

MENU

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16.10.2026

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Culture

By Maria Astrapellou



Photo Courtesy Tilos Artist Residency

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Black Females in Architecture came to Tilos to record island women's knowledge of care, farming and community life, and to ask who really gets to shape the built environment.



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A small place. Women of considerable stature. Tilos, in the heart of the Dodecanese, recently became the meeting point for Black Females in Architecture (BFA), an international group working in architecture, design, and construction. Since 2018, BFA has been bringing to the fore the knowledge, experiences, and voices of Black women and women of mixed Black heritage, particularly from Africa. It highlights how they shape the built environment through recycled materials and everyday practices rooted in cultivation, care, and community life, expertise that still goes largely unrecognized by institutions.

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At the invitation of the Polygreen Culture & Art Initiative (PCAI), two BFA members, Neba Sere and Lauren Fasokun, spent September 28 to October 7 on the island as part of the Tilos residency. The residency belongs to “Circular Cultures (Making Matters),” a program PCAI is running for the fifth year with the British Council, Greece. It focuses on sustainability, the circular economy, and how different ways of managing resources can inspire creativity in architecture, design, and urban planning.

The choice of Tilos was no accident. Sere and Fasokun told *BHMAgazzino* that the mayor, Maria Kamma, had described to them a deeply rooted culture of protecting the island, which meant residents were eager to learn about sustainability and put it into practice. That, they said, made Tilos ideal for a program like this. They added that the openness and warmth of the people was palpable from the moment they arrived, and that shared challenges had fostered solidarity and a willingness to listen to people who are different. In their view, this explains the island’s progressive attitude toward marginalized communities, such as LGBTQ+ people, and toward welcoming refugees.

Sere, a spatial analysis specialist, is an associate professor and director of the “Decolonising and Decarbonising” program at The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. Fasokun specializes in architectural design. Working with the municipality, the island’s schools, and its residents, they met local women and recorded their stories, experiences, and everyday practices around care, community life, production, farming, food, and adapting to life in a remote place. Their aim was to distill a local, specialized body of knowledge that can enter into dialogue with that of women in Africa, Europe, and beyond.

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Fasokun stresses the importance of looking at how smaller communities function, in places where everything you need is not always readily available. She grew up in a small seaside town in Cornwall that shares some similarities with Tilos, and she explains that living in such places teaches you to appreciate the process of production. Not having everything at your fingertips, she says, makes people more resourceful and leads them to organize their lives in ways that reduce their environmental footprint.

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Small communities, in her view, can show designers how to be more responsible and patient, and to accept that the pace is sometimes slower. “We are a global community,” she notes, “and what we design affects not only its immediate users but also people whose contribution to the climate crisis is minimal compared with ours.”



Photo: Courtesy Tilos Artist Residency 2024

Knowledge, visibility, and structural change

An interest in knowledge generated within communities is part of BFA's DNA. What began in 2018 as a WhatsApp group of four women has grown into an international network of nearly 600 people. The group took part in the 2023 Venice Architecture Biennale, and in 2024 it launched the research program "MA," grounded in Sankofa, a philosophical principle of the Akan peoples of West Africa. Through talks, workshops, exhibitions, and research across Africa and the diaspora, the program explored how women's knowledge of space, culture, and the environment passes from one generation to the next.

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Sere recalls that in the early days the group met with pushback because it was specifically for Black women rather than for women in general or a broader diversity group. That reaction, she says, only confirmed the need for a dedicated space, since Black women's experiences and contributions were not being recognized or centered as they should have been. She acknowledges that things have started to change: Black women are more visible in conversations about architecture and culture and are increasingly asked to bring their expertise to projects.

“But visibility is not the same as structural change,” she cautions.



Photo: Courtesy Tilos Artist Residency 2025

The biggest barriers, she says, still concern who has access to decision-making, whose knowledge is valued, and who gets to shape the built environment beyond the initial concept. While many professional fields have moved closer to gender equality, she observes, racial diversity remains less visible, especially in positions of influence. There is, she concludes, a persistent gap between being invited into the room and having the authority, resources, and support to influence what happens there.

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