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FACE OF THE AIA

Diversity: What the Numbers Tell Us

by Stephen A. Kliment, FAIA

"Merely engaging in high-minded debates about theoretical future reductions while continuing to steadily increase emissions represents a self-delusional and reckless approach. In some ways, that approach is worse than doing nothing at all, because it lulls the gullible into thinking that something is actually being done, when in fact it is not."
—Al Gore, in a speech at NYU Law School, quoted in The NY Times September 19, 2006

Al Gore's objection to lots of talk but little action in reducing emissions has something in common with the urge to say the right things about the challenges facing African American architects, even though there are many successes to balance the bad news. But all this does little actually to advance the cause of greater opportunity for black architects. In the Old West, they had a pithier phrase than Al Gore's sincere but plodding language: *Talk is cheap but it takes money to buy whiskey.*

African American architects licensed to practice in one or more of the states at press time numbered 1,558, of whom 185 are women. There's no single model. Black practitioners range across a vast spectrum of firm size, ownership, employment status, gender, personal history, location, self-appraisal, and aspirations.

Some of the architects came from humble beginnings, grew up in segregated or all-black high schools, were discouraged in more or less subtle ways by their instructors from embracing architecture as a career, and simply by persevering fought their way through architecture school and into practice. Others, from more privileged backgrounds, found their way into practice with fewer bumps, but not without facing various forms of discrimination in architecture school and beyond. Some have aspired to owning their own firm; others have sought the special status conferred through a full partnership in a large, establishment, majority-owned firm. Still others have found careers in the public service, with its security and solid benefits—permanently or as a stepping stone to private practice. Finally, a small contingent—a little over a hundred, took to teaching full-time in the architecture schools, providing a steady income and offering a modest supplemental income by taking on small design projects.

The mood today.

A small number of black-owned firms operate on the same lines as majority firms. They win a share of work from private and public sources, though more from the public patron. But many other firms work very hard to carry on—because they are small, or because they lack the benefits of networking, because, as the late Chicago-based publishing magnate and publisher of *Ebony,* John Johnson once told me, they're "outside the area of gossip." So they end up with a low volume of work and unadventurous clients, and they miss out on opportunities to do pioneering work, attract attention, make the professional journals, and recruit the most

talented staff.

One example of barriers broken

When John Johnson (1918–2005), was planning the new world headquarters for Johnson Publishing in Chicago's Loop, he turned to Dubin, Dubin, Moutoussamy. John Moutoussamy (1920-1995), name partner in the Chicago firm had designed schools, colleges, apartment buildings. But he had never designed and completed an office building because no white person would ever let him do it.

Said Johnson: "Now I'm black and he's black. If he can't build my building, whose building can he build? You know, he has the same credentials as all the other architects, he's a member of a respectable firm. And I said, 'All I know is I'm in the publishing business and I will have to let people know that you [the bank] turned me down because I had a black architect, fully qualified, and the only reason is he has never built an office building before is because you and people like you never allowed him to build it.'"

So Johnson, leading publisher of black-directed media, broke down long-standing biases against black-owned property in Chicago's Loop and insisted on having the black partner of a Chicago firm design his company's headquarters. I will cover this and other stories of barrier-breaking patrons in a later episode of this diversity series.

Black architects as individuals

By virtue of being in a tiny numerical minority, black architects often work as lone individuals in a firm, and thanks to remnants of racist attitudes, are often closely scrutinized and expected to produce a level of work not demanded of their majority colleagues. They are often denied the benefit of the doubt at promotion time when matched against majority and female colleagues. Some succeed despite the odds. For example, Ralph Jackson, FAIA, about whose life more in a later episode, is now the design partner in the 132-year-old Boston firm Shepley Bulfinch Richardson and Abbott.

Many African American practitioners are employed by industry, public agencies, and as faculty at schools of architecture. This gives offers them a certain security more seldom afforded owners or employees in private architectural practice.

Some revealing statistics

The bare figures defining the status of African American architects are nevertheless shameful. I use them as the basis of this first episode in the diversity series. Note the low levels of black architects as a percentage of all architects, when compared to their numbers in the overall U.S. population; the modest levels of black faculty in the schools of architecture and the low percentage of black students; and the scarce rate of improvement over the recent past. One bright sign, happily, is that profitability levels of black-owned firms typically rival, even exceed those of majority firms.

(Note: Where figures designate only African Americans, it is so stated. Otherwise, the term *minorities* includes Asian and Hispanic/Latino groups and a breakdown was not available.)

For a start, here are some totals. U.S. Census Bureau's 2004 Community Survey figures [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet] show that out of a population of 285,691,501 at the time of the survey (the population on October 1, 2006, actually stood at 299,879,191, but the demographics breakdowns weren't yet available), 34.8 million were African American. That's 12.1 percent, a ratio that has remained constant over the past decade.

Switching now to the architect population of the United States, the numbers depend on the source. The 2000 U.S. Census Bureau figures—the latest available—place the number of architects at 192,860, a hugely inflated figure that includes unlicensed and any unregistered individuals who call

themselves architects.
A far more accurate number is the 101,179 recognized by the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards as having passed the licensing exam in their state (NCARB neither collects nor maintains demographic data on it registrants on the advice of counsel, according to the summary of a demographic diversity audit report (DDAR) issued by the AIA in December 2005.

Now if we see eye to eye with the argument—and I see no reason not to—that in a just society African American architects' representation in their profession should match their representation in the population, and taking NCARB's statistic of 101,179 as a base, then 12.1 percent of architects should be black. In truth, the actual ratio, using Dennis Alan Mann's Center for the Study of Practice, University of Cincinnati database of 1,558 black registered architects, is 1.5 percent, a figure that has changed little in recent years. Note that 185 of the 1,558, or 11.9 percent, are women. If you compare these numbers with the ones contained in Mann's 1991 database (870 architects, 49 of them women), the last 15 years have seen a great surge of 63 percent for black men and 278 percent for women, for a total increase of 79 percent from 1991 to 2006. This would be an encouraging figure were not the base numbers so small, as they end up exaggerating percentage increases.

Using the AIA's own figures in its DDAR, 1% of its 52,000 registered-architect members are black, 2% are Hispanic/Latino, and 3% Asian.

The black-owned firm

Here's another type of measure: the numbers of black-owned firms. According to Mann, 608 of the 1,558 names in his database have identified themselves as firm owners, or 39 percent, an intriguingly high ratio, which, Mann told me, ranges from large firms such as Columbus-Ohio based Moody-Nolan all the way to one-person firms. (Many of these one-person firm pricipals have regular day jobs as employees and work on independent projects after hours. Twenty-one percent of minority partners are sole practitioners, according to the AIA's latest (2003) Business of Architecture report, but that includes all minorities except women, who are tabulated separately.

Meanwhile, of the total of 17,589 firms listed as AIA firms, 6 percent, or 1,055, are shown as minority-owned firms, according to 2006 AIA figures, a decline from the 1,190 existing in 2000. The federal government defines a "minority-owned business enterprise as one that is at least 51-percent owned and controlled by minorities."
The number of women principals and partners rose from 11.2 percent in 1999 to 20.7 percent three years later.

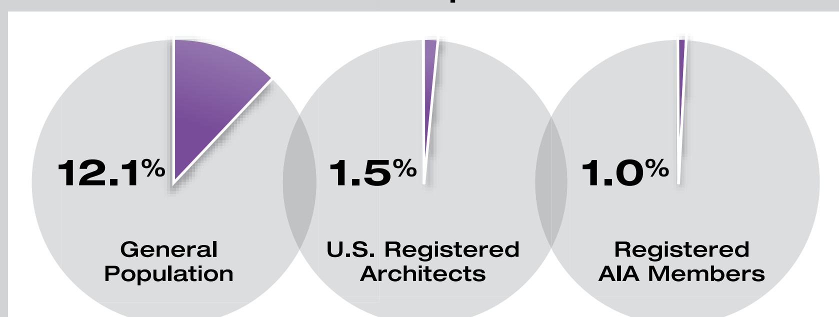
Minorities account for 16 percent of architecture staff at AIA member-owned firms. And though this includes non-black minorities (but not women), it has not even begun to approach the combined percentage of those three minorities in the overall U.S. population (about 25 percent).

The good news: profitability

Some 75 percent of minority firms reported profits of 10 percent or more before taxes, discretionary bonuses and profit-sharing. Not only were the minority firms profits higher than the rate for all firms; of those which cited a loss, minority firms accounted for slightly less than the average for all firms, which was 13 percent.

The best explanation, according to Pradeep Dalal, formerly AIA's director of economics and market research, is that minority firms, as defined above, are eligible for minority set aside status and are slightly larger than the percentage for "all firms" resulting in slightly higher profitability and slightly lower losses. Moreover, minority firms reportedly take on a broader range of building types, and the better balance in typologies is more likely to produce profits than would a lop-sided workload.

Note: to be eligible for minority status, firms must self-identify themselves as a minority-owned firm. The status comes with limitations in ownership and size. To be so designated by a public agency, a minority firm must be 51 percent minority-owned and must be under a maximum size based on volume and type of work. That's



a trade off that could retard a firm's overall growth.

Many inside and outside the profession have attacked set aside programs because they allegedly create an artificially-protected practice environment. Yet these rules have helped many minority firms get a start in the marketplace.

Dennis Mann estimates that 47 percent (39 percent who are owners plus 8 percent as employees) of the black architects who work in the private sector work in firms that are 100 percent black-owned; some five years ago Mann estimated that only 16 percent worked in white or white/other minority owned firms, but he sees these numbers rising as younger black architects join majority firms. Meanwhile, 217 or 14 percent of black architects work in the public sector.

In school

The enrollments of black students and the presence of black faculty in the schools of architecture have long been a reflection of black architects' status in the profession as a whole.

The nation's architecture schools fall roughly into three types—private, state, and HBCUs (Historic Black College and University). Five HBCUs exist offering NAAB-accredited degrees—two in the south, three in the mid-Atlantic states.

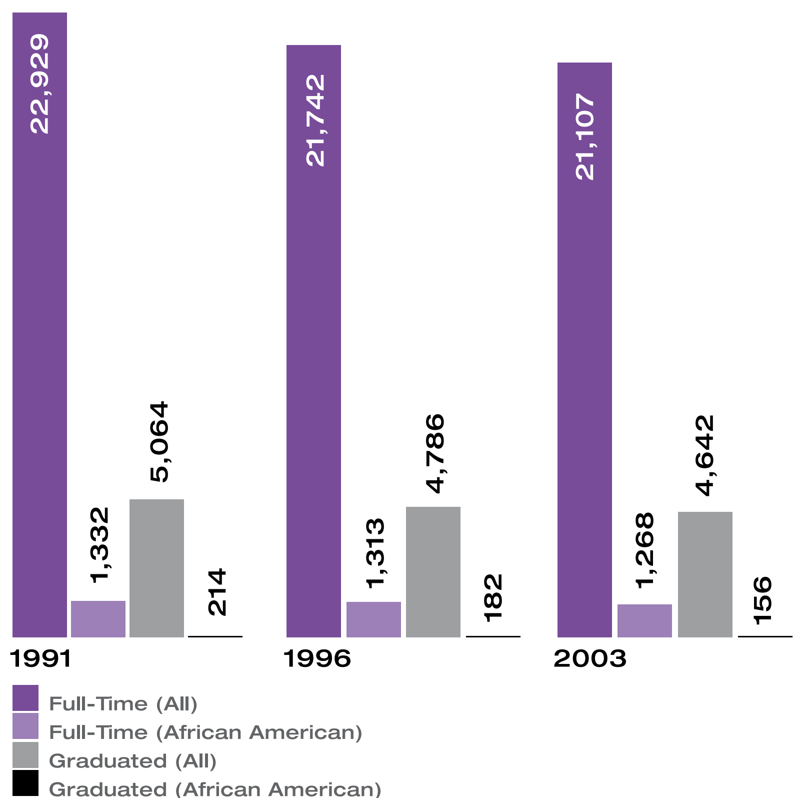
The number of fulltime professional degree students in all accredited schools totaled 21,107, according to latest available NAAB sources, of which 1268 were African American or 6 percent. Comparative figures for Asian students came to 1728 or 8.1 percent and Hispanic students 1877 or 8.9 percent. For details, visit NAAB's Web site. [http://www.naab.org/]

A comparison of school graduation and career attrition rates is useful. That's the ratio of graduates who ended up as architects versus those who left to go into other lines of work. The post graduation attrition rate for architects as a whole is said to be around 45 percent; the ratio for African Americans (68.4 percent) stands out as a tragic waste of talent, expenditure, and initiative. That is the price the entire profession pays for the severe challenges black architects face in practice—a mix of reluctant patrons, unsupportive majority firms, social attitudes, and low pay.

Faculty presence lags

Black faculty representation in America's schools of architecture is slender. The current NAAB database shows a total of 109 fulltime faculty (50 tenured), compared to 105 Asian (52 tenured) and 142 Hispanic (67 tenured), out of a fulltime faculty total of about just under 2087 (1254 tenured). (The Hispanic figures are skewed by the presence of large numbers of Hispanic faculty at the Universities of Miami and Puerto Rico). The ratio of black to total architectural faculty is thus 109/2087 or 5.2 percent. In 1997 it was 6.5 percent; in 1983, 4.4 percent.

The ratio at HBCU colleges is less than encouraging. Out of a total of 47 fulltime faculty at the five HBCU schools, 21 are African American, or 45 percent. The highest ratio is at Howard University (75 percent); the



lowest at Prairie View A&M University (29 percent), according to current NAAB figures. The March 2007 episode of this series will offer a closer exploration of the status and prospects of black students and faculty at U.S. schools of architecture.

More than numbers

With a few exceptions, such as profitability, the numbers are not encouraging, And there's a lot these figures don't tell you—about the anguish many black employees of majority firms feel as they look around them and find they're often the only ones of their race, closely scrutinized; about the extra effort many black-owned firms feel they must exert—often with inferior resources and less glamorous commissions—in order to be accepted by clients on the same basis as majority firms. They don't tell you about the slights when a black client goes to a majority architect for design services.

But you'll see in upcoming episodes of this monthly series that there's much for black as well as majority architects to feel good about. Look for a parade of significant innovative work by an array of quality-conscious black practitioners, along with stirring stories on how some had a smooth path to success, some overcame steep professional, social, financial and personal hurdles.

In November, expect a look at fascinating black trailblazers. The July 2007 episode will explore African identity by examining historic African architectural roots. These have prompted many black architects and critics to advance Afrocentrism as a counterbalance to the dominant Eurocentric mindset that drives contemporary teaching and architecture criticism. And in the September 2007 episode, get a glimpse at the critical role patrons and patronage hold in shaping the prospects of black architects.

Also coming up is the role of black women in the profession, and finally a look at the three great drivers that if applied will shape the prospects of the African American architect for the better for generations to come.

Captions:

1. "The Builders," by Jacob Lawrence, 1947. Photo: The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation/Art Resource, N.Y.

2. For the Africana Studies and Research Center expansion by Shepley Bulfinch Richardson and Abbott, principal architect Ralph T. Jackson, FAIA, uses texture and color to establish the program's identity and presence on the Cornell campus.

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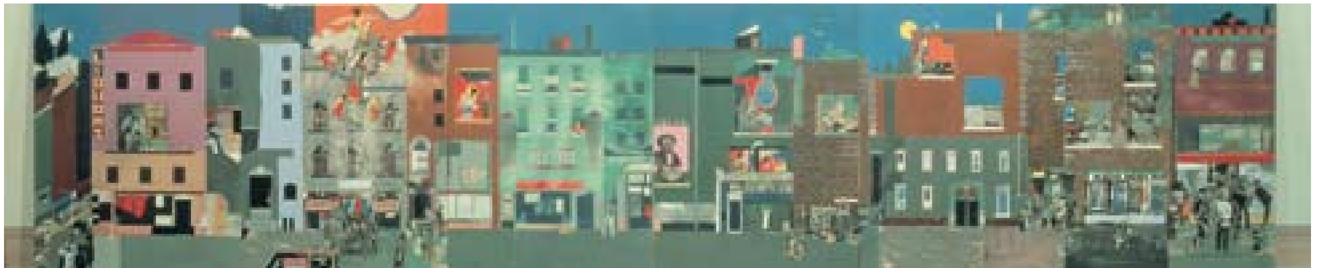
The Trailblazers



by Stephen A. Kliment, FAIA
Contributing Editor

How far back to trace the emergence of a black architecture profession is a matter for debate. The first blacks arrived in America in late August 1619 and were identified as indentured servants. Little is known about who they were, their skills, or what craft they practiced.

In 1652 and 1654, two freed blacks were granted land—550 acres and 100 acres respectively in Northampton County on what is now the Delmarva Peninsula, Va.—in reward for importing servants, presumably indentured, as there was a great shortage of hands to perform useful work. The acres needed tilling and demanded the planning and construction of dwellings and farm buildings, no doubt patterned on the wooden salt box structures typical of the East Coast from Virginia to Massachusetts.

A more logical starting point is to fast forward by 100 years to an era when the big southern plantations were emerging, and when slavery in America had developed in its fullest form. Here more is known, because records kept by the plantation managers included facts, figures, and drawings depicting the contributions of black carpenters, masons, painters, ironworkers, and glaziers to the design, construction, maintenance, and operation of the plantation houses, farm buildings, and slave quarters, as well as the few public buildings of that era.

For a more rigorous assessment of the status of the black architect and craftsman, one must fast forward another 100 years to Reconstruction and the years following, when many emancipated African Americans were able to make a living as skilled crafters and design professionals.

The status, roles, and contributions of African Americans may be grouped roughly into three phases—colonial and antebellum (1619–1863); emancipation, Reconstruction, and the rise of the professional architect (1863–1945); and post-World War II, civil rights, and post-civil rights (1945–present).

Colonial and antebellum (1619–1863)

The precise roles of blacks in the building of early America is blurred by the vagueness of most records in indicating whether a particular craftsman or builder was black or white. By the 18th century, opportunities to build were becoming available to—indeed, were being forced upon—blacks as the phenomenal growth of the cotton, tobacco, and sugar-based economy of the Old South spawned a spate of construction activity.

This greatly affected the black bondspeople. The volume, scope, and variety of building types on and off the plantation—from the big house to storage and agricultural processing structures, slave quarters, and eventually churches, academic buildings, and large public buildings such as the commercial and government buildings at Williamsburg—all ended up embracing the design and crafts talents of the black slave population.

Until 1700, the concept of the separation of races had not yet hardened into the rigid racial lines that later came to mark American social attitudes. It seems that whites never even thought of themselves as white but rather as English or Dutch, and they did not consider Africans as blacks or Negroes, but as dark skinned people but otherwise racially indeterminate.

The demands of running a community as large and complex as a plantation, and given the small minority of white peo-

ple…the preponderance of craft work fell upon the slave population.

Against this background, the role of the slaves as builders and craftsmen (there is no evidence that women engaged in the building crafts, as their principal roles were as field workers and mothers) is largely established. Toward the end of the slavery era, white planters increasingly sought formal credit for the design and construction of the myriad types of dwellings and work buildings that dotted the plantation. The reason, according to Ferguson, was that the white planters had to demonstrate their total superiority over their slaves in every possible way, and the credit for planning the plantations, peripheral buildings, and their furnishings was one talent they wished to air as their own.

In the event, the demands of running a community as large and complex as a plantation, and given the small minority of white people—especially in what became South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana—the preponderance of craft work fell upon the slave population. Those who practiced the trades most in demand—carpenters, coopers, masons, spinners, tanners, blacksmiths, shoemakers, distillers—were slaves.

Since buildings in those years were largely the job of carpenters and masons, one must look at the customs that linked programming, design, and building on the estate. Contrary to the northern custom—dictated largely by cold weather, comfort, and convenience—of consolidating functions in a few large structures, the south was noted for doing the opposite. Every tub, as it were, sat on its own bottom. The estate was an array of free-standing outbuildings. These consisted of kitchen; smokehouse; dairy; icehouse; craft shops; storehouses; stables; barns; pig house; buildings containing production machinery for processing sugar cane, tobacco, cotton, and rice; clinics; dining rooms; chapels; the overseer's house; and, of course, the slave quarters.

Slave craftsmen learned their trade on the job. Some were sent off to trade schools and disseminated their skills on the plantation. No distinct style emerged during this long period covering the late 17th, the entire 18th, and a large part of the 19th centuries. Except for the Big House, the form, materials, and construction of the outbuildings and slave quarters were a straightforward expression of available materials, space demands, and craftsmanship. Glass was expensive, and most of the structures had small openings; even those were seldom glazed.

The role of slave craftsmen in building the Big House is not widely documented. The great mansions, such as Mount Vernon, Westover, Monticello, and Evergreen, were clearly patterned on English originals. Having one's own Robert Adam-like manor was considered, at least until Independence, as a sign of prestige, much like today when erecting a 16,000-square-foot trophy mansion in Southampton or an $18 million pad in Malibu. Therefore, in its general outline, form, and ornament, the Big House tended to follow English prototypes, with some variations, such as the large porch and dog run breezeways to accommodate the hot climate.

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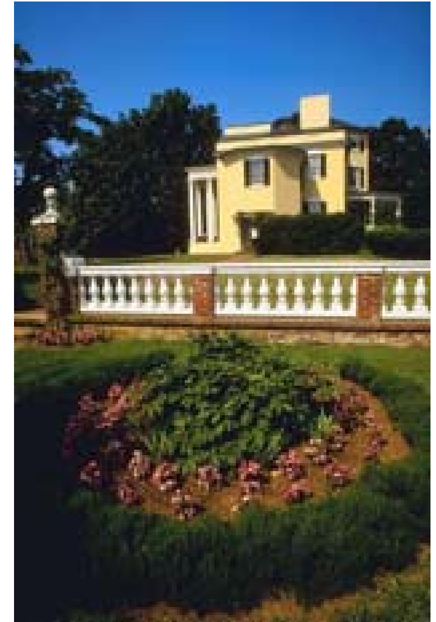

An occasional white craftsman from the old country provided guidance, but the substance of the Big House was slave-built. So was much of the furniture, although the most prosperous of the southern planters had some of their furniture shipped from England or France. Both white and slave communities considered black craftsmen an elite, and the planters gave them special treatment and privileges, among the most prized being the opportunity to practice their trades without the backbreaking toil of the fields.

As many as 10 percent of the slave community were of the craftsman class. The elite status extended into American independence. Historian John Michael Vlach gives this account of Thomas Hemmings, one of Thomas Jefferson's slave carpenters:

"Hemmings had prolonged his stay at a neighboring plantation, where he was engaged in a demanding series of repairs. Jefferson wanted him back at Monticello, but Hemmings deflected his demand, writing at the end of a lengthy description of the work he was

doing: 'I hope by the nex to Let [sic] you no when I shul finech and when to send for me.'" A reply that was a heady mix of self-confidence, determination, and glibness.

But always remember that the same people who built the slave quarters, the smoke houses, and the barns and stables also built the Big House, a far more elaborate structure with complex forms, larger spans, and subtle detail. Here, too, slave craftsmanship came to bear, and although many of the larger, monumental plantation houses were derived from English patterns or models, there is no evidence that black craftsmen and artisans were excluded from work on the Big House. Witness the demand for the Thomas Hemmings of that era.

A curious aspect to bondsmen's contributions to design and construction is the role of black plantation owners—freedmen who ran their operations with the help of slaves just as did their white counterparts. The details, as described in two sources indicate that they built their Big Houses, outbuildings, and slave quarters to the same standards as did all landowners.

A neglected piece of evidence of black slave craftsmen's involvement in the construction of public buildings indicates that black craftsmen and laborers played a big role in building the original White House and U.S. Capitol, which, incidentally, were built contemporary with the key piece to the AIA headquarters in Washington, The Octagon. Before emancipation, pay slips uncovered in the U. S. Treasury Department by television reporter Edward Hotaling show that 400 of the 600 workers between 1792 and 1800 were black slaves whose wages were appropriated by their owners.

> **Slaves in those years were paid five dollars a month.**

Slaves in those years were paid five dollars a month. The Capitol was completed in the 1860s, and the degree to which black laborers worked on it after emancipation is not known, since slavery was not outlawed in Washington, D.C., for another two years after the 1963 Proclamation. Former Oklahoma Congressman J. C. Watts Jr., who is African American, called for a detailed study of the documents and eventually a memorial in the Capitol to recognize those contributions.

With the end of the Civil War, the opportunities for those craftsmen declined sharply due to the influx of immigrant carpenters, masons, metalworkers, painters, and other craftsmen; the import, from northern states and Europe, of manufactured building products such as bricks, precut lumber, and miscellaneous metal products, which hitherto had been produced on site; and last not least the limitation some southern states placed on the right to contract with blacks for construction.

Reconstruction and the rise of the professional architect (1863–1945)

Despite passage of a battery of Reconstruction laws designed in part to establish guidelines for the rights and treatment of the newly freed African Americans, longstanding discriminatory attitudes held by whites towards blacks (and eventually enacted in Southern states in a series of so-called Jim Crow laws), and practices dealing with segregation of blacks in public places, schools, and vehicles held black architects and builders back well into the 20th century.

Yet, by the 1870s, a movement was under way, triggered mostly by black activists, to advance the intellectual underpinnings of a black society. This was linked to a growing emphasis on business and economic strength as the shortest road to acceptance of blacks by the majority. As John Hope, who would become president of Morehouse College, Atlanta, told the Fourth Annual Atlanta University Conference on the Negro in Business, advocating the founding and expansion of a black business class: "We must take in some, if not all, of the wages, turn it into capital, hold it, increase it."

Also in those years was born the stress on academic development to reverse centuries of intellectual suppression. The American Negro Academy was born in 1897, with W. E. B. Du Bois' backing. Black architects and builders fit into this framework marginally at first, held back not by lack of skill but by the spirit of the patron. The patron not only provided the capital to erect a new building, but would have to entrust the commission to a racial group whose performance was untried and whose members had to compete with the white architect who was part of the patrons' social circle.

Given these barriers, the years from the 1870s through the 1920s turned out to be surprisingly productive for the emerging black design professional. The reason is plain. African Americans, newly emancipated but suspecting with reason that the civil rights legislation passed by Republican post-emancipation congresses would soon flounder in a sea of state-passed segregation laws, decided on a line of attack of solidarity and self help.

From a line of attack of

solidarity and self help, the result was a flowering of construction financed, designed, built, and occupied by blacks.

The result was a flowering of construction financed, designed, built, and occupied by blacks. The participation of black designers, craftsmen, and black-owned banks came about in two settings.

New towns. The first was in the new towns and communities formed by freed blacks, placing upon the newly arrived inhabitants the task of building a community from the ground up. Among these communities were Nicodemus, Kan.; Boley, Okla. (plus more than two dozen other towns in what was a territory through 1907); Eatonville, Fla.; Mound Bayou, Miss.; and Hobson City, Ala. These so-called "Black Towns," later disappeared, weakened, ironically, by growing integration in the mid-20th century. Only a few, such as Nicodemus, have survived. But, in their heyday, these towns provided dignity, work, and self-expression to black families newly released from bondage.

Old neighborhoods. The other post-emancipation phenomenon was the concentration of black families in certain neighborhoods in some major cities of the South. Streets came to be associated in those cities with black populations, such as Memphis' Beale Street, Jackson's Farish Street, Chattanooga's Ninth Street, Richmond's Jackson Ward, and above all Atlanta's Auburn Avenue, which came to be known as Sweet Auburn, and contains among other monuments the old and new buildings for Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Reverends Martin Luther King Sr. was pastor and Martin Luther King Jr. preached.

Writes Richard K. Dozier in Spaces and Places: "Located in these communities were the city's 'Negro' bank buildings (by 1912, 60 of the 64 Afro-American banks were in the south), hotels, theaters, fraternal lodges, and churches. Each city had its 'Afro-American Street,' with a collection of buildings, that to [the] Afro-American symbolized race progress as opposed to racial segregation."

Special category. A category unto itself was the African American community of Washington, D.C., centered on U Street. The black population in Washington had the peculiar position of living in a Southern city with a northern Republican government, along with a substantial black population. That, with its banks, insurance companies, churches, and fraternal lodges, gave black Washington the economic power, self-directed yet significant, to give birth to a flow of building construction unequalled since. As it flourished, it spawned a group of successful professional architecture firms.

These firms used the congenial environment of Washington as home base. From it they extended their practices all over the South. In his 1979 Catholic University doctoral dissertation, *Black Architects of Washington, D.C.*, Harrison Mosley Ethridge states that "even in the dark days of racial animosity at the dawn of the twentieth century, the black architect in Washington has practiced in a politically protected location."

He adds:
"The black community, increasingly segregated, urbanized, and more aware of the talent of the race, was in need of skilled men who could design churches, fraternal organization buildings, and college structures that were beyond the design capabilities of mere builders."

Reference:
In next month's episode, look for work by and interviews with three prominent contemporary African American practitioners.

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DIVERSITY

The Trailblazers: Six Profiles

by Stephen A. Kliment, FAIA
Contributing Editor

Following are profiles of six eminent trailblazers who thrived in this environment.

John A. Lankford (1876–1946)
Lankford arrived in Washington in 1902, followed three years later by William S. Pittman (see below). Born in 1874 in Potosi, Mo., Lankford came to town with the commissions to design the True Reformers Building and the John Wesley A.M.E. Church. He had started an office in Jacksonville, Fla. His training was typical of the handful of black architects of that era, combining design and practical construction knowledge. Lankford had spent six years at the Lincoln Institute in Potosi, Mo., where he studied "mechanical drawing, blacksmithing, carpentry, and engineering," according to the *Washington Bee,* Washington's principal black newspaper of the day. He then moved to Tuskegee, Ala., the college founded by Booker T. Washington, which emerged as the fountainhead of solid practical training for black professionals and crafts.

John A. Lankford

Lankford showed up in Washington to great fanfare. Ethridge writes that along with "a large front page picture of the architect, [the *Washington Bee's*] readers were told that he had made drawings for the new John Wesley A.M.E. Church, and that his drawings for the True Reformers Building had been 'submitted to the Engineers Department of the District Government and have been fully approved.'" The Bee ended up with the following panegyric:

> Lankford became in 1925 the first black registered architect in the District of Columbia after registration became a requirement in 1924

"The Nation's capital will see one of the finest structures ever designed by man, notwithstanding the charge that the Negro cannot grasp science … the scientific history of the world will never be complete if it fails to contain Professor John A. Lankford, M.S., to whom the nation's capital is introduced."

Lankford did well in Washington. He was the nation's first black practicing architect. Aside from churches and fraternal work, his practice included dwellings and small commercial jobs, and much remodeling. For a short span he also went into real estate in a small way, but eventually teamed up with his brother A. E. Lankford, a mechanical and electrical engineer and, for a period, with the redoubtable talented and abrasive William Pittman, who eventually founded his own office.

Meanwhile, Lankford thrived. By the 1920s he had won a national reputation, with commissions in 15 states and the District of Columbia.

His local reputation also bloomed. "He became in 1925 the first black registered architect in the District of Columbia after registration became a requirement in 1924." Like Pittman, he married well: his wife was the granddaughter of A.M.E Bishop Henry M. Turner.

In a self-confident, upbeat speech, Lankford told an audience:

True Reformers Building, Washington, D.C., by John Lankford.

"The Negro architects and builders are doing well in Washington; in fact, it is said that there has never been so many Negroes at work for the city and the government as now, and we could today put 500 more to work and

have places to spare. The field is so very great with very little discrimination, and we should grasp this great opportunity. In the past three years I have designed for Washington and 15 states of the Union nearly $6 million worth of buildings [a vast sum, in those days]. I have designed, overhauled, and built in Washington and vicinity over $700 thousand worth of property during the same time."

His practice declined with the Depression, and he ended up working for the Public Works Administration. He died in 1946. Wrote Ethridge:

"[His] significance was his ability to succeed as a black architect in a world that offered few encouragements. A man of great energy, he used racial solidarity advanced by Booker T. Washington's philosophy of self-help … Lankford's churches and fraternal buildings deserve recognition as monuments to the stamina, faith, and self-reliance of the black community in a particularly difficult era."

William S. Pittman (1875–1958)

Pittman left Lankford's office to hang out his shingle in 1906, at the age of 31. As a boy he had worked with his uncle, a seasoned carpenter, then followed what had become a traditional route for black architects, graduating from Tuskegee with a certificate in architecture in 1900, obtaining a degree in architecture from Drexel Institute in Philadelphia, returning to Tuskegee to teach, finally moving north to join Lankford's office in Washington, D.C.

YMCA Building, Washington, D.C., by William Pittman.

In Boyd's Directory of the District of Columbia, 1906, Pittman marketed himself as an architect who specialized in steel construction and later prided himself on his ability to do drafting , detailing, tracing, and blueprinting, further claiming he could render in monotone, water color, and pen and ink, according to the July 1910 Washington Bee.

A year after launching his own practice, Pittman married Portia, the daughter of Booker T. Washington, and his father-in-law's connections (he was also president of Tuskegee Institute), did him no harm. President Theodore Roosevelt, who knew Washington, gave the couple a set of silverware, and shortly afterwards Pittman got to design a home—a neat two-story house with a generous porch in Fairmount Heights, Md.

Pittman's best known building was the YMCA Building on 12th Street in Washington, D.C. President Roosevelt had laid the cornerstone. The dedication in May 1912 was a celebrated event

His best known building was the YMCA Building on 12th Street. Roosevelt had laid the cornerstone. The dedication in May 1912 was a celebrated event, and attracted as the main speaker Secretary for War Henry L. Stimson, who would occupy the same post under another Roosevelt. Stimson told those present, according to that day's *Washington Bee,* in remarks that by any standard are grossly patronizing:

"[I wish] to congratulate you first on what you have done towards the erection of this building—what has been done by the colored people of this city and this land. I want to congratulate you on the fact that this magnificent building, which I have just inspected, is the work of a colored architect, Mr. Pittman. I want to congratulate you on the fact that it has been substantially built by the labor of your own race and your own hands."

Black citizens put up about a quarter of the $100,000 cost. The rest came from John D. Rockefeller, Julius Rosenwald, and the Central Association of the District of Columbia.

Pittman also dabbled in real estate, including an ambitious venture to erect an eight-story mixed use bulking to contain a 2,500-seat theater, and aimed at a black customer base, but the venture failed amid charges that funds had been mishandled. Meanwhile, Pittman's Washington practice grew, but to what extent it was hard to tell because, after the notoriety of the 12th Street YMCA Building, the bulk of his Washington work was small scale—houses, stores, and schools.

But outside Washington, his work flourished, and none drew greater attention than his design for the Negro Exposition Building at the tercentenary celebration of the landing at Jamestown in 1607. Pittman won a competition, and was cited as the first black man to win an architectural commission from the federal government. The building, in traditional neo-Georgian style, was built by two black contractors, S. H. Bolling and A.J.Everett, and cost $30,000.

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Pittman also designed churches and fraternal buildings in Alabama, Texas, North Carolina, and Georgia, where he allegedly out-promoted all other competitors, black and white, for the commission to design the Odd Fellows auditorium.

Pittman in due course moved his office to Dallas, where he died in 1958.

Ethridge thus sums up these two careers: "it was the two Washington architects' application of the theme of racial self-help that made their careers so representative of the era. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the almost total dependence on commissions generated within the black community was a result of attitudes and limitations imposed by the dominant society." [A black architect was not admitted to the AIA until 1926, 69 years after its founding in New York City. His name was Paul Williams (see below).] "Racially generated commissions continued to be a salient characteristic of the careers of black architects until well after World War II."

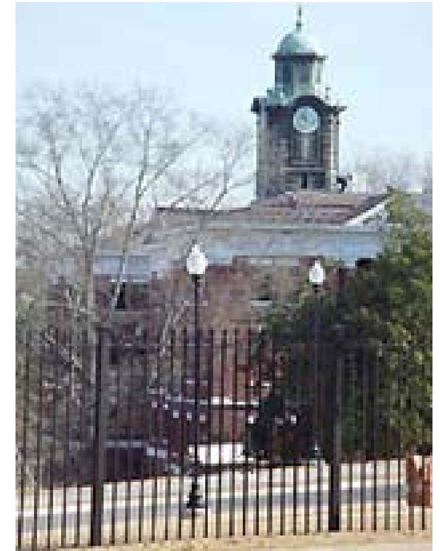
Robert R. Taylor (1867–1949)
Taylor was the first African American to receive an architectural degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (class of 1892). The same year he joined the Tuskegee Institute. There he headed the mechanical industries department, which included architecture and construction. The main buildings at Tuskegee were built under his direction: "students learned every phase of architecture, from drafting to making bricks." (Taylor was also in private practice, with a clientele throughout the South. He eventually became the first licensed black architect in Alabama—in 1931, the first year that licensure was required by that state.)

Robert Taylor

Lankford, Pittman, and many other black designers and builders studied under Taylor at Tuskegee. The curriculum there, which came to be known as the "Tuskegee Machine," was rooted in the teachings of Booker T. Washington. The core of Washington's dream appears in his classical work *Up from Slavery,* above all in chapter X, entitled "A Harder Task Than Making Bricks Without Straw":

"From the very beginning, at Tuskegee, I was determined to have the students do not only the agricultural and domestic work, but to have them erect their own buildings … My plan was not to teach them to work in the old way but to show them how to make the forces of nature—air, water, steam, electricity, horse-power—assist them in their labour."

The main buildings at Tuskegee Institute were built under Robert Taylor's direction: "Students learned every phase of architecture, from drafting to making bricks."



White Hall, Tuskegee University, by Robert Taylor.

In the event, students built 36 out of 40 buildings, large and small, on the Tuskegee campus. Moreover, "hundreds of men are now scattered throughout the South who received their knowledge of mechanics while being taught how to erect these buildings." In short, it was through the Tuskegee Machine, buttressed by Washington, that "the first black architects obtained education, national experience, and the beginnings of practice. The Black churches, Prince Hall lodges and other Black institutions provided these architects with their primary contracts," wrote Dozier in his article, "Black Architects and Craftsmen" in the May 1974 Black World.

The Tuskegee precedent was in due course emulated at what is now Hampton University and Howard University, where an inspired leader of a later generation, Howard H. Mackey (1901-1987), across a 50-year span as dean of the school of architecture and planning, maintained a creative and hospitable milieu for generations of future black architects. He was succeeded by Harry G. Robinson III, who later became a top administrator at Howard.

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FACE OF THE AIA

Julian Abele (1881–1950)
Although more and more African Americans passed professional training in architecture and became licensed, credit and recognition failed to keep up. The leading example is Julian Abele, designer for the Duke University campus, Philadelphia's Museum of Art, and Harvard's Widener Library—a true trailblazer.

Julian Abele, photo courtesy Duke University Archives

Abele was one of the most brilliant yet one of the least fêted of these early black practitioners. He was the first African American to graduate from the University of Pennsylvania school of architecture, and he later attended the Ecole des Beaux Arts. The man who underwrote his Paris trip was also the man who gave him the unique break to design some of the nation's best known architecture. Horace Trumbauer's practice was based in Philadelphia. Abele joined the firm in 1906, and in 1909, at the aged 28, Trumbauer appointed him chief designer.

Julian Abele, designer for the Duke University campus, Philadelphia's Museum of Art, and Harvard's Widener Library was one of the most brilliant yet one of the least fêted of these early black practitioners.

Trumbauer had a solid practice of well-to-do clients for whom he designed mansions, museums, academic buildings, and libraries in neo-Classical or neo-Gothic. Abele took to those historic styles like a duck to water and was soon designing buildings of the highest profile. These included Widener Library in Harvard Yard, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, a New York mansion for James B. Duke, and the original master plan and buildings for Duke University.

But, although Abele was designer for these monuments, the credits went to Trumbauer, who of course had his name on the door. An excerpt from the Duke University archives kindly provided by William E. King, Duke University archivist from 1972 to 2002, quotes Abele: "The shadows are all mine." By that he allegedly meant, said King, that he accepted a central fact of his life—being black, he lived in the shadows because the social circumstances of the day denied him the fame due his talents.

An odd combination of bias and opposition links Trumbauer with Abele and a third member of the firm, William Frank, who headed the firm's technical/specifications department. In *If Gargoyles Could Talk, Sketches of Duke University,* William King writes: "Because of his talent and aloofness, Trumbauer gained accolades in New York before he did in his home town. His colleagues in Philadelphia did not elect him to membership in their chapter of the American Institute of Architects until 1931, an affront that reportedly greatly disturbed him. Added to this mix was the fact that he employed and befriended one of the very few African American architects

Duke University Campus and Tower, by Julian Abele, photo courtesy Duke University Archives.

in the country. [So] Trumbauer and Abele each faced discrimination and because of that Trumbauer empathized with the racial discrimination confronting Abele."

"Consequently," King goes on, "they forged a close relationship based on respect for talent and friendship, but each also trapped the other in a peculiar set of circumstances." Trumbauer was the salesman who brought in the work. Abele was the brilliant chef d'atelier and designer. Frank, who was Jewish, was the technical man, making sure the architecture went out and up safe and sound. Appointing two such men to top positions in his firm further underscores Trumbauer's enlightened, for that day, outlook.

Trumbauer, furthermore, had no formal education from the age of 16 on, had learned what he knew about architecture through the apprentice route, and admired formal training in others. Abele's education at the University of Pennsylvania and the Beaux Arts fit the bill exactly, King argues.

The partners who took over the Trumbauer firm after Abele's death in 1950 destroyed the firm's records, and with it any hope of an in-depth inventory of his contributions. We know that after Trumbauer's death in 1938, the firm continued until 1958 under Trumbauer's name. Drawings had been going out under the Trumbauer name through the 1930s, and Abele's name began to appear thereafter, King reports, calling it "an obvious change of policy." And when in 1940 the question of design of a tomb monument in the crypt of the Duke Chapel arose, the university turned to Abele because he "prepared the plans and knows the details better than anyone else."

Abele's profile rose after his death, especially after 1974, when a memoir by Alice Phillips entitled *Spire and Spirit* included a short chapter, "Le Noir," that describes a meeting with Abele's secretary and son when they came to see the chapel.

Abele applied for membership in the Philadelphia Chapter AIA in 1942, and the endorsement letter from Fiske Kimball, the eminent architectural historian and at that time director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, is evidence of the high esteem in which he was held. Abele was also an outstanding draftsman, renderer, and water colorist (see crayon rendering of Duke chapel).

The height of Abele's involvement as an architect covered 1906 to 1950, hyperactive years in the evolution of architectural styles, including Art Nouveau, International Modernism, Art Deco, Constructivism, and Wright's organic Prairie Style. These had tempted hitherto mainstream architects to stray from the beaten path of gargoyles and the Five Orders. How did Abele respond to these sirens? The answer: hardly at all. Trumbauer's clients, well-to-do and conservative in their tastes, were not ready for the most part to accept the revolutionary look of an architecture without ornament, machine made (or pretending to be machine made), and carrying a hidden agenda of egalitarianism.

Moreover, as an educated black man of that era, Abele no doubt wished to conform to the Euro-centric cultural and social norms then prevailing in America, which did not get around to wholeheartedly embracing new architectural trends until the start of the 1950s.

In the end, one is hard put to find any traces of Modernism in Abele's work, except, perhaps, in his "belief that the plan of a building determines how that building is experienced, a surprising view in one so wedded to the mantra of formal composition," as J. Max Bond Jr., a partner at Davis Brody Bond, wrote in the summer 1997 *Harvard Design Magazine.*

As for a sign of black origins, none appears. Wrote Bond: "Neither in form, reference, detail, nor decoration do his buildings betray that the man who designed them was black." But in that he is a precursor of many of today's black-owned mainstream firms, which despite the preponderance, in many of them, of black designers, managers, and technical people, the work follows the European-derived Modernist idiom, as amended from time to time by such passing blips as Postmodernism and Deconstructionism.

Ironically, Abele, who deeply resented segregation, never went to see the buildings he had designed for Duke.

Paul R. Williams (1894–1980)
Williams was a contemporary of Abele's, but longer-lived, and certainly far more famous. He is best known for the large mansions he designed for film stars and other Hollywood celebrities such as Frank Sinatra, Tyrone Power, Lucille Ball, Cary Grant, and Lon Chaney.

Paul R. Williams

What is less well known is the steep ladder he had to climb to reach that fame. Much of it is told in *The Will and the Way,* a reminiscence by Williams' granddaughter Karen E. Hudson.

Just as Julian Abele designed the campus for a university in which he would not have been allowed to enroll, so Williams designed palatial houses for clients in places where he was not welcome. Born in Los Angeles (his parents were from Memphis and orphaned at age four), he was raised by foster parents (his foster father was a janitor) but went to an integrated high school. On learning, wrongly, that there was reportedly only one black architect in practice, William Pittman, Williams wrote in his diary, as edited by Karen Hudson: "I was sure this country could use at least one or two more black architects." On confiding this ambition to his high school counselor, he was told: "Who ever heard of a Negro being an architect?

Paul Williams is best known for the large mansions he designed for film stars and other Hollywood celebrities such as Frank Sinatra, Tyrone Power, Lucille Ball, Cary Grant, and Lon Chaney.

He made the commitment anyway, at the age of 18, and on graduating from Polytechnic High School he attended the Los Angeles Art School and the Los Angeles branch of the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design of New York. Five years later he won the coveted Beaux Arts Medal for excellence in design. Here's how he went about finding his first job:

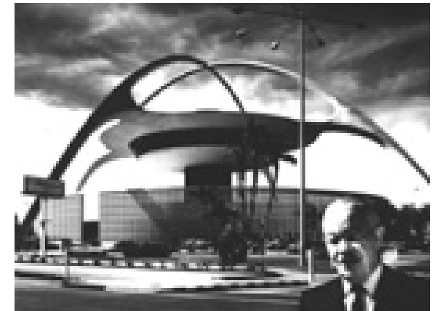
"I went through the yellow pages and copied the addresses of all the architects listed. I arranged them in geographical order, and called on each office. I asked if they were hiring or not. Next to each name I wrote down if the answer was 'no' or 'maybe next week,' and whether it was said with a smile or a frown. The following week I put my sketches in a smart portfolio, and went back to each office where someone had 'smiled.'"

Finally, he was offered three positions, his race notwithstanding. Two offered three dollars a week, the third one nothing. He took the last, because it was one of the most prestigious offices in Los Angeles, and he figured he would "pay" for learning (shortly thereafter, they began to pay him three dollars a week).

What at first propelled Williams forward was his remarkable draftsmanship—he discovered he could be faster and more efficient and accurate than others, and did so because, he wrote in his diary, he wanted to be "judged for my abilities rather than simply dismissed because of the color of my face."

But he soon discovered there was more to architecture then drafting. So he went back to school at the University of Southern California and studied engineering and business. He supported himself by making brass fittings for men's watch fobs and women's handbags. He made so much money at this that he considered going into business.

Eventually, he went to work for the then-prominent Los Angeles firm of Reginald Johnson and, as his first assignment, was given a $150,000 house to design (a $2,250,000 house by today's prices). A high school friend asked him to design his house, and, with the fee so earned, Williams opened his own office in 1922, aged 28. In 1923 he became the first black member of the Southern California AIA chapter.



L.A. Airport, by Paul Williams.

His practice grew as the newly rich film magnates and stars looked for ways to spend their money, and their first thought was usually a suitable house. Williams, with his engaging manner, eye for materials and form, and rapid production, caught the eye of Lon Chaney Sr. and a small handful of other celebrities, and, as the word got around, the work began to flow into the office.

Yet Williams' path to success was anything but trouble free. In an Ebony profile published in March 1994, a dozen years after his death, reporter Karima Haynes wrote: "Racism was pervasive in the business climate in which he worked. White clients loved his work, yet felt uncomfortable shaking his hand. His elaborate homes were built in some of Los Angeles' most exclusive neighborhoods, yet segregation barred him from living there. He never would eat lunch with a White woman alone, even if she happened to be a client." In a wistful entry in his diary, Williams remarked:

"As I sketched plans for large country homes in the most beautiful places in the world, sometimes I dreamed of living there. I could afford such a home, but each evening, I returned to my small home in a restricted area of Los Angeles where Negroes were allowed to live."

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While Abele was committed to a classical idiom, Williams embraced the freer milieu of Hollywood. He too, be it said, conformed to whatever the client wanted—Art Deco, neo-Gothic etc. One finds in Williams' work what Max Bond calls "less about stylistic consistency than about direct response to the aspirations of his clients, to socioeconomic developments in Southern California in the first half of the century, and to Southern Californians' self-conscious understandings of style and urbanity." Indeed, Bond likens Williams to Morris Lapidus in his ability to "concoct stylish pastiches," but argues that Williams' houses were much like the man himself—"affable, well-mannered, gracious and graceful." Bond should know, because he and another Eastern architect, Jeh Johnson, had driven from New York to Los Angeles in 1957 to take up a summer job in Williams' office—a job they had obtained, as Bond put it, "on the strength of letters from school." They were put to work on the Sinatra house—Bond to detail the kitchen floor tile, Johnson the stair railings.

His house for Sinatra was ahead of its time from a technical viewpoint, incorporating all kinds of electronic devices for controlling blinds, music, and security.

But Williams never lost the common touch. In 1945, members of the armed forces returned from the war, married, and began to look for affordable homes. Williams wrote two books on small homes, *The Small Home of Tomorrow and New Homes for Today.* These two works were on the lines of the old pattern books—they carried enough information to give young couples an image of their dream house, and a rough idea to the builder of plan, elevation, materials, and dimensions.

Otherwise, Williams is best known for the theme building at Los Angeles International Airport (in association with Pereira & Luckman and Welton Becket & Associates), a new wing for the Beverly Hills Hotel, and numerous churches. By 1950 the Williams office had a staff of over 50.

That said, there is little evidence, certainly not in his diary, that Williams' race played any major role in securing him commissions, no matter what impact it had on his social life and his social contacts with clients and their entourage. His concern for the well-being of fellow blacks is manifest in the designs he did for Los Angeles' black community, including low-cost houses, a church, an elementary school, several YMCAs, and a children's hospital in Memphis, for which he waived his fee.

John Moutoussamy (1922–1995)

The most contemporary of the latter-day pioneers is Chicago-born architect John Moutoussamy. He is known above all as the black architect who designed a high-profile downtown Chicago headquarters office building, with an African American as client. This was a feat unprecedented even as late as 1971, when his client, Johnson Publishing Company chief executive John Johnson, moved into his new building on South Michigan Avenue.

Earlier, Moutoussamy had designed the 744-unit Theodore K. Lawless Gardens, named after a prosperous black dermatologist and philanthropist, a model project that won several design awards.

Moutoussamy's work was a lot broader than these examples would indicate. He was principal partner on such complex commissions as the Southwest Transit Project, which comprised eight rapid transit stations, a maintenance facility, and seven traction power substations. He designed health-care facilities and many schools, including the modernization of 18 school buildings for the Chicago Board of Education.

John Moutoussamy is known above all as the black architect who designed a high-profile downtown Chicago headquarters office building, with an African American as client.

Born in Chicago in 1922 of parents born in Guadeloupe—his mother was Creole and spoke next to no English. How Motoussamy, with these roots, ended up as a prominent architect is a tale of timing and perseverance. His mother had worked for an architect as a maid and regaled her son with glowing reports about the architect's personality and lifestyle. Then, faced with the all too common admonition to black youths that architecture was not the career for them, it only hardened his resolve. An admirer of Mies van der Rohe, Moutoussamy elected to study at the Illinois Institute of Technology, whose architecture department was then headed by Mies. John's daughter Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, widow of Arthur Ashe, told me that John White, later president of Cooper Union, had been responsible in 1948 for getting her father into IIT under the GI Bill.

At IIT, Moutoussamy was close to Mies, who even gave him a drafting set. His work, then and later, reflected Mies' spare design, flat surfaces, and absence of ornament. He graduated in 1948 with a BS degree in architecture and was licensed after an unusually

short internship two years later.

He soon joined Dubin Dubin and Black, a prominent Chicago office. The partners, who had never known Moutoussamy as anything more than a name, came to recognize him as an extraordinary employee who was now also billing as much as 25 percent of the firm's total revenues. They explored the idea of a full and equal partnership in the firm. They also reviewed the idea with their clients, who welcomed it. So, in 1966, Moutoussamy became a partner in the firm, which changed its name to Dubin Dubin Black and Moutoussamy (DDBM).

Johnson Publishing Headquarters, by John Moutoussamy

DDBM had long embraced minorities in its hiring and promotion practices. Henry Dubin, Arthur's father, and George, his uncle, who together founded the firm in 1914, had employed minority staff long before this became commonplace. Several of the firm's junior partners in recent years came from racial and religious minorities, and the firm went out of its way to hire minorities out of school (the Dubins were Jewish, Black was Anglo Saxon Protestant).

As a disciple of Mies, Moutoussamy felt that Mies' spare impersonal design vocabulary worked anywhere. He also thought it presumptuous to expect successful black entrepreneurs or other well-to-do blacks to hire black architects merely because of their race. "You can't put that burden on a Black guy who happens to be successful," he told *Ebony Magazine* in a July 1983 article. "I think he ought to use the architect that serves his needs best." [Black and majority patronage will be discussed as a key issue in this column in mid-2007.] Moutoussamy's partner Peter Dubin once said: "[John] was always amused with the question [about his role in shaping an African American influence in architecture] … He believed in the theory of one architecture for all people, rich and poor," according to a Chicago newspaper obituary in May 1995.

By the time Moutoussamy had died, DDBM had become broadly diversified racially, to the extent that it was rated as a 51 percent minority firm for government set-aside purposes. The firm did not survive his death, despite efforts by partner Arthur Dubin, who, with three other architects, ended up forming a new firm.

Moutoussamy shared many of the personal qualities of another pioneer, Paul Williams. He was gracious and courteous. The order of worship of the funeral mass in 1995 describes him as a "kind, compassionate, gentle and loving man … quiet spoken, always eager to listen, and had a humor all his own."

He got his start under urban renewal. His first jobs as head of his own firm consisted of working on the redevelopment of an area on Chicago's South Side that had been settled by black families during World War I. His role was to design high-rise and low-rise housing. One project was later designated as the Dr Theodore K. Lawless Gardens.

But the critical event in his life was design of the Johnson Publishing headquarters. Arthur Dubin relates the tricky circumstances of getting a loan and approval for the building. The mortgage company had suggested that Moutoussamy ally himself with an experienced architecture firm. He was given a list of four all-white firms. Three of them would have placed John in a routine position with little impact. The fourth firm, Dubin Dubin and Black, offered him his own space in the office, drafting and other support he would need to get the work out, and a separate checking account. The lion's share in breaking down the financial and racial barriers go to publisher John Johnson, who used persistence, contacts, guile, and sheer pluck to obtain the necessary permits and loans to proceed with the job. But Moutoussamy was an essential weapon in Johnson's arsenal.

Appraisal

Did Abele, Williams, and the other trailblazer architects inspire later generations of black architects? The circumstances of founding and developing a practice are different today, in many ways, though uncomfortably similar in others. The numbers of black architects employed in or owning a practice have multiplied manifold since the gallant days of the trailblazers, who showed that even under the most severe restrictions, black architects had the skills, initiative, and perseverance to produce work of professional quality.

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

Stull and Lee, Orchard Gardens School, 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.

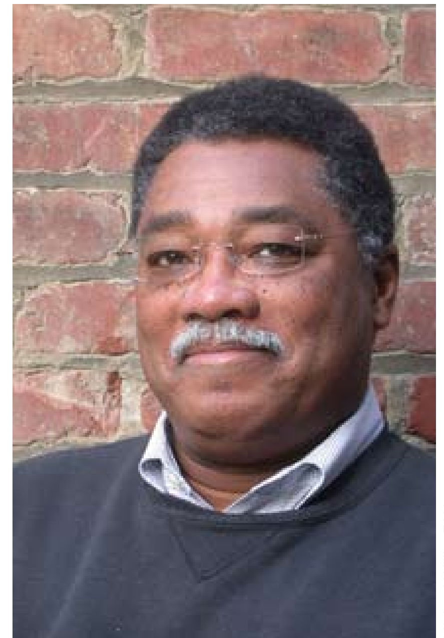
Stull and Lee collaborating with William Rawn Associates, monument to the victims and survivors of Katrina, photo courtesy of architect

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."

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

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 sit and the technology to survive.

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

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

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?

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FACE OF THE AIA

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.

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.

Philip Freelon, FAIA

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.

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.

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

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—confirm], a former partner at SOM and later principal at Ai.

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 [verify the F] 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 [am checking if black owned or with black principal].

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.