[MUSIC PLAYING]

TYLER WHITE: Hi, I am your host today, Tyler White, and I am a duel master's candidate in urban planning and design studies. This is the Nexus, brought to you by the African-American Design Nexus, an initiative from the Frances Loeb Library at Harvard University's Graduate School of design. The Design Nexus seeks to gather African-American designers to showcase their craft, explore different geographies of design practice, and inspire design institutions to adopt new approaches towards elevating Black designers.

Today, we have two wonderful graphic designers with us. The first is Silas Munro, who is an artist, designer, writer, and curator, engaging multimodal practices that inspire people to be the best versions of themselves in order to effect positive change on society as a whole. He earned his BFA from Rhode Island School of Design and holds an MFA from California Institute of the Arts.

Munro is founding faculty chair emeritus for the m.f.a. program in graphic design at Vermont College of Fine Arts. He is a curator and author of *Strikethrough, Typographic Messages of Protest,* which opened at letterform archive in 2022. Munro was a contributor to W.E.B. Du Bois's data portraits visualizing Black America, and co-authored the first BIPOC centered design history course, Black design in America, African-Americans, and the African diaspora in graphic design 19th through 21st century.

He is also the founder of Poly-Mode which is a bicoastal queer and minority-owned graphic design studio leading the edge of design with thought provoking work for clients across the cultural sphere. They collaborate with innovative businesses, community-based organizations, and those shifting the world through social justice. By advocating for clear and transparent structures of communication, compensation, and relationships, Poly-Mode creates a radical approach to design, where the product emerges from a process of mutual respect and enjoyment.

We are also here with Tobi Ashiru, who is a creative problem solver, leader, and designer. With a mission to change the world through design, she strives to push the boundaries of creativity. Born in Nigeria and raised in South Africa, Tobi seeks to create contextually relevant work that celebrates Blackness.

She's an interdisciplinary creative with diverse experiences as an architectural designer, installation artist, forever student, educator, and business owner. She holds a Bachelor of Architectural Studies from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Durban, South Africa and a Master of Architecture from the University of Southern California.

Tobi is also adjunct professor at A-Lab and a course instructor for undergraduate architecture courses at the University of Southern California. Tobi is also one half of the founding duo of Poche Design Studio, poche meaning the word for the Black portion of an architectural plan that represents solids, which is a Black woman owned design studio whose mission is to occupy and amplify the poche or Black space in design. Working at the intersection of architecture and design, Poche creates impactful designs for clients and customers, with over 100 clients served since their start in 2020.

So today's episode is dedicated to thinking about how the discipline of graphic design and its critical role in the visualization and representation of design, and most importantly, the role of graphic design in expanding the visual justice of Blackness in our public consciousness and graphic materiality.

Our central question is, how can a Black orientation to graphic design deepen the role and function of visualization in architecture fields? And more importantly, how can a Black form of graphic design offer something entirely distinct, and why do we need that? Welcome to the show, Silas and Tobi?

TOBI ASHIRU: Thank you.

TYLER WHITE: Thanks. Really grateful to be here. So just to open this up, what are you all listening to right now? What is really influencing your work at this current moment?

TOBI ASHIRU: That's a great question. I am currently listening to the new Megan Thee Stallion album, Megan Thee album. It's wonderful. Otaku hot girls right now getting many, many spins from me. I'm listening to the new Rema album as well and it is blowing my mind. As a Nigerian in diaspora, I feel like he was throwing a little shade at me, but that's OK.

But it's just people have been talking about, it's giving, like, witchcraft or it's giving, like, what's going on. But I just really love how he's digging deep and talking about how he's not trying to create stuff that can be watered down and then resold back to us. And I was like, that's a bar. That is preach preacher. So loving the Rema album right now as well.

I'm also listening to a friend of mine. Her artist name is LSD. She has this beautiful song called*Synergy* and it's just a vibe. It makes me feel like I'm on an island in the Caribbean.

TYLER WHITE: That's where I want to be right now. Thank you.

TOBI ASHIRU: Same

TYLER WHITE: Thank you. Amen. Amen. And how about you, Silas?

SILAS MUNRO: Listening to a mix of things. Definitely listening to a lot of Khruagbin right now who are on tour. They're going to be coming to LA. I'm going to see them live later in August, which I'm really excited about. Just something about the spaciousness of the way that they jam and make music is really inspiring. I think it's very soothing, especially with a moment in the world where things feel very unstable.

I am also like guilty pleasure listening to BRATZ and Charli XCX. I know there's something about her way that she plays with the pop genre that I just feel like is on point and disarming. And sometimes sometimes it makes my eyes roll, but I don't know. I think in a good way, the best way possible.

TYLER WHITE: It is surely being embraced. Thank you both for a fantastic sonic awakening. Potentially personified through your own personal stories, can you help us understand graphic design as a discipline and practice?

SILAS MUNRO: I feel like my answer is constantly changing in terms of what graphic design is and how it's emerging, how it's shifting. I think for me, I found graphic design through a love of typography, and I think a love of books, like I discovered graphic design through my local public library as a kid. And I was particularly drawn to books about art and books about design. There's something about the tactility and physicality of them.

At one point, actually, my dad, at the time, was working for National Public Radio, and one of the-- he was an editor for the show Morning. And one of the perks of working there is he would get review advance copies of books. And so what I would do is take some of these books and then I would go to my local Barnes and Noble and exchange them for other design and art books. So that's how I started building my design library.

Probably not totally above board, but was just the way that I could access that. And so for me, the idea of discourse around publishing and materiality and anything with type or image that I think can shape or move a message is how I define graphic design.

And I think lately for me, I've become this accidental design historian. So I think part of what graphic design is for me is also rewriting design history in a way where I could see myself as a queer person, as a person of color, as a biracial person, as a person with a mom from Africa and a dad from Minnesota.

TOBI ASHIRU: I love that. For me, it's interesting because my journey of design starts in architecture. So starting within that graphic design was there, but it was almost like this invisible thing that existed, but I didn't really quite understand how to merge that into my work.

And then as I started, like, in my architectural education journey, I realized that a lot of my effort and time and where I really found my jam was, after conceptualizing, after creating the design, how I was sharing it with the people I was presenting to. I would be looking forward to that part, even more so than anything I was doing.

So just starting to see how I could use color and pattern and just clashing, contrasting things in my design work. And then when I would be ready to present, and I would always then match my work so that when I was literally standing up to present, there was already a surety of confidence that I gave off just from the fact that even if my designs weren't the greatest, I knew it looked good and I knew I looked good and I knew I could talk about it.

And that time, again, I did not realize that I was really leaning into the visual communication, using graphic design as a separate discipline alongside or parallel to architectural design. So that was the first time I noticed that I was doing something with that, and that was in my undergrad journey. And then when I moved to LA, I started to see that played up more.

And I had this moment where I got an opportunity to be a part of an art show, and I was like, what do I share? What do I put up? And I found myself going back to things I had created in class and then playing those up using visual hierarchy, contrast, and really digging deep into that and seeing how I could create something, make it abstract, and then still have this meaning or meaning tied to what I was creating. So that's when I started to realize what I was doing and how my understanding of graphic design then pushed into my career.

And then the final culmination, for me, was my thesis project, where an understanding that there was going to be a distinctive way that it would have to live on, or for me, I felt like it had to live on, because I couldn't have spent a year of my life working on something that I really cared about and that it just end there.

There's this final image that I put in so much time, love, care, and effort to work on. And that's when I was like, Oh, wait, I'm graphic designing right now. And the architectural design has been left like two months ago, and I'm just fully focused on how I'm sharing this and how it's being presented and how it's being perceived. And that's where really I felt like I had a better understanding of it and I felt like I'd embraced it.

And I always find creating these connections between-- I was creating a lot of installations, a lot of one to one installations, which was directly rooted in architecture. But what would then create those engaging moments between the audience and the piece that I was creating was when I would start to play with graphic design and actually introduce it as a practice. So to me, I think of it as a method of communication and visual storytelling, and it always plays up whatever my design medium is.

TYLER WHITE: Two things I'm picking up is this process for you, Tobi, in which you became an accidental graphic designer, and then this journey for you, Silas, in which you became an accidental design historian. And I'm curious how the process of exploring the thing that you're interested in can lead you to new facets about it.

And particularly, Tobi, you coming from an architecture background and now really living within a graphic design world. I'm really curious, when did you first become introduced to and how would you define, even if this is a definition from yourself, the aesthetic tradition of Black graphic design?

And I think another thing you both all mentioned too, is how there is an embedded symbolism in everything that you're conveying and you're telling a story. And I'm curious, how you would describe when you first came across that, was that something that you did on purpose? Did you stumble into that, and how would you define a Black graphic design tradition?

TOBI ASHIRU: For me, because Blackness is not a monolith, it's always been like a more personal relationship and interpretation. So that the first part is it's up to interpretation or your personal interpretation. But what I find that is specific to the aesthetic tradition of Black graphic design is that it's always rooted in where you're from and what you're interested in.

So for me, I've always been the girl who never had a problem projecting her voice, and my work does the same thing, where it's like I'm not inherently even trying to do anything that makes someone stop and stare and be like, Wow, this is loud in many ways.

I think also that maybe too, like, being the girl who's always been described as loud, which it can be seen as a microaggression in some. It is, but there's also a reclaiming of that where it's like, I'm loud, yes, and you can ignore me. And that also speaks to my work.

And I feel like that's something that a lot of Black graphic designers have in common, and a lot of work that comes out of that, where it's like, you're going to see me even if you don't want to see me, or even if you don't want to acknowledge me, you're going to see my work. And that work is going to do so much speaking. And because of that, it always seems to be rooted in what happened and what came before me, but also existing in how it fits into the future and how somebody else is going to see my work or see something I created and resonate with it and not even realize what they're resonating with.

But then, I tend to find this, where I go to the museum, I see something really cool. I'm like, Wow, this is so cool, and then I find out the artist is Nigerian. And there's this weird, silent invisible string that has drawn me to this thing, but I think it's because they themselves in creating something that's rooted in where they're from, I too have these connections with them as well. So yeah, I think it's creating something that's deeply rooted based on your journey so far and where you came from.

SILAS MUNRO: Yeah, that's really beautiful. Tobi, just that idea of bringing yourself to graphic design and how that informs how we operate as a designer. And I feel like that's how I stumbled upon an aesthetic tradition of Black graphic design. It was really that sense of--

For me, I think in my own learning absence, I didn't have Black teachers in my undergraduate program or graduate program, but I had a classmate in grad school at CalArts and we sat next to each other. She was actually the class above me, Toshiko Arsenio Sutton, and she had been working on her own research of that similar feeling of, where am I in design history, and how do I find myself?

And she was doing this amazing project called I'm an angry Black woman, which made me think of my mom, especially when I was in trouble, my mom had this phrase in Lunyole, which is an Indigenous language in Uganda. That's basically, what kind of child are you to be treating your mother this way, when I was in trouble. But we would have conversations about that.

And I credit Toshiko with turning me on to a number of references, like Sylvia Harris wears the Black and graphic design. I think it takes a lot of Black designers have found and encountered. And she turned me on to Saki Mafundikwa's book *African Alphabets.* And she was just doing this kind of taxonomy work around where's the Black in graphic design, which I think I know a lot of other designers have been asking for many years, including Cheryl Miller.

It was really through this oral tradition of meeting other designers or graphic designers who were also asking these questions. And it just kept snowballing. And I think that idea of lineages and this process of going back to get it, like Saki Mafundikwa talks about that. He references the Ghanaian term, Sankofa, going back and get it, that Adinkra symbol of the bird with its head looking back. And I feel like that is what we're all doing. I know Tobi's doing that.

We're just trying to connect to the past as a way to be like, Oh, what is the now? Where are we headed? And like, how do we find a sense of representation, maybe a sense of justice, maybe a sense of just freedom to explore and also not necessarily letting our Blackness define us, but knowing that there are aesthetic sensibilities that do inform? That's part of our complexity. I love that, Tobi, you were saying it's not a monolith. There's lots of pluralities and possibilities in what is a Black graphic design or Black graphic designs.

TYLER WHITE: That was a perfect segue into my first question for you, Silas, which is really talking about going back to find something, putting together this kind of archival work, this taxonomy work that she had been introduced to. Can you walk us through your approach to writing about graphic design.

And particularly, when you were putting together or being a part of the production of these Du Bois data portraits, what were some potential things that you learned or unearthed themselves through that work that you found from engaging in writing and thinking and really contributing to the scholarship around Black graphic design?

SILAS MUNRO: Yeah, that's a great question. That project was definitely a watershed experience for me, and definitely has informed so many things that came after that. I think the main thing, and I relate to you, Tobi, with exploring installation and then suddenly you're like, Oh, I'm using graphic design to connect and be part of this project. I was practicing as a designer, I was teaching. I was actually teaching design history already and grappling with this and not really trained as a historian, but more trained as a designer.

And I remember seeing those data portraits from Du Bois in 2016, going into 2017, when I was actually working on a catalog for the artist Mark Bradford. And one of the texts that was in the publication was a quote from Du Bois's Black Reconstruction. And so the curator, Katy Siegel, was like, hey, have you seen these diagrams related to Du Bois? They might be something. Do we want to put this in the catalog? And we were like, Oh, it didn't work for that project.

But a couple of months after that, Britt Russert and Whitney Battle-Baptiste who edited the W.E.B. DU Bois's data portraits book, sent me an email, and they were like, Oh, we just found some of your writing. Would you want to write about these plates for this book we're working on? I'm like, yes.

And also just the whole thing of seeing them for the first time, just gagged about, how do I not know about this? How is this not part of my design education, this amazing, contemporary-looking, modern, Avant-Garde work dealing with data justice and Black equality in 1900? This is 19 years before the founding of the Bauhaus, before Russian constructivism. This style, all these modern movements that have been burned into my brain, I was just like, what.

And so that coming to each of those images from the Library of Congress and with other scholars like Mabel O. Wilson, who had already written about those years before that, which I didn't know. Aldon Morris, who is one of Du Bois' foremost scholars, and the five of us, just sharing resources with each other.

And for me, the way to enter-- writing about the design was like, I actually wrote them more as poems because I wrote an introduction, but also captions for each of these 63 plates. And so it was almost like writing as a design process. So it was like fragments of understanding and then some of the backstory of how they were produced, Du Bois's students. A lot of that credit Black women and young men who are part of his students at Atlanta University who helped co-create all of these diagrams and very quickly.

And so contributing to that, I realized, Oh my God, there's so much more out there. What happens if you add Du Bois and you center a narrative of design history around him, in addition to these other movements, and how could you rethink about design education that way? And I feel like that was just this thing that opened up and continues to open up so much for me.

TYLER WHITE: That's also another great transition into my second question, which is thinking about how centering, particularly this investigation around these plates provided you with a capacity to then build a curriculum around it. And that is the Black design in America, African-Americans and the African diaspora and graphic design 19 to the 21st century. And I'm curious, what did you find in those works that had some kind of a design epistemology?

One thing I've been thinking a lot about is like, how do we-- in everything you said, Du Bois is doing this before Bauhaus, before a lot of the major movements of transitions in the way that we think about and conceptualize what design is and who it works for and what the visions of the future are, and there seems to always be lacking some idea of what Black folks wanted.

To me, it seems like most logical that Black people would have been some of the most visionary people at the time, given the consideration of the context that they were in. So I'm curious, in compiling this course and really producing the work of educating this now to other people, taking people through your own process. But streamline it for them, what kind of visions did you see in that work, and do you see any kind of manner in which they're coming manifest today?

SILAS MUNRO: Yeah, my contribution was completed in 2017 and then that book came out in 2018. And so it started to circulate, and I got asked to speak quite a bit in public about that. So like through 2019, I was lecturing and being very visible, traveling to a lot of places and talking about this work.

And then 2020 happened with the pandemic. Obviously, George Floyd, like all of this radical structural change to how we could socialize or not, which we have been doing for many, many generations of questioning police brutality, thinking about the vulnerable Black body, and trying to think about collectively how that could be repaired or reconsidered or looked at differently.

And so we are ready, myself, Toshika one of our students at VCFA, Pierre Bowins, were doing this research. There were so many other Black educators and thought leaders and designers that had been done doing this work and were doing this work that we had been thinking about what a larger book could look like. But in 2020, we just scrapped that and we were like, we need to do something now to respond to what's happening. And there's so much demand and interest and questions.

And so that fall in October, I and my co-authors, we just started thinking about, Oh, how do we make this into a class? I remember making a tweet. People retweeted, were interested in it. And then over the break from Christmas because I was still teaching online, running a design studio part-time and thinking about this.

So me and this former student, Tanvi Sharma, we just cranked out a curriculum using this. We invited a bunch of people, like, will you speak? Will you join that? And we just made this microsite. And then January 1, 2021, we posted it. We had the sliding scale come do these lectures.

And we just had a really remarkable response that I was not expecting. I think just people were ready. There were stimulus money. People were having questions. Some of my own design teachers, design history teachers joined. Many former students, like people I didn't know. And all of this was, we were filming and recording our classes, right as January 6 was happening. So that, I think people were just looking for a place to make sense of things that weren't making sense.

And so that oral tradition of co-authoring, we had lots of different visiting lecturers. Some of those people I mentioned, Saki Mafundikwa, was our first speaker, who told the story of *African Alphabets.* And so you had hundreds of people on Zoom in real time talking about these issues, sharing knowledge collectively, this idea of multiple voices, like being able to create.

It was not just me. It was a whole sea of people. And then also sharing the profits of the class with all of the educators, having it be accessible to BIPOC folks. There were all these different things that just shifted not only the curriculum, but also how you could share that.

So making that a library, digital library that then anyone could watch, and you still can, these talks. And then now we're turning that into a publication, a book, which I found and we have found is taking much longer and much harder, because there was something about that moment where it was just really urgent.

And I feel like, I'd love to hear what Tobi thinks about this in particular of where I'm feeling like this moment of where there's all this pushback against DEI and pushback against centering marginalized voices in the discourse of design and in the world. And so it actually feels like even more radical and even more important that we are having these kinds of conversations and thinking about, how do this shift a notion of a canon, and how do we do both?

And we, last summer and last fall in 2023 and going into the spring, we consulted with the University of Cincinnati. They had a two series courses of design history, where they were very much wanting to do that, how do you have the canon plus these marginalized voices being together? And so we use the resources from that class.

There have been two other classes, one in Latinx graphic design that Ramon Tejada co-curated, and then one in Swana region design that Randa Hadi created. And so we combined those with also like, how do you look at the canon at the same time? And so for me, that was a way of actually reconciling that you can have both, and. You don't have to just have this diasporic conversation. You can actually have it in conjunction with a dominant narrative, and you can shift hierarchies and really reconsider what Black design might be in a larger context of design, or it itself is a larger context is another way of reframing it.

TYLER WHITE: That's so important. And Tobi, this makes me think of some of the conversations that we were having about what 2020 looked like for you, and how this groundswell of people's energy and commitment to wanting to be engaged really was like a catalyst for you to want to pursue actually engaging in altering the canon through practice.

And I'm really curious about if you can take us through your thinking at that time, but particularly how that thinking has led now to the work that you and Morgan do at Poche, particularly, I'm thinking about Black Hair Lab, Cohort Sistas, Aspen Institute. How would you really explain and define the work that you all do, because it sounds like you're materializing what Silas is creating, a bibliography and instituting and learning, you're doing in practice? And I'd love to just get a sense of what you think of that.

TOBI ASHIRU: Yeah, no, it's so interesting and it's so crazy because in 2020, we launched our business on March 29, so in the midst of things, right? And it was like, well, everybody's at home, might as well. And in that moment in starting there, what I did appreciate about what was happening-- at the same time where I don't feel like our business, we were too early to I feel really get in our bag like we could have but that's OK because it was the perfect launching pad.

So for us, I mean, even as little as PVP loans, we weren't registered as a business early enough to get a PVP loan. But what I do love, and I still see is that there was a revived interest in other Black people and other people of color investing back into themselves, and myself included. Like every time somebody compliments me, something on me, I'm like, Oh, that's actually from a Black business.

So people finding ways to naturally integrate designers of color and just creatives of color into their daily lives was the first point, which I still feel like, no matter what, with the push on DEI and all that nonsense, no matter where that swings, there's inherent shift that's happened, where we at the core of it understand that if you like a business, if you-- and I mean, this year has not been great for many businesses, but specifically Black-owned businesses, and we're seeing them close left, right, center. And if you want to see this thing, you have to be a part of keeping this thing here now.

So for us, it was very interesting because I feel like from architecture into graphic, into brand, web, digital, all that stuff, they naturally fell into each other. Where it first started was like, with us, we did first start with pitch decks. That was our Golden Goose product or service. That then we found that we would design these pitch decks, and then our clients would come back to us and say, well, this pitch deck is so good, like it's gotten the reception that I needed it to get, but now when I show them anything else, they're like, what. What is this?

And so that's kind of how we then stumbled into or fell into brand design because then it was like, well, can you help me redo our whole suite of things? Around that same time, I was actually working at MKG in experiential design firm. And what I really loved that, while I was working there and working there, like part-time, I was starting to see all the different parts and all the different pieces of interdisciplinary creatives in action, and how that comes to life and how that works.

Because in architectural design it's the same, but it's at a bigger scale. It's like, to find somebody that wants to build something, break down a wall is much harder, but to find somebody who is starting something is a little easier. But then also telling our clients and allowing them to, hey, if you like what we do, I would say tell your friends with budgets about us.

And just continuing that open lines of communication of not just creating something and leaving it where we left it, but also picking up and building into those relationships. Hey, how was the launch, or how can I contribute to the launch, or little things like that, how we found ourselves like snowballing into what we became.

And at the same time, what I did not love is that I noticed that, for me, I had two architecture degrees and it was so hard to get a job that I was like, this is wild. And I thought I was the only one experiencing it. And then when we got to the point where it was time for us to start hiring, we had other designers, specifically Black women designers, having the same story.

And for us, that has really part of been why the influence for the fact that we are all Black women team from the router to the tutor. We have our, even outside of our core team, the people that we work with are accounting as a Black woman. We are not just saying like we're walking the walk, but we're also talking it and acting on it.

I can count on my two hands how many White men clients that we've had. And the ones that we've had are so fantastic. Love them down. But at the same time, it's also understanding that if we do the work and we show up in the spaces to say, this is what we can do, this is how we can contribute, this is how we're ready to serve, our people will hear us. And again, it's not all the time that they look exactly like us, but we shared a mission in common.

And I also, especially in 2020, I just recently became an American citizen. So I've been literally on a visa my whole life, because in South Africa I was on a student visa for like 13 years. But as an immigrant, there's things that I can't partake in. Like if I go to a protest, that can compromise literally every single thing that my family has worked for and invested in and all that stuff. So I knew that my form of protest had to look different because I had other things at stake.

And that's where the core of our mission really started to get founded, where we realized that what we are creating is like, it's bigger than us. And what's really beautiful is that we found ourselves in an interesting space where outside of being able to work with small Black-women-owned businesses, we're able to work with also medium and larger-sized businesses and leverage those contracts and those projects to be able to support our work with people who might not even have the budget to work with us.

So in 2023, we gave away like 15k of design services to Black-women-owned businesses, which was just like, hey, this is what we're doing right now. We have a little bit of cushion room, so let's create something really cool. And what's been really beautiful about that was in doing that, then we had another client, Sabrina Hersi Issa, who we had done her branding for the Bold Prize, which is an award that she gives to, I like to say, badly behaved Black women, but they're not badly behaved. It's just like Black women that are shaking shit up in spaces that they're like, don't do that. Don't change the status quo.

So she gives cash Prize to Black women, and this year, she decides to add on to that Prize where she paid us to serve them in their specific needs. So it's like carrying that mission forward of-- she knows the big dogs that will invest, and she's investing in a Black-owned business and investing in Black women that are doing crazy, amazing things in the world.

But yeah, it's interesting to even think about how they're all related, like everything is connected, but there isn't a clear point-to-point line that this is how everything is connected. But in common, what we have is the mission that we're putting into the world through Poche, but then through the people that we help them do their work even better and make their work even more impactful.

And it's just interesting to see, like with us, there's been a parallel history of Black design happening as well as mainstream design. And what we found really interesting with a lot of the clients that we work with, there's always a reference point that we can go back to and that's only a Black design. So we can either look at the FESTAC festival or even like the design of African masquerade masks and taking that and finding a font that is literally inspired by that and then applying that to our clients branding.

So it's just interesting to see how we can take those kind of histories that have been untold and then inject them as related references to specific projects. That is a little like Easter egg. That nobody would know if they unless they asked me, or they looked at our portfolio and our case study. But these things are existing in the world and taking up space, but it's like the head nod. If you know you know, but if you don't, that's OK. It's already really cool as it is. But yeah.

TYLER WHITE: Well, I mean, so much of what you've said there is bringing us in connecting even more things. And I'm particularly very interested in this process that you kind of described here of referencing material culture from Black histories, from Black designs, and then translating that into things that people can tangibly see and becomes very aware to them.

I'm curious how this process, or maybe I'm trying to turn it into a process, but it does seem like a process. It seems like a practice. It seems like an approach. How do you integrate that and bring that to your work at the A-Lab? And particularly in so much of what we've been talking about, is opening up the can and opening up spaces, particularly in your case for Black women. But, Tobi, how are you also opening up spaces for these young students in the incoming future of Black designs?

TOBI ASHIRU: That is a great question. So the A-Lab program itself, it is a program through USC that specifically engages high school juniors at schools that wouldn't always get the opportunities like others would. So we work with two schools, specifically right now, Foshay Learning Center and George Washington Prep. And Washington prep is on 103 and Western, which is all very South, and Foshay is actually down the street from USC.

But the specific people that we work with at, like Foshay, so Foshay is a top feeder high school to USC. But we found that there's this program, I think it's like neighborhoods in action, whatever. A lot of people that don't get into that program, they can't then make it to USC.

And what we found that A-Lab is now a little bit bridging that gap, and also being able to work with students-- yes, as a Black woman, I am a minority, but then there's also other minorities and people of color that don't look like me. And my class tends to be a reflection of that which I really, really love.

And with our engagement with the high school students, they're coming in. I'm teaching every single day of the week. It is, it is, the hardest. I love it because my program director and everybody, like all the USC faculty, they really do cheer me on because they're like, this is the hardest version of teaching because we come in a couple of times a week. I'm here every single morning. It's been a stretch, but I knew it was coming. I got all these confirmations that this was something that was about to happen. I didn't know how it was going to take form, but it did.

And it's ironic because I had actually applied for the A-Lab program through, it was first the citizen architect fellowship, which again, is rooted in creating empathetic future forward thinking, innovative designers. And the thing with architecture that I know and I have experienced is that the jobs that they tell you are waiting for you when you graduate are just not there. They exist, but I don't know, they're just not there. And it's been my experience.

So in coming back and teaching high school junior is my main goal is that I just want them to confidently take the next step and then also understand all the intersections that architecture has. So in the beginning of the semester, I get their interest, like who's interested in architecture, who's interested in creative, who's interested in just like design, and then tailor the guests that I have come speak.

So this past semester I had a game designer. I had a friend that also works at Nike and she does computational design, had a former Miss Barbados who is now a wellness coach. I've had different people that just come in and speak to the students and help them understand that the opportunity that they've been given through this program, and I mean, they apply for it, so obviously they earned it, is not just about, Oh, I'm going to come out of here and become the next architect in LA. No, it's like you are coming out with a shift in how you think, how you see the world, and how you interact with the world.

And for me, one thing that they're always going to have to do, is they're always going to have to stand up in front of somebody and present. And when I say present, that could look like presenting to a client, that could look like an interview, that could look so many ways.

And that's one of my core things, like when they're leaving A-Lab, I want them to be able to stand up and talk to the richest person in the room, stand up and talk to the most important person in the room without a crack in their voice, without their body language, kind of, Oh, I'm so shy and I don't know what I'm going to say to you.

And what I also really enjoy is that as, similar to Silas, I studied in Africa and I did not have a Black woman teach me, which is wild. And also in my architectural history education, I was not learning about African architecture histories, nothing, which is another wild thing to be in, a low key, a stone's throw away from where humankind began and be learning about things that are several oceans away in terms of architecture.

So when I'm even going in and teaching architecture and teaching my students things like placemaking, just different concepts and things from it, I'm always going through the route that I didn't see. And it's also nice because then living in Los Angeles, this is one of the best cities to experience architecture. Most of the Pritzker Prize winners have projects in LA that you can go visit for free. So even being able to inject that into the things that I'm teaching them and things that when it's time for them to do case study and present on those, they're like, Oh, I didn't even know that this was up the street for me.

So it's really beautiful for me because then I get to also bring them in on the process where I know where we're starting and I know where I want us to go, but how we get there can be a collaboration and be a discussion. It's not just me standing in front of them.

Like I don't stand and teach all the time I'm sitting. And I'm like, this is a conversation, this is a dialogue, but at the end of the day, I know more than you. But that doesn't mean that we can't learn from each other, and you don't have a say in what you take out of this program as well.

But so far, so good. So far I haven't had any students that have taken the next step to college just because I started teaching in October last year, but I've had students that have gone on to get internships at big firms. I've had students that have reached out to me and like, Oh my God, I'm applying for the summer program at NYU, and it's just like, whoa, this is so crazy and so cool. And I like to think that I played a little role in that, but again, no matter all the things I say, it's up to them to take that next step, whatever that next step looks like for them.

TYLER WHITE: Wow. Headed out now with our last question here. I think so much of what you said, Tobi, in the end, and so much of what has been personified has really been about how we are going back and bringing things from the past into the future, and very much how you all are deeply engaged, from teaching to educating, to the actual practice of work that you all do, shifting the way we think about and interact with our notions of visuality, of graphic design, of visual storytelling. And my final question is, what is the future of graphic design and why is that important?

SILAS MUNRO: Yeah, I mean, I feel like the future of graphic design is happening right now. It's happening on this podcast right now. And I feel like all the things that you were talking about, Tobi, both in terms of education but also in practice, really resonate with me as well.

And I think one of the things that we're doing at Poly-Mode, I talked a lot about teaching, but not about practice, mirrors a lot of what Poche is doing. We have this process that we call poetic research. That is about taking these things that have been pushed to the margins and centering them in the work of our clients. And I feel like that is part of what Tobi is saying, design that is informed by more expansive audiences and designers, like our field doesn't reflect the diversity of the people of the world. And so how do we close that gap?

And I think we do it both through the educational initiatives that we've been talking about. And there are many others. And also the way that practice itself, who is practicing, who's in the room, who is allowed, who is given permission, who is empowered to lead and participate in contemporary design discourse. That to me is the future of graphic design.

And I think that's really important that graphic design, architecture, all design fields, mirrors back and reflects the world that it is making design for. And so that can actually shift and be a more reflective, accurate representation of what the world is already doing.

TOBI ASHIRU: Yes, I love that. The future of graphic design, to me, it's accessible. Similar to what science is, it's creating a field that is reflective of what the world looks like. But also in this time of technology that we have, information is passing much faster than it used to. There's collectives where the Black designers that are actively doing the work of asking the question, but also doing a part in answering it as well.

So just seeing ways that this doesn't feel so mysterious, even in academia, people always talk about how the process in academia has always been like hush, hush, but it's because that was intentional to keep certain types of people in those spaces. But nowadays, it's like there's a wall, but we're actively dismantling it and making it more accessible for the next generation and for us as well.

TYLER WHITE: No better way to end. Thank you so much again, Silas and Tobi. We'd like to have everyone close out by finishing the statement Black design is. Maybe, Tobi why don't you go first and then we'll have Silas go once again, finish the statement Black design is.

TOBI ASHIRU: Black design is interdisciplinary.

SILAS MUNRO: Black design is fractal.

TYLER WHITE: Thank you again, Silas and Tobi.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

I am Tyler White, and you've been listening to the Nexus, a product of the African-American Design Nexus at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Today's episode was produced and edited by Maggie Janneck, and we would like to thank DJ Iway for our theme music. To learn more about the African-American Design Nexus, visit us online at aadn.gsd.harvard.edu. Godspeed. Thank you.

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