

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**AMY** Hi, everyone. I am Amy Gonzalez.

**GONZALEZ:**

**ESESUA** And I'm Esesua Ikpefan.

**IKPEFAN:**

**AMY** And we are master of landscape architecture and doctor of design students at the GSD. *The Nexus* is produced in conjunction with the commitment of the Frances Loeb Library to acquire and create an open access bibliography of various media suggested by the community at the intersection of race and design.

**GONZALEZ:**

**ESESUA** Today we have a group of exciting guests with us. First we have the pleasure of having Akil and Seth Scafe Smith from RESOLVE Collective. RESOLVE is an interdisciplinary design collective that combines architecture, engineering, technology, and art to address social challenges. They have delivered numerous projects, workshops, publications, and talks in the UK and across Europe, all of which look toward realizing just and equitable visions of change in our built environment. Much of their work aims to provide platforms for the production of new knowledge and ideas whilst collaborating and organizing to help build resilience in their communities.

**IKPEFAN:**

An integral part of this way of working means designing with and for young people and underrepresented groups in society. RESOLVE Collective's design practices encompass both physical and systemic intervention, exploring ways of using a project site as a resource and working with different communities as stakeholders in the short- and long-term management of projects. For RESOLVE, design carries more than aesthetic value. It is also a mechanism for political and socioeconomic change. Welcome, Akil and Seth.

**SETH SCAFE** Thank you for having us.

**SMITH:**

**ESESUA** We also have the pleasure of having Ama Gisèle with us today. Ama Gisèle is an artist, writer, and filmmaker from Queens, New York. She graduated from Amherst College with a BA in English and Black studies. There, she completed her first short story collection entitled *there are sharp things in the ground and her hands are soft*.

**IKPEFAN:**

From there, she expanded her practice to filmmaking, writing and directing her first short film, entitled *Be Like Me*, in 2020. Her second and most recent project is called *Convergence*, an experimental documentary and dance piece that explores intimacy, connection, and vulnerability. Welcome, Ama.

**AMA GISELE:** Thank you for having me.

**ESESUA**

So we'd just like to kick off today's episode by getting into some of your recent projects that you've all been doing. And we noticed that you have all done work that sits deeply in issues surrounding identity and space in Black communities. Your recent collaboration, Akil and Seth, with Skin Deep for their first editorial season is called *Local*. And the word, in itself, holds a lot of meaning and contestations, but what I think I found most interesting in your statement about this issue being-- and to quote you-- "about the locals that are part of architecture," if you don't mind, I'd like you to speak a bit more of this definition of local, its relationship to architecture, and what, essentially, inspired you to engage with a project that highlights this connection.

**IKPEFAN:**

**AKIL SCAFE**

**SMITH:**

Definitely. So the project started from a longstanding partnership and collaboration we have with Skin Deep, who are an organization or platform that work on race and culture and kind of strive towards this kind of vision of equity in the city and in the UK.

And so we came up in and around lots of groups like Skin Deep. And we were all working in our own local area that's in London. And we were working towards trying to affect that local area. And so we saw ourselves as part of this ecosystem through which we were trying to affect and transform our area for a more equitable vision.

And that longstanding relationship, I guess, had been evolving and we were really keen to try and work on something collaborative but also kind of self initiated. And so we were really interested in exploring other people's locals and how we then catalyze and build upon existing relationships from our own practice in other places in the UK, specifically with underrepresented communities in those places.

So we came to this idea of exploring three different cities-- London, Birmingham, and Sheffield-- and different social infrastructure within that city, so community centers, groups that look at racial justice through art practice, and youth centers. And we looked back and reflected on some old collaborations of ours and chose to try and build those up.

So that's where the onus came. And to think about locals and local people and locales of being part of this canon of architecture, I think, was something that was implicit in the way in which those groups will be using space.

In Birmingham, MAIA, the group that we're working with, really, really amazing organization, they're using and appropriating these new spaces that sit amongst an old, unequivally designed space, a space in which inequality had been kind of designed in, had been baked into the fabric of the space. And they use these types of spaces in order to then create room and to create local infrastructures for different creative groups, for people who are looking to use music recording, to use artistic practices, to use food as a way to connect with one another. So they were using space in a really interesting way.

Similarly, in Sheffield, Sadacca, who are an old standing Caribbean community center, they were using and appropriating an industrial heritage of the city and reusing these types of spaces to connect Caribbean diaspora across the city. So how people were using architecture was implicit. I guess it wasn't architecture with a capital A, but it was something that was really the object of the project.

**AMY**

**GONZALEZ:**

Thank you. So Ama, your latest work, *Convergence*, you describe it as an experimental documentary. It's just very beautiful, expressive dancing against these equally beautiful backdrops of landscape. And to me, it has this kind of beautiful, hazy feeling of watching a dream. Can you speak more about *Convergence*, both generally, but also related to some of the things that Akil has touched on?

**AMA GISELE:** Yeah. *Convergence* was born, I guess, in early 2021. I was living in LA, and I had moved to LA about six weeks before the pandemic. And it's based on a book, *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*, by Bhanu Kapil, where she takes 12 questions-- and she's of Indian descent, but she spends a lot of time in the UK. And so she goes back and forth, asking people these questions as a way to connect.

And I thought, post-pandemic, living in a city that I never really got to explore, that it would be a really cool project to try to ask these questions and develop a sense of intimacy with people that I knew marginally, people that I didn't know, people that I knew really well. It was a collection. And it turned into this really beautiful experimental piece.

And in terms of what drew me to Seth and Akil's work, I think they were talking about an interdisciplinary approach to work really resonated with me. As I just discussed, there's so many different ways to approach the art, whether it's through food, whether it's through music, whether it's through architecture, with or without a capital A. In my practice, I'm trying to be more interdisciplinary. Obviously, this is a film mostly, but it incorporates dance, it incorporates documentary style elements.

And I think space was a really important part of this film. Because I didn't get to explore LA, I really wanted to play with landscape, I really wanted to be outside, and I really wanted to show LA in its beauty. And I'm really happy with how it came together.

**AMY GONZALEZ:** Wonderful Yeah it was beautiful. So Akil and Seth as designers, and Ama, as a filmmaker, you both are engaging with space. Something that caught my ear earlier that Akil said was the idea of inequality baked, being designed, into space. And Ama, you've spoken about inspiring feelings in a space invoking particular emotions or reactions in your viewers through the ways that you manipulate space.

So I'd really like to take a second to talk about that since I think you all have very interesting perspectives on it. So we're really interested in how you make decisions about how to use space. Who fills that space? Who is highlighted or included? And just as importantly, what is excluded?

**SETH SCAFE SMITH:** I think our work in space comes from this line that we straddle between initially being the local and then becoming the practitioner, developing our practice as a way of understanding the potential of space and the potential space has to bring people together, but also to stimulate the imaginary of, particularly, minority groups who are usually left out of this decision-making process.

But I think what we're always very careful to do is not to take on the position of authority and to determine and dictate who then uses that space and how that space is then used in the future, but rather to open up and build a much more-- I use the word "much more inclusive," but perhaps it's more like participatory process of creating space.

And one of the ways that we've done that and arrived to that is emotional mapping, which is an exercise that, in 2019, we developed. And the reason why we developed it is because we were really interested in this idea that people can exist within the same city, within the same neighborhood, within the same town, but experience a completely different city. And you can be walking down the same street but experience a completely different connection to that place, and it's not because of the bricks and mortar and the [INAUDIBLE]. It's because of the feelings, and the emotions, and the connections, and the histories that are overlaid in that space.

We use that as a kind of tool to explore spatial condition and explore possibilities with different communities and different groups of people-- old, young, from different kind of backgrounds. And I think that, as I was saying, rather than give us a real stringent model of how to build space, what it did is it allowed us what we find a really amazing way to open up these conversations about space to people who feel like they might have been left out of those conversations in the past or just haven't arrived to that conversation yet. So it's kind of like-- it's how do we flip that conversation so it's less about what can and can't and more about possibilities.

**AMA GISELE:** I think the word "potential" really stuck out to me as we were looking for spaces to shoot *Convergence* in it was important for us to find a space that had a lot of natural light, mostly because having been in spaces where there isn't a lot of natural light, it just inspires a feeling of-- the word "dread" came to mind. I think that might be a little dramatic, but it doesn't inspire openness, which is what we were trying to get at, and vulnerability and intimacy, which was the point of *Convergence*.

So looking for spaces that naturally were inviting. And that had a lot to do with design. I think, particularly, because we're trying to find a shot, the space matters, and then all the different potential for shots in the space matter.

So it's finding walls that are interesting-- AKA not white. It's pretty hard, actually, to find a non-white wall. And in LA, luckily, there are tons of studios. But trying to find spaces that were just more interesting to the eye was really important to us.

And then our outdoor spaces, trying to find spaces that I think incorporated all of the things about LA that I love. So a lot of nature, a lot of mountains. Our main shot for the dance portion was a mix of greenery and brown/orangey mountain ranges up in northern Los Angeles. And we actually shot it in an orchard. And I think that was important to inscribe that feeling of the earth, of home, which was important for the piece.

**AMY** Great. Akil, would you like to say something as well?

**GONZALEZ:**

**AKIL SCAFE SMITH:** I think I'm really interested in this idea of location as both a mechanism for filming and also an integral part of a kind of architectural or spatial practice. I think the way that Ama describes location-finding is very similar to how we think of the site as a resource in our practice. We're often scoping things out. We're often going on the hunt or foraging areas, both for physical materials, but also for emotional types of materials, for nontangible material, for memories.

And the processes that we develop, although kind of tangible, are always around speaking to this plethora of experience, both intangible and tangible. How do we reconnect memory and place? How do we understand this vision of home and how people project this idea of home into these places? So I think there's a lot of harmony, a lot of concord, between those two types of practices. I think it's a really interesting way of framing these things.

**AMY GONZALEZ:** That's great. I love some of the things you said about making the intangible tangible. Sometimes I like to think that is what things like architecture are. I'm wondering how you feel about that. Do you feel as if the work that you do is that, is to make the intangible something tangible?

**SETH SCAFE SMITH:** You've got Seth now. I think there is an element of that certainly. There's an element of translation in the work that we try and do. But then it's also important to think about architecture as one of the tools that we use in a plethora of tools that we have to create space and actually take it, kind of breaking down some of these existing hierarchies that we have between the discipline and then the product of that discipline, and thinking about all of us, all of the different actors within this process, as agents of space or architects of that space, both physically and emotionally or kind of intangibly.

I think that's one of the processes that we do more so. So there's a translation process, but it's less about translating the complexities and detail that exists within a discipline into a more understood fashion. There are a lot of people who do that and do that very, very well. And whilst that is important, I think there's this much more kind of meta way of thinking about it and there's a much more-- we say, or we think-- equitable way of thinking about that translation process. And it's about valuing and platforming some of these different actors, architects, agents of this big spatial picture that we work within.

**AMY GONZALEZ:** Ama, as a filmmaker, how do you feel about that intangibility? Do you feel as if your practice is making the intangible tangible?

**AMA GISELE:** Yeah I think that's a really, really wonderful way to describe it. I was writing something for *Convergence*, and I wrote, "What's so special about the space we created? I can't articulate it but I know I felt it." And I think that was a really big thing for us, was just, does it feel right?

And I think, as a director, my job, mostly, is to create the optimal conditions for the magic to happen. I can't force those little moments on screen that really make a film or any piece of work powerful. It's more about creating all of the conditions for things to be as open as they can be and using all the tools in my toolkit to do that.

And I think, similarly, for architecture, you can build a space, you can have all the hopes and wants and dreams and desires for a space, but until people start using that space, do we really know what it is?

**ESESUA IKPEFAN:** I actually that you are transitioning to some of the personal elements of the work that you all do. And so far you've all mentioned your work deals with connection, with diasporas, with intimacy, with agency, and memory. And while these are all kind of unifying words, they're also deeply personal, I think.

And I was just wondering what parts of yourself-- creator or designer or filmmaker-- that you see reflected in your work and how you navigate that position of being in a complicated place where you sometimes have to narrate other people's experiences but essentially it's still subject to being influenced by your own personal experiences. So I was just wondering if, I guess, Akil or Seth, you could speak a bit about how you see yourself reflected in the work that you do.

**AKIL SCAFE SMITH:** OK. Akil speaking. I think that there's always a tension in how we work with and design spaces in the sense of exactly what you said between this kind of battle of authorship and spaces, as we know, they take on these lives as a result of the lived experiences and the spatial practices of just everyday people in those spaces. I think it's very easy to assign a space to a function. And we do that all the time when we're working out how we produce something, whether it's a process or whether it's an object or whether it's a full space.

But that function inevitably gets overwritten and overrun and takes on a life of its own. And I think, perhaps, one of the ways in which we understand that is just to be comfortable with the idea of gradual decay of authorship when it comes to how we create, or co-create, or kind of dissolve spaces. I think there's an inevitability to how things end up taking on a life of their own.

And our aspect of design, our intention with design, is never to overconscribe those types of things. I think we react quite viscerally against this 20th century ideal of the auteur or the gesamtkunstwerk. It's very much around a participatory process, but really not with an illusion of grandeur towards a kind of fully democratized space. I think it's really just about a contended space, a contested space, in which our identity jostles with the identities of others. So that's really important for us, and especially when we're working in places that aren't our own backyard.

We did a lot of work, in the start, in our own area, "in our own ends," like we say in London. But since then, we've gone around the UK, around Europe, to places which are really, really not ours. And how we connect to those, I guess, always starts with this acknowledgment of it not being our place, but thinking about how we bring some of those places, how we bring our ends with us when we're designing and when we're co-creating with people there.

**ESESUA**  
**IKPEFAN:** Thank you. And Ama, I'd also like you to speak a bit to this. And I think I really still hung up on this idea of decay of authorship that happens through your work. And I would just love to hear your thoughts about how this happens or if it happens at all in your work in filmmaking.

**AMA GISELE:** Yeah, I think that's a really beautiful way to say it. I think I have a little bit less of that in filmmaking because I'm the editor. I'm the director. At least for this project, I was involved in pretty much every aspect you could think of.

So I think my authorship was pretty strong. And I think that required, though, a lot of trust from the participants, which I was really proud that they trusted me with a lot of the vulnerable things that they shared because I got to pick and choose. And similar to even this, I told people, you know, if you don't want something in there, if you said something that you definitely know that you don't want out there, like, just let me know.

And I think those types of agreements, those types of setting the scene help inscribe the amount of trust that is necessary to make a project like *Convergence*. And because I have so much, I guess, quote unquote "power" to sort of put whatever I would want in there, I think it was important for me, as a director, to level the playing field a little bit, which is why I decided to interview myself, actually.

I felt like if I'm asking people to come and be as vulnerable as they are with me, I should have the guts to do that myself. For me, it's more about finding ways in the process to share the power and to make everybody feel as safe as possible.

**ESESUA**  
**IKPEFAN:** Yeah. And I'll just go off of that and you describe the process and how much of yourself goes into this. And I think a crucial part of all the work that you all do is the labor that actually goes into this. And I think this is something that gets left behind in a lot of conversations that we have about these kinds of projects. We end up focusing a lot on the end product. But I was just very interested in how you organize that labor and how you encourage creativity given the long timelines that you face. And especially for RESOLVE and also yourself, Ama, you both discuss working with communities, with people, how much involvement do you rely on from these people.

And if you could just give us a brief walkthrough of what that process is like for you. And Ama, if you could start that off for us, and Akil or Seth, you can continue.

**AMA GISELE:** Yeah. I think probably one of the hardest parts is preserving creativity given long timelines. In the grand scheme of things, *Convergence* took about a year, which is not a long timeline for a film. But personally, I get bored pretty easily. So I try to work as quickly as possible. And that's been a theme in my work since I started. I make most of my films in about a year.

But yeah, I think preserving creativity, for me, it's a very self-motivated factor. I was working while I was making *Convergence*, so a lot of it is, OK, I'm just going to, after work, even if I'm tired, I'm going to keep editing. And I think watching the footage and being sort of so attached to how good I want the outcome to be, how authentic I want the outcome to be, that was also a motivating factor as well. But it is a long process, and it's sitting down with my editor almost every week, making tiny changes. It's hard. I don't feel like I'm describing this as well. So maybe I'll add on after Akil and Seth. But yeah, it's not as easy as I thought.

**ESESUA  
IKPEFAN:** Yeah. So Ama, you've described your process and the labor that goes into this process. And for Akil and Seth, I was really curious about how you deal with the different transformations that happen or how you leave room for the transformations that happen in your work. And that is to say how you adapt or include adaptable elements in your design to allow it to morph as it intersects with people and their experiences.

And if you could just speak more to those relationships that you talk about at the very beginning, when you talk about the relationships you formed and your reliance on these relationships you formed with the communities, and how they inspire you, and how this relates to the adaptability or if, in fact, you make your projects adaptable because of this.

**SETH SCAFE  
SMITH:** Yes. Seth Scafe Smith back on the mic. It's a good question. I'm going to try and be as concise as possible, but I'm going to describe it through a case study of a project that I think actually captures a lot of the things that you said quite well because there's a recognition of all of the different transformations that a project in a particular space can go through.

And I think we, as practitioners, need to learn that as we develop our practice. It's not something that anyone comes to you and says, this is exactly how it's going to be done. It differs every project you go on because people have their time commitments, especially when you work with, let's say, like, marginalized communities or communities that are outside of this particular creative process. You have to recognize their time commitment and the value that they put on their own time. So unless you've got the kind of same amount that you're paying yourself as a professional to cover these people's time, you can't expect the same input.

So that changes throughout each project. If we take the first project that I think I mentioned-- or maybe I haven't introduced-- is a project that we did in 2019 in Sheffield. And we're really just interested in how we could use this small gallery space that we had to create a space that allowed us to explore these different relationships that people have with their city.

And that was kind of working with young people, working with residents and resident association, working with the local artist community, working with some people in the kind of music scene. And that process went through some of these really interesting stages of transformation that we uncovered at each step of the process. And the space then reflected that. And the way that we built a flexible enough space to reflect that was really important for us.

So the initial kind of process where we started to understand what the space might look like was done in collaboration with two art schools and a residents association. And that was actually introducing-- we got a really amazing opportunity to get introduced to the city and to these different relationships and layers of the city through the eyes of these groups of people that we worked with. That then gave us a really good understanding, or what we thought was a quite good understanding and relationship with this new space for us.

We then allowed that to influence how we wanted the space to be designed, but also, importantly, how we wanted the space to be programmed. What kind of conversation do we want to have in there, what kind of activities do you want people to be willing to do in that space. At that stage, the kind of transformation that you're talking about, the space switch that turned from this kind of thing that was co-created and co-designed into something that was then going to be, let's say, co-programmed, at that point, it became much more about how do we allow and facilitate networks of artists, musicians, and people who need space to express themselves and want to use that space to express themselves. How do we then transform this space so it can platform those groups throughout the summer that we were there. And that's where we had to think about the flexibility. We had to think about some of the prompts that we had in the space, some of the ways that we invited people in. We had activities that invited people in.

We also made it kind of an accessible space. So we offered it out as a free rehearsal space for music groups and musicians in the city because we wanted people to be encouraged to come and use it. So we had to then think about how are we going to then invite these people that we want to work with. They're not always going to be the same people that were involved in the design process because that was, I guess, a little bit more formal. We had a relationship with these groups, and then it moved into something that was much more explorative.

And that, then, I think, contributed a lot to the afterlife of the space. So when the residency was done, it then became more about relationships that we formed and that people formed through that summer, through that space. The Garage is what we call it. Those relationships are still things that we're exploring now.

And again, that meant it's kind of moved from this space that has been co-designed to, then, something that's been programmed. And now it's kind of moved. Its third phase is something that is imagined for the future, like what kind of relationships and connections and possibilities are relevant to these people that we worked with.

That actually, interestingly, is how we arrived at these conversations with *Local*. So a lot of the people we're speaking to in the Sheffield context through *Local* were relationships that formed that we had formed through that space in 2019. So that's a very roundabout way, but hopefully I've explained that kind of well and tried to hold it down to a case study and a project that we've delivered in a space that we're also unfamiliar with.

**AMY GONZALEZ:** Great. So I want to talk a little bit about this process of transformation a little bit more. And I think it's interesting because, in both of your practices, you're going through a lot of different drafts. I'm thinking about, Ama, how you were talking about, earlier, you will work on editing, and you'll be coming in, and you'll be changing very small things one at a time. And also, of course, architecture, you have your first draft and then your second draft. It's constantly changing, right, both of your works.

And so we gain a lot from that transformation. Maybe we gain some type of refinement from it. But I'm always wondering, do you think we lose anything in the process of transformation? The original content that was had, whether that be in the form of film or in the form of design, as that changes and as it's refined, do you think that anything is lost in that? And Ama, if you could kick us off with that, and then either Seth or Akil, you could chime in as well.

**AMA GISELE:** Yeah. I think a lot is lost. I think about when you read an interview, at the end, it goes, "edited for clarity." I feel like that's what I do. I edit it for length and clarity because nobody wants to watch 10 hours of footage-- or maybe some people do.

Yeah, I think that there's so much gained from being able to sit in the creative process and really refine-- because you're refining the film, but you're also refining your intention. You're refining what exactly you wanted from this, from-- at least for *Convergence*, from the people who spoke to me.

But a lot is lost. And I think about the phrase, kill your darlings. There were so many beautiful things that people said that I just couldn't include, for length, for clarity, for whatever reason. But I do think that there's a sort of beauty in these things that, at least for me, that only I know was said, or the people on my team know was said, or the person who said it knows was said, and how, even though it's not in the actual film, I like to believe that the essence of a lot of what we've talked about, a lot of what was talked about in the film that didn't get included, is still in there.

I think, sort of in a broader sense, there's an energy that we all bring to our projects or that we're trying to bring out of our projects. And the things that are said and unsaid, the things that are designed and taken out or put in or not put in, I think that those all still tie-in to the final version or the final vision of our projects.

I did want to speak on limitation, I think, a little bit, because I think limitation, in my practice, is very important. As an independent filmmaker, I sort of thrive off of limitation. I have to have boundaries, because if I didn't have boundaries, then I think I wouldn't know where to go.

And as much as people think of limitations is sort of a negative thing, I think a bit more as a structure. And I think of how can I build my vision inside of this structure. And that, I think, helps keep me on task. I think it helps prevent me from flying off into the ether with my ideas. I think that limitation is one of the most positive things about my praxis. And I think it allows me a lot of freedom, actually, to create because I'm tethered to something because I am grounded. And I think, in order to make something that is material in the real world, you have to remain grounded.

**AKIL SCAFE SMITH:** Akil speaking. I think there's a really beautiful convergence-- not to make a pun-- between that type of practice and ours. And I think where filmmaking and spatial practice become really synergetic practices really is in this-- that phrase you said, Ama, kill your darlings, is something-- I don't think we say it explicitly-- I think is really heavily featured in all of our practices.

Our practices are very nebulous. The way we co-create is always a really kind of roundabout way. We are process-driven designers. So we're not designing product in some ways. What we design is always unfinished and is always the result of these entangled and kind of stretching conversations.

And so as a result, we can't always include that in something that's physically manifest. And the idea isn't to do that. I think we really try and avoid this idea of being didactic, this idea of instructing and telling people what to do-- you must sit here; you must look at this; you must read this; you must know this-- and really start to use space as a way of questioning those things. And in some ways, I guess that kind of comes and has some parallels in how you leave a film to be interpreted or you have a cinematic practice that leaves things to be interpreted, that kind of thrives of the multiple projections of what something could be, the sorts of possibilities that Seth is talking about.

And that's really where we try and sit. We really try and dwell in that space in which we're opening up possibility and space for interpretation, opening up a space to be written and rewritten by those inhabitants or by those users. And in order to do that, we really do need to kill those darlings, to kill some of the details that might overprescribe a space or to kill some of those conversations and some of those experiences, not necessarily to remove them from the project, because I think they always sit in the experience of the project, but to remove them from overprescription, to remove them from taking some form of didacticism in the space, a way in which people have to experience exactly what it was that we did and what we thought and how we constructed to leave more things to the imagination, to leave things to be lost in a process. That process of losing, I think, is something that's interesting to try and open out and to broaden for other people.

**ESESUA**

**IKPEFAN:**

I think part of what you've both talked about deals with this idea of exclusion as a practice or a process of refinement, but I think there's also the other side of this work that you do where there is a very intentional kind of inclusion or creating spaces that highlight a certain kind of inclusion in your work. And I'm wondering, in relationship to this, how intersectionality plays into your praxis, and more specifically, how you design spaces or projects that are meant to have entry points for underrepresented or groups that are historically excluded.

And I would just love if, Ama, you could speak to this a little bit.

**AMA GISELE:**

Yeah, I think, when thinking about the participants of *Convergence*, I thought a lot of convergence. I thought a lot about who I wanted to include. And it mostly was people in the film are people of color who are from various, quote unquote, "underrepresented" groups. And that was on purpose. I think that it was important for me to represent those voices, particularly because some of the questions are so vulnerable. I think that the perspective of those folks, just it's not heard enough, and I wanted to include them.

**ESESUA**

**IKPEFAN:**

I think that also links to a larger topic-- and we've talked about this a little bit, earlier on, about the agency of the communities that we work with, especially when you're dealing with groups who have been, like you said, underrepresented or historically excluded. And I was wondering, Seth and Akil, if you could speak about how you balance what you want for the communities that you're working for.

You spoke briefly about what the communities want for themselves, but I think it also is tied to what you hope to produce for those communities and how you balance that with the processes of your work.

**SETH SCAFE SMITH:** Yeah. You got Seth back on the mic. I guess it's a challenging one because you will always have your aspirations, especially when you're working with communities and people who are quite close to your ideological aims, let's say.

But I guess an example might be a project that we did last year with the Victoria and Albert Museum in East London. And it was about a museum that they're forming in an area of East London that is having a lot of development, but a lot of it, over the last, let's say, 10 to 15 years, that development has left out certain communities, often in quite close proximity to the site of investment. And this was a kind of long-term action research residency that wanted to look at the role of young people in four particular boroughs. And a borough is just like a district in the city.

Now, with a project that's quite open-ended and strategic like that, you can have these really massive aspirations. And I think it's important to have them because that allows you to take your interactions and your-- because we did a lot of workshoppings. It allows you to take the intentions of your workshops and the aspirations of your project to quite great heights. It allows you to talk about some really amazing things, talk about institutional transformation and how these spaces and these places might become more equitable. But I think, then, the important thing is, when you're delivering the work, and especially when that then becomes spatial, as a lot of our projects does, like with an installation or with an exhibition, it's important to just the value of the voices that you're platforming and the value of platforming those voices in certain spaces.

Sometimes it's actually the contention-- and so the tension those voices, in certain spaces, exist within and the presence of them-- that tension and that presence, I think, which is the important thing. And it checks your own aspirations. And you might not necessarily achieve all of these amazing things that you want to do, but I think just by creating those tensions, and putting them in those positions, and allowing that conversation to continue, and creating spaces that ask questions rather than provide definitive answers, I think, automatically doing a lot for your initial aspirations and doing a lot for the people that you're working with, although it is very hard to-- in this point around kind of accessibility and agency, it's like you have to sometimes check yourself and your own intentions and your own desires of what agency looks like, and think about agency in the relevant context that you're working within.

**ESESUA IKPEFAN:** I have a question just to sort of add on to that. How would you guys describe an equitable space? Obviously, with accessibility, there's tangible equitable elements. But I'm talking about that intangible. How would you define that?

**SETH SCAFE SMITH:** With great difficulty, I think. And that's because it's a really good question, because it's like I don't think you're often presented with a space that you can say, yeah, this ticks all the boxes for an equitable space.

But what I can describe is equitable visions that I can see people trying to translate into some kind of spatial proposition. But that does not mean that it's going to meet everyone's expectations for what equitability means. I'm not trying to do like a classic politician and avoid the question, but that's actually the kind of difficulty in the environment we put ourselves in, especially as Black practitioners who are trying to put some vision forward.

Akil mentioned, already, MAIA, a group in Birmingham. And we sing their praises so much. And one of the reasons why-- me, personally, one of the reasons why I sing their praises so much is that that's what they're trying to do. What they are trying to do is deeply embed equitability, and this idea that you need to create larger platforms for those who previously didn't have a platform and prioritize the experiences, and importantly, the imaginations and the possible visions of a future, with these communities in whatever spatial proposition you have.

And you can work with artists, designers, architects, anyone, to try and realize that vision. And I think there's someone who we see as truly inspiring when they put that forward. Sorry. Not to duck it. And I think Akil could jump on the 1-2's now as well.

**AKIL SCAFE SMITH:**

Well, I was just going to flip the question on you, Ama. I'd be interested in knowing, from your perspective, especially from behind the camera, do you ever see spaces-- do you ever see the potential for spaces to be equitable? And what types of spaces do you see? And what type of spaces do you encounter that you feel have that type of potential?

**AMA GISELE:**

Well, in my opinion, no, I don't really see a lot of spaces that are equitable. And my definition of equitable is sort of, will everybody that I envision being a part of this naturally feel safe in this space? And the answer is usually no. I just think that has a lot to do with, also, the construction of LA is very much-- there's the studio, there's the Hollywood of LA, and then there's real LA. It's where the neighborhoods are, where people live, where people have been for generations.

So in order to even shoot this space, I had to bring people from their neighborhoods into these studios, which there's no way I can necessarily guarantee that they're going to feel safe, particularly if I don't know them.

But yeah, when we were looking at spaces, it was important to me to find a place that was at least close to South LA, which is where a lot of people that I worked with live. It was really important to me to try to find a landscape area that was close, which I didn't. The area that we chose ended up being an hour outside of what we call "proper LA." And that is just because that's where folks have access to space like that. The place where we shot, it's at a vineyard, and it's expensive, and it's in a much richer neighborhood than a lot of the people that I interviewed come from.

So I think it's really hard because films cost money. And particularly in LA, where film is such a viable industry, there are spaces carved out for those industries that are sort of intentionally exclusive to the people who actually live there, who actually grew up there, who actually maybe are in LA but aren't there to do film.

So no, I don't think I saw a lot of equitable spaces. And in my film practice, I don't see a lot of equitable spaces in general. And so it's up to me, I think, as a director, to balance that out and to try to make it as inviting, as accessible, to make it so that people feel safe.

**AMY GONZALEZ:**

So it seems like a word that is constantly coming up is of space. We talked about that earlier. And I want to keep that going for a little bit. I'm actually going to pull a quote from Seth and Akil's mission statement. It says "Exploring ways of using a project site as a resource and working with different communities as stakeholders in the short and long term management of projects. For us, design carries more than aesthetic value. It is also a mechanism for political and socioeconomic change."

And that really struck me, because it makes me start to wonder about, how do you see your designs as future spaces? And also the fact that these spaces exist, and then they will be occupied, and then they will evolve and they will change. How do you feel about your lack of control in that?

**AKIL SCAFE**

**SMITH:**

Akil speaking. And I know Seth will say something after me as well. I just want to follow on from what Ama was saying, and then try and unite that with this question here. And I think, in that lack of the presence of equitable spaces, an almost a kind of inherent paradox that this idea that an equitable space can exist within an inherently inequitable justice system, land rights system, et cetera, et cetera, that's where I think our practice-- ours and Ama's-- the camera, the tool, the camera, the type of space-transforming tool, and the number of processes and the types of collective and participatory processes that we endeavor to use to explore and to redefine space, I think that's where there's almost a kind of romantic allure to it.

To some extent-- and this is almost, maybe, kind of sadomasochistic, I think-- it'd be very difficult to reclaim equitable space. You know, it'd be very difficult to do these types of things which I think we find a lot of power in when we talk about justice and we talk about reclamation, when we talk about inverting and subverting power structures. I think that's all towards practicing activity rather than the acknowledgment or the creation of equitable spaces. I think equity is something which is a spectrum within which we try and operate, not the object with which we try and run towards. There's a lot in there. And I think there's something that's quite complex.

And then to revisit that question around our particular type of practice, the site of the resource, again, is a kind of acknowledgment of that avilance of these types of spaces, the acknowledgment that there are spaces that are being produced by much wider structures of injustice and inequitable structures, but that the tools that we're concerned with, those tools by which we can forage material, those tools by which we can access, and use, and catalyze existing knowledges of space, I think those types of tools are quite inspiring for us because they see these things not as final statements. They see these spaces and these systems of oppression or these systems of [INAUDIBLE] not as finality but rather as these things by which to be resisted, to be reclaimed, but also to be used, to be subverted. Those are the types of language that I think that we're really interested in when it comes to using these spaces and when it comes to practicing spatially, I think.

**SETH SCAFE**

**SMITH:**

Seth to jump in here. When we started, I guess, because we were younger and perhaps we were getting an introduction to some of these ideas, you do think a lot about the future and the future for your spatial proposition. I've used that term a lot, and I realize that. I don't want to be exclusive with the term, but sho-- what are you suggesting to this space is going to be.

And I think we were quite fixated on what that meant for the future for us and for our practice and for our space, because we all want a space. We all want to feel like we can kind of control and see through a space. It gives us so much power and so much agency, as we've used that term a lot as well.

But the more we've practiced, the more spaces that we've moved through, we start to find ourselves becoming much more committed to some of these things that Akil has mentioned-- to the process, to the methodology, to the tools that we develop, to the relationships that we form, but less to the space that we create and operate within and more accepting of this state of existence and nonexistence that we try and encourage a lot of the institutions that we work with to become comfortable with.

Now, it'd be contradictory for us to say that people need to be comfortable with that without us ourselves being comfortable with it, but it's a commitment to the kind of platonic form of what we're working with, this idea that we're trying to tease out. And hopefully it's translated in the relationships that we form and the practices that we build.

And *Local*, again, to go back to our project, is a great example of that, that commitment to the idea of what our practices are doing rather than the four walls of each practice, I think, is a way that we are starting to be able to try and navigate this future, because as we all know, the future is uncertain, the future is challenging, but also the future is repetitive.

And if we, unfortunately, repeat this commitment to some of these binding ideas of how we need to exist as an organization, as a collective, as a space, and then, sometimes, as an institution, then we find ourselves in danger of repeating those same problems, repeating those same habits.

**ESESUA**  
**IKPEFAN:** Yeah. I think, in this conversation about future spaces, I think it goes alongside while Ama has talked about when we talk about limitations. And I just wanted to bring this back up. And this idea about our limitations in envisioning or how our visions for equity might, in fact, be limited by our own experiences. And I'm wondering what you think about this and if it's something that has crossed your mind before.

**AMA GISELE:** Yeah, I think it has crossed my mind. And it's difficult to grapple with because I don't know what I don't know. And I think that's where I rely on my community. I think that's where I rely on other artists. I think that's where I rely on the youth. I think they inspire me a lot in terms of envisioning even bigger than what I had thought.

I also wanted to speak a little bit on time. And I think when we think about the future, for me, it represents a cycle. Like I think a lot of what we're experiencing and talking about now-- and I think about environmental rights and land rights and Indigenous rights-- a lot of what we're experiencing is sort of a Back to the Future type of thing, where even in film, a lot of filmmaking practices such as like TikTok, or YouTube, or vlogging, or actually really connected to Indigenous practices of recording in terms of short-form recording, or recording without editing, or recording without stopping.

And I think that maybe when we think about future, we're actually thinking about returning to a place that we've been and seeing that through our own lens.

**ESESUA**  
**IKPEFAN:** Yeah. And I think, just to go off of that a little bit. We're talking about futures, we're talking about limitations. And I think there is also the fact that a lot of the projects that you're going to do talk about this kind of cyclical aspect of looking at time. And a lot of the projects that you may work on may take on very different lives in the very diverse and sometimes opposing spaces that they may encounter. And I'm wondering how you grapple with this in your work. Or does it even matter at all?

**AMA GISELE:** In terms of the actual process, no, I don't think about how my film will be viewed a month from release or 10 years from release. But that, to me, is very exciting. I feel like releasing projects is one of my favorite parts for that very reason. It's because I don't know if this is going to be a magnum opus or if people are going to hate this in 10 years. And I find that exciting. I think, with more time comes more context. And I think about films like "Gone with the Wind" that, for many, are considered, like, seminal works that, for me, simply because I was born in the time that I was born in, it doesn't. It doesn't really carry any aesthetic or meaningful value to me because I think it's racist.

I think a lot of artists, particularly filmmakers, there's an ego about it in that works are supposed to be revered for years and years to come, but I don't really see my work in that way. I create it in the present time. And I think that's my job. In my own way, through my own lens, inscribe and have my stamp on this particular time and with these particular people in these particular spaces.

So when I'm creating my works, I don't think about the past or the future, I think about the present. And then when I release it, I try to release any sort of attachment to my ego about what people will think about this because I hold on to what I created it for as opposed to how other people ingest it.

**ESESUA**

Thank you. And I'm wondering, Akil and Seth, how you've dealt with the kinds of contradictions that come about from your work or if you have dealt with any kind of oppositions to the work that you've done, and how you deal with these things.

**IKPEFAN:**

**AKIL SCAFE**

**SMITH:**

Akil speaking. We often find that we're faced with opposition in our work. And I think that's sometimes the nature of working within the built environment. You're often in a kind of conflicting political socioeconomic space. So maybe to say more than just stating the obvious with the response to the question to draw on an example of a project in which we faced a lot of resistance from various groups or factors, but not a kind of bog-standard opposition, more like a kind of ideological point of conflict, I think when we were working on a project in Woolwich in South East London earlier this year, we were working in a local area in the town center.

And we were part of a process in which we were selecting and guiding the work of five local designers. So these were people who had come through a process that we set up, and guided by a number of different local committees, and there was a selection process, and then also a series of artistic practitioners, creative practitioners, in order to develop a piece of public work that would exist within the town center for two weeks. And then we acted as a type of infrastructure for the delivery of these works, and also helped to select the site in which these works were formed, based off their historical condition but also the lived heritage of this place. Woolwich is a really diverse space and is the product of lots of different cultures, lots of ethnicities and subcultures that went into the production of the place that we know as Woolwich, the iconography of Woolwich.

And in this project, we faced, I think, types of opposition which I think are not often thought of as directly opposing. Often that's because they become from inside. So for example, the perception of the types of sites that we were selecting-- we were often shortlisting a number of sites across Woolwich that included a lot of alleys. And a lot of these alleyways were vestiges of the old Victorian urban fabric. And so they were very dingy, they were quite dark, and they often contained or became the platform for different types of behavior, behaviors that were collectively seen as deviant, I guess. And also their perception was places that were very unsafe, especially for women, especially for young children. They were collectively seen as quite unsafe.

But a lot of these spaces ended up being the spaces that the local artists ended up choosing. And I think that was testament to their prevalence in the kind of psychological and the collective imaginaries of local people. These spaces which are often kind of shoved to the peripheries are also quite prevalent in people's collective imagination of their own area.

We faced a lot of opposition from the partners in the project, not an antagonistic opposition but one of opposing viewpoints and perception, as to why these were even figured in the first place. And I think that type of contestation was actually quite helpful for the result of the project, which ended up being a type of revelation, a type of way of rethinking how we see these alleys as part of the heritage of the site and sites for potential, but nonetheless contested sites, not to disprove or to dissuade previous views on those sites, but to include them within these type of overlapping histories.

I think there was also opposition from local stakeholders in terms of where these types of artworks would go and what these types of artworks would be. And those, I guess, are kind of more structural opposition. These are the things that become important when we start to think about the placement of these types of objects-- where they go, how they look.

But again, that type of opposition, I think, is something which really feeds a project. It feeds a complexity of a project. It endangers a project in many ways. It means that, sometimes, some things just can't happen. It means that sometimes that a vision or a kind of grand scheme or grand delusion ends up dissolving and not being able to be materialized. But it enriches the investigative nature of the project and means that we get to read the environment more.

And I think that's-- harking back to some of the things that we were saying, the projects that we're doing, we're designing processes. So we're thinking about how we read environments. We're not really thinking about how we deposit objects or products into the environment, but rather how can we create these processes that listen and develop our own understanding of these spaces.

And to harken back and to keep banging on with this parallel between filming, between Ama's work, I think that, in many ways, it's a type of camera. I think that we're trying to hold a type of lens to the environment through which to read it. And that just manifests in lots of different and weird ways.

**ESESUA  
IKPEFAN:**

You've all talked about your intentions, your processes, the transformations within your work, its futures, and finally, the contestations within these projects. And in *Nexus* podcast fashion, we wanted to conclude today by going back to some of your personal inspirations as designers and as a filmmaker, Ama.

And what is one work-- and it could be a book, a film, music, anything at all, that has inspired you in the past?

**AKIL SCAFE  
SMITH:**

So yesterday, we were reading a publication by a group that is quite close to us that we worked with in the past, before, called the Stewart Archives. It's a radical publishing house developed on the work of Stuart Hall, who was a really important cultural theorist of Caribbean origin in the UK, and inspired a lot of the practice and the conceptual framework through which, I guess, we work.

And STUART Archives are based around-- it's a tripartite endeavor. It's Rose Nordin, Priya Jay, and Amrita Dhallu, all three of whom we very deeply respect and whose practices and work, I think, are deep sources of inspiration for us. And the publication is called *Floating Margins*. That is a collection of essays, experiments, textual and graphic, recorded conversations, et cetera, around, to some extent, I guess, this idea of the living archive, but really tangibly looking into the various practices of, again, a real kind of collective and network of individuals with whom we have a really deep resonance with, broadening on topics around Black spatial justice, around topics of Carib spirituality and relationships to land, radical practices of healing, and how these spaces, how these textual spaces, can also become those spaces for healing.

So that's been really inspiration for us, even in the last 24 or 48 hours since we read this, but it precludes a deeper inspiration that we had thought from those others. And so I think we often talk about our heroes as being the people that we practice amongst and those idols as being the people past. And so we feel very deeply privileged to be able to work within an amalgam of heroes of people who are practicing whether it's people like Rosa-Johan Udoh, who we share studio spaces with, who we share practices with, who we share endeavors with, whether it's MAIA, the group in Birmingham that we consistently reference in the project, whether it's Skin Deep, who we worked with in *Local* and who we really try and drive towards in terms of our aims and ideals in terms of progressing one another's practices, and the whole kind of remit of practitioners whom with we share and hold space. So I would say that that is probably a deeper history of inspiration maybe condensed into this one publication, *Floating Margins*.

**AMA GISELE:** And for me, I would say-- I guess I'll talk about the book that I'm reading right now, which is *Lilith's Brood* by Octavia Butler. I could sing her praises forever, but I think she's an artist who actually saw the future. And when we talk about futures and we talk about how we want to create for futures, I think she was somebody who was creating literally outside of her time.

For context, *Lilith's Brood* is about a young woman named Lilith who is on an alien ship after Earth has decayed into an unusable land and an alien race has come and taken the few humans who are left over and are raising them, essentially-- not to give anything away.

But in reading this book, there's a lot of themes that I admire. I think the way she thinks about these themes are really fantastic. She talks about environmental degradation, obviously, which is a huge issue right now. She talks about autonomy for the body, for space, for place. She talks about beauty. She talks about beauty standards and what's considered beautiful. And I think, in many ways, what inspires me about this work is her world-building. And I think that applies to design, that applies to film, that applies to writing, that applies to so many different practices.

But we're all trying, I think, at this point, to build a new world, to envision something new because a lot of what's old is crumbling. And I think, in my practice, I think visualization is really a huge thing. How do I show people what the future can look like?

And I think, for design, it's more material. It's more practical. How do we actually build something that people can latch onto?

I'm a big believer in the phrase-- I forget the actual phrase, but just that you have to meet the material needs of the people in order to actually have them hear you. And I think that, in many ways, that's what we're all trying to do.

**AMY GONZALEZ:** And so these inspirations, do you see them reflected in your work? Do you think they have inspired the work you've done today?

**AMA GISELE:** Definitely. Like when I talked about world-building, I think that that's-- for a documentary, that's a little bit different. But in my other works-- my first film is called *Be Like Me*, and it's about two sisters who are growing up in Los Angeles. And with the short film, the film is only 11 minutes long. So I had to sort of build out these characters' worlds for viewers in a very short amount of time.

But it's an important aspect of anything that I create, is how do I set the scene, and not just aesthetically, but how do I tell you where this person is at emotionally, where this person is at financially, where that person is at in their lives, so that when I tell you their story or this small part of their story, you can understand it a little bit more, understand it in context, because context is really important for me as a filmmaker.

At least in *Convergence*, I'm taking these people's really, really vulnerable and personal stories and I'm putting it together in the context of a film that's four parts that talks about intimacy and vulnerability, as opposed to, when I'm creating something more narrative, I'm more physically trying to put my viewer in the space. I'm trying to, I guess, metaphysically put you into my characters' lives.

So it's very important for me to build a world as succinctly and as specifically as possible because I think that's how you do justice to the people that you're filming, is that the specific can be universal, but the specifics are what makes it about them. So world-building is what I've taken from Octavia, in this work and in other works that I've read from her, and that definitely inspires me.

**SETH SCAFE SMITH:** Seth here. Just to briefly talk about the ways it inspires us, I mean, as Akil said, we're fortunate enough to exist within the field of inspiration that Akil has just described. So the way that it influences and impacts our work is that it is our work. Well, and that's the way that we started. It's the way that we came about, is creating these spaces in which we could platform and work with similar organizations in space, both traditional physical space but other forms of space as well. And it's something that we continue to practice and prioritize as we develop and grow.

So yeah, I think we're fortunate enough to be able to operate within that same space as some of the people that inspire us so much and work from them and with them.

**ESESUA IKPEFAN:** That brings us to a conclusion, but Amy and I would love to say a big Thank you to RESOLVE Collective and to you, Ama, for joining us today.

**AMA GISELE:** Thank you for having me.

**SETH SCAFE SMITH:** Thank you for having us too.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**ESESUA IKPEFAN:** I'm Esesua Ikpefan.

**AMY GONZALEZ:** And I'm Amy Gonzalez.

**ESESUA IKPEFAN:** 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 to learn more about the African-American Design Nexus, visit us online at [aadn.gsd.harvard.edu](http://aadn.gsd.harvard.edu). Thank you for listening.