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Half Ghanian, half-Scottish, architect and educator – also writer and curator – Lesley Lokko has built a career by crossing professional boundaries and challenging inherited assumptions about gender and race. In this interview, we focused on the design of the institutions she has set up and led – the GSA in Johannesburg and the AFI in Accra – because, through them, we may have a glimpse of what a decolonizing architectural pedagogy may look like.
LL: Well, I suppose it’s important to say that in the U.K., at least, you can’t study architecture at the graduate level. It doesn’t matter if you’ve studied something else previously – you have to go back to the first year. So, although I already had a degree in Sociology, I still had to start from scratch. When I applied to the Bartlett to study architecture, I remember that my primary reason was that I wanted to know a lot about one thing. My first degree was in Sociology, which teaches you a little about a lot of different things. But I was attracted to the idea that a professional degree would teach me everything I needed to know about one thing. In the end, of course, I understood this to be a complete fallacy – that architecture would give me a deep understanding of one thing. In my interview at the Bartlett [Faculty of the Built Environment, University College London], I remember that when they asked me, “why do you want to study architecture?” I replied, “Because I really want to know one thing.” The professor who interviewed me just laughed and said, “come and talk to me in five years.” And I did, and I remember saying to him, “You were right. I know less now than when I came in.” So, I thought I was going to do one thing and came out having done something completely different.

LL: I think it was the idea of the “professional” that initially attracted me. Sociology and languages give you a huge range of questions but not many answers. So, there was something about the idea of the professional which was deeply attractive. I don’t know what you’d call it – perhaps the luster of a professional? I thought to myself, “that’s what I want! I want to know something properly.” After some time, I realized that although architecture certainly teaches you how to think about certain things, it doesn’t give you any answers. Or at least, it didn’t give me any answers. But what it did give me was a very good framework for asking questions, which in retrospect, I realized I’ve been asking all my life – questions around power, race, identity, gender... Today, we’d call those questions of ‘decolonization.’ At the time, the questions I had were more personal, less political.

LL: In a way, I didn’t, to be honest. My PhD was a new one at the time – it was a PhD by Design, using a design research methodology, not the more traditional historical or theoretical dissertation. I’m not a historian nor a theoretician by any stretch of the imagination. In the U.K., particularly at that time [in the early 90s], the distinction between history, theory, design, research, practice, and studio was more blurred than it is today. So, even though I’ve never really thought of myself as a practicing architect – as in somebody who makes buildings, although I have made a few buildings – I don’t see myself as a bona fide researcher either. At the Bartlett in those years, students were able to move quite fluidly between categories. I think it has become slightly less fluid now, not just at the Bartlett but overall. In fact, one of the things that I found most difficult about the North American curriculum, in general, was the absolute rigidity of the separation between design and history and theory.

LL: I’m going to answer that in a slightly roundabout way. I grew up mixed-race, or ‘half-caste,’ which is how we referred to ourselves in Ghana as I was growing up. I know that word isn’t very popular, but that’s what we were called. And I was very aware of being half-Ghanian and half-Scottish, or half-African, half-European, but I was also very puzzled about the terminology – the use of the word ‘half’ – because I couldn’t work out if it was half this way [horizontally moving her finger from side to side of her face], or half that way [vertically raising her finger from chest to her head] or half this way [moving her finger diagonally down from her right shoulder to her left side]. I couldn’t quite work out why we were described as ‘half’ something. You understand that you have two parents, that there’s a mathematical division. But this insistence on the word ‘half’ was quite difficult for me to grasp because it seemed to me that the boundary was much less linear, not quite as neat. I knew there was clearly a boundary, perhaps in terms of skin color or maybe language, but I also understood it was a very porous kind of boundary; it didn’t seem to be a precise line.

LL: Absolutely. Sometimes things only become apparent in retrospect, in hindsight. It’s only now, after a couple of years have passed, that I understand that the Graduate School of Architecture [GSA], which I set up at the University of Johannesburg, was very much a pilot or a test run for the AFI. However, the GSA was constrained in many ways because it was set up within an existing institution. When I began thinking about the AFI, I had a very clear idea of the curriculum; I had a very clear idea of the issues I thought it should tackle, but what I didn’t have a clear idea of was the structure of the institute itself. So much of my time, energy, and thinking at the moment goes into figuring out what is the institutional organization. What is the organizational structure? What are the hierarchies? What are the finances? What is the institutional infrastructure? Finding the right answers to those questions has taken way more energy and time than I ever thought imaginable.

Having said that, I also realize that, having struggled for nearly thirty years within so many different institutions to implement the changes that I believe will get the results that we want, I now understand that you can’t shortchange this process. There’s always tension between the kind of freedoms that support exploration and the bureaucratic requirements of an institution that generally stifle it. I’m so tired of seeing colleagues who manage to do good
work in spite of their institutions. To me, that just seems like a travesty. So, what does it mean now to put an institute in place that actively and deliberately supports the kind of work that we all claim to want?

VRK-FD: Interesting. Since the idea is to decolonize the curriculum and traditional institutions resist that option, you’re trying to build a new one. But, what can we do with those existing institutions? So, perhaps that is the question if we want to think about decolonizing pedagogies.

LL: This is a very interesting question and a very difficult one. I remember when I first started thinking about race and architecture, as a graduate student – I must have been in my third or fourth year – I realized that if I really pursued the question of how race is relevant to architecture, I would probably end up un-doing architecture. Even at that very superficial level, I could see that architecture was somehow complicit in holding up an idea about ‘race’ that I wanted to dismantle. For twenty-odd years, I’ve skirted around the tension that lies just beneath the surface of architecture, which, if you push hard enough, you will undo. So, in putting together a new institution, what I’ve tried to do (and I have to think very carefully about how I say this), is to take those aspects of architectural education and training that are propositional and explorative and put these in the service of ideas about race, gender, power, equity in order to encourage new architectural languages, a new vocabulary. One of the most amazing and inspiring things about architecture is its ability to propose. Architecture cannot only ever be critique, it has to put forward something. And there’s something in the way in which architects are able to think about propositions that I find incredibly optimistic. There’s something about the training that I think is incredibly powerful when we think about race and colonialism.

So, what the AFi – and to a certain extent the GSA – were trying to do was not to say, “this is what a decolonized curriculum looks like,” because I don’t think anybody knows that yet. But rather to say, “this is what the space looks like, feels like, behaves like, in which it is safe to explore those questions.” In a way, I see both the GSA and the AFi as transitory spaces; I don’t know if they will become anything close to a definitive answer. I also know that if we don’t have those spaces, we will be asking the same questions in 50 years’ time. It’s less about saying that these institutions are already decolonized. I don’t think they are. I think that it is much more complex than that – the impetus for building or creating institutions like the GSA and the AFi is to bring a certain level of safety to the questioning.

VRK-FD: Skeptics might argue that the decolonizing turn in our field is not honest, that it’s just a trend. Your words resonate as almost the opposite to those Western institutions anxious for solutions like “we’re going to give you a crash course on decolonizing pedagogy, and now you’re going to be all decolonized.” While you’re saying, “no, we’re not there yet, it’s going to take time, and it’s incredibly difficult,” and you’re doing it in Africa. So, we wonder what you think of this moment we’re living in. Because there’s the opportunity to bring some of these topics to mainstream education, but at the same time, there’s the suspicion that this is only a trend. What do you think?

LL: I first arrived in the U.S. in 1997 [to teach architecture at Iowa State]. It was the first time I’d ever heard the term ‘design problem.’ I was so confused by it! Students kept asking me, “what is the design problem for this semester?” I didn’t know how to respond. I’d never heard students talk about architecture in that way. In the U.K., students talked about a ‘brief’ or a ‘topic,’ not about ‘problems.’ I came to understand it as a very North American term – you know, the idea that for every problem there’s a solution. There’s a kind of naïve optimism in that which is infectious. The energy of saying, “there’s a problem; how do we solve it?” I found it infectious – I don’t want to say seductive because they’re slightly two different things. The energy is infectious, but I’m not seduced by it. After a while, when I had grasped a little more about the North American education system, I realized that it wasn’t in the academy’s interest to really embrace decolonization – or, as it was called back then, ‘diversity.’ In fact, the academy would do everything in its power to resist it.

Fast forward nearly twenty years, to the student protests at the University of Cape Town in South Africa in 2015, which were addressed directly at the academy – at tertiary education – and I saw an opening. There was something about the nature of those protests that was intellectual, as well as historical and theoretical, and tertiary education had no choice but to respond. In South Africa, the relationship between architecture and apartheid is complex. Apartheid could not have happened without the tacit approval of the built environment professions. There’s a deep sense of shame within the profession that makes it difficult to speak about. When the protests started, within architectural circles, there was a kind of fear or a premonition that suddenly the cat was going to be let out of the bag. The “Rhodes Must Fall” protests started out by calling for the removal of a statue of the British colonist Cecil Rhodes from the University of Cape Town campus. It wasn’t directly about architecture, but what was being attacked went far beyond a statue. In the second wave of protests around tuition, we were talking about equality and access to education. All this opened up a kind of space that was characterized, on the one hand, by incredible energy and anger, and on the other hand, by deep shame and fear. That relationship for me was very interesting. A space opened up suddenly in education where you could do things that previously you would never have had the opportunity to do.

That was the first time I realized that to make the kind of changes that would bring about substantive change, you needed bigger scale transformations. Until recently, those bigger transformations hadn’t happened in the U.S. So, when people say that decolonization is a trend and so on, I get what they mean because the wider scale revolution hasn’t happened.

However, when the protests of Black Lives Matter happened, I was reminded of the situation in South Africa, some five years previously. Except, in the U.S., the protests were accompanied by a terrible fear. It reminded me of the way I used to think about the relationship between race and architecture – which is to say that if you push too hard, the whole thing had to fall. And nobody could afford that, least of all, academia. In my experience, the push-back in the U.S. against curriculum change has much more to do with the terror of what might lie ahead.

I think Europe has a more complex relationship with history. In some ways, it’s been easier to talk about complexity and change in Europe because people are
not so terrified that everything about the society they’ve built is going to be undone. Europeans – some reluctantly, some not – do recognize that some things have to change. But in Africa – and this is one of the reasons I decided to move home – we don’t have the burden of either of those constructs. In a sense, we are all about the future.

VRK-FD: Following that line, we have two questions. The first is related to what you labeled as ‘cultural insecurity.’ Do you see it as one of the fears that arise with colonization, mostly in societies like Europe or the U.S.?

LL: In a way, I think it’s the post-colonial society that is more insecure. It was very evident to me in South Africa and, to a certain extent, in the U.S., even though the U.S. doesn’t think of itself as a post-colonial society. In both places, I perceived the same kind of deference towards European ideals, which come from a Europe that no longer exists. I don’t know South and Latin America well enough to know what it’s like in that context. Certainly, we have the same conundrum in parts of Africa, this tag of a ‘developing world’ – developing into what? There’s a kind of value placed on where one is in history, which also breeds insecurity. Everybody is looking somewhere else to see how things should be done. But invariably, the place where everybody is looking at no longer does things that way anyway. So, there’s a kind of double consciousness: that you’re aware of yourself, but you’re also aware of yourself looking at something else, or of someone looking at you. This is a really interesting moment to try to develop a vision that is not aware of its own gaze, let’s say, or aware of the gaze of others.

VRK-FD: In that sense goes our second question, related to this idea of Africa as the laboratory for the future. This is a fascinating idea because it plays into past narratives. On the one hand, this idea of European colonizers using Africa literally to experiment with certain traits of modernization. On the other hand, it reminds us of the racist idea that Africa has no history, as Hegel and others talked about. There’s an interesting temporal tension that emerges when you use that term. You’re clearly choosing to think towards the future, but by decolonizing, you’re always thinking about the past as well. We wanted to know more about this idea of the laboratory of the future and what it means for you. What is it mobilizing?

LL: We’re the world’s youngest continent – the average age is under twenty, but we have the world’s oldest leadership – the average age of an African leader is invariably his late seventies, eighties. So, there is a different relationship set up between the continent’s demographic and its vision, or those who are responsible for its vision. It’s similar in a way to the distance between my lens as an educator and that of my students. As an architect, that’s a very interesting distance. It’s a challenge, but it’s also a source of creativity. For me, to think about how my students understand contemporary culture is interesting, but also to understand how they view the tools of my trade – the tools that I acquired – the ability to draw plans and sections, for example. These tools are no longer the only tools available.

I also know that a culture’s relationship to the past is not singular; in other words, it’s not universal. Cultures do not understand the past in the same ways. In Africa, we have a curious tendency to think about culture and tradition as if they were the same thing. I think this is a dangerous assumption. It points to the dangers of a preoccupation with history, especially with the idea that one’s history has never had the space to be told, to grow, to narrate, to defend itself. It’s a defensive position.

I’m going to be careful about how I’m going to say this because it is a complex argument: when I’m teaching or working with students whose impetus is two-fold – they want to absorb the canon in order to change it – I tell them they have two tasks going on simultaneously: they have to be able to see and understand the present, but also to figure out how to use it tactically to propose something else. This is an enormous ‘ask.’ I feel the same way about history. It’s an enormous burden to think too hard about what history means for others, and then how to translate what it means for us... and then having to propose an alternative history. To me, that task seems like a tightrope walking – every so often, you’re just going to fall off. So, tactically, I have to make a choice: look forward or look backward. I think that with the AFI, I made the tactical decision to look forward even though I’m aware that, by not looking closely enough at the past, you may miss something. I suppose it comes down to balance. If you look too closely at the past, you’re going to lose the ability to see in front of you.

VRK-FD: How has “Speaking History” – a project that the AFI developed – tackled some of these questions?

LL: I’ll give you a very concrete example. The former mayor of Accra, Nat Nunoo Amartefio, was an architect and an amateur historian, although there were very few people who knew more about the urban history of Accra. He published very little – articles, op-eds – and was a mayor and a politician, but he was also a walking encyclopedia. One of our first projects, “Speaking History,” was an attempt to explore histories in Ghana. We decided to film Uncle Nat (as everyone called him) and to make six mini-documentaries about Accra. We began filming, and in the first few sessions, he told me things about Accra that I had no idea about – and I’m from Accra. And then, suddenly, he died. We filmed with him on a Wednesday, and he passed away.
for me, it raised all kinds of interesting questions. When I did my PhD, much of the conversation in my examination was around footnotes—you know, had I written something properly, and so on. And working with Uncle Nat on “Speaking History” suddenly brought up really difficult questions for me about the methodology of history and what it means. It cannot mean the same thing in all contexts.

So, what does it mean to think of history in a different way, in a different context, but not to lose any of the rigor? I suppose I’d say that all the fuss about methodology is history’s way of being rigorous. But there are many ways to be rigorous. Not just footnotes.

**VRK-FD:** That is also something that hinders the work of re-writing decolonial histories; the limitations of the archive. Perhaps the “Speaking History” project can be thought of as a decolonizing method because there are so many histories that we’re not able to get at with the traditional methods of the historian.

**LL:** If there’s one thing architecture has taught me, it is how to think about things, how to design. I wouldn’t call it a non-archive—I don’t think things are quite so binary. There’s not ‘the archive’ and the ‘other-thing-that-is-not-the-archive’—there is always something of the old thing in the new. But architecture really gave me the tools to design structures that better serve whatever it is that I would like to put in them. I don’t think of myself as somebody who designs buildings, but I certainly do think of myself as somebody who designs educational structures, and the curriculum just happens to be one of those structures. After thirty years, I think that I’m actually quite good at designing structures that allow a certain way of thinking to emerge.

What isn’t clear is the impact that these structures can have on the wider world. Partly because, in a way, the curriculum that we’ve designed, both at the GSA and now at the AFI, is slightly ahead of its time. Students that have graduated in the last two, three, four years, are moving into teaching because that seems to be the most welcoming space for them.

It’s too early to tell whether they will have an impact anywhere other than the narrow kind of worlds of the academy, the exhibitions, the publications, and the biennales. I do know that part of what we’ve done—and part of what we hope the AFI will go on to do—is also to build confidence. And all of this peripheral stuff—this interview, the magazines, the dissemination—all of that is the structure that supports confidence. If you ask me, “what is it that has hampered so many African-Black-‘Othered’-Diaspora students over the past 30 years?” It’s the lack of confidence. And that is what institutions don’t see as their role: to build the structure that will give their students support and confidence. On the contrary, most institutions seem to be hell-bent on destroying it, in order to conform to something else.

**VRK-FD:** Regarding how to design curricular and institutional structures, you have stated that the AFI is based on two predicaments, “decolonization” and “decarbonization.” Coincidentally, this year’s issues of our magazine are titled “Decolonization,” “Degrowth,” and “Deconstruction.” So, why are we speaking about this prefix ‘de’—so often nowadays? What is in the ethos of this time that leads us to think about the ‘de-’ instead of the ‘re-’?

**LL:** That’s a really good question. I’m going to speak as a kind of anecdotal historian because I don’t have any data to back this up. I think that the changes that happened globally post Second World War, and probably post the 1960s, particularly in terms of education, show a growth that we’ve never replicated. If you think about the number of people who came into academia, if you think about the class movements in Europe since the Second World War, the movements of women across the world, these are huge social changes. In a sense, all of that input has brought about new sets of questions. To go back to that original relationship between race and architecture, the more questions you throw at the canon, the shakier it becomes. So, in some ways, I think it is not a coincidence that we are very much in a ‘de-‘, a dismantling era, because so much of what was put in place, was at the expense of so many, not just in terms of race and ethnicity, but in terms of gender, class, and sexuality. So much of the canon has been about the exclusion of almost everything else. Now that that ‘everything else’—in whatever shape or form—is entering academia, entering the world, it doesn’t seem like a coincidence to me that we are starting to unpack the canon. My sense is that this period of ‘de-’ will last for a while.

This is exactly why I think architecture is such an interesting discipline—as an architect, you cannot only unpack: you have to propose; you have to ‘repack.’ Thirty years ago, people told me, “architecture is the wrong discipline to think about questions of race, identity, and colonialism,” which is absolute horseshit. Architecture is the only discipline that I know of in which, from a very early level, you have to figure out how to rebuild. That, for me, is the optimist side of it, and it’s the same optimism that guides me when I’m teaching students. This happened at the GSA, and I hope that it will happen in the AFI. We teach in a tutorial fashion, which means it is a conversation; we don’t lecture our students. Almost everything is done in a kind-of-studio format because of the intimacy it allows between tutor and student. You can still go into those scenarios and come away with goosebumps, thinking, “how did you think of that?” For me, that is the magic of architecture.

**VRK-FD:** Speaking about the canon, there have been so many debates about how to question it, wondering whether it is possible to teach a revised, even decolonized canon. Some people say, “you need to teach them the canon, so they can undo it;” others say, “no! why do we need to have so many classes about Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier?” And, although most people’s hearts are in the right place—they want to think about architecture differently, they want to teach history differently—there’s still
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Lesley Lokko is the founder and director of the African Futures Institute (aFi) in Accra, Ghana, an independent postgraduate school of architecture and public events platform. She was the founder and director of the Graduate School of Architecture, University of Johannesburg (2014-2019) and the Dean of Architecture at The Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture (2019-2020), cca. She is the editor of White Papers, Black Marks: Race, Culture, Architecture (University of Minnesota Press, 2000) and the editor-in-chief of Joumial of Contemporary African Architecture, published by the aFi. In 2004, she made the successful transition from academic to novelist with the publication of her first novel, Sundowners (Orion, 2004), and has since followed with twelve further bestsellers, which have been translated into fifteen languages. She is currently a founding member of the Council on Urban Initiatives, co-founded by LSE Cities, UN-Habitat and UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose; and a Visiting Professor at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. She is a trustee of London-based The Architecture Foundation and has held visiting professorships at the University of Westminster, University of Cape Town, The Cooper Union, and the University of Virginia. In December 2021, she was appointed Curator of Biennale Architettura 2023 of La Biennale di Venezia.

a fear of letting go of the canon. What do you think about that?

LL: I have a very shaky sense of history. I’ve never taken a history survey class in my life. I’ve never taught one. But I know how to think about history. When I was at high school in Ghana, we had an African American teacher. Instead of teaching us about the Lancasters and the War of the Roses and whatever it was in the British curriculum, she decided to teach us about the four great revolutions: American, Chinese, Russian, and Industrial. Before, we had very little understanding of why these revolutions were important to us; but she tried to teach us the meaning of the revolution without relying on memorizing dates. When I came to the Bartlett to study architecture, it was the first year that Peter Cook had taken over the curriculum, and history and theory were suddenly taught in a very similar fashion to the unit system. There were a number of people running history and theory units that were about topics; they were topic-driven rather than chronological. The idea was that you chose a unit, a design unit, and then you combined that interest with a history and theory course; later they did the same with structure courses. We didn’t have the curriculum that was broken up into undergraduate and graduate courses, or into electives and core: all the things that the North-American curriculum is built around. It meant that, from almost the first year, you were trying to figure out how your interests found resonance in a whole range of topics that were put before you as catalysts.

When I started the GSA in Johannesburg, I had an inkling, an intuition, that the same approach would allow students who were angry at the previous canon; to test their own anger. Because now we were saying to them, “okay, you say that you don’t want this canon, now you have to come to the table and take responsibility for figuring out how you’re going to build a new canon.” And when I use the term ‘laboratory of the future,’ I mean it in that laboratory sense, that students and tutors understood collectively that they are building something together. We made some very key decisions in that regard. For example, units in Johannesburg always had to be taught by two people, with a maximum of about fifteen students. That way, there was a small enough number to have a conversation, and students understood that knowledge is produced in dialogue. We did the same thing in history and theory, as well as in what we call ‘design realization,’ which is about construction or technology. Suddenly, our way of teaching became a catalyst for a different way of thinking, which then became a catalyst for the production of a new canon. That’s about the clearest example I can give of why ‘how’ you do things matters, because the ‘how’ leads in the end to the ‘what.’ I think what some are trying to do right now is to produce a new ‘what’ without examining the ‘how.’ I can’t see how that’s going to work.

VRK-FD: Would you say that decolonization is a ‘how’ or a ‘what’?

LL: It’s both. What we’re in, at the moment, is a really intense period of ‘how.’ I think it was Einstein who said, “madness is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” When I taught in the u.S., that was what came to my mind: how are you going to get a different result if you’re not going to change what you do? To me, all of these workshops about decolonization, decarbonization, and all of this kind of problem-solution policy dynamic are just scratching the surface. They won’t tackle the real problem. It’s the same when you’re talking about race, you talk about equity, diversity, inclusion, but you don’t talk about slavery. You have to go down to the root of the problem, yet some societies are not prepared to do that.

VRK-FD: Is there an afterlife to decolonization?

LL: I don’t know if there is. I go back to someone like Stuart Hall. When I first started reading Hall and his interpretation of questions of identity, he had this sort of Derridean idea that things are always in play. And, lately, I’ve been coming to understand much of my architectural training not so much as tools but as tactics. Tactics work in different ways under different conditions. But, if the tactic is robust enough, it is able to deal with a new condition. So, when people say, “what are you teaching your students to do?” I would say that we’re teaching them how to think about the things that we give them in the hope that they would be able to deploy them in ways that we can’t imagine now. ARQ