

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**TARA OLUWAFEMI:** Hey, everybody. I'm Tara Oluwafemi, a master of architecture student at the GSD, and 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 toward elevating Black designers. *The Nexus* is produced in conjunction with a commitment by the Frances Loeb Library to acquire and create an open-access bibliography of various media, suggested by the community, on the intersection between race and design.

On today's episode, we're going to have Justin Garrett Moore. Justin Garrett Moore is a transdisciplinary designer and urbanist, and is the Program Officer for the Humanities and Plays Program at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. He has extensive planning and design experience, from regional and urban systems, policies, and projects, to grassroots and community-focused planning, design, public realm, and arts initiatives.

At the Mellon Foundation, his work focuses on advancing equity, inclusion, and social justice through place-based initiatives, built environments, cultural heritage projects, digital and ephemeral programs, and commemorative spaces and landscapes. In his 15 year career in public service, Justin has led several complex planning and design projects, including the Greenpoint and Williamsburg Waterfront, Hunter's Point South and the Brooklyn Cultural District.

His work spans housing and community development, place and open-space design, historic preservation, public art and monuments, and civic engagement and participation. He is also the co-founder of Urban Patch, a family-run social enterprise focused on sustainable design and development projects in the United States and Rwanda. Justin, thank you so much for joining us today.

**JUSTIN GARRETT MOORE:** Thank you, Tara, really happy to be in conversation with you.

**TARA OLUWAFEMI:** I'm so excited. It's been a while. We've been trying to get you on the show-- because we know you're so busy. So I'm really excited about the conversation today. And you know, your work has spanned so many different sectors. You're done work all over the place. But today I want to kind of start off the conversation with a project that I know is very close to your heart. And it's about your Urban Patch project, which started off in Indiana-- specifically, Indianapolis. Could you tell us a little bit about how this project came about? And just also, how your family history was a major catalyst for this work?

**JUSTIN GARRETT MOORE:** Sure. Thank you. It's really interesting, the work that we do as designers and urban planners and urbanists. It's so much about the places where we come from, in many ways. And I think I'm definitely one of those people. So I am from Indianapolis originally-- from the north side of Indianapolis is kind of how we called it back then. And it was an inner city, predominantly Black community. So that was sort of the community and the place that shaped me, in many ways.

And so the work that we've been able to do in Urban Patch in a way is me thinking about my practice as an architect and urbanist, and why I do that practice-- the sort of the impetus to make places better somehow. And so Urban Patch began where I'm kind of working and thinking, well, how can I contribute to the community where I'm from?

And so there was a couple of different things that sparked the idea. And one was actually family history. So my dad is big into sort of genealogy and family history, and had started doing some research in various archives about his father-- so my grandfather, who was named Albert Allen Moore. And it's funny sort of growing up we learned that he did things with farming and agriculture-- was sort of all that I knew.

But in doing this family history and research, we found out that he really was an incredible person, that had done work with urban agriculture programs-- kind of community improvement food programs in Indianapolis back in the 1940s. And so went and started archival research.

And I know the African American Design Nexus is ultimately an archive, in a way. And because of the great documentation was there, I found all this great work that a Black community had done in making their place better-- reports and documents and even drawings of plans for their gardens and some of the building projects they were doing.

And so it was just an incredible experience to kind of learn that there is this rich history and power in what Black people have done to transform their communities. And it became sort of a challenge to me. It was like, if my grandfather could have done this in a much more challenging time and circumstance, there must be something that we can do.

So my family and I were kind of motivated by this and decided to begin an initiative to do improvements around food, around place, around environment, and around issues like housing and development, in our neighborhood. And so that was sort of the birth of Urban Patch.

**TARA**  
**OLUWAFEMI:** Mm-hmm. So this project really became a study on the importance-- or of understanding how people do work, and the social and environmental practices that informed those methods of production. You're talking about people making their own gardens and drawing their own gardens-- and the systems and the localized systems of food production and food making, and all of those things that you were able to read their designs on, to get a better understanding of how they did these projects. Correct?

**JUSTIN** Yes, yes, exactly.

**GARRETT**  
**MOORE:**

**TARA**  
**OLUWAFEMI:** So then I have two kind of questions for you. One is more personal and the other one is a little bit more about the project. So if you could explain, exactly what was this undertaking that your grandfather was doing? What was the scope of it? How many people was it reaching? And then also, what were the kind of documents that helped you piece together the work that he was doing?

And then the follow-up to that is seeing what he did how, how has that kind of affected the way that you've started to archive your own work, or even document the work you do? I mean, you're saying that even looking at the way that they recorded food is helping you imagine how they designed these spaces. So is this kind of informing how you design, and also how you archive what's essential in your own design? So I know that those are two big questions, but hopefully we can get through them together.

**JUSTIN  
GARRETT  
MOORE:**

No, sure. I really appreciate your picking up on this aspect of the project. Because people often look at sort of only kind of the product, or the outcome, and not enough at the process-- like kind of, how is the work actually done? And that was what was really so motivating about this work and this archive that we were able to have access to, is that we were able to see not just what they did but how they did it. And when we talk about social justice work, dealing with issues like race that are clearly still with us as things that we need to kind of understand, how it's done is quite important.

So the program that my grandfather ran had a lot of different components. And it was under the aegis of an initiative at the Flanner House-- the organization he worked for-- called the Self-Help Services. And so the premise was that they had a large Black community-- an urban Black community-- that was really made up of both people that were from Indianapolis-- but kind of the flows of the Great Migration were a part of this story, as well-- of predominantly low-income people moving to the city and really needing the most basic kind of services and help. And because it was a Black community, the idea that they really needed to help themselves was, unfortunately, kind of a reality that they had to deal with.

And so there were multiple programs around health, job training, nutrition-- all sorts of components. And my grandfather ran the food and nutrition programs. So issues like diet-related diseases, like obesity and diabetes, were a big issue in that community. And so the programs that he developed there were kind of multipronged.

So they thought about the whole system-- not just kind of the cost, but what were the systems? So the ability to produce food was one of those systems. The ability to process and package and provide access to food was another component of the systems. But even kind of educating people and training people for how to be healthier in their diet was a part of it.

So they had a whole program, and it was really based on the people and the families. And so my grandfather's initial framework for this was this garden program-- so kind of teaching people in their yards or gardens-- kind of backyard plots-- how to grow food. And there were over 600 families that were participating in these sort of garden plots. And they aggregated those into, in some cases, larger farms. And by the time program was sort of going, there were over 200 families that were kind of consistently participating in these garden programs to produce the food.

But they went even further, once they produced the food, to understand they needed to sort of can and process the food. And so they ran a cannery and developed all the operations for that. But then they went even further. So again, they're building out all of these systems. And then they created a cooperative grocery store.

And so he was even the president of this cooperative, to provide food access at affordable prices-- using this system that they built of food production to provide food still for people in the community that maybe didn't have the time, or ability, or interest to garden directly.

And so something that was important in that is, again, this idea of looking at all the networks-- all the people-- all of the different skills that were needed. And that's very much motivated our work and our approach at Urban Patch. And something that is sort of a challenge in a way is that it's sort of de-centers the idea of the expert, or only kind of problem solving, solution based kind of approaches, but actually thinking about, how do you build capacity? How do you provide ways for people to have some model, or mode of self-determination in how they're developing work? And that has really grounded so much of the projects and initiatives that we do today in Urban Patch.

**TARA**  
**OLUWAFEMI:** That's really, really amazing, hearing about the history, and then the way that you've kind of brought it back in our contemporary setting. So I'm curious to know, what exactly happened to the work your grandfather did-- these farms, all the systems they made-- the networks and the grocery stores? And how are you in your own work kind of combating whatever those forces were that led to the decline of that program?

**JUSTIN**  
**GARRETT**  
**MOORE:** Sure. So the program was intact. And there are other dimensions to it kind of connected to the larger kind of Flanner House efforts. They even developed things like self-help housing construction. So people think of Habitat for Humanity, for example, but Flanner House actually did similar work with affordable housing construction. And it was a quite successful program. And in fact, it was so successful that people from the United Nations would come to visit their models. And actually, in some cases, their model is adapted to other contexts.

But in the Indianapolis picture, there was still the challenges that we know that all Black communities have and face. So the community where much of their work was centered was still subject to all the major challenges and forces and dynamics that we've seen in so many American cities-- and especially their Black communities. So urban renewal, highway construction, systemic racism and disinvestment in Black communities did sort of eventually just sort of become too much for this organization.

And so even though they did a lot of good work-- and in fact, the community of homes that they built-- 300 homes that they built back in the day still exists, and is one of the only affordable communities in downtown Indianapolis. But Flanner House did kind of go through kind of with the decline of the Black community and things like disinvestment and population-- some really challenging times. And they shifted their mission over the years to do more direct social services. They even had a charter school, right? They're sort of finding how to adapt and serve their community.

But in doing the work of kind of researching and recovering this history, actually, the current leadership of Flanner House was actually really motivated by learning, or actually relearning that history, and have begun to bring back some of these programs. So one of the things we're really proud of it at Urban Patch is we've been able to use the archive to make it relevant to present. And the Flanner House has in recent years brought back the large-scale gardens and food programs, and even a local grocery store. So they're able to get some funding from the city and foundations to provide a fresh food access point-- again, providing food in the community.

And kind of a fun thing is on the outside of this new grocery store that they've put in, there's a mural of different leaders from the community's history. And my grandfather is actually included in the mural. So it's great to kind of learn from the past right-- for people that know African symbology, like the Sankofa-- the go back and get it-- this sort of figure of the bird and the egg. We've been actually seeing that through with our work with Urban Patch and in the Indianapolis community.

**TARA** Thank you so much. Wow. So I keep being torn. Because we're talking about history, but we're also tying it to the  
**OLUWAFEMI:** present. So all my questions are always like, I want to talk about one thing, but I want to connect in the other way. And thank you for so expertly addressing and holding both of my questions at the same time.

**JUSTIN** Well, we have to learn how to do that in a better way. To deal with complexities and to be anchored in our  
**GARRETT** history, it's important.

**MOORE:**

**TARA** Mm-hmm. Exactly. Thank you for that. Thank you so much.

**OLUWAFEMI:**

So my next question is, how did this project then get expanded to other parts of the US and Rwanda-- Urban Patch? How did you make that kind of leap? Because this project is really centered around local communities taking over their own systems of production and literally becoming their own self-sustaining, like, we no longer need these sort of long highway routes. Honestly, because the highways are built to allow for more trucks and things like that to go interstate.

But if I'm doing local farming, we don't need to bring in those outsiders. So then how can we kind of reclaim back those spaces? But I think that's another conversation we can get into later. So then how do these projects kind of reclaim that local nature as they expand?

**JUSTIN** Sure. Yeah, I love this question because it let's me get kind of geeky. Yeah, so Urban Patch, there's kind of the  
**GARRETT** history and kind of learning and understanding of what had been done in the past. And it is connected to and  
**MOORE:** bridged with some thinking about our current and, hopefully, future ways of operating. And you're picking up something that's kind of critical and essential to Urban Patch, is that it's not about the big outside, or kind of the top-down approach. It's very much grounded in the power of the local-- kind of the learning and process of things being more emergent, let's say, in how they happen, rather than determined.

And so the actual name Urban Patch is a derivative of some work and research I did while I was a graduate student. I did my master's at Columbia GSAPP both architecture and urban design. And one of the research projects we were doing was work in Baltimore, which is another sort of teachable moment city for people interested in American urbanism.

And we were looking at this concept of urban-patch dynamics, which is something that is generated in the ecosystem sciences. So it's ecologists learning about how places transform and change from an ecological perspective, and sort of realizing that that actually also happens in cities-- not only in things like forests or a meadow, right?

And this idea of how that change is happening is often local and often incremental. And so Urban Patch dynamics is this sort of framework and concept for how places change as systems, as ecologies, as environments over time, but from this local and incremental perspective.

And so that was something as kind of a broad concept/theory of how change may need to happen, which is very different from what would have been a dominant trope in my personal education as an architect an urbanist, which would have been modernism industrial capitalism, colonialism-- all of these sort of big systems that are seen and understood as the dominant way that change happens-- that systems are understood and developed and resourced, et cetera, right? That would have been our model-- the modern project, let's call it.

But instead something that's different from that, which is the idea of the urban patch-- the idea of the incremental and the local. So that's kind of the foundation and basis-- and how Urban Patch as an organization and entity was really grounded in the community that I knew well-- kind of the local context. But understanding that local is universal, at the same time. There is the local in many different contexts. And taking that approach works.

And so we did start looking at other places. And frankly, people from other places were asking, can we do this in our place? And so that's what really kind of turned the light bulb on, that this is an approach that is valuable in other contexts.

And so very randomly, I happen to know some people working in Rwanda, in that context. They're trying to deal with these sort of huge issues. For those that don't know, over 25 years ago, Rwanda had the genocide. And the country since then has been in this incredible process of sort of recovering and rebuilding and thinking in a forward way about how they're going to live together on this earth. And urbanism is a key part of that. And things like housing are part of that, as well.

And so there the model was following some tropes that we know, right? Oh, well, we should build large housing estates and make it affordable. And it sort of goes back to that kind of modern project-- addressing the problem.

And so we thought that actually would be important to introduce this urban and urban patch kind of local incremental scale of thinking. And that was how we kind of worked with people both in government, but also different organizations and stakeholders there, to create a housing development model that would operate at the incremental scale-- five units, eight units at a time-- and in places that needed to see new investment and new housing, but also affordable housing-- also locally-sourced materials, providing lower environmental impact but greater local economic impact.

And so are affordable housing development that's there, which just finished this year, actually, we were able to do things like provide for new housing without government subsidies-- that is actually affordable to Rwandan people. We were able to do things like use locally-sourced materials, that didn't require long-haul transportation, or imported materials. And even things like making sure that women-owned businesses were able to benefit from the project.

So again, back to that systems approach of thinking, but through the very local and through kind of the incremental project, that can scale over place and over time.

**TARA**  
**OLUWAFEMI:** So these projects that you're doing through Urban Patch, for me, they're like a form of protest. And even your grandfather's original projects are kind of a little bit like taking a stance. Because it's showing that, you know what, the government isn't helping me. I'm going to do it. And I'm going to do it myself. And I'm going to do it better.

So I find it so shocking to me-- because you just mentioned, too, that you found a way to make these sustainable and affordable housing in Rwanda without any government subsidies. So it makes me wonder, what is the government really doing? And that's like an open statement. I'm not sure if you've heard about these new initiatives by the government to re-support Black farmers and things like that-- because of how many Black farms were just basically snatched up, taken away in the last century. So I'm wondering what your thoughts are on that.

**JUSTIN  
GARRETT  
MOORE:**

Yeah, it's a really important point and question. And the Black farmers will see that Vilsack-- I'm a little cynical about his appointment. But the reality and the thing to understand-- and again, I'm going to keep going back to history. I just can't help it. There is a way that we got into this mess. And the government was a big part of that.

So with the work that Flanner House did, and kind of the leadership of that organization back in the day, they actually tried to go to the government, at one point. And they were denied. The Rural Resettlement Administration-- so kind of Depression-era, Roosevelt, New Deal-type programs, that were discriminatory-- and did not provide resources at scale to Black people and majorly advantaged White people. And then we saw the urban version of that, with mortgages and all sorts of policies.

And so the government would have to-- I say with the same degree of fervor and ingenuity that they created all of these problems and inequalities, we need the same from our government to have equal fervor and ingenuity in undoing and addressing in a positive way some of the problems that we're still working with. And unfortunately, what frequently happens is government will respond and try to do something, but it's incremental or light way, and not at the scale with which they operated when they did these programs initially.

I worked in government for a very long time. I believe in government. I love street lights and public school, so I love paying taxes. I do believe in government. But I think our government is too unambitious. It's not willing enough to operate at the scale and degree of impact that its power really holds. And so in a place like when we're doing work and Rwanda, our US government has incredible power and resources and agency and all sorts of things. And not everywhere has that advantage.

And so in Rwanda, they don't have the kind of money and resources that the US government enjoys. And so in a way, they have to be more innovative. And frankly, they're incredibly supportive in the means that they do have to allow for a project like ours to happen. And there was sort of assistance and engagement in other ways, beyond kind of subsidy, to help make a project like ours possible. And once there's sort of proof of concept, or show that it's realized, that the government can still support in other ways.

But I do think it's a really important question, that we need to do more to kind of challenge the government to be bolder and more ambitious with some of this work right. What it took to build the highway system, right? Like take that same boldness and do it to undo the bad things that the highway system did.

**TARA  
OLUWAFEMI:**

Yeah. It's almost like there's this hesitancy to admit that we're wrong. They're like, oh, but we did all of that. And everyone's like, yeah, it sucks. It's not working. Can we get trains back? And can you give us back some, like, green space? And they're like, how about we put trees by the highway? It's like, that's not what I'm into, you know?

**JUSTIN  
GARRETT  
MOORE:**

Exactly, exactly.

**TARA  
OLUWAFEMI:**

But I'm like, yeah, you're absolutely right-- the same work you did to raise houses and to pluck up all the farmland and everything, just do the same thing in reverse. Just bloop, break it up. And the actual cost of maintaining highway systems and all of that is-- when you think about it, I'm like, you could really re-funnel that money in some great places.

**JUSTIN GARRETT MOORE:** Exactly, exactly. And so yeah, that's kind of the challenge and push. And it's a difficult thing. And again, I worked in government, so I know how hard it is to do these things-- because people are risk averse. Status quo definitely dominates. And to be honest, there are reasons that bureaucracy and status quo exists.

If the Trump administration had been able to do what it totally wanted to do, it would have been really bad. Bureaucracy saved America from being much worse than what we already saw. It could have been so much worse without bureaucracy. People don't appreciate that, but it's true.

**TARA OLUWAFEMI:** No, that's absolutely right. I know. It's like we kept being like, the checks and balances. But it's like, sadly, the few checks and balances we had are what kept us from purely just-- Lord, the thought of it sometimes, I'm like, oh my gosh.

**JUSTIN GARRETT MOORE:** It's really scary.

**TARA OLUWAFEMI:** It's scary, yeah. So now I'm thinking, I have two questions. So the first is that I'm seeing the way that Flanner House has used this archive to revitalize, to bring back a lot of these initiatives, how does this then make you-- hmm, I'm trying to think about how to phrase this. Because it's really a conversation about, who do we uplift in architecture? And whose archives do we find important enough? I mean, this archive was so important that it's saving communities again.

But on the other hand we're here appraising-- and I will say it-- Philip Johnson, the Nazi.

**JUSTIN GARRETT MOORE:** Oh my God, yeah.

**TARA OLUWAFEMI:** --in architecture. And there's all these things that are now trying to address it. The GSD is trying to rename buildings that were built by him and such and such. I mean, Bobst Library was also built by him at NYU. Things like that-- we're praising this guy for ideas that we claim are revolutionary, sure-- whatever, debatable.

But then you see projects like Flanner House. And I'm like, that is revolutionary. That is protest. When your government is not supporting you, and you're like, we're asking for your help, you're not going to give it to us, we will make our own farms, our own grocery stores, our own systems. And these are archives that are being ignored.

**JUSTIN GARRETT MOORE:** Absolutely.

**TARA OLUWAFEMI:** So how can we shift those lenses? Is there a way for us to remove the White capitalist goggles and try to really think about the communities around us? Maybe the way to approach it is to not look at the systems that are currently here, but to look at neighborhoods that used to be here. What used to be here?



**JUSTIN  
GARRETT  
MOORE:**

Yes. And this is honestly why I'm so excited about the African American Design Nexus. We have a problem with our archive and with our cannon. The older I get, the more I learn in and around, it's almost criminal, actually, because it does cause harm.

And I think it should not be understated or misunderstood how much harm the White-centered way of understanding and valuing and operating in the world. And in particular-- I'm sure this is a much broader issue. But I've been around long enough to know my field and my expertise and how things work. In the built environment field-- in particular, planning architecture design-- it has caused harm and even death. And people need to sit with that, let it sink in. It has caused harm and even death, and at scale.

And so something I didn't mention was that the work that Flanner House did, that they worked with Hilyard Robinson-- so with a Black architect. And Hilyard Robinson, for example, worked with Flanner House to develop this toolkit of kind of different house components and parts and things that could be customized for these individuals to sort of build and kind of co-design and build their own homes. It was an incredibly, quote unquote, "modern" idea-- the customizable home that you self-construct, that was kind of using labor and your time and skills as a source of capital-- to hack that Black people didn't have access to capital. It's an amazing project, that frankly every architect should know.

And I mean that. Like everyone that studies architecture in America-- because every place has their knowledge basis and content. But I knew about 50 different White, quote unquote, "modernist" attitude about how to build the world. And I never learned that there was a Black architect who worked for the Black community that didn't have access to power capital, that through architecture and design created a way for people to have housing that adapted to their family's needs. Never learned that. Why didn't we learn that?

**TARA  
OLUWAFEMI:**

It's like an early kit of parts for prefabricated housing. It's very revolutionary. But the funny thing is there's professors now at the GSD who, that is what they do. They're like, I'm doing this research. And everyone's like, this is groundbreaking. And I'm like, someone else did this so long ago.

**JUSTIN  
GARRETT  
MOORE:**

It's not groundbreaking, right. They're like, where's my MacArthur Prize? And it's like, you know.

**TARA  
OLUWAFEMI:**

You're not going to get it from me [LAUGHS] unless we start posthumously giving it to so many other people

**JUSTIN  
GARRETT  
MOORE:**

Right, right. So that history is just so amazing and incredible. And so much of our time and energy goes into whiteness. And I'm on the adjunct faculty at Columbia now. And the Black Faculty at Columbia GSAPP put together this letter during and following the protests this summer, called "Unlearning Whiteness."

And it has to do with this idea that there is so much work to be done to unlearn, as much as we resource the work to kind of learn and recover things from the archives and to deal with the erasure that we've seen. And that shouldn't be on Black people to do that work. I mean, it really is something that White people need to get on board and spend the time and the money in the energy and resources to do that.

So something like the Philip Johnson-- we get it. Philip Johnson. OK. What else can we do with our time?

**TARA** What else?

**OLUWAFEMI:**

**JUSTIN** Right. There's so much else that we could be doing with our time and energy and everything. And it's time to  
**GARRETT** move on. It's time to, one, acknowledge the full history. You have to acknowledge the complete story. And  
**MOORE:** frankly, there's complexity in that. It's not that everything he's ever done is awful and terrible.

But there is some complexity and some complete stories that we need to engage in, so that we can ask, how are we spending our energy and resources? What are we valuing? Who are we valuing? Why are we valuing it? And then act accordingly.

**TARA** I think one of the funniest moments in my undergrad-- I did architectural studies, but I focused a lot on art and  
**OLUWAFEMI:** art history. So in one of my art classes, each of us had to present at the beginning of the week-- each person had a week-- just some of their design inspirations.

So I present some of mine. And the professor afterwards goes, did you realize that everyone you showed was a minority? And I was like, oh, I didn't realize. I guess it just is like, to me, I'm like all the other stuff that I've seen, I've seen it already. It's boring to me. It seemed so shocking to me.

**JUSTIN** And it's also not the minority.

**GARRETT**

**MOORE:**

**TARA** Right, exactly. To me, I was like, these are people that are just fantastic at their craft. They should not be  
**OLUWAFEMI:** pigeonholed into woman architect, or woman minority architect, or animator who is from XYZ country. I was like, they're just really, really good. And they're also great people-- very unproblematic.

And she was the one that pointed that out. And I was like, it's strange that you notice that because it was odd to you. Because to me, it's weirder to me if I start presenting on a bunch of White people, that we've all already seen. Like, you know?

When she said that I was kind of-- like you know when you look at somebody and go, huh? That's strange, because I would have said the opposite to you. It's those moments that made me really aware that I was, like, wow, yeah, my professors too, some of them are just-- they're lost in this White sauce, and they can't see.

**JUSTIN** And they will identify-- if you were to have a conversation, they'd say, yes, quote unquote, "diversity and equity"  
**GARRETT** are important. And they don't understand the almost kind of psychological misalignment that there is with  
**MOORE:** something like that.

And I remember kind of back in college like, first, art and architectural history, being told that the first art-- something identified as far as the *Venus of Willendorf*, or something like that, right? And it's like-- it begins in Europe, right? It's like that is literally impossible.

**TARA** Yeah. In my undergrad there was another class called, like, "Renaissance Illusions." It's a class just on  
**OLUWAFEMI:** Renaissance art. And the professor, she's an amazing lady, actually. She loves student feedback. She's great. And she mentioned that she changed the name of the class because a Black student years earlier-- because it used to be just called "The History of Art," or something like that. And she was like, this is not art.

And the professor was like, you know what, you're right. It's all about the Renaissance. My bad. Yeah. And I'm like, how for years was this class taught and nobody said-- and everyone was like, yeah, that's art. And then, of course, the art classes on African are very specifically called West African Art and blah, blah, blah.

It's like this almost cognitive dissonance, where there's an awareness and then there's a purposeful blindness to it. But recently, too, I'm in this thesis prep class. And some of my classmates actually brought this up to the professors, because every week the professors teach a lecture on a famous architect's thesis-- and the work before it and the work after it-- just how it was influenced and who would influenced. So all the people they've shown us are White men.

And I think there's like two women-- both minority women-- oh, and then one White woman. Oh, and then maybe David Adjaye, I think. I don't remember.

But my classmates last class were like, hey, so when we have our section meetings, each of us are talking about really exciting theses projects, that are very new and different topics. But the lectures we're taught in class don't seem to be doing that. And the professor's response was just, your generation is so anxious. That was it.

And he was like, you guys are so anxious. And we're like, it's not an anxiety. It's just like we're finally like, this isn't it, dude.

**JUSTIN  
GARRETT  
MOORE:**

That's not it. Well, and the thing is-- so the idea of how much work is needed is something that I don't think is fully appreciated. So like those faculty, they've been doing things a certain way for a long time. They drink the Kool-Aid. And that structure of everything is in reference to something that has been valued-- and that's the lens to look at it, to the exclusion of essentially the rest of the world.

And they are just so grounded in that to get out of that framework would take a lot of work for them. And the thing is their approach is this sort of acceptance that, OK, yes, maybe there's this other work that needs to happen. But our work, our way is still valid and central.

And so they personally, typically, aren't willing to do that. They're like, I had to learn German to read original text to get my PhD, and all I know is this sort of Western-dominated thing. So to challenge that would be a lot of work. And they're just not willing to do it.

And my view and take on that is that institutions need to transform and change. And part of the issue is that you need to bring other people that have other knowledge bases and values and that kind of episteme-- point of reference for their episteme that is different from that-- to, frankly, challenge some of these people.

**TARA  
OLUWAFEMI:**

And not having those new voices brought in be the exception

**JUSTIN  
GARRETT  
MOORE:**

Right. The tokenized thing, right? Like, one person and then-- yeah, yeah, yeah.

**TARA** They're like, don't worry, we have the Black. And I'm like, no, that doesn't cut it. And that's the same thing. I  
**OLUWAFEMI:** mean, the same way we were talking about how the government doesn't want to admit they're wrong what they've done in the past, so they try to do these patchwork fixes, it comes back on the same scale. These big institutions, they're like, this is how we set up our pedagogy. This is what it is. And for you to tell us it's wrong, it goes against everything that made us who we are.

But I'm like, it's so weird, because in other cultures we're just so used to-- maybe it comes from colonialism telling us that our cultures aren't the thing-- our cultures are the side thing. So we're used to kind of bending.

**JUSTIN** Unless it can be capitalized, in popular culture, and things like music and fashion and all sorts of things. The art  
**GARRETT** world is going through this moment now, where Black stuff, for lack of a better word-- someone called it the  
**MOORE:** Black Excellence Industrial Complex. And we're ramping up. And it's this sort of bizarre and curious moment, that people rightfully are sort of questioning and challenging. Because anyone with a history book knows that this isn't the first time America has gone through this.

And thinking about not saying, OK, yes, here's our Black thing, or here's our Black stuff-- or we did some Black stuff. But actually it's like, no, you actually need to undo the White stuff. The Black stuff-- like, we'll be OK with the Black stuff. Like, you deal with your White stuff. And then when you deal with our White stuff, the Black stuff and the Brown stuff and the women stuff and the gay stuff and the ability stuff-- I mean, there will be so much space in room and resource and energy for a complete and more complex way for the world to be. But that work of undoing the White stuff is just not really happening.

And the example you're giving of like, OK, students-- do a thesis, and you care about this stuff. Do your ideas. But we're actually not going to provide you the real infrastructure and support to do that fully, because we're still going to make you do all the work to translate what you're interested in working on to our White stuff. And it will only be valuable if you can do that. It's so much energy and work to do that, right?

**TARA** Yeah, it's shocking, because the only examples of student work they show us have all been previous White men  
**OLUWAFEMI:** that went to the GSD. They show, like, the bigger architects. And even some of your peers did a project that followed this line of thinking. We're like, oh, another White man, who graduated two years ago. What is the difference? I understand that student did a lot of work. But I'm like, his project is a duplicate of, I don't know, Philip Johnson's thesis, which is like a duplicate of someone else's. I'm sitting there and I'm like, oh my goodness.

**JUSTIN** Yeah. And the scary thing is right you're sort of seeing experience in that kind of within your institution, but your  
**GARRETT** institution has a lot of power. And that happens outside of the institution and in all sorts of spaces and places  
**MOORE:** that are-- just really shocking, honestly, how powerful certain institutions and places are.

And so that shouldn't be taken for granted, that power. Because a place sort of communicating to its existing and broad audiences of people that are in firms and associations and even political positions-- things of that nature-- they're all in that same mindset. And so it's actually scary how big this issue is.

Frankly, we've even seen that in not the kind of Harvard and Ivy League institutions. We see it in state universities. We even see it in historically Black colleges. One of my things I've been doing recently is trying to more actively engage in historically Black colleges. They still teach the kind of curriculum and canon of Western European modernism, is what is taught to young Black people trying to learn design. And they are evaluated based on their proximity to the established ideals and modes of that. That's almost more heartbreaking than it happening at a place like Harvard.

**TARA OLUWAFEMI:** Yeah. I was going to say it's upsetting. Because they're probably like, we have to prepare students for the real world they're going to face.

**JUSTIN GARRETT MOORE:** That is exactly it. You know, we don't have the luxury of allowing our students to do that-- to dream and explore and engage in something that isn't a norm. And they're not crazy for thinking that, by the way.

**TARA OLUWAFEMI:** No, absolutely not. That's the sad part. It's like the external forces are so strong that it's like even if I wanted to teach you this, I think I would be putting you at a disadvantage. And that should never be the case, that by teaching you your own history, you're disadvantaged.

But I guess this goes back to-- we were just talking about systems of power. And you and I have had this conversation. I mean, I go to Harvard, so I'm in a position of power. The fact that I get to speak on a podcast, another position of power-- because what I say, people hear. And same for you. You've transitioned at least, actually.

So you were the executive director of the New York City Public Design Commission. And now you've transitioned into a new role at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. So would you be able to talk a bit about, what are some of the burdens, I guess, of being in a position of power and having projects like Urban Patch that you're so tied to, and then dealing with kind of government and government relations, then, as the executive director for the New York City Public Design Commission.

And then from going from government, now you're kind of a nonprofit. So what are those kind of shifts? And how did you feel a power shift? And also the range of the work you're able to do with the government versus away from the government. And how have you used your position of power to kind of address some of these issues we've been talking about?

**JUSTIN GARRETT MOORE:** Yeah, this is definitely important. And I'll put a pin in and just quickly say one thing, which is that I think most people that go into design or planning, they have to sort of acknowledge that they're in some form or another an instrument of power dynamics.

And they have to sort of navigate and think about where and how they can find agency in that. In my kind of academic background-- kind of education-- came into architecture and eventually kind of went into urban design and urbanism and urban planning. And this question of power is one that I just personally had to deal with. Because as an architect, I like to think I did well in different modes and enjoy design and all that.

But I knew at a young age that I didn't have the power to be an architect. It's sad, but it's just something that was sort of a reality, because I had been exposed to kind of the field of practice in different spaces and things. And I just saw. I knew who had the kind of power and ability and access to be an architect. And it had nothing to do with, can you design, or can you draw? Or do you know the technical things of how buildings are put together? It has nothing to do with that. That is not what-- and who determines who gets to be an architect.

And so I went into government, for all of its flaws, knowing that I could actually have agency in that framework to have a more direct understanding of my kind of relationship to power and where I could have an impact-- and do the kind of work that I cared about, that could see impact. And that was a good gamble. I went to architecture school for seven years, and you all know how hard it is. But I had to make that choice, because of the fundamental flaws in architecture as a discipline. So sorry, I just wanted to take that little tangent because I think it's related.

**TARA**  
**OLUWAFEMI:** No. I mean, I'll just jump in really quickly. Yeah, everybody always goes like, oh, you want to be an architect? I'm like, no. They're like, you go to architecture school. And I'm like, have you seen the actual field? And my cousin actually did architecture at Columbia too. She pivoted and went into construction and real estate and building systems materials and things like that, because actual architecture is such a wealthy, White male-- like, you have to already have influence to be a big name architect. It's insane.

**JUSTIN**  
**GARRETT**  
**MOORE:** Yeah, it's unfortunate. So yeah, so the reason I was saying that is because it's connected to this power conversation. So I did go into government. And there the power is-- the way I would call it is transparent-- because there's explicitly kind of political power, financial power, kind of bully-pulpit power. It's sort of easier to navigate how it's happening kind of besides just money and influence, or whatever, which is a little more clandestine.

But kind of the modes of operating there were still challenging. An anecdote I often like to tell people is that your knowledge becomes your power in that context-- whether it's kind of technical knowledge, or kind of understanding of a place and dynamics, is kind of what determines what is able to move forward and what dies, essentially.

During the Bloomberg years the idiom was, God we trust. Everyone else, bring data. Because people that have the data and the information to make an argument kind of had a lot of power in that time. And so I would be in situations where I kind of felt confident and solid that like, OK, I've got the actual data.

I've got the understanding of the situation, and I've got some kind of technical and other skills to kind of bring those things together to do what I call telling truth to power. And in theory you do that, and do that in public or explicit ways, and that's kind of how you would see certain shifts.

But there were a number of cases where even that didn't work, because institutional racism and all that is so entrenched. There was a big initiative to do new housing in Brownsville, Brooklyn. So Brownsville is a community in Brooklyn-- predominately Black community, predominately lower income. And the city was essentially going to just build a bunch of supportive housing-- so meaning kind of the lowest income rungs, and very often people that are coming out of homelessness, or even the justice system and things of that nature. And they were going to do it in large concentration in this community.

And I had been working in that community for some time and knew kind of what local people were interested in, cared about. And more than anyone, they understand the need for more affordable housing and the need for housing and all that. But the argument was, why do we have to get all of it? It's a big city. Why do we get all of it?

And there was a big meeting. And I was the only Black person in the meeting. Probably, 40 people in the meeting. I'm the only Black person in the meeting. And this conversation about how they're going to put all this housing in this Black neighborhood was going to happen. And I sort of raised my hand. I'm like, this is my chance to speak truth to power. And I had done my background

**TARA** You have your data.

**OLUWAFEMI:**

**JUSTIN** I had the data. I was like, oh, you know, feels really good. And I did it. And I posited it, because I had practiced it  
**GARRETT** and talked to other people. And I kind of said my piece. And the 39 people in the room looked at me like I had  
**MOORE:** horns. I just say that to mean that it's like the power dynamics in theory. And I'll be real like-- Black dude considered top in my field-- not one but two Ivy League degrees-- and I could have been a church mouse.

**TARA** It meant nothing. It doesn't mean anything [LAUGHS] in certain moments. You're literally like, wow, OK.

**OLUWAFEMI:**

**JUSTIN** Right. And listen, I've had plenty of wins. But in a conversation like this, I don't want to talk about wins, actually. I  
**GARRETT** want to illustrate and demonstrate to people how messed up everything still is, so that they could do something  
**MOORE:** about it.

So fast forward to further into my career and executive director of Public Design Commission. So in New York City government, lots of different city agencies-- the Public Design Commission is the city agency that's responsible for the design review of all the public projects. So somewhere between 800 and 1,000 projects a year coming in for a design review. The closest thing the city has to a design czar. If I don't think this is on the right track, I can make a pain, and it can't be built. So it's an explicit position of power.

And again, lots of wins. There are places where you can use that position of power to see better outcomes for your communities. But one of the more controversial and more recent projects is the Borough-Based Jails project. So the city closing Rikers Island, which is an absolutely great thing, be able to do new smaller facilities that could be more locally based-- also generally a good idea. But then there is a question about the design-- what these new facilities are going to be, how they are going to be considered and designed and implemented.

So this is another one of those situations where, in this case, I'm higher up the chain. I'm a direct appointee of the mayor, in a position of power. And these conversations about, what's going to be the design of these facilities, which we all know, or most people hopefully know have disproportionately Black and Latinx populations affected by those facilities. And again in the rooms, in these spaces. And I would say certain things from my position of power, which is in this case an explicit legal position of power, and it would still be ignored.

And so during the protests and everything over the summer, I was like, OK, well, maybe-- because all the right people, frankly, are going around acting like they get it. And so I'm like, OK, well, if you all really get it now-- so the stuff I've been saying for two years that you just ignored. If you supposedly get it, I'm going to say it again. And let's try again. Because again, I'm a civil servant-type. I'm like, it's why we're here. And it was the same response, which was no response-- which is that we're actually not going to challenge and push these things. We're just going to get it done.

And so in that case, I actually went to the deputy mayor and said, I can't be the only Black person in the room talking to a predominantly White group of people who are making decisions that will significantly impact mostly Black and Brown peoples' lives and be ignored. I just can't do anymore.

**TARA**  
**OLUWAFEMI:** Yeah. It's like, you know how Pontius Pilate tried to wash the blood off his hands?

**JUSTIN**  
**GARRETT**  
**MOORE:** Mm-hmm.

**TARA**  
**OLUWAFEMI:** But it's like, but you were still there, you know? There's that kind of weird burden where it's like, but it was out of my hands. Like, I tried and nobody listened to me. But then I'm hurting my own people. I hate this. That's so hard. That's very hard.

**JUSTIN**  
**GARRETT**  
**MOORE:** And lots of positive power things. But yeah, it's just really a challenge. And kind of the scale and systems of things can be-- in that case, the only kind of power I have left was sort of nonparticipation. We talked about protests like the work that Flanner house is doing being a kind of a form of protest.

And saying, OK, well, Instead of contributing to this system and approach and way of doing things, if your power isn't able to be realized and actualized and same kind of evidence that transformation is happening in a way that at least personally is resonant, then maybe it's time to find other channels and other modes of operation. And so I work at the Mellon Foundation, which is kind of an arts and humanities funder-- is how they're most well known, or associated. But the new leadership, with Elizabeth Alexander as the president of the foundation, has done, I think, some important and challenging work to say that institutions like these wealthy foundations, or the types of institutions that they support and connected to need to do the actual and hard work of transformation.

And so I'm still relatively new to it, to be honest. But I think that explicit mandate by the foundation that social justice is an objective, and not just an objective but really a demand for the work explicitly, is something that I'm interested in. When you work for the city-- it's something I always tell people who work in government. You work for the city. Of course, there are the politics and elected kind of dynamics and the platforms and policies and how you position. But at the end of the day when you work for the city, and if you're doing your job right, you work for everybody.



And when you work for everybody, and if you take that responsibility and everything seriously, you're not necessarily always able to do the most transformative thing. And so at the Mellon Foundation where we're in a position of providing resources and kind of helping direct transition and leadership through this big and somewhat ill-gotten bag of money, my hope is that that is a different kind of space and type of power to more intentionally think about and resource and work on the work of transformation versus the work of what I would have considered the work of public service-- which is a slightly different space.

**TARA**  
**OLUWAFEMI:** Thank you so much-- your dedication to public service, to really changing things for the future for your community. And I felt that so much today. And I felt it in the way you spoke so candidly about, there's things that are wrong that we just need to fix. We just have a couple of things to fix.

And you're candid about it. You're like, I've lived it. I've worked through it. I've seen it all. And I'm glad that you still have hope. You know what, it's just going to be a transition, moving from architecture. Then being like, architecture, even just to do local projects-- there's so many. Even if you don't want to be a star architect, there's so many obstacles, that sometimes I'm like, man, what can you do?

But I love this podcast, because you get to speak to people like you that are like, there's things that you can do with your design skills and your passion. So just thank you so much for that.

**JUSTIN**  
**GARRETT**  
**MOORE:** Yeah, you're welcome. And I'll just say one last kind of thing, which is that it is hard and challenging work. Like, change is hard. And all architects and planners and urbanists, your job is change. And it's just really hard.

And the thing I wanted to add was that there are the issues that Black architects and other people have been otherwise marginalized in the field are going through. But it really would help all of us if we can address these things, including the White people. We're incredibly underpaid, for example, and under-resourced in the work that we do. And it's connected to these systems of whiteness and power and privilege. That affects a lot of White people, too, including White, powerful, privileged people-- are also negatively affected. So it's like we really just have to figure this out

**TARA**  
**OLUWAFEMI:** Yeah. Sometimes I look at some firms' pages. When a firm is like, oh-- people are like, apply. They're looking for summer interns. And I go to their page and I look at their team-- nary a Black person.

And I'm like, what are you doing? Like, why not? There's many Black students-- OK, well, many are at the GSD. But I'm like, how come none of us are-- like, we're all applying? Why?

There's so many questions. We know the source of these issues. It's just everyone has to really put a stake in it and be like, this change has to come.

**JUSTIN**  
**GARRETT**  
**MOORE:** It's time. It's past time, but it's time.

**TARA**  
**OLUWAFEMI:** We are tired. And the work is looking tired, OK, because it's coming from the same view.

**JUSTIN  
GARRETT  
MOORE:**

Thank you for having me. I enjoyed the conversation. And again, I'm really happy that *The Nexus* is there. I was at the inaugural Black In Design, in 2015. And I've kept track, and was there when *The Nexus* was sort of announced, that it was going to be established.

And this archive that you're resourcing is a part of the work

**TARA  
OLUWAFEMI:**

Thank you. Thank you for that. Thank you for being with us on the show today. You're welcome.

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 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).