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What Can Architecture Learn from an Island? Black Females in Architecture on Tilos

BY  PEPI NIKOLOPOULOU · 7 MINS READ



What can a small island teach us about the way we design, inhabit and ultimately live together? On Tilos, an island that has emerged as a point of reference for sustainability and the circular economy, architecture encounters a different kind of knowledge: one passed down through generations, through everyday practices, care and the living memory of a place.

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as an important case study for circularity and zero-waste practices.

BFA, a global network supporting Black women and Black-mixed women across architecture, design and construction, will be represented on Tilos by **Neba Sere**, Spatial Practitioner, Associate Professor and Director of Decolonising and Decarbonising at The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, and **Lauren Fashokun**, Architectural Designer and BFA Collaborator.

At the heart of their residency is **MA**, BFA's ongoing research project inspired by the Akan principle of **Sankofa** retrieving knowledge from the past to inform the future. On Tilos, the project will focus on women's knowledge, everyday heritage and living memory, exploring forms of knowledge that often remain overlooked or outside conventional understandings of architecture and cultural production.

We spoke with **Neba Sere** and **Lauren Fashokun** about what architecture can learn from small communities, the relationship between sustainability, care and local knowledge, the continuing barriers faced by Black women in the profession and, ultimately, what architecture itself needs to unlearn and relearn today.

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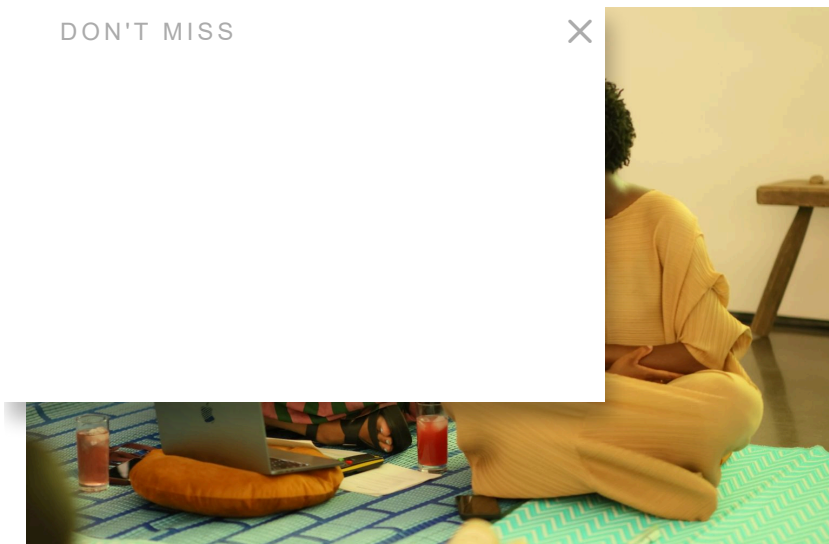
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Neba Sere and Lauren Fashokun

What interested you most about participating in the Tilos Artist Residency, and what makes an island like Tilos an interesting place from which to think about architecture, sustainability and community?

Neba: In 2024 BFA embarked on a self-initiated research project titled MA. This is an ongoing project that draws from the Akan principle of Sankofa, retrieving knowledge from the past to inform future practice. Through conversations, workshops, exhibitions and research across Africa and the diaspora, MA explores how women's spatial, cultural and ecological knowledge is created, transmitted and sustained across generations. We've brought our work to the UK during the London Festival of Architecture 2024 (With an exhibition and programme of events titled 'Earth, Memory and the Spaces we Inhabit') and 2025 (with an event titled 'A Creative Assembly').

We've always been keen to extend our working practices with more communities of women across the world and in this instance a hyper-local exploration of women's knowledge, everyday heritage and living memory on the island. We are interested in forms of knowledge that often remain invisible: **recipes passed between generations, practices of growing and preparing food, textile traditions, plant knowledge, domestic rituals, storytelling, caregiving, celebration and community-making.** While these practices may not

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since 2022. What can architects and designers learn from a small island community when thinking about environmental challenges on a much larger scale?

Lauren: I think that when we work and design in cities, it's important to look at **how things work amongst smaller communities** where everything you need to live isn't readily available. I grew up in a small seaside town in Cornwall, England, where the population is around 10,000. This population is much greater than Tilos, and it's certainly more accessible, but I find that when you live in these places, remote and abundant in natural beauty, you are able to respect the process of production more than you might in a city where you're so far removed. Not having everything you need conveniently on your door step makes you more resourceful, you end up planning things in a way which reduces the impact to our planet. We can absolutely look to small communities as an example in how we can be more resourceful and responsible and patient, perhaps accepting slower paces at times.

What we also have to remember as designers and architects living in cities, is that our usage impacts the smaller communities whose contribution to climate disaster is minimal compared with ours.

During your residency, you will work with local women and explore female knowledge, everyday cultural heritage and living memory. Why is it important to bring forms of knowledge that are often informal or overlooked into conversations about architecture and the built environment?

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matriarchal construction practices on the African Continent, we believe we can learn valuable lessons for future types of making with renewable or recycled materials and develop more sustainable ways of designing for our shared future.

We believe this project will contribute to the wider MA research programme, expanding an international archive of women-led knowledge systems and everyday cultural practices. By connecting Tilos with conversations taking place across Africa, Europe and the diaspora, the residency seeks to **highlight the value of local knowledge** while exploring shared experiences across different geographies and cultures.



Tilos Residency 2023 Artists

Sustainability in architecture is often discussed in terms of materials, technology and energy efficiency. Do we need to broaden that definition to include social relationships, local knowledge, care and community?

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example. However, if we look at historic ideas of community, or ideologies in the global south, circularity is ingrained into life.

Black Females in Architecture was created in response to questions of representation and inequality within architecture and the built environment. What has changed since BFA was founded, and where do you still see the greatest barriers for Black women in the profession?

Neba: When BFA was founded in 2018, there was very little space within the built environment for Black women's experiences to be discussed collectively. We received backlash for creating a group specifically for Black women, with questions about why it wasn't simply a women's or wider diversity group. For us, that reinforced the need for a dedicated space: Black women's experiences, barriers and contributions were not being sufficiently recognised or centred.

Since then, there has undoubtedly been a shift. **BFA** has grown from a WhatsApp group of four women into a **network of almost 600 members globally**, and Black women are now more visible within architectural and cultural conversations. We have been invited to contribute to major platforms, including the **Venice Architecture Biennale 2023**, and increasingly find ourselves being asked to bring our perspectives into discussions, projects and initiatives across the profession.

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BFA Co-Directors Neba Sere and Selasi Setufe MBE by Darnell Ibrahim



BFA Lauren Fashokun

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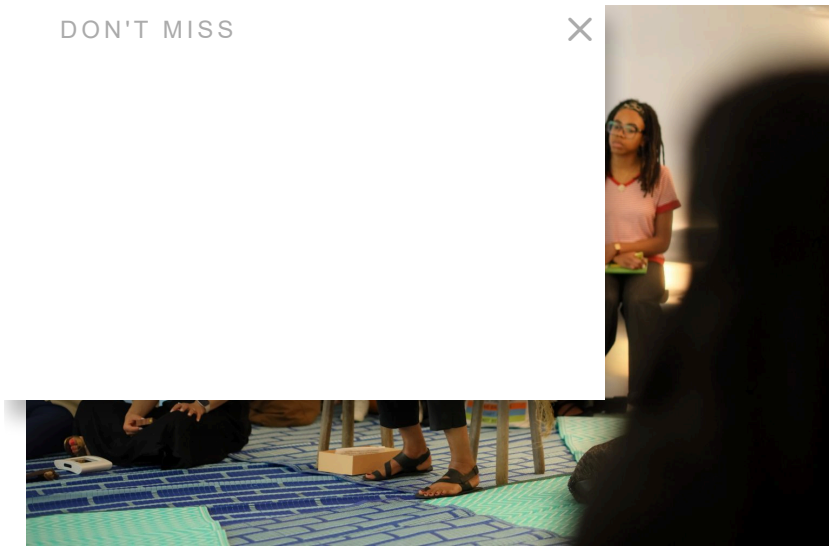
Neba Sere by Ben Pipe Photography Roca Gallery

But visibility is not the same as structural change. The greatest barriers remain around who has access to decision-making, whose knowledge is valued, and who gets to shape the built environment beyond the consultation or concept stage. We can see greater gender diversity in many professional spaces, but racial diversity is still much less evident, particularly in positions of influence. There is also a persistent gap between being invited into the room and having the power, resources and support to influence what happens there.

This is why BFA has increasingly moved beyond representation alone. We have built our own platforms for community, skills and confidence building, education, research and project work, creating opportunities for Black women to articulate and pursue ideas that may not find space within the conventional profession.

So, while the conversation has changed significantly since 2018, the work is far from finished. The challenge now is moving from visibility and participation towards lasting changes in who holds agency, whose knowledge is valued, and how decisions about our built environment are made.

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BFA A Creative Assembly Event 2026 DarnellIbrahim



BFA A Creative Assembly Event 2026 DarnellIbrahim

After your time in Tilos, what would you like to leave behind on the island and, what knowledge or experience do you hope to take away with you

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everyday knowledge and practices of women on Tilos as forms of cultural knowledge in their own right.

For us, the residency is also an opportunity to experience the wider context of the MA project. We want to connect with women who are making, creating, caring, growing, cooking, building and thinking in the unique context of an island, and to listen for knowledge that may be missing, undervalued or forgotten. We are interested in looking backwards not simply to preserve the past, but to ask what these forms of knowledge might teach us about different ways of making, thinking and being in the world.

We hope to take away new relationships, stories, materials and ways of knowing that can become part of the wider MA research, adding Tilos to an evolving conversation between women and communities across different geographies. In a sense, we are looking to **“speak with our great female ancestors”**: to bring attention to the knowledge carried by generations of women and consider how, by shining a light on these stories, they might continue to inform the future.



Tilos Residency 2025 Artists STORE

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BFA Showcase in Accra 'Women's Way of Knowing the City' in collaboration with Edan Ghana, 2025 by Ivy Gbeze



Tilos Residency 2025 Artists STORE

Finally, if architecture is ultimately about shaping the way we live together, what do you believe architects need to unlearn and relearn today?

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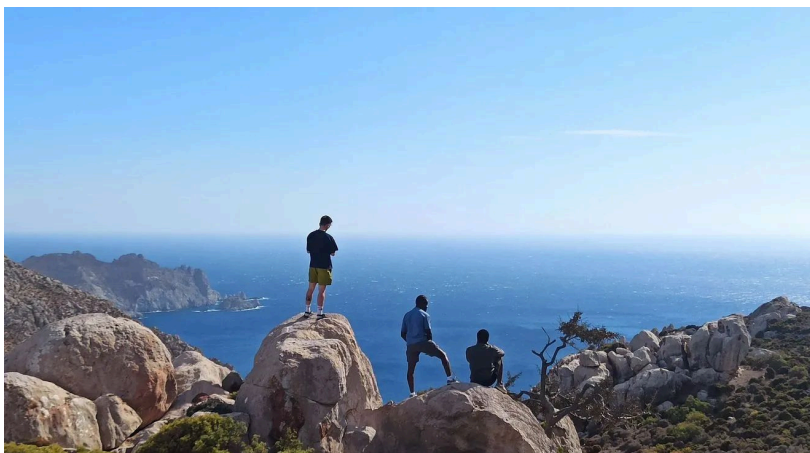
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We don't talk enough about post-occupancy in our industry, we're so focused on delivering a product for a moment in time when the reality is that spaces evolve as they are lived in. We can learn so much by going back to places and seeing how they've grown with the people who inhabit them.



BFA Showcase Accra You Are Invited 2025



Tilos Residency 2024 Artists POoR1

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SEPTEMBER 4, 2026

Black Females in Architecture join Tilos Artist Residency 2026, an innovative environmental residency programme

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