



Oct 26 Dean of School of Architecture Resigns Due to Racial Prejudice

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Words by Brahmjot Kaur

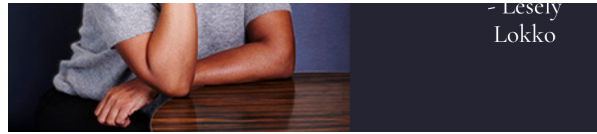
Graphics by Aspasia Celia Tsampas

Lesley Lokko, the first dean to take office at the Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture since 2017, resigned after only formally joining in January of 2020. The school of architecture has been without a dean for over three years since the previous dean and renowned architect, George Ranalli, stepped down from his position at the school while facing sexual harassment charges resulting in a lawsuit. The departure of Dean Lesley Lokko comes only months after the death of esteemed architect and professor at the Spitzer School, Michael Sorkin, who passed from complications due to COVID-19 in March.

Lokko is a Ghanaian-Scottish architect, best-selling novelist, and academic. She attended the Barlett School of Architecture in London, UK, where she earned her Architecture degree. She also attended the University of London where she earned her Ph.D. in Architecture. In 2015, Lokko founded the



School of Architecture at the University of Johannesburg. She told the Architectural Record she accepted the



- Lesley Lokko

position at City College because she was impressed with the diversity of the students. She said, “They reminded me of many South African students: hungry, quite curious, many juggling jobs to stay in school.” However, months later, Lokko has resigned. In an interview with the Architectural Record (<https://www.architecturalrecord.com/articles/14831-lesley-lokko-explains-her-resignation-from-city-college-of-new-yorks-spitzer-school-of-architecture>) explaining her resignation, Lokko explained, “My decision to leave Spitzer after less than a year is fairly straightforward: I was not able to build enough support to be able to deliver on either my promise of change, or my vision of it. The reasons why are more complex.” Her primary reason for resigning was the racial prejudice she faced at the school. “The lack of respect and empathy for black people, especially black women, caught me off guard, although it’s by no means unique to Spitzer,” she stated. She explained that COVID-19 and the lockdown that followed were also major contributors. After only beginning her role three months prior to the lockdown, Lokko now needed to maintain her authority over Zoom. She also faulted the highly bureaucratic and “[inflexible] United States academic structure,” admitting that, “The lack of meaningful support -- not lip service, of which there’s always a surfeit -- meant my workload was absolutely crippling.” The lack of respect she dealt with as a black woman was exacerbated by the online approach implemented by the coronavirus pandemic. However, in an open letter to the Architectural Record (<https://www.architecturalrecord.com/articles/14839-spitzer-architecture-students-respond-to-news-of-lesley-lokko-departure>) responding to her resignation, sixteen students from the Spitzer School of Architecture expressed both their support for Lokko’s resignation and disappointment in her decision to leave. The students wrote:

We understand that she faced complications in the implementation of her vision before its full realization. However, we are disappointed that she chose to abandon that project and those who stood to benefit from it, leaving us in a more precarious state than the challenges we already face.

The students also believed that Lokko’s vision did not incorporate “the needs and desires of its students,” and that “Dean Lokko’s vision of a radical, inclusive, and participatory educational experience was ultimately undermined (at least in

part) by her inability to acknowledge the concerns and dreams of her very own students,” according to the open letter. The letter closed by acknowledging that Lokko’s need to preserve her health, family, and personal issues were the primary reasons for her resignation and that students wished her the best.

The previous Dean, George Ranalli, who became dean in 1999, stepped down from his position in 2017. In 2015, he was put on administrative leave after accusations of sexual harassment, and later, a lawsuit due to the incident

(<https://casetext.com/case/campisi-v-city-univ-of-ny-dean-george-ranalli>) which had occurred years prior in 2013 and was finally settled in January 2017. The lawsuit also stated that CUNY “had ‘actual knowledge’ of the sexual harassment and responded with ‘deliberate indifference.’” According to Gothamist (<https://gothamist.com/news/cuny-dean-accused-of-sexual-harassment>), in February 2015, the American Institute of Architects appointed Ranalli to its College of Fellows, which “recognizes architects that ‘have made a significant contribution to architecture and society on a national level, as well as achieved a standard of excellence in the profession.’” The link to the City College website announcing Ranalli’s achievement has been deleted since the news of Ranalli’s sexual harassment accusations were published.

Dee Dee Mozeleski, the Senior Advisor to City College’s President Vincent Boudreau confirmed Lokko’s resignation to the Architectural Record. President Boudreau also published a statement (<https://www.ccny.cuny.edu/iac/statement-dean-lokkos-resignation>) on the City College website where he expressed his sadness for Lokko’s resignation on behalf of City College and responded to the interview Lokko gave to Architectural Record. He stated:

In a recent interview, Dean Lokko discussed the role that both gender and race play in conversations seeking great change. The College has, for more than 173 years, worked to take on these extremely difficult questions with honesty and commitment. We will use the remainder of Dean Lokko’s tenure on campus to engage with her on the issues she’s raised and continue that work as part of our commitment to making our campus everything it should be.

With the departure of Dean Lokko, the future of Spitzer’s administration is unknown. As of right now, The Spitzer School of Architecture has not announced any potential replacement for Lesley Lokko.

UPDATED 4/23/21: This article has been updated to reflect some corrections.

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