

Talks at GS
Sumayya Vally,
Founder and Director of Counterspace
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[MUSIC INTRO]

Nishi Somaiya: Good afternoon, everybody and welcome to Talks at GS. I'm Nishi Somaiya, Global Co-Head of the Growth Equity Business in the Asset Management Division. And I'm delighted to be joined today by distinguished architect and incredible talent Sumayya Vally. Sumayya is the Founder and Director of Counterspace, a Johannesburg-based collaborative architectural studio, whose work focuses on community engagement, inclusivity, and the future.

Sumayya is the 20th and the youngest architect to accept the invitation to design the Serpentine's Pavilion. And has been named in *TIME* magazine's 100 leaders of the future. Sumayya is an incredible talent. And her structure opened earlier this summer for public viewing. I hope many of you have been able to see it for yourselves. It truly is inspirational. So, thank you Sumayya for being with us here today and welcome.

Let's start with yourself and your childhood. You were brought up in an apartheid township in Pretoria. Tell us about your upbringing and how that experience has shaped who you are today.

Sumayya Vally: So, I was born in a very small community in Pretoria as you mentioned. It's called Laudium. And it was designated as Indian only during apartheid. There's a very specific and a particular way in which townships during apartheid were designed and were drawn in that the darker someone's ethnicity and skin color is, the further away they were placed from opportunities.

And so, for Black communities, of course, they were placed the furthest away from centers, and also next to the most toxic infrastructures. But across the color gradient, so to speak, races were separated and segregated from each other.

And so, in a way I had a small, kind of isolated, upbringing in my hometown, in my home community. But what that did give me was a very close-knit relationship with community, with family, with community structures. And I was born in a time of change. And thus, the energy of apartheid falling and of the new South Africa was also very much in everything around us.

And so, you know, political organizing and the rush of optimism that came around that is also something that I got to experience, alongside, of course, having to experience structures that are still very much ingrained and embedded in our cities even now, even today. Because the change is very slow.

But then as we saw, I also had part of my life in Johannesburg from a very young age, my grandfather was

a store owner in Johannesburg. And his stores still exist in inner city Joburg. They're still family run. And so, I spent lots of my childhood in the streets of inner-city Johannesburg walking the streets, walking to the Joburg Library. And I feel very blessed and very lucky to have had such an urban experience from such a young age. And also, to be able to experience the city that possibly many other kids from my social, economic, racial background wouldn't have experienced because on the other hand it was this time of opening. But also, because the inner city was a place of so much flux where worlds do, in a way, start to collide. We have the world of big banking. But we also have everyday traders. And I feel lucky to have experienced that in my childhood. And I think that those understandings definitely, even now, still shape the way that I see so much of my practice.

Nishi Somaiya: And one of the things that comes across in your work, and you've spoken a lot about it, is creating worlds where people can come together. Tell us about how architecture can play a role in convening communities?

Sumayya Vally: So, of course, to mention again, I did

grow up in South Africa. And so, I think I have a heightened awareness of how weaponized architecture is. And that so often, I think not just in South Africa, it's very explicit or it was very explicitly named in planning in so on, but all cities, well, most cities in the world or most places in the world are designed to be really segregated. And I think being able to understand that should push us to understand the opposite, that architecture can also be a force for good and for bringing people together. And it absolutely is. It can be.

Nishi Somaiya: And what's your perspective on COVID? It's obviously changed so much in many cities, including and not least the way that people gather together. What's your perspective on how behaviors may have changed and, you know, maybe permanently?

Sumayya Vally: Yeah. I think for me it's definitely deepened how powerful architecture is. I experienced a very visceral, I don't know, disconnect in myself just from not being able to be in physical space with other human beings, which is such a deeply human phenomenon. And so, I think that's something that most of us have missed.

And I hope that when we do start to come together more and more, that we appreciate that sensation more. And we realize the power of architecture again to be able to bring us together.

Nishi Somaiya: Let's spend a minute on your practice. So, Counterspace, you founded it. You're a director. Your architectural studio that has a big emphasis on collaboration. Tell us about why collaboration is so important to you and what it means?

Sumayya Vally: I think that we have so many challenges at the moment that we need to face. And my generation has inherited so much, so many crises. And I think there's something to be said about asking different questions about the problems that we have. And I think in order to do that, collaboration is really important because it allows us to see things from a perspective of others. And to be able to also start to translate our knowledges across each other so that we can be in a position to even ask questions differently or look at these challenges from different perspectives.

I think also, beyond that, just conceptually it's so exciting and enriching to be able to work with subject matter from different realms and different arenas. And I think my practice, in particular, is focused on searching for the design language and design expression for place, for Johannesburg, for the African Continent, for conditions of hybrid and contested identity. And I often find that there's so much inspiration to be found in the other creative disciplines and in how forms of representation and design and visual expression, creative expression in the form of sound, music, lots of the other creative fields are expressed. There's a lot to draw on as an architect in the other fields. Because architect is a very slow profession. Or it has been traditionally. And we're also in a position now where we have to start asking why the disciplines work in a certain way, why all of the systemic issues around so much, I think, can feed off of and look at things differently. And collaboration is central and key to that.

Nishi Somaiya: So, I mean, look, amongst many of your incredible works there are a few projects I'd love to ask you about. One that is particularly striking to me is the Folded

Skies installation. Those huge sort of colored iridescent mirrored sculptures. Tell us a little bit more about your inspiration and vision around those.

Sumayya Vally: Well, thank you. So, that project-- all of my work is very research driven. I can't help myself. I really do see everything around us as archive. And that project was driven by an interest in land and earth as archive. And it started when I was still a student in my masters' thesis, I was working on a site along the mining belt. And really looking at the condition of the earth or this piece of earth and all the layers of history that it held in its different arenas. So, geologically and in terms of the makeup of the land that it held the toxic aftereffects of mining and extraction, but also how it was used socially for ritual practice and as a part of the apartheid landscape also. So, all of these different layers that tell us something about the condition of place.

And that's an ongoing and a long body of research. As part of that research, I worked with a chemical engineer called Dr. Craig Sheridan at my university, Wit University in Johannesburg. And we worked with cleaning out the

mining soil or partly rehabilitating it by extracting pigments from the soil, these toxic inorganic pigments from the soil.

So, what that does is it leaves the soil less toxic and the effects of water on the soil are less toxic when it seeps down into the earth. But it also then leaves these brilliantly colored pigments. And there's a myth in Johannesburg that's also scientifically proven that we have such iridescent sunsets because of the iridescent dust. And you know, we're constantly breathing this in.

And so, the Folded Skies Project, I think it was partly working with that material exploration and we used the same chemical compounds that are found in the mining soil to be able to tint these mirrors. But then the mirrors also sit on-- or they were meant to sit on mining buffer zones on these landscapes and then start to fold perspectives of extraction and resource and where labor is coming from in the same fold.

And so, on one hand it was a snapshot of a much broader body of research around this material phenomena. But

also, my practice is constantly working with translating phenomenon in the city and thinking about how we can find architecture from different sources and find inspiration in other places. And there's something about our condition that is very much about the atmospheric, about the intangible.

And so, the project also, I think, is working to capture that phenomenon of how color can create an environment or, you know, looking at why some of these landscapes are so atmospheric and how we can also learn from and draw on it.

Nishi Somaiya: So, turning to the Serpentine, you know, we're incredibly proud to support that again for the seventh consecutive year. And congratulations, again, for being the youngest architect ever commissioned for that project. Tell us about your ethos for the pavilion.

Sumayya Vally: Thank you. It's such an incredible honor, still, yeah, to still to see it and to have the support of Goldman Sachs and to be here with you also today talking about it.

So, the pavilion is inspired by London. And I really wanted to reflect London to London. And it's conceived in five parts. There's this part at Kensington Gardens that we're looking at now. And I worked with waves of migration in London. Of course, that's the story of all of London.

And so, in particular I became really interested in spaces that became important to people in how they constructed home and constructed belonging when they settled in London. And many of these places also started to birth huge movements of, you know, resistance, but also hybrid cultural conditions. Music movements were birthed. Literature movements were birthed.

And so, I looked at many different spaces, from some of the first mosques, African churches, synagogues. But then also markets that held ingredients to people's traditional dishes. Some of the first music venues to play Black music. Some of the first publishing houses to publish Black literature in the city. Places that people could get news from home. So, the calypsos, the headquarters of *The West Indian Gazette*, the Mangrove in Notting Hill, of course, very central. And I

also thought very much about how these spaces that were so small were able to then create really huge movements and connect people creatively. And also, that they didn't function in isolation. They also functioned as an ecology and as a network. And many of them supported each other. There was resonance between these places.

And so, that also led me to thinking about present day London spaces. And looking to somehow draw attention to the conversation around some of these spaces. Because I think because we haven't looked at them as valuable pieces of architecture that need to be involved-- sorry, evolved.

Many of them have been erased just because of development and gentrification in the area and so on. Instead of finding ways to evolve these places, we've lost so many. And there are so many present spaces that have that same risk.

So, the Pavilion draws on these places. And I thought in particular about the architectural gestures of generosity in many of these places. So, how a surface is unfolded unto the street for fast break around the time of the Grenfell

Protests. Or how people came together on the Brixton
Porch steps before the time of protest to organize and meet
and find solidarity with each other.

And I worked on abstracting and translating these
moments into the Pavilion so that there are these small
islands of gathering for intimate moments. But then they
also face onto each other to create larger gatherings within
the structure. And I really see it as a transfer in
abstraction, and hopefully an honoring of all of these voices
from across London.

It's really just so wonderful that we now have these
collaborations that hopefully will be sustained beyond the
life of the project.

Nishi Somaiya: Maybe we'll pivot to another theme in
your work, which is sustainability. I know the Pavilion has
made use of many reused and recycled materials. Tell us
why that's so important to you.

Sumayya Vally: Yeah. I think social sustainability is, of
course, I think, incredibly important in my work. And I

think that that's something that perhaps comes through more strongly as a theme than-- so, how do I say? I really want to be able to be thinking about sustainability in a way that's intertwined and that considers how intertwined issues of sustainability are. Because if we think of empire, if we think of extraction, if we think of the ways in which labor works, if we think of the way we treat the earth, it's so connected to our social histories. It's so connected to all of the injustices that we have.

And so, I think very much about how we start to highlight through our work that all of these things are interconnected. And as you mentioned, the Pavilion has a material attitude towards reclaim. So, it's made of many recycled materials. The cork is reclaimed from the wine industry. The internal steel in the Pavilion is reclaimed from the contractor steel yard from the previous projects. And it's made of sustainability sourced ply that's been covered in a micro cement because we wanted to also have a lightweight approach that's easy to be disassembled. And that hopefully won't end up in a landfill. The concrete is also recycled every year. So, it's crushed and used as aggregate.

But beyond that, I think that another aspect that's been so important for this project is the initiation of the Support Structures for Support Structures Network, which has been such a deep honor to be able to work on with the Serpentine. And that I really thought about in response to COVID.

And so, when I started to work with engaging communities last year, that process was kind of interrupted because of COVID. And it led me to think really deeply about the vulnerability of people and bodies who are doing the work of carrying-- sorry, caring for other people and carrying communities.

And so, Support Structures for Support Structures was born. And it's an initiative that will support ten artists a year, this year it's ten, working at the intersections of art and social justice, art and ecology, and art and the archive. I'm working on it at the moment with Amal Khalaf at the Serpentine. And for me, what's important about it is that hopefully we are able to grow this network over the years. Serpentine's committed to it for at least three years. And

the idea is really that this year there will be ten, next year there will be more, and then more. And hopefully, we also can start to support work from places and bodies of knowledge that are coming from places of difference. And start to create different kinds of networks in the arts and support them in a more deeply sustains and sustainable manner.

Nishi Somaiya: I think our time is pretty much up. So, thank you for being with us again here today. It's just incredibly inspiring hearing you speak. And you're extremely humble and modest about your work, which truly is exceptional. So, thank you for being here.

Sumayya Vally: Thank you so much for having me. Thank you.