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FACE OF THE AIA

Three Contemporary Star Architects

by Stephen A. Kliment, FAIA

Summary: Here, in the third of *AIArchitect's* Diversity series, are the stories of three African-American architects who founded, own, and lead profitable firms, despite severe hurdles on the road to success. And each is producing high octane design.

- David Lee, FAIA, of Stull and Lee Architects, based in Boston, tells of the special effort his firm has had to put out to be seen as of the same caliber as majority competitors.
- Michael Willis, FAIA, of San Francisco-based Michael Willis Architects, had the brilliant idea to come upon a building type that had hitherto been seen strictly as engineering—and made architecture out of it.
- Philip Freelon, FAIA, of The Freelon Group, at Research Triangle Park, N.C., has developed a solid institutional practice. He, like Lee and Willis, has received an enviable string of AIA honor awards that testifies to the design quality of their work.

M. David Lee, FAIA, co-founder, Stull and Lee Architects, Boston

David Lee, one of the most original of today's black designers, has found, as he goes about seeking new business for the firm, how exposed he is to the trials of owning and running a black firm in our time. He looks with longing, but without resentment, at the cutting-edge design breaks afforded majority firms thanks to the power, independence, and big budgets of their patrons. He has found that most private clients still gravitate to majority design firms and, without many of the constraints on budgets and innovation of the typical public client, give their architects a freer hand in stretching the design envelope.

David M. Lee, FAIA

Poorer communities generally rely on public sources for funding. "Often the agencies that underwrite these projects impose design requirements that are inflexible and not suited to reinterpretation to fit a particular ethnic culture," argues Lee. "The HUD requirements we often worked within did not vary whether one was building on a Hopi reservation or in Harlem." [Source: 1996 speech to Tulane Jazz Architectural Workshop. For insights into patrons, patronage, and the black architect, look forward to Episode 13 in this diversity series, scheduled for mid-2007].

On private-sector work and typically on public work, too, black-owned firms have to prove themselves every time. They have to be more than simply "qualified." Their previous projects are never just evidence they can handle the next one. This holds even for firms with the solid reputation of Stull and Lee. In their portfolio, they can point to many award-winning buildings and urban design projects. But often the level of documentation necessary to "win" the job or have out-of-the-box thinking accepted calls for levels of documentation not required of even less experienced majority firms. And the money for high-quality photography or for making sensational models is seldom there, as it is for white firms with huge presentation budgets. Lee doubts a majority firm would have to undergo such rigorous checks. He remembers in earlier years how frustrated he and partner Donald L. Stull, FAIA, were when they would show a past project to a client prospect, only to have the client ask: "OK, now what part of that project did you do?" He would respond: "No, we were the architects of record. The whole thing was ours."

Lee concedes that with his track record he often gets an easy bye in the first round of selection. Having served as president of the Boston Society of Architects, taught at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and, along with Stull, having judged a host of design award programs—all this has raised the firm's profile and made things a little easier.

But not all the way down the line, and not all the time. He has run into serious obstacles when working for established public clients. Many firms cannot afford to. They must work for a limited fee and small margins and put up with micro-management from lifer departmental bureaucrats. So firms like his end up spending undue labor hours simply to move a project forward.

A disproportionate share of Stull and

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Lee's workload is still public sector. For example he has done work for the "T"—the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority—and designed the Boston police department headquarters. Their share of private work is improving, but even then it is primarily focused in minority neighborhoods. As for what Lee calls a "straight job," downtown or on the waterfront, it is has proved elusive. An important exception has been the firm's work for Northeastern University in Boston. Lee has been leading the institution's new master plan and has completed two recent buildings on campus.

To change it will take political leadership. In Atlanta, leaders made a difference. The late Mayor Maynard Jackson and former congressman Andrew Young each told people: "If you're going to work in this town, you're going to be inclusive." Not many politicians are making those kinds of demands. Lee told a former mayor of Boston: "If you really want to see how we can get minority professionals—lawyers, architects, accountants, whatever—involved, somebody's got to say, 'these are people I want you to talk to, and give those people a chance.'"

Many black firms have a special concern about the way tight fees and tight budgets hurt opportunities to sell innovative designs. Recalls Lee: "Cesar Pelli is a person I've known and served on juries with. A warm and wonderful person and an extremely talented architect. One time, I was scheduled to go before the Boston Civic Design Commission the same night as he. His project was a tower over South Station. Cesar did a wonderful job presenting it. But he had all these models that had been built with basswood and lighting and all kinds of gadgets to show the commission what this lobby and other spaces was going to be about. They had two or three of them. Beautiful things, well done. And Cesar kept referring to them as, 'well, these are just little sketch models.' And I'm sitting there, thinking, 'God, I'd be happy to have a budget that would allow me to build those just as the final model, much less a sketch.'"

And although current technology goes a long way toward leveling the playing field in helping clients to envision possibilities, physical models and (expensive) hand drawn renderings still rule the day.

Note too the difference between the way clients perceive a black owner/principal versus a black partner in a majority firm (the latter have included Robert Wesley at Skidmore Owings and Merrill in Chicago; Ralph Jackson at Shepley Bulfinch Richardson and Abbott; Max Bond at Davis Brody Bond; and Darrel Fitzgerald at Gensler, in Atlanta). Max Bond tells friends that the way clients relate to him now is entirely different from the way they did when he was partner in his own minority firm, Bond Ryder and Associates. As a principal in a majority-owned firm, he plays a different ball game: he is accepted naturally as a mainstream player by client and competitors alike.

Stull and Lee, Orchard Gardens School, photo courtesy of architect

Stull and Lee, John D. O'Bryant African-American Institute at Northeastern University, photo courtesy of architect

Black ownership

Accepting partnership in a majority firm may disappoint black colleagues still in black-owned firms. They may see it as a personal triumph but, given the individual's obvious talents, they would rather see them remain at the helm of their own black-owned firms, because of the prestige this would bring to black firms all over. They feel the gifted black architect who joins a majority-owned partnership could better have formed a dream team of minority architects—with some majority partners perhaps, but essentially a minority firm—that would rank with the best of the majority firms and sustain itself over time.

How close they are to realizing that destiny is best described in Lee's words: "Are we where, perhaps, we

should be, given our track record? I'm not certain that we are. If you really look hard, even where we have had breakthroughs—and some of our clients are majority clients—it has been in those places where there was a minority angle in some way, shape, or form." But work in the majority private sector is still the exception.

Recent examples include the award winning Orchard Gardens Elementary School in Boston with TLCR Architects and the John D. O'Bryant African-American Institute at Northeastern University. The O'Bryant African-American Institute is a 30,000 square foot component within a larger mixed use structure that also includes general classrooms and a student dormitory. Stull and Lee collaborated with William Rawn Associates on the overall massing and urban design concept. Lee then designed the O'Bryant African-American Institute as a distinctive Afro-centric inspired "piece" within the overall composition.

Lee also worked in New Orleans planning with the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward in designing and overseeing construction of the monument to the victims and survivors of Katrina.

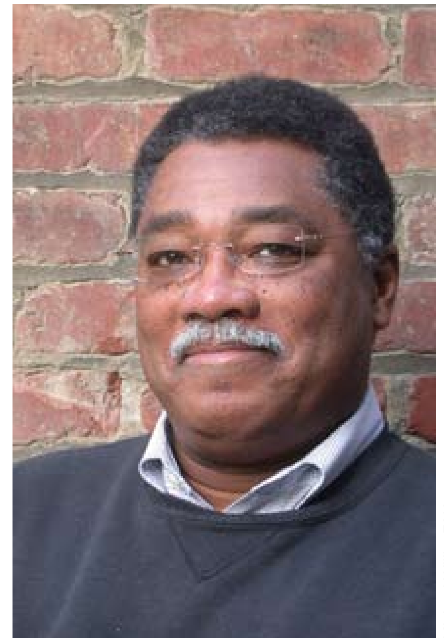
After nearly 40 years in practice, the firm was established initially as Stull Associates by Donald Stull in 1966, the firm is gravitating toward a new model. At one point Stull and Lee reached a staff level of 60 persons, 19 of whom were assigned to Boston's Big Dig Project. Stull and Lee, in a subconsultant role to PB/Bechtel, was a key member of the coordinating architectural and urban design overview team.

Largely as a matter of choice, the firm has downsized to 15. "We never want to grow larger than 20 persons again. Chasing money and dealing with endless human resource issues is not why we chose to become architects. Today the firm looks to work nationally (and locally) in collaborations with other architects or engineers who bring specific knowledge of particular building types."

Stull and Lee collaborating with William Rawn Associates, monument to the victims and survivors of Katrina, photo courtesy of architect

Michael E. Willis, FAIA, Michael Willis Architects

Michael Willis Architects, with offices in San Francisco and Portland, Ore., has had the kind of success envied by architects of every race who have wanted to own and run a successful firm. His early high school run-ins do suggest an uncanny replay of what the great black architect Paul Williams encountered 60 years earlier.



Michael Willis, FAIA

Reports Willis: "I wasn't particularly outgoing but I loved drawing. My mother was a successful commercial artist. My first stumble in the road was in my high school. I was talking to my junior counselor who received the news unhappily that I wanted to go to architecture school. She was steering me towards trade school."

Frustrated by this gloomy prospect, Willis was taken in hand by Gloria White, the senior and only black counselor. "She invited me to her cubicle and said, 'if you want to go to architecture school, I'll get you to the door. You'll have to do the work yourself, but if that's where you want to go, I'll get you there.'"

Willis did get to go, to Washington University, and found it difficult. But at no time did he feel he was in the wrong place. He never thought of a serious

alternative. At the school, there was no "house style" to follow, as at Illinois Institute of Technology in those years. That left him free to follow his own path. After graduating, he worked for Charles Fleming, a large black-owned firm in St. Louis, where he once rejected an offer from the principal to go into marketing. He nonetheless became interested in where the jobs came from. So Fleming started having him come along on business development trips and do some proposal writing. But he understood that somewhere in this room was a job that would allow him to go back and work on it.

Not long after, he captured a much prized job to teach studio at the University of California at Berkeley. Berkeley changed Willis' outlook in other ways. He saw a way of practice that attracted him. "St. Louis is a place of many talented people, but the structure of work is fairly conservative. In San Francisco, I was seeing small firms doing what I would call major work. I saw small firms, talent driven, being able to capture substantive work. You didn't have to be in a big firm for 20 years to get what you would consider real work."

Willis went back to St. Louis anyway, and after working for some of that city's best known firms, Charles Fleming invited him to open an office in San Francisco. Back in San Francisco, he had to hire people, negotiate for rents, and "talk about the 80 percent of stuff that's not architecture just to do architecture." And he found he now had to hand over the part that he loved to others. He could look over the fence, comment, perhaps do a drawing now and then, but his real job was getting the firm known; creating the work.

Finally, in 1988, Willis started his own firm—in San Francisco. His designs were mainstream, with no visible African influences. "Our design approach was just to create a place where the solutions were—the solutions we came up with were generated by place and program and not standard anything." He was 37.

Fork in the road

Still, opening an office brought Willis to a fork in the road that has confronted many a black-owned firm before and since: most of his workload became, and remained, public sector work. He applies his own rationale to this: "Public work is organized, there's a structure to it. As a publicly-oriented office we know how to attract the attention of the city, the public works department, the environmental health department. We understand the apparatus of public work."

He began to focus on a subset of public works construction that most people do not associate with architects and architecture: water purification facilities. Typically you call in the engineers to make sure the roof doesn't leak and the equipment does not fall through the floor. But a dramatic response to this shopworn model came from an unexpected quarter—from Willis's architecture firm, and a black-owned one at that, which had never designed a building even remotely like the one they now sought with uncommon vigor.

The Sobrante Ozonation Facility, in El Sobrante, Calif., provides conventional chlorine and ozone-based waster purification. An industrial building, it has become the flagship for the district, enticing visitors from the water industry and the general public. This was an important project for Willis. It was an industrial project, designed to purify water in a major water processing plant. He had never done a structure of this type or scale before. He heard of this project in 1991 and made the short list. When he got the call he was a brand new firm—only four staffers. "I avoided telling them in the interview. They kept asking me, but I kept talking about the incredible challenge of the project. If they had heard the number four, they just would have deflated.

"It ended up probably the single best

Michael Willis Architects, The Sobrante Ozonation Facility, photo courtesy of architect

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INDUSTRYNEWS

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interview for the firm because it created a body of work for us. It wasn't just that job." The interview taught Willis a lesson—that they were architects, not engineers. "We asked: 'What do people need? They still need light and air, the workplace needs to work for the people who are in it. So we asked not just the dumb questions about the purification process, we asked some questions about how the entire building works. 'What do you do all day? What do you in this building and what in that building? And from listening to those answers, we were able to devise an approach for designing a building type we'd never seen before. But the beauty of it was that no one had."

So Willis started on a novel approach to designing such structures—not by imposing architectural order on an industrial plant, but by understanding the industrial plant and processes and making architecture out of that. He now had created not just a nice job for the firm, but also one that paid well. The firm had earned the money it needed to buy computers, office space, and chairs, so in case of a downturn, they at least had a place to

Michael Willis Architects, Jensen Filtration Plant Oxidation Retrofit Program, photo courtesy of architect

Michael Willis Architects, Mandela Gateway Hope VI, photo courtesy of architect

sit and the technology to survive.

But Sobrante had a longer-term return for Willis. The engineers called and said "let's go work on another one." So Willis started work on Richmond Water Reclamation Plant. Both projects, to Willis, had a larger societal function. You could now purify water in ways other than to use the explosive chlorine gas and chlorine liquids, which have to be trucked into these facilities or brought in by train. That is risk-free ozone, which is also healthier. Ozone was used at the Sobrante and Richmond facilities and third facility for Metropolitan Water in Los Angeles, which in 2001 became the largest ozone facility anywhere.

So the Willis firm became experts in the design of water treatment facilities based on a newer, safer, and healthier technology. It led to invitations to speak at American Water Works Association conferences, where Willis played evangelist and plugged the evidently novel idea that architects should be a part of water facility design. As Willis discovered, these public megaprojects were a great opportunity for African-American architects. "There's almost no bar to your being involved if you understand the technology," he contends. "And because it's not glamorous, it narrows the field."

Willis's greatest achievement is that he boldly approached industrial architecture and made it a brand of the firm. His blackness is a non-factor. He goes into interviews as an expert. He knows how to make the building work not only for the client's industrial program but for the people who actually work there and for the neighborhood.

Social conscience

Willis did not abandon a social conscience as he went up against the heavyweights in the Bay Area. "If we were talking at an interview about the number of housing units we designed, compared to one of the more established firms in town, we would always have come out on the short end." Instead, he talks to the public client about the way people live. What can you see from the window? How does light and air get into your building?

What's your relationship with the outside from your front door? Can you see your front door from the street? How does it fit in the neighborhood? "How many units have you designed" becomes irrelevant when judging whether or not he is qualified to do the job. He floods the client with talk about the project's impact—how it affects the neighborhood, its patch of city. He has completed several projects that follow this philosophy.

Willis has also designed added socially related projects—including the Cecil Williams Glide Community House, a hardy effort to kindle self-reliance and optimism among the dispossessed, and Mandela Gateway Hope VI in Oakland.

By fall 2006 Michael Willis Architects employed 43 persons. The racial breakdown was: 25 Caucasians, 7 Asians, 9 African Americans, and one Latino. Men outnumbered women by a ratio of 29 to 14. Of Willis' three partners, Carlton Smith, also the incoming president of NOMA, is African American; Rod Henmi is Japanese American; and Jeff McGraw is Caucasian.

Philip G. Freelon, FAIA, The Freelon Group

While some African-American architects feel that they are straddling the fault line of the racial divide, Philip Freelon, founding partner of The Freelon Group, embraces the notion of working and competing within the mainstream architectural profession. He believes that the vocabulary and palette of contemporary American architecture is rich enough to allow for the appropriate interpretation of most building programs. Freelon chooses to address his clients' desires for "appropriate" solutions as he applies modern design principles.

Philip Freelon, FAIA

Freelon attributes his design sensibilities to a combination of three factors: his family background, his education, and his work experience. Growing up, his parents filled their home in Philadelphia with modern paintings and sculptures. His grandfather, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania who was a well-known painter and active in the Harlem renaissance, also fueled his appreciation of Modern art. Freelon's training in the Modern architecture tradition began at Hampton, a historically black university, and continued at North Carolina State University, MIT, and the Harvard Graduate School of Design where he was a Loeb Fellow.

Freelon spent 12 productive years honing his skills at majority firms, where he excelled. He was named an associate at 3D/International in Houston, where he managed sizable design commissions in the U.S. and abroad. From 1982 through 1989, he worked at O'Brien/Atkins Associates in Research Triangle Park, N.C., where, at the age of 34, he became vice president of architecture and the youngest shareholder. He oversaw the 50-person architecture group, which included 25 other architects.

It has not all been smooth sailing for Freelon, but he has been able to deal with the assaults of prejudice and discrimination that have come his way. He says it's like rain. He knows it's there

The Freelon Group, Chambers Biomedical/Biotechnology Research Institute for North Carolina Central University, photo courtesy of architect

but he doesn't let it sour his attitude. He has been helped in this regard not only by his success in majority architecture design firms, but also because his firm has received 23 AIA design awards at the regional, state, and local levels. Award winning projects his firm has designed include the Chambers Biomedical/Biotechnology Research Institute for North Carolina Central University, the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture in Baltimore, the Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD) in San Francisco, and the Parking Structure at Raleigh Durham International Airport.

The Freelon Group, Parking Structure at Raleigh Durham International Airport, photo courtesy of architect

Freelon's work also includes major commissions for corporate clients such as Lord Corporation, an international developer of high-tech products. Lord, a majority privately held company, hired Freelon to masterplan their 60-acre campus and design their 51,000-square-foot headquarters building, which was an AIA design award winner.

When clients visit his offices in the Research Triangle Park, they see the diversity. He presently has a combined staff of 51; 30 percent are people of color. Although Freelon concedes he has been more fortunate than many African-American architects regarding commissions from corporate clients, much of the firm's work still comes from the public sector, and that trying to do innovative work on a limited budget is a challenge. Tight budgets can place constraints on the ability to do great design, but Freelon has proved adept at designing high quality work geared to the needs of a diverse client base.

The Freelon Group, the Museum of the African Diaspora, photo courtesy of architect

In terms of program, many of Freelon's buildings have no cultural elements. Still, his African roots often peek through. He sees no point in arbitrarily superimposing African images or symbols on buildings, yet these influences have made it into his work where appropriate. "My roots are in Africa and the branches and leaves grew in America," he notes. The parking structure at Raleigh-Durham International Airport, for instance, clearly features conical forms used widely in traditional West African architecture.

Freelon sees an African-American aesthetic in architecture not as a patchwork of African and/or European design motifs, but rather one built on the same principles as those that created jazz. Instruments traditionally used for symphonic music, such as the saxophone and trumpet, were reconceived to create a new form of music that expressed freedom and creativity. African-American architects bring a similar energy to environmental design, he feels, but many lack access to the "instruments" or resources to form and lead the "band." He notes that the heralded GSA Design Excellence program, which has produced numerous award winning buildings funded by the taxpayers, has yet to award a major new construction project to an African-American architect. The private sector presents similar challenges.

Freelon's vision is to design great buildings that leave a lasting impact on society. He hopes there will be more such opportunities in the years to come. In the meantime, he is sustained, he points out, by his passion for the work, the love of his family, his faith in God—and a comfortable line of credit!

Reference:

Did You Know…

Ground broke this fall for the Pittsburgh Center for African American Culture, named for Pulitzer Prize winning playwright August Wilson. Architect is Allison Williams, FAIA, a former partner at SOM and later principal at Ai, is now a partner with Perkins + Will.

The newly launched Princeton University Center for African-American Studies for "understanding the impact of race on the life and institutions of the United States." is headed by professor Valerie Smith and includes Kwame Anthony Appiah who left Harvard for Princeton in a much publicized dispute in 2002.

In a dispute over fees, Wichita, architect Charles McAfee FAIA has parted company with the Kansas African American Museum whose new riverfront home he was to design. He is replaced by Schaefer Johnson Cox Frey & Associates, of Wichita.

As an extra spur to local competition, Moody-Nolan, Inc., one of the nation's largest black-owned architecture firms and based in Columbus, Ohio, is opening an office in Kansas City.