

## Twisted: Signature Commissions and African American Architects

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*Woe can befall the painter, writer,  
musician or filmmaker who imagines  
that he or his work can somehow exist  
outside the national dialogue of race.*

— David Thigpen

In 1989 America's official repository of history and heritage<sup>1</sup> – the Smithsonian Institution – commissioned a group to look at the state of African American archives and museums across the country. This act was in response to efforts of several organizations to revive what at that time was a three-quarter century effort to garner space for African American representation on the National Mall. Two years later, the Smithsonian Institutional Study Commission concluded that there “exists no single institution devoted to African Americans which collects, analyzes, researches and organizes exhibitions on a scale and definition comparable to those of the major museums devoted to other aspects of American life.”<sup>2</sup> It was both an accurate and unfortunate conclusion. Accurate, because it was undeniably true; unfortunate, because despite a long struggle to construct such an institution, a struggle that remarkably includes a 1929 authorization by President Calvin Coolidge to do just that, the institution remained a dream deferred.

Fast-forward a good 60 years or so to a dank, court basement, when a then public defender in Washington, DC came across the Congressional Record of these discussions and grew interested. The more he read about the effort begun in 1915 to construct what was then described as a National Negro Memorial,

the more Robert Wilkins came to the conclusion that this unfinished project deserved attention. His attention. Following in the footsteps of such well-known African American citizens as Mary McCloud Bethune, Mary Church Terrell, Paul R. Williams, Albert Cassell and John Lewis, as well as the countless lesser-known, but no less important champions as Ferdinand D. Lee and Charles Moore, Wilkins devoted two years of his professional and personal life to researching, writing and organizing in an attempt to get this issue back into the public conversation and into the halls of Congress. This was no easy task, as since its first inception in 1915, the idea of a national memorial to the descendents of enslaved people in this country had endured any combination of open hostility, ridicule, mockery, disdain and indifference both in and out of the halls of congress.<sup>3</sup> Yet still, Wilkins eventually succeeded in picking up the bipartisan support of Congressmen John Lewis (D-GA) and JC Watts (R-OK). Together they were successful getting a bill on the floor for debate and on December 16, 2003, 84 years after the first version was presented to Congress, President George W. Bush signed into law the National Museum of African American History and Culture Act.<sup>4</sup> However, even before the episode authorizing the concept of the museum had come to a close, notes for the next contentious chapter in this long-running saga were being prepared. In this new narrative, the storyline shifts; no longer concerned with the idea of the museum, the drama now revolves around the reality of the museum itself.

In other words, this new chapter is about architecture.

Hurbert Muschamp, architectural critic for the *New York Times* wrote, *“since cultural values tend to coax up their opposites, a space dedicated to harmony and independence can easily become a battlefield.”*<sup>5</sup> I recall his words here because it aptly depicts the background against which this particular narrative is being written, as skirmishes across that imagined field of harmony and independence have already begun. For instance, given the fact that since as far back the Coolidge administration it was generally understood a museum of this significance would be prominently located on the National Mall, the debates surrounding the final location of the museum were both vigorous and passionate on both sides, with those supporting the Mall site ultimately prevailing.<sup>6</sup> Considering the strident exchanges that emerged from these deliberations over a point considered moot seven decades earlier, it is not unreasonable to expect that not only will there be similar debates concerning the selection of the architect charged with communicating the history of African Americans in America’s front yard, but that they will also be equally intense, if not more so. And it is to this latter point that I wish to concern myself with for the remainder of this piece, for while this historic and long-overdue museum is expected to illuminate the general experience of the African Diaspora in America, it is at the same time also poised to shed light on something unexpected as well: the specific experience of African American architects in this country. For example, while not often acknowledged, it is inarguable that African American architects have a long history of being overlooked for commissions of such size, scope and symbolic importance. So, in the context of a project dedicated to African American life, art, history and culture, I think it a worthwhile project for both the concept and the reality of this future museum to not only make clear this regrettable condition, but to also examine reasons why it exists. I posit that the predominant reason why this condition remains steadfastly so has to do with notions of race. Thus, in this essay, I will take to opportunity presented by the museum project to look deeper into the ways in which the notions of race subtly play out in the study and practice of architecture. For brevity’s sake, although often employed on projects of lesser size and

symbolic importance as well, I will specifically concentrate on three of the most frequently provided and commonly accepted reasons for the lack of invitations received by African American architects to compete for high profile projects: existence, experience and aesthetics.

Before I begin, in the spirit of full disclosure, it’s probably a good idea to make public that not only have I worked on various projects both academic and professional with several people that will be mentioned in this essay, I was even employed as a graduate architect by one office at the beginning of my professional career. Finally, readers should also note that yes, the aforementioned Robert Wilkins and I are indeed related. And while these disclosures have no bearing on the facts to be argued below, they may in some way help to explain the occasional passion you may discern in the narrative to follow.

#### **Existence: Are there any?**

I’d like to begin by examining the comment that has most often been initially suggested: *“Are there any African American architects? We can’t find them.”* Now, there are a myriad of conditions that contribute to the illusion of invisibility around African American architects; far too many to go into here. Admittedly, some have been created by African Americans themselves. For example, the initial edition of the celebrated *Encyclopedia Africana*, a project begun by WEB DuBois and completed by noted Harvard scholars K. Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. almost a century later that purports to comprehensively cover the exploits of the African Diaspora, unforgivably contained no entry for the category of architect; this despite a history in the building professions that dates back at least to the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> No entry whatsoever. Imagine the outcry had the category of doctor or lawyer been omitted, yet, for architect, hardly a peep – or an apology – was heard. Further, one might also point to the fact that those African Americans who have the desire and ability to employ an architect, don’t often enough look to the African American architectural community to provide those services. But, don’t get it twisted. I want to be very clear that this, of course, is not a requirement and I am hardly arguing for a balkanization of professional design services along color lines. That would be foolish. Still, the lack of opportunities seized by the African American service and consumer communities in this area demonstrates a

certain amount of apathy on the part of both the practitioner and potential client pool that must be examined. My point is that as both a cultural and professional group, African Americans bare some responsibility for their seeming invisibility in the field of architecture. However, having said that, below I will show that many of the conditions that contribute to that invisibility, and certainly the most significant ones, exist through no fault of their own. They are institutional in nature and indeed, have deep historical roots. In fact, history is where I'd like to begin this confutation.

For any profession to justify its control over a specific body of knowledge – be it medical, legal, architectural, etc. – establishing a notion of history, and a progressive history at that, is imperative. For the public, the belief that what the profession offers is a time-honored, ever-increasing and of course, essential service is key to its willingness to allow the monopoly to continue; for the professional, the belief that what they do is not only all of the above, but also both specific and special is critical to attracting future practitioners to perpetuate the profession. Put another way, in the legal arena, without Charles Houston there'd be no Thurgood Marshall. Without Marshall there'd be no *Brown v. Bd. of Ed.* In medicine, without Charles Drew there'd be no blood transfusion. Without transfusions, there'd be a lot less people around who might possibly read this piece. In each case, the ability of the professional to perform that *special* act was in large part, a *cumulative* effort. It built on a past knowledge base – a history, if you will – to reach that necessarily transformative moment that in theory is why professions exist. But, equally as important as having, is disseminating that version of professional history as well. It is through this process that we, as a public, have and trust professionals. History – the place where the expectations and aspirations of the two groups conflate – becomes both the repository of the past and the promise of the future. We hold both past accomplishments and future aspirations in the body of our professional practitioners. History is where the heroes and heroines are acknowledged, emulated and one dares hope, advanced. The profession of architecture is no exception; in fact, it might be more the rule than most. Yet, within its historical narrative, architecture has paid little attention to the presence, much less the contribution, of

African American practitioners. Bradford Grant, chair of the Hampton University School of Architecture has accurately observed that historians “*have not yet incorporated African American contributions to American architecture into their work or into architecture curricula.*”<sup>8</sup> Given what history means to sustaining professions and attracting new initiates, the importance of this omission cannot be overstated.<sup>9</sup>

Now, one might reasonably remark that the omission is not an omission at all; it is simply the result of the natural course of events and nothing more. Perhaps African American architects simply have not yet created work worthy of note; that there may be no Houstons, or Marshalls or Drews within their ranks. However, Vincent Scully, professor emeritus at Yale School of Architecture and one of the discipline's preeminent historians, disagrees. He writes that it is “*obvious that a good many black architects have been very good architects indeed – a great many of them in relation to their number*”<sup>10</sup>, which at the very least renders the previous supposition debatable, and quite possibly false. Thus, there must be some other reason to account for the fact that even today, a cursory review of the syllabi, debates and images that constitute the typical history survey course of the nation's architectural schools, not to mention professional seminars and conferences, will routinely be found wanting the mention of names like Julian Able, chief designer of Horace Trumbauer and Associates who designed much of Duke University; Hilyard R. Robinson, whose Langston Terrace Homes in DC won several design awards as well as high praise from Louis Mumford in the 30s; Vertner Woodson Tandy, who with his partner George Washington Foster, designed the St. Philip's Episcopal Church in New York City and the mansion of Madam C.J. Walker; Charles “Cap” Wigington, the first African American municipal architect in the nation, who designed an array of public buildings in St. Paul and six of the fabled Winter Carnival ice palaces of the 30's and 40's; and Paul R. Williams, who designed homes for Cary Grant, Frank Sinatra, the iconic tower at Los Angeles International Airport and was once called the most successful Negro artist in the United States by *Life* magazine in 1950; architects who produced work deserving of a place within the chronology of architectural history. Yet, within the annals of architecture, the work of these and other

African Americans continues to be – to borrow from James Baldwin – evidence of things not seen.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, I think we all can agree that architecture, whatever else it may or may not be, is a highly visual profession. Buildings, neighborhoods and cities are all created through the interventions of designers and the resulting objects and landscapes, when done correctly, can certainly be called works of art. In fact, it would not a stretch to say that indeed, this is exactly what the architect strives to create with every commission: art. But, the art world is no place for the uninitiated. It is not a place the majority of the public enters without a guide; without some assistance to make sense of what it sees. It is in this manner that the media and various other methods of mass communication play an important role in forming public opinion about what is architecturally significant. However, forms of mass dissemination – which include journals, magazines, newspapers, books, museum exhibits, public lectures, films and the like – that frequent the works of African Americans architects are underwhelming at best. To date, there have been less than a dozen books in print documenting the work of African American architects, one African American architectural critic to have written for a major metropolitan newspaper and zero editorial positions at the major architectural publications, while stories in the most popular professional journals that highlight the work of African American firms are few and far between. None of this is by accident. None. More than simple oversight, this is the result of a deliberate, almost willful ignorance. In this day and time, it is unconscionable that many architects, whom I have found generally to be some the brightest and well-read people around, cannot name four or five African American architects that have a substantial body of work, or even a few of their most prominent commissions. Yet within both the academy and the profession, this is the rule, not the exception.

Still, there have been concerted efforts to address the textual and visual omissions for sometime and there are indications that these efforts have not been in vain; that the tide may in fact, be slowly but inexorably changing. Textually, the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA) has been in existence for over 30 years and, like the American Institute

of Architects (AIA), has recently begun to publish its own professional journal. The Center for the Study and Practice of Architecture has published two separate volumes of The Directory of African American Architects, identifying thousands of African American architects registered to practice in this country. There are also several new tomes being published that focus on African American architects and their work in addition to general books written by African American scholars as well. African American Architects: A Biographical Dictionary 1865-1945 edited by Dreck Wilson and Dr. Wesley Henderson is an invaluable resource that will hopefully become an indispensable resource for survey courses around the country. Visually, the 2006 exhibit highlighting African and African American architectural visionaries, “Architecture: Pyramids to Skyscrapers”, was curated by Wilson at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. In 2004, Studio Museum of Harlem curator Thelma Golden organized an exhibit entitled “Harlemworld” and invited over a dozen black architects participate. It was the first such endeavor since the 1993 and 1994 traveling exhibits entitled “Design Diaspora: Black Architects and International Architecture 1970-1990” curated by Carolyn Armenta Davis and the “African American Architects and Builders” organized by the late Vinson McKenzie, respectively. These are believed to be the first major shows featuring African American architects since the Harmon Foundation artist awards – which included the work of such African American architects as Hilyard Robinson, Louis Bollinger, Paul Williams and John Lewis Wilson – ended in the late 1960’s. And finally, in the institutional realm, in what may be arguably the most significant event of the last few decades, at this past general convention the AIA selected Marshall Purnell of the Washington DC architectural firm Devroux & Purnell as its president-elect. In an organization that expressly barred membership to African American practitioners until 1923, Mr. Purnell will become its first African American member to lead that organization in its 150 years of existence.

If the above has shown anything, it is that caution must be exercised against confusing invisibility with an absence of presence; they are not the same thing. Despite conditions that have worked to obscure and in some cases erase all traces of their existence and achievements, African American architects

have not only been present for centuries, in many cases they have thrived. As illustrated above, they've had a rich, if hidden, history in the study and practice of architecture and within the offices of Devroux & Purnell, Stull & Lee and the Freelon Group, as well as with sole practitioners Darryl Crosby & Melinda Palmore, Michael Willis, Jack Travis and Walter Williams in addition to practitioner/educators Nathaniel Belcher, Coleman A. Jordan, David Brown, Mabel O. Wilson, Mohammed Lawal and Darrell Fields, that history continues. Thus, in light of this briefest of accounts – believe me, I could go on – it should be clear to most reasonable people that the question “Are there any African American architects? We can't find them” is empty of any credibility whatsoever. Any further use of it is disingenuous and, arguably indicative of something far less innocent than the simple ignorance the speaker would have one believe. If African American architects indeed can't be found, it isn't because they don't exist.

It's because you aren't looking.

#### **Experience: Don't have the requisite background**

Having addressed the, well...shall we say, inaccuracies in the initial assertion, we can now examine another commonly held opinion bound to make its presence felt before an architect is chosen for this project: *“African American architects don't have the requisite experience to handle a commission of such size and import.”* While such concerns often find their way into any conversation where commissions and designers court each other, given the widespread belief in the previous position outlined above, this statement has particularly problematic connotations for African American architects. Yet, it is hardly surprising that such opinions are held, and held strongly, by the public. It stands to reason that the kind of thinking that would produce the challenge *“If there were any, why haven't I ever heard of them?”* would progress onward to something along the lines of *“Well, ok, so there may be a few, but they certainly don't have the background to do anything of this size and magnitude.”* Yet, both the premise and the fact of this declaration are deeply flawed.

Putting aside the provocative assumption of omniscience that stands at the heart of this

assertion until later, as to the fact of this statement, it just simply is not true. At the very least, J. Max Bond's Martin Luther King Center for Non-Violence in Atlanta, Sims-Varner's Museum of African American History in Detroit and the Freelon Group's Reginald F. Lewis Maryland Museum of African American History, the late Walter Blackburn's National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Allison G. Williams' August Wilson Center for African American Culture in Pittsburgh – I suspect there are many more – provide a very effective, museum-specific, counter-argument to the above line of reasoning. This is not to mention the work done on convention centers, hotels and even sports stadiums that can easily alleviate questions of experience concerning large-scale, complex architectural projects. But in addition, I would posit that if experience is indeed the critical component in determining the architect for the proposed African American museum, these architects – and those like them – bring to the table an additional level of experience unique to only them: the experience of being African American. For example, while Bond, Sims, Williams and Freelon have been practicing architects for a quarter century or more, they've been African American for, oh...I would guess, a lot longer than that. Perhaps even all their lives. Harlem architect Victor Body-Lawson argues that such experience uniquely provides this group of architects with *“a cultural and spiritual link to the issues these institutions deal with”*<sup>12</sup>, often demonstrated to be an immeasurable advantage for a design professional. As to the premise itself, a closer look reveals evidence of some mighty fine circular reasoning: African American architects don't have the experience, so they don't get the job; they don't get the job, because they don't have the experience – no experience, no job; no job, no experience; no experi—well...you get the picture. Had one the time, one could go on like this for days on end. If we are to believe that African American architects don't have the experience to handle a commission of this size and scope, then where, exactly, are they to receive such experience? If they are not provided the opportunity then of course African American architects will never be in a position to ever bid on such projects. It's a vicious, never ending cycle and one that ultimately serves to keep conditions from substantively changing. At some point, the opportunity must be provided for the experience to be gained. At some point, there

was a Wiesman for Frank Ghery, an Atheneum for Richard Meier, a Tate for Herzog & DuMond.

There is *always* a first time. Always.

Ultimately, the more one examines the overall line of reasoning here, the more indefensible it becomes; so much so that one is left to wonder what allows for apparently rational people to present such irrational positions with such earnest conviction. I suspect it is because the claim masks a deeper, maybe even unconscious concern that lies just beneath its seemingly sensible surface, which leads me to the third, and perhaps the most insidious, anticipated comment.

### **Aesthetics: Don't you want the best?**

By far the most problematic of the three, this seemingly innocent question embodies two very problematic, interconnected assumptions that should be unpleasant to all, but specifically distasteful to African Americans. The first is that it presumes the speaker knows what is best – or at least, best for African Americans – and the second is that it takes for granted the best cannot possibly be African American. Both are the result of the presumed omniscience referred to above, which reveals itself here as a kind of cultural imperialism that if accepted, not only authorizes such statements as legitimate inquiry, but also authorizes decisions to be made based on that imperialism as well.

Let me begin by first saying that on the face of it, I find this a silly question and I feel silly for answering it. Of course both the client and user group want the best. Anything less is a waste of time, money and resources, not to mention opportunity and perhaps even hopes. I would think this true for any architectural project, but for a project of this import, who can imagine any other answer than *"The best? Why of course?"* I mean, who expects to hear *"Uhm, the best you say? Whoo hooo! Good lordy, no. All that thought provoking, contemplation and admiration? Sorry, sir. That's not for us. 'Sucky' would be just fine, thank you."* It boggles the mind that such a question might even be posed with a straight face. But, not only is it guaranteed to be posed; it will be posed again and again until an architect is chosen, straight face and all. And here's why.

In his book *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form* architectural critic Kim Dovey makes an insightful comment, observing that the will to *form* is also the will to *inform*; that the motivation to build something is really about the desire to say something. Thus, at its best, architecture speaks to those whom encounter it. Now, if it is true that all museums reify notions about the past, the phrase "wanting the best" can be more accurately read on the surface as a concern about what the eventual building might say about the past and who, exactly, gets to say it. But there is even more to it than that. If what Smithsonian curator of African American History and Culture Fath Ruffins points out is true, that *"most African Americas inhabit a cultural landscape...quite distinct and at odds with many other Americans' view of the national past"*<sup>13</sup>, it is not much of a leap to conclude that at its most fundamental level, the phrase "wanting the best" is a polite way of voicing a belief that the aesthetic sensibilities of African American architects might not be suitable for this highly visible project; that what they might say through their work, when compared to what has already been said about the nation's past through the architecture on the Mall, is inherently different and thus, inherently inappropriate, if not inferior.<sup>14</sup> A stretch you say? I think not.

Look, it should come as no surprise that in the arts in general, and especially within the field of architecture, there are those whom lay claim to arbitrators and guardians of the high concepts of design and thus, act as gatekeepers into that specialized realm. It isn't often that the gatekeepers – who commonly determine what is considered historically and culturally significant; in short, what is "best" – have been particularly interested in artistic forms of disparate cultural producers, at least not when produced from a disparate cultural perspective. Hegemony is the de facto order of the day, a hegemony defined and enforced by the gatekeepers; both art and artist must look the particular part as construed by this cultural elite. Certainly there are always exceptions, but often in such cases, the disparate is considered "other", if not "primitive", "raw", "vernacular" and the like – all terms that tend to solidify the hegemonic boundaries, not dissolve them. And if, as Dovey writes, *"forms of domination, based in cultural capital, are [often] made to appear as pure aesthetic judgments"*<sup>15</sup>, then, seemingly benign claims

to what is generally positioned as “best” are often very specific claims to “what we think is best” and, what we think is best is always what makes us most comfortable. *“Control of the arts is obviously control of culture,”* says Bond, a fellow in the American Institute of Architects and supervising architect of the World Trade Center Memorial, and where the artistic expression afforded by significant architectural commissions is positioned as ultimate symbol of professional success, decisions made under the auspices of purely neutral aesthetic judgments often serve to enforce what Bond deems as *“the right to rule, if you will”*<sup>16</sup>; the right to know better, the right know what’s “best”. If what Dovey and Bond suggest is accurate, then that appropriated right is also the right to choose who will, and more importantly, who will not succeed, ultimately expanding the notion of cultural imperialism to professional imperialism as well. Consequently, if the design and aesthetic notions of “best” are the real and perhaps ultimate determining factors in selecting an architect for this project, then it is imperative that we ask who, exactly, will be determining what is “best”? And even more to the point, “best” for whom?

Understandably, this is not an easy proposition to engage. The gatekeepers have so institutionalized their particular cultural and professional predilections within the aesthetic system that not only is the question of the nature, propriety and pertinence of these predilections not addressed, they are difficult to even perceive. Yet perceive we must, and we would do well to begin by remembering that aesthetic judgments are *always* subjective. They are arbitrary choices that ultimately masquerade as universal truths. Now, I do not wish to imply that the concept of aesthetic appropriateness is not without some manner of comparison. Not at all. I simply wish to point out that the choice of what is or is not appropriate is always embedded within a particular point of view. Such choices are by their very nature, conjecture, not fact. Conditional, not absolute. Yet the gatekeepers would have us believe otherwise and even more than that, that it’s the height of unsophistication to think otherwise. But, indeed, think otherwise we must because, to quote the comfortably unsophisticated Moms Mabley, *“if you do what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you’ve always gotten.”* We should all be so clear.

Architecture is often considered a reflection of culture; the physical expression of what society thinks, feels and believes. In that light, architecture could be described as society’s diary, with its authors writing their entries on the very space of our shared environment. Quiet as it’s kept, African American authors have been ghostwriting entries for years. From Benjamin Baneker, who saved the mall planning project by reproducing from memory a complete layout of the streets, parks, and major buildings from L’Enfant’s Parisian design to the laborers, carpenters and masons, both enslaved and free, who helped build many of the historic structures that adorn it, including the Capitol and the White House, African American designers and builders have been a consistent, if invisible, presence on the Washington, DC mall. Yet Bond and Dovey’s insightful observations help us to see what’s really at stake in this selection process: the freedom to *openly* express the African American experience in built form and to intentionally inscribe African American cultural interpretations on the very air around us to last for centuries.<sup>17</sup> It also makes clearer the claim’s second connotation; however, any belief that the best can’t be African American is preposterous on the face of it. Outside of the fact that the term is, as explained above, relative, as creative agents in every other artistic medium, African Americans have demonstrated the kind of talent and dedication to their vision to reach the top of their fields, so, all things being equal, why should architecture be any different? In fact, an excellent case might be made that the “best” architect for this project couldn’t be anything *but* African American, given the kind of additional acumen brought to the work that Body-Lawson describes above. And while I am hesitant to go so far as to make such a definitive claim – there are as many adequate to less-than-adequate designers within the African American community as there are within any other and while it is clear that a good many African American architects can do this project with skill and aplomb, not every African American architect or firm can – still, one would be extremely hard-pressed to argue a better author of the story of African Americans in this country than someone who is the fruit of that experience; someone who has emerged out of that historical condition. It is a supposition echoed by Robert Wilkins, who recently told the [New York Times](#) that *“a museum dedicated to countering the historic*

*subjugation of African Americans should do that, in part, by giving African Americans prominent roles in deciding what it will look like.*<sup>18</sup> It would be one thing to say that the authors don't exist or must be taught to speak, but as I have taken pains to bring to light, such is not the case here. We have the writers. Damn good ones. So in the end it comes to this: Does the freedom to inform exist for people of color within the architectural realm? If so, is it available to African Americans on an equal basis as their non-African American counterparts? And finally, and perhaps most importantly, is that will to inform available to them on this, that most logical of projects? The selection of this project's architect will go a long way towards answering these questions, now and for years to come.

Let me close by saying that my primary purpose for exploring this specific aspect of how race often operates in the field of architecture is to open what I expect to be a long and contentious debate concerning the selection of the principal architect for the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). By dispelling and dispensing with some of the most commonly proffered reasons for the lack of invitations offered to African American practitioners to compete for highly visible cultural and commercial commissions, I hope to relive both sides of the burden of having to offer and defend, parry and riposte the same, tired, disingenuous reasons for operating the status quo and thus enable us to skip ahead to a much more critical – and constructive – discussion around revealing and dismantling systemic obstacles that limit African American practitioners access to architectural commissions in general, and specifically signature commissions such as represented by the NMAAHC.

Now, I am acutely aware that the more stubborn of us will read this and conclude that, in the context of the NMAAHC at least, putting this piece out is premature. They will argue that since the dismantling of the previously discussed historical methods of exclusion is still a work in progress, I've only alerted the powers-that-be to the fact that they now must create new methods – methods that we will not have sufficient time to refute before the selection process has concluded. The more hopeful of us will counter with, if powers-that-be do exist, they will see this as an issue with

which African Americans are deeply concerned and will thus take serious steps to address the issues raised. Still, there are those who will walk a more difficult, nuanced line between suspicion and gullibility; those who will have learned from history that while it is hopeful to believe institutions will do the right thing, it is always prudent to be ready to act, quickly and decisively, if and when they don't. Further still, there will be those who will argue that the point is moot – that either a) African American architects should receive no more consideration than any other architect for this project or b) only African American architects can do justice to this project.<sup>19</sup> There are, or will be, other, even more complex positions to be argued I'm sure, but wherever you stand within the panoply of opinions isn't really the point of this piece. What immediately matters is that from wherever you stand, one thing should now be perfectly clear: the above three reasons rationalizing the lack of high profile commissions offered to African American architects no longer hold any substance, if they ever did. Should they continue to be employed to explain away the dearth of African American architects considered for signature architectural commissions – and especially *this* commission – you can be sure of two things: 1) that it is something far more sinister than simple ignorance keeping it in play and 2) you damn well should be doing something about it.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Small, Secretary of the Smithsonian. "Smithsonian mission statement." <http://www.si.edu/about/mission.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Smithsonian Institutional Study Commission. "Final Report of the African American Institutional Study." (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Museum, 1991). p.6.

<sup>3</sup> The height of this disrespect occurred with the congressional effort and resulting legislation passed in 1923 authorizing a "Faithful Colored Mammies of the South" monument sponsored by the Daughters of the American Revolution, sparking both passionate protests from African American citizens as well as editorials denouncing the effort in African American newspapers all across the country.

<sup>4</sup> Currently, the Smithsonian Board of Regents has appointed 19 executives to the founding Council of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), which is scheduled to open in 2013. This board consists of the following: Oprah

Winfrey, talk-show host, philanthropist and president of Harpo Inc; Robert Johnson, founder of Black Entertainment Television; Quincy Jones, movie, television and music producer; Linda Johnson Rice, of Johnson Publishing Co.; Kenneth I. Chenault, of American Express; E. Stanley O'Neal, of Merrill Lynch; Samuel J. Palmisano, of IBM; Richard D. Parsons, of Time Warner; Ann M. Fudge, of Young & Rubicam Brands; Franklin D. Raines, of Fannie Mae; James Ireland Cash, retired associate dean of the Harvard Business School; Michael L. Lomax, the chief executive of the United Negro College Fund; James A. Johnson, the former chairman of Fannie Mae and the Kennedy Center board; Anthony Welters, of AmeriChoice; Ann D. Jordan, a former University of Chicago administrator; H. Patrick Swygert, president of Howard University; Lawrence M. Small, Smithsonian Secretary; Sheila Burke, Smithsonian deputy secretary; Wesley S. Williams Jr., a Washington, chairman of the Smithsonian regents executive committee. The scholarly committee appointed by the Smithsonian are: John Hope Franklin, the dean of black historians, author of *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*; Drew S. Days III, professor of law at Yale University; Deborah L. Mack, a museum and academic consultant; Alfred Moss, a professor at the University of Maryland, author of *The American Negro Academy: Voice of the Talented Tenth*; and Richard J. Powell, an art history professor at Duke University.

<sup>5</sup> Hurbert Muschamp. "Looking at the Lawn, and Below the Surface." *The New York Times*. Arts and Leisure. Sunday, 5 July, 1998. Section 2. p.32.

<sup>6</sup> The 2003 bill is not the first time the idea of an African American Museum has come before Congress. In 1915, the Civil War veterans organization calling itself the Committee of Colored Citizens began soliciting donations for the purpose of erecting a monument to the memory of the Colored Soldiers and Sailors veterans to be built in Washington DC. The official organization to oversee this effort, the National Memorial Association (NMA), was created the next year. For the next 13 years the NMA worked to get Congress to authorize the Mall memorial. Their efforts were finally rewarded on March 4, 1929 when President Coolidge signed P.R. 107 into law authorizing, as a tribute to the Negro's contribution to the achievements of America, a "memorial building suitable for meetings of patriotic organizations, public ceremonial events, the exhibition of art and inventions" to be constructed. It was generally understood that this structure would be built on the National Mall. In the current iteration; however, the lawmakers were either unaware of or did not feel obligated to recognize the work previously done on this bill back in 1929. Thus, it required the Smithsonian Board of Regents to choose between one of four possible museum locations congressionally specified. The sites to be considered

were: 1) the Arts and Industries Building of the Smithsonian Institution at 900 Jefferson Drive S.W. on the Mall; 2) the Mall site bounded by Constitution Avenue, Madison Drive, and 14th and 15th Streets N.W.; 3) the off Mall site known as the Liberty Loan site at the foot of the 14th Street Bridge and finally; 4) the off Mall site known as the Banneker Overlook site at the end of the L'Enfant Plaza promenade.

For a fuller understanding of this site selection process, see the unpublished paper "Forgotten Museum: The Quest Over Four Generations To Bring A National Museum Dedicated to African American History and Culture to the National Mall" by Robert L. Wilkins, Esq. Member, National Museum of African American History and Culture Plan for Action Presidential Commission (NMAAHCAPAC) as well as the final 2004 site evaluation report issued to the NMAAHCAPAC by the Plexus Scientific Corporation and PageSoutherlandPage.

<sup>7</sup> See *America's Architectural Roots: Ethnic Groups that Built America*. Dell Upton, ed. (Washington, DC: The National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1986)., *African American Architects: A Biographical Dictionary 1865-1945*. Dreck Wilson, et al. ed. (New York: Rizzoli Press, 2004), among others.

<sup>8</sup> Bradford Grant. *Directory of African American Architects*. Bradford Grant and Dennis Mann, ed. (Cincinnati: Center for the Study of Practice, University of Cincinnati Press, 1996). p.9.

<sup>9</sup> Mary K. Pratt. "Diversity by design: Architects work to broaden appeal." *Architects, Engineers & Construction Quarterly*. April 4, 2003.

*[M]inorities aren't even well represented in architecture schools and related design programs. Officials speculate that minorities might not have the same exposure to the design profession, and therefore don't recognize it as a career option. Or, they say, minorities might not be attracted to the field because they don't see many potential mentors.*

*"If you don't see people working in the profession that look like you, you probably don't think of that as a profession you'll be successful in," Graves [American Institute of Architect's manager of special initiatives] said.*

Despite the fact that in about the last 10 years, African American women have more than tripled their numbers as licensed architects and the percentage of African American men becoming licensed architects has seen slower but steady growth, while every other minority group practicing have increased their overall numbers within the profession, the number of African American

practitioners in the US has remained flat for the last 30 years at somewhere between 1 and 2 percent.

<sup>10</sup> Vincent Scully. "The Architecture of Healing." *African American Architects in Current Practice*. Jack Travis, ed. (New York: Princeton Press, 1992). p.11.

<sup>11</sup> Melissa Mitchell. "Research project spotlights African American architects from U. of I." <http://www.news.uiuc.edu/NEWS/06/0209architects.html>

*In "The Canon and the Void: Gender, Race and Architectural History Texts," an article just published in the Journal of Architectural Education, [Professor Kathryn] Anthony and doctoral student Meltem O. Gurel document their examination of history texts assigned at 14 leading architecture schools. Despite lip service within the field regarding "the importance of women and African Americans as critics, creators and consumers of the built environment," Anthony noted, "our analysis of these history texts revealed that contributions of women remain only marginally represented in the grand narrative of architecture. And for the most part, African Americans are omitted altogether."*

<sup>12</sup> Fred A. Bernstein. "For African Americans, a Chance to Draft History." *New York Times*. Home and Garden. June 24, 2004. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=travel&res=9A0DE6D81139F937A15755C0A9629C8B63>

<sup>13</sup> Fath Davis Ruffins. "Culture Wars Won and Lost, Part II: The National African American Museum Project." *Radical History Review*. 70. (1998). p.85.

<sup>14</sup> David Dunlap. "Black Architects Struggling for Equity." *New York Times*. December 4, 1994.

When asked about the perception of Black architects and their ability to design by the general public, African American architect Terrance O'Neal said that, in his experience:

*"People guard their culture very closely...A lot of what is considered architecturally good is often considered to be out of the reach of a nonwhite or a black architect."*

<sup>15</sup> Kin Dovey. *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*. (London: Routledge, 1999). p.38.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Dutton. "Architectural Education and Society: An Interview with J. Max Bond, Jr." *Voices in Architectural Education: Cultural Politics and*

*Pedagogy*. Thomas Dutton, ed. (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1991). p. 88.

<sup>17</sup> Edward T. Linenthal. *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum*. (New York: Viking/Penguin Group, 1995). p. 101.

The freedom to openly express the African American experience in built form cannot be overstated, for it indeed has recent precedent. For example, the 1988 Commission of Fine Arts, displeased with Freed's design of the Holocaust Museum, sought specific changes which, Linenthal writes, "*appeared to be merely aesthetic concerns but were in essence requests that he create a preferred architectural narrative to soften and dilute the building's strong visual statement.*" However, in response to these requests, linguist Lawrence Langer, a member of the private committee charged with shepherding the project through to completion, effectively destabilized the presumptive normative foundation supporting the Commission's desire by arguing:

*"When we write of martyrs instead of victims; focus on resistance instead of mass murder; celebrate the human spirit and bypass the human body; invoke the dignity of the self and ignore its humiliation – we are...initiating the evolution of insulation against the terrors of the Holocaust, without bringing us any closer to its complex and elusive truths."*

Yet, Linenthal correctly points out that the "desire for such "buffers of insulation" was certainly at work in reaction to Freed's design." Further, Douglas Cardinal faced similar difficulties – specific political aims couched in general aesthetic concerns – designing the American Indian Museum and while his design ultimately won the day, he himself was a casualty of the battle, having been fired from the project.

<sup>18</sup> Bernstein. "For African Americans, a Chance to Draft History." *New York Times*.

<sup>19</sup> Id.

*"To say that these museums and monuments are opportunities for black architects suggests that other projects are not opportunities for black architects, and I think that's dangerous," Ms. Williams said...And others question whether giving preference to black architects is even necessary. Clement Price, an adviser to the Museum of African American Music in Newark, which has hired the Hillier Group, a Princeton-based firm, said: "We may have transitioned to a period when the race of the architect is not as much of an issue as in the heady days of black nationalism 25 years ago."*