

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**DARIEN CARR:** Hey, everybody.

**TARA** I'm Tara Oluwafemi.

**OLUWAFEMI:**

**DARIEN CARR:** And I'm Darien Carr. And we are master of architecture students at the GSD. *The Nexus* is produced in conjunction with a commitment by the Frances Loeb Library to acquire and create an open access bibliography of various media suggested by the community on the intersection between race and design

**TARA** Hi, everyone. On today's episode, we have Tiara Hughes. A St. Louis native now based in Chicago, Tiara Hughes  
**OLUWAFEMI:** is a senior urban designer at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and adjunct professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology, a commissioner with the city of Chicago Landmarks Commission, and a real estate professor. She is a devoted activist, educator, and advocate for underrepresented communities and voices, and currently serves on the board for the National Organization of Minority Architects and the Charnley-Persky House Board of Directors for the Society of Architectural Historians.

Tiara's personal experiences in the industry, along with her passion for advocacy, led her to establish a national research initiative called First 500 in 2018. As the founder and executive director of First 500, Tiara travels the country to raise awareness of the importance of Black women architects throughout history and their contribution to the built environment. Tiara is a believer in giving back to her community, serving as a co leader of SOM's ACE mentorship program in Chicago.

As a designer, Tiara is driven by creating work that emphasizes greater socioeconomic equity and cultural awareness. She believes ultimately, our efforts to positively impact communities of color will expand outward and involve our academic institutions, our firms, our industry, and by extension our communities. In 2021, Tiara received the prestigious AIA Associates Award given by the institute to associate members who best exemplify the highest qualities of leadership, and have demonstrated an unparalleled commitment to their component or regents' membership. Thank you so much for joining us today, Tiara.

**TARA HUGHES:** Thank you so much for having me. I'm extremely honored to be here with you guys.

**DARIEN CARR:** Wonderful. So during our conversation, you mentioned a quote. "If there's no well to drink from, dig until you create one." We think that's a great portal into some of the core values of your work-- a passion for your youth development and mentorship, and also advocacy and activism. So it's only right we start there. How do these values affect your identities and ambition as an architect, capital A, and how do these values play into the amazing work you're doing?

**TARA HUGHES:** Yeah. Thank you so much. And that quote has really been a life trajectory and motto for me. I've lived and breathed by this quote for as long as I can remember.

And what I can say is advocacy, activism, and mentorship drive everything that I do. It enables the transformative change that I'm able to bring to our industry and the world around us. Also, all of the contributions as a designer, teacher, and civic leader that I bring stem from personal experiences and lessons that I've learned along the way.

I'll also say that almost all of the work that I do today is informed by my past. Wanting to become a resource and a voice that I desperately needed when I was growing up and dreaming of becoming an architect is what I attempt to embody today. In school, I did not experience having any Black professors.

I did not experience an inclusive curriculum. And so now today, with regards to youth development and mentorship, helping foster future generations of designers has been a huge passion of mine, because providing these opportunities and infrastructure for our young designers of color is key to fostering our industry's future leaders. As an adjunct professor at IIT, that means promoting a curriculum that reflects the environments that we live, work, and play, and also bringing in more accessible and equitable curriculum to our students.

**TARA  
OLUWAFEMI:**

Well, statistics say, and I absolutely believe it, less than 1% of architects in the US are African-American female-identifying people, right? I mean, it's obvious. I'm currently the only woman in my year in my program. There used to be two of us, and right now, there's only one. And there was only maybe two more in the year above me - something like that.

So how are you able to now create a mentorship program for the younger generation? Like, how were you able to mentor yourself, in a sense? Because like you said, you didn't have any teachers that you could look up to.

There weren't many people that look like you. How did you start to develop that for yourself, and then be able to kind of flip that to teach it to other people? It's a hard role to be in to teach yourself, and then also teach others.

**TARA HUGHES:** Yeah, that's a great question, Tara. And your personal story that you're telling right now is a true testament to the industry, to academia, and most Black women experiences as they enter the field. And for me, it really was creating a goal once I learned the statistics.

Back in 2018, I was well into practice and had never seen a Black woman architect. I had never met one in school. I'd never met one in the industry.

And so I jumped online and I started searching, and realized that there's not really a central resource that houses their voices and their stories and really promotes this, so that other young Black girls interested in the field could have this as a resource. And to see someone that looks like them, we know, is a very powerful tool. And so what that meant was digging deeper and doing more research, and ultimately finding out at the time, there were 100,000-plus licensed architects.

We're getting closer to 120,000 licensed architects today. And at the time, there were less than 500 African-American women architects. And everyone is always like, where does the number 500 come from and how did you come up with that?

Once I learned the statistics, once I learned the horrific numbers of us equating to less than 1%, when in fact, we make up 7% approximately of the US population, that was jarring. And I think for any Black girl or Black woman that learns that statistic, it's shocking. It lets us know that there's a lot of work for us to do in the industry to change that and transform us to be more equitable.

But also what I will say to your question, Tara, is I found at first 500 within months of learning all of this in 2018. And 500 was an identifier as a marker just for all of us to quickly understand the figures. We are less than 500. And it rippled through the industry like a storm. I did not expect for it to get as much traction as it did.

But I ultimately started traveling the country to give these talks and raise awareness about Black women architects and our contributions to the built environment, and really just sparked a fire. On the Black women's side, so many women came to me and thanked me and said they felt reinvigorated to go get the license because they wanted to be a part of the first 500. And then on the other hand, our white counterparts, a lot of them were educated and became more aware of these statistics, and understanding that it is their duty to cultivate and foster any Black woman that they see as a part of the industry to push us forward, and to help us grow and evolve.

**TARA**  
**OLUWAFEMI:** So I'm just wondering, along the way in education and the licensure and this whole process, where do you think is the major gap that causes this lack of women getting licensed? Is it from when they're younger, they don't want to pursue architecture because they don't see people doing it? Or once you're in grad school, you're like, this process seems too tedious, I'm going to do something else, or they don't even bother going to grad school for it? Where do you think it happens?

**TARA HUGHES:** Yeah, that's a great question. I would say there's pinch points along the entire trajectory and pipeline of becoming an architect. From early on, you already said it, Tara. Exposure is an issue. I never met an architect until I was in college.

And so that's an issue for me because we know in more affluent communities, if a child is interested in drawing homes or blueprints of whatever, they have those resources and access almost right away. And that wasn't the case for me. It isn't the case for our communities that are underrepresented.

I'll say, too, transitioning into Blackness in academia, it is something that is few and far in-between. I mentioned already I did not ever meet any Black professors, but there were also no Black lecturers. And my school was very unique in the sense of bringing in speakers from all over the world.

I mean, you can imagine the budget that they have for this. And even then, and even so, none of those lecturers were Black. The jurors that critiqued our projects, none of them were Black. Even though I was attempting in my projects to tackle Black issues, because that was my interest, there still was no one around me that could relate to the problems that I was attempting to solve. And then, of course, not having proper outreach and recruitment opportunities in academia to really show and introduce architecture to different communities.

School culture I think is something that needs to transform. It's a very dog-eat-dog land right now. And we are very intentional about changing that thought process and the way that we work together in our own studio that we teach.

It should not be a dog-eat-dog. It's not like that when you get into practice. You don't ever work on a project by yourself in practice. And so it shouldn't be that way in academia. And then the curriculum, don't even get me started.

But traditionally, we are given a site and an area. You don't have a lot of wiggle room to really go outside of the parameters that you're given to design. And that's an issue, too. We need to have a more diverse curriculum. We need to have a more inclusive curriculum.

Our school bordered a Black community to the north of it, and we never designed anything north of our school. And we went downtown, south. We went to all these other communities, but we never ventured into the African-American underrepresented community to design for them. Industry firms, design firms, the industry at large, we've all discussed equality of opportunity as a remedy to systematic racism in America.

And for me, equality is not the solution. Many Black employees have experienced decades of economic and emotional trauma stemming from redlining, overpolicing, environmental exploitation, pay inequity, and more. We bring these burdens with us into the workplace, which ensures that equality, by providing employees the same resources for success without acknowledging those previous burdens, it's not the answer. Acknowledgment has occurred to an extent following the murder of George Floyd, but our country's collective mindset has to shift from equality to equity. Equity means meeting people where they are and addressing their needs and issues accordingly.

And then the last thing I'll say is it's just an industry reflection as well. We have been a very exclusive industry, and exclusive in a very negative way. We have not been welcoming to different voices, different perspectives, different viewpoints to bring to the table, and really evolve us and create a place that reflects the environments that we live, work, and play. So all of that.

I'll say really quickly, too, on the record, Whitney Young, his speech from 1968 at the AIA convention in Portland is my bible. It is something that I reference all the time. I reread it all the time.

It's about 12 pages. I highly recommend anyone to check that out. But he says in there, one of his quotes is, "We need as many people committed to doing the right thing as we have had into inclusion as we have had to exclusion in the past." And I truly, truly stand by that, 50-plus years later, by his words and his advice for our industry.

**DARIEN CARR:** Wow, I think that's such a good distinction I'm hearing in your response. Like, I'll be in conversation sometimes, and people are talking about diversity. But that kind of quote "diversity" isn't inclusion, because inclusion is so much about the process that's embedded. And I think that relates to industry and it also relates to pedagogy.

And I know you did a studio at the Illinois Institute of Technology when you're talking about reinvesting and bringing design solutions to Inglewood, which I think is very much aligned with the design process and the type of values that are embedded in it, and how those values need to be rethought, decolonized. They need to be imbued with more equity. So I was wondering if you could speak to those values and how they are continuing to play into your work, and also the way you teach and pedagogy.

**TARA HUGHES:** Thank you. That's a great question, Darien. I'll just go on the record and say that I co-teach a grad level design studio with two of my SOM colleagues, Dawveed Scully, who's a senior urban designer with SOM, and also Arathi Gowda. She's a sustainability and high-performance design expert with SOM as well.

And the three of us, it's like a trifecta of what we bring and introduce to the studio. We are all three persons of color, which our students have been very clear in saying that they've never experienced this before and the perspectives that we bring. Arathi very focused on sustainability, and she brings a very green point of view to the course. Dawveed is very focused on design, community engagement. And I am very focused on us understanding the political fabric and preservation, and community engagement as well.

But it's of three very different lenses that, in addition to the curriculum being changed, introduce our students to a more equitable way of thinking. And we've essentially flipped the traditional studio culture on its head, because typically-- I've mentioned this before, you're given a prompt, you're given a site, you're given a program to design for. But we jointly chose a community, which in this case was Inglewood, and we had our students do their own research.

We also had them connect with local residents. We visited the site, and based on their findings, based on their research, our students selected their own sites and their own program. And of course, we continuously touch base with them. It was an iterative process.

We didn't let them fall off the deep end, but we were there as support along the way. And this approach really equated to some beautiful solutions that the community was proud of. And this approach for us not only bridged the gap between how we work in the real world, but it also introduced equitable design methodology to academia.

**DARIEN CARR:** Yeah, I think it's so refreshing to hear that and be thinking about that. And I just really have a question of where are you getting the life from to be putting this life back in the world? Like, what type of things are sustaining you, inspiring you, be it book, songs, buildings, or movies. Are you getting this energy from within architecture, or are you drawing it from other places and kind of bringing it into the context of the built environment?

**TARA HUGHES:** Yes, thank you for that, Darien. I would say everything that we're discussing, all of my values are built off of passion. That's really where my foundation is rooted. And I'll just say quickly that there's two things that really drive me.

And the first one is a promise that I made to my late grandfather. I was experiencing a really rough time in academia when I was there. At one point, I was homeless for a semester, and my grandfather was sick at the time. And he traveled to the bank each month to make sure I had funds for food.

And when he was sick, I wanted more than anything to return home with him. And he said, no, we got to do this. We got to keep going. And he promised me that he would be there at the finish line. And that was the one light that I needed to recenter myself and continue forward.

And based on that-- him keeping his promise, because he was there virtually once I graduated, one of our last conversations was him saying to me, I kept my promise. And I was like, yes, we did it. We're here.

And he's like, now I need something from you. And guys, I literally would have given him the shirt off my back. And so I said, yes, yes, anything.

And he said, now I need you to make me a promise. And he said that promise is to never give up and live my life to the fullest, to live my passions, to travel as we planned, and to mentor girls from similar backgrounds. And he said he wasn't always going to be here with me physically, which was so hard for me to fathom that at the time. But he'd always be here to light my way. And so that's really been the first source of what drives me.

And then I would also say, secondly, the advice that I always give any students, or anyone that comes across and asks for it, is also what drives me. And that advice is if the industry feels lonely, you're not alone. If your ideas are not heard, keep speaking. And if one door closes, three will open. Keep going and never give up because if there is no well to drink from, dig until you create one. And those are really my two sources that sustain me and keep me going.

**TARA  
OLUWAFEMI:**

That's a really amazing point to make, because that's something that we've had, I think, in an earlier conversation with Michelle Wilkinson, who is a curator at the Smithsonian Museum for African-American-- oh my god. I always got the name wrong because it's so many syllables and abbreviations, all of the things. But you know what it is and you know where it is.

And we were talking about the need for oral histories and family histories in a sense and how things like this podcast are a way that we're supporting those oral histories, like you talking about that past and how it influenced your practice as a designer. It's not something that is a direct influence that you could say, oh, I built this building thinking about that. But it's almost like an oral story that's always going to play a part in a lot of the work that you do.

So the importance of things like family relations and those kind of dynamics, like family histories and the part that they play in architecture, is another conversation we were also having with Justin Garrett Moore and a lot of the research he was doing. Because he was doing a lot of work with Urban Patch in Indiana, and he started that research because it was a project that his grandfather was doing. And it was about how Black communities in Indiana, specifically Indianapolis, were able to sustain themselves when the government was falling short of being able to take care of them. So how they made their own social services and all of that-- their own grocery store.

But honestly, listening to your story, it's always very interesting to hear how a lot of Black communities, we've come to support ourselves in our own ways through these familial communities and networks and social services, and through a lot of oral histories, are how we are able to preserve these things. But in Justin Garrett Moore's instance, it was interesting that his grandfather and Urban Patch had actually had a very well-documented archive.

So I'm glad we're able to memorialize your grandfather and his contribution to the work that you do as an architect through the podcast, because that's what we're trying to do here is expand the work of Black architects and expand this archive in a way that's not a traditional archive, a lot of the ways that traditional Western culture has gone about archiving neglect these kind of stories. That's just my two cents, my little rant, about the importance of a different archive, and also the importance of family and all of that and how much it plays in pushing forward our careers.

I do have another secondary comment, then, about how you structure your mentorship program. Because I'm wondering how your personal situation going through college and experiencing homelessness, how you are working through different ways to support younger women and younger girls as they're going through their own struggles right now. Like, what are some of the specific aspects that your mentorship focuses on, and what are ways that our listeners can also support?

**TARA HUGHES:** Thank you. Right now, it's been very much about connecting them to resources that they are looking for, whether it's study materials for the AREs or that there's a Black Women in Architecture group on Facebook. It's really been just making sure they're plugged in to NOMA, doing the basics right now.

But ultimately, there's going to be a system for Black women architects and those looking to enter the field to be a part of with a website that's launching this fall. So the website is under construction right now. Like I said, I didn't expect this to be relevant still, and as a need, after we reached 500 in October of 2020.

But what I will say is the message now has transformed into now that we have reached that monumental marker for us, it is our collective duty as the first 500 Black women licensed architects living in the US to cultivate the next 500 and to be a resource for them. And so I know that's a mouthful, and I know that doesn't exactly answer your question, Tara. But right now, it's been about resource allocation and sharing, and making sure that these women have support around them. And eventually, it'll evolve into a database that lives on a website and places where these women can connect.

**TARA OLUWAFEMI:** And so my next question then is-- I know it's something that I also feel as well. It was interesting, like, even while I was in my undergrad, and as I graduated, because a lot of the alums that I reached out to that were the most helpful ended up being women of color and minorities. And as soon as I left there, it's almost like they passed the baton on to me. They're like, OK, now there's people already reaching out to me for help.

And I remember, there were a couple of times, especially in my first year of my grad program, where I was exhausted. And I was like, although I'm exhausted, I still have to help because someone helped me. And it becomes almost like a burden for people of color. And we all say that white people will never have to deal with this, especially white men. They never have to worry about carrying the next generation on their shoulder to uplift them.

So you just mentioned that the first 500 have to do the work to make sure that there's another group of 500? How are you all supporting each other to practice self-care or creating a community? And I know self-care now becomes this, where everybody goes self-care, self-care. I say self-care every time I nap for, like, four days straight right. But it's because we're exhausted. How do you balance helping and taking on this monumental effort that needs to happen, but also not becoming angry with the fact that this is an unfair thing that you have to take on, or just becoming exhausted by it or overwhelmed by it?

**TARA HUGHES:** That's a great question, Tara. And I think there is a balancing act. And so it is frustrating.

We are angry. We are tired. We haven't felt heard. Like, all of the things have happened. But if we keep our eye on the prize, which is leaving the industry better than when we entered, and all of us focus on that collectively, it is achievable and it is something that we can do.

To answer your question about the balancing act and how that works for me, it's really about sharing the load and understanding that we're in this together. And we all are at different points in our life. We have very busy lives. Some of us have families and kids and dogs, and we have all of these things going on. And so just doing a pulse check.

Like, if I'm recommending Michelle to connect with Dena, I'm going to check with Dena first to make sure that it's OK and to make sure that Dena has the capacity. If Michelle reaches out to me and she needs resources for the ARE, so she needs help figuring out her AXP accounts, well, I know that NOMA offers sessions on helping students start their AXP account. So I will recommend her to that. It's also about becoming an encyclopedia and learning where the resources are so that you are not being pulled in 50 different directions, but you become a resource yourself in helping point people in the right direction. So there's some of that.

There's also some moments where Michelle may come to me and she just wants to talk to me. She does not want me to send her anywhere else. And that's OK, too. I make sure that I make the time when the time is needed.

And for me, I'm just always making sure that I have a good bill of health, I'm taking care of myself. I have a puppy now that is, oh my goodness. He's therapy in and of himself whether he knows that or not. But doing things like that for self-help and understanding what self-help remedies work for you is important.

**DARIEN CARR:** Cool. So I wanted to switch the gears to ask about some of the other things you're doing, mostly on the systematic scale. So during one of the AADN's previous conversation with Kimberly Dowdell, a Chicago-based architect, real estate developer, and educator, and 2019 to 2020 president of NOMA, she mentioned how architecture is a great starting point for change, but it could only do so much. So at some point, we have to start looking at the systems that choreograph cities, and thus the buildings within them.

Taking into account the civic leadership work you've mentioned previously in this conversation, I also wanted to bring up, you served on the Commission on Chicago Landmarks, and have been involved since 2019. I wanted to ask, how is it important to step into conversations happening on the scale of the city? And what have you learned through that process, and how has it changed your approach as a result of these learnings?

**TARA HUGHES:** Thank you, Darien. It's so important for us to have our voices at the table. As principal purveyors of the built environment, architects should have more active voices in the civic spaces. We should actively engage and advocate for underrepresented communities, especially the ones that we're designing for. It's important for us to collaborate and to truly listen to communities that were serving.

I can give a very, very personal example. My childhood community and home was obliterated back in St. Louis and turned into baseball fields for a private all-boys high school that's adjacent to the site. And I went back and saw that-- it was probably my junior senior year in college, and was immediately in tears because I was just like, oh my gosh.

There's so many memories just wiped away. And to Tara's point earlier, our history is not preserved in the ways that other history has been preserved around us. And so it's really up to us to step into these spaces where we can impact those decisions in what's being saved, what's being lost, to change that narrative, and to be a voice and advocate for underrepresented communities.



I will also go on the record and say one of my proudest accomplishments as a commissioner was our research and advocacy that led to the preservation of Emmett Till's childhood home, which is located right here in my community that I live in in Chicago-- Woodlawn. But though this is a modest structure, it does not have a lot of significance architecturally speaking. It's a two-flat. It's very modest brick structure that looks like any other two-flat throughout the city.

But this place was preserved. And it is considered a Chicago landmark now because we have to be more intentional about changing that perception. We have to step in as commissioners-- even if you're not a commissioner of a city.

I'm not saying go and be a commissioner. But even if you're just a community advocate, no act is too small. And all of those acts collectively bring together change and equal things like us preserving Emmett Till's legacy.

**TARA**  
**OLUWAFEMI:** Thank you. So I'm just curious about what was the process of preserving his home for an incidence that happened elsewhere. I'm wondering how people felt about that, because I feel like so often, Chicago's in the North. People try to act like the North was so free of racism. I'm wondering what was that process like to be like, although this incident happened somewhere else, we still have to remember him here and reckon with the fact that that incident wasn't isolated? It was a snapshot of the temperature of the whole country.

**TARA HUGHES:** Yes, well, the incident which you're referring to, Emmett Till's brutal murder down in Mississippi, was not the only reason that the house was preserved. We did extensive research around what this home meant to him and his family, which it was the last place that he lived in Chicago before he was tragically and brutally murdered. It was the last place that he and his mother lived.

And also, his family lived on a different floor within the two-flat as well. So he took up one of the family units, him and his mom. And then some cousins took up another unit. And to this day still, that family has a lot of memories there. It's their last living memory here in Chicago of him.

And so it's that paired with he was essentially the launch of the Civil Rights movement and the United States. And so honestly, everything that Emmett Till has touched should be preserved in my opinion. That's a very biased and on-the-record opinion. But everything that he touched-- the train that he rode down to Mississippi and the store, the freaking lake, the two-flat that him and his family lived in, everything should be preserved. Because this is such an important piece of Black history and how we've gotten to where we are today that should never be forgotten.

And similarly, the funeral that he had his open casket burial in here, which is also considered a Chicago landmark, is also being repaired and restored. But all of those places are important. And his body was brought back to Chicago after all of that happened to him.

And so the process, though, was there was a white developer that brought the property. And he was going to flip it. So he was going to gut it out, renovate it, and sell it. And once the community caught wind of this, and some of the preservation groups and advocacy groups, it was flagged immediately because this is not a piece of history that we wanted erased.

And so it immediately kicked it into gear for it becoming a landmark. And I was one of the very voiceful commissioners in these hearings that made the statement that the developer needed to give this or sell this to the community. It is not a property that he should continue to possess and profit from. This is something that does not belong to him. The history and the context should be with the Black community that surrounds this property.

And those statements that I made-- which again was totally out of line. I shouldn't have said those things according to the rule books, but they absolutely needed to be said. It ultimately caused this owner to sell that property to the community. And like I said, acts like that sometimes you have to go off the record a little bit or outside of the rule book a little bit to get things done the right way.

And the community owns that property now. They're currently renovating it, turning it into a house museum. And it will be Emmett Till's heritage and legacy here for his community, the community that he was born and raised in.

**TARA** I have another question. So prior to the developer buying it, was it just a house in the community that people  
**OLUWAFEMI:** knew to respect?

**TARA HUGHES:** It was not.

**TARA** Oh.  
**OLUWAFEMI:**

**TARA HUGHES:** It was still used as living units. There were tenants. One of the units was vacant, one was occupied. But it was treated as a normal two-flat. And this is something that, really, it's causing a movement throughout, I think, Chicago and other cities as well.

More recently, we've started the process for preserving the Muddy Waters' Chicago home. Muddy Waters-- I did my own research, in addition to the giant packets that they give us to look through. I did my own research and went back and listened to a lot of his songs, and learned a lot.

You remember the beats from a child. But once you hear the lyrics now, it's going to blow your mind. Just a heads-up if you go and listen.

But he also was in a two-flat, him and his family. And there's a photo that exists within the property of Muddy Waters and his wife holding their granddaughter. And she is living now today and she manages the property, her and her daughter.

And they were the ones that spoke up on behalf of the family at the hearings for the commission for preserving the property. And they're very much in support of this decision and want to preserve his legacy. So it's things like this.

And why now is what we're saying. Well, different commissions, different advocacy groups, we are stepping into spaces that we traditionally haven't gone. And we are telling communities that there's value in preserving, whether it's your legacy, whether it's an important place, event, whatever the case may be, it's worth it. And we need to do it. We as a people, we as a city, we have to change and transform and evolve what we've done traditionally for preservation.

**TARA** Yeah, it's so interesting, because I went to Amherst College for undergrad. And Emily Dickinson's dad used to teach there or something. So the Emily Dickinson house is now like a museum. And I think back in the day, Uma Thurman's dad used to teach at Amherst College, and she had lived in the Emily Dickinson house before they turned into a museum.

And it's a thing that they all talk about. They're like, can you believe that people were just living in Emily Dickinson's house? And I'm like, I guess. It's a house.

But in certain cultures, they're like, Emily Dickinson's house must be preserved. When something is important to your culture, you have to speak up and say it. And to me, like, I would just be like, it's Emily Dickinson's house. I guess preserve it.

But it's the same way. For them, they're like, it's unfathomable that normal, everyday people are just living in this house with their kids. I'm like, I can't believe that people were just living in Emmett Till's house for years? I'm shocked. It's like, you have to speak up for what's important in your community, and you have to fight for it and get it preserved.

**TARA HUGHES:** Yes, absolutely.

**DARIEN CARR:** I think the point on preservation is so important in light of property and property dynamics. I'm currently doing research on the Harlem Renaissance. And I'm focusing on rent parties, and thinking about how rent parties were a way for tenants to have events that and generate money for rent, and how that exists outside of traditional architectural idea of property.

Similarly in undergrad, I was doing a research in DC in the context of U Street, in the context of a genre of music down there called go-go music. And so often, people felt like they owned U Street back when white flight was happening and it was like the hood. But then all of a sudden now, U Street is the most gentrified place. And a lot of people felt like they were culturally displaced and lost ownership there, even though they had claimed it culturally through life.

And right now, in both Harlem and DC, music is being a proxy for life. And I think that in the context of cities, this is such an important conversation to be having, because so often, it's all erased because property isn't owned by the people who are making these cultures sometimes. And that's what makes those cultures more important.

And as I was thinking about the question, I was thinking about these points. And I'm like, wow, this is why this is so important. So this is a long-winded way of saying cosign-- it's so inspiring to hear and imagine cities where culture is not being erased all the time.

**TARA HUGHES:** I can just add on to that, too, Darien, because you're making some great points in there, that preservation is a balancing act. There's a fine line between preservation and development. What is worth preserving and when is a good time to develop? When is a good time to not preserve and instead develop?

And I think previously, and a lot of times throughout time, a lot of these communities were gentrified because their place and their space was not identified as an area worth saving. Their culture wasn't identified as a heritage worth saving. And so now we're moving in a direction of understanding our flaws in the past-- our flawed way of thinking, our flawed way of completely disregarding certain peoples and their contributions to the built environment.

And we're understanding that, hey, now we need to understand what's important to them. Not just what's important to us as city officials. What's important to those communities and what do they deem worth saving?

And so now, preservation is starting to have a more equitable lens, which it did not before I think there's still a delicate balance with power dynamics, political dynamics. Also, traditionally, preservation has had a correlation with gentrification, or places becoming really expensive and the original folks not being able to afford it anymore. And so there's a stigma around preservation in some of our communities as well that we're currently working as a current board to address. So it's a fine balance, and I think that there's definitely a lot of things worth saving in addition to buildings that are part of our built environment, to your point.

**DARIEN CARR:** Thank you so much, Tiara, for coming on the podcast. We've really appreciated the conversation and all of your thoughts.

**TARA HUGHES:** Well, thank you guys so much.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**TARA** I'm Tara Oluwafemi.

**OLUWAFEMI:**

**DARIEN CARR:** And I'm Darien Carr.

**TARA** And you've been listening to *The Nexus*, a product of the African-American Design Nexus at the Harvard  
**OLUWAFEMI:** Graduate School of Design. Today's episode was produced and edited by Maggie Janik. And we would like to thank DJ Eway for theme music. To learn more about the African-American Design Nexus, visit us online at [aadm.gsd.harvard.edu](http://aadm.gsd.harvard.edu).