

Navigating Architectural Education Spaces as Black students, Researchers, and Educators

Text introduction and recorded conversations by Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye, Juliet Sakyi-Ansah, Michael Badu, Alisha Morenike Fisher and Nana Biamah-Ofosu



Please scan or click the codes to access the conversation

Introduction

This is a two-part conversation between five voices to respond to and think with the ‘Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action’. Juliet Sakyi-Ansah, Michael Badu, and Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye previously studied at Sheffield School of Architecture, Nana Biamah-Ofosu delivered a guest lecture at the SSoA Theory Forum, and Alisha Morenike Fisher delivered a guest lecture in the Trajectories module of the MA Urban Design programme. Our conversations move between our experiences of race and racism in architectural study, research and teaching, and we think through overlapping themes that span our times and experiences at SSoA (and other architectural educational institutions and spaces) to also affirm the demands vocalised in the ‘Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action’.

In two recorded conversations, we talk together about our experiences as Black students-researchers-educators in predominantly white architectural institutions (in both representation and knowledge orientations). We come from different heritages and lived experiences of Blackness, but share across our encounters structural and interpersonal antiblack racisms within architectural education, both at the SSoA and other spaces in the UK. This practice of coming together, sharing and learning from each other exposes the multiple interpersonal and structural racisms that we

encounter and experience. Our sharing provides yet further evidence of the ways that SSoA and similar architectural spaces are structured by racism.

Through the format and approach of collective conversation, we reflect on the ‘Call to Action’ and our own individual experiences and draw on our own racialized experiences. We question the SSoA and other architecture schools’ narratives of teaching, research and learning. We bring together our reflections on the narrative of SSoA as a ‘Social’ School of Architecture in these two conversations, drawing on our diverse experiences and accounts of the embedded issues of racism and systemic racism in architecture. This contribution is a testament to the urgency that the SSoA needs to place on holding conversations on race within teaching, studying and researching experiences. Whilst we perform emotional labour here by telling our experiences of racism, we also seek to acknowledge and critique the role white fragility plays in discouraging these important and urgent conversations. Within this context, Juliet adds that a critical element that must be included is culture: ‘The richness and powerfulness of our culture and heritage, which we continue to hold on to, against Eurocentrism. That’s our fight.’

We structure this collective conversation as a practice of coming together to share our experiences, to build relations and understandings between our different Black subjectivities, and to shape together critical perspectives and offerings on what embodying an antiracist architecture must look like. We curate these conversations as deliberately safe spaces between the five of us, to learn from and to affirm each other. In order to produce this contribution, we discussed and settled on the format (an audio-recorded conversation propelled by individual contributions we shared with each other). In our discussions, we shared together freely between us, and then Victoria edited, shortening the length of the recordings and respecting what we chose to make public.

The first recorded conversation is between Juliet, Michael, Alisha and Victoria. The second is between Nana and Victoria. The provocations that inform the discussions are provided below, followed by a list of references that include the individuals, readings, and inspirations mentioned in the discussions.

Juliet’s Provocation: Space

After reflecting on my experience at SSoA and the work I embarked upon leaving SSoA (The Architects’ Project), I raised some questions based on our collective general critiques as Black people in these architectural spaces. The visual provocation (Space) sparked my thinking on the following:



Image of the Carina Nebula from the press release “ESO’s VLT reveals the Carina Nebula’s hidden secrets. This broad image of the Carina Nebula, a region of massive star formation in the southern skies, was taken in infrared light using the HAWK-I camera on ESO’s Very Large Telescope. Many previously hidden features, scattered across a spectacular celestial landscape of gas, dust and young stars, have emerged”. ESO / T. Preibisch, 2012 CCBY.

Being visible, being heard, and being valued

Spaces for critical and creative discussions.

Spaces where we can be our whole selves.

Spaces for sincere dialogues, for discourse.

Spaces created by Black and minority ethnics, valued and recognised as part of the system.

Spaces that can place themselves as part of the system and also as alternative or belonging to their creators, i.e. outside the system.

Spaces for our voices and experiences to be heard, considered and acted upon.

Spaces that are invested into by the system.

Where space can be considered as physical, psychological, emotional, intellectual and TIME!

Michael's Provocation

Reflecting on a teaching experience:

“So I’ve just come out of external exams, and this was the actual discussion. So our top student, it wasn’t about a building for her... she was looking at something bigger. And it’s really funny, there were two white males [examiners], they were like ‘Why is this student marked so highly, she hasn’t done a complicated building.’ One of them said even, ‘I want to see the screw heads lined up.’ I think that says so much about the problems that we are facing. I guess what I want to kind of provoke is, is there something white about that? I think there is something white about that. The idea that you have to have something physical, there has to be an object, it has to have an aesthetic appeal. Whereas for people of the Global South and Black people in particular, our way of engaging with the world is different.

Alisha's Provocation

Excerpt from Down Second Avenue, by Es'kia Mphahlele (London: Penguin, 1959).

‘And the Black man keeps moving on, as he has always done for the last three centuries, moving with baggage and all, forever tramping with bent back to give away for the one who says he is the stronger. The Black dances and sings less and less, turning his back on the past and facing the misty horizons, moving in a stream that is damned in shifting catchments. They yell into his ears all the time: move, n*****, or be fenced in but move anyhow.

They call it a slum clearance instead of conscience clearance - to fulfill a pact with conscience which says: never be at rest as long as the Black Man’s shadow continues to fall on your house.’

Victoria's Provocation

Excerpt from ‘African Space Magicians’ by Lesley Lokko (in ...And Other Such Stories, edited by Yesomi Umolu, Sepake Angiama and Paulo Tavares. Chicago Architecture Biennial in association with Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2019).

‘Several years ago I visited Jo Nacro’s prizewinning Red Location Museum near Port Elizabeth, South Africa, which now stands dilapidated and permanently closed. Located in the neighborhood where the African National Congress was founded, it won several prestigious architectural awards, but local residents have accused the city of “building a house for dead people” while they continue to live in squalor. At the time of my visit, undertaken with architecture students from the University of Cape Town, the museum was pristine, awaiting inauguration. I noticed that the signs were in three languages – English, Afrikaans and Xhosa – and that the Xhosa translation of “standard” museum signage – Entrance, Exit, Shop, Restaurant, and so on – were sometimes four or five words long. Curious about the exact translations, I asked a security guard to explain why the phrase for “museum exit,” for example, appeared to be a completely different phrase from “museum entrance.” He was baffled by the question at first but grasped what I was trying to ask: “What is the Xhosa word for museum?” He consulted a colleague for a few minutes, then returned.

“Actually, we don’t have a word for that.”

“So what do you call a place like this?” I gesture to the building around me.

They exchange a quick glance. “This place,” his colleague interrupts coldly, “is a place for white people.”

“So what do you call the building where you go to remember something?” I ask after a moment.

They look at me incredulously. “Madam, we don’t need a building for that.”

It remains one of the most powerful conversations I have ever had about architecture, anywhere.’

In this excerpt, the security guard points out that the design has completely missed the grounded ways in which his (Black South African) Xhosa people engage with remembrance of past histories, peoples and knowledges. The idea that these things need to be enclosed in a material edifice – a museum building – is part of a long racialized colonial history in which knowing must be categorised and presented in particular and material ways in order to count as “architecture.” The implication for us is to understand how architectural practice, research, and teaching reinforce this – the assumption that you need a building in which to house, to capture, to hold this knowledge, that this is necessarily something to be designed (and designed in a particular way, usually grounded in westernised spatial considerations and aesthetics). That the Black security guards says the building “is a place for white people” reads South Africa’s seemingly post-apartheid past as present. The building’s concept and design assumes an entrance, an exit, a shop, a restaurant, the western

orientations of exhibiting artistic pieces and artefacts. These westernised orientations are impressed on this African space, and the translations into Xhosa assume that is all that is needed to make it “work” in this context. It assumes so much! Also it misses and forecloses so much, too.

In the ‘Call to Action’, the authors write that at SSoA ‘[c]onversations about race have been consistently minimised, resulting in the propagation of largely Eurocentric and imperialist perspectives.’ Avoiding these conversations on race, or treating them as optional add-ons or afterthoughts, separates race, which fundamentally informs inequalities in our society, from our engagement with society through design. This practice of not seeing race (re)produces racialised inequalities and erasures, particularly in a highly racially unequal city like Sheffield, and also in SSoA’s engagements beyond Sheffield. Either we are reproducing coloniality, or we are actively working to learn, and then addressing and repairing our racial history and present of design, through teaching/ pedagogy, our research, our study, our treatment of our students, staff, researchers, their ideas and knowledges.

In the ‘Call to Action’, the authors demand action through ‘more actively engag[ing] in outreach within local communities.’ When I read this excerpt, I am reminded of a chance conversation I had with a community resident who is a person of colour and who had been engaged as part of a SSoA project. They described their experience as “colonial.” I imagine what architecture and urban design might look like if community feedback and review of projects were structured into how students’ projects were assessed. I wonder what it would mean if community residents and organisations could talk back to SSoA on its projects in the ways that this Black security guard speaks back on this museum. What would the school have to hear?

Nana’s Provocation

Excerpt from ‘Architectural critique - “form and what else?”’ by Nana Biamah-Ofosu and Shawn Adams, (Architecture Foundation email newsletter, 8 October 2020)

When we critique architecture and design, it is largely an examination of its formal qualities and aesthetic value. But what stories are left untold? This absence is felt nowhere more strongly than in the popular architectural press where buildings are often described and merit ascribed on the basis of brick choice or the “right” architectural language or expression. This is not to suggest that these elements are not important, but what if we challenged this status-quo or introduced other ways of seeing ‘good’ architecture? What if, say, architectural awards and building

reviews were based on a community's reflections about a building or space? What if we questioned the power structures, violence and displacement that often enable architectural production?

If magazines and journals neglect informal spaces, deeming them beyond the boundaries of architectural critique, then what injustices do we reinforce? There are great architectural writers whose work examines the formal and physical qualities of architecture, to quote an influential architectural critic, "Summerson, Rowe and Venturi," but what do old dead white men have to do with architectural critique today?

Biographies

Juliet Sakyi-Ansah is a practising architect at her Midlands-based Studio OASA. She has taught at the Birmingham School of Architecture and Design and has coordinated international architecture conferences, including at the UEL School of Architecture and SSoA. She founded and spearheads The Architects' Project. She also works on Narratives, a semi-academic publication space for research and projects exploring new and emerging ways of practice (thinking and making) and writing on planning, politics and policy in the field. Her current work is focused on Black in Architecture research. Juliet completed her RIBA Part 1 (2005) and Part 2 (2010) at SSoA and is currently completing her PhD in Architecture and Built Environment at Oxford Brookes University.

Michael Badu was born in South London and trained as an architect at SSoA, London South Bank and Cambridge Universities. Michael spent his formative years as an architect working in the public sector (Norwich County Council, education projects) and in the historic sector while working for Thomas Ford & Partners Architects before setting up Michael Badu Architecture in 2009. He now teaches at Kingston University while also working on a PhD in Architecture at London Metropolitan University.

Alisha Morenike Fisher is a Landscape Urbanist/Researcher, Designer and Community Activist engaged in practices surrounding equitable cities, technology, spatial decoloniality and working against oppressive systems and African urbanism within the natural and built environment. She is founding director of the social design and urbanism practice Migrant's Bureau. In addition, she is a Design Council Specialist and runs Black Daughter, a growing organisation to support the economic wellness of Black women in their environmental career paths. Alisha delivered a guest lecture to the MAUD module Spatial Trajectories in Urban Design Practice in 2021.

Nana Biamah-Ofosu is an architectural designer, researcher and writer practising in London, UK. She combines practice with teaching at the

Kingston School of Art and the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London. Nana is particularly drawn to the complexities of the modern African city and the relationship between the individual artefact, the house and its connections to the collective, the fabric and structure of the city. Nana delivered a lecture for the SSoA Theory Forum in 2019.

Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye is an urban planner and designer, researcher and writer. She has practice-based experience in Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa, where she has collaborated with architects, designers, planners, artists, NGOs and young people on community space interventions. She began a PhD in Architecture at SSoA in 2017 and contributed as teaching assistant and tutor on studio, theory and thesis modules in architecture and urban design. In 2020, Victoria changed PhD supervisors and transferred to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning. Victoria has a Masters in Urban Planning from Columbia University (US), a PhD in Urban Studies and Planning from University of Sheffield, and is Lecturer in Geography at Sheffield Hallam University.

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