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**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 it's 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 Dr. Michelle Joan Wilkinson, curator at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture, where she works on projects related to contemporary Black life. Dr. Wilkinson is also developing the museum's collections and architecture and design and recently completed the Loeb Fellowship at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Dr. Wilkinson spent six years as director of collections and exhibitions at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture. And she has also worked at the National Gallery of Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Her most recent research explores issues of representation in architectural renderings. Michelle, thank you for joining us.

**MICHELLE
WILKINSON:**

Thank you for having me.

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:**

Today's episode will be based off of the work Blueprint by Terry Boddie. It is a gelatin and silver emulsion and iron blue toner on paper. The artist's statement, and I quote, goes, "In the image blueprint, I juxtaposed the image of a housing project in Harlem with the slave ship icon that shows the way Africans were stowed in the holds of the ships on the journey from the African continent to the Americas and the Caribbean. The title Blueprint suggests that both of these acts were premeditated. One was to efficiently expedite the shipment of as many bodies that could physically fit into the holds of the ships. The other was to warehouse the descendants of those Africans post-Emancipation in as efficient a manner as possible. The color blue also references the blues, the uniquely American musical idiom created by enslaved Africans in response to their social and political position within American society."

So Blueprint shows two images referencing housing issues among Africans and African Americans. The lower image is a detailed view of the conditions for enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage. The illustration of a ship's cargo hold shows each figure lying confined in rows. The upper half shows a

multi-storey housing project in Harlem. The white paper is visible around the border, with some staining on the edges. The work is signed on the bottom, and the print is adhered to a foam core board. So, Michelle, what drew you to Terry Boddie's Blueprint?

MICHELLE WILKINSON:

Terry Boddie's Blueprint is, to me, one of those iconic works that once you see it, you can't forget. So the first time I saw Blueprint was an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum titled Infinite Island. And the exhibition was about contemporary Caribbean art. And I would say I was drawn to it-- one, the color, just from a distance. That really saturated blue color drew me in. And then as I got closer, I was really drawn to the juxtaposition. As you see in the image, it is juxtaposing this, for many people who have studied African American studies, a kind of iconic image of the slave ship, this slave ship iconography and crowding of really densely packed bodies in the hold of the slave ship. That's at the bottom.

And then on top, to see the image of what looks like a housing project was almost like a light bulb moment, to think about what are the relationships between the storing and packing and crowding of bodies across the Atlantic during the Middle Passage and the way in which, in so many urban areas, people are really densely packed into these housing projects and the kinds of outcomes associated with that. So I was drawn to, I think, the storylines as well as the color and texture of the work.

TARA OLUWAFEMI:

So what do you believe is the message he's conveying? And as an artist interested in space, geography, and roots, how does his work implicate architecture and design professions?

MICHELLE WILKINSON:

That's a great question. One of the things that he's conveying is by using the cyanotype process that was originally used to reproduce architectural blueprints. So that blue color that you see in the image is related to the process of producing blueprints. And by titling it Blueprint, he's basically saying that this is a design. This is a blueprint for something that has been created and implemented that goes to the idea of what is premeditated that he mentions in artist's statement about the work.

And so I think what he's really trying to convey is the systems of power that are implicated in creating these designs. And then even beyond that is, I would say, the ways architecture and design professions are implicit in the creation of spaces, space-making, and really upholding strategies for confinement for, in some cases, imprisonment. Because there are other works in the series of Blueprints. This is just one, but there are other works in the series that also deal with incarceration.

And so when you look at the image of the housing, the rows upon rows of apartments, they have a kind of cell-like quality to them. There's a way in which they really present you with an image of people being packed and really condensed. And clearly those projects are designed by developers and housing officials and planners and architects and designers. So what is the responsibility in creating just spaces and spaces that can have more equitable outcomes? And to what extent are these types of buildings complicit in perpetuating inequity and inequality? So I think those are some of the things that he's commenting on.

CALEB NEGASH:

Yeah, I think that's really powerful. I mean, I'm glad you mentioned that there is a whole suite of design professionals that are implicated in the raising up of any project, but especially a public housing project.

So you have architects involved, you have developers, you have planners. And I think what's interesting is the juxtaposition that he's making, like you mentioned, implicates a kind of idea about cells, and there's a cellular nature to the way the apartments are laid out. And it's interesting because you used the architect as an example. The laying out of the enslaved people's bodies on the ship and the way that it's diagrammed as a plan, essentially. Right, we're seeing this in a plan view.

Which is, I think, really striking, because we sometimes think of drawings and architectural representation as a neutral medium or a neutral way of communicating ideas about space. When, in fact, these things can never be neutral, just because of the histories and the ways that they've been developed. And so I think that there's a really striking resonance between the position of the architect or the planner laying out cramped apartments into these cell-like arrangements with the position of the ship captain or, I guess in some cases, the insurance agent, or whoever is laying out the diagram of these bodies on the ship, right.

MICHELLE WILKINSON:

Yeah, that's a great point. And that slave ship iconography is related to the Brooks slave ship. And in fact, this graphic was often used by abolitionists. So it has an interesting history in and of itself. Used by abolitionists to really say, these are some of the atrocious conditions in which people are being transported across the Atlantic. And so by attaching something that's visually graphic to discuss what that experience could be like was a way to say, we need to stop this as well. And so it functions in this both and in the sense that it says, look at the horror of what people are doing to other people. It serves to visually represent that. And then on the other hand, it's also a, look and let's stop.

TARA OLUWAFEMI:

I think this ties in really well with a lot of your work right now on representation in architectural renderings. Right, a lot of the work that we're doing is diagramming how people are going to inhabit these spaces that we design. Could you talk a little bit more about some of that work you've been doing?

MICHELLE WILKINSON:

Yeah, I have a project titled Rendering Visible. And it's something I've been working on for several years. I really first started getting excited about it when I began collecting from architects for the museum. And one of the conversations I was having with Phil Freelon, who is now deceased, but he and I were just looking at some of the materials in his archive and thinking about potential things that could come to the museum to represent his life and career.

And one of the books that he had was large book of architectural drawings by architectural illustrations by American architects. It was about 600 pages. And he just said to me, this book was really important for me in my coming of age into architecture. And it's a great book to just thumb through and to see the different types of creativity, the images. It's not a book in color. So it's represented in a very basic way, but you get a sense of texture and line and figure and all of that.

And when I saw that book I thought, wow, I get to see renderings done by Black architects for the work that I'm doing at the museum. And here is a book that's all drawings that inspired Phil. Imagine if we had a publication that compiled a lot of the work that I'm getting to see into one volume. And so that's essentially what Rendering Visible seeks to do. So that first conversation with Phil was probably maybe 2016, 2017.

And I've been developing the project, working to collect since that time.

And also just on my own reading the literature about renderings, which I found very exciting. And so one of the things that I was learning about was the transfer from architects doing their own drawings by hand or watercolor to the wave of everything being digital and the limitations essentially of when you're working in digital and having to rely on stock images at a time in the early period when there were not a lot of stock images for Black scale figures. So it was really exciting to learn about the transformations and representation and what's lost as we move to digital-- although a lot of that is being recovered and challenged at this time.

**CALEB
NEGASH:**

Yeah, that's really interesting. And when you mentioned the book that you were looking at with Phil Freelon-- so those were architectural drawings by Black architects, or was it a larger body of work by architects?

**MICHELLE
WILKINSON:**

The book that I was looking at with Phil Freelon was by Alfred Kemper, and it was a book of illustrations by American architects. I believe there may be one or two Black architects or architectural firms represented. But for the most part, it was white or other American architects.

**CALEB
NEGASH:**

Yeah, it's interesting because those kinds of collections of early drawings that were primarily communicated through books before the digital era-- I think that a lot of times those collections can often mask or erase Black labor that push the architectural discipline forward. So I'm thinking, for example, about an architect like Julian Abele who, working for the firm that he did in the early 20th century, did do a lot of drafting and original design work, but was often not credited, right, for his contributions.

**MICHELLE
WILKINSON:**

Right, exactly. Julian Abele, who, one of the works he contributed to, is on the campus of Harvard. So, yeah, he worked for Horace Trumbauer and was known as one of the lead designers. So there were a lot of drawings that he would have completed as part of his work there that are just coming more to public attention now.

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:**

So I'm going to switch gears a little bit and ask, what was the first work of art that you saw that made you realize that art can have an effect on people? Right, so you were talking about how when you saw Blueprint and you saw the way those two images were juxtaposed, it was a light bulb moment, right. And there are several works that I feel like art has the ability to just make a point so clear in just one simple image. And if you can't think of the first work of art, what are a couple of works of art that you think are really essential to your practice and to your development and your motivation?

**MICHELLE
WILKINSON:**

That's a great question. What I'm really thinking about is, when did I really start thinking about art as a thing to think about? And what I'd say is that when I was in high school, I recall applying for colleges. And it was a moment in which as you're trying to get into college, you're thinking about what are the courses that you need to seem well-rounded. I had always had a general interest in art. But I took an art history class, and as part of the art history class, we went to the Boston Museum of Fine Art.

And at that museum, I saw an Andy Warhol image, an image of a Campbell's soup can-- I think an image that many of us has seen. Was pretty simple. I recall, though, that when I looked at the work very closely, you

could see a vague pencil outline. It really showed that there was someone behind this reproduced image of the soup can, right. And the hand of the artist was there, but yet it was hanging on the museum wall at a museum that seemed pretty prestigious and pretty imposing. But being able to see just that faint pencil line really signaled to me that it was possible to be a creative person, an imperfect person, or to present something imperfectly.

And also to use humble materials. This soup can image, it wasn't something that he personally created. But he referenced it, and it was recognized and made into an official sanctioned thing as art in the museum. And so it's a really basic example, but I think that was one of the first moments that I really started thinking about what it might mean to create art. Who gets to represent it? Who gets to deem it worthy? I think even glimpsing the power of all of those things together in my teenage mind at that time really made an impression.

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:**

I think one of my favorite projects by Andy Warhol is when he went into the storage room-- I can't remember which museum it was, but he just brought out all the artworks from the storage room and just put a bunch of paintings and had them leaning on the floor layered on top of each other, just haphazardly thrown about almost. And people were so shocked. They were like, why would you do that with these amazing works of art? And it's always a question of, well, who gets to decide what is really good art? And he's like, how do we represent art, and why do things get hung up in museums the way that they do?

And I think that leads into one of my next question's for you, is, how do you go about your practice as a curator, designing what works should be highlighted? You do a lot of focusing on elevating the work of Black designers and architects. So how do you decide which projects to choose and which ones the museum should acquire and how to display them? And what is considered design or architecture versus another form of art? I mean, Blueprint is a perfect example of something that combines an architectural idea, but translating it into something else. So how do you draw these lines?

**MICHELLE
WILKINSON:**

I think everything that you've described about curating is really right on, because it's really about a lot of decisions, constantly making decisions. And I'm thinking about even how curating is used more informally these days. People talk about curating closets or playlists. Even just this weekend, I was unpacking boxes and having to decide what would go into what room, what do I want to see every day, what goes into a closet.

And to that extent, I understand why the term has the popularity it has, because there are decisions that we're making all the time about what matters to us, what has meaning, what we want to share. And the thing that I really enjoy about it is the fundamental aspect of the research and reading to inform those decisions. And essentially, curators are scholars of particular areas, and I feel really thankful that the work that I've been doing around architecture and design at the museum has been so well received and really encouraged.

So in making decisions about collecting related to architecture and design for the museum, one of the first things that I had to do was come up with what we call a collecting plan. And all curators at our museum are responsible for different collecting areas, and therefore for creating a collecting plan. The plan essentially guides what we prioritize as important for the museum's permanent collection. And by permanent collection, I

also want to clarify that that is everything that the museum owns or has acquired. Our permanent collection at the National Museum of African American History and Culture is about 40,000 plus objects. What you might see on view at the museum in any given visit may be about 3,000 objects. So it's really a fraction.

But the permanent collection is essentially what allows us to take items off you and replace them with different items, particularly for things that can't be on display long term. And the permanent collection also allows us to create new exhibitions over the course of several years. So what I really wanted to do was to make sure that the museum could be a resource for people who wanted to understand the history of Black architects as well as Black designers and architects everywhere, designers everywhere. And so sometimes we don't sit down and name them, we just experience them. But I thought that the museum had a really important opportunity, partly because of the design firms that came together to create an award winning design for the museum.

That their stories need to be told, but then beyond their stories, what is the legacy of the traditions of Black architectural history? And so my focus has been to really identify some of the seminal Black architects, historic as well as contemporary. Talk to their families, select objects from items that they may have in their families or in their personal possession, and acquire them for what is essentially archive of Black architects at the museum. So it's a long term process. We have about six archival collections right now. And we're working daily to make more context and bring in more materials.

**CALEB
NEGASH:**

Yeah, that's really interesting to hear. And I'd also be curious to know about-- I know that some of the earlier exhibitions that you've curated at the Smithsonian had to do with the building of the museum itself and the history of that as well as history of Black architects in America, specifically. But I also know that you've done research and work on architectural heritage in the Anglophone Caribbean. And especially given the Blueprint, if we're talking about the artist Terry Boddie, who himself actually is an immigrant to the United States from the Caribbean, I'd be interested to hear if the idea of diaspora comes into play in the way that you think about your curating practice and the idea that there is a shared or linked, at least, Black history as it relates to architecture throughout Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas.

**MICHELLE
WILKINSON:**

Very interesting. For me, yes, diaspora is really at the root of what I do. I'm personally not an immigrant, but my mother is. She's an immigrant from Guyana in South America. So although I was born in Brooklyn, I lived with my grandparents for five years before moving back to Brooklyn. And my work about architectural heritage in the Anglophone Caribbean is really about me trying to understand those spaces that I saw as a child and the history, the design history of those spaces. So even though Guyana is not part of the Caribbean geographically, it is part of the Caribbean culturally.

And a lot of what I'm interested in is the way in which diasporic traditions have traveled between West Africa, specifically Central Africa, the Caribbean, the southern United States, across the United States. Even looking at the histories of colonialism and imperialism and the ways in which those nations have been affected by diasporic travels and diasporic traditions back to seats of empire.

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:**

I'm really interested in a lot of that work, because I am an immigrant. I'm currently an international student. So

I think a lot of my early interest in architecture started in undergrad when we would learn about other forms of architecture in other countries. And I would ask all of my professors all the time, OK, how is there no record of the representation methods they used to build these buildings? Right. Like you think about the Mughal Empire and you think about Nigeria and there's all these different forms of architecture. And I find it so incredible that we've all adopted this Western way of representing architecture and diagramming it.

And I'm so curious. I'm always like, I wish there was some sort of preservation. And even if these are a lot of cultures that don't really document their histories in written form and all of that, one of the things that I always wish I could see is, how did they go about designing the amazing structures they did without using these same tools that we're always using now for plans and sections and all this orthographic views?

And I feel like that's something that's so lost. And if we could get some of that back, it would reframe how we look at architecture and how we diagram how people move through space. And we would maybe think about architecture more three-dimensionally and more about the actual experiences we want people to have when they walk into certain spaces. I constantly think about that. And I'm wondering if you have anything in the archives that would reference that in some way. Because it's something that I feel like is so lost, and every time I ask about it, people go, well, it doesn't exist. We don't know how they built it.

**MICHELLE
WILKINSON:**

Wow. There's definitely a great deal of new research, I think, that needs to be done on precisely the points that you bring up. How is architecture documented? One of the things that has inspired me is really finding documentary and documentation within my own family. So, for example, my grandfather was a builder. We never called him an architect. He did large scale projects, government colonial projects for the British Guyanese government. At the time, he was active from the 30s to the 70s. And I found some of his ledgers. We have a blueprint for a particular house.

But in addition to all of that, what I have access to is my family. And I think that is really, really key for any of us that is interested in doing this type of research and understanding what has been lost. We often have a gold mine, a treasure within our own families and our own community of contacts. And in talking with family about the work that my grandfather did, one of my uncles said, oh, you need to talk to this guy. He's about 90 years old and he lives in Brooklyn, and he was an apprentice to your grandfather.

And so I went and I probably spoke with him for about two hours, recorded the interview. And he was a wealth of information. And so I've been writing about my own process of going to official archives, the National Archives in Kew in the United Kingdom, the National Archives in Guyana. But also going through really family archives and creating archives based on oral history, based on letters that I found, ledgers that I found. Not everyone is going to have access to that type of personal information, but other people's families may. And so I think it is important for us to think beyond the sorts of official repositories and the official ways that architecture design histories have been written about and visually documented.

So as for the archives at the museum, it's really interesting to think about what those may reveal regarding the questions that you pose about different forms of representation or the ways in which work that's been

done by Black architects may reveal new ways of thinking about either documentation, history, representation as relates to architecture. I don't know the answer to that yet, but let's see. We're still processing many of the things that we've received, and so ideally, those answers are forthcoming.

**CALEB
NEGASH:**

Thank you for sharing. I'm really encouraged to hear you talk about the work you're doing within your own family to record and document that history, because politically, it's a really important goal to build up that legacy. Because in a lot of ways, in the end, that is what we have for the future. And especially given that a lot of Black traditions across the diaspora do rely heavily on oral history, like Tara alluded to. And I think the idea that there have been past efforts more nationally or institutionally done to record certain things.

So I'm thinking, for example, about the Works Progress Administration in the 30s. Like the New Deal program by which there were lots of interviews done with former slaves in order to record narratives of their history. Build up slave narratives and keep them preserved. But in a lot of cases, those interviews are done by government agents who are largely white and who come with the outside perspective. And in many cases, there's a breakdown of trust between the interviewer and the interviewee for so many historical reasons. And so you lose a lot, I think, in those interviews and you lose a lot of the richness or the full dimensionality of the kind of interview you could get, especially thinking about speaking to someone in your own family. I bet that would produce all kinds of really interesting stuff, so that's really exciting to me.

Speaking about the idea of oral history and documentation, in 2018, you served as the lead organizer for a three-day symposium at the Museum of African American History and Culture called Shifting the Landscape-- Black Architects and Planners, 1968 to Now. And how do you see that work fitting into that conversation?

**MICHELLE
WILKINSON:**

Yeah, Shifting the Landscape was really an extraordinary opportunity that we had or we took as a museum to look back on the last 50 years from '68 to 2018 and the contributions and impact of Black architects and urban planners. Pretty much all of the sessions were recorded, so it speaks to that point about either oral history, interviews, documentation. It was important for us to bring together about 40 to 50 presenters. The attendees were over 300. But I think the key thing was that the sessions were recorded. And so even if you were not able to attend, you could participate. This is before Zooms, right, were so popular. But you could participate in the livestream, and you can also go back and look at the video archive of presentations.

So this is essential work that the museum does as well. It's our exhibitions, it's our collecting efforts, but it's also our public programming. The Smithsonian Museum, the Smithsonian itself sees itself as a convener. A convener of critical conversations, and certainly our museum has been convening some of the most critical conversations around race and American history. And as a museum, we also want to be part of those conversations and have been part of those conversations about race, space, architecture, design.

And Shifting the Landscape really allowed us to bring in really key folks who have been active in architecture and design over the past 50 years. As well as folks who were really new and the generation that's taking up the mantle. So I highly encourage folks who have not been on the site to go take a look at it. Listen to some of the videos and check out also we have a bibliography and other video resources from similar conversations that were inspirational for us in our planning.

**CALEB
NEGASH:**

Thank you for sharing that. I mean, it speaks to, in some ways, maybe a light in the darkness, I see sometimes about the pandemic and the ways that our lives have been so radically transformed in the last few months. And I think one possible positive outcome of that is that there has seemed to be a lot of recording.

And I know this event happened some years ago, but I'm thinking about how now, I've been able to get access to so many different kinds of symposia and talks that are almost always by default recorded and posted to the institution site later on. That was maybe less common before all of this happened, and it's just become a lot more convenient to have access to those conversations, at least for the time that they leave them up. So I'm sure there are ways that the Smithsonian is thinking about how to deal with preserving and recording the different programming that's going on through Zoom and all of that now. So could you maybe share a little about that?

**MICHELLE
WILKINSON:**

The museum has a digital strategy team, and the public have access to the content, ideas, scholarship that the museum produces is important. We want to be a resource for all of you. We really wouldn't exist unless we could do that. So being able to have materials online has been long term. And as some of our listeners will probably know, the founding director of the museum, Lonnie Bunch, who's now the director of the entire Smithsonian-- and digital strategy is part of his mission as well. So as a museum, it's important for us to have the public have access to our content 24/7. And so there is already a lot online. But over the last several months, we've made concerted efforts to make sure more of our research and scholarship is there as well.

**CALEB
NEGASH:**

That's great. Thank you so much for sharing. So definitely, please, listeners, check out on the site. We'll be posting information about the artwork itself, Blueprint, which we discussed towards the beginning of the show, as well as some links to the different symposia and exhibitions that we discussed later on. Thank you so much for joining us, Michelle. This was awesome.

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:**

Thank you.

**MICHELLE
WILKINSON:**

Thank you so much, both of you, for having me. I appreciate it.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**TARA
OLUWAFEMI:**

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.