

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DARIEN CARR: Hi, everybody.

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:** I'm Tara Oluwafemi.

DARIEN CARR: And I'm Darien Carr. And we are master of architecture students at the GSD. *The Nexus* 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.

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:** Sekou Cooke is an architect, researcher, educator, and curator born in Jamaica and based in Charlotte, North Carolina. He's the newly appointed director of the Master of Urban Design program at UNC Charlotte, and a recipient of the 2021-2022 *Nasir Jones Hip-hop Fellowship* at the Hutchins Center for African & African American research at Harvard University.

Within his professional practice, *Sekou Cooke Studio*, he brings thoughtful processes and rigorous experimentation to a vast array of project types from public, non-profit, and residential works in New York, New Jersey, and North Carolina, to mixed-use projects and tenant improvements in California, to speculative developments locally and internationally. Sekou holds a B.Arch from Cornell University, an M.Arch from Harvard University, and is licensed to practice architecture in New York and North Carolina.

SEKOU COOKE: Thanks, Tara, for that introduction, and thank you both for having me.

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:** Sekou, thank you so much for joining us today. We wanted to start off today's conversation with the *Black in Design Conference*. It's coming up pretty soon. It's going to be the weekend of October 8 and 10, and tickets just went on sale.

For those listening who don't know what the conference is, the *Black in Design Conference* is held every two years, so it's a biannual conference. And it's organized by the Harvard University Graduate School of Design *African American Student Union*. The goal of the conference is to recognize the contributions of the African diaspora to the design field, and promote discourse around the agency of the design profession to address and dismantle the institutional barriers faced by our communities.

Sekou, in an earlier conversation, you mentioned how Kanye coming to the GSD in October of 2013 while you were still a student here was the first unofficial *Black in Design Conference*. What events led to Kanye coming to the GSD? And what impact do you feel his presence had on the school and the community at large?

SEKOU COOKE: Thanks for that. Yeah, you asked me to reveal some inside secrets, but I guess we're far enough removed from it that I think it might make sense.

DARIEN CARR: The reveal.

SEKOU COOKE: Yeah, the big reveal, right? [LAUGHS] But I mean, a lot of this part, the story has been talked about and discussed publicly thus far, so there's not a whole lot of secret information.

But basically, the summer before Kanye did an interview with *The New York Times Magazine* where he was talking about how he's so impressed by and influenced by Corbusier and about architecture. And then the president of the AASU at the time, Héctor Tarrido-Picart, was like, oh, we should engage Kanye. We've got to talk to him. We've got to tweet back at him. I was like, OK, yeah. Let's do that. That sounds good.

Then later, by the fall of that year, then he had another interview with Zane Lowe, a British DJ. And in this interview, a pretty well-publicized interview, he was talking about how he's so influenced by architecture and how he meets with five architects at a time, and how he really wants to be designing, and he's frustrated by people not taking him seriously as a designer.

And that really set off us at the GSD to think about, OK, how can we really engage Kanye? This might be something that we can do. People are saying, well, let's invite him for a review kind of jokingly. And I said, why not invite him? I think if we look in our connections, our networks, we can definitely find someone who knows someone who knows Kanye.

And that's exactly what happened. So we had maybe one or two lines of connection between us as a group and Kanye himself. And so we decided to write a letter to him and get the letter in his hands directly. And I started writing the letter. Sara Zewde, who you all know and love, she helped write the letter as well. And we both drafted this document to get into Kanye's hands to really invite him to meet with us at the GSD.

And we definitely played up to his ego. We played up to some of the things that he was interested in, and sparked his interest. And apparently, he said yes immediately. It took him a month to come. And none of us knew this. We kind of had no idea where that letter would go.

But he just said, when is my next date in Boston? And that happened to be October 17. And so he came in and met with us, and that was really the beginning of us talking about and engaging with larger issues or the larger power that we had as a small student group, and how we could get the ear of the administration, get the ear of the faculty, get the ear of the larger GSD community, and make a bigger splash about some of these issues that are really important to Blackness and design. And then the first *Black in Design Conference* was done two years after that on the same date to kind of commemorate that event.

DARIEN CARR: Awesome. Awesome. And as I'm hearing it, I'm remembering there was a chapter in your book. The last chapter kind of starts with Kanye and then goes to neo-postmodernism, which we'll touch on later in the interview.

But before we get there, I kind of want to ask, what happened between the GSD and you starting to write the book *Hip-Hop Architecture*? And how did your role in conferences like *Black in Design* and your role in

student groups like the *African American Student Unit* or AASU play into your journey towards writing Hip-Hop Architecture?

SEKOU COOKE: Yeah. So the fascinating thing is that when I first wrote the letter to Kanye, I wanted to make it public. I wanted it to be an open letter, because I had quite naively thought that Kanye's never going to respond to this. He wants to engage us in the public sector. So I was adamant that I wanted to put it public, and then the rest of the group said they wanted it to be private. And of course I said, yeah, let's make it private.

But then I did something that really pissed everybody off. I wrote a different -- wrote another letter that was going to be the public letter. And it was completely different. Completely different content. But it was really making an argument about why it was important for Kanye to be talking about architecture publicly.

Because right after that Zane Lowe interview came out, the architecture community had a really negative backlash to it. We were hearing things like, who is Kanye to make these statements? What does he know about architecture? He has no basis for saying any of these things.

And I was like, wait. There might be a whole lot more to this story that we don't know. And Kanye talking about architecture publicly actually could inspire a whole new generation of young Black and brown kids to actually get into architecture. And we know how dire the situation is in architecture or has been for several generations of how few Black people there are in the profession.

So just somebody with that profile talking about architecture all of the sudden gives kids this inroad, this idea that maybe architecture is almost as cool as rapping. Maybe architecture is almost as cool as playing basketball. Maybe architecture is almost as cool as becoming a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer, right? So give them another career path. So that was really the start of me thinking about or revisiting this connection between hip-hop and architecture.

And right after that, I was hearing some other conversations about hip-hop architecture starting to resurface. And I remembered that back in the '90s while I was at Cornell, we were talking about hip-hop architecture all the time.

I tell the story in the book about Nathan Williams, who did his thesis in 1993 and blew everybody out of the water, because he was proposing this theory of hip-hop architecture. And you know, '93 is still early days for hip-hop, right? It's still just getting public or global attention and worldwide acceptance as a real form that's not just a fad. It's not just going to die down, and it's expanding rapidly.

And he is now presenting to a very conservative institution his ideas of connecting hip-hop and architecture. So it was really radical, and we were talking about that for years and years afterwards.

So after I wrote that piece about Kanye, it was like, OK. Now I have this opportunity to think about this idea of hip-hop architecture once again. And that's when I first wrote the piece "The Fifth Pillar: A Case for Hip-Hop

Architecture" that got published in the *Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy*. And that was picked up by ArchDaily, and then got a whole lot more attention than I thought it would.

So then I thought, well, maybe I'll keep doing something else with this, because I thought I was just going to write that one piece and I was going to be done. And then a couple years later, I was at Syracuse teaching, and I put together a symposium with 12 different people, 12 voices, everyone who was saying anything about hip-hop architecture at the time. And I thought that was going to be the end of it.

And the response to that was much bigger than I thought. And there were so many new questions there, so many unanswered or undiscovered, unexplored threads of this topic that really needed a more robust research and study. And so after that symposium, I made the decision to make this the primary research that I was going to do for the next five years, six years of my tenure track appointment at Syracuse.

DARIEN CARR: Yeah. My introduction to architecture was actually during that interview run. That's the first time I learned about Corbusier.

SEKOU COOKE: See, you're the case study.

DARIEN CARR: Right.

SEKOU COOKE: You're exactly the people I was talking about.

DARIEN CARR: Yeah. This was a senior year in high school, and you know, now I'm at the GSD studying architecture, so I could definitely say that that-- there's a recent talk with the creator and her interview about reference points and how reference points are so important. And that was my reference point to see myself in this space, you know?

But I think it's important to underscore what you underscored in the book, that hip-hop architecture isn't new. Nathan Williams was exploring this before. And also in the book, you talk about building on the work of a Craig Wilkins or a Kara Walker.

And I just wanted to ask kind of as you were thinking of contextualizing your work and what came before you, and also us kind of imagining what is hip-hop architecture of the future, how do you kind of take the similarities and different between your work and the work that came before you? And how do you imagine it evolving for thinkers and architects and theorists that will come after?

SEKOU COOKE: Yeah, it's definitely part of the general academic scholastic process, right? You're always building on work that has been done before and you're setting a foundation for future work to be done.

Usually in the process, people start out by doing little conference papers and journal articles and public presentations. So I was already doing some of that, but I was more interested in pulling it all together, which is

why I first made the proposal for the exhibition, because I knew this work was happening all over, but I didn't know how expansive it was. And so I really wanted to pull as much of that together as possible.

So in that process, I started to discover other faculty members who were teaching studios on hip-hop architecture like Chris Cornelius at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee and Stephen Slaughter at University of Cincinnati. And I was also discovering people who are contemporary designers like Maurer United Architects in the Netherlands and people like Zedz and Delta who are graffiti artists who are crossing the line into exhibition and installation and architecture.

That's how I discovered Carlos Mare, Mare 139, who's a really amazing graffiti artist, but started to do graffiti sculpture and started to do graffiti sculptural installations. That process was really about uncovering all of these different stories and all these different trajectories that had been happening over a 25, 26-year time span and pulling it all together. So it was really trying to answer this question, what does hip-hop architecture look like, so that people had a visual reference point for how to build on this topic.

And then the book was really the main attempt to have a singular reference point for all of the work that was done before, and a major publication so that anything that comes after it is building on all of these resources that have been pulled together in a singular place. Otherwise, it just remains as something that's kind of kitsch, or something that's in little pockets, or something that is underdeveloped or under-explored.

DARIEN CARR: Yeah, yeah. And personally, I really appreciated that. In an earlier conversation, we talked about it as a scaffolding to kind be able to hold a lot of these different ideas, read the before and after point.

This reminds me of one of the chapters in Hip-Hop Architecture, which is titled "Grids and Griots." The idea of a griot actually came up in a podcast interview earlier this season with Rob ProBlak Gibbs, a graffiti artist and muralist in Boston. For him, graffiti is a method of passing on stories and bringing those stories into conversations through the activation of space, which he describes as the responsibility of a griot.

Similarly, you discuss the hip-hop DJ as a digital griot who employs a series of techniques like the shout-out to activate space in architectural ways. So I wanted to ask, how have you thought through and how are you thinking through this relationship, the relationship between the griot, DJ, and the techniques they use to activate space?

SEKOU COOKE: Yeah, so the griot is this figure in West African culture who was a storyteller, a kind of history keeper. He was also a performer. In some areas, the griot was also kind of what we would think of as like a medicine man, someone who knew a lot about a lot. But really, someone who is the keeper of the information. But didn't just keep the information, performed the information in public settings.

So if you know anybody who's a DJ, you know that they know more about music than anybody else who's just a casual consumer of music. And some of these early hip-hop DJs were some of the most knowledgeable people could ever think about.

There are stories about *Afrika Bambaataa* and how wild he would go in exploring all these various different musical styles and genres. And one of his most popular tracks has a sample from a group called *Kraftwerks*, which was a really weird, early electronic group in Germany somewhere. Nobody had heard any of that shit anywhere, right?

And so he was just literally digging through crates. And digging through the crates is such a DJ thing to do. It's a deep dive into musical research. And he's also hide, conceal what he had found, because he wouldn't let anybody know what the actual track was so that they couldn't replicate what he was doing. So none of his records had labels on it.

But he was really taking this knowledge, going far and wide, finding this knowledge, bringing it to the dance hall, and sharing it with people in a mixed form. But he was really sharing this knowledge that had been excavated, right? So this is definitely this really essential process that I think is really relevant to architecture in many ways.

And I'm using some of these ideas in some of the projects that I'm thinking about and working on and developing now. The project that I just completed that's in the Chicago Architectural Biennial, that's opening September 17 and running through the end of the year, is called *Grids and Griot*, right?

So I'm actually using a reference to the grid and how the DJ breaks up the grid. And in breaking up the grid, you're revealing new opportunities. You're revealing new information, revealing some lost histories in certain senses. And also, creating a functional place, a usable place, a place for gathering, a place for storytelling, a place for exchanging, a place for performing, a place for growing, and a place for storing materials and histories and information.

So this is kind of how I've been thinking about how a lot of these ideas deeply embedded within the African American experience, the African diasporic experience, that are in hip-hop that are directly applicable to us as architects and designers.

DARIEN CARR:

Word. Awesome. And it reminds me of actually Katherine McKittrick. She has a new book. It's called *Dear Science*. And in it, she writes that stories are the practice of Black life. And in turn, they draw attention to the fact that stories form these networks of knowledge.

She's coming from a standpoint in multidisciplinary thinking in Black studies, but she kind of connects this to citation practices and things like footnotes. And for her, this networked understanding creates an interconnected story that functions to resist oppression.

So back to the book. I love the series of block quotes you use at the end of each chapter, because it feels like it's doing the same thing. It's like the shout-outs, but it's like the samples, because it's kind of like a loop of material that I think help us start to form and identify and also understand these networks of resistant McKittrick writes about. So I'm wondering how you thought through that, and to what extent those ideas are related.

SEKOU COOKE: Yeah, I'm definitely thinking about the whole book as a composition. So it's not just a single train of thought from the beginning to the end. It's something that is interrupted and is mixed and is moving forward and backward in time, and is introducing multiple forms of information.

So from deep theoretical references to narratives to these outtakes or excerpts of people, transcripts of people talking about the topic to all the imagery and the drawings and the photographs that are in the book. So all of it is kind of a composition. And I didn't do the graphic design myself, but I gave the graphic designer enough material there to work their magic and to make it feel like a kind of composition.

And in doing so, keeping it authentic to the structure of hip-hop itself as a musical genre, as a cultural phenomenon, as a way of operating in a kind of performative way. So it is a performance. The book itself is a performance.

But it's also a way of bringing other voices into the conversation so that it's not just a singular voice, as nothing in architecture should ever be a singular voice. And in hip-hop, there's always these collaborations that are really critical.

So I find all of these block quotes or these interludes that are between the different sections as adding to the overall narrative, the overall voice of the book so that even though it's a monograph, it's sole-authored, it's something that's still kind of co-authored by these people who are making these statements in these various situations.

DARIEN CARR: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. I want to dive into a few of the different co-authors. One is the work of Craig Wilkins. I read the book *The Aesthetics of Equity* last summer. It's a great book. I felt like so many doors unlocked.

And it taught me so much, and also materialized so many of the things I was thinking about architecture, at the intersection of architecture and Blackness and even music. And I think that as we're talking about referencing and footnotes and sampling, I think there's an interesting connection to property.

One of the themes in your book is about contradiction. And me kind of imagining myself in the world of architecture, there's a system of property that kind of encourages economic investment and certain predetermined rules in order to own things.

But then you have on the contrary, or what at least feels like on the contrary-- I'm not sure if it actually is-- DJs who would actually be sampling or kind of-- the oral traditions that we're hoping to spotlight on this show. And there's an interesting nexus between the two that I think relates to Craig Wilkins' work.

Emmanuel Amosu, he's taught a studio at the GSD, actually, called *After Property*, exploring similar kind of dynamics. So I was wondering if you could speak of the contradiction between a sample and a footnote, but then how that relates to architectural notions or non-notions of property.

SEKOU COOKE: Yeah. So the sample I think is in some ways an honorific, you know? And there have been many different scenarios or legal cases dealt with about the sample. And there's a point where De La Soul couldn't have any of their music on any of these streaming platforms because of how heavily sampled all of their work was.

And yeah, so there's a kind of attitude of asking for forgiveness instead of permission, right? So you do the thing, you take the work. And then maybe if it's discovered to be too similar to somebody else's work, then you pay them a royalty.

But the footnote is in a different realm, right? It's not in the realm of musical production. It's in the realm of academic production, academic knowledge production. So the footnote is almost as much of an honorific as the sample, but it's kind of understood that this is what's going to happen.

And obviously, there's limits to footnotes. You can't just copy somebody's entire chapter and put a footnote and put it in your book, right? There are structures to that.

But what's most important to that is, especially in the structure of my book and relating it to the structure of Craig Wilkins' book, is that I wanted to make sure that I was doing double duty, that I could show that I can back this up with as much academic, traditional citation and research work as I was doing with field work and other sources of knowledge and other processes of gathering information, and actually sampling.

So when I'm putting these transcripts together or these interludes, this is literally sampling. Even though it's footnoted as well, it's still primarily sampling. And how Craig Wilkins' book is structured, he basically writes a chapter, and then rewrites the chapter in *Ebonics*, right? And he calls it the remix. Like, this is my statement. Now I'm going to remix the statement in this *Ebonics* way of talking, a kind of Black dialect way of describing the things that he's interested in or he's talking about in the chapter.

Luckily-- and I give Craig a lot of credit for this-- he did that and broke so many boundaries and barriers in doing that, which allowed me to not have to do that, right? So now instead of clearly code switching from the beginning of a chapter to the end of a chapter, I was able to now integrate that approach from one side to the next. Again, I'm not sure how any of that connects to the property question, but this is how I'm looking at the sampling and the citation.

So in the book, I do have a section that's called "Commodity." It's about the commodification of the products of hip-hop culture and how hip-hop in one argument may have died. I think *Afrika Bambaataa* makes the argument that hip-hop died once it became recorded, right? Because as soon as you recorded it, you took this thing that was always a performance, always live, always improvised, and then you put it on something that made it permanent, and something that is a commodity, something that can be easily sold.

And then hip-hop-- and it's not just the tape or the CD or the record that becomes the commodity. It's the entire culture that becomes a commodity as a result. It's like, now we can record and we can have a piece of this culture, and we can sell it.

And the people who profit from anything that's sold ultimately is always going to be the people who always profit from this. We can say, well, all these smaller record labels are making money. All the artists are making money. But

that all trickles up. As we all know, we live in a trickle-up economy. And it's just the nature of capitalism that allows all the wealth to funnel to the top.

So yeah, the commodification of any cultural product is a real thing. And so this is some of the things that allow us to start these conversations about, how do we protect and define hip-hop architecture as a thing? Is it something that is a style that we can identify that can then be replicated? Are there a series of very prescriptive rules that anybody can follow and produce hip-hop architecture?

Or is it something that is much more loosely defined, much more nimble and flowing, much more like hip-hop is authentically? That as soon as you try to tie it down and put your finger on exactly what it is and commodify it, then it slips and flips the script and creates something different.

DARIEN CARR: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. And I guess a follow-up question is as we've been talking, I've just been thinking of how you bring these things into the classroom and your teaching pedagogy. And thinking of how to communicate information about hip-hop architecture while at the same time not codifying it such that it doesn't have the ability for that fluidity is I feel like a difficult thing to juggle. So I'm wondering how you kind of imagine these ideas as someone who's in the education of architecture. Yeah.

SEKOU COOKE: I think that is also part of the code switching, right? So I am an academic and a practitioner. As I say in the book, I'm not trying to be a Black architect or a hip-hop architect. I'm just trying to be an architect. And I'm teaching people who want to know how to become architects. Not necessarily people who are trying to become hip-hop architects. So it's something that I take very seriously.

But the nature of design education is really wonderful in its ability to allow us to be very flexible. Ultimately, for a true, pure design education, there are fundamentals that are being taught. But it's primarily in the realm of exploration. So you're facilitating and guiding and creating a space wherein people can create explorations and find out for themselves what this thing is.

So there is no real prescription that I'm giving them from the top-down and saying, these are the things that you have to do. It's really saying, these are the issues sets, and these are other examples of other people who have addressed these issues in different ways. But for us, we're going to make sure that we are on the side of exploration.

DARIEN CARR: So yeah. So kind of getting back to the block quotes, one is from Lauren Housley, an artist who uses architecture and installation art to demonstrate the lived reality of places like South Central LA. She mentions how a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem helped give her space to articulate her ideas, and eventually gave her the opportunity to do an actual built construction project.

And similarly, congratulations. The *Black Reconstruction Collective* exhibit was crazy. Tara and I both went, and we both found it really inspiring. So kind of thinking of pedagogy, one, in the academic institution, and

throughout our conversation, the role of the museum has been important in disseminating a lot of these ideas. And I was wondering if you could speak to the role of the museum specifically for disseminating and creating a discourse for Black architecture.

SEKOU COOKE: Actually, that's a question that we at the BRC, the *Black Reconstruction Collective*, are really confronting head-on. We're really questioning whether or not any of these institutions should be the primary voice within the Black community, or should be the tastemakers.

If you think about MoMA as an institution, they have been the standard bearers, the pace setters for almost any kind of cultural production. If it happens at MoMA, then it's all of a sudden avant garde, if it's all of a sudden something that people need to pay attention to.

I think we can and should begin to define our own set of standards for what institutions should be. What that is specifically is not super clear right now, but these are the questions we're taking up in the BRC.

Can we found a different kind of institution? Can we specifically support Black designers and Black artists and Black architects in ways that didn't exist before?

And we're dealing with that in a way that presents a bit of a dilemma. How do we do the thing in the right way without replicating exactly what other institutions have done in the past?

So some of that has to do with naming things differently. Some of that has to do with creating a process that's slightly different or slightly less laden with all of these colonialist ways of thinking. And you know, it's a tough question and a tough process, but we know it's going to take multiple years and multiple attempts to get there. But we're definitely about doing that work.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: So my follow-up question was beyond the *Black Reconstruction Collective*, did you see the MoMA trying to make any changes themselves to support this work that you're doing for posterity or longevity? Did they make any promises or any vows to kind of support the work of Black architects and designers in the future without you having to start this whole separate collective?

SEKOU COOKE: No. That is the clearest and shortest but truest answer you'll get today. [LAUGHS] And it's simply that. It's no. They've made no space for that at all. And yeah, the BRC is something that was necessary. It wasn't just a cool idea that we came up with. It was a necessity, because nothing like this exists.

And because if we didn't do this, then the same process would just keep repeating itself. It's like, oh, we need a show about Black architecture, and we've never had a show about Black architecture. So let's pick a few superstars, give them a limited amount of money, and then have them make some stuff that people are going to think is Black architecture. And then we'll move on to the next issue in contemporary architecture after that.

And the reality is that when you do that, it sets up individuals against the collective. It sets up an idea that these 10 people that we selected, they are representative of the entirety of Black architecture. And we've checked that box on Black architecture, and we no longer have to revisit it instead of creating a long-term commitment, an investment in telling this part of the story that is grossly under-explored within our discipline.

We have a lack of Black architects not because there aren't enough Black people who know how to create space. It's because the way that we're taught how to create space is entrenched in a very Western, white, European way of thinking.

And so when people come into these institutions, they don't recognize it as anything that reflects their own culture or their own identity, or anything that they recognize as space making. Those of us who are in the positions of privilege like I am are reinventing or reassessing the ways that we evaluate what space making is and bringing light to the understanding that Black people have been space makers from the beginning of time. We just don't fit into this really narrowly defined idea of what discipline has called architecture.

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:**

So how do you avoid this whole balance between representation and tokenization? Because it's a conversation that's constantly happening at school right now. There's a bunch of diversity initiatives. I mean, schools all over the place.

And we're always like, OK. So if you're having a diversity initiative or if you have someone as a diversity and inclusion chair, they should be Black, right? Because you don't want-- or they should be a minority. But then do we want minorities to be the only ones doing the work? We don't want to over-exhaust the minorities. It's not fair. But then when you have non-minorities do the work, often they don't get it, right?

So then how do you balance this of being in the position and pulling someone up, but then also sometimes feeling like the token? I mean, you talked about how it's like the MoMA brings you guys in for a show to be like, look at us. We did a Wilkes show. And then they're like, all right. Get out. And there's no real long-term commitment.

SEKOU COOKE:

I don't think there is a balance. I don't think there is a good or a balance or an effective way of saying, we want this amount of tokenism and this amount of representation. I think it's something that is probably going to continue to exist until we find something else, right? Until we find a different way of valuing people's experience and valuing who they are as individual, and recognizing that people aren't in these rooms to make decisions because of deeper structural issues.

So tokenization is a way of fixing things at the surface level. But to get at the root cause, you have to do a kind of complete embolism. The whole thing has to be reimaged and reconstituted.

Yeah, I like quoting Bob Marley at times. And one of his most radical quotes is "total destruction is the only solution." And I don't believe that he was an anarchist, but I think it's about rethinking everything from the bottom to the top is the only way to actually fix a problem.

There's another quote by Einstein that I often butcher, but it's something about the thinking that created these problems cannot be used to solve them. You have to bring new and different kinds of thinking to address any issue.

DARIEN CARR: Yeah. So right now, I'm in the introduction class to-- I think it's called *Foundations of Practice* or something. So we're learning about what architecture practice is. But in the previous class as we're getting into the material, we're thinking about, what are some of the challenges and opportunities of architectural practice?

And during our conversation in class, a point came up on how we define the architect, how traditionally an architect has been seen as a master builder kind of. But how actually, if we start to pivot and think of an architect more as an orchestrator, we were talking about how that might enable more diversity of perspectives within the discipline of architecture.

And to connect that to the earlier point, thinking about how we teach people to see their environments as stable, but they're actually dynamic, and they're actually a product of design. And they could be designed better, and that could be a source of hope.

But it feels quite hard to imagine that, at least even speaking from my perspective. Coming into architecture it's like, oh, you could design a building? Wait. Huh? I didn't know till I heard the Frank Ocean line, I'm living an idea from another man's mind. And then all of the sudden, I started to be able to see these things as more fluid.

Anyway, I'm just kind of thinking on how we can start to define architect, and what the architect does, and how the architect relates to community and more to incorporate these imaginations so more people feel like they could come in and actually join the work of redesigning so many of these inequitable things.

SEKOU COOKE: Yeah, I think that's part of the crux of the book, right? It's really clarifying how architecture exists in so many different places and spaces that we don't necessarily recognize enough or give it the title of architecture. And architecture is such a protected title for such a really narrowly defined thing.

And anything that fell-- for several, several years or decades, anything that fell outside of European or maybe Japanese architecture was called primitive or non-skilled or outsider, right? So it wasn't acknowledged that everybody who was creating space in any other way was also producing architecture, because architecture had to be defined as this very specific thing.

I mean, even the last administration's attempt to say all federal buildings have to be designed in a classical style is just a remnant of this larger insanity, people thinking of architecture as this one specific thing, and it has to look like a very specific thing.

But yeah, the last line of the disclaimer that I put at the beginning of the book is that this book is by, for, and about architects, even though they may have defined architecture differently than you have. The architecture is there. It's just that people define it differently.

So the definition of architecture is really, really critical to how we move forward. We can keep defining what we do something as outside of architecture, as other people have. And a lot of people are of the thinking that if we define something separate, then it would be good. We define a Black architecture. We define a Black aesthetic. We define a hip-hop architecture. Then that will be something that we can operate under.

And I just want to call it architecture, because it all is. It's all the same thing. I'd rather redefine architecture than create a whole separate thing that I have to practice under.

DARIEN CARR: Mm-hmm. I think ending with this idea-- it's actually your last chapter on neo-postmodernism, which Charles Jencks has dubbed *PM2*. And as you say, the use of references and samples in hip-hop allows us to characterize it as a postmodern form.

But from the tasks, it feels like neo-postmodern has more to do with incessant layering of information that characterizes the digital age, but also how it relates to an expansion of architectures. And whether it's hip-hop architecture or architecture, I think I'm asking the same thing, re your last point, about how it relates to expansion of this expanded architecture imagination.

So I wanted to kind of pick your brain on why you ended the book there on neo-postmodern. It gave me a new understanding of my professor's where, Jennifer Bonner, who uses logics of sampling and remixes in *Best Sandwiches* in *Haus Gables*. And I think that could be a good note to end on as we're all going to go back to our respective places to be thinking about architecture and thinking about and digesting the ideas we've mentioned in this conversation.

SEKOU COOKE: So I think it's important to point out that there is an outro after the postmodernism section. Yeah. So the outro is really, really important, because that's where these things are kind of wrapped up. And the outro is really about where this takes us. Where are we going with it? And how can we define something completely different?

And if you notice, in the end, I really talk about an experience, experiential space, like a cultural, deeply immersive experience, and how this happened in a space that was created in a very improvisational way. And then even some of the final quotations, the last little bits, there's a clip from Craig Wilkins talking about hip-hop architecture should be a model of architectural practice, period.

And then another clip from Kyle May who's talking about who the next architects are going to be, that they're scrappy, they're intelligent, they're determined. They don't care about the ways things are typically done.

And then the very, very last quote is one of these quotes from a song that I couldn't actually write out, because getting the rights to publish song lyrics is much more complicated than I thought. But it's a line from Lauryn Hill, from a *Fugees* track where she says, "even after all my logic and my theory, add a 'motherfucker' so you ignorant niggas hear me."

And that's the way I wanted to go out, is like, OK. I've got to just say all the stuff that's on the board, there's all these theories, and we can debate and talk about this forever. But a lot of motherfuckers just ain't going to get it, right? [LAUGHS] That's just it.

But the neo-postmodernism chapter is really important in highlighting how the ideas and the roots and the processes that are embedded within hip-hop and hip-hop culture have already begun to find their way into the work of people who don't necessarily identify with hip-hop culture. Like, they're influenced by hip-hop culture, but they don't identify themselves as quote, unquote, "hip-hop."

And that's really crucial to understand, because it's showing a couple things. One, the commodification, how commodification is really easy to proliferate, that a whole group and a whole movement of people can create a whole new architecture that's based in hip-hop, but not call it hip-hop, and completely profit off of it or take credit from it and get beyond that. I'm not saying that that's what these people in the chapter are doing, but I'm saying the potential for that happening is there.

But the other thing is that hip-hop culture is so ingrained and embedded within our collective psyche that we can't not produce work that is influenced by hip-hop anymore, right? And that's a much, much bigger statement or position to take. And not everybody's going to be on board with that, but it's something that I'd like to put out there.

DARIEN CARR: Yeah. Oh, man. Well, thank you so much for this awesome conversation. I'm so happy it was recorded. Some of the things you've said, even things personally, I'd like to revisit and keep thinking about. And yeah, thank you.

SEKOU COOKE: Thanks for your time, and thanks for having me on. I really appreciate it.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:** I'm Tara Oluwafemi.

DARIEN CARR: And I'm Darien Carr.

**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.