

PAGE DESCRIPTION

Decolonizing Design: A Focus on Non-Western Vernacular

In an effort to shed light on diverse design practice and challenge the notion of "good" design, this site gives a brief introduction to the work of five talented, contemporary designers who have drawn from their cultural roots to create design that is part of a Non-Western vernacular. In typical Western design curriculum and practice, there is a tendency to overlook designers who reside outside of a Eurocentric design focus. This presents a missed opportunity to expand upon design knowledge and ultimately limits perspective, which is a hindrance to creativity in an increasingly global field and society. When the same groups of people, or "tastemakers," continue to decide what is "good" or "high" design, it hurts the profession, as it leads to many designers aiming to achieve a similar style - thus diminishing vernacular identities across the globe.

DESIGNERS

Malene Barnett

Artist & Designer



Dominica Handmade Rug



Zulu Stoneware Jar



Moko I & II Stoneware



Adjoa
Mix Medium - Pastel & Acrylic

About The Designer

Malene Barnett describes herself as "an artist, activist, and authority on the cultural traditions and practices of art in the African diaspora and how it translates into her vision of the modern black experience." Born to Caribbean parents in the Bronx, NY, much of Barnett's work draws not only from her heritage, but also the African origins of her heritage. Barnett often addresses the importance of decolonizing design and acknowledges the cultural appropriation that occurs within the industry. She continues to look "...beyond the Euro-centric perspective and into the influence Africa has had on design, architecture, and fashion." She mentions that she always asks herself, "where are the Black voices in these conversations?"

In an interview with *Iconic Life*, in regards to deepening the narrative and creating art that invokes dialogue, Barnett expresses, "...we want to create and own our own narrative and be able to present our own work the way that we see it needs to be represented. I am saying to the industry that it's time you respect it, acknowledge it, and for people to give credit to the traditions that inspired their work."

In 2018, Barnett founded the [Black Artists + Designers Guild](#), a global platform which represents a collective of top independent Black artists, makers, and designers across a range of disciplines.

[Further Information & Projects](#)

[Iconic Life Article Profiling Malene Barnett](#)

Shelia Bridges

Interior Designer



Hay House
Hudson Valley, NY



Santa Barbara, CA Residence



Reykjavik, Iceland Home



Harlem Toile Fabric

About The Designer

Based in New York City, Sheila Bridges founded her design firm in 1994 and since then has completed offices and residences for many notable and influential clients. The designer is an author of two books, has had a television show, and has appeared in numerous publications. In 1996, she began designing a line of furniture and home décor, Sheila Bridges Home.

Her well-known Harlem Toile De Jouy wallpaper has been featured in many museums, most recently on display at The National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. The Harlem Toile print is a witty take on African-American stereotypes, partly inspired by traditional French toile motifs of the late 1700s. Bridges created the design after having difficulty finding a toile pattern that suited her own life and story.

In her personal spaces, Bridges fully embraces her family history as well as her identity as both a Black woman and designer.

[Further Information & Projects](#)

[Elle Decor Article Profiling Sheila Bridges](#)

Stephen Burks

Industrial Designer



Anwar Lighting
Designed for Parachilna



Grasso Ceramics



Ahnda Chair
Designed for DEDON



Basket Workshop

Baskets designed by Stephen Burks and handmade by Senegalese artisans

About The Designer

Trained as both an architect and product designer, Stephen Burks has established a career as a designer, educator, and traveler. After years spent traveling between New York and Europe, Burks became an independent designer in 1997. He has collaborated with many notable brands such as B&B Italia, Calvin Klein, Missoni, Roche Bobois, and Swarovski. His work has been exhibited internationally and he is the recipient of numerous awards. In 2019, Burks became a Harvard Loeb Fellow, and is currently a design critic in the Masters of Design Engineering program at Harvard University.

Burks recognizes the lack black representation in the industry, and has noted that he tries to express his identity "in some regard." He has also noted "...international design isn't the most diverse place. It's been my great privilege to be the first and only African American to work with all my clients. And that's kind of crazy. You realize that design is kind of this final frontier of culture."

Working with European designers made Burks very aware of his African heritage, and he has explained that "the stereotyping he experienced led him to steer away from mainstream European industrial design and start exploring his African heritage through his work, which in turn led him to work with artisans across the world." He has also commented that much of the world has been left out of contemporary design, since these designs seem to only be focused in the Western world. His work with global communities aims to elevate culturally diverse design and broaden the scope of 'traditional' contemporary design.

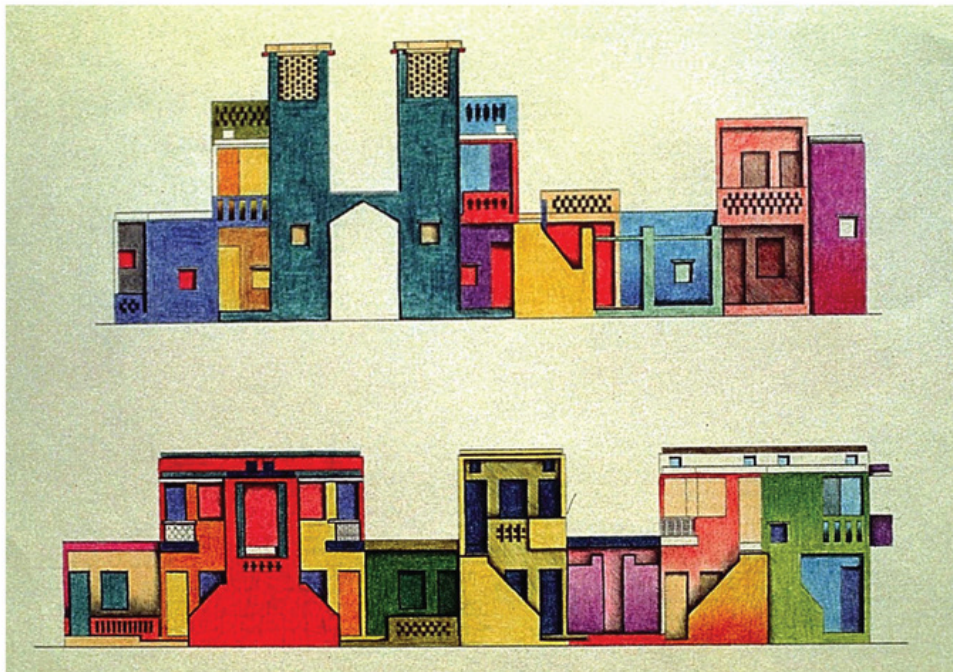
[Further Information & Projects](#)
[Dezeen Article Profiling Stephen Burks](#)

Balkrishna Doshi

Architect



Featured Project: Aranya Low Cost Housing
Indore, India
Vastu Shilpa Foundation, Balkrishna Doshi





About The Project

Completed in 1989, the Aranya Housing is home to over 80,000 people utilizing a system of houses, courtyards, and pathways. There are a range of housing options to accommodate varying incomes and family sizes. Doshi's focus on the needs of the community are clear in this design, which allows

residents the freedom to expand and improve their homes as necessary, while also providing ample communal space.

Doshi has noted that in the Indian culture, buildings are "organic" - large families often live together, so they require a space that can be changed. The structures are built around a "central spine" which accommodates both businesses and houses, with clusters of ten houses facing inward to create central courtyards.

About The Designer

Traditionally, architecture has ignored the needs of poor and middle income individuals, yet Doshi has aimed to change this over the course of his career. The architect was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 2018, partially for his work on the Aranya project. His design is focused on people and place, and how Indian designers can get back to their pre-colonial origins. Doshi established his studio, Vastu Shipla, in 1955, which has designed numerous projects according to Doshi's philosophy of creating unique, lifelong structures.

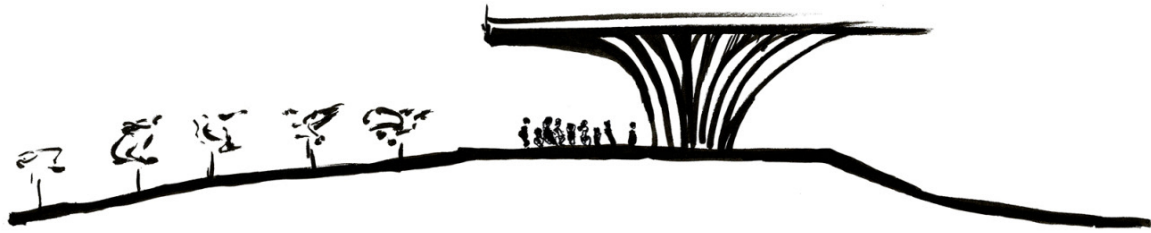
[Further Information & Projects](#)

Francis Kéré

Architect



Featured Project: Benin National Assembly
Porto-Novo, Republic of Benin
Kéré Architecture





About The Project

The Republic of Benin has outgrown their current assembly building, which dates back to the country's colonial past. The government has commissioned Kéré Architecture to design a building which speaks to the values and cultural identity of the country's citizens.

The project, still in the conceptual stage, takes inspiration from the palaver tree and the "West African tradition of meeting under a tree to make consensual decisions in the interest of a community." The building is divided into two sections, with a 'trunk-like' base and an upper 'crown' which references the tree's foliage.

Much of the site allows for a public park, providing an extensive recreational space for the city of Porto-Novo.

About The Designer

In 2005 Kéré founded Kéré Architecture, which "creates contemporary architecture that feeds the imagination with an afro-futurist vision." The practice works throughout diverse geographies, constantly aiming to "shed dominant norms" and "set [their] own precedents."

Kéré won a Global Holcim Award in 2012 for his Gando Primary School project in his native Burkina Faso and his work has been featured in various global exhibitions. He has also held professorships at both Harvard and Yale, and currently teaches at Technische Universität München in Germany.

[Further Information & Projects](#)

Additional Resources

Websites, articles, and videos to help guide practice of inclusive design

[Dori Tunstall: Decolonizing Design Practices in Academia](#)

[House Beautiful: Why We Need to Decolonize Design](#)

[Francis Kéré: African Architecture Should Stop Copying the West](#)

[OZY: David Adjaye and the New African Architecture](#)

[Parse Journal: Three Perspectives on Decolonising Design Education](#)

[Dezeen: An Interview with Balkrishna Doshi, Young Indian Architects Being Taught to Appreciate Their Design Heritage](#)

[Curbed: Black Artists Designers Guild](#)

[Design Indaba](#)

[Dezeen: Bhavin Taylor on Interior Design Borrowing from Various Cultures and Lack of Diversity](#)