets to white supremacy. But before that, I find most consistent thinking about kind of just general colonization or cooption appropriation for the purpose of political power. v Colonization is about holding and aggregating land mass for the purpose of political power. And so in that extension became a metaphor for colonization of other things as well.

But then there's delineation. So white supremacy forces the delineation of races of people from as many ways as possible as a means to delineate power and then also maintain kind of individualism as an ethos to hold that same set of conditions around delineation to be true.

And so it's about how white supremacy starts to describe precisely who has value and who does not in relationship to that power because then you get to deconstruct or dismantle the folks that you believe don't deserve that power. So you're reducing or analyzing situation by way of that deconstruction and then ultimately, the act of segregation. So moving people away or shifting them away because you've already determined that they don't deserve power.

You've already determined that those who do deserve power are the ones who fight for freedom and are individuals and have earned their stake in this. And then we determine how people earned their stake in this. And it was in large part because they have colonized the ideas, or the land, or the bodies of people for political power. So white supremacy is a very corrosive kind of ethos that has permeated all of our systems. And we have to, again, start to pull ourselves away from that construct.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Would you be able to point us to some resources that you found to be essential in developing your approach to design and its ability to be a tool for justice?

I would say that we don't frame it from the perspective of design. We frame it from the perspective of justice. And the books that are most formative for the work that we do really when we talk about The Fire Next Time, James Baldwin, when we talk about books by Audre Lorde when we talk about the Philadelphia Negro, which starts to dig into the kind of analysis of place and space and race, which really drive so much of our work.

I think contemporary books that start to bring some of those things out the color of law. Obviously, everyone just got a chance to dig into that, thinking about Stamped From The Beginning, which is a tremendous, tremendous way to understand the origins of the idea of race and the idea of racism and how it's been articulated in our world are all kind of amazing ways to start.

I think Soja-- it was a book called Seeking Spatial Justice that is amazing. Community as Urban Practice by Blokland. And one of your GSD professors, Michael Hays, wrote a book called Architecture's Desire, which is hyperdense. And it's a book that you want to critique and challenge, but it forces you to think. And I think that is extremely important for me.

So again, those are just a few, but I would say thinking about The Water Dancer by Ta-Nehisi Coates, the ability to think creatively outside of just the nonfiction scope is also important. So again, those are a few things that have driven me over the last many years of this work. And we have a whole list of resources and books

that we think about on the Colloqate site and even more on the The Collective. So check both of those sites out and see more.

CALEB NEGASH:

Bryan, there's so much we have left to talk about, but I think we do need to cut things short. Thank you so much for joining us, and I hope we can bring you back on the show or at least continue these conversations. But thank you so much.

TARA OLUWAFEMI:

Amazing, thank you.

BRYAN LEE JR:

Yeah, thank you for having me. I do appreciate it.

[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.