

What if Africa, not Europe?

A Conversation with Lesley Lokko

Sala Elise Patterson

Lesley Lokko is adept at spotting dated or erroneous narratives. One of her preferred subjects is Africa and its connectedness with the rest of the world—a relationship, she argues, that predates the three-decade-long experiment we know as globalization.

“The way people use the term actually comes from a very specific reading of globalization; but there are others. Africans have had this relationship with the rest of the world for 2,000 years, and in a sense that has been to the detriment of our own specificity. This idea that once you leave Africa, you’re all Black. The difference between Jamaica and Nigeria—it’s all subsumed,” she explains.

This is characteristic of Lokko’s thinking and approach to her profession. The 2022 Senior Loeb Scholar at the GSD works to upend any tenet of architecture and architectural education that is oppressive, exploitative, and exclusionary. “The imagination is the most powerful tool of liberation that we have,” she says. “The ability to move beyond the everyday requires the facility to imagine. And what education does is train your imagination.”

This commitment to a radically different and more equitable future—and training students to design it—is born from Lokko’s deep understanding of the globalization of racial and social injustices. Over three continents and as many decades, she has dedicated her career in academia to exploring those injustices as they play out in the built environment.

“Most of the 30 years that I’ve been in architectural education has been about the attempt to carve out space to link racial identity and the built environment. Coming into architecture as a student, it was made clear to me that identity—and by that I mean racial identity—had nothing to do with the built environment. My work has been about trying to prove that statement wrong,” she reflects.

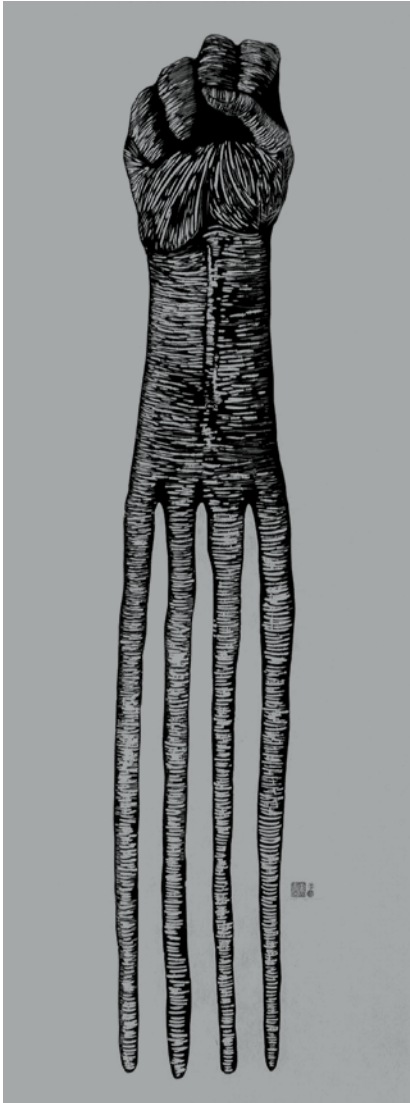
Lokko has worked to establish that “these big issues of race, identity, culture, oppression, diaspora, migration, all of that,” are in dialogue in architecture, and how not seeing those connections has led to practices that privilege dominant cultures and their worldview. In her ideal training program, students would come to understand these interplays, causing a shift in the discipline that would center a broader range of approaches and realities.

The motivation is intellectual but also personal. Born to a Ghanaian father and a Scottish mother, Lokko can still remember the first time she became aware of her race or culture as something that could be a source of tension. “Growing up in Ghana, it never occurred to me to identify myself as Black because in Ghana, everybody’s Black. But when I left at 17, I got onto the airplane one night, half Scottish and half Ghanaian. And when I landed the next morning, I was Black,” she says.

“When I started studying architecture, I kept hearing this word ‘culture’ bandied about. I kept thinking, Well, the thing that people are talking about here as culture has nothing to do with my culture. That discrepancy between the way people were using the term universally and the way I’d always understood it, which was very specific, was the first clue that something was not quite matching up.”

Not surprisingly, Lokko’s life within the academy has not been without frustration. It stems both from how antiquated thinking is in many schools of architecture as well as from how resistant they are to challenge that thinking: “The default was a kind of universal Eurocentric culture that had no room for any kind of maneuver. There was also no room for any kind of questioning because it had been around for so long. It was there in the precedent; it was in the history and theory.”

Following her resignation from the Spitzer School in 2020, Lokko returned to Ghana to found the African Futures Institute. Based in Accra, AFI is a response to a series of What ifs: What if professors and students were unencumbered by centuries-old notions of architectural practice? What if an African institution modeled true diversity and inclusion? What if the Global South supplied the Global North with the blueprints for a sustainable and equitable future? What if Africa and not Europe? She explains, “Architecture is fundamentally about translations: translating an idea into a drawing, a drawing into a model, a model into a building, and so on. There’s something about the constant shift of meaning and material that’s in its DNA. I don’t think there’s a single African alive who doesn’t speak more than one language. And every Black person on this planet has a sense of double consciousness. We translate all day long, all the time.”



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- A Simone Leigh, *Las Meninas*, 2019.
- B Sanford Biggers, *Afropick*, 2005. Woodcut on mulberry paper, 72 x 27 ½ inches.
- C Simone Leigh, *Jug*, 2019.
- D Sanford Biggers, *Trickle Down*, 2019. Antique textiles, acrylic, tar, silkscreen on archival paper.

She continues: “For the first time, I was able to see how the DNA of a race—and I mean that in the broadest possible sense, the DNA of a historical experience, let’s say—combined with the DNA of the discipline could produce this incredible alchemy. That’s how AFI took shape. We’re no longer living in 19th-century Europe. The equation for so long has been that Africa is too poor, too underprivileged, too whatever to offer much to architecture. I think that the equation is the exact opposite. I think these conditions are so rich, so complex, so avant-garde.”

Coming out of the tragedy and reckoning of the past two years, Lokko sees a rupture that has forged an “interesting and radical space” that architecture is especially well equipped to leverage for the greater good. She says, “Architecture is a wider category than the building of buildings. It’s one of the most fascinating disciplines that teaches us how to think, how to see the world. Imagining is the one endeavor that I think architects do really well.”



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