CALEB NAGESH: 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 NAGESH: And I'm Caleb Nagesh.

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 NAGESH: Today, we'll be speaking with Stephen Gray, Associate Professor of Urban Design at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and founder of the Boston-based design firm, Grayscale Collaborative. Operating at the intersection of research and practice, Stephan's interests center on political and cultural justice in cities, socio-ecological urban design approaches to resilience, and the intersectionality of humanitarian aid and design. Among numerous other projects and initiatives, he is currently co-leading an Equitable Impacts Framework pilot with the Urban Institute and the High Line network aimed at advancing racial equity agendas for infrastructure reuse projects across North America.

Hi, Stephen! It is great to finally get you on the show.

STEPHEN GRAY: Hey, How's it going? Thanks for having me.

CALEB NAGESH: So you're both an educator and a practitioner, and often in the classroom I think we find that student work can be disconnected from the real world. We conduct research and develop ideas that could have a real impact if implemented outside of the classroom, and yet we decide to scrap lot of these ideas and use them only as teaching aids. So, in what ways have you combined your dual roles to engage your students in real life projects outside of the classroom?

STEPHEN GRAY: It's a good question. You know, there's a huge brain trust and a lot of really focused and intelligent energy within academic institutions. And very often we don't channel that energy towards actual real world problems. Part of that, I think, is necessary.

There's a little bit of space that we need in academia to be able to separate ourselves from reality enough to develop some skills, develop some ways of seeing the world, and lenses through which we plan to operate, and suspending reality just enough to explore new ideas and advance our thinking and not really just regurgitate and repeat the things that we see around us. But I think that even in those stages of development and those sort of phases of academic pedagogical structure, there are opportunities to connect to the real world and realities that are far-reaching and structurals should definitely not be ignored. So that's a preface to say, there is a place in core, the fundamental foundational coursework for a suspension of reality.

But once you get to your options studios and to your electives seminars and lecture courses, that's where there is an opportunity to really engage with real problems and real urban challenges. And so, there's a class that I teach, which I think we'll probably talk about today a little bit, but just to introduce it, it's called Urban Design and the Color Line. And the course engages directly with the realities of structural racism in the United States, bringing students through and understanding of how and why, and for what capitalist purposes directly related to slavery. Race was really kind of defined and perfected as a distinction in the United States.

And connecting that understanding of history and cultures of racism that have resulted to geographies of racism, understanding how our culture and society impacts where people have settled and live, either by choice or by force in the United States, and then really unpacking those physical divides between different racial and ethnic groups, which are the physical infrastructures of roads and parks and waterways railroads, et cetera. And really understanding the role of designers in imagining those infrastructures and reimagining those infrastructures. So really implicating ourselves in the making and reinforcing of these structures, but also allowing ourselves to understand that we also have a role in unpacking and dismantling them. So that is one level of reality that is much more focused on students gaining a greater depth of understanding of their relationship and their role within that existing structure.

And then we've done some interesting things with the course this past year and, hopefully for the next couple of years, connecting it, actually, to projects and organizations across the country, as you mentioned, with the High Line Network to be able to work with students to embed some of their thinking in the course into the organizational structure of the power dynamics and the ways in which they're thinking about moving forward with implementation

CALEB NAGESH:

I think you bring up a lot of really great points. And I think given that race and issues of blackness and certainly the afterlife of slavery are definitely under explored in design pedagogy, to say the least, do you think that there's a specific advantage or opportunity to bringing practice and research together when it comes to these topics? When it comes to racial equity? I mean, because you mention Urban Design in the Color Line, which we're definitely going to talk a little bit more about in a minute. But generally speaking, what's your approach to maybe curriculum building or research and developing classes that deal with or promote solutions toward racial equity and liberation and bringing those things together with real world collaboration. Is there a specific way you look at those issues when it comes to race?

STEPHEN GRAY:

So I guess that's two questions. Like how do I bring pedagogy and practice together, and then what is the role of race in all of that? You know, I come to the GSD having been a practitioner. I'm a graduate of the GSD in the Urban Design program and then I went to work at Sasaki Associates, which is an urban planning design and landscape firm that also practices architecture but founded in planning and landscape architecture. I was a practitioner, I was involved in a number of broad range of projects. And then I taught at MIT for a couple of semesters and then I ended up getting this opportunity to teach at the GSD.

But I come to the GSD, not as a lifelong academic, but as actually a lifelong practitioner. And so I really see this as an opportunity for me as a practitioner to think more deeply about practice and the ways in which we operate and the way we engage in issues like race. So the work that I do in practice, I'm able to bring into the classroom as teaching tools. Both the successes and the things that I think are really worth thinking about and emulating, or at least learning from. But also, lessons learned based on mistakes that I've made myself, and I think that those are also very strong teaching tools.

So, bringing practice and lessons from practice into the classroom and into the way that I approach research and teaching, but then allowing that space within class, allowing that space within research initiatives, to really advance and think deeply about things that you don't often have time to really take on when you have a certain set of agreements with a client that are based on a certain time frame and a certain set of deliverables that have to be delivered at a certain price point. So you have all of these pressing realities against your real desire to think more deeply and innovate. So then I use the space in academia to really expand my thinking, and there's no better way to expand your thinking than to do that in discourse. And so having, every year, a whole cohort of really driven and intelligent graduate students who are engaged in this discourse, that really helps me to advance my thinking and my ability then to practice better and be a better practitioner. So to me I see them as really reciprocal.

Now, where race fits into that is really interesting. I'm a biracial person. My father's Black, his mother grew up in the South. She went to elementary school with Coretta Scott King. My mother is white, her father is first-generation German immigrant in the United States and her mother has Irish background. And my great aunt and her family are traveling Bluegrass band who used to live in the hills of Kentucky and we'd go out to their pig roast every year and every other house had a Confederate flag hanging on the lawn. So I've had both perspectives, I'm a product of America in that way. So my background and my experiences have given me insight and I think an ability to understand in a really truly empathetic way multiple perspectives, diverging perspectives, but also to engage with people and help to push people out of their comfort zones in ways that I can anticipate how far to push that is still going to sort of be productive.

So race is personal for me in terms of my work. And if you think about doing community processes for urban planning and design projects in cities, there's always a public process associated with that. So my ability to connect with both sides of the table has been a real asset for me in my work.

In terms of the way that it fits in as a topic within my practice and within my research, race, really, I think, was actually brought to me as a topic of research by students. In 2015 when I started at the GSD, there was a group of students that had been doing research looking at fatal encounters of Black Americans with police. And they've done this mapping project called Bang! Bang! Bang! And they were seeking out some feedback or some guidance on doing a more extensive research project to really unpack the relationship between the spaces that we plan, design, and build, and the people who occupy those spaces who, in some cases, are more likely to end up in one of those fatal encounters than others who are living in other parts of our cities.

And so, working with those students, they looked at Boston, St. Louis, and Baltimore and did a series of mappings. The course that they created was called Map the Gap. And that really, I think, opened up a lens for me to connect urban design to issues of race, racism, and racial equity by really providing a set of really thoughtfully, beautifully, illustrated maps of the relationship between race and educational attainment, race and public infrastructure transit, race and public infrastructure parks, race and life expectancy, and a whole other host of categories.

And what ended up happening was, I was connected with the Mellon Research Initiative, which was being led by Eve Blau at the time, and I worked with Alex Krieger. The Mellon Initiative looked at four cities: Boston, Berlin, Istanbul, and Mumbai. And each of them had a different set of faculty lead, and working with Alex Krieger, we both actually started from the point of departure of the student research and the student mapping project, and we just commented there seems to be this recurring pattern for all of these issues. There's this particular geography of the city that these issues are all overlapping in and it also happens to be the geography that is the concentration of Black, brown, indigenous, and immigrant communities in Boston. And so we decided to look at the boundaries between that sort of wedge shape in the city and the other side of each of those boundaries and unpack the physical infrastructures that defined those spaces.

So we looked at it through three eras of urban development: the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of industry in Boston, which led to large landfill projects and a huge immigrant influx. So connecting the ways in which the city was envisioning itself growing in relation to this new population which was coming in and which was really-- if we think that we're xenophobic now, they had a whole political party back then called the Know Nothings that were focused specifically on anti-immigrant rhetoric. So sort of understanding the relationship between race and the large landfill projects.

Second, was looking at the relationship between the parks movement: so Olmsted Parks, the Emerald Necklace, that whole movement, which followed closely behind the industrial, landfill, and influx of immigrants as a way to provide respite from the smog-filled cities. But also from Olmstead's perspective, a way to introduce different types of people, different classes of people, people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds to one another in a common space. And so really unpacking that and the unfinished part of the Emerald Necklace, Columbia Road, which eventually would go to connect Black Dorchester to white, Irish South Boston, and looking at the history of that conflict between those two groups, especially on that border.

And then finally, the era of urban renewal and federal highway expansion, really unpacking the southwest corridor, which is now the home to the path of the Orange Subway Line in Boston. And also to a linear system of community gardens, and parks, and institutions like Roxbury Community College. But actually, that corridor, the reason why there's space there, is because it was initially six miles of the city were demolished completely to make room for a highway. And the highway was ultimately shut down, but that's the scars of the city, or of that major infrastructural move, that attempt, city building in that way led to space-- which became the space where the Orange Line was moved to.

But if you map the demographic realities and differences on both sides of that line today in terms of race, in terms of income, in terms of educational attainment, in terms of life expectancy, you would assume that there was a highway there today. And so that brings up the question of, if people aren't truly a part of the making and the imagining of the infrastructures within their communities, should we really expect them to be the beneficiaries? And that connecting, that Mellon research and deriving it from, and extending from the student research and Map the Gap, really was, I think, a start for me to really actively and intentionally embed race into my research agenda and my teaching agenda. But also, much more explicitly and unapologetically into my practice.

TARA OLUWAFEMI:	Honestly, thinking about-- you're talking about how academia is often a suspension of reality and how you're working on mixing some of that with actual practice and some of the lessons we learn from practice right. And how students are often seeking for a way to already start combining the two approaches in our education now so that when we go out into the real world, we already have the ability to do both, right? So if we're talking about your class from this past spring, Urban Design and the Color Line, and we've talked a little bit about it before, but can you talk some more about how this course collaborates with the efforts of the High Line Network and what the High Line Network is. And it's a corrective approach, right, by the designers of the High Line to promote increased racial equality in projects, focus on infrastructure reuse around the world. And this came about based on the recognition of the issues of racial inequality present in the High Line project, right. So what are some of the projects your students have worked on with the High Line Network and how do you feel they are mixing these two worlds of suspending reality and imagining a better future, but then also facing some of the real world consequences and some of the real world limitations. And also learning from major projects like the High. Line
STEPHEN GRAY:	Yes, so the High Line Network is interesting and it's relatively new. It was created in 2017 by Robert Hammond, who is one of the founders of the High Line and still the executive director, and Robert and Josh, who were the two founders, basically, you know they had a mission to try to save this, what they felt was a beautiful, derelict infrastructure, sort of dancing through the buildings in the sky in the neighborhood of West Chelsea in Manhattan. And to do that in order to provide a public space and amenity for the existing residents that had really limited access to quality public space. That was really where they started.
	And the project was an impossible project, really. It should have failed at every stage. The amount of coordination, the number of lawsuits, the amount of opposition from developers, if you can imagine that, as well as from Mayor Giuliani at the time-- who actually issued a demolition order as one of his last acts as mayor --the project was really kind of doomed. And so they were able to navigate all of the politics and the economic pressures and the various sectoral and departmental frictions were able to achieve what is really a spectacular example of the hybrid collaboration between architecture and landscape architecture, even engineering.
	So the project as a project, I think is an excellent example of a great success. But at the same time, what Robert didn't fully anticipate was the rate and scale at which gentrification and developer speculation and growth was going to happen. And even the city didn't anticipate it. My biggest questions with the project is, why didn't they plan to capture some of the value-- that was going to happen whether the High Line was built or not --and let that at least fund the operation of that park. And if it was in excess, then let it fund the operation and improvements of parks and other neighborhoods around New York that don't necessarily have the benefit of that high profile location.
	And so instead, while the High Line generates an estimated additional $64 million a year in tax revenue for the city-- that doesn't count Hudson Yards, which is probably going to double it --that money goes into the general fund. It doesn't go into the parks budget. So seven acres of 30,000 acres of the entire New York City park system generates 12%, about 1/10 of the entire parks budget. But that money doesn't go into the parks budget, it goes into the general fund. Which means that that money doesn't get spent on any other parks in the city, but it doesn't even get spent on the High Line. So Robert is left to fund raise now roughly $18 million a year, 10 million for operations, 8 million for public programs on his own from single donors. There's big donors and there's small donors, but it's all, maybe there's like 13 or 15,000 individual donors that are funding the High Line.

He wanted to find a way to make amends and it was too late for the High Line, right? You can't change the rules once they're set, every developer in town is going to sue you and they'll probably win because the rules were clear. And so he decided to create a peer network of infrastructure reuse projects around the United States that were in various stages of development. And that might be able to not only learn from the High Line's process, but also learn from each other in real time. And the main focus of the High Line network, which now I think has-- well, it had 23 members. I think they've just onboarded the next 15 members, and you can go to their website and see who all of those members are. But they include a range. And I'll name the nine that we worked with in the pilot for the class. But basically, the network is this peer to peer group that's trying to advise each other, and learn from each other as they're implementing their projects to achieve higher levels of equity in their outcomes.

And so I guess the back story of my connection to them, I was on the Veronica Green Prize selection committee which is an award in urban design that the Urban Design Program and Urban Planning Design Departments gives to an urban design project once every two years, and we selected the High Line as the winner. And that was not a foregone conclusion, it was actually, in my mind, very unlikely that the High Line would get selected. But when we met with Robert, we learned about the robust public programs agenda that he had, which was very culturally targeted, which was in response to them measuring that only 22% of all visitors to the High Line that were New Yorkers were people of color. And they doubled that number, got it up to 44% with intensive targeted programming, that was interesting.

But what was really interesting, was that roughly six months before we met with them that they had this newly established High Line Network that we didn't really know what it was, but we really saw it as a promising new experiment in a way that an urban design project was actually having a life and an impact. Not only beyond its physical footprint and beyond the neighborhood it's in, but actually beyond the city and the region that it sits. And it's actually impacting projects across the country and not just by giving them a good idea to try to have their own High Line, but to actually work with them to have projects that are more successful in terms of their equitable impacts than the High Line initially was.

And so from that relationship that was formed after the award was given, and I co-authored a paper with Diane Davis, who was the chair of that committee, that was really introducing this idea of the High Line Network. Then, Robert invited Harvard and CoDesign, which is an initiative within the Urban Planning and Design Department, and Lily Song and I have been doing some of the inaugural projects with-- on my side, it's the High Line Network. And they invited me to work with Urban Institute to develop an Equitable Impacts Framework pilot. And it's a one year pilot, and there are nine of the organizations involved. So Buffalo Bayou, Houston Parks Board, Trinity River Conservancy, Waterloo Greenway, 11th Street Bridge Park, Atlanta Beltline, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, Philly Rail Park, and of course, the High Line. And those nine projects signed up to be a part of this one year pilot.

And so for the first part of the pilot, we used the course Urban Design in the Color Line as a way to provide students with real world case studies to unpack the cultures of racism, geographies of racism, and infrastructures of racism that led up to and defined those particular infrastructures and the people that are around them in the given cities. And then the reports that students made and delivered to those organizations then became the points of departure for a coaching session, or a series of coaching sessions, which are now led by Urban Institute and supported by me via Harvard. The first session was responding to the student proposals, understanding what resonated, what didn't, what do they think is a great idea but they never could achieve it. It's really to get a sense of where they stand and then going from there to define some clear agenda items and things that they want to work on as an organization. And that they think they can make some kind of headway on in that first year. And then when we're done with the process, the idea is that I'll work with the folks at Urban and the High Line Network to codify that process, and have that be a process which is used, for onboarding future Network partners. And they're planning to onboard 15 to 20 new partners a year for the next three years.

CALEB NAGESH: So as you mentioned, the High Line starts out with this intent to give a kind of quality public space back to that disinvested neighborhood in New York. And obviously the forces of capitalist speculation descend so quickly on that window of impact that it ends up being eclipsed, and we end up with rapid gentrification, kind of loss of public value. And that's a really common narrative I think for New York City, certainly but also our nation and the world, increasingly. So, it's easy for designers I think, and students, to feel a little overwhelmed and maybe powerless in the face of those kinds of processes. And given that we're working as individuals, often or even individual firms let's say, in a much larger system when it comes to especially urban processes and development. And we've talked about this a lot in the show before. Are there specific ways that the Equitable Impacts Framework in your work with students are approaching that dilemma and what's the balance between collective and individual power, let's say.

STEPHEN GRAY: One of the things that the students do in addition to doing their archival research and their color line mapping and sort of unpacking the relationship of that infrastructure in that geography, they also look at creating an equity matrix. They also are focused on creating an equity matrix and a collaboration web. So the equity matrix is really focused on them trying to understand what the organization is already doing and what the organization is doing in terms of broader urban issues than just the definition and implementation and building of a park space. So, how does that public investment, how does that large scale public park impact, and how is it impacted by issues of affordability and housing, health and well-being, economic development, and local jobs, cultural identity right? So like mobility and connectivity? How does that investment relate to the broader urban systems?

And so the students first interview and collect information from the organizations and really try to categorize the project's initiatives that they're currently working on within those categories of equity impact, and then projects that are aspirational within each of those categories. And then by the end of the semester, students are making recommendations for additional projects and programs that they might add to their roster to amplify their impact in each of those equity impact areas.

The collaboration web is directly connected to that because what the collaboration web asks them to do is to ask the students to identify organizations outside of the principal organization who is leading the park planning and implementation project identify collaborations within each of those categories of housing affordability, health and well-being, economic development, and jobs, connectivity, et cetera. And ways in which they're collaborating and ways in which they can begin to build upon those relationships in order to achieve a broader set of goals even though their expertise and focus might not be in those areas.

And then the students do additional research to identify other organizations in the geographic area that are working in those categories of impact that the organization might reach out to and build a relationship with and collaborate with towards some set of shared goals. So that's where the students really try to understand the various players and power dynamics within the communities in these different categories of equity. And then suggest ways that the prime organization might begin to build bridges to those other organizations in order to share power and build on each other's momentum.

Now the way that that translates into the coaching, is that we've really been helping these organizations visualize their internal structure and decision-making process. So they have a board and they have another body which is maybe providing advice or expert counsel, they have the public sector, which they somehow intersect with-- maybe the Parks Department, and then they have committees-- they have executive committees and they have community engagement committees and they have equity committees. And so really trying to first help them understand the relationship of all of those decision-making bodies that define their internal governance in order to help them to realign and rebalance the power dynamics within those much more outwardly and in ways that are much more connected to residents in surrounding neighborhoods, as opposed to people who are power brokers or who are high rollers. Which you need on your board, because you need people to be able to navigate and to finance projects, and they also have great ideas, but you also need some of those ideas and some of the decision-making power to lie more directly and be tied more closely to the people that are going to be most impacted living in the neighborhoods around these projects.

And so, that's kind of how the students took the first step at really trying to identify potential collaborations and the ways in which these organizations are working and opportunities to expand their impact. And then now the coaching is really focused on understanding the nuts and bolts of the internals of the organization, how decisions are made, how budgets are formed, and what the relationship is of that power to surrounding neighborhoods.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: So you're mentioning the impact of this original cohort of students in your independent study and how developing a curriculum and integrating real world applications has had this major impact on several public projects. So do you think there are opportunities at the GSD and other design institutions for students to take this approach to learning. I remember-- I grew up in Canada and our schools have co-ops, where for part of the day students would go to different firms or whatever to learn different skills and them offering their talent and their time working for these companies was a bit of an exchange of them also getting to learn how things work in the real world. But at a little bit of a lower stakes opportunity because they are still being watched over by professionals.

So you're mentioning how there's a trajectory of projects from Map the Gap to Urban Design and the Color Line, and all of these were driven by students. Should the burden of these be on the students or the professors to demand that their work has an impact beyond the bubble of academia, right? And how do we balance this with the impulse to keep a bit of critical distance from the real world and processes of research.

STEPHEN GRAY: Yeah, I mean, that's the conversation that faculty are having now. There are these demands that were made in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others-- and the protests that have erupted in this country as a result --that were made by, I guess, the African-American Student Union at the GSD and Africa GSD. And those set into motion a whole series of conversations and initiatives on the faculty side.

And one of the things that's come up in our discussions is that we really need to be leading. I mean, students are paying to come and get something that they didn't have. But on the other hand, if the service that's being provided is not standing up to the measure that as a student you come in with, an expectation that you have when you come in, then you certainly should step up and say something. I would say I don't think that the burden falls necessarily on one group or the other. I think faculty have not carried our share of that, but I also don't think of it as a burden. I think it's actually an opportunity and it's really exciting.

One of the things that always surprises me is when I hear people talking about the fact that oh, it makes me so nervous, are we going to have to rethink curriculum? And like all of the stuff that we've really focused on, and thought about, and expanded our own teaching, is all of that out the window? Or like, every time we say something we have to qualify it in some kind of way. And from my view our job as academics, people working in institutions of higher learning, is to always question the status quo and to be excited when something comes up that forces us to innovate. And so, I'm of course speaking from the position of privilege in some way because I've already been thinking about this stuff. So for me, it's just like bolstering and amping support that I might get for the work that I'm doing. Instead of me having to be like oh, shoot I got to rethink everything, so I acknowledge that. It's stressful anyway for me, so it's stressful I'm sure for other people.

But it should be exciting, too, because it's an opportunity to think about something differently. To engage in a different set of issues that don't have the most precedent. Thinking about design, architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, urban planning that directly engages with structural racism.

Now there's a spectrum right, on the planning side that happens more often. It's not always what happens, but like that's more likely and more common. In the urban design side, it's a little less common, but where it can to planning.

Landscape architecture is less common now, but there is a history of that, right? Olmstead, part of his whole philosophy was based upon his experience interviewing slaves. Because he was a journalist before he was a landscape architect and he interviewed slaves, or enslaved people, who were under the power of the families of friends of his from school-- and he got them to let him on to the plantation --and that influenced the way that he thought about the way space could actually promote democracy and equality. And so that led him to become involved in Central Park and the designing of that space, which has displaced a Black community so that's problematic in itself. But it really led to his philosophy which was really focused on democratic sharing of space by different people. And so it's in landscape architecture.

And architecture probably has the least history, but that should be the most exciting thing because that means everything you do is brand new and you get to own that. So I personally am excited, because now some of the stuff that I've been working on, I'm being invited to and encouraged to embed that even more directly and explicitly into the core curriculum-- as we all are, actually. And I think it's just a real opportunity to innovate.

So I think students push for it, because the younger you are, the less patience you have with stuff, and faculty are responding. But I'm hoping that faculty can now take this opportunity to really lead because the sky's the limit. We can do anything because most of it hasn't been done yet in this realm connecting structural racism to design. So let's get to it, and let's have fun, and let's be serious, but let's enjoy the work that we're supposed to be doing, which is questioning the status quo and advancing our disciplines in ways that have meaning and impact. And now we have language like equitable outcomes in society. Because that's what we do. We build the spaces that society exists within.

So if you fill up an ice cube tray that's a novelty ice cube tray, then the ice is going to come out in some different kind of funny shape or a different size. So we're creating the lattice work, the framework, for what can happen within. We have a lot of agency here and we have a new purpose and I am hopeful that the GSD will keep its place as a leader, but do so in this new space.

CALEB NAGESH: Yeah, I think you bring up a lot of really great points. We certainly see this as an exciting moment, too. Tara and I were both involved with the writing and publication of the notes on credibility like you mentioned, the statement that came out from Africa GSD and AASU earlier this summer. And it's an exciting opportunity to reimagine and look really critically at the ways that our disciplines have ignored some of these racial discourses and to bring that back into the fold. It's an exciting opportunity to basically strengthen our position critically, and I think that'll require a bit of dismantling but I think it's an active building and it's an act of just adding a more critical position on certain issues of race and blackness.

And it's funny, because we've talked a little bit about how-- obviously, this summer in a lot of ways has been really exhausting as Black people dealing with the news and seeing what's going on and participating in protests and having to raise our voices all the time while balancing the demands of our own jobs and lives. And I think it's funny because this summer has activated in a lot of ways certain things that were already in the works. So you mentioned for example, how your own research already deals with questions of race and structural racism and equity as they relate to design.

I mean, this podcast itself, we've been developing it with the African American Design Nexus for at least a year at this point, and things only came together for us logistically to start this summer. And it's been a really great opportunity to get so many people on this show and to really get these ideas and this conversation going. I mean, that's been really exciting for us.

And speaking of architecture, I just wanted to bring up. I think there's a couple of other examples of obviously people who have been working on these issues of race and equity in these different disciplines, including architecture where-- I think you're right to point out that of, let's say the three disciplines at the GSD with urban planning and design, landscape architecture, and architecture. Probably architecture is the most detached, maybe, or has not integrated racial discourses into our knowledge about the discipline. And I think there are some exciting work that's coming out now. There was the Mabel Wilson and Irene Cheng, and I think Charles Davis, edited the *Race and Modern Architecture* book which just came out.

And that I think is really critically examining a lot of this conversation as it relates to the development of architecture and modern architecture. We also have Charles Davis's book *Building Character* which came out last year. Which again, is looking really critically at pedagogy and the development of modern architectural thinking and how that's so tied so closely to race and co-evolves with those issues. And you also mentioned about Olmstead, I'm really excited about the class that Sara Zewde is teaching this fall-- I'm really hoping I can get into it --which is examining directly Olmstead, the publication he made after coming back from that tour through the South. It's certainly a really exciting moment for us.

I guess this leads to my next question, which is in light of the ongoing pandemic, we know that we've been dealing with this larger pandemic, as it's been framed, of structural racism in this country. But also the COVID-19 pandemic, which is now coincided with so much of the activity and prompted so much of what's been going on this summer. It's important, I think, to recognize how mechanisms of white supremacy and structural racism are often reinforced in moments of social or environmental crisis and especially through the built environment. So you've written about this. And about how discourse around post-war or post-crisis city building often falls short of really fully committing to racial justice and ultimately, Black, and brown, and indigenous, and immigrant, and poor communities are really left out of these visions of the reimagined city after the crisis. So how do you see this playing out with regard to COVID-19 and how can designers play a part in repairing that kind of harm? What level of impact-- again, to come back to this conversation --what level of impact can designers or planners have in this effort as opposed to local or federal governments and community organizations

| STEPHEN GRAY: | Yeah, I mean I think it's a big question. It's a big challenge. It's a big opportunity. Business as usual is not going to cut it. Typically, people's demise is protracted. People die early from hypertension, diabetes, high blood pressure, these kinds of things. But dying early is different than dying suddenly and more often. And so I think we have a moment now where we can take stock in our history and why certain people who are genetically equivalent in every way to each other, but because of the color of their skin they're dying more frequently-- it just doesn't make any sense. And so it's all of the social constructs and limitations that have been put into place because of the visual perceptive difference between someone who has dark skin or light skin. |

And then we've classified people and then we've created trajectories for different groups based upon that. And so I think as you mentioned, it's time for collective action from the federal government down to designers working on very hyper local projects. There are some initiatives I could talk about which I think could be good, but really the bottom line is that we need to focus on community health equity, community economic justice, and economic rebuilding. And as designers, really centering that energy on improving the quality of housing, the quality of the physical environments around where people live, and the amount of access that those people have to high-quality open space which has become more critical now than ever because there is so few places you can go casually. And many people are either stuck at home or they are underemployed or out of work.

And so if you don't have any place to walk to that's nice in your neighborhood, then you're stuck in your house and then you're potentially spreading COVID more often than others because you're inside more with more people, some of which are potentially essential workers working in nursing or grocery stores and so forth. So high-quality open spaces should be a focus. And focus on connecting people to other opportunities, whether that's through programs or through actual physical infrastructure investments.

I wrote an Op-Ed, that you referenced, for Next City, "COVID-19 puts structural racism on full display. Will we finally do something to correct it?" So I sort of do a quick breakdown of where we are and why we're here. Then I have a couple sets of recommendations that come from a combination of project collaborations that I'm working on now, case studies that I've referenced, and ideas from other scholars. And it really focuses on economic development, housing, and the public domain. And so if you want to Google that you can see a little bit more detail of what I'm saying. But really, we need to be focused on community wealth-building, community health, and the built environments in which we live.

CALEB NAGESH: That's great Thank you. So to come back to the question of academic institutions and the role of research in meeting practice. We've spoken in a previous episode to Bryan Lee, who talked to us a little bit about Dark Matter University and the efforts that are ongoing there to rethink and restructure the idea of an institution of higher learning. So what are your thoughts on that movement?

STEPHEN GRAY: Yeah, so Dark Matter University. Check it out it. Is the future, and I'm serious. Let's say it's a ragtag, ad hoc, consortium, cabal-- whatever you want to call us --of folks who are teaching at institutions across the country from Harvard to Howard, Tuskegee and Columbia, others. So we've got the Ivies we've got the HBCUs, and then we've got community colleges that we're trying to pull into the fold.

And the idea is that we just want to question, critique, and counter all of the things about the institution that we find problematic or we find to be roadblocks to progress. And so Bryan Lee has been organizing Design as Protest now for a couple of years and it's really amped up recently. There's a group of folks on a WhatsApp and we were just kind of like Oh man, this and this and that, and this and that, and so why don't we just start our own University? And then we just did it.

So we basically are not place-based, we have virtual space but no physical ground, and BIPOC academics and academic adjacents who are interested in creating this institution that is cross boundaries. So the idea, ultimately, is that if you're a Harvard student you can take a class that's also being taken by someone in another school, and so there's a blurring of those distinctions and boundaries. It's a collaborative group of people who are taking on issues of structural racism and racial justice very actively and explicitly in our work. And so it provides a space, or a repository or whatever, of folks who are taking this work on in a critical mass. We see ourselves as becoming a resource to these institutions who are grappling with ways to bring these topics in and really respond to student demands. And we're already doing it and we're doing it with some scale.

And so we're right now in the process of developing an infrastructure for our own library where we're going to have materials that are curated by us that offer resources to students, and also to each other on these topics that aren't necessarily highlighted in traditional card catalog sense, in libraries. We are developing curriculum, which is affiliated and associated with Dark Matter University, and then we're also moving towards developing curriculum that is specifically Dark Matter University curriculum.

There are some of us who are already offering courses that are cross-register across universities. There's one that's cross-register, I think is Yale and Tuskegee, maybe Columbia and Tuskegee. Justin Garrett Moore is teaching at both institutions, so I don't know if it's his Columbia class or his Yale class. But we're online, you can go to-- I think it's --darkmatteruniversity.org and you can find information about the people who are involved and the kind of work we're doing, the actions that we're taking, and how to get involved, too, if you're interested in being a part of this movement.

CALEB NAGESH: That's awesome. Thank you so much for sharing. We were really excited to hear about that from Bryan and to get a little more background and all of that is really great. I think we'll definitely be plugging that on the website and on the episode page. So listeners, be sure to look out for that.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: And F.Y.I. I will be taking Map the Gap this semester with Stephen. So look out for some of the work on that we're going to be looking at three major cities and we're very excited to do some of this research and implement some change.

CALEB NAGESH: Thank you so much Stephen I'm sure we'd have a lot more to talk about if we could go a little longer, but this has been great, so thank you for joining us.

STEPHEN GRAY: My pleasure, thanks for having me.

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.