BEST HELPING HANDS

Stephen Burks and Malika Leiper

PHOTOGRAPHY: JOSH ARONSON WRITER: ALI MORRIS



When we sit down to speak with designers Stephen Burks and Malika Leiper, they say they are fulfilling a long-held dream by living in Paris, the latest location to serve as their base since 2024, reflecting a practice in which home is less a fixed point than a network of places shaped by relationships and work. Over the past year, the designer and cultural director have reshaped their lives around residencies and collaborative projects in Montana, Senegal, Alabama, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and rural Japan, using each location as a testing ground for new ways of working at the intersection of craft, community and industry.

For Burks, who found international acclaim as a New York-based product designer, and Leiper, who grew up in Cambodia and trained as an urban planner, their nomadic model is a way to rethink what a design studio can be. Rather than sketching from afar, they embed themselves in local communities: sitting with quilters in Gee's Bend, Alabama, or working with foresters and carpenters in Yoshino, Japan. The goal, as Burks puts it, is to be 'as close to making as possible' – and to use design as a conduit between worlds that don't usually meet.

Leiper and Burks' partnership began at Harvard, where Burks was completing a Loeb Fellowship and Leiper a master's in urban planning. When the pandemic hit, they suddenly found themselves grounded and asking 'what design could actually do' in the face of overlapping crises. A parallel dialogue with curator Monica Obniski at Atlanta's High Museum of Art invited them to consider 'spaces where design doesn't typically exist', from domestic rituals to spirituality and mourning at home. The result was the 2022 exhibition 'Stephen Burks: Shelter in Place', which displayed speculative domestic objects that marked the start of their collaborative practice. As Burks points out, 'Our work and personal lives have always been very intertwined and continue to be so today.'

This period also reframed Burks' long-running project, Stephen Burks Man Made, which has, for nearly two decades, sought to 'bring the hand to industry' by connecting artisans, manufacturers, non-profits and distributors. 'Our goal is to believe in the possibility of trade, not aid, and to develop products that build upon capacity and move design in a new direction,' he says.

The practice has become increasingly nomadic, shaped by residencies and workshop-based projects. 'We make no distinction between art, design or exhibitions,' Leiper says, and residencies have become a structural part of their aproach. Recent projects have taken them from Montana and Senegal to filming with contemporary Kuba makers in Kinshasa. Kuba textiles – a centuries-old raffia weaving tradition from the Kuba Kingdom in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo – have become a thread running through their most recent work. Invited by the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina, to design an exhibition around Charlotte-based textile designer Wesley Mancini's collection of historic Kuba textiles, Burks and Leiper quickly realised that they wanted to understand not only the past of this craft but its present. This led them to Congo and to Kuba collective Kilubukila, pushing the technique into new forms, challenging the idea that it is a 'lost art'.

In Yoshino, Japan, they began exploring how Kuba's abstract geometries might converse with the local cedar forests and Shinto spatial traditions, creating sculptural pieces that pair cedar 'bodies' with ceremonially dressed Kuba surfaces; these were then shown at Space Un Tokyo as part of their 2025 exhibition, 'Kuba Sugi'. From there, a collaboration with engineered wood specialist Alpi translated Kuba motifs into marquetry and veneer that were presented at Design Miami last December.

What links these projects is less a visual signature than a set of questions: who gets to participate in contemporary design? How can long-established techniques be allowed to evolve, rather than be frozen to fit Western expectations of 'authenticity'? And what kinds of economic structures need to be in place for this work to move beyond one-off commissions? 'What »



Opposite, Stephen Burks and Malika Leiper photographed at Design Miami 2025

Above, chairs from the 'Mattts' collection, created with Thread Senegal during a residency supported by the Josef & Anni Albers Foundation



really makes it so meaningful is that you have so many different hands and voices playing a role in the process,' says Leiper.

Burks and Leiper are clear that their role is not to parachute in with ready-made answers. They talk instead about challenging artisans as equal partners, and designing processes rather than simply objects – as with the Gee's Bend quilts, where they didn't draw the compositions, but set up the framework within which they were made. The project was developed in dialogue with Sew Gee's Bend Heritage Builders and informed by Burks and Leiper's longstanding relationship with Italian textile house Dedar, with whom they have collaborated for nearly 15 years. The resulting quilts appeared in the US Pavilion at the 2025 Venice Architecture Biennale as part of Burks and Leiper's curatorial contribution, 'Objects of Belonging', bringing the Gee's Bend quilting community into dialogue with a global design audience and expanding the contexts in which these traditions are seen and understood.

In this sense, they describe themselves as conduits, or, as Burks jokes, 'the tube', connecting small cooperatives in Malawi or Naples with brands such as Dedon and Roche Bobois, who can put pieces into wider circulation. 'We want to influence the systems of design that define who's involved, what we're making, how we're making it, who benefits from it,' he says.

The pair draw parallels between their practice and that of Isamu Noguchi, whose refusal to separate sculpture, furniture and landscape design offers a model for working fluidly across disciplines. Burks and Leiper contrast this with what they see as the 20th-century obsession with a singular, recognisable style. Their own output can appear disjointed at first glance – quilts, cedar sculptures, outdoor furniture, museum installations – until you start to see the common threads: a belief in 'other centres' beyond Europe and the US, and a reluctance to get 'stuck' in any one category. 'There are always other ways to live, and we should never be getting stuck,' Burks says. 'This is what motivates us, the constant search for a new approach and not being defined, not being categorised.'

This runs counter to an industry that, in their view, is becoming more conservative. Big brands tend to return to the same names, especially in precarious times. Burks and Leiper argue that this is precisely when risk-taking is most needed, and when new voices should be shaping the agenda. Their travels only strengthen this conviction: in Brazil, they encountered a self-sufficient ecosystem of local design brands operating far from the industry's usual centres, reinforcing their belief that 'many centres, not one' should define the future. This looks exhilarating from the outside; in practice, it comes with its challenges. Now into their second year of a fully nomadic set-up, they prefer longer residencies – ideally three months or more in one place – which give them the chance to slow down and immerse themselves more fully in their surroundings.

One of the biggest learnings, they both agree, has been about looseness: trusting that ideas can emerge from being present, rather than arriving with a finished concept. Their workshop-based model, implemented in more than 20 countries across six continents, has provided them with the greatest education of their lives. For Burks, the lesson has been to keep resisting stasis – creatively, emotionally, structurally. 'It's also about finding freedom,' he says. 'If there's really one thing that we absolutely agree on every day, it's about trying to find that space to be free. Freedom equals fun for me, always.' ✱

stephenburksmanmade.com

Above, 'The Lost Cloth Object' is a 'speculative ceremonial site' based on Kuba patterns created in collaboration with Alpi for Design Miami 2025

Opposite, a quilted piece from a collaboration with Dedar and the non-profit Sew Gee's Bend Heritage Builders in Alabama

Photography: Christian Martinelli