

[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 is 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 Isabel Strauss, a current master of architecture student at Harvard Graduate School of Design. She is currently working on her M.Arch thesis, "The Architecture of Reparations," and has previously worked for Johnston Marklee, Michael Maltzan Architecture, SOM New York, Todd Rosenthal Scenic Design, The Goodman Theater, and The Whitney Museum.

Isabel previously worked for the African American Design Nexus beginning in 2017 as a project researcher. She worked closely with GSD faculty, students, and alumni to conceptualize the scope of the project, produce website content, and outline this digital archive's position in relation to other important cultural archives and collections. Isabel, we're so glad you could join us.

**ISABEL  
STRAUSS:** Thank you so much for having me.

**TARA  
OLUWAFEMI:** Hi, Isabel. So we're so excited to have you on the show today, especially to talk about your thesis. Traditionally, architecture thesis at the GSD comprise a design proposal for a build project. Can you describe your thesis and your decision to shift from this method?

**ISABEL  
STRAUSS:** Of course. So my thesis looks at the damages inflicted upon the Black community in Chicago during the Illinois Institute of Technology campus expansion, which was part of a larger urban renewal program that happened in Chicago in the mid-20th Century on the south side. And this thesis started actually by living in Bronzeville before I applied to the GSD as an adult and then researching the history of the neighborhood.

I kept wondering why there were so many beautiful, ornate, stone row houses missing. There are just gaps in the street, like the houses are just completely gone. So I started exploring this history through images first, and I learned that so many of the row houses that were demolished and that are just missing from the neighborhood were built by Adler and Sullivan, which I thought was really interesting.

And I also learned how much Black history occurred in Bronzeville. It was called the Black Metropolis for a reason. For example, Mahalia Jackson ushered gospel into the world in Bronzeville in the Pilgrim Baptist Church which was a synagogue designed by Adler and Sullivan. And MLK spoke in Bronzeville often, and famous jazz musicians and famous women activists lived in Bronzeville.

And even though this history was new to me, this is popular history. This is known history. And through this research, I also learned a story that is really familiar to members of the Black community. What happened in Bronzeville in the 20th Century is similar in a lot of ways to what Ta-Nehisi Coates describes in his piece *A Case for Reparations*, which centers on the community of Lawndale on the northwest side in Chicago.

But basically, fleeing the legacy of slavery in the South in the early 1900s, Black people took the train right into the heart of the south side in Chicago. And Black people were confined to specific neighborhoods, and tools against them included blockbusting and included restrictive covenants. And if Black people tried to move into different parts of Chicago, their houses were mobbed.

And Arnold Hirsch describes this. He writes that in the late 1940s, there was one racially motivated bombing or arson occurring every 20 days, and that these included large housing riots where, essentially, Black homes were mobbed by hundreds, if not thousands, of white people. So most of the city was off limits to Black people, and this led to further overcrowding within Black circles and further exploitation of Black families.

And so the Black Metropolis was becoming denser and denser and denser with African Americans fleeing the South and white Chicagoans preventing Black Chicagoans from securing decent housing. And all the while, the Illinois Institute of Technology was hoping to expand their campus. And to do that, they needed land.

So basically, with the slew of, quote unquote, "legislative tools for assembly," the city robbed the Black community of their land for the campus expansion-- the city IT, Michael Reese Hospital, and a collection of other institutions which comprised the south side planning board. These tools, outlined by the board in a packet which they call an opportunity for private and public investment in rebuilding Chicago, these tools facilitated land condemnation, campus expansion, and, most importantly to me, the displacement of over 26,000 families, and most of them African American.

So ultimately, the city and state engineered a slum-- quote unquote, "slum"-- took the land, and then cleared the land for their own interests. So since I've lived there, I've wondered, what goes in these vacant lots? What goes in between these row houses? So after learning this history, I felt that whatever came next had to include some type of acknowledgment, some type of redress for the atrocities that Black residents were subject to during the urban renewal program in the 20th Century.

So that led me to the format of the project which takes shape as an RFP, and that allowed me to include as much of this history as possible with-- and also state that I don't have an answer for what comes next, and that we need to be having a conversation about how to respect these places and their histories. And to do that, we need to know the history first because it manifests spatially and it manifests in who lives there now and who doesn't live there anymore because of how the place has changed within capitalism.

**CALEB**  
**NEGASH:** Right. Yeah, and I think, with the form of the RFP, you're requesting these proposals, and I think that's a really interesting approach to the idea of reparations and how it relates to architecture because there's kind of a range of spatial or, let's say, visual maybe approaches to reparations. I think they span a wide range of scales, basically. So there are larger scale, more like public reckoning, maybe in the form of monuments or media, and then also more intimate interventions at the scale of a single house or maybe a single family.

So can you talk a little bit about the scale of the proposals that you're soliciting?

**ISABEL**  
**STRAUSS:** Yeah, sure. Totally. I started earlier by looking at William Darity and Kirsten Mullen's book which is called *From Here to Equality*, different economic models, and basically they trace the history of proposals for reparations within the United States. And they outlined the different economic models, how they're calculated, the history of ones that have been put forth, and whether or not they've worked and why.

And outside of the economic models that they described, I've also been keeping an eye on the program that's taking shape in Evanston, Illinois right now. They have rolled out some plans for homeownership program based on taxing residents of Evanston, from what I understand, in the coming years. And then Asheville, North Carolina also has committed to community investment that's intended to be a type of reparation.

So that's like larger scale initiatives. And then you see things like the model that's put forth by The Nap Ministry. And The Nap Ministry says, "Rest is a form of resistance because it disrupts and pushes back against capitalism and white supremacy." So thinking about how resting and napping and how that is restorative and how that is something Black communities deserve and have been robbed of.

So I'm trying to look at larger programs to smaller forms of resistance along with the history of multifamily housing and the row house typology. Most of the housing in Bronzeville consists of row houses. And public housing too and trying to push back against models for public housing that we know haven't worked because of the way they've been implemented, and keeping that in mind when designing for the Black community.

**CALEB**  
**NEGASH:** Yeah, so I guess to back up a little bit, just to go back to the question of the form of the thesis and how it differs from the traditional model for an architecture thesis, I think, in considering reparations or the idea of repair, you might see a tradition in architecture of master planning as a way of trying to reconsider or imagine a new, better form of city living. And I think in your project, you really emphasized that you aren't trying to make a master plan. And the idea that you have the RFP, or the request for proposals, is inviting this kind of multifaceted approach.

So you do also talk a little bit about the shortcomings of master plans in the RFP, and I'm interested to know how you think your thesis might present a new way for architects to implement change in communities.

**ISABEL**  
**STRAUSS:** Yeah, absolutely. This project definitely attempts to critique the "make no small plans" mantra. I think we really should make small plans, and I think that that's evident in the story of the relationship between IIT and Bronzeville. They wanted a bigger campus. They wanted a bas-relief field of beautiful, crisp, platonic forms. And to do that, they had to completely redefine an entire neighborhood.

And in their report, they admit-- they confess, in a way, that 26,000 families are going to be displaced. A lot of them are probably going to be able to find new homes, but 10,000 of those families are going to have to find "nooks and crannies of the city to live in," I think, are the words that were used. And that's pretty jarring on paper. Saying "that's pretty jarring" is an understatement. But in the master plan, you're making changes, and you can't see on the ground how those are changing the makeup of a community and half of the city.

So what does it mean to start at the scale of a house? Like I've been looking at what Emmanuel Pratt is doing with his work. And you can look at LA Más. They're changing the game in Los Angeles by designing ADUs which have the smallest footprint. But it's having a huge impact on the housing crisis because it allows residents to make decisions on their terms.

It doesn't push people out of their homes, which is just to say, I think there are problems in trying to anticipate all of the ramifications of large-scale development. And if we can start at a smaller scale and see how that changes a block, it might give us more agency in accounting for these things that are hard to account for.

**TARA**  
**OLUWAFEMI:** So you've already given us a couple of examples of some other ideas of reparations that you've been looking at. But can you give us a brief description of what reparations for Black communities and individuals looks like to you?

**ISABEL**  
**STRAUSS:** Yeah. The first thing that comes to mind is the understanding that reparations is going to mean something different for everyone. And even the word is contested. I talked to two organizers last week who said that the people they work with don't think reparations is ever going to happen in their lifetime and are not focused on that. For them, what's important is pushing against capitalism, in general.

So first, not everyone believes in reparations and not everyone believes in reparations fitting within a capitalist frame. For me, it means equipping people with the tools they need and the tools they were promised to live a full life. And whether that takes the form of baby bonds, whether that takes the form of other funding or housing or community centers or places for racial reckoning, I think that's going to change depending what city you're in and what community you're talking to.

For me, I don't know if housing is the answer, but I think we need to talk about it. I think it needs to be a broader conversation besides a check in the mail. So that's how I'm envisioning it right now.

**TARA**  
**OLUWAFEMI:** Yeah. I love that answer. And honestly, this is like a little aside, and I know I've definitely talked about this with you already, but my love for the show *Watchmen* and how it addresses so many issues like this, but it also has-- a whole aspect of the plot is about reparations and the way that it takes shape there and the people who are contesting it. And I just think that show was very beautifully scripted, and it is addressing a very localized version of reparations in Tulsa. So I'm wondering if there are any examples of localized or piecemeal reparations that you are modeling some of your work after or envisioning as like a jumping-off point for some of these ideas you're working with.

**ISABEL**  
**STRAUSS:** Well, I've definitely been encouraged to look at how redress has taken place in South Africa or Germany. And I've done some research on those initiatives but have tried to also stay away from attempting to adopt another nation's model and just mapping it on to what we're grappling with here because what we're grappling with is always site-specific and community-specific. So I've been looking at different types of community land trusts across the country, and I haven't seen reparations in the form of housing.

That doesn't mean it doesn't exist. I just haven't found a model to look toward in that way. I've seen community land trusts. I've seen public housing. I've seen homeownership programs and things of that nature. I would love to look toward what's already happening, and I think finding these examples has been challenging for me.

**CALEB  
NEGASH:**

Yeah, it's worth spending a little time just thinking about that idea of piecemeal reparations. In a way, that's one of the underlying logics of your project is that, as you've mentioned, blanket approaches to reparations for all Black Americans. It's a really tough and contested issue, and it's not going to be resolved easily. And so these smaller scale interventions are a way to start right and to try to start to approach the problem and, like you've mentioned, some of these cities that are working on those issues.

But I think the idea of looking to another country, if anything, what that can do is maybe teach us about processes or ways of thinking about reparations that are a little more expansive. Because I think we've talked before, even this show, about the limited conversation about reparations in our country always ending up being about the check. It's always about financial operations and who's going to get how much money.

And so I think there are so many other ways, and to consider architecture as one of those is interesting. Because if you look at South Africa, for example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission after apartheid, what they were doing is something that-- it's even almost a pre-condition to reparations. The idea of truth telling and of reconciliation, that's something Americans have almost never done.

South Africans, they were sitting down, it was people naming names, people were calling out institutions, not just institutions like government officials and people who ran jails and prisons but also members of the media-- of the mainstream media who acknowledged their role in downplaying apartheid or making it seem as though things were equal and happy and sunny in South Africa.

So I think acknowledging and creating that record and that demand for reparation is almost this pre-condition that's never happened here. And maybe increasingly so, we're seeing it happen with things like the 1619 Project in the way that is seemingly starting to infiltrate into the culture. In some cases, I've even heard of that project being incorporated into elementary school or middle school curricula. So there's a kind of symbolic dimension always to the idea of truth telling.

And so I'm interested in how you see architecture fitting into that. Because spatial approaches are certainly really important and are a big part of approaches to reparations, in general. You do have things like monuments, like we talked about. There's the Equal Justice Initiative Memorial in Montgomery that just went up. And so there are these spatial approaches. So I guess thinking about housing and at the scale of a house is it's a really unique proposition.

**ISABEL  
STRAUSS:**

Yeah, absolutely. And I want to go back quickly. One thing I have been keeping an eye on too is the homes guarantee. And when thinking about models for this, what are we talking about? We're talking about what do these homes look like once they're universal?

Architecture can provide the space for healing. Architecture is not going to do the healing on its own. And architecture can facilitate these conversations. And the type of architecture and the way you implement these things matters, and we've seen how it can work negatively. We know how certain styles have been racialized. We know that overcrowding in Chicago led to kitchenette apartments, which were unsafe for residents, which led to the demolition of these buildings, and the erasure of this history.

IIT wanted to bring in modernist architecture. They wanted to mark a new era in their school through image and through design. And to do that, they partially erased an entire neighborhood. So we know how implementing design can change things.

So how do we do that in reverse? Do we do it on the larger scale? Do we start with a room? Do we start with restorative justice spaces?

**CALEB  
NEGASH:** You're conducting a very interdisciplinary kind of research, and you've described that to us. So you're synthesizing research from economists, from urban designers, architects, from politicians, and so many other fields. So you're demonstrating in a sense that architecture alone can't repair these deep-seated issues of inequality in the United States and abroad.

So considering all of this, how do you see the role of the architect in your work? And maybe we could talk a little more specifically about the RFP. And so what are the kind of things you're asking for architects to do in thinking about these issues, maybe alongside other professionals in other disciplines?

**ISABEL  
STRAUSS:** The format allows me to solicit materials that are not solely plans, sections, perspectives. I'm really asking for people to respond with any thought or feeling they have about what sort of compensation or reparations, like images, are welcome. And I'd love to start an archive or a collection of these materials. Most people have responded to the survey that's posted on the website that asks about their households and envisioning their households and envisioning their households in new spaces.

But the RFP is kind of an attempt to synthesize all of these conversations I've had with economists, with planners, with artists, with organizers because everyone has different knowledge that's critical to any project of this scope. And I don't think the architect is the most important person in a conversation like this, and perhaps this is because I'm a non-background.

But I think aggregating this material and presenting it in a way that is digestible on the page is something we contribute. And designing the spaces once we know what these spaces are meant to do but figuring out what these spaces are meant to do and how to develop them starting from the idea is something that goes beyond the scope of design and, honestly, I think, starts with policy.

**CALEB  
NEGASH:** Yeah, I think getting outside of architecture gives perspective in a sense that you can't necessarily solve things with a design. Maybe we easily do fall into that kind of modernist mode of using design to solve a problem. What it sounds like you're saying is that you could use design or even just a response that's outside of design to this proposal as a way of asking a question. rather than providing an answer.

That's super interesting. I think we talk a lot about the tendencies, let's say, between artists and architects. And in a sense, architects are maybe concerned more with practicality or trying to make something real-- let's say, a building-- something that has to be functional. But I think in a lot of ways, one of the major differences is that architecture, we usually fall into the mode of trying to answer a question, and artists want to ask a question. And I think that's really interesting-- the idea that you're looking for proposals as a way to just open up conversation. I wonder whether you've gotten any push back from the department on not really wanting to propose a design.

**ISABEL  
STRAUSS:** Well, so I will be proposing a design as an answer to the RFP.

**CALEB** I see.

**NEGASH:**

**ISABEL** But not as the answer. Just as one row house or one series of row houses. I'm not extending it into a master plan.

**STRAUSS:** It's really at a small scale because I think everyone will be bringing different needs and priorities to the table. And you asked me before who I am looking to or what models I'm looking to when undertaking this project, and the Black Reconstruction Collective just gave a lecture at GSAPP called "What is the Architecture of Reparations," which was incredible.

And all of the ways those designers are addressing the question are completely different, and it's going to be different. Hearing how everyone's response is different is part of the reason why this question is so hard. And part of the reason why we need to start having the conversation in concrete terms, so we can get H.R. 40 passed so we can move beyond optical allyship.

**CALEB** So just for the listeners, Isabel, could you give us a little more background on what H.R. 40 is?

**NEGASH:**

**ISABEL** Yes. So on June of 2019, the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties held a hearing on H.R. 40, which is just the commission to study and develop reparation proposal for African Americans act. It's not a proposal to Institute reparations. It's just a proposal to investigate it. It was originally introduced in 1989 and was reintroduced. It did not pass, but I'm very hopeful that it will pass.

**STRAUSS:**

**TARA** So the RFP is a request for proposals, right? So we are wondering how can people submit their ideas to you, and **OLUWAFEMI:** what is the deadline for it? Could you give the listeners an opportunity to submit to this? Is there something that you're soliciting any submissions from anywhere? We're just curious what exactly is the proposals and how can people contribute.

**ISABEL** There's a website. If you go to [architectureofreparations.cargo.site](http://architectureofreparations.cargo.site), basically, you'll see three timelines that describe some of this history through images. The RFP is there. There's a questionnaire. And just email me if you want to continue the conversation you can respond to the questionnaire on the website I'd love to just talk to people about what this brings up for them. I know it can be heavy, but it can also be exciting because I do think H.R. 40 will be passed in the next couple of years. I really do.

**CALEB** Yeah, and that's really exciting. I mean, thank you for sharing that because I think conversation is the place to start, for sure. Thanks, Isabel. Thanks so much for sharing. And please, folks, check out again [architectureofreparations.cargo.site](http://architectureofreparations.cargo.site) to chat a little bit more about the architecture of reparations Thank you, Isabel.

**ISABEL** Thank you, Caleb. Thank you, Tara. Thank you so much for having me.

**STRAUSS:**

**TARA** Thank you so much. It's great to have a student on the show talking about GSD. We were very excited to have **OLUWAFEMI:** you.

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](http://aadn.gsd.harvard.edu).