

## 'Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action' A Year On

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George Floyd's murder and the subsequent resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 forced us all to confront the deep-rooted biases that shape our day-to-day lives. The global call to arms gave rise to a wave of advocacy and empowered many of us to demand change.

For the students at the Sheffield School of Architecture (SSoA) this is manifested in 'Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action'. The work of Metropolitan Architecture Student Society at London Metropolitan University and BLM\_Arch@MSA at Manchester School of Architecture has been influential and at the forefront of the current anti-racist movement in architecture. I have interviewed two students, James Thormod and Elise Colley from these groups, to hear about their experiences, motivations and approach to activist work.

With work of this nature, it is easy to shut yourself into your own echo chamber and method of approach. It is vital to consider the full spectrum of work already being produced at SSoA and beyond; to learn from our shortcomings and adopt new strategies.

This article collates the conversations between James, Elise and I, offering the student perspective and insights into each of our institutions' downfalls and achievements during this time.

1% of all registered architects are Black.<sup>1</sup> Comparatively, Black people account for 3.3% of the UK population.<sup>2</sup> BAME stands for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic – while it can be useful for statistics, it is a highly

1 Architects Registration Board, 'Equality and Diversity Data', *Architects Registration Board*, 2021 < <https://arb.org.uk/about-arb/equality-diversity/data/> > [accessed 22 June 2021].

2 Office for National Statistics, 'Population of England and Wales 2011', *Gov.uk*, 2018 < <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/population-of-england-and-wales/latest> > [accessed 22 June 2021].

divisive term used by the media and government to homogenise and reduce the disparate histories and experiences of millions of people (7.9 million to be exact) into one acronym.<sup>3</sup> BAME people account for 14% of the UK population and yet under 10% of architects are BAME in 96 AJ100 practices – the UK’s largest practices, as defined by the number of architects employed.<sup>4</sup> The disparities between these figures are even more abhorrent when you take into consideration that the majority of these practices have an office in London, where 40% of the population is BAME.<sup>5</sup> Despite statistics like this, why does it take a global pandemic and the murder of George Floyd for the architectural profession to finally plead guilty to systemic racism?

George Floyd’s murder and subsequent resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2020 forced us all to confront the deep-rooted biases that shape our day-to-day lives. The global call to arms gave rise to a wave of advocacy and empowered many of us to demand change. For students of architecture, like James Thormod and Elise Colley, one means of initiating this change has been through publications and letters calling their institutions to action.

“We pay a lot of money to these institutions, and effectively, they’re letting us down,” said James, Part II graduate of London Metropolitan University (LMU).<sup>6</sup>

## Conversations on Racism at LMU

James Thormod and Lucia Medina co-curated the ‘Conversations on Racism’ publication for the Metropolitan Architecture Student Society (MASS). This document is a collection of carefully researched and evocatively portrayed essays that offer multiple perspectives on racism. Unable to attend the BLM protests in 2020 and finding the performative activism of posting a black square on Instagram for the so-called ‘Black Out Tuesday’ futile, ‘Conversations on Racism’ offered James the chance to use his talents to respond and protest in a meaningful way. The publication was effective in putting pressure on LMU, sparking productive conversations between the Heads of School and student body. Although they received encouragement and verbal support for MASS initiatives, James was disappointed with the lack of urgency within the school. The students then took matters into their own hands, seeking out funding for the ‘Now What’ lecture series from the Centre for Equality and Inclusion within the broader University. According to MASS, “‘Now What’ is an open discussion through which to enable re-learning of design, history, aesthetics; challenging the way in which we learn and practice”.<sup>7</sup>

- 3 Office for National Statistics, ‘Population of England and Wales 2011’, 2018.
- 4 Bruce Tether, ‘AJ100 2020: Women are gaining ground in the profession, but not BAME architects’, *Architects’ Journal*, 2020 <<https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/aj100-2020-women-are-gaining-ground-in-the-profession-but-not-bame-architects>> [accessed 22 June 2021].
- 5 Greater London Authority, *Supporting Diversity Handbook*, London: Mayor of London, 2019 <[https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/supporting\\_diversity\\_handbook\\_web.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/supporting_diversity_handbook_web.pdf)> [accessed 24 June 2021].
- 6 James Thormod, Interview by Author, (Google Meet, 18 June 2021).
- 7 Metropolitan Architecture Student Society, @massatmet ‘Introducing Now What’, *Instagram*, 2021 <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CLM5y3nMwqt/>> [accessed 23 June 2021].

In June 2020, the school changed its name to ‘The School of Art, Architecture and Design’, removing slave trader Sir John Cass’ name.<sup>8</sup> James revealed:

“The architecture school loved its name as ‘The Cass’ – as it was commonly known – and it seemed the main pressure to change its name was coming from the central University.”<sup>9</sup>

## Silence in Manchester

Similarly, Elise – who recently completed her Part 2 at the Manchester School of Architecture (MSA) – felt Manchester was also complacent. During the BLM protests, students were dissatisfied by the lack of public support received from MSA. Elise shared that the students were falsely informed of an ‘embargo’ regarding public statements due to the complications of MSA being a part of both the University of Manchester (UoM) and Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU).<sup>10</sup> This embargo was revealed to be a “lie” only after students rallied together and wrote to the Deans of MMU and UoM, stating that “the forced silence of the MSA makes it painfully clear that you have fallen short in acknowledging the institutional work urged by the Black Lives Matter movement.”<sup>11</sup>

“They were allowed to comment [...] they felt it would have taken too long to go through all the channels,” said Elise.<sup>12</sup> This complacency and deceit by the university led to the formation of the BLM\_Arch@MSA student group, of which Elise is a key member.

Even though the hard work and emotional labour of students writing and signing the letter felt “redundant”, it forced MSA to reflect on “the clear racial disparities [...] in the School”.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the EDI Code of Practice was formed, which among many things focuses on diversifying reading lists, specific mentoring and scholarships.<sup>14</sup> While she considers it rewarding that staff are listening, signing the EDI Code of Practice and promising regular reviews, Elise fears there is no accountability for staff, and it relies heavily on individuals’ consciences to follow this framework. Instead, BLM\_Arch@MSA is leading the anti-racism cause at Manchester, curating talks from inspiring guest speakers, educational resources and The Family Scheme—a mentoring scheme inspired by the Royal College of General Practitioners’ model. Led by Lifa Zvimbande, RIBA North West Director, this mentoring scheme seeks to connect students at secondary school, Parts 1 to 3, newly qualified and experienced architects. It is aimed at students “who do not fit into the typical portrayal of an Architect (whether that’s due to race, gender, social class, etc)”.<sup>15</sup>

8 Prof. Lynn Dobbs, ‘A message about our School of Art, Architecture and Design’ London Metropolitan University, 2020, <<https://www.londonmet.ac.uk/news/articles/a-message-about-our-school-of-art-architecture-and-design/>> [accessed 26 June 2021].

9 Thormod, Interview.

10 Elise Colley, Interview by Author, (Google Meet, 21 June 2021).

11 Colley, Interview; The MSA Black Alumni, *A statement on behalf of the Manchester School of Architecture* (MSA) student body (Unpublished 2020).

12 Colley, Interview.

13 Colley, Interview; Helen Aston and Prof. Ola Uduku, ‘Equality Diversity and Inclusivity at Manchester School of Architecture’, Manchester School of Architecture, 2021 <<https://www.msa.ac.uk/2021/edi/>> [accessed 27 June 2021].

14 Aston and Prof. Uduku, 2021.

15 BLM\_Arch@MSA, @blm\_archmsa, ‘The Family Scheme’, *Instagram*, 2020 <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CEeQqldJqZN/>> [accessed 28 June 2021].

## ‘A Call to Action’ at Sheffield

James and Elise have been impressed by the ‘Call to Action’ letter written by the students at the Sheffield School of Architecture (SSoA) and the school’s response. In this letter, through evocative personal accounts, students unveiled their experiences of professional, academic and experiential disenfranchisement, arguing that the school “remains complicit in the structures that perpetuate systemic racism [...] to be a ‘social’ school of architecture that it claims to be, it needs to become an actively anti-racist institution.”<sup>16</sup> The letter was signed in solidarity by over 200 people—spanning professionals, alumni, and students across different institutions.

In response to this ‘Call to Action’, the staff and students from the EDI Committee at Sheffield have been meeting fortnightly to discuss and propose initiatives, such as the ‘SSoA Voices Survey’. This anonymous survey seeks to take the temperature of the school to identify and act on the issues staff and students face. Sheffield University Architecture Society (SUAS) have also committed themselves to inclusivity. Their popular ‘Lecture Series’ and ‘Lunchtime Specials’ have showcased work from diverse professionals and students. The Student Action Group – an EDI splinter group, of which I am a member – has set up and launched film nights in collaboration with SUAS. These sought to extend the important conversations resulting from the ‘Call to Action’ letter with the entire School.

Ultimately, the EDI Committee has opened up a space through which to engage in discussions and put forward initiatives in the hope of improving the culture of the School. While conversation is a crucial step in creating change, the EDI Committee is at risk of being stuck in its own echo chamber. From personal experience, too many meetings have been spent discussing issues, speculating on the best course of action, and indulging in self-congratulation for just turning up – made even more frustrating by the fact the ‘Call to Action’ letter already laid out a comprehensive action plan.

## Representation

‘Now What’ and other lecture series that increase representation of the non-typical architects and non-architects are vastly important. James considered their talks a success, with attendances of 50-60 people.

“There was a real desire for something different, more young voices, diverse voices [...] women doing great things in architecture, people of colour doing great things in architecture”, said James. The true impact and success of these changes and inclusions cannot be measured.<sup>17</sup>

16 Connie Pidsley and others, ‘Anti Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action’, 2020 <<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cRMQPFOjpw7UTD5RmHywWiNduAsB4Bf/view>> [accessed 28 June 2021].

17 Thormod, Interview.

From their collective ten-year experience at four different institutions, James and Elise – both of Black heritage – have never been tutored by a Black person while at university.

“If you can’t see it, it’s very difficult to think that could be you”, said Elise.<sup>18</sup>

James shared that his motivations behind pushing initiatives like this are also about changing the historic culture and Eurocentric discourse within architecture.

“If it’s all being presented as this White establishment – and that’s the only people who succeed – there’s a problem, isn’t there?” he said.<sup>19</sup>

The effects of lack of representation are subtle but prominent. James shared how working in a large, predominantly white practice, was challenging. He was not able to find his voice, leaving him feeling unfulfilled. From my own experiences of studying my Part 1 at the University of Nottingham, despite achieving excellent grades, I felt very anxious and not competent enough in comparison to my peers. Always feeling a step behind my white counterparts was further cemented by over 120 rejections for job applications and months of unemployment when I was looking for a Part 1 placement in 2019. At the time, I naïvely did not consider my race to be a contributing factor.

## Networking

In an industry in which who you know is more important than what you know, James and Elise both believe networking is key for people of colour (POC).

“It shouldn’t be [...] that POC have to make more of an effort to build networks but the fact is [...] you can’t always rely on family connections that other people can,” said James.<sup>20</sup>

Elise divulged that the support and lessons she has learnt from being a part of The Family Scheme were invaluable while job hunting. Elise will be working at Hawkins\Brown later this summer. Although in its infancy, around eight families have already been created in The Family Scheme.<sup>21</sup> Being paired with people at different stages of their career allows you to ask important questions like ‘how do I ask for a pay rise?’ or ‘what do I actually need to do for the enigmatic Part 3?’. Elise wishes she had access to such an incredible support system earlier on in her career. James also shared that his mentors at MAP Architecture – where he is now leading projects – have had a huge impact on growing his confidence in the field:

18 Colley, Interview.

19 Thormod, Interview.

20 Thormod, Interview.

21 Colley, Interview.

“Architecture is hard, it takes a long time to really feel like you can offer your services effectively to people”.<sup>22</sup>

Networking and access to mentoring, if not part of a scheme, relies on an individual putting themselves out there. As POC we have learned that the system will not accommodate us – we have to play by our own rules and use that to our advantage. Scroll down your LinkedIn feed, and count how many Brown and Black profiles you encounter in one minute. What happens to the people who do not have the same energy to work a room, or regularly post on LinkedIn?

“They feel left out of the profession and feel forgotten about [...] and that’s where [the industry] is letting people down,” said James.<sup>23</sup>

## Education can make a difference

This is where our education and curriculum can play a crucial role. ‘Advocacy’, a core module at LMU, allowed James to research diversity. Listening to professionals in the industry talk about the Black experience gave him the confidence to research and write about it. Most importantly, it allowed him to network with people like Joseph Henry, Neba Sere and Elsie Owuso, who are already leading the anti-racist front in architecture. ‘Histories’ is another module at LMU that James feels is particularly ahead of the times: where Black history is taught through art and how we relate to it from a decolonial perspective. At MSA, ‘Events’ – similar to ‘Live Projects’ at SSoA – connects you with ‘collaborators’ who are your clients. Elise shared that a couple of these collaborators prioritise diversity in architecture by encouraging their students to focus on outreach to schools. The idea came about to encourage more young people from less privileged backgrounds to consider a career in architecture. The Theory Forum, as part of the ‘Architectural Research Methodologies’ module at Sheffield, introduced me to the activist work of many talented professionals, including Joseph Henry with Sound Advice, Nana Biamah-Oforu and Bushra Mohamed and their work with Studio Nyali, and Feifei Zhou with Feral Atlas. I have been most impressed by the breadth of guest reviewers that have been made accessible to us this year. A particularly memorable experience was having the opportunity to be reviewed by Neba Sere, co-founder of Black Females in Architecture.

The general feeling from my conversations with Elise and James was that our institutions are slow to change, and are simply not doing enough. Moreover, there is a lack of accountability amongst staff. Aside from the work mentioned above, carried by a few staff members at each institution, the initiatives are largely student-led. Students are in a unique position within schools. We are the first to feel the effects of change as a result of

<sup>22</sup> Thormod, Interview.

<sup>23</sup> Thormod, Interview.

the current political sphere. We know the needs of students and so can inspire change which is effective and relevant.

Work of this nature demands a lot of time and emotional labour, which is particularly challenging for students of colour. While writing 'Conversations on Racism', James was in his final year of university and working part-time, constantly juggling his desire for change with his own mental wellbeing.

"It's actually helped me build a voice and feel more confident in the profession. At the same time, there was a point where I had to say I can't actually do more than what I'm kind of doing at the moment," he said.<sup>24</sup>

Equally, Elise feels frustrated that the students of BLM\_Arch@MSA have to create a plan and organise events in detail before MSA would even consider taking part. She felt that for any real change to happen, there needs to be a top-down and bottom-up approach; students can only do so much and need the support of their tutors, schools and organisations like the RIBA.<sup>25</sup> This work should be paid. A lot of the important work being done by students past and present is free labour. I should not be feeling grateful that my work within the EDI Student Action Group at Sheffield is only being partially remunerated. Acquiring payment for the work students have carried out should not be this convoluted, especially considering how much profit institutions like SSoA, LMU and MSA will make through admissions in painting themselves as anti-racist.

Despite the challenges they have encountered, James and Elise feel optimistic about the future. Through BLM and other anti-racist work being undertaken by professionals, the industry is beginning to change. Practices, competitions, design teams and even procurement are now being judged on how diverse the teams are. A year after the various calls to action, the range of initiatives students have set up all tackle similar issues in our institutions: lack of representation in staff, Eurocentric curriculum, and lack of networking opportunities. Both highlight the importance of mentorship and support from tutors in giving them the confidence to start their ascent up the steep social gradient that maps out the architecture industry. The issues affecting education directly impact practice.

Elise is looking forward to collecting feedback on this year's initiatives from students. According to her, BLM\_Arch@MSA's main priority for next year is to assemble an outreach programme for schools in the deprived areas of Manchester, to showcase architecture as a viable career.<sup>26</sup> For James, a diverse workforce can only enhance innovative design and represent the multicultural public it promises to serve moving forward:

24 Thormod, Interview.

25 Colley, Interview.

26 Colley, Interview.

27 Thormod, Interview.

“It’s more positive for design if you have a range of lived experience offered to the design process. You get better architecture [...] this actually matters for the environment we’re creating.”<sup>27</sup>

## Biography

Anureena D’costa is an MArch student studying at the Sheffield School of Architecture. She is a committed member of the EDI Committee, through which she has had the pleasure of working with some of the authors of ‘Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action’ to collaboratively extend these conversations with the whole school. Her research and discourse on race and education is prominent in her fifth year studio project based on challenging Eurocentric ideals of intergenerational housing. Furthering this, Anureena’s dissertation focuses on the architectural profession between Part 2 and qualifying as an architect, critically analysing the period that witnesses the highest drop off rate for students of colour.