

On New Cosmologies: Stephen Burks Approaches the Sacred

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Each morning I make my way to the large east-facing windows overlooking the Harlem River. Sage, photos of my Beloveds, candles, water and items too sacred to name adorn my makeshift altar- an antique wooden liquor stand turned “spirit house.” Nothing about this repurposing of the mundane feels sacrilegious, yet the irony of a liquor stand turned into an altar is not lost on me. Imbued with the stories it holds and lives it has lived, my altar has become the most potent part of my home, and the space that grounds me in a sense of gratitude and power.

As the morning sun bathes my altar in its bright light, I sit at its feet and recite a series of Yorùbá greetings, paying homage to those who came before me, my family, teachers, and comrades whose wisdom shapes my life. As a student still early in my journey and understanding of the Yorùbá religio-spiritual practice Ifá, I have learned to recite this compulsory and ritualistic oral poetry each morning as a way to honor and affirm the spiritual and ancestral powers that guide and inform all aspects of my sentience and karmic destiny.¹ For over five thousand years, peoples across Yorùbáland, consisting of modern day Togo, Benin, and Nigeria have recited Iba’s with the morning sun. It is a daily practice that predates all Abrahamic religions, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, modern day racial formation, colonialism and western expansion, and today increasing numbers of people across the African Diaspora look to this ancient practice and life-way for its enduring truth. As more people turn to a range of veneration practices across the globe, the necessity of creating furniture and products to meet the particular needs of modern day spiritual practitioners has emerged as a new design imperative.

It is within this spiritual and cultural context that I engage and understand the most recent work of industrial designer, Stephen Burks, who has created a collection of modern altars entitled “*Spirit Houses*.” Burks’ first spirit house was commissioned by the High Museum of Art, for his solo exhibition *Stephen Burks: Shelter In Place* (September 14, 2022 - March 5, 2023). The exhibition surveyed Burks’ last ten years of commercial practice and craft-based collaborations, while also speculating on the role of radical design in addressing issues of belonging, loss, race, self-care, and spirituality in the wake of global uprisings like the Black Lives Matter movement and crises like the Covid-19 pandemic.

The open structure of the first publicly displayed *Spirit House* offers space for photographs, incense, and other sacred objects that honor the memory of loved ones who have since transitioned. In fact, this first *Spirit House* was exhibited in memory of the late visionary, bell

¹ “ÌBÀ (HOMAGE): A Compulsory Ritualistic Performance for the YORÙBÁ’ Oral Artists.” Dayo Akanmu, Lagos State 1 University, Nigeria Joy Odewumi, Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education, Nigeria. Pg. 45

hooks whose friendship and teachings were very important to Burks' practice. Created during the midst of mass casualties and unspeakable suffering, Burks remarked during the exhibition opening, that 'Covid-19 was and continues to be experienced as a collective moment of grief. And while many individuals were forced to transition in isolation, away from the love and comfort of family and friends, our commitment to honoring their legacies has only intensified during this experience.' For Burks, this reflection was a catalyst that turned him deeper toward worldviews or in this case, cosmologies that ritualize practices around remembrance and root them in shared religio-cultural and ethical meaning.

Pulling from a myriad of West African and Asian religio-spiritual practices, Burks' interpretation of the traditional spirit house exists within cosmological worldviews that affirm the dead as active, everyday participants in our world-making process. For the many peoples and cultures who exist beyond western ontology, the practice of religion cannot be separated from everyday life and the public sphere, as it informs nearly all aspects of society- from politics, social life and cultural production, to how we shape our dwellings and death rituals.² These ranges of cosmological worldviews and religions (from the Yorùbá practice of Ifá to Buddhism) ground ancestral veneration and the establishment of worship temples or altars as intrinsic to the human experience. Thus, through the act of ritualized journey, prayer, and offerings— be it water, food, kola nut, liquor or incense, we may come to see how the materiality of altars and worship temples are imbued with a type of divine life and power, (or Asé in the Yorùbá tradition) propelling the human-made object away from profane insentience and toward limitless spiritual animation.

The creation of the pieces for the exhibition *Spirit Houses* at Volume Gallery in Chicago, Illinois (September 8 - October 28, 2023) reflects a necessary expansion and intervention into the largely secular world of industrial design that responds to and serves our everyday needs through the creation of products, furniture, and devices. *Spirit Houses*, in their varied forms — from a woven floor lantern, to a wall-mounted display shelf, partitioned coffee table, and ambiguous wooden container— have become both physical and metaphysical portals, allowing us to place our present lives within a temporal continuum, beginning with our ancestors and ending with future generations to come, whose lives will be informed by the choices we make today.

Burks' multifaceted approach toward crafting *Spirit Houses* allows us to engage what is sacred and personal in a multitude of ways, that are both reflective of traditional altar use and expansive in their exploration of new typologies that can be imbued with spiritual sentience at the will of the user. Possibly the most recognizable is Burks' *Altar*, an open-faced, minimalist plywood, wall-mounted standing height display shelf, that not only offers space for personal objects and images of remembrance, but also creates an intimate space for acoustic contemplation. *Tableau*, a black stained, partitioned oak coffee table allows users to honor individual familial lineages as distinct parts of a whole that converge around the low table at seating height. In this way, offerings and moments of shared meditation may be made in community, which reflects the communal act of prayer and veneration that is central to the

² Olupona, K. Jacob. "Rethinking the Study of African Indigenous Religions." *What is African Religion? The Big Question*. 2 Harvard Divinity Bulletin, Spring /Summer 2021.

practice of *lfá*. The meaning of *lfá*, “we pay homage” denotes the importance of shared communal veneration and prayer, and in this way it is understood that spirit is not something to be tended to alone and in isolation. Away from the western-colonial inclination toward hyperindividualism, Burks roots his understanding of *Spirit Houses* in worldviews that center interdependence and the active presence of ancestors as agents in the world. Thus *Tableau*, in its physicality, creates the space for us to embody and employ the meaning of *lfá* as a collective act and venerative form of remembrance.

The handheld conical, cubic, cylindrical, interlocking container entitled *Transformer*, is interesting in that it has no defined orientation and is a collection of vessels, creating space for small sacred objects that may be understood for the faith we put in them. In keeping with the belief that the ancestors continue to move amongst the living, many religio-spiritual practices maintain food and sacred offerings as a central component of veneration practices, as a way to nurture the spirit realm and their relationship with it, so that it may reflect a form of mutuality in the give and take of wisdom, prayer, and good fortune between practitioner and ancestor. While I am inclined to see *Transformer* through this particular lens (as a vessel for a singular offering) it is but one interpretation of its many uses and meanings.

The collection of *Spirit Houses* in the exhibition also contains three distinct objects of illumination entitled *Cozy*, *Lantern*, and *Ypsilon*. These three *Spirit Houses* nod to the historical belief that the first paper lanterns made in the Buddhist tradition were to light and guide the way of Monks, while making their pilgrimages across what is now India and Nepal. *Cozy* is a small, warm-toned, coiled rope container for the sacred, whose internal light source glows through its woven surface, which can be removed to allow one to interact privately with its contents. *Lantern* translates the traditional vocabulary of the washi paper lampshade into a large hand woven house of light, made of silk ribbons more reminiscent of an inverted basket. Its formal simplicity is buttressed by its subtly sophisticated details.

The use of weaving techniques in *Lantern* and *Cozy* is reflective of Burks’ deep respect and intentional incorporation of artisanal craft traditions into his practice in an attempt to not only express the relevance of hand production in contemporary design, but to also underscore the divine nature of making in general. Against movements that laude creative authorship as a key marker of American individualism and exceptionalism, Burks maintains a commitment to collaborative building and resource sharing as a set of ethical and creative practices that are reflected in the materiality of *Spirit Houses* and many of his other projects.

Ypsilon, the largest of the three, is a Y-shaped floor lamp made of bent, welded and blackened steel that stands at the scale of Burks, a fully grown human being, with his arms outstretched in exaltation. The Greco-Roman origins of the letter and metaphorical symbol are rooted in the ancient notion of arriving at a fork in the road or a threshold, reflecting vice and virtue, and the importance of making the right or *righteous* choice.³ In this impressive sculptural object, memories of morality are integrated within its form. Thus through *Ypsilon*, we can see how even a lamp can be considered sacred through its expression and use.

³ “Juvenal and Persius.” *The Loeb Classical Library*. William Heinemann, 1920.

As a daughter of ancestors named and unnamed, I understand the creation of *Spirit Houses* as both a meditation on the importance of the ancestral realm and as a design imperative for the modern world as we increasingly look to earth honoring and communal-based practices in response to the failures of rapid globalization, environmental degradation, structural racism, and inequity. I believe Burks' process-oriented approach and design of *Spirit Houses* embodies the Twi principal Sankofa, which comes from the Akan peoples of Ghana and means "it is not taboo to go back and fetch what is at risk of being left behind." The principle, Sankofa affirms that the power to know and honor our history and heritage is also the power to fully know ourselves in the current moments in which we exist. In his offering *Spirit Houses*, Burks has turned toward and honored spirit-based cosmologies while creating a new design lexicon and physicality through which we may engage the wisdom of our ancestors and honor the lives of our loved ones.

I often wonder what the western world would be like if each household had its own *Spirit House*, as most households each have chairs, tables, and beds. Affirming the importance of spiritual nourishment as central to our lives has the possibility to fundamentally shift how humans engage with each other and the world around us. Thus, *Spirit Houses* are not only a new expression of design, but they are also an ethical intervention and expansion of our daily practices, allowing us the space to commune, honor and love in ways that affirm our intrinsic interdependence with the world around us.

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We pay homage to our heavenly comrades
We pay homage to the ancestors, [known] and unknown