

# Studio

The Studio Museum in Harlem Magazine Spring/Summer 2019



# Building Dispatch: Aissatou Bey-Grecia of McKissack & McKissack

by Emily Dunkel



McKissack & McKissack, the nation's oldest minority-owned design and construction firm, is serving as a consultant to Sciame Construction on the building of The Studio Museum in Harlem's new home. Aissatou Bey-Grecia, Director of Workforce Strategies & Initiatives at McKissack, is responsible for the recruitment and development of minority-owned, woman-owned, and locally based contractors (MWLBE) for the Museum's building project.

Her work ensures that the people hired to work on building projects across the five boroughs reflect the diversity of New York and its local communities.

Aissatou began her community-centric career in the 1980s as the program director of Harlem Hospital's Injury Prevention Program. After observing that many major injuries result from unmaintained, unsafe playgrounds, Aissatou worked with a team comprised of hospital professionals, community members, and elected officials to renovate every playground in Harlem's Community School District 5. She began working with McKissack years later in a similar capacity, first on the construction of the New Patient Pavilion at the Harlem Hospital Center campus.

Below, Aissatou speaks to the importance of hiring local tradespeople, her excitement about the Studio Museum building project, and her connection to Harlem.

**Emily Dunkel:** Can you tell me about your role at McKissack and how you got there?

**Aissatou Bey-Grecia:** I worked with Cheryl McKissack Daniel and the community advisory board to come up with the concept of community employment for Harlem Hospital. We developed a process for identifying who is really qualified, who we could help with training, and how we could take each of those people—wherever an applicant was in life—and move them to the next level.

**ED:** What are some significant challenges you face in the field?

**AB:** The current shortage of qualified labor. The City of New York has pretty big goals for every construction project, so everyone is trying to engage the qualified MWBE contractors and the local workforce. Every resource is being tapped. To readers: Anyone who is interested or knows of anyone interested should get in contact.

**ED:** What excites you about the Studio Museum project?

**AB:** The number one thing is that it's the Studio Museum. What's not exciting about that? I moved here from Ohio in 1967. There was an emergence of all kinds of arts and cultural institutions during that time. The Studio Museum has

been an important part of the community and its growth, and the new proposal by Sir David Adjaye OBE and his team is very exciting. It's going to change the landscape in a way that is very meaningful.

**ED:** What do you hope to accomplish with the project?

**AB:** I want to exceed our goals and I want to get as many qualified people in this community involved in the project as possible. It's something that the team I work with is always pushing to accomplish. I want this project to succeed in every way and to have a story that goes along with this building—not only as a member of the team, but as a member of the community.

**ED:** Outside of this project, what is your relationship to the Studio Museum?

**AB:** My family and I love going to the openings and exhibitions, and I love seeing what the young people are coming up with. In fact, this project has rekindled my interest in the Museum's programs. Whenever I hear mention of The Studio Museum in Harlem I feel proud to be attached to it.

**ED:** You have been in Harlem since 1967. What is your connection to the neighborhood now?

**AB:** My family has lived in Harlem for five generations. Here, I'm able to find a balance between this family history, our traditions, the arts, and community. Those are my bottom lines, the things that make me tick. It's really nice to be able to work with and for institutions that support the same kinds of important bottom lines. I feel like I found it in all these projects and in my work with McKissack. At McKissack I can be myself and put forth the importance of community. Making sure people in a community can find sustainable work is important.

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