# African Designers and *the* future *of* African Design

Notes from 4C Spaces on African Design

# Table of contents

# Overview

Drawing on Dr. Amos Wilson's foundational questions about collective agency, Simon Charwey challenges African designers as a collective to consider: "What kind of people must we become in order to solve the problems that we must solve as a people? What kind of institutions must we develop so that we can act in terms of our interest?."

This paper synthesizes insights from a multi-stakeholder dialogue among African design leaders: Seyi Olusanya, Victor Fatanmi, Bolanle Banwo, Simon Charwey, and Tunji Ogunoye into two deliverables:

(1) thematic findings that diagnose African design's current landscape.
(2) an action framework outlining interventions across multiple time horizons for sustainable sector development.

The objective is transforming stakeholder dialogue into an executable agenda for practitioners, educators, policymakers, and investors committed to advancing African design on the continent's own terms.

# First words

African designers have achieved significant individual recognition in global studios and markets, yet African design remains under-theorized as a discipline and under-resourced as an ecosystem.

As Tunji Ogunoye observed: "You can name any global tech company and you'll find at least one African designer on the team. African designers are getting recognized globally, but African design as a distinct entity? That's different."

The panel, comprising specialists in product, brand, education, and typography converged on a central question: **How can African design transition from isolated excellence to collective authority?**

# Key themes

| Theme | Diagnostic Insight |
|---|---|
| Recognition vs representation | African designers are visible worldwide, but the term "African design" lacks a shared definition authored by Africans themselves. |
| Infrastructure and access bottlenecks | Unreliable electricity, costly bandwidth, and restrictive visa regimes erode credibility and block global opportunities. |
| Resilience and agency | Constant adaptation to constraints has cultivated problem-solving grit. This could be a latent competitive advantage if channelled strategically. |
| Documentation imperative | Absence of broad documentation of African design excludes local perspectives from AI training corpora and global design discourse. |
| Ecosystem building | Sustainable influence requires African-run conferences, awards, scholarships, policy advocacy, and funding vehicles. |
| Growth mechanics | The ecosystem must simultaneously elevate star talent and raise baseline competence through mentorship and shared resources. |

# Call to action

## Immediate Actions (0 – 12 Months)

### 1. **Knowledge sharing**
Host monthly virtual sessions such as the one this report was born out of to bring awareness to these issues. We must advance beyond portfolios to actual breakdowns for the creative process.

### 2. **Documentation initiatives**
African designers must systematically document their work and methodologies for digital accessibility. As Seyi Olusanya notes, "Large Language Models(LLMs) feed on data." Without documented African case studies, design philosophies, and visual histories online, these perspectives will remain absent from AI training and future design discourse.

### 3. **Community support**
The design community needs to become more actively supportive of one another's work, through likes, retweets, shout-outs, donations, and other gestures of solidarity. Practitioners are also invited to contribute to emerging archives like African Design Matters.

### 4. **African context**
We must ensure that the African viewpoints and stories that have influenced our work be well reflected. This would also include the use of local keywords and cultural references in project descriptions.

# Call to action

## Systemic interventions (1–3 Years)

### 1. African-Led flagship conferences
Launch annual gatherings focused on type, product, and brand design, rotating host cities to distribute access.

### 2. Scholarship & travel funds
Pool corporate sponsorships to underwrite visas and travel for designers accepted to global conferences.

### 3. Policy & infrastructure advocacy
Engage existing design-industry coalitions to lobby for creative workspace initiatives and expedited creative professional visas.

### 4. Regional accreditation & awards
Establish peer-reviewed award programs recognising both innovation and culturally grounded practice.

### 5. Academic drive
Partner with universities to launch comprehensive, current bachelor's and master's design programmes that ensure sustainability and continually produce top-tier talent.

# Conclusion

The conversation underscores a pivotal shift: African design must evolve from celebrated individuals working in isolation to a coordinated ecosystem defined by African voices.

This evolution requires leveraging what Bolanle Banwo identified as a foundational strength: "There's something about growing up in Nigeria—it makes you very tough, and it just pushes you." This resilience represents a strategic advantage, not merely a survival mechanism.

Achieving this transformation demands both immediate interventions and long-term institution-building. By coordinating short-term actions with sustained development efforts, African designers can transform resilience into a competitive advantage that shapes global design discourse on their own terms.

# Next steps

- **Practitioners** — Commit to documentation, community support and mentorship.

- **Educators** — Integrate African case studies into syllabi; support archive initiatives.

- **Policymakers** — Engage design coalitions on infrastructure and visa reforms.

- **Investors & Corporations** — Sponsor scholarships, conferences, and journalistic endeavours to anchor long-term ecosystem growth.