



See Beyond My Skin

Nigel Ousey interview with Kieran Renfrow

Nigel 00:21

I'm Nigel for See Beyond My Skin and today I'm with Kieran Renfrow, a student at the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture at the University of Houston. And he's currently an intern at Kersky Architecture. Kieran, thanks so much for taking the time out of your day to be here. How's your internship going? Are you working on anything currently?

Kieran 00:48

It's going pretty good. It's honestly been easier than what I thought. So that's really sort of refreshing and nice to know. But I actually just got accepted to continue the internship into my fall semester. So that's really exciting because I get paid while I'm in school, which is always nice. And it's just nice to know that you know, I'm doing a good job there. So it's been pretty good. Thank you for asking.

Nigel 01:13

Congratulations. That's great. You must be doing a good job. Another highlight is that you won the AIA or American Institute of Architects Houston Design Award. Congratulations.

Kieran 01:28

Thank you.

Nigel 01:30

I looked at your award-winning design, Homecoming. And it's really impressive. I love that you incorporated homage to John Lewis in the civil rights movement. I love that you incorporated sustainability too. I don't know much about architecture, but I can definitely tell that it's made with competence and love.

Kieran 01:53

So the entire project was centered around John Lewis and kind of giving or memorializing his work both as an individual and as a civil rights movement and government officials. So it was thought to be the sort of activism center. Sweet Auburn is a historically black neighborhood. A lot of you know, notable civil rights movement leaders came out of there. There's a lot to do- active day life and night tlife. It's also got an interesting demographic in terms of age as well. You know, there's a lot of settled older community members there, but there's also a sprawling, younger community, millennials and Gen Z,

working professionals there as well. So they actually have an active nightlife. But it's in inner city, Atlanta. So as you could imagine, there's not much tree canopy and plants or design and architecture in and of itself. You know, there's a lot of research that not having tree canopy and plants integrated into these communities can actually have a really detrimental effect to how the community evolves and survives. So, if you can kind of correlate these historically black neighborhoods and these minority neighborhoods that typically do not have a lot of resources to that amount of plant life in their communities, there is typically not a lot of resources and these people are usually struggling you know, all those sorts of things. So, my partner and I wanted to reintroduce this thought of putting tree canopy and plants and sustainability back into the community so they can utilize it for themselves. You also get a sort of sacred relationship with your community if you're going to plant these trees with your community members. You know, it strengthens that bond of community and sort of higher self esteem. So we thought of a unique program in the building, like in and of itself. By day it would be a greenhouse that kind of teaches the community the importance of native plants in Georgia because Georgia also has a staggering amount of deforestation. It is actually one of the worst in the country. Georgia and Atlanta both are like so redistributing these native plants back into the community because there's so much deforestation going on. And the community can kind of volunteer and work together, get to know one another, create those community bonds, which are really integral for black communities, especially during the night when it actually turns into a sort of, we coined it a social garden. It's almost like a beer garden or a bar, but it has more flexibility to be able to really form into any kind of space you'd want it to be. So like I said, it could be a sort of beer garden where you can go and have a couple of drinks with your friends, you can have kickback. You can have barbecues and parties with family or friends or it can be used for something a little more formal and organized like an activism center or for organizing protests or something like that. So you know, with those two things, also, we really wanted to focus on Black joy and Black normalcy, you know, giving people the opportunity to have normalcy in their lives and in celebrating community in themselves and kind of just focusing on joy rather than Black trauma. I know for me, both as a Black person growing up in America, but also as a designer in architecture. There's a lot of Eurocentric ideals and there's hardly ever any focus or consideration on Black contribution to the field or even, you know, other counterparts like indigenous African culture, things like that. So, we thought that was really important to integrate this sort of idea of radical activism. Or unconventional activism rather than this formal idea of protesting in the streets. You can actually use Black joy and Black normalcy and just having fun organizing and that's a sense of protesting as well. You know what I mean? So, I guess that's the rundown of it.

Nigel 06:18

A social garden highlighting activism, connection, and Black joy. That sounds very challenging to pull off. Very few people talk about Black joy and the idea of Black joy being seen as a form of protest. It's fascinating. A lot of illustrations in your design are reminiscent of old comics. What made you incorporate this as a feature in your design?

Kieran 06:48

So my partner and I- my partner, Michelle Vanessian, and I cannot not name drop her, right? So we had kind of gotten that idea from paying homage to John Lewis. He was a notable figure especially during the Civil Rights Movement, which was from the 50s up until the present day but it really took place a lot during the 50s to the 70s. So we felt that could really have a nice connection back to the

past. And when we thought of, you know, what is something that's really American? That automatically comes to mind from that period of time, we thought of American comics. That's when they really began to almost blow up and have a lot of popularity. So we thought that could be a unique way of contributing in an artistic way, the sort of period of time in which all of these important things happened. But not only that, it was also just really efficient for us to relay information, especially textual information and make it still interesting without it being sort of a normal, boring book to read. You know what I mean? And it was also kind of challenging because if you know anything about comics, or looked up, you know, the history, there's not a lot of comic books or comics in general that focus on People of Color. It's usually very, again, White-centered. So it was nice to put black people in those comments or comics and re-narrate that, if that makes sense.

Nigel 08:24

Something that's interesting about these types of 60s comics is how many terrible stereotypes they had.

Kieran 08:33

Yeah, and I found even when we were doing our research, while we actually made the comics and stuff it was pretty alarming to see how problematic these comic books were not just for People of Color, but also for women. There was a lot of misogyny and stereotypes towards women always being the damsel in distress or being over-sexualized. With Black people, they were either no comments that included people of color or no Black people at all, or if there were, they were often kind of- I'm not gonna say kind of- it was absolutely racist with these tropes of you know, big lips and sort of giving them these stereotypes and making a mockery out of it. And you know, they are mean, not treated like human beings, so it was very eye-opening to see it. It really has deep and kind of profound effects everywhere. You know what I mean? Even stuff like that, which you really wouldn't think of.

Nigel 09:36

Yeah, mindset is still present in a lot of forms of media today. We could go on about this for hours, but to stay on topic. Do you have a future design?

Kieran 09:48

Um, yeah. So I kind of figured this out towards my second or third year of school. Again, I had mentioned there's a lot of Eurocentric ideals in architecture. I want to narrate and highlight people of color and design not only being considered, but also changing the narrative of what there is to learn, especially in my program. It's very Eurocentric, everything is very much from the Renaissance and sort of ancient European ideals and this way of thinking is very beautiful and only that should be esteemed. I think that that's very hypocritical. And I think that's very selfish. I think that there's beauty in all sorts of architecture, especially if it's not something that's as normalized or, or prestigious as what they call it. And I think there's a lot of beauty in that and sort of indigenous vernacular so indigenous just being local peoples who are native to a land and then vernacular is a kind of term we call in architecture which is more localized building that doesn't have set plans to go to a contractor and there's not much organizing. It's usually stuff that's built by townspeople that's more improvised or just doesn't have as much of an organized and set way of building. But I think there's tremendous beauty and ancestral knowledge in that as well. Oftentimes, these people live harmoniously with the environment and with

the earth and with their mindset, it's just always very refreshing sense to see. And I think that's incredibly beautiful, and there's a lot to learn there. And I think that should definitely be regarded and talked about to others as well, because I think the profoundness in architecture is that it has so much potential to change, sort of everything, if that makes sense. It could very much inflict a paradigm shift on an entire society. So I think that's why I was always drawn to it is because I can really change the narrative and contribute more to Black people all around the globe and People of Color by normalizing what is thought to be beautiful and integrating, you know, these black buildings that are constructed by Black people out there all around the globe, which then in turn teaches people hey, there's beauty in all sorts of cultures, and that then trickles down to each and every individual. So I think that's a pretty cool system. You know, if I could do that I think that has a lot of power.

Nigel 12:37

I think it's kind of interesting when most people think of architecture they think of famous buildings, but creating spaces where you can live authentically in the beauty of our own culture. I like that mindset. Kieran, you're living in Houston now, but you're from a much smaller town. I used to live with my White family in a small conservative Pennsylvania town and it had its challenges. How does that compare for you?

Kieran 13:12

Um, It was a bit of a culture shock in a sense. I've always tried to remain as cultured as I could be, even when I was living in Weatherford, Texas, which is a very small kind of country town. I've always been fascinated by things that were different and people who were different, who saw things differently who identified differently. And I think that's largely because I was kind of different myself. I am biracial in a primarily White town and also being gay and androgynous as well, which I wasn't really as aware of then as I am now, but I think coming to Houston was definitely eye opening. And it was almost like going to Oz in a sense it's just so incredibly diverse. And there's so much to be learned here. And there's a lot of resources as well. I think, you know, even when I go back home, it's just almost like the Twilight Zone - it's just completely two different worlds. So I think moving out and kind of exploring my options and really pushing myself as an individual to just really learn all sorts of things about all sorts of ways of life. Not only helps me, you know, as an individual and helps anybody but it also really helped me a lot as a designer and as an architectural student. I think a good architect, I will say, needs to push themselves that way - they need to familiarize themselves and sort of become a master of none, if that makes sense. You know, what I mean, just become familiar with all these different ways of thinking and stuff like that, because I think if you don't do that, both as a person and as an architect, it really limits you. So I'm very grateful I've been given the opportunity to move out and venture out and learn things. It's been a journey and it's been very, very much fun.

Nigel 15:22

It must have been hard for you growing up in that area, and trying not to be shaped by it too much. Things changed for me too when I moved to a diverse community in Philadelphia. On a different note, I heard you're an excellent cook. Do you have anything special that you like to make?

Kieran 15:46

See now you don't get started! I'm very much a foodie. That's a difficult question. I think Asian food or like any ethnicity or culture is always really fun to make. It's always very colorful, really bold and sort of beautiful flavors. Any kind of Latino food is really fun as well. I think for me personally, though, like, my favorite is probably either southern food or the like or Creole food. Just because it always makes me feel really grounded back to like my ancestral connections and kind of going back to who I was and connecting back to that idea of family because I also wasn't very close to my dad's side, which is my Black side. They live in Oklahoma, so I don't know it always feels like very nostalgic for me to get to learn these new recipes and kind of understand how it works. And sort of refining it myself like restitching pieces of history. . And it's really cool because I think it can be passed on to other people as well. So I've always been kind of excited about that.

Nigel 17:01

Now you're making me hungry. What's your least favorite thing to cook?

Kieran 17:05

Oh, I don't know. I feel like I've enjoyed but also I have the bias of cooking things that I like, right. So I think baking, if you would consider cooking baking because there's some people who think they're like two entirely different things and they don't really consider them the same but I don't like baking that much actually, I like to make cookies and I'm known for my cookies. But I only like to do that because I'm good at it. I think yeah, like baking cakes. I never really liked that much because honestly I'm not good at it. I believe Yeah. And I don't really enjoy that.

Nigel 17:49

I want to ask you two more questions that asked everyone I interview. These questions are the core work for See Beyond My Skin. How do you see yourself and how do you fear others perceive you?

Kieran 18:05

That is a beautiful question, how do I feel others perceive me? Yes. Well, I hope I'm perceived as someone who is passionate and I think that could typically be said. Confident, I think is very important. And I often get that as well. Sometimes I ironically enough, get intimidating, but I don't really think I'm an intimidating person but I think happy goofy for sure. Anyone who knows me very well. Often says that I'm a very goofy rambunctious person I don't know. I think also intentional, if that makes sense. I'm a very introverted person by nature, but you know, I don't like to do things or say things if it's not intentional and I don't fully understand it. If that makes sense. And if I don't have full plans, I don't like to bullshit, I guess is another way of saying it. And I'm also very much I think people say I'm straight to the point, but yeah, I think that's how I feel others perceive me. Oh, how I see myself. I think a student. Not in a sense of educational but as a human being. As I've gotten older and I've definitely sort of understood and came into consciousness that, I came here to learn, you know, as the soul. And I think that's a very beautiful journey to understand. And I'm very grateful that I've come to realize that and taking that seriously I see myself as a sort of unicorn. I'm very weird and unconventional. And I think in my life, I've been told by others to harness that and you know, almost push it down and swallow it. But as I've gotten older, I've very much learned to let that come out and take pride in that and almost nurture it. Because I think that's the most beautiful thing about myself and anybody is their uniqueness and their unconventionality I think a nurturing person, very much a healer. I think everyone in my family

is very much a healer, especially my mother and my sister. I think that's why I've come to who I am. Is because of their nurturing and their guidance. I'm incredibly grateful for them. What else? I think Black but in a sense that you know, for me, Blackness is authenticity and taking pride in it and being absolute in it. I think there's so much uniqueness in Blackness and that's the great thing about it. Is that almost like the more unique you are and the more comfortable with with it if that makes sense. It's almost like it shines through. So I think that's that's very beautiful about our culture. Queer, very queer person. I love my community. I love being queer. Yeah, and I think also just inquisitive. I've always been a very curious child, very imaginative. And I've always tried to instill that in myself as I've gotten older because, man when you get older, people really want that in the you know what I mean? Imagination and stuff to die off, but I've always really loved that part about myself. So yeah, I guess that's a good summation.

Nigel 22:19

Celebrating uniqueness is our Blackness. I like the sound of that. If my listeners would like to follow your work, how should they go about doing that?

Kieran 22:30

Um, so I have an Instagram for my architectural work. The name is __inteus__ that's my middle name (with two more underscores) So I just post a lot of stuff from my academic work so just kind of my creative works. I also have a website. I believe it's Kieran dot, let me double check. <https://kieraninteus.cargo.site>. So that's where I also post a lot of my work and just my interests. Other than those two, I'm really not too active.

Nigel 23:25

Thank you, Karen for your time. I loved hearing about your story and your design ideas. I like how you're incorporating all of who you are into what you do.

Kieran 23:40

Yeah, thank you. Nigel was really fun.

Nigel 23:43

Today, this interview was with architect Kieran Renfrow. This is Nigel Ousey for See Beyond My Skin.