

FROM NC STATE TO THE SMITHSONIAN

an architect with stories to tell

BY CHRIS SAUNDERS



LEADING THE TEAM DESIGNING A NEW SMITHSONIAN MUSEUM, PHIL FREELON '75 CELEBRATES THE FUTURE WITH DESIGNS HONORING HISTORY AND CULTURE.

Charlotte's Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture sits in a neighborhood where urban renewal in the 1960s pushed out a thriving African-American community. One casualty was an all-black school that had an iconic metal staircase that led to the name "Jacob's Ladder School."

When Phil Freelon '75 first saw the site, it was a barren space on a rail-thin 50-by-400-foot tract with ramps to a parking deck. Some architects might have shrugged off the project and seen only an inert space. But Freelon saw potential. Today, the Gantt Center building tells a story of the neighborhood's past by including a Jacob's ladder motif in its stairs, escalators and atrium. On the exterior, diagonal channels intersect

with one another at upward angles, looking like a steel fire escape spun by a spider. "The story is one of projecting a vibrant future but at the same time honoring the past," says David Taylor, president and chief executive officer of the Gantt Center. Several hundred miles away, the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture could be Freelon's greatest story yet. He leads the 32-consultant team of Freelon Adjaye

artifacts as diverse as a powder horn owned by an African-American who fought in the American Revolution and Bo Diddley's trademark hat.

It's a project that falls in line with what Freelon has always tried to do. "We have a standard that says the building should contribute positively to the community in which it's built," Freelon says. His firm specializes in cultural museums, educational buildings and other projects that tell stories. "In our measure libraries, museums and educational buildings do that. And prisons and strip shopping centers don't."

FASHIONING A NARRATIVE

Architects like Freelon fashion a narrative by placing symbols of history and culture into the building's walls. They configure functionality into that story. They consider what experiences the potential visitor brings to a building. Such have been the concerns on the projects Freelon has designed or had a part in designing, like projects at Yale University, Greensboro's International Civil Rights Center & Museum, San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora, the Charlotte Bobcats Arena and the upcoming renovation of the Gregg Museum of Art & Design at NC State.

Like buildings, architects have stories, too. Freelon's lies in his trademark of seeing opportunity. Freelon's oldest son, Deen, collected comic books as a child. Instead of just buying Deen comic books, Freelon bought stock in Marvel Comics. The two would pore over the newspaper to see the latest stock prices. He found a

way to combine his son's hobby with his own aim of instilling a lesson into his children. "As a business owner, I wanted the children to see that there's more to life than just being a consumer," Freelon says.



Freelon in front of his firm's awards for its architectural designs.

At play in that story is Freelon's business acumen, a trait that served him well when he started his career. In the early 1980s, Bill O'Brien '62 and John Atkins '66 convinced Freelon to join their firm, O'Brien/Atkins, in Durham. Atkins, managing partner at O'Brien/Atkins, says

Freelon's ability to engage people stands out from those days. Within months of being at the firm, Freelon had started a basketball team there and found a gym for games. "He's a gregarious guy in a good sense of the word," Atkins says. "He became what we call director of architecture for the firm."

But Freelon began to feel a push in another direction. He took a leave of absence from O'Brien/Atkins in 1989 to go to Harvard on a Loeb Fellowship, awarded to mid-career professionals in the design field who show potential as industry leaders. During that first semester of independent study, teaching and reflection, he saw an opportunity—he wanted to start his own firm. When he returned to Durham in May 1990, he started The Freelon Group with only one employee—himself. "I wasn't scared because I had been with other firms for 13 years, so it wasn't like I had just gotten my license or degree and hung out a shingle." The firm has since grown to include 51 employees.



The Central Hall in the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture will have wooden planks lit with soft light for its ceiling. Below, the museum will occupy one of the last building sites on the National Mall.



CROWNING ACHIEVEMENTS

In his office, a baseball sits on a shelf over his desk from when he and his team designed the new Durham Bulls Athletic Park, where his wife, Nnenna, an accomplished jazz singer, sang the national anthem on the park's opening night. Alan Axelrod's *Patton on Leadership* adorns his office bookshelf alongside Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. Twelve of his wife's jazz CDs align the window of his glass office along with five passes he's worn to the Grammy Awards when she's been nominated.

His office represents him well. Freelon glides smoothly through an array of conversations. He shifts from chess—it took his son 24 years to beat him for the first time—to science fiction. From his hobbies—fishing, hiking, photography and dj'ing New Year's Eve parties—to being "Pop-Pop" to his three grandchildren, Aion, Justice and Stella. From his favorite movie, *The Matrix*, to inspiration for projects.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS COURTESY OF THE FREELON GROUP

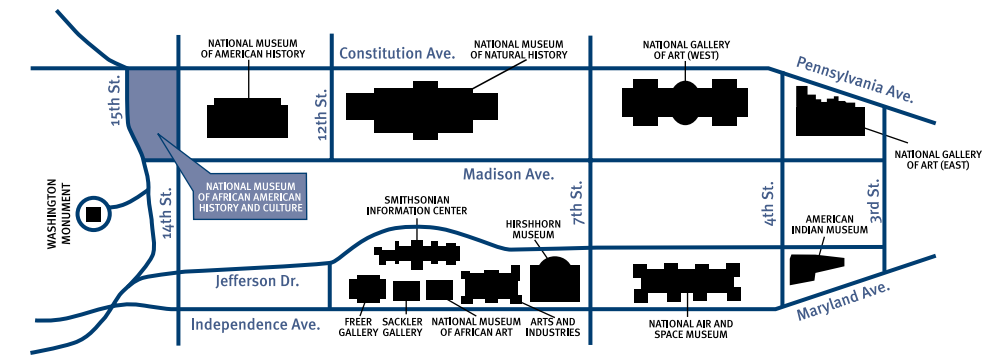
SCULPTURE PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE FREELON GROUP

He shows a distinct willingness to help the layperson understand where his team's design ideas are born. Asked to explain the designs of the new Smithsonian museum, he hesitates. Instead of offering a quick answer over sushi, he suggests a visit to his office where he can show the design that tells the building's story.

There, Freelon displays diagrams and renderings of the current design of the Smithsonian. The building will extend upward into the sky as a three-tiered bronze corona, representing faith, hope and resiliency. The concept, he says, originates in Yoruban art and architecture, where caryatids were built with their capitals resembling three-tiered crowns. It's no accident that the angles on the corona match the 17-and-a-half degree angle on the capstone of the Washington Monument.

Freelon and his team have invested much in answering the museum's design demands. But while Freelon believes it is a pinnacle for him, he also views the

The National Mall in Washington, D.C.



project as an integral part of his professional evolution. "I'm in here not to get to a certain destination, but to make sure the journey and the path is a meaningful one and that at the end of the day, we've made a positive impact," he says.

The Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture, which opened in 2005, was also part of that journey. The Freelon Group helped design the 72,000-square-foot structure, which stands out near Baltimore's Inner Harbor with trumpeting red and yellow panels against the black of the building's exterior. "This is something that is indicative of the African-American legacy where you have jazz, improvisation and harmony," says Leslie King-Hammond, chair of the board of directors for the Lewis Museum. "It's all there. It's bold. It's animated."

Freelon believes his African-American culture's influence is only natural and that artists are infused by who they are. "When someone asks, 'Are you a black architect or an architect?' Well, I'm an architect," Freelon says. "But the fact that I'm African-American is a reality every single day

of the year for every year of my life. I'm proud of my heritage. It makes a difference in who I am and in my design work."

Born in Philadelphia to middle-class parents, Freelon received advantages and education that he says he didn't always see in some of his friends' homes. His father, a salesman, and his mother, an English teacher, were well traveled, he says. Freelon was encouraged to paint and draw. Allan Freelon, his grandfather, helped lead the African-American Impressionist movement in America.

Phil Freelon remembers visiting his grandfather's studio and falling in love with art. He later combined that love with a knack for tinkering and building model cars, miniature battleships and airplanes.

Freelon went to Philadelphia's Central High School, a magnet school. He stumbled into design classes and saw them as the perfect blend of art, science and math. He consumed all aspects of the discipline and applied to architecture school at Hampton University.

His family's influence and his education at Central helped provide opportunities that formed



The Yoruban caryatid, which features a three-tiered crown, serves as inspiration for the new Smithsonian's design.



Architect Phil Freelon '75

Best part of being an architect:

Walking through a construction site and seeing a building take form and watching an idea come into reality in three dimensions in real time.

His first project he saw finished:

I was a student working with Latimer [architect firm in Durham]. Mr. Latimer had given me an opportunity to design a greenhouse for a client. . . . It got built before I finished school. . . . It was a real thrill to see the ideas that were on paper.

The building that most inspires him:

I was always impressed with the Sydney Opera House. It's an example of what we try to do. . . . It makes a reference to something else, like the sails. It's iconic and has come to symbolize a whole country.

Favorite Wolfpack sports memory:

I was in Reynolds Coliseum when David Thompson went up and came down on his head. They had to carry him out on a stretcher, but he came back. We were all relieved that he hadn't been killed.

the basis to understand and connect to different cultures. Doug Shipman, the executive director of the National Center for Civil & Human Rights in Atlanta, says it's that trait that made Freelon the ideal candidate to imagine a vision for a museum that will link two worlds—the civil rights movement and how that legacy continues with human rights today. Freelon, 58, was a teenager in the late 1960s and early 1970s and saw the products of a segregated world along with new opportunities when that world began eroding. Says Shipman: “He can tap into the legacy of the civil rights era, of African-American history. But he experiences the world when the walls come down and there's burgeoning freedom. Phil's right at the fulcrum point.”

A FORCE OF NATURE

On the campus of N.C. Central University, the BRITE building houses a statewide initiative to prepare workers in biotechnology industries. Designed by The Freelon Group and opened in 2008, the building has strips of windows, running horizontally, whose ends asymmetrically marry one another to give the building the appearance of an unfolded DNA strand. The BRITE building also stands as a symbol of The Freelon Group's commitment to education, an integral part of Freelon's own DNA.

Part of that commitment came from his time in Raleigh, where he saw the value of mentorship. In the early 1970s, Freelon made his way to Hampton University, but his sojourn eventually took him to NC State in 1973 when Roger Clark, ACSA distinguished professor in the College of Design, recruited him.

“He was a hard-working, sophisticated, mature young man as a student as I interviewed him and tried to talk him into leaving Hampton to come here,” Clark says. “In a very quiet way, he was energetic. He was always quiet but he worked hard.”

Experiencing a world in Raleigh 180 degrees different from Hampton, a historically black university, Freelon invoked social malleability he says he learned from watching his father function in private and public worlds. At home, his father might be admiring Muhammad Ali. But then he'd be on the phone with his boss in Miami, sounding more formal and being more conscious of how he came across. Freelon says that was “hardwired” into him. “You're a kid and you're not studying it, but you're absorbing it,” he says. “I knew it was possible, even fun, just to relate across the board.”

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE FREELON GROUP

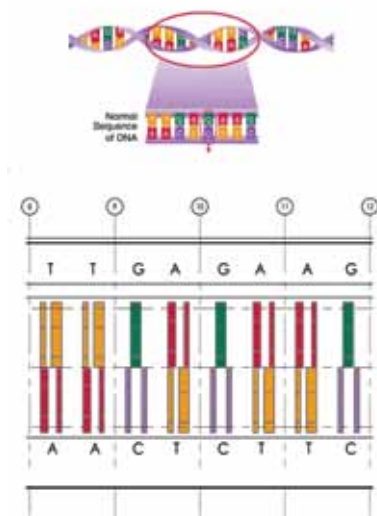


Freelon's designs intertwine function and aesthetics. Clockwise from left, the Raleigh-Durham International Airport's parking deck, Baltimore's Reginald F. Lewis Museum and Charlotte's Gantt Center, which also features the symbolic Jacob's ladder motif.



“I'm in here not to get to a certain DESTINATION, but to make sure the JOURNEY and the PATH is a MEANINGFUL one and that at the end of the day, we've made a POSITIVE impact.”

—Phil Freelon '75



Freelon's team designed the windows of the BRITE building, above, at N.C. Central's campus to resemble an unfolded DNA strand.

Marvin Malecha, dean of the College of Design, says that Freelon didn't have a lot of African-American architects for role models. In the 1975 *Agromeck*, photos of Freelon's senior class in the College of Design show two African-American students out of 63. "There weren't a lot of African-Americans around him in class," Malecha says. "If you're sitting in a class and none of the students look like you, and your teacher doesn't look like you, you start to ask, 'Can I make it?'" Freelon says he never struggled with that question. He had seen and functioned in a similar environment at Central High, where he says he was a minority.

"Let's say that there is a struggle in the broader sense," Freelon says of the under-representation of minorities in architecture. Sanford Garner, president of National Organization of Minority Architects, says African-Americans account for about one percent of all licensed architects in the United States. He attributes that to minority youth's lack of exposure to the field of architecture.

Freelon thought he could serve as a valuable mentor in his time as a student at NC State for other students who may have felt their backgrounds and experiences weren't represented. When he was a junior, he met freshman Percy Hooper '78, '81 M.A. Being African-Americans in a program consisting predominantly of whites, Hooper says he and Freelon noticed each other immediately. Freelon taught him expert model-building techniques and schooled him in the musical virtues of *The Spinners*. The two cooked together. Hooper saw Freelon's and his own success as something that transcended race.

"Excellence tends to overcome those things," says Hooper, an associate professor of industrial design in the College of Design and director of the Product Development and Entrepreneurship Initiative. "People no longer see you as an ethnicity. They see you as a force of nature."

Malecha says Freelon, who has served as an adjunct professor in the College of Design, continues that mentoring role, serving as the college's "conscience" for those students who feel out of place or

A PROBLEM is just "something that needs a SOLUTION." —Phil Freelon '75

ill-prepared for expectations. He has served on the Design Guild Board, a fundraising and advisory group for the college. Malecha says Freelon regularly asks how the college is recruiting and nurturing those students and always adds his insight about how to better deal with them. In July his leadership role at NC State expanded when he joined the university's Board of Trustees.

Freelon has also served as a visiting lecturer at Harvard, Syracuse University and MIT, where he did his graduate work. And his mentorship extends to his professional world. He recruits a diverse team at The Freelon Group. "That's absolutely critical to what he does," says Edwin Harris '04, '05, who has worked at the

firm for three years. "He makes no bones about it. He's proud of that. He understands that being diverse in our workforce can only make it better."

DESIGNING SOLUTIONS

In 2009, the Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History in Augusta, Ga., was in need of expansion. Its executive director, Christine Miller-Betts, was looking for a designer who would be sensitive to what the project needed. By then, The Freelon Group had completed a handful of cultural museums, starting with the renovation of the African American Culture Center at NC State in 1993.

Miller-Betts saw Freelon present at a conference on historic museums and

decided he had the sensitivity she wanted. The Freelon Group showed up ready to invest time in the project's design. The staff arrived in Augusta and talked with the museum's staff. Then they talked with civic leaders. Then they talked with other community stakeholders. "I remember saying, 'They know more people in Augusta than we do,'" she says.

Freelon's projects are not all cultural museums. They are also public works buildings, campus buildings, athletic facilities and hospitals. Freelon is just as proud of the parking garage at the Raleigh-Durham International Airport as some of the major museums he's designed. "Airports are the portal to your community," he says. Holding thousands



ILLUSTRATION AND PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE FREELON GROUP

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL ZIRKLE



The Freelon Group has designed the National Center for Civil & Human Rights in Atlanta. The building's design includes the motif of interlocking arms, a symbol of human chains from protests in the 1960s.

of vehicles, the structure has spiral ramps, each resembling at night an illuminated funnel with a thumbtack pressed down its center. "This isn't what a parking lot is supposed to look like," his son Pierce says. "It's supposed to be a place where you put cars. But it takes an artist to really be able to appreciate how you can flip that in a way that when people see it, they say, 'What is that structure?'"

Freelon's ability to fuse function with aesthetics and a community's identity define his style. And it's what keeps him hungry for imagining what could be next for the firm. "[The Smithsonian] is not the last and best thing," he says, wondering out loud if an Obama presidential library might one day be on the horizon.

For Freelon, looking to the future is not a problem. In architecture, he says, problems exist, but never as obstacles. A problem, he says, is just "something that needs a solution." It's in those solutions where Freelon's work becomes so interesting.

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» Phil Freelon '75 is more than just an architect. Read a Q & A with him that shows his vast array of interests and see more of his projects in North Carolina and around the U.S.

KEYWORDS: Phil Freelon

A Selection of The Freelon Group's Projects

North Carolina

BOONE
 > Turchin Visual Arts Center, Appalachian State University

CHAPEL HILL
 > Stone Center, UNC-Chapel Hill

CHARLOTTE
 > Charlotte Bobcats Arena
 > Harvey B. Gantt Center

DURHAM
 > Durham County Library, North and South locations
 > Durham Bulls Athletic Park
 > Durham Station

GREENSBORO
 > International Civil Rights Center & Museum
 > Buildings on campus of N.C. A&T State University

RALEIGH
 > RDU General Aviation Terminal
 > RDU Parking Deck

Georgia

ATLANTA
 > National Center for Civil & Human Rights (in development)

Maryland

BALTIMORE
 > Reginald F. Lewis Museum

California

SAN FRANCISCO
 > Museum of the African Diaspora

Washington, D.C.

> Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

Taking Up Residence:

The New Gregg Museum of Art & Design

Phil Freelon '75 is back on campus. The College of Design graduate is again bringing his vision to NC State as his architectural firm begins to design the new Gregg Museum of Art & Design, slated to open in 2014 in the chancellor's residence on Hillsborough Street.

"For me, being able to work on the campus again gives me an opportunity to contribute to NC State," says Freelon, whose firm also designed the Partners III research building on Centennial Campus and the renovation of Thomas Hall. He also credits NC State as the beginning of his foray into designing museums and cultural centers in 1993 when The Freelon Group completed renovations of the African American Cultural Center in Witherspoon Student Center.

Located in Talley Student Center, the Gregg plans to move into a temporary space in the Brickhaven Building adjacent to JC Raulston Arboretum by summer 2013. If all fundraising goals are met sooner rather than later, it could bypass that step, move directly into the chancellor's residence on Hillsborough Street and open the following spring. That building will be renovated and a new wing will be added.

"It will literally put the Gregg on the map," says Alex Miller, associate vice provost, ARTS NCSTATE. "You can't look on any campus map or any city of Raleigh maps and find us. We're not a stand-alone facility."

The chancellor's residence will move to a new home near the Dorothy and Roy Park Alumni Center by the end of this year.

The Gregg specializes in cultural artifacts, holding exhibits of textiles, ceramics, folk art, photography, architectural drawings and modern furniture. It also houses the James and Eileen Lecce Ethnic Art Collection, which features tribal art from Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the Americas.



The Gregg Museum's storage space filled up quickly over the last 20 years. More storage space is one of many amenities featured in the design of the new wing, seen here (far right).



The new project will cost \$7.5 million, but the university is providing \$3 million—about the cost of the original museum—to get things rolling. The Gregg Campaign Committee will need to raise the remaining \$4.5 million from private sources, Miller says.

Plans include a renovation to the 7,950-square-foot residence, built in 1928 at a cost of \$30,000. An approximately 16,800-square-foot addition will feature exhibition galleries, teaching spaces for on-site instruction and school groups, and increased storage space for the museum's collection. "That's important because museums just don't stop collecting," Miller says.

Roger Manley, director of the Gregg, says the new space will also allow the Gregg to host arts festivals. The grounds of the

residence will enable visitors to walk through an outdoor sculpture garden.

The Freelon Group won the bid to design the new Gregg in June. Freelon says that he loves the opportunity to incorporate the chancellor's residence in the new Gregg's design rather than leave it unused. That approach is one of the most effective ways to achieve sustainability in architecture, he says.

And he likes finding a solution for the architectural challenge the residence poses. "How do you begin to add pieces to an existing building and come away with a unified whole, something that makes the two pieces complimentary?" he asks. Freelon believes that because the two buildings will hold different purposes—galleries in the new wing and largely administrative spaces in the

residence—he can bring his contemporary sensibility to the traditional building and still find compatibility.

NC State and The Freelon Group are discussing design plans, and the goal is to have a final one in place by spring 2012, Manley says.

For Miller, the firm was a clear winner because of the homework it did for the proposal and the sensitivity it had shown in understanding how to utilize the historic Georgian-style home.

"When you've got a local architectural firm that's been selected to do the latest Smithsonian museum on the Mall, that's an obvious choice," Miller says. "It's not every day that design firms are entrusted with the design of a museum." —Chris Saunders