

Projects of Note

African American Museum Partners RTKL and The Freelon Group

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A new African American history museum slated for Baltimore's Inner Harbor will seek to embody the character, pride, struggle, and accomplishments of Maryland's African American people. Beginning with a "strong commitment to an emotional architectural response," the planned Maryland Museum of African American History and Culture will be designed to reflect the seven concepts that relate to key aspects of African American identity: spirituality, joy, vibrancy, resilience, the power of knowledge, values and principals, the importance of family, and cultural continuity.

The architecture "embraces the duality" of "celebration and disappointment, flight and perseverance, joy and pain," the designers said. It is "very spirited and is filled with many layers of meaning," reflecting the common aspects of African Americans in Maryland, said Gary Bowden, FAIA. Bowden is now a professor of practice at the University of Maryland, after retiring from RTKL, Baltimore. He has extended his ties with RTKL to finish the project, which is slated for completion in late 2003 or early 2004.

The museum sits on a narrow site near Baltimore's active Inner Harbor. When completed, it will house a performing arts auditorium, gallery space, resource center, oral history recording studio, classrooms and educational facilities, cafe, museum store, and administrative support space.

Partnership

The five-story, \$18 million, 72,000-square-foot structure is being designed by RTKL, whose flagship office is in Baltimore, and The Freelon Group, whose main office is in Research Triangle Park, N.C. The two firms teamed up for what Bowden called a "storybook project."

The team, officially The Freelon/RTKL joint venture, was chosen over five other groups competing for the project. The team was formed based on the relationship of Bowden and Phil Freelon, AIA, president of the Freelon Group Architects. As highly accomplished architects who are African American, their personal and professional lives have crossed at many points during the years, Freelon and Bowden



The symbolic red wall is at the core of the spirit of this building and houses the major vertical circulation elements.

said. There had been some general discussions about working together, but it was Baltimore's African American history museum that piqued their interest and again got them thinking about collaboration.

Bowden said it was important to him and RTKL that they put forth a diversified team to design what will be the nation's second-largest African American history museum. The Freelon Group, which was the recipient of AIA North Carolina's 2001 Firm Award, had developed a reputation for "high quality, high design, and delivery" along with recent experience and plaudits on several other cultural institutions, both in North Carolina, and nationally. Freelon's firm, which is also working on high-profile projects in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia, saw the partnership primarily as an opportunity to enhance the team, but also to have a local component involved in the design, engineering, and construction phases. The partnership is not in name only: the firms are splitting the fees in half and working closely together to make the process seamless for the client.



The Freelon Group/RTKL joint venture is designing the planned Maryland Museum of African American History and Culture.

Freelon advised firms interested in collaboration to seek out partners with common values and principles so that there is chemistry involved in the strategic alliance. Once that is accomplished, he said, all other things fall into place.

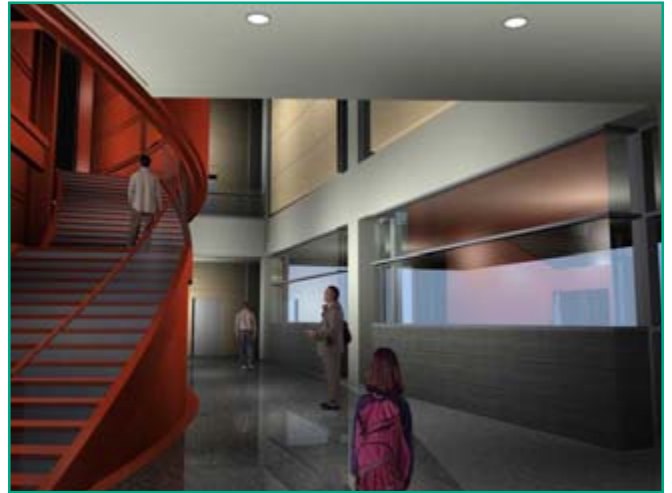
Layers of meaning

The design was born from listening closely to the client, working with a conceptual vision, and executing a scheme within the space set aside for the new cultural center, Freelon said. Situated in an urban area, it must compete with all the other cultural and entertainment opportunities downtown Baltimore offers.

As a result, Bowden said, the architecture is strong, bold, and "very spirited" and visually explores the common aspects of African American experience in Maryland. The five-story building is designed around a central core lit by an atrium that accentuates a red "intervention wall" that is present on all five levels of the museum. The wall "flashes through" a black box of a building, Bowden said. The architects said the wall's symbolism is manifold and represents the dichotomy of the African American experience in Maryland. Among other emotions and concepts, it represents the pain, suffering, struggles, and conflicts encountered by African Americans as they settled in the U.S.; the effort to fit into society; and the creativity, vibrancy, and passion African Americans bring to Maryland and the U.S. The colors are also derived from the Maryland flag. Like the African American experience, all the circulation paths are oriented back toward the core red wall.



The museum will reflect the experience of African Americans in Maryland and their contributions to the state's history.



The red "intervention wall" is used as a central element of the design. Its symbolism is felt on all levels of the five-story building.

The walls will also feature screened images of African Americans who have contributed to Maryland's history, as both historical and artistic elements.

The project manager is Maryland's Department of General Services. Other members of the design team include Mahan Rykiel Associates, landscape architects, and Delon Hampton Associates, civil engineers. The museum's programs will be part of the curriculum for Maryland public school students.

The firms have obvious mutual admiration for each other's strengths and the level of expertise that they bring to the joint venture. The joint venture is also emblematic of the relationships that can be formed by being active in the profession and open to new ideas and ways to practice. The project is evidence of the "lofty idealism" that the design team itself represents and how that idealism can be harnessed into exceptional architecture.

PHOTOS BY DAVID WHITCOMB.