

[THEME MUSIC]

**CALEB** 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** Hi everybody, I'm Tara Oluwafemi.  
**OLUWAFEMI:**

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

**TARA** 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** Today, we'll be speaking with Toni Griffin, Professor in Practice of Urban Planning at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and the founder of Urban Planning and Design for the American City, or Urban AC, based in New York City. Through the practice, Toni has served as project director for the long-range planning initiative of the Detroit Work Project. And in 2013, completed and released Detroit Future City, a comprehensive citywide framework plan for urban transformation. Professor Griffin was also recently a professor of architecture and the founding director of the J. Max Bond Center on Design for the Just City at the Spitzer School of Architecture at the City College of New York.

She currently leads the Just City Lab at the GSD, which investigates the definition of urban justice in the Just City and examines how design and planning contribute to conditions of justice and injustice in cities, neighborhoods, and the public realm. The lab has produced The Just City Index, Just City Indicators for the Public Realm, tools for civic engagement, design case studies, and offers master classes and workshops on designing for justice.

Toni, thank you for joining us.

**TONI GRIFFIN:** Thank you for having me.

**TARA** So, your work as a practitioner and educator includes an equal emphasis on physical artifacts of design and written publications. How have you found writing to be an essential vehicle for design work?  
**OLUWAFEMI:**

**TONI GRIFFIN:** A couple of ways. I think I want to start in answering that question by mentioning that throughout my entire architecture education, I have no memory of reading any scholarship by a person of color, specifically a Black person. And it wasn't until some years after I graduated that two books came into fold for me. One was an essay written by Dr. Sharon Sutton. It was an essay that she wrote that was in a compilation of essays about urbanism, and the city, and architecture. And I was just blown away. I was blown away to find this Black woman's voice in a document that was otherwise populated by predominantly white men. So that was just so pivotal for me and left a long impression.

And then a second book was the publication of African-American architects by Jack Travis, probably around the same time, which was around the early 90s. It was a compilation of profiles of Black architects in the United States. The majority of which were firm owners, African-Americans who had started their own architecture practices probably as early as the 70s. But there was one architect that stood out in that publication, J. Max Bond, who was a principal at Davis Brody Bond, and he was the only one featured in the book that was a Black architect and a named partner in a majority white firm. So not only did having that publication that gave me this more robust access to blacks practicing architecture in the United States, it also pointed me towards someone who was practicing in the space that was similar to me because I had began my career at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in the Chicago office where I was one of very few Black architects practicing at the time. But there was a Black partner, Bob Wesley.

So had it not been for those books, I would be very limited in the ways that I understood the ways in which Black folks in the United States were practicing architecture, or involved in architecture, and the different ways that they were involved. And I think that they planted an early seed for me, particularly as I evolved and pivoted my career from being in architect and getting licensed in Illinois to moving into urban design and planning, to moving into the public sector, to then branching out on my own. And over the course of that trajectory, going from being an architect to an urban designer, to an urban planner, that the way in which I activated and produced creative artifacts also changed.

So there was a period in one of those pivots where writing became this other creative vehicle by which to express my observations, my ideas, my opinions, and my values as it related to design and cities. And I think more importantly, me recognizing that people studying the fields of architecture, urban design, planning, landscape architecture needed a greater diversity of authors speaking about, educating about, lending their perspective to this work through their vantage point. That's why it's important to me, that's how it's begun to show up, that's the starting point for when it inspired me to start writing more as a part of my creative work.

**TARA**  
**OLUWAFEMI:** Can you tell us a bit about what prompted you to make that transition from an architect to, like, an urban designer to an urban planner and how you distinguish those different paths?

**TONI GRIFFIN:** It was quite by accident. So I was practicing at SOM in Chicago working on a fairly large scale architectural project not based in the US with one of the named partners Bruce Graham. During one of those last rounds of projects we were working on based in London, a small recession hit in the early 90s. Our firm, like many firms, contracted significantly. So the Chicago office, for example, was 800 people at the time. Over the course of a year and a half that got reduced to about 200 people. So I survived a massive layoff and as a part of that survival, I was moved from an architecture studio to an urban design and planning studio. So the good news in that is I was believed to be a valuable employee and contributor to the work we were doing, so moving me to another studio was a way to keep me involved and active.

But it was a very different scale and the first time that I was really practicing at that scale on real projects. So the pivot happened due to a recession, not because I asked to pivot. But the pivot, then allowed me to one, learn a very different scale of practice through urban design and planning. And secondly, and probably more influential, was I began to work in Chicago, more domestically, and Chicago happens to be my hometown.

So I'm now also working in parts of the city that are very familiar to me through a very different lens of a lived experience of growing up there, having friends and family living in different parts of the city, as well as understanding it now as a young practitioner. And working at the scale of urban design and planning also allowed me to work with a client, or a client group, that was bigger than just a developer, who by the way I rarely got to see when I was practicing architecture at SOM. But at the urban design and planning scale, I'm getting out of the office more. I'm meeting with constituencies in these spaces of the city, I'm meeting with the client. So that began to open me up in a really exciting way to examining the city very differently, questioning why parts of the city were invested in, or underinvested in, or disinvested in, how design was contributing to those conditions, but also contributing to the solutions to ameliorate those challenges. And it just cracked open a whole new view and perspective of the role of design and the scale of design.

So I then decided-- or actually, a colleague recommended --that I apply for the Loeb Fellowship at Harvard Graduate School of Design and so I took the opportunity to do that so that I could ground myself a bit more in this new scale of work that I was doing. And by that time was completely hooked. Decided not to go back to SOM, quit my job without a job, but then landed in New York for the first time where I began my first big pivot, which is work in the public sector.

**CALEB NAGESH:** And it's a really interesting trajectory you describe and I think even thinking about your earlier interest in writing, alongside design, the thing that those have in common is this question of authorship, right? And the kind of different modes of authorship that you engage in as an architect versus as an urban planner or designer or even as a writer. So is there a relationship that you see or could you talk a little more about that sort of switching of modes between publishing, plan-making and placemaking?

**TONI GRIFFIN:** It's really interesting when I reflect upon that because I think I've always activated my authorship through different mediums. So obviously as an architect, and again I'm working at a fairly large firm, SOM, design is team-driven. But having my hand in the design of buildings, the design of the technical ways we put buildings together, and the process of doing that at very large scale is one way in which my authorship shows up. Which is by being a part of that team that designs and constructs. I remember though, during those years of SOM, particularly when we were in the more technical phase of the design process and doing CDs, I would sometimes come home and create art because I needed another form of authorship to express whatever creative feeling or instinct the I was having. So I was making buildings, making places, but I was also kind of making art. So even in those early years as I reflect back, I had these different forms of authorship at play.

When I transitioned into the public sector, you know, as a public official, first, the deputy planning director in Washington D.C., and then planning director in Newark, New Jersey, my authorship was maybe more classically regulatory in nature. And by regulatory I mean design regulatory. So not just through the means of plan-making around land use and zoning, but it was also an opportunity where I got to author the direction and the shape of cities by how we overlay design on how publicly-owned land would be developed. How we overlaid design as a requirement around different financial incentives that we would give to developers to develop in the city. All of those different forms of regulating design or providing design direction through plan-making was another form of authorship. So, in D.C. We created over 50 different land use development design guideline plans for different parts of the city. And so there's an authorship that I have exercised that is now institutionalized within certain regulatory documents that cities hold that I've worked and that continues a direction for urban design, architecture, and planning for future generations until someone changes it.

And then as I've been working within the Academy as an instructor of design studio, seminars, and lectures, and then also having the good fortune to create and run the Just City Lab now for the last eight years, I get to explore, yet again, additional forms of authorship. And I think this is where the writing has been most prolific for me. At once being quite nervous about writing and putting my voice out there in such a personal way, because for me the space that I feel most comfortable writing from is from a reflective space. Which means I tell, or I attempt to tell, the narrative through how I perceive it, feel it, understand it.

But it was also really exciting to be able to do that after years of being a consultant and being a public servant to now having this opportunity to author exclusively from my own point of view without limitation or editing. First mandated by a position I had at City College of New York as a tenure track professor which required me to write. So being mandated to write was good because it forced me to do so and to get comfortable with the medium. And then as I recognized the fact that I enjoyed it and then again remembering how important it is for practitioners of color, academics of color, people working in the space of color to create documentation, to record our histories, to record our narratives in our own voice, still being so important because I don't think that that is yet a very full and robust body of work that students get access to was then the other driver to continue to produce and author in this format. Whether it's through articles, book chapters books, records of convenings, reports, research, all of that is to me written authorship that's now just become a part of the arsenal of how I produce.

**CALEB NAGESH:** So you've been, as you mentioned, very widely published in several book chapters articles, books, and what's also interesting is that you've been self publishing quite a bit of your writing through things like the "Just City Essays" and works from your own studio. So I mean, that's kind of a new mode of authorship itself and we'd love if you could just tell us a little more about that decision to self publish and, you know, what the process has been like.

**TONI GRIFFIN:** Thank you for referencing the "Just City Essays." As I started this research agenda, which I first started at the City College of New York at the J. Max Bond Center, it was really this attempt to crowdsource whether or not anyone else was aligned with my thinking at the time. Which was, can design really have a meaningful impact on social and spacial justice?

So I became rather obsessed with this notion of the just city. And it was during a time when Susan Fainstein had just published her book, *The Just City*, and the Ford Foundation hosted a convening around *The Just City*. And so I just became really enamored with the aspiration of what that meant. And this was also during the time where Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown deaths were igniting a new wave of social justice activism.

And so the "Just City Essays" was this experiment to see, "Well, I wonder if other people, other designers, other people working in cities and on city issues think that there's a difference between justice and equity. And how would they respond to the question 'What is a just city, what does it mean, and can design have a meaningful role?'" And so I was able to partner with Next City, which is an online magazine outlet, the Ford Foundation, and the Municipal Arts Society in New York who brought us together with Design by Nature to do outreach to different professionals and edit a collection of essays, so there are 26 representing 22 cities from around the globe, to posit "What does this mean?"

So I did that to create some content and a discussion about this research question I had. So it was really more of a way of building some momentum and some there there that I could then use to fund raise and acquire more resources to continue the work. And so rather than spending time trying to find a more traditional publisher, collaborating with Next City gave us this immediate publishing vehicle, which was free and can be broadly distributed and be used to generate broader conversations, and it's done just that.

So for me, it's like the way the music industry has transformed in the last decade where artists are not waiting for the intermediary of a music company to produce and disseminate their work. And so I think I've taken a very similar approach to taking content putting it into a manuscript, and disseminating it under the Just City Lab to continue the movement of this conversation around design and justice. We may, and now that we have these manuscripts that we've self published, maybe we will find an audience for traditional publishers to put them more into mass production, that would be awesome. There are two more that we're working on right now that we're finishing up. So I just didn't see the limitation of that. Partly because I wasn't binding my writing and publishing to any position, I was binding it to dissemination, conversation, and movement-building

**CALEB  
NAGESH:**

One of the really exciting things about the "Just City Essays" is, I think, precisely that freedom that comes from not going through the traditional publishing process, which I think can have embedded in it a lot of disciplinary boundaries, or kind of siloing. And I think by self-publishing and positioning these essays as provocations, you really free yourself up to look at all these urban issues from a really wide range of perspectives. So we know that you've specifically solicited contributions from architects, planners, designers, but also artists, politicians, ecologists, community activists. So is this interdisciplinarity a kind of intentional framework for the project?

**TONI GRIFFIN:**

It is absolutely intentional. Oftentimes, in any discipline but certainly in our discipline, we're very good at bringing ourselves together and having conversations about our work. But if we are to have a conversation about the role and impact that we can have on social and spatial justice, it requires us to be in conversation with not only the other disciplines that have to be involved in addressing that question, but also in conversation with those who are perhaps most affected by conditions of injustice. So when I put that question forward to myself as the grounding research question of the lab, I was not expecting, and in fact, I did not necessarily want to be proven right.

What I wanted to do was to expose the aspects of where design and designers could be effective. But I also wanted to expose our limitations and why, and where, we needed allies in other disciplines and other spaces of leadership to join with us, or us with them, if we wanted to make more meaningful impacts. And so in a way, I really wanted to expose the necessity of the interdependence of how design must be collaborative across other disciplines if we really are to dismantle injustice through design. And so it was really important that the essays expose, elevate different perspectives from different spaces of leadership, activism, implementation, policy so that the reader would have a well-rounded perspective of the interdependence that these disciplines have on one another for doing this work. Perhaps the overlaps of how despite being from different disciplines, we begin to point towards the same aspects or issues of justice and the just city.

So it was the opportunity to look at where there was alignment, where there were divergent points of views, and where there were points of collaboration. And this is something that I feel very strongly about embedded as a principle of the work that we do in my private practice, Urban AC, or Urban American City, which is we very much work with our clients before we really start the planning work to encourage them to set a table of a client group that is also cross-disciplinary. We feel very strongly that this type of work cannot be led solely by a single sector, that there is a greater momentum, greater ownership, and greater opportunity for success when cities and communities can collaborate across sectors early in the project to both do the planning work through the project and then be better positioned for implementation afterwards.

So projects like Detroit Future City, projects like I've done in Milwaukee, projects like the St. Louis Economic Development Strategy all had clients groups that included perhaps the public sector, a private sector entity, non-profit sector, community sector, or philanthropy sector in some combination thereof. So when they're all at the table helping to define the project and then work through the projects together, there seems to be a greater success rate on the backend as it relates to implementation.

**TARA OLUWAFEMI:** So right now you're talking a lot about the different projects that you're working on, a lot of the different writing that you've been doing. And then we've also heard from you earlier about how important it was for you to read about Black architects and the work that they had done and to see that representation. So we're wondering right now, thinking about your mode of production and publishing, what do you think can be done for the design discipline as a whole to better document artifacts of design authored by Black people. And how are you taking this on in your own work?

**TONI GRIFFIN:** I think in our own work, my work in particular, the research lab, the Just City Lab, has become my platform for creating artifacts and documenting artifacts that can be archived. I'm very excited about the body of work that we've been producing not only for its utility out in the world and its usefulness as a resource to educators, students, practitioners, policymakers, but that it is creating a living record of work produced led by an African-American designer, produced by a multicultural, multi-generational group of people, and documenting different approaches to issues of justice and injustice in cities. So that's my own way of creating the archive of artifact.

And then there are other platforms of merging. Obviously, the African American Nexus at the GSD is an exciting portal that's doing that, and I know that there are other universities that are similarly beginning to think about ways of creating spaces that hold this content exclusively, as well as how to disseminate this content within curriculum and activity within schools on a regular basis. So it's not just sitting somewhere as a resource to be found, but there's actually being access and embedded in the curriculum and pedagogy of what we teach. And then there is the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture which has a curatorial track exclusively dedicated to architecture, design, and cities, which has already done an extraordinary job of documenting, collecting, and being in conversation with Black creatives to create another space that holds this content.

**CALEB**  
**NAGESH:** It's funny that you mention the Smithsonian, the African American Museum, because we actually were just talking to Dr. Michelle Wilkinson in an earlier episode, who is a curator there among many other things, and we were talking a lot about oral history. And I'm interested to hear what you think and how oral history kind of fits into this conversation. I mean, it's funny that I'm asking this as we're talking on a podcast, but we were talking with Dr. Wilkinson a lot about the importance of documenting oral traditions which are so rich across Black communities, the African diaspora more generally, even though we sometimes kind of lament the dearth of archival records of Black contributions to design in terms of traditional archives, drawings, and construction records, and things like that. And in a lot of ways there is this really rich tradition orally, and so she talked a lot about her work kind of working on going and recording these stories, even within her own family. And I wonder if that's a kind of frame that the Just City Lab, or even yourself are thinking about?

**TONI GRIFFIN:** We started that as a part of the first exhibition that Just City Lab did at the GSD back in 2018. Part of the installation included what we call these talking heads. And it was six oral narratives in discussion about what it means to have a just city, what would a just city look like from the context of where they live work, how have they experienced injustice, and why is it important to center the conversation around justice rather than equity. So it was our first attempt to think about oral history as an important part of how people could access the conversation and the work around design justice.

We haven't furthered it beyond that. But I would agree with Michelle that using multiple mediums of documentation, I think, is extremely important and particularly in this moment in time when we have so many different ways that we can access information. It allows us to create content that also taps into the different ways people not only access that information, but the ways that people learn and choose to absorb information whether it's visual, or audio, or in written form. We now can use the internet to disseminate this conversation through those different mediums. And so, I think it will be important for us to, perhaps, continue to think about what we can continue to contribute through the lab that is oral in nature, in addition to that which we are documenting in written form and disseminating through our website, [designforthejustcity.org](http://designforthejustcity.org)

**TARA**  
**OLUWAFEMI:** Thank you so much. So I guess the last question we have for you is, what are some of the stuff you're working on right now? Written, built, in the process of being built. If you could just tell us a little bit about some of the work that you're doing.

**TONI GRIFFIN:** Sure, I am doing a number of different things. So let me start first with the Just City Lab. So the Just City Lab is in final production of two new self-published books. One is on my 2018 Design Studio called *Urban Disobedience: 99 Provocations for Disrupting Injustice in St. Louis*. So we are finally wrapping up that book and hope to have it available on the Just City Lab website this fall.

We are also wrapping up a publication called *Disruptive Design* and it is based on a transcript from the 2019 Just City Assembly convening we held with about different practitioners, again, representing different sectors in conversation around, again, it's kind of five years after the "Just City Essays." I wanted to bring a group of people together to-- I won't say peer review the work we've been doing at the lab --but reaffirm that this is important work, reaffirm why justice is different from equity, affirm who we need to be working for or who needs justice now, who's going to need it tomorrow, and how can we be more disruptive in the work we do as designers to push the needle on actually realizing justice or the just city. So we documented that convening, we have a full transcript, and we're turning that into a publication really designed to model the way in which a conversation, and sometimes a difficult conversation, can be had amongst a group of people who, again, are of mixed generation, mixed race, mixed ethnicity, mixed gender, and mixed discipline. So those are two publications that are coming out, as well as a new body of research that we're beginning around indicators of gentrification and neighborhood change.

Within my practice, Urban American City, we're currently working in Chicago in the neighborhoods around the University of Chicago and the Obama Presidential Center and modeling a new approach to local neighborhood economic development. We've developed nine just development principles which we are in the process of fleshing out that are very much centered on economic development that accelerates household and community wealth. And I'm also working on a research project that is examining that very premise and the drivers and methods of intervention around Black wealth accumulation with a major funding partner. So those are some of the things that I'm working on currently.

**CALEB** It's really exciting and we'll definitely be connecting our listeners to all of those projects and other exciting things  
**NAGESH:** we talked about today on the website. Toni, thank you so much for being on this show. We had a great time.

**TONI GRIFFIN:** Well, it was my pleasure being in conversation with you all and thank you all for hosting these podcast and contributing to the body of discussion and people working on these issues and exposing your listeners to Black creatives I'm very appreciative and honored to be invited.

**TARA** Thank you so much, that's so nice.

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