



BEGIN WITH THE PAST

BUILDING THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

MABEL O. WILSON

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FOREWORD BY LONNIE G. BUNCH III

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For J. Max Bond

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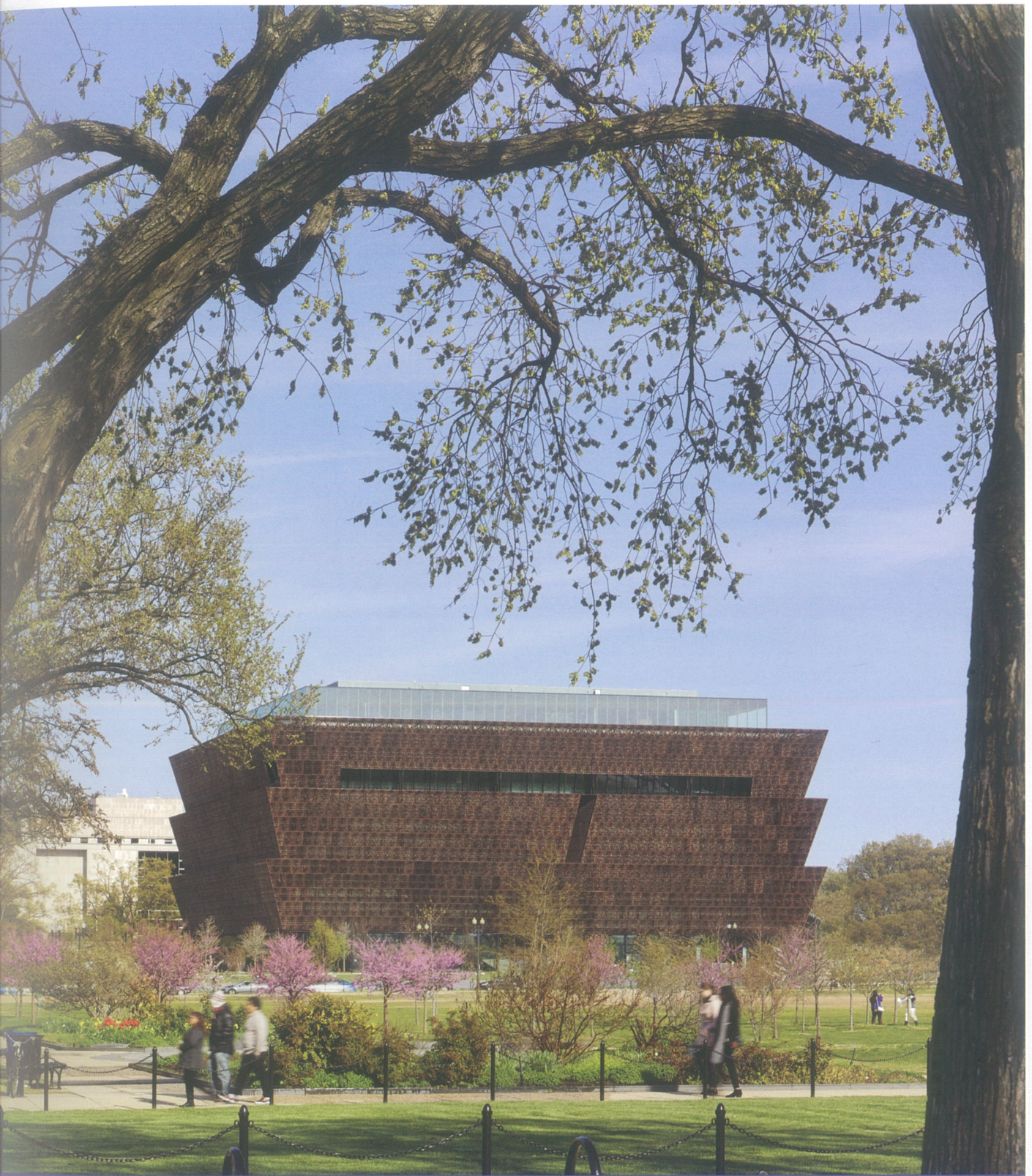
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If the house is to be set in order, one cannot begin with the present; one must begin with the past.

—John Hope Franklin

FOREWORD

President Barack Obama spoke at the groundbreaking ceremony for the National Museum of African American History and Culture on February 22, 2012. Since that event, there has not been a day when I have not either driven or walked past the site. Sometimes I did it just to convince myself that progress was being made; at other moments, I visited hoping to be inspired by the comments uttered by passing tourists. Occasionally I hoped that my presence would help will into existence a completed building that would fulfill the unmet expectations and dreams of so many generations who struggled and waited for an opportunity to tell America's story on the National Mall in Washington through the prism of African American history and culture.

In the early days of this endeavor—before architects were selected—one question was asked constantly: What would the building look like? While the museum staff was beginning to wrestle with that issue, a myriad of people were not shy in sharing their thoughts: The building must be monumental and marble; it must be boldly black; it must look African; it must not look African. In every case, they said, it must not obstruct the public's view of the surrounding monuments.

We examined recent museum architecture from around the world, immersed ourselves in the language used historically by African Americans to describe their hopes and expectations, and tried to imagine which architectural elements would make our ancestors smile. Ultimately we desired an environmentally sustainable signature building that would capture the feelings of resiliency, spirituality, and communal uplift that have always been at the center of the African American experience. This building also needed to remind us that there has always been a dark presence in America, a presence that often has been overlooked or erased from history. But the building had to speak to more than one community—ultimately, it had to be a monument to both a people and a nation—while also working as a museum visited by millions. Fortunately, after an international design competition, we benefited from the skills of a team led by J. Max Bond, the dean of African American architecture, and including Philip G. Freelon and David Adjaye, the lead designer.

We are humbled by the symbolism of this museum on the National Mall. The Mall is the place where millions of visitors come to understand and revel in what it means to be an American. These visitors often grapple with ideas, issues, and subjects that they might



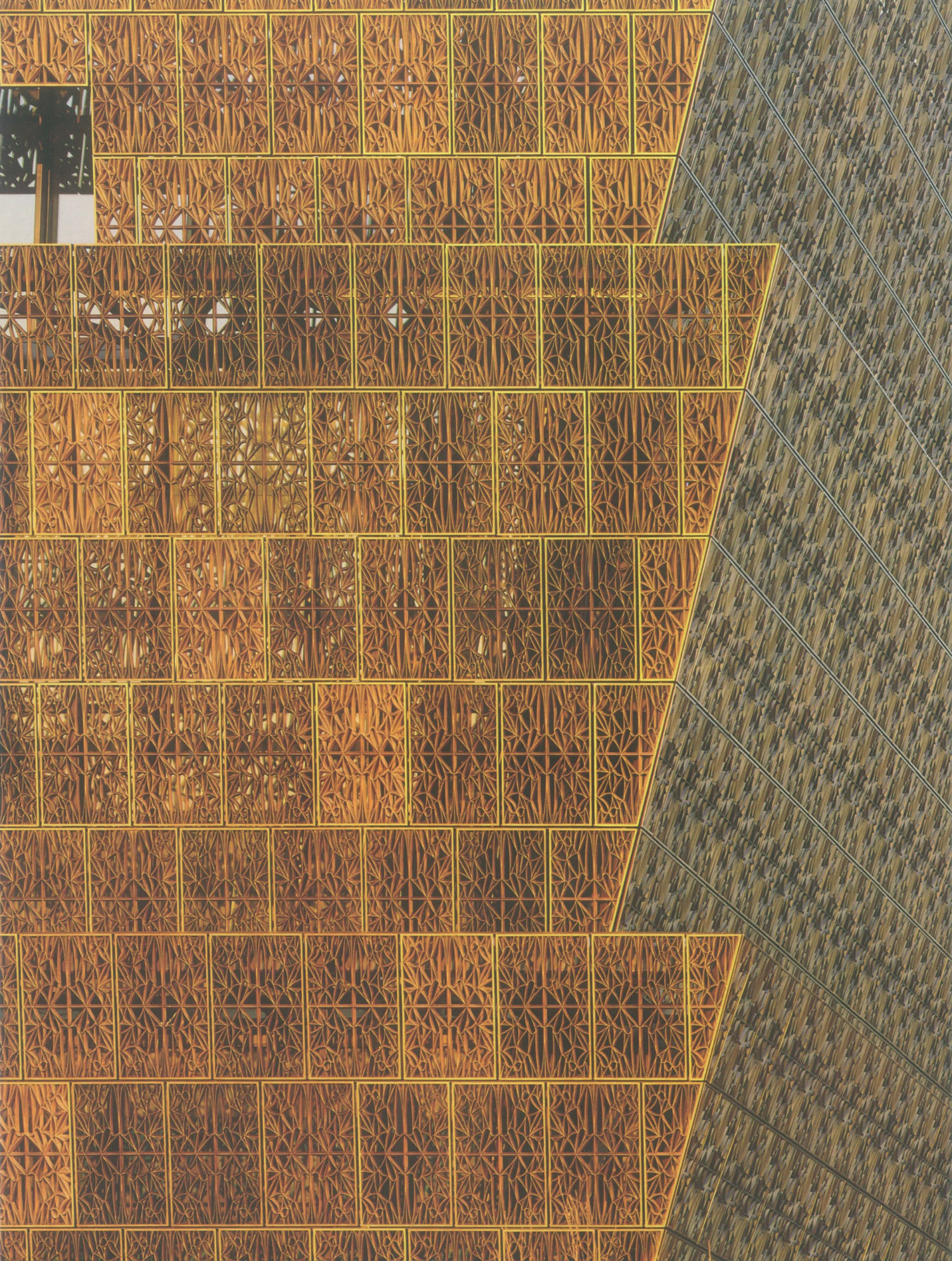
Aerial view looking southwest at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Washington Monument, and the Lincoln Memorial (at upper right).

explore further when they return to their communities. And the building itself is ripe with symbolic meaning. Its bronze Corona reflects the patterns and creativity that enslaved craftspeople brought to the distinctive ironwork of Charleston and New Orleans. The Corona, both subtle and spectacular, is, in essence, a homage to the fact that much of African American history is hidden in plain sight, unacknowledged and often unappreciated.

On one of the many mornings that I visited the museum site, I saw an elderly African American man staring at the nearly completed building. When I looked back at him, he was crying, so I rushed over to see if he needed help. He explained that he was simply overcome with emotion by the reality of the museum building and said that it should “help us better understand who we are as Americans and point us toward a better tomorrow.” All who are involved with the creation of the National Museum of African American History and Culture hope he is right.

Lonnie G. Bunch III

FOUNDING DIRECTOR, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY & CULTURE



INTRODUCTION

As visitors to the National Mall walk west and draw near the Washington Monument, a new sight greets them. Rising to their right is the façade of an utterly original structure—the triple-tiered Corona of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. The Corona’s metallic carapace shimmers reddish-gold, deep sepia, or copper in the changing light, a dazzling tribute to African American contributions to American craft and building.

It is fitting that the newest of the Mall’s museums is also the closest to the Washington Monument, built to honor the first president of the United States. The Museum’s proximity is a reminder of the vital role that African Americans have played in the rich and complex history of the nation. As the Museum’s founding director, Lonnie G. Bunch III, has said, “You can learn a great deal about a country, about a people, by what it remembers. The Corona is a beacon that reminds us of what we were and what challenges we still face, and it points us toward what we can become.”

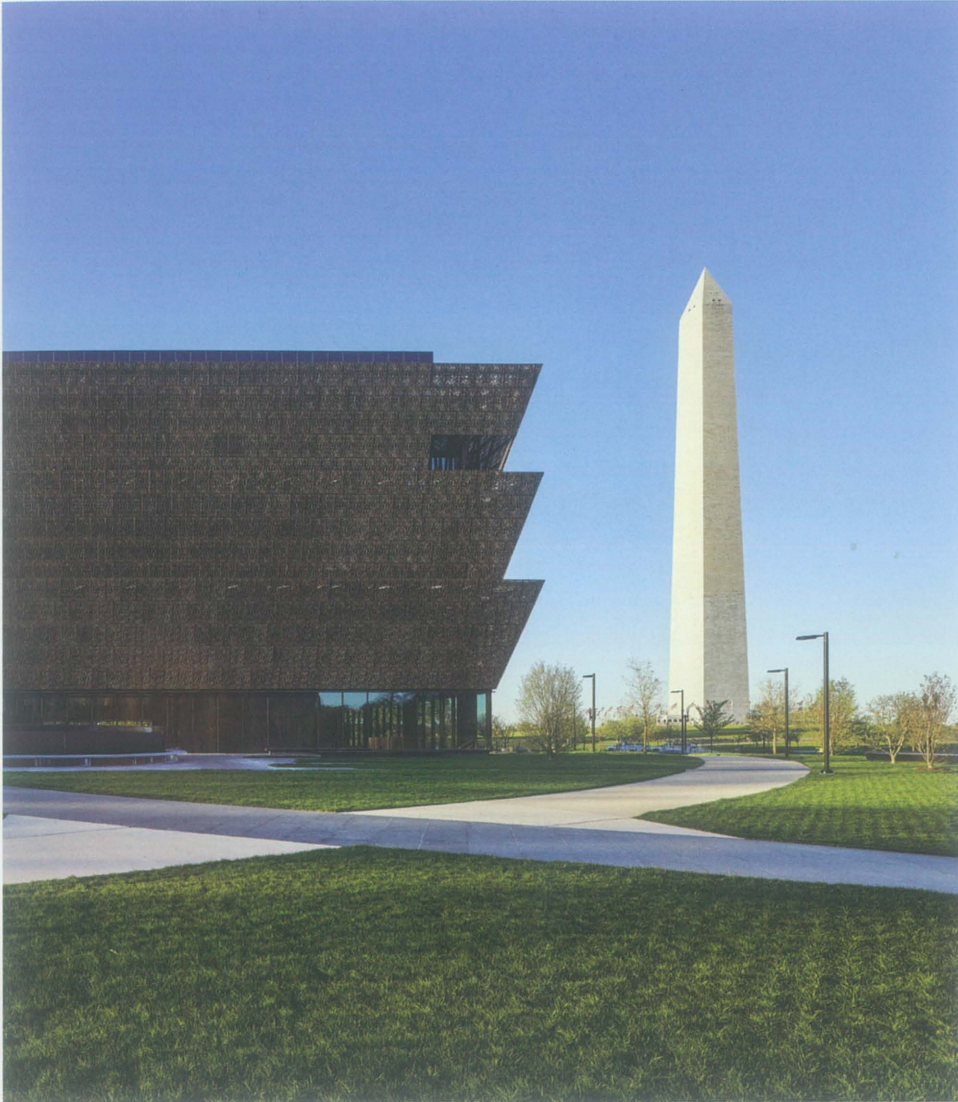
Corner view of the Corona’s three tiers. The intricate details of its bronze-colored screen panels shimmer in the late-afternoon sunlight.

The need for a national museum of African American history emerged in the early twentieth century, when demands that black contributions to the nation be publicly acknowledged gained momentum. In many ways, the story of the Museum's creation echoes black history in America. It begins with the African American insistence that America live up to the values of equal rights enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, goes on to chronicle battles against institutional racism in the celebrated halls of national heritage, and ultimately shows how Americans—museum experts, politicians, architects, philanthropists, and citizens—worked together to launch a new vision of how museums can address the difficult history of race and racism.

The Smithsonian Institution wanted to construct a building so compelling that it would attract visitors from across the globe. It had to be inventive, with space for individual reflection and state-of-the-art galleries, accessible public areas, and innovative classroom and theater spaces for collective celebration. It wanted even casual visitors, drawn by the building's unique façade, to feel compelled to walk inside and explore the meticulously curated galleries capturing the many facets, both uplifting and somber, of the African American experience.

The Museum was designed by Freelon Adjaye Bond with the Smith Group (FAB/S), a collaboration of four internationally renowned architecture firms, with David Adjaye, a New York City- and London-based architect, taking the design lead. In the best architectural tradition, elements of the design draw on both history and African American sensibilities of place to make a bold architectural statement. The Corona's distinctive look, for example, is inspired by two forms: the traditional sculptural columns found in the courtyards of West African shrines and the gesture of a group of people with arms raised in praise and jubilation. It also draws inspiration from the cast ironwork on antebellum buildings in New Orleans and Charleston. Because racism has influenced the narratives presented in American history, the artistic contributions of the enslaved and freed black men who forged such ironwork was not attributed until recently. This oversight constitutes what Director Bunch has called history "hiding in plain sight."

From the National Mall and Constitution Avenue, a colorful landscape of trees and verdant gardens welcomes visitors to the Museum grounds. Outdoor vignettes, such as the Reading Grove on the north side and a fountain inscribed with revelatory quotes from black leaders on the south, link to the history told inside the Museum. Most visitors approaching the Museum from the Mall make their way to the south Porch entrance, modeled on the porches shading the fronts of southern shotgun houses. The Porch's deep overhang provides the same cooling effect in the hot summer months that its smaller domestic cousin does. For the architect of record on the project, Philip G. Freelon, this interplay between the Porch's form and function "underscores the importance that the Museum not just be a place about and for African Americans but, as Director Bunch says, that it tell the quintessential American story. Therefore, it is important that the Museum feels open and welcoming to everyone."



Vista of the Museum from Constitution Avenue, looking across the north lawn to the Washington Monument.

The Museum's central Heritage Hall is a sweeping space with a luminous black ceiling that is lower toward the center of the space, creating a stepped, convex form. The architects envisioned the central hall as the Museum's meeting place and crossroads, a grand room that draws people into the building's center to pick up information. The ceiling then gestures visitors back to the perimeter of the space, where escalators and stairs lead

Following pages: View from the Washington Monument Grounds, looking northeast to the Museum.







Light filtering through the Corona's screen into the Community Galleries on the Museum's third level.

down to the Concourse level, and a glass elevator carries visitors down to the History Galleries or up to the Explore Your Family History installations and research centers and the Culture and Community Galleries. On all four sides of the entrance level, floor-to-ceiling windows treat visitors to views of the surrounding landscape. This outside-in design is an unusual feature; the entrance halls of most museums are surrounded by galleries.

All these design features spring from the Museum's core architectural concept—a building that Adjaye envisioned as a series of nested containers. The upper-level galleries reside in the core container, wrapped by a perimeter zone dedicated to circulation passages and enclosed by a glass curtain wall; the panels of the Corona form the exterior container. As visitors move between these layers, they discover spectacular vistas. On the lower Concourse, for example, people can look upward through several stories and see first the bridge of the north entrance, then the third-level balcony of the Community Galleries, and then skyward through the Corona's screen. Dramatic spaces like these convey a sense of uplift, according to Bunch, and instill “a spiritual feeling like that felt in a cathedral.”

The galleries provide more than 100,000 square feet of exhibition space. The inventive displays weave together themes of history, culture, and community, using items selected from more than 40,000 artifacts assembled over the course of a decade. The extraordinary cache includes cherished family heirlooms donated to the Museum and historic



The Corona's west façade casting sunlight and shadows along the main perimeter zone leading to the upper galleries. Security checkpoints, escalators, the grand staircase to the Concourse level, the museum shop, and the coat- and bag-check area are also in this zone. Other functions, including elevators and other vital services, are in four large pillars in the Heritage Hall.

treasures from all over the country and the world. The diverse exhibitions, some with changing displays, take visitors along a multivoiced African American journey. Visitors hear stories of unyielding determination and triumph over seemingly insurmountable obstacles. They learn how the black struggle for equality redefined America's democratic ethos over the course of 250 years, beginning with the hard-won freedoms upheld by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Constitutional amendments passed after the end of slavery and the Civil War to provide equal protection and voting rights for all American males, regardless of race or ethnicity.

The need for considerable space was a major factor in the decision to build 60 percent of the Museum underground. The lower-level History Galleries, which are the largest exhibition space in any Smithsonian museum, begin their narrative a full sixty-five feet underground. The team of curators divided the History Galleries into three thematic exhibitions: “Slavery and Freedom,” “Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom: Era of Segregation 1876–1968,” and “A Changing America: 1968 and Beyond,” taking visitors on a chronological journey through dozens of multimedia galleries. Ramps connect the three exhibitions, with Landing Theaters where visitors can pause for an overview of the next theme on the route or reflect on what they have just experienced.

The exhibitions vary greatly in size. In small galleries, the low ceilings bring the story intimately close, while the large galleries soar four stories high. In one such cavernous space, the eye is drawn upward to an aircraft piloted during World War II by the famed Tuskegee airmen, the first African American pilots to serve in the armed forces. Other capacious galleries house a bounty of rare artifacts, including a segregated rail car from the 1920s and a diminutive wood-frame cabin that was once home to an enslaved family living in coastal South Carolina. In the words of Bunch, these galleries “bridge a gap in our national memory by creating exhibitions and programs focusing on a wide arc of history.”

The Contemplative Court nestles above the History Galleries. Copper-inlaid glass panels enclose the chamber and bathe it in a radiant glow. In the center, the Oculus fountain drips in a wide circle into a pool below. The Contemplative Court is designed to be a hidden treasure discovered at the end of the journey through the exhibitions. It offers an interlude for reflection upon the inspiring as well as difficult and complicated stories that are not often told in museums presenting American history.

The upper-level galleries celebrate the rich complexity of African American culture. The Community Galleries, for example, a series of interconnected spaces on the third floor, describe how African Americans formed institutions and organizations to serve the needs of their communities and enact social change. Artifacts displayed in the exhibitions “Sports: Leveling the Playing Field” and “Double Victory: The African American Military Experience” highlight important arenas of black achievement and recount how African American men and women challenged segregation. The ten vignettes in the “Power of Place” exhibition take visitors into locales across the United States to show the diverse experiences of African Americans. A series of displays in “Making a Way Out of No Way” explores themes of agency, creativity, and resilience through the personal stories of African Americans who challenged racial oppression and discrimination and created ways to live with dignity and pride.

On the fourth level, a series of open-plan galleries separated by gently curving walls make up the Culture Galleries. Here, the exhibitions “Cultural Expressions,” “Musical Crossroads,” “Taking the Stage,” and “Visual Art and the American Experience”

showcase black contributions to music, film, media, theater, and the visual arts. Soundscapes, interactive screens, and large projections enliven the viewing experience. Visitors can revel in African American culture and style while hearing stories of cultural survival, individual accomplishments, and social progress.

One of the most important goals Bunch set for the architects was to create an environmentally efficient building that would be respected worldwide. As a result, the floors, ceilings, walls, and other elements are constructed with regionally sourced and recycled materials, and the management of energy, water, and air quality takes full advantage of the local climate and context. The Corona and the Porch double as passive energy features that help make the interior and exterior environments comfortable for the public and staff year-round. It is hoped that this integrated design philosophy will help the Museum gain Gold certification from the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program, making it the Smithsonian's first newly constructed certified green museum.

For Bunch, the Museum's central mission is "to help all Americans remember and, by remembering, to stimulate a dialogue about race and help foster a spirit of reconciliation and healing." To embody this concept in the design, the architects incorporated Lens spaces on the upper level. These balconies and openings extend through the Corona, providing dramatic views of the nearby monuments and civic buildings. Visitors can take stock of the symbols of the nation and the sites where many of the important struggles for equality have occurred, including the West Front of the U.S. Capitol building, where the forty-fourth president of the United States, Barack Obama, was inaugurated in 2009, and the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, where singer Marian Anderson sang after being barred from performing to an integrated audience at a local concert hall in 1939. This opportunity to grapple with the nation's difficult—and at times painful—racial history moves America closer to its ideals of liberty and freedom for everyone.

What follows is the story of the making of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, from overcoming the deeply rooted prejudices and institutional challenges that stymied early initiatives to solving considerable practical problems, including funding, management, content, and location, once Congress had given the green light. It goes on to relate how the innovative building was conceived, designed, and constructed, beginning with an architectural competition, and discusses the many considerations that contributed to the decision-making process. The architecture had to embody African American cultural sensibilities about space, form, and material. But what should those be and who should decide? How should the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture proclaim its place in the nation's collective memory and claim its place on America's public commons—the National Mall?

PART 1

An African American Museum for All

NATIONAL
MUSEUM OF
AFRICAN
AMERICAN
HISTORY &
CULTURE



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