

## What if Architecture Looked like me? A Photographic Essay

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### Introduction

The title of this essay derives from my ongoing reflection of architectural practice and the role of my own culture and identity in shaping it. As a graduate of the Sheffield School of Architecture, I critically reflect on where my journey has taken me since my days in the Arts Tower. I explore how the agency of starting an architectural studio has led to opportunities of personal and cultural expression. My studio, SPATIAL-ESK, seeks to hold no restrictions when it comes to collaboration. To date, I have worked with hip-hop artists, poets, artists and coders. The main premise of these collaborations is to forget my preconceptions for what counts as a typical architectural project. On the other hand, what is brought to mind is how the identity, experience and culture of the architect and client can create new and original projects.

As a response to 'Anti-Racism at SSoA: Call to Action', I share my own journey so that others may see the power of agency and one's own unique cultural background in the world of architecture. By using your skill-set in a way that reflects your background and experience, new and wonderful things can happen. My own agency is my activism.

## Towards Ethnographic Practice

As a dual citizen (Zambian and British), I have grown up with an appreciation for the value that various cultural experiences can bring. I have a strong village mentality – which views all relationships (business and otherwise) as lifelong social and supportive networks. Within this framework, all are connected and valued equally. In architectural terms, anyone can be a client.

When I first embarked on the life-long education that is architecture, I sought a means of creative expression that combined personal creativity with civic duty. Specifically, that my cultural experience and approach would positively impact the world around me by using the tools that architecture provides. This expression would undoubtedly be balanced with the expected constraints (and opportunities) introduced by the client, site, technology and programme. When I eventually entered the architectural workforce, I continually sought ways and opportunities to ‘practice’ architecture in ways that were most natural to me. This was developed by deliberately seeking project opportunities which align with my cultural interests, which often existed beyond the boundaries of my employment. This led to the development of my studio SPATIAL-ESK, which allows me to respond to the following question: ‘What if architecture looked like me?’. If I intentionally chose to relate to clients as a sort of creative village, what would this look like? The question focuses primarily on the opportunities created by a culturally aware way of relating. This photo essay concentrates on two key case studies where some aspects of personal and cultural interest have led to new and interesting opportunities.



Figure 1. Photograph of The Barber Shop Gallery, Leeds (SPATIAL-ESK, 2019)

### The Barber Shop – Alternative Means of Exchange

Kirkgate, Leeds is home to one of the largest indoor markets in Europe. The local area has been at the heart of the Leeds retail scene since 1857, with businesses spanning generations and representing a wide range of nationalities. It has recently become a cultural hub with a thriving community of creatives, musicians and artisans.

It is also the home to an inconspicuous barber shop that caught my attention. Despite its undecorated appearance, bare interior and A4 printed signage, this establishment still operated as an active social intersection. The Black Caribbean owner, Tony, had taken pride in the variety of nationalities and characters that walked into his doors from local market tradespeople to business executives and occasionally (to the owner's annoyance) those who just wanted to use his Wi-Fi.

The creative relationship with Tony began with an unconventional exchange. One day, I simply noted how the walls and finishes of his business could benefit from colour and vibrancy. The frugal business owner did not see the point in parting with funds for anything that would not help his already lean business model. I therefore took the opportunity to propose a piece of artwork for one of his walls in exchange for a haircut. This unusual business proposal both intrigued and humored Tony, who gladly accepted the exchange. Creating relationships through non-monetary exchange is not an unusual concept from my Zambian upbringing, allowing individuals to exchange skills and tasks in lieu of currency. His requirement was simply that the piece was bespoke and colorful. I therefore developed an elevational drawing of the barber shop with bold street art on the elevation: this large vertical print immediately caught his attention and sparked conversations in the barber shop throughout the following weeks.



Figure 2. Photograph of Wall Mural, The Barber Shop Gallery, Leeds (SPATIAL-ESK, 2019)



Figure 3. Elevation artwork of The Barber Shop Gallery, Leeds (SPATIAL-ESK, 2019)

“Can you have that guy make a piece of art for my son?” one customer asked. On another occasion, a local councillor visiting the street stated, “It would be great if your store looked like this!” By making this subtle intervention, the nature of the space began to change. In curiosity, Tony proposed that he would give me five haircuts to paint a mural on the rear wall of his space. He began to notice how his customers engaged with the space and the positive impact this was having on his business. I took this step further and worked closely with him to re-think how his barber shop could connect with the existing arts community and present an opportunity to exhibit local work. This eventually led to the barber shop serving a dual function: it housed and celebrated local artwork whilst maintaining its role as a convivial hub in Kirkgate.



Figure 4. Photograph of shop front at The Barber Shop Gallery, Leeds (SPATIAL-ESK, 2019)

## The Remix – Virtual Reality and Black Space

When I first moved to England from South Africa in the year 2000, I was fascinated by the built environment around me. This was one of the main reasons I was attracted to the world of architecture. At some deeper level however, the question that many immigrants face is not only that of belonging but also that of effecting change in their new environment. After all, it is one thing to feel at home, and quite another to rearrange it. I have long been fascinated by the ways in which various cultures and groups re-imagine spaces in the city through the application of street art, social gatherings and music. In Manchester in 2008, I was seeing the impact mobile phones had on street culture. By carrying and playing a backing track on a phone, my school friends and I could rap and perform in any

space, sharing our latest creations on a bus, in a park or anywhere else we desired.

I recently moved to Toronto, where I connected with Nia Centre for the Arts, Toronto's first Black arts center. Nia Centre supports, showcases, and promotes an appreciation of arts from across the African Diaspora. As an initiative it resonates with my sense of desiring a spatial manifestation of my own African diasporic experience. Their latest project, 'The Remix', was an online exhibition seeking to explore themes of Afrofuturism through the medium of analog and digital collage. The project brings together the work of eight contemporary artists deeply engaged in the excavation of a future informed by their individual ancestral connections to the African and Caribbean diaspora and their varied interpretations of collage.

As a result of COVID-19 pandemic, public gallery viewings were no longer an option. I proposed that my skills in architecture (combined with some training in code) would allow me to create a virtual world through which these artworks would be exhibited. There were many other companies that offered a VR creation service, however I sought to architecturally develop the space in line with the themes and aspirations of the exhibition.

Therefore The Remix was established as a virtual space created to challenge conventions of exhibition. This space was coded and modeled as a spatial manifestation of the exhibition's Afrofuturist manifesto. The digital presentation combines spatial and temporal experiences marking an invitation to participate in this new imagining. The virtual worlds, in which The Remix resides, demonstrate an example of not only collaging in code but also an investigation of how the foundations of the Afrofuture can manifest. In the construction of the virtual exhibit we rejected notions of "the white cube" in every sense and challenged the ways in which a gallery can exist when it is no longer bound to physical space.

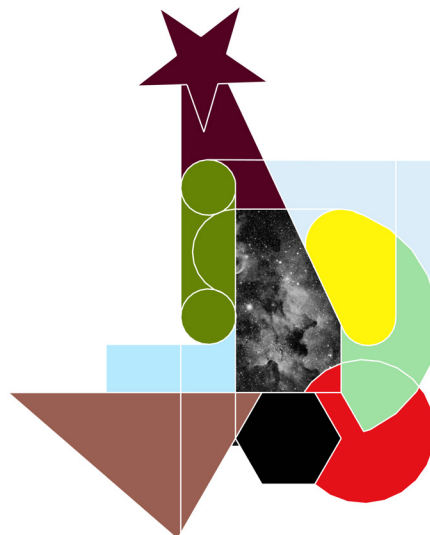


Figure 5. The Remix: Virtual Exhibition Floorplan. Each artist was given a bespoke space relating to the artwork presented (SPATIAL-ESK,2021)

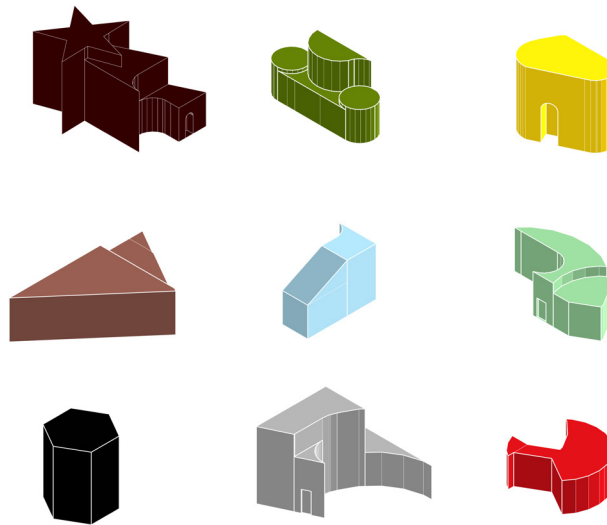


Figure 6. The Remix: Each space designed collaboratively with each artist (SPATIAL-ESK, 2021)



Figure 7. The Remix: Virtual exhibition artwork of artist Ghislan Timm (SPATIAL-ESK, 2021)

The exhibition also acted as an activist response to recent Black Lives Matter protests. It spatially re-interprets the infamous last words of George Floyd 'I can't breathe', into a spatial and emotional inflation of



expression. The exhibition floats ethereally in outer space, untethered by convention and standing independent and free.

In the same way my personal practice has acted as a satellite to the conventions of commercial practice, it maintains a vital lifeline to the optimistic architectural aspirations of my university days. Throughout this process, I have become more personally aware of contrasts which may exist between my desired way of working and my professional work environment. I encourage personal explorations of practice, since these have the opportunity to give greater personal perspective and incentive to seek like-minded individuals within the industry.



Figure 8. The Remix: Exhibition poster at McMasters Museum of Arts, Canada (SPATIAL-ESK, 2021)

I often perceived that I would establish my practice at a certain point in time when I would be most financially and professionally secure. Of course, however, we are always learning. This led to the commonly asked questions of ‘when will I have enough (money, knowledge, skill) to start my own practice?’. By establishing SPATIAL-ESK after the completion of my MArch, I was able to give validation and importance to my explorations, however small. As a result, the term practice was given its fuller meaning as the ongoing development of architecture’s outworking. I believe therefore that the expression of this outworking is truly enhanced by individual cultural experience. However, this, like all forms of practice, must be tested and developed through the practice of architecture.

By drawing on all aspects of our cultural upbringing, in my case my Zambian heritage, we can allow the face of architecture to change. It can

look more like you. I don't simply mean the skin tone of the architectural image but also its voice, its personality and manner of relating. Whilst I chose to create an independent studio for this exploration, I also have case studies which can suggest the benefits of these alternatives to wider architectural practice.

## Biography

Samuel Kapasa is a registered architect and graduate of The University of Sheffield School of Architecture. He founded his studio SPATIAL-ESK to explore new modes of architectural practice. The name of the studio reflects an undefined approach to architecture which grows in definition from project to project. His studio promotes freshness, spontaneity and surprise through the bold combination of cultural, experimental and spatial themes. Furthermore, he combines art, design and technology to create new and powerful spatial experiences in both physical and virtual realities. He is currently based in Toronto, Canada. More information about his ongoing practice can be found at: [www.spatialesk.com](http://www.spatialesk.com).