

The Minnesota
Women in Architecture
FAIA Legacy Project

Abimbola Asojo Oral History Interview

Introduction

Legacy Project

The Minnesota Women in Architecture FAIA Legacy Project, is a joint effort of the Minnesota Architectural Foundation (MAF) and the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Women in Architecture Committee. In 2018, the Legacy Project began to amplify the achievements of our female fellows by documenting the stories of the women architects in the Minnesota recognized with the AIA's highest membership honor, Fellowship (FAIA).

The project's primary goals are: 1) to increase the visibility of women architects to break down stereotypes that may be instrumental in the formation of unconscious bias about the women in the profession and 2) to increase the visibility of women architects to encourage more women to seek a career in architecture and to stay productive in the profession despite adversity.

Funding from the Minnesota Historical Society supported the first eleven interviews and oral histories; with this template, the project will continue to grow.

Dr. Abimbola Asojo



Abimbola Asojo is an academic Dean whose multidisciplinary work directly contributes to the architecture profession's future social equity and broader inclusion. She expands access to design education, providing cross-cultural, global perspectives to thousands of students.

Interview

Abimbola Asojo, Interviewee

Kimberly Long Loken, Interviewer

May 9, 2023

Kimberly Long Loken: **KL**

Abimbola Asojo: **AA**

00:00

KL Today is May 9, 2023. And this is Kim Loken AIA here at the Humphrey School to interview Abimbola Asojo and Dr. Asojo. For our archival purposes, could you give us context of your origin?

AA My name is Abimbola Asojo, and I am originally from Nigeria.

KL All right. And we're here today to talk about your elevation to FAIA. And let's get the conversation started. So let's start by talking about how did you find architecture, or how did it find you?

AA Thanks so much for that question, Kim. I would say that I remember when I was a student in a high school in Nigeria, I went to international school in Ibadan in Nigeria. So to give you a little bit of a context, international School Ibadan is located in the university campus in Ibadan in Nigeria. I was born to academics. My parents are retired academics. So we grew up in a campus, University of Ibadan in Nigeria. University of Ibadan is the premier university in Nigeria. So I attended International School Ibadan, and I remember as a young ten-year-old student, when I started at the high school, two female architects my mom's age came to talk at our assembly. So one was Mrs. Fola Olumide and the other one was Mrs. Shobande. And when I saw them, I automatically wanted to be an architect. I decided I wanted to be an architect at a very young age. And interestingly, I ended up interning with FOA Architects, Fola Olumide and Associates when I was in college in Nigeria as a third-year student at Obafemi Awolowo University.

AA I remember University of Ibadan started an architecture program, but then they closed it due to lack of enrollment. I was admitted to University of Ibadan to study architecture. But then when we're going to start, they had canceled the program, and I convinced my dad to go with me to Obafemi Awolowo University. And that's how I ensured that I studied architecture. When architecture was canceled in University of Ibadan, my dad asked me to consider studying civil engineering because they had engineering at University of Ibadan that was also close to architecture. And for the most part, everyone knew what engineers

were. I really wanted to study architecture so my dad went with me to Obafemi Awolowo University to switch my admission to architecture there. There are no architects in my family. Besides Fola Olumide and Associates, owned by Mrs Fola Olumide who is an architect in my mother's generation, and Mrs. Shobande, I'd never come across female architects. I'm glad that my parents are very supportive. When the architecture program was canceled in University of Ibadan, we went together to Obafemi Awolowo University. I started there, and I am so excited that I decided to pursue architecture.

KL I've got two follow-up questions to the story you just told me about your education. The first is your parents are retired academics. What are their fields?

AA Okay, my mom is a retired philosopher, and my father is a retired biomedical scientist. So when you think about it, actually, architecture combines the arts and the humanities and STEM. When you really think about it, I feel like I got both of that from both parents.

KL I think so too.

AA My science skills from my father and my writing skills from my mom, although they're both good at all that too.

KL Yes, and certainly that culminates in your interdisciplinary studies, which we'll get to in a minute. I'm also curious about your natural attraction to architecture and ways in which that was expressed in your childhood. There was this galvanizing moment where you had the assembly at school and you saw role models and you saw possibilities, and you put the formal idea of studying architecture to that experience. But were there other ways in which you were just naturally exuding an interest in the built environment?

05:03

AA That's a great question. I would also give credit to past high school teachers. I had an art teacher. I took art in high school too. My art teacher, Mrs. Luck Akinwale, thought I was the most creative student in the world, and I would get 100% on art projects. You know, I would always wonder 100%. And she was so fascinated by my drawing skills and my artwork that when my siblings took class later, she would always even call them my names, and my siblings would get frustrated because all she could remember was like, oh, are you Abimbola's sister? And things like that. So she was really encouraging in art. That really sealed my interest in architecture as well. And then I also had a technical drawing teacher, Mr. Akinyede. Unfortunately, he's passed away, and that was another class I was really good in. So with autographic projections and drawings and all that, I was very, very good with technical drawing as well. And then math was also my favorite subject. I remember in high school; we would have homework. That was the entire chapter of the book. I was the

only student in the class that completed the whole chapter the next day from Dr Mrs Ejike, my Math teacher.

AA My mom and my parents still talk about me when they're talking to my kid today, that, you know what your mom will do? She will come back from school, sit in the veranda. We would encourage her to eat, but she wouldn't even want to eat until she's done with her homework. She'll complete the whole chapter of the math textbook. I think some of those really helped me, because when I think about it, even till today, even when I'm teaching my architectural lighting class, math is one thing that I'm always telling my students that when the computer fails, you need to be able to calculate some of this lighting manually. I'm always telling them, talking about sine and cosine and Pythagoras theorem and things like that, for us to be able to calculate our lighting levels or the inverse square law and rules like that. So I think a lot of that really helped me. And when I took my licensing exams in Oklahoma in early 2000s, I remember, those skills also helped me with lateral forces and general structures Architecture Registration Examination (ARE). I I took nine ARE exams. Back then lateral forces and general structures were separate exams.

AA And those math skills and foundation that I had earlier on were really, really helpful for me. I also know that those skills were very helpful for me even when I was in college, because in Obafemi Awolowo University, we took a lot of structures classes. I remember. I don't know if this should be part of the recording as well. One of the structures classes we took, we were taught by there was this Italian professor that taught a very big class, about 250 of us, only four of us passed that structured class, and I was one of them. And it was just interesting because he also evolved a grade. Like he said, a failure was equated to a G, which he called a bad failure. He gave many people Gs. So you can imagine architecture school was kind of brutal in a way, when you think about that. But I was happy. Those types of experiences really helped shape me because it made me strong.

KL So you have two undergraduate degrees, correct?

AA No, I have one undergraduate degree and two masters. Two masters and then a PhD.

KL All right, just give us the rundown.

AA Okay, I'll go ahead and give you a rundown. So I hold the Bachelors in Architecture from Obafemi Awolowo University. And I also hold the Master's in Architecture from the same university, Obafemi Awolowo University. And when I completed my Masters, I worked for a couple of years in Lagos Island. Lagos, the former commercial capital of Nigeria. I interned with Ayo Onajide Associates. I worked with him. And in Nigeria, we have what we call the Youth Service. So when you're done with your education, you're required to work for one year. It's called Youth Service. And my youth service was with Ayo Onajide and Associates. Incidentally, Ayo Onajide is also one person that I regard as a huge mentor to me because my first job when I got the Youth Service was in the bank. But

me being me, I was just not satisfied with studying architecture and then working in a bank. And then I went up to Ayo Onajide Associates. And fortunately for me, Mr. Onajide, who is RIBA, is a fellow in the Nigerian Institute of Architects, and also he was trained in United Kingdom hired me. He had a firm, and I worked with him. I was with his firm for one and a half years before I moved to England to study, where I completed my Masters in Architecture, Computing and Design.

10:28

AA And then from there I moved to the United States and started teaching in University of Oklahoma. And as an educator there, I did an interdisciplinary PhD, which combined anthropology, educational psychology, and history. And yeah, that's my career, my academic background.

KL So you've already mentioned some people, and events that influenced your career. I'm sure there were a few more along the way, especially around the time that you started engaging with your PhD studies. And at that early mid-career, around the point of licensure, are there other people and events that you'd like to reflect on?

AA Yes. Someone I would also like to give great credit to is my mentor, who hired me, but she became my mentor. She hired me as a faculty, as an assistant professor in 1997 in the College of Architecture at the University of Oklahoma. So when I moved to the US. After my Masters in architecture, computing and design from England, I moved to Houston. And it was quite challenging to find a job in architecture, but I ended up working for a firm, Stage Planning and Design. They designed Palais Royal, Bealls and Stage Stores all over the US. I would say that was one of my first experiences in practice in interior design, to an extent. So I was working in the firm in Houston, and then I saw a job in the College of Architecture in Oklahoma for entry level assistant professor. And Professor Katharine Leigh, who was the head of the interior design program, hired me and became my mentor. And that's how I got tenured in the interior design program in Oklahoma. And one thing was the program was really looking for someone who could introduce computer applications in their curriculum. And fortunately for me, my master's from UK then was in Architecture, Computing, and Design.

AA And a fascinating story I would tell about that was my thesis in England was a 16-page LISP routine that used the rules of Le Corbusier's Architecture, the five points of architecture, to create rules that were written into AutoLISP. AutoLISP is the programming language for AutoCAD, and every time you type a random number, you can generate a building that looks like Corbusier's. And I ended up publishing an article on that. I will share that, so it will be interesting. And I remember my Masters of Architecture professor in England then Professor Paul Coates. He's passed away. Now, he would always say, oh, I wonder what Corbusier would have thought about this work you're doing, because he wouldn't have liked it, because every time you type a random number, you

generate something that looks like Villa Savoye, or you generate one of its buildings. It was interesting.

KL Yeah, that sounds like it needs to be brought back into the AI conversation that is so present this spring.

KL I'm very curious to learn more about that. Yes, we will talk more about that.

AA The thesis is actually titled After Le Corbusier. So it's interesting. It's the beginnings of parametric modeling and things like that. So it was fascinating. I enjoyed my time in London doing that, and I will tell you, I'd never done programming in my life. So to write a 16-page routine that would generate multiple typologies that look like Corbusier's buildings is very interesting.

KL So how did you find your way to that thesis topic then?

AA I guess most architects are huge fans of modern architecture. The way the program in UK worked was you were learning various aspects of computing and design, and you needed to choose at the end a thesis topic. So I learned basics of programming, I'd learned AutoLISP, I'd learned macromedia, all kinds of programs, and I had to choose a thesis. One thing I found fascinating was that you could easily write down the rules for Corbusier's designs in you could write them down as rules because it talks about pilotis, raising the buildings on pilotis, ribbon windows, roof gardens, continuous fenestration etc. I think his work lent itself to being easily written down as rules that you could program into the computer and generate typologies that look like that. So that was what I would say was fascinating for me about it. And of course, I'd studied a lot about international style architecture, definitely from my background from Nigeria, and the fascination with a lot of the international style buildings that were adapted to tropical architecture that you have in West Africa, Nigeria included.

16:22

KL So I'm kind of unspooling and going backwards a little bit here. I'm curious what piqued your influence about going into this architecture and computing masters specifically, and about making the jump from Nigeria to the UK.

AA What really influenced, Nigeria was colonized by the British. So even my father went to King's College in England. So naturally, Nigerians have a lot of affinity for the UK. So when I was working in Lagos with Ayo Onajide and Associates, I applied to the Master's in Computing and Design architecture, computing and Design at University of East London. And I was accepted. So I wanted to learn more. As a child of an academic of academics, you're always yearning for lifelong learning. So it was just a natural progression for me to be interested in seeking further education. And then when I was in England and I

completed the Masters, my sister was doing a PhD at the University of Houston. So that's why I moved to Houston because my sister was already here.

KL All right. And it sounded earlier when you were talking about your art teacher and your siblings, that you're the oldest sibling.

AA No, I'm the oldest girl. But most times when you're the oldest girl no, you're technically the oldest..

KL Okay. I'm assuming your first Masters was a professional degree in architecture, whereas your second masters was really meant to be research oriented and the beginning of an academic path. All right, so you're in Houston, you're doing set design, interior design. You got the position at the University of Oklahoma. Let's talk about some challenges that shaped your career, whether they were expected or unexpected. You're getting into your groove as an academic at this juncture. What were some challenges along the way?

AA Yeah. In terms of challenges. I would say moving from several continents brings these challenges to anyone. I remember when I first moved to Houston, it was very challenging to find a job. I remember some firms that I would take my portfolio to and interview. I would literally be told, oh, they really liked the portfolio and they liked my work. But because my degrees were not from the US, it was hard for them to hire me. Another challenge I would say was when I started, when I got, you know, I got some experience in Houston, kind of moonlighting, you know. I also met, I have to mention, a professional engineer I met Mrs. Doris Gibbs Washington. That's also how I got to get some practice experience in America. She studied architectural engineering, but she's a PE professional, and she was into residential design and designing for a church in Houston. So I would help and volunteered and did some work for her drawings and things like that. So that gave me some experience in the US as well. I also did a lot of volunteer work for different organizations as well, to just get some American experience there.

20:44

AA So that will be some of the challenges, I will say. Another job I did too. I remember in University of Houston, Professor Betty Bollinger hired me to teach Form-Z to architecture students back then in the University of Houston because, of course, my degree in England made me a strong computer protagonist or whatever you want to call it, because I was good with a lot of software. So she hired me to teach Form-Z to students in architecture in University of Houston then. So some of that helped me begin to build my portfolio and my career. Another challenge, I would say taking nine licensing exams is not an easy feat. It's not an easy feat at all. I took some before I had my child, and I took some after I had my child too. So I would encourage people to never give up is what I will say, because I remember that I took them. I just was focused. Even when I wanted to give up, I'm like

because when you have kids, I feel like sometimes you share your brain with them. I would encourage that you to never give up.

AA You get more forgetful and things like that. My sister I have a sister who's an engineer. She's an electrical engineer. She kept pushing me and like, no, don't give up. You have to keep doing it. So, yeah, I'm so glad I never gave up, because if I gave up on the nine exams, I wouldn't be where I am today with the fellow AIA. So that's what I would say.

KL And a whole bunch of other letters behind your name. This seems like as good a point as any to mention. FAIA, NCIDQ, IDEC, IES, LEED. and NOMA. All of those credentials and experience and leadership will continue to be revealed as our conversation unfolds. So you were completing your exams while you were an assistant professor at Oklahoma?

AA Yes, I was completing my licensing exam in Oklahoma when I started when I was an assistant professor there. And I got licensed, I believe, in 2006, was when I completed my exams in Oklahoma. You're allowed to take the exam one at a time. People before me that had to take all the exams in one day had a brutal experience. I'm so grateful that by the time I was taking it, you could schedule your time to when you can take the exams, and they were computerized, too, so you could schedule and go into the exam center and take them one by one and split them apart. So I was one of those that I split them apart, and I didn't take multiple in a day or things like that. I spaced them apart. And fortunately for me, too, once I passed the ARE exams, taking the NCIDQ was just easy for me, too, because I had gone through the brutal path of taking nine exams. NCIDQ is three sections. So I took those ones as well. And as an interior designer, like I mentioned earlier on, even though I was in the College of Architecture, my faculty role was in the interior design program.

AA So interior design in academia, to teach studio, one of the requirements for the accreditation is for the faculty to be NCIDQ certified as well. So that was one of the reasons I took that one.

KL So just being an assistant professor, being on the tenure track is its own challenge. Sure. What were some of the classes that you were teaching? What were some of the things you were starting to do in your PhD? How were you increasingly defining your research path and your direction as an educator?

25:18

AA When I arrived in Oklahoma, my main area of research was computing and design, because, as I mentioned earlier on, I was coming off of my experience in UK and the computing and writing the 16-page LISP routine. In fact, that was the first publication that I had in academia After Le Corbusier. So I also want to give credit to I mentioned earlier on one of my mentors, Dr. Katharine Leigh. She encouraged me. I believe I was the first

black tenured track professor that was hired in the College of Architecture in Oklahoma. And by the time I was tenured in 2003, I believe I was the first Black faculty that was tenured in the college as well. So my area of research, having this international background and knowing that there was a void on African architecture, when you start to do research on that in fact, I remember earlier in my career, people will stumble on me when they were trying to search for African architecture, because they said not much was published out there. So it really encouraged me to focus on that area and cross-cultural design and African Architecture for my area of research.

AA The other thing is, in terms of teaching, I taught studio at all levels from first year to fourth year because interior design programs are very small, they have few faculty, so you have to be able to teach at multiple levels. I was also responsible for developing their computer applications area. And incidentally, interior design at the University of Oklahoma was the only one that first got ranked by Design Intelligence, and we were ranked second in computer applications area. So that was like icing on the cake for me, because coming and developing that area and getting ranked by design intelligence for computer applications area was something that I was really fascinated about. And then lighting, I developed lighting curriculum there. I remember as an architectural student in Nigeria, we took acoustics and illumination. Lighting and acoustics were combined together there. So that was my first experience with acoustics and illumination. And full circle many years later, I got the opportunity when I was in Oklahoma to participate in the workshop for educators that was where my interest in teaching lighting started. So in fall of 2002, when I came back from that workshop, I started to teach the lighting class for the interior design program in Oklahoma.

AA And in my lighting class, it really became a class where I could teach interdisciplinary students. So students from interior design and architecture participating together and learning about lighting full circle. Here in Minnesota, we now have an architectural lighting minor which combines interior design and architecture. That lighting minor and theater was co-developed by my very good friend and colleague, Professor Mary Guzowski, who is an expert in daylighting. And we have a minor now that it's an undergraduate minor and a grad minor that brings interior design and architecture as well as theater together for students to be able to get a minor in lighting either at the undergraduate or the grad level. In fact, I've been fortunate to be funded by the Nuckolls Fund for Lighting Education. I was funded in Oklahoma to develop the lighting curriculum there. I was also funded to work with US lighting consultants in Manhattan, in New York by Nuckolls Fund. And twice now we've been funded by Nuckolls Fund for Lighting Education to develop lighting curriculum here in Minnesota. So I want to give credit to the foundation that has funded that program as well.

KL Yes, and there's a comprehensive list of fellowships and grants in your package on your CV. As there are there's really not a year that goes by that you don't have a fellowship, a

grant, an award, a publication, a conference leadership award. I'm trying to figure out how you fit it in 24 hours a day. I think you're bending light and time with your mad skills.

30:24

AA That's a great point. Kim because the thing is, especially when you're an administrator now, that and incidentally, I've been the Associate Dean. I was the Associate Dean for Research, Creative Scholarship and Engagement in the College of Design for four years. And I started as the Associate Dean for Faculty here at the Humphrey School last in August of 2022. I find that when you're in these leadership roles, you're doing the leadership job in the daytime, and then the time you have for your research is after hours and weekends. So you're very right about that. And those grants that you see in my CV as well in academia, and I'm sure you're very familiar with this as well, Kim. In order to develop some of these programs, when I wanted to really develop the lighting minor and the architectural lighting curriculum, there wasn't any support. So creatively, as an architect and designer, you start to look for where you could get support. Fortunately for me, the Nuckolls Fund for Lighting Education valued my proposal, and they funded it, and they've been funding it for years now. Same thing with the youth engagement program. I looked around my classes, and there were very few BIPOC students.

AA And one of the reasons that we have underrepresentation in design is because young kids don't hear about architecture or the design professions, and they don't see it as a future career path for them. So, I developed the Youth Engagement Program, and of course, comes with that is the challenges of how you're going to deliver the program. And I wanted the programs to be free, because the reality is that programs that are paid programs, only middle class and upper middle class kids can afford it. So, if we want to reach a wide range of communities, we have to be able to offer the programs for free. And the reality is, sometimes even middle-class families don't have the extra funding to pay for those programs. So, I started to look for grants, little grants here and there, internal grants from University of Minnesota, and it started to grow. Fortunately for me, I was able to receive the National Endowment for the Arts and BestBuy Foundation grants. We've been funded the second time now by the Best Buy foundation. And then I collaborated with a colleague in math (Dr. Lesa Clarkson) to look at the intersection between design and math. And then we started to get more grants for the program.

AA So that's where I am with that. So those are the grants that you see mainly on my CV. It's a symptom of there being a problem and wanting to develop a solution to fix it. And in order to fix it, you had to find the funding to fix it as well.

KL So we've very naturally segged from formative projects to favorite projects and from Oklahoma to Minnesota. But let's just put some formal dates on this. What year did you come to Minnesota?

AA I came to Minnesota in fall of 2011.

KL Okay. And had you just completed your dissertation then or that was a little earlier?

AA Okay. I actually finished my dissertation, my PhD in 2011.

KL Okay. And what was your dissertation topic?

AA Okay, my dissertation topic, it's a very long title.

KL They usually are.

AA My dissertation title. Okay. My dissertation my PhD dissertation was a *Culture-Based Design Pedagogy Using Nigeria and South African Spatial Forms*. So, like I mentioned earlier on, one of the reasons I really wanted to do that dissertation too was because when I would teach my students design in a cross-cultural setting, it was very foreign to them. It was hard for them to understand how to design in a different cultural setting. So that's why I developed that research area, and it's been one of the areas that I've focused on as well. So, it was a study that was conducted in my lighting class where the students were designing in Nigeria and South Africa. And as a result of that, I developed a framework for design in a cross-cultural setting. So, within the framework, when students start to design, I encourage them to look at the social dynamics within the culture they're looking at, and then I encourage them to look at how to juxtapose traditional and contemporary forms and then look at design elements and principles from that setting and also focus on sustainable principles as well.

35:43

KL All right. So, you came to the University of Minnesota with a tenure path or a tenured position in the College of Design. And in the last decade, you've added leadership now in the Humphrey School as an Associate Dean for Faculty. And as I understand from our previous conversation in your role as the Associate Dean for Faculty, that you're focused on faculty retention, faculty recruitment, and faculty research. And so, I'm seeing this did I misspeak?

AA No, research in my previous role in the College of Design was when I was the Associate Dean for Research, Creative Scholarship and engagement.

KL Okay.

AA And I will talk about that separately as well.

KL Sure. So, yeah, if you would like to elaborate on both of those leadership roles, what I'm seeing in your career arc, you also mentioned the summer camp I see you mentoring. Wherever you are, whoever your peers are, whoever your students are, whoever your

community is, I see you mentoring. So, talk more about the roles that you've held here at the University of Minnesota.

AA Okay, thank you. Yes. So, when I came to Minnesota in 2011 as a faculty in Interior Design, I also became the Interior Design Program Coordinator, or Interior Design Program

I was the program director of Interior Design from 2015 to 2018. In fact, I was tenured in Oklahoma, came here I feel like I've been tenured in two different institutions and came here in 2011 and was promoted to full professor in 2015. I was already a full professor in Oklahoma, but Minnesota made me come up again, and I was promoted in 2015. So, I directed the Interior Design program from 2015 to 2018 and took them through accreditation during that time. And I mean, interior design is accredited by the Council for Interior Design Accreditation. We passed with perfect scores, so I'm excited about that.

KL Congratulations. It is a task.

AA From 2018 to 2022, I became the Associate Dean for Research, Creative Scholarship and Engagement in the College of Design. And in my role there, I was responsible for mentoring faculty in research, creative scholarship, and engagement, making research contributions and our creative scholarship visible within the university. As you know, design research oftentimes is not as visible in research institutions unless we make a lot of effort to do that. I feel like in my role as Associate Dean for Research, Creative Scholarship, and Engagement in the College of Design, I made the work very visible to my peers and colleagues across the university. I also oversaw our collegiate centers because we have collegiate centers there in College of Design, The Center for Sustainable Building Research, The Minnesota Design Center, and then we have a Digital Design Center, and then we also have a museum, The Goldstein Museum of Design. So I was responsible, as the Associate Dean for Research overseeing those centers, and of course, also responsible for mentoring faculty to apply for grants and increase our funding portfolio was one of my roles as associated for research there. And in last August, I became the Associate Dean for Faculty here in the Humphrey School.

AA So that helps give a context for leadership roles I've held here.

40:00

KL Yeah. I have to imagine that one of the most critical challenges in your Associate Dean for Research role was the challenge of defining creative research. Right. There's so many ways in which it is expressed, so many different media, so many different outlets, and the challenge of, for lack of a better term, quantifying that to an institution of higher learning is its own challenge.

AA In fact, I will say some of the ways by which we accomplish that too, is I was telling you earlier, when the pandemic hit, the medical school even reached out to us there to help them with pandemic solutions. For example, I was showing you the N95 container box that

I brought a team together to come up with that solution, and we fabricated a lot of them in our maker space in Rapson, and they were provided to medical facilities within the Twin Cities because at that time there was shortage of N95 masks and they needed a way to store them after decontaminating them with UV lights. So that container box was devised to have the Monday, the Tuesday, the Wednesday, the Thursday, and the Friday mask. And that was a team (Will Durfee, Abraham Jacob, Justin Kindelspire) with a professor in engineering and a professor in product design, Ehsan Naderi, and we worked together on that. So things like that elevated the importance of design to the university community. Another team I was on. We got a grant, a small grant from University of Minnesota, the office for the Vice President for Research Rapid Response Grant. Ramsey County came to us.

AA They wanted service design solutions. They wanted to design their systems to return the community, to be able to function while the pandemic was ongoing because they found that there was disparity in access. For example, not everybody had High-Speed Internet and could just transform and do everything remotely. So, we helped Ramsey County. Myself and Tom Fisher and Virajita Singh were fortunate to get that OVPR rapid response grant. And we worked with Ramsey County on several of their libraries and their government centers to develop, redesign their services so that they could still function and offer some of their services to the residents who were not able to access it remotely in person during the pandemic. So those were examples. I felt that a lot of that propelled and also showcased why design is really, really important. Because you even find this global pandemic we are experiencing people have realized that the indoor environmental quality really matters. Design really matters. We spend 90% of our time indoors, although we're supposed to spend a lot of time outdoors, but the reality is that we are in buildings. So, design really matters, especially the built environment.

KL So those are excellent examples of creative product design, creative systems design. But your research has also been in the space of publication and of conference speaking. You have co-authored or edited or contributed to six different books. Could you talk a little bit about the topics that you have written about?

AA I will talk about *African Humanity, Creativity, Identity and Personhood*, which was published by North Carolina Academic Press in 2021. So, the book offers a dialogue, dialogue of multidisciplinary researchers from across the globe. And there are five sections. There's a section on gender, education and language. There's a section on design and arts in Africa

and its diaspora, a section on creativity, performance and Nollywood, and a section on sustainability, health and the environment. So basically, there are authors from all over the world who contributed chapters, and myself and Professor Toyin Falola from UT Austin were editors. And I actually have a chapter in that book on sustainable design strategies in

Nigeria. So those are the areas in which I published. Another book that I served as a co-editor for was *Design Thinking and Making at a Community Engaged University* that was published by the College of Design, and it was co-edited with me and several other colleagues in the College of Design. The dean there, Carol Strohecker, the former Associate Dean, Marilyn DeLong, Tom Fisher, the former Dean there, Brad Hokanson, former Associate Dean, and Sue Chu, a former Associate Dean there. I also contributed a chapter there too, on the K through 12 maker spaces that I've created.

45:45

AA And I also contributed a chapter on the Art of Healing project that I worked on with some colleagues. Several of us women of color faculty came together and developed a rejuvenation space, which was a pop-up space that we moved around different places around campus. There's an article about that in the book as well.

KL So you just mentioned the K-12 students and maker spaces. This seems like a good time to talk about the Youth Engagement Program in a little bit more detail.

AA Yeah. So, the Youth Engagement Program, I remember when I was in Oklahoma, I was fortunate to get a grant from University of Oklahoma then Women, Minorities, and Architecture was the title of that grant. I think that must have been one of the biggest internal grants I started with. It was \$20,000. Very fortunate. I felt so happy to get that grant. So, with that grant, we developed a panel and brought several renowned African American architects to University of Oklahoma. That's where I got to meet Cheryl McAfee, fellow AIA. She was a panelist on the grant, and then Professor Bradford Grant, too, came and spoke. And Jack Travis fellow AIA also came to Oklahoma then to speak. And one of the importance of the program was to ensure that our students in Oklahoma could see a reflection of themselves in the profession. So, we had a panel and several panels. Fast forward. When I moved to Minnesota in 2011, I was fortunate to get an internal grant. Then the former dean, then Tom Fisher, had an internal grant program. I was fortunate to get another internal grant to develop a diversity and design program. So, what I did with that was I brought several scholars from around the globe to speak on several topics, such as race in architecture, and paired that with a Saturday program where youth could learn about design and the design related fields and architecture.

AA So I started that program in 2013 as a lecture-based program and a Saturday event where students will have those experiences, because when kids are not aware and don't know about the design related fields, they're not sure of it as a future career opportunity for

them. So, I started that with internal grants, and we were able to move that from just after school experience for a couple of hours during the semester to, like, a week-long summer camp, which I've now offered since 2018 till 2023. We've been able to offer longer than a more substantial program two weeks through the funding we've received from NEA, Best Buy and so on. So basically, the program involves daily activities where students sketch, they learn to design through sketching. They learn about the different design related fields, about architecture that we have in the College of Design, learn about interior design, learn about graphic design. In fact, in our website, you can see current design students, current BIPOC design students talking about their career path, why they chose their field of study, and showing their drawings too. Because I think it helps when young kids can see people who look like them who have been successful in the profession and part of the program.

50:19

AA Also, kids are learning to sketch. They're building all kinds of Lego buildings. One of my favorite ones is when we collaborated together and built David Adjaye's Sugar Hill Building out of Lego in one of our summer camps in 2018. And then in 2019, we built Tamara Eagle Bull fellow AIA's Wounded Knee Memorial out of Lego in our camp program as well. And now we are fortunate to be able to experiment and have the students sketch and model and also do some rapid prototyping, sometimes with the laser printers and also with 3D printers. Yeah. And while doing this too, when you go to our website, we're also showcasing underrepresented designers and architects and landscape architects and interior designers so students can see a reflection of themselves and learn from the past.

KL So we've talked about your involvement with K-12 students in the community. You're also a mom, and you told me previously that you're a chess mom. So, we wanted to talk about some complementary skills and interests. I know that that's one of your complementary interests.

AA It's fascinating. I consider myself a chess mom and a chess player as well, because I remember I should tell the story, too. In Nigeria, when I was at Obafemi Awolowo University in my fourth year, I was in a university that was in a different city from my parents. So for housing, you had to stay in the dorms. In my fourth year, the only way you could find a dorm space was if I had a sport. So I had to pick up a sport. I couldn't run. Of course, I'm not a runner. So I picked up chess. And amazingly, I represented Obafemi Awolowo University twice in chess tournaments, and I have medals from there. So, I started playing chess in my fourth year in architectural school. Fast forward when I had my child and when I moved to Minnesota, too. One of the communities that I first got friends in was the School Chess Association because my son participated in various chess tournaments across the Twin Cities. We'll drive to various schools and we're part of the School Chess Association. And I even paired up with him a couple of times where we played, teamed up together and played together.

AA I love chess. I feel like it's one of those an analogy that I always think about when I think about myself. I think about myself about sometimes in chess, you have a pawn. The pawn are like the minor pieces, but when you have a rook or a stronger piece behind, the pawn supports in them, and the pawn makes it to the other end of the board, the pawn can become a queen. So sometimes I think of myself as that pawn that has the support, and I keep moving forward until I get to the other side of the board. And I maybe become a stronger piece and that's how I can check mate the opponent. So, it's an interesting analogy. Today, my son and I, sometimes we play each other, he is a lot stronger chess player than I am, but I can still take him on every now and then.

KL It's a beautiful analogy. What are some of the forces that you feel give you that support from behind?

AA I would say family, even my son too, and mentors and the different people that I have come across through my career. Chess for me, I love the game to an extent too, because you're always having to come up with multiple ideas. And when you're in the board, on the board and you're playing the game, you really have to have a strategy to figure out you're going to it's just like design. When you're solving problems, you're having multiple ideas, you're fixed with multiple challenges, and then you have to come up with several different solutions to solve the problem. Sometimes in chess you might start out with a strategy, but you can't only focus on your strategy. You have to look at what the opponent is doing to because you have to respond to the opponent's move. Otherwise, if you don't and you're just following your strategy, you get checkmated quickly and you lose the game. Something like that. I'm not sure how much this fits in, but it's an interesting game.

55:41

KL And you talked in the beginning about how supportive your parents were of all of your goals and interests, and you still have the support of your parents.

AA Yes, I do, and I'm very, very grateful for my parents and my siblings because they always champion me on. And yeah, I'm excited because when I think about, I mean, I really learned from them in terms of how you offer kids the tools and allow them to make their decision, I feel that's the kind of background I came from, my parents really supported me and offered me those tools. And when I wanted to be an architect and study architecture, my parents were very supportive of it.

KL So this starts to lead us into some of that reflection that will conclude our conversation. What direction do you see the profession of architecture heading in and are there changes that you hope to see in its direction?

AA That's a great question. I think architecture I always use this example for my colleagues, even when I write to in terms of broadening participation and ensuring that they are

underrepresented youth and underrepresented architects in the profession. Architecture has really been leading in that direction and architecture has provided like leadership for other design related fields to see how that can be done. Of course, there's still a lot of work to be done, but there's been several gains recently too, here I am, I believe I'm one of four black licensed female architects in Minnesota. When I was in Oklahoma, I was the only one.. In Minnesota, I believe there are two of us that are black Fellow AIA. My mentor and myself. My mentor, Alicia Belton. I'm really, really grateful for mentoring me through the FAIA process. I think architecture should lead and continue to increase representation. One thing I guess the clock never expires now throughout the validity of the ARE exam version is one of that examples that NCARB has brought forward, which means that if candidates start taking their exam is that right, Kim? That they have more time to pass.

KL Wow, I really hope so, because I think that would make a big difference, especially for the impact of motherhood. Or we can check on chronic illness that could have on a younger and mid-career candidate.

AA Yes, I totally agree. We'll check into that and just confirm it because that's a significant change that can really help moms and not just BIPOC, because we have a lot of responsibilities. I remember when I was studying for my exams, sometimes I had a baby, new baby. I would wake up late at night and do some more studying for lateral forces or do some more studying for general structures or something. So, I think it's helpful if the profession can be more inclusive to broaden participation and bring more underrepresented people to the field. Because when you really look at the demographics, there are more licensed male architects than women or people of color. So, we need to increase that. The pandemic has helped us shift our focus too, to really showcase how we as architects and designers and in the built environment, we're really responsible for the health and well-being of the of humanity, basically. So, I think continuing to lead in those areas can really impact and make change.

01:00:33

KL So you've accomplished much in your career, but you're not retiring. You are very much robust mid-career. What are your next steps? What are your next goals? There's a certain thesis in your FAIA application that starts to speak to legacy, but you're also still forming what will eventually be a legacy, what is yet to accomplish? What are your next priorities?

AA Yeah, there's a lot of work that we've been doing around youth engagement and some of the design research I've been doing too. I would like to find time to also publish more on that. Because one thing I learned from academia as well is that we need to scale up, the only way to scale up and be able to replicate some of this is if we write about it and share our findings so people can learn from it and also find ways to replicate it in their community. So that will be something I will say that I could use some time on and spend more time on publishing about some of our findings from the youth engagement and the

design research that I've been doing, and post occupancy evaluation we haven't even talked about.

KL No, we need to talk about that. That's how we first encountered each other.

AA There's a lot of work I've done around post occupancy evaluation. Like, I've been leading the state of Minnesota B3 buildings post-occupancy evaluation whenever a new construction or major renovation is done. And you receive state funding, in collaboration with Center for Sustainable Building Research, we've been doing post occupancy evaluation after about nine to twelve months of occupancy to learn how the building is supporting the health and well-being of the occupants. So, I would like to continue to publish some of our findings on that work. So that's something that I would say will be something I want to do again. I also supervise a lot of grad students.

KL Yes.

AA I want to continue to mentor them because it's always a joy of mine to see them out there and making a lot of impact. The first PhD student I graduated here at the University of Minnesota. Dr. Angie Scott. She's the director in WELL building in New York. I'm always proud to talk about that because it's always good to see our graduates blossom, and then some are assistant professors in other universities across the nation as well. So it's exciting. Yes.

KL The post occupancy analysis, I saw you speak about it at the State Conference on Architecture a couple of years ago. It's certainly robust with the data that was central to your second master's degree. Right. All of those pieces continue to inform your career, but they're also so much a part of the value proposition of architecture. Like, yes, we are charged with the health, safety, and welfare of the users of our buildings and of the built environment at large. But the economic piece that's attendant to that with elevating the value of architecture and of the practitioners of architecture are critical corollaries to that area of practice. All right. And as you're looking to your next steps, there's also next steps for all of the people that you mentor. A number of people in our community, both within architecture and people who may join the community of architects. I'd like to close by asking you to give advice to some of these groups, to your fellow women architects, to your fellow BIPOC architects, but also advice to young, emerging young or not young emerging professionals, depending on when they've entered our field of practice. Or to any student, a young student here at the university or a K-12 student who might just be playing with the idea of becoming an architect.

01:05:28

KL Could you share advice to those various communities, many of whom overlap?

AA I'll start out with the youth. One thing I would say to the youth is determination, dedication, and discipline takes you a very long way. Never give up. I would say when I look back at myself many years ago, I was determined and I remember, I always wanted to have the AIA behind my name, so I worked so hard, and I got licensed. Right. And I also used to dream of fellow AIA, and believe it or not, the dream is a reality. So I think work hard, be determined, and find mentors, right? There's always people who would support you out there, and you can do it, is what I would say. That will also be the same advice I will give to BIPOC colleagues as well, and same thing for women as well, because I feel like I've been through. I'm a member of each of these different communities that you've mentioned, and, you know, it's there's always opportunities. And the other thing I would say too, is that there will always be challenges, but don't let the challenges weigh you down. Celebrate the success, and then try to improve on the challenges.

AA No situation is perfect. And I think maybe as architects or as designers too, we know that there are multiple alternatives to a solution. I think that really helps. When I look back and I think about my career path, it's like full circle.

KL It's been a pleasure getting to know you better today. Thank you for your time and for sharing the fullness of your career and your experiences with us.

AA Thank you so much. Kim, it's been a pleasure talking with you as well. I am so appreciative. I'm so appreciative of this, and I feel so blessed or thrilled to be in the company of all the amazing women that you have interviewed for this project. I'm humbled to be part of this group. Thank you.

KL You're the 20th addition to the group. It's a significant number.

AA That's amazing. Yeah. Who could have taught, like a young girl from Nigeria would end up being part of this group? Thank you, Kim.

[End of Interview]

Total Interview Time: 1:08:48

Credits

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