On Architecture

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Architectural rendering of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, showing porch-side south entrance. Courtesy of Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup.

Architectural rendering showing light entering museum though filigreed panels. Courtesy of Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup.

Architectural rendering of the corona. Courtesy of Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup.
Some spaces shape you.
For great things, or nothing at all.

The house with the veranda shaped me.
At five, I made my first curatorial decisions:
marking in crayolas
where I wanted red, orange, blue —
over the paint-patterned
fleur de lys walls.

Then someone said,
you are not supposed to do that, make
marks on walls.
So I stopped.

Until much later,
until curating.

I am a granddaughter, and a curator. Not an architectural historian. But in 2011, I began an architectural research project about a house my grandfather built. The project, titled “V is for Veranda,” centers on a concrete home my maternal grandfather, Charles Eric Wilkinson, designed and built in British Guiana (now Guyana), South America in 1954. It is the home I lived in with my grandmother and grandfather until age five, when I moved to Brooklyn. The goals of my research project were multiple. I wondered how a black man in colonial British Guiana was able to design and build his own concrete home at a time when the typical material for building domestic spaces was timber? Why did he build outside of the capital city, choosing instead a village where most of the homes were one-room wooden structures on stilts? Why did he include an upper level veranda on the blueprint he drafted for the home? Did he consider himself an architect?

Grandfather Wilkinson was a prolific builder of concrete houses, but he also worked on bridges, dams, and golf clubs. Although he did not complete high school, Wilkinson learned his trade through apprenticeships with Guyanese master builders and through correspondence courses with technical institutes in England. His occupation was listed as “carpenter” on official documents as late as the 1970s — the decade he died — despite his role overseeing civil engineering projects and participating on government-led housing and planning committees.

In countries like Guyana, across the African Diaspora, and elsewhere, people design and build their own homes all the time, without being called architects. As did Wilkinson, they draw plans, they coordinate labor, and they enact all of the steps of architectural production to create not only single family homes but entire communities. As countries under colonial rule transitioned to independence, the designers and builders of these homes made design decisions about how they wanted to live and what
they wanted their built environment to look like. Yet scholars often discuss the innovative work of black builders as a function of skilled labor, rather than an intellectual engagement with architecture and design.

It troubled me that the work of men like my grandfather (and women) did not figure much into the histories of design I came across. If Charles Eric Wilkinson was not an architect by license, he certainly seemed to be one by vocation. I decided to develop a case study of the 1954 house Wilkinson designed for his family. I aimed to understand how the practices of carpenters, craftsmen, and builders functioned within the realm of “architecting” — my term for the range of expressive and cognitive practices that shape the built environment. Seeking to intervene in conversations about architectural heritage, “V is for Veranda” began by using oral history, family records, original blueprints, and other archival materials to recover Wilkinson’s work as an authored — not an anonymous — innovation in the architectural language of his era and location.

I AM A CURATOR AT THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION’S NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE (NMAAHC), scheduled to open in 2016. When I pass the construction site for this nascent museum, I can’t help but reflect on the work of Charles Eric Wilkinson and the legacy of black builders and designers. The role of African Americans in the building arts is a theme being taken up in the museum’s inaugural exhibitions. In preserving and interpreting the black past, the museum offers up “a mirror that makes those who are often invisible, more visible,” says Lonnie G. Bunch, the founding director.

As a curator at the new museum, one of my tasks is helping visitors to understand the architectural symbolism of the building and the significance of its historic location. The museum sits at the corner of Constitution Avenue and 14th Street, between the National Museum of American History and the Washington Monument, on a stretch of land in Washington, DC referred to as the National Mall. From the Capitol Building on one end to the Lincoln Memorial on the other, the National Mall encompasses monuments and landmarks, Smithsonian museums, sculpture gardens, and a large expanse for open air festivals and recreational activities. As has been documented in Black Men Built the Capitol, the area includes several buildings constructed with the aid of free and enslaved African Americans.

Four firms make up the National Museum of African American History and Culture’s architectural team: The Freelon Group; Adjaye Associates; Davis Brody Bond; and the SmithGroup. The architect of record is Phil Freelon of the Freelon Group. The lead designer is David Adjaye of Adjaye Associates. The Adjaye Associates website offers a concise overview of the design direction for the museum:

As lead designer for the Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup (FAB) team, David Adjaye’s approach has been to establish both a meaningful relationship to this unique site as well as a strong conceptual resonance with America’s deep and longstanding African heritage. The design rests on three cornerstones: the “corona” shape and form of the building; the extension of the building out into the landscape — the porch; and the bronze filigree envelope.

The corona is based on elements of the Washington Monument, closely matching the 17-degree angle of the capstone and the panel size and pattern has been developed using the Monument stones as a reference. The entire building is wrapped in an ornamental bronze lattice that is a historical reference to African American craftsmanship. The density of the pattern can be modulated to control the amount of sunlight and transparency into the interior. The south entry is composed of the porch and a central water feature. An extension of the building out into the landscape, the porch creates an outdoor room that bridges the gap between the interior and exterior.

Like Wilkinson’s blueprint, the architects’ design decisions are actions that frame the building in one way or another. Their
decisions shape our expectations, emotions, and empathy as we journey through African American experience. From the building’s exterior through to its structural core, the architects aim to fold the history and culture of African Americans into a design that has both communal and personal resonances.

The architectural elements of the museum have become grounding devices for my own story as a scholar, curator, descendant, and heir.

As a granddaughter, I recover my grandfather’s work as both an intellectual and material legacy.

As a curator, I translate the architectural symbolism of the building for the museum’s visitors.

As both, I am the language through which my experiences and identities can speak to each other.

“Buildings are deeply emotive structures which form our psyche.” —David Adjaye

As a child I felt safe and protected on my grandparents’ veranda.

For David Adjaye, the museum should create a feeling of incredible inclusion and attainable triumph. Imbued with the “emotive” qualities Adjaye is known for integrating into his designs, the new museum promises to be a place that “helps form your everyday psyche.” One of the design inspirations for the building is a photograph of a woman whose hands are raised upward and outward above her head, in a gesture of praise. This uplifted posture is alluded to in the vertical lines that similarly pull the building’s silhouette upward and outward from its structural core.

Adjaye’s practice of an “emotive architecture” and attention to spaces that inform the user’s psychological state is supported by the museum’s director, Lonnie G. Bunch, who envisions the NMAAHC as a place where “people can find tools and paths to help them live their lives.”

Bunch and Adjaye are expressing a shared concern, but conceptualizing responses suited to their distinct roles. The architecture must be seductive enough to engage and arrest the potential visitor, a visitor who may not be interested in the idea of a museum about African American history and culture. In this sense, Adjaye’s job is to entice, to lure. His design will have to open minds and hearts, to make a story that many will not want to know seem too good to resist. Bunch’s job will be to match in content what the architectural team has offered in concept. “If one wants to understand the notion of American resilience, optimism, or spirituality,” Bunch says, “where better than the black experience.”

On the inside and outside of the museum, the African American past becomes a template for resiliency and a narrative from which all visitors can draw inspiration.

I embrace the museum’s design as a touchstone to my past. I listen for an echo. It sounds like this:

The Porch

“One extension of the building out into the landscape…”

One of the three key elements of the building is the porch. The idea for something called a porch on a public building is fascinating. I think about porches belonging to domestic spaces, to homes. But a “porch” on a 420,000 square ft. public institution?

The concept of using a porch as an architectural element relates to the social function this space holds in African and
African diaspora communities. It is a space for greeting neighbors, receiving visitors, and conversing with family and friends. It is where stories, banter, and intergenerational lessons are shared. A design that includes a porch for the museum, even an abstracted gestural one, affirms its connection to black southern vernaculars like the shotgun house, which has roots in Africa and resonances across the diaspora. The porch also is an architectural element that offers a gateway into a more interior space. In this case, the NMAAHC porch functions as a gateway between the stories inside the building and people outside, on the National Mall. As a Smithsonian museum, the NMAAHC falls prey to museum lore that the Smithsonian is the nation’s attic. At the same time, with the museum situated on the Mall it will also be understood as participating in the public culture of that space, affectionately known as America’s front yard or front lawn. The Mall is where the March on Washington, antwar protests, and presidential inaugurations happen. It is also a space for leisure activities like picnicking and games.

The Mall is a purposefully unmarked communal space that allows visitors to just be. In contrast, the museums and government buildings around the perimeter of the Mall do the work to pull you in; their forms and facades are respectful but magisterial. The design for the NMAAHC has no steps raising the porch feature above the street level. Unlike neighboring museums that are set back and high, the NMAAHC offers level access into the building through its covered porch feature. Because the Mall is a promenade with little shade, the porch’s canopy over the museum entrance functions almost like a tree on the landscape, according to Adjaye. The concept of including a porch also holds special, personal significance. Interpreting the significance of this building feature as part of a national museum connects directly to my ongoing exploration of the space of the “veranda” (a covered porch or balcony) in domestic architecture. The large veranda on the second floor of the home my grandfather built was a sheer delight to me as a child and remains a site of happy memories. As a scholar with interests in cultural geography and architecture, I became curious about my grandfather’s decision to design a home with a space that was between inside and out.

Wilkinson’s house was sited on what is called Public Road, a main artery leading out from the capital city of Georgetown and into the East Coast Demerara region. I saw the house on Public Road as Wilkinson’s way to make a public performance through architecture, and his inclusion of a second floor veranda as a means to provide access to and protect access from the street. There is something genteel about a second floor veranda, something between curiosity and composure. On this commonplace element of Caribbean architecture, J. Edwards writes:

"The highly dualistic nature of social life in West Indian society requires of its culture that it provide readily available mechanisms for mediation of recurring social oppositions. The gallery [or veranda] is a half-way stage between the intimacy of the hall and the formality of the road."

I’ve wondered if the reverse is not true also, or instead. That the veranda mediates between the formality of the hall (that is, the home) and the intimacies of the street.
Verandah Post, Yoruban Caryatid, Inverted Ziggurat

“In Yoruban art and architecture, the column or wooden post was usually crafted with a capital resembling a crown…” 14

When the designs for the NMAAHC were first presented to the public, one of the things that seemed to get repeated in the press was that the Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup design took the form of upside down pyramids, stacked one on top of another. I recall thinking it strange to describe the building this way and even stranger to make the pyramid a central motif of a museum in the United States. It seemed, through this description, a privileging of an Egyptian lexicon over the vast architectural vocabularies used throughout the African Diaspora. But I was wrong. And that description of the pyramids was misleading.

The “ziggurat” (stepped pyramid) shape of the museum, particularly on the floors that sit above ground, is based on wood sculptures like those created by Olowe of Ise (or Olowe d’Ise, 1873-1938), a Yoruba master carver. “Reminiscent of an inverted ziggurat, the corona is akin to a huge capital at the top of a Yoruban column — tiered and cantilevered as it rises,” explains one critic.15 For Freelon, these top tiers of the column evoke “an architectural form that’s uplifting and dignified.” 16 In choosing a distinctly Yoruban inspiration, the FAB team identifies West Africa as a point of reference for a building that will trace the transatlantic slave trade to regions that are ancestral homelands of Africans brought to the Americas.

The six foot tall Olowe sculpture that Adjaye draws upon for inspiration is a type of caryatid — a sculpted form representing a human or animal figure that is used for architectural support, similar to a column on a building. Caryatids are common features in ancient Greek architecture. In reference images showing Olowe’s

Academics love to ponder liminality, thresholds, interstitial space. No wonder I was attracted to writing about the veranda. But the truth is, I had already written about this space in a 1991 prose poem, composed shortly after my first visit to Guyana since childhood:

In the house of my childhood, like any real house of childhood, there was a veranda. I remember when it was taller than me and when I grew past it. I could see outside then, onto the Public Road. And I could look down into our yard and see the trees—now barren, now blooming. On the veranda, I myself was Barbie before she came to me packaged and blond. I reigned in that dream house…. I owned that space above the open porch and patio. Ver-an-dah. My autopilot eyes sailing across a sea of green palm leaves with yellow patches. My own dream house, full-sized and first class.

I didn’t see any verandas in Brooklyn. I lost that word. Buried under new vocabulary, veranda muted to balcony. But all along I knew it; that it wasn’t the same. Buildings had balconies, but a house, a house had a veranda.13

The title “V is for Veranda” was from this first foray into understanding the spaces of my childhood and their lasting effect on me. More than twenty years later, I can say that my engagement with the veranda, the gallery, the porch, and so on, has profoundly reconnected me to my Guyanese roots and by extension to the veranda, the gallery, the porch, and so on, has profoundly reconnected me to my Guyanese roots and by extension to the

In reference images showing Olowe’s...
caryatid, there is a three-tiered “capital” atop the figure. This capital provides the conceptual shape for the museum building. For the most part, literature about the museum’s architectural design simply notes that the building’s “corona” shape is inspired by Yoruba sculpture. Rarely do journalists explain what a caryatid is and how it was and is used in Yoruba culture.

Delving deeper into the history of these types of sculptures, I found resonances with my research project. Olowe’s caryatid served as a “verandah post” in Nigeria. Writing about the use of caryatids in Yoruba housing, scholar Olotuah Abiodun Olukayode notes:

Caryatids are predominate features of Yoruba traditional architecture. They are used to support the roof structure of verandahs in the impluvium of courtyards of houses and in palaces of traditional rulers. They are also used in tribal shrines.17

It isn’t surprising that in articles about the building’s design, the term “verandah post” is mentioned fewer times than “caryatid,” and that both take a back seat to the more conventional and easily digestible references to the Yoruba “sculpture” or “carving” that inspired Adjaye. While the word “caryatid” focuses interpretation on the figurative and decorative aspects of the architectural support, “verandah post” conveys the form’s relationship to a specific building feature and designates the prominence of both the sculpted post and the verandah as characteristic elements of traditional Yoruba housing.

But the word “verandah” itself is not common parlance in the United States, although in Nigeria, Guyana, India, and other countries under British colonial influence into the 20th century, “verandah” is the primary term (and spelling) for what Americans may variously refer to as a porch, balcony, or terrace. In recapturing the word verandah as part of the lexicon of the building’s conceptual design, my version of the museum is recalibrated through this linguistic vestige of a diaspora that spans West Africa and the Caribbean. The traditional Yoruba architectural feature of the verandah post becomes as emblematic as Adjaye’s purposeful excerpting of the three-tiered capital that crowns Olowe’s caryatid.

The Corona, Egypt again

"The corona is based on elements of the Washington Monument..." 19

Located next to the Washington Monument grounds, the NMAAHC will also reference the capstone of that national landmark in its design of the corona. As architectural reporter J. Michael Welton comments, “most symbolic is the angle of this corona. It slants skyward at 17 degrees — almost precisely the cant of the capstone atop its neighbor, the Washington Monument. It’s at once a deft and thoughtful statement by Freelon Adjaye Bond — and a fitting gesture for the nation’s newest museum.”20 In connecting the design of the building to a U.S. national landmark, the architects are also attaching the museum to an internationally recognized architectural form —

the obelisk — that originates in ancient Egypt and that has been borrowed, stolen, or circulated across the globe.

Egypt becomes significant in understanding the building’s design, not because the capital crowning the Yoruban column may look like an inverted pyramid, but rather because Egyptian forms have been part of the architectural landscape of the National Mall, where this newest building sits. Many of the surrounding buildings are in the neoclassical model — modernized versions of Greco-Roman and Egyptian classicism. Among the more distinctive museums on the Mall are the Smithsonian Institution Building, referred to as “The Castle” — a red sandstone structure with turrets and Gothic-like vaulted ceilings; the Hirshhorn Museum, a circular, hollowed-out concrete cylinder that houses modern and contemporary art; and National Museum of the American Indian, a tan-colored, gently curving form that references natural landscapes. With its trapezoidal profile and bronze color, the NMAAHC presents a visage of a different sort. For many casual observers, the shimmering metallic surface of the museum may look modern, fresh, perhaps even African-inspired, unlike any of the stone and concrete structures that line the mall’s grassy promenade.

As Adjaye explains, “the buildings on the Mall, which are the classical buildings, come from the northern trajectory of Egyptian classicism. And essentially what I’m trying to say is, this [NMAAHC building] is a kind of southern Egyptian strategy, it’s a southern Egyptian classical, but it comes from the same narratives

The place, and place
meant of black people.
Their heavy Egypt.

—AMIRI BARAKA, “RETURN OF THE NATIVE”
actually. And that, if you look, the founding fathers actually placed the entire history on the Mall, because what is the monument of Washington, the first president of America? It’s Karnak’s needle. I mean that obelisk… it’s Karnak’s needle.21

Karnak is a massive complex of temples in southern Egypt, dating at least from the beginning of the Middle Kingdom (roughly 2000 BC) onwards. The obelisks built in Karnak are some of the earliest examples of this monumental form. Often mounted in pairs at the entrances to temples, their upward peaks communicated with the gods and conveyed strength and protection. Some of these towering pillars constructed by the ancient Egyptians are currently located in Rome, Paris, and New York.

For Adjaye, Karnak commences a classical tradition that can be read as “the beginning of the enlightenment of architecture.”22 The temples at Karnak were a site for pilgrimage. While Adjaye does not subscribe to the idea of the “museum as temple,” any institution built on the National Mall is potentially a destination for mass arrival. The temple architecture of southern Egypt gets quoted in the Washington Monument’s obelisk, and by extension in the NMAAHC’s corona design, which also quotes from Yoruba shrine architecture. As the museum building emerges onto the hallowed grounds of American history, and into architectural canons, it does so with Africa as a locus for a global history of enlightenment. As the architect and scholar Mabel O. Wilson writes: “This Neo-Egyptian aesthetic play of the museum along with other visual cues re-emphasizes the ‘other’ origins for American national culture.”23

Bronzen Skin

“...wrapped in an ornamental bronze....”24

Initially, the NMAAHC was to be clad in bronze metal. The significance of bronze partially relates to the color of the material and to the uses for bronze historically. The radiant brown hues of bronze represent for the architectural team an “African American presence that is a permanent part of the American landscape.”25 Adjaye also comments that in continental Africa “bronze was the ultimate material to concretize your art form.”26 Bronze is the monumental material of skilled artisans and sculptors not only in Africa, but throughout the world.

The architects proposed using a decorative bronze mesh for the building’s filigree exterior. The concept became a homage to the creativity of enslaved and free black artisans and the metalwork designs they evolved. In particular, the architects drew inspiration from the intricately crafted wrought iron porches, verandas, and fences throughout Charleston and New Orleans.

Bronze turned out to be too heavy for an ornamental structure that hangs off the building, and the architects and Smithsonian agreed to use a bronze-colored material that will offer similar luminous surface properties, but without the excessive weight of the metal.

Filigree

“The density of the pattern can be modulated to control the amount of sun-light and transparency into the interior....”27

In the Caribbean, architecture is asked to moderate climate and provide shade, keeping buildings and their inhabitants cool from tropical temperatures. The veranda is one approach, as it offers opportunities for cross breeze, and by definition, provides a covered area with views to the outside. Another common structure in the Caribbean is the “breeze block,” a type of perforated concrete screen that may serve as a fence or wall through which air and light passes. Breeze blocks are cousins to the “brise-soleil” — lattice-like architectural forms that provide openings in walls to let in light and provide a measure of shade. These forms were popular in the “tropical modern” variety of architecture promulgated at the middle of the 20th century, particularly in the designs of British architect couple Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew in Ghana and Nigeria (and in their work and Le Corbusier’s in India).28

The museum’s architects explain that the patterns selected for the building’s filigree envelope are abstractions of cast iron designs by African American metalworkers in South Carolina and Louisiana. The bronze-colored lattice-work is a prominent feature on the exterior of the building, but it does not function in the ways expected from a wrought iron gate (protective) or a balcony trellis (decorative). Rather the filigree system is designed for moderating light into the museum building, suggesting a relationship to the family of brise-soleil features used for official government buildings and private homes in West Africa, the Anglophone Caribbean, and other “tropical” locales. Working in two ways, the filigree technique brings “dappled light” — as Adjaye calls it29 — into the building, while also providing strategic views for visitors to look out from the building to the monument sites along the National Mall.
Conceptualized with the material heritage of African Americans in mind, the building design speaks of history and ongoing ingenuity. While the use of a filigree pattern abstracted from iron facades in the American South spotlights the role of black builders and craftspeople, it does so through a diasporic lens. Even the visual effect of scattered light mimics dispersed, but conversant traditions across black cultures. A diasporic lens is useful and necessary, as it affirms the significance of the international, transatlantic partnership that constitutes the museum’s selected architectural team. Both African-born and North American-born “black” architects are working in tandem, and alongside non-blacks, to shape distinctive architectural features that resonate as expressively “African American.” In doing so, they fulfill an aim of the museum to be a place for healing — not only one that helps Americans to empathize with other Americans, but a place that invites people from across the African continent, throughout the Diaspora, and around the world to see something of themselves as they look through the museum’s mirror into America.

“There are not many moments where black culture can express its typologies — its notions of space — within the contemporary condition.”

—DAVID ADIAYE

The complex history of the United States of America and the colossal history of the built world are the axes upon which the National Museum of African American History and Culture has been drafted. The building is a form made of other forms. Some of its forms emphasize public engagement and demonstrative inclusion. Other forms attend to ancestral homage. And even others are about the history of architecture itself. Embracing the spirit of African American resilience, the building expresses the museum’s vision by using the languages and typologies, as Adjaye calls them, of black cultures, ancient through modern and contemporary.

That the most visible part of the building, its ziggurat shape, visually connects Yoruban verandah posts, African American gestures of praise, and the angles of the Washington Monument, speaks to the idea of a collective memory amassed through individual, episodic encounters. With its grand porch and filigree metalwork, the design also brings me back to childhood in my grandparents’ house, a house that I came to believe had been built for just for me, with my yearnings and my welfare in mind.
Notes

Thank you to the friends and colleagues, including Priscilla Renta, Fred Joiner, Andrea Pippins, and Juliette Harris, who helped me think through the ideas and format of this essay. This essay is dedicated to my grandmother, Miriam Angelina Wilkinson, and my grandfather, Charles Eric Wilkinson.

1. The problem of anonymity is well-characterized in “Us Quarters Fixed Fine”: Finding Black Builders in Southern History,” where John Michael Vlach explains: “Maybe some person will occasionally recall that a certain big plantation house, a set of fortifications, a system of roads and canals, or a row of cabins was built by slaves. Such collective credit, while deserved, submerges the vibrant personalities of individuals who poured their labor and often their intelligence into their tasks. The black worker in such recollections becomes an anonymous laborer whose achievement appears minor because no one seems truly responsible for it.” (Vlach, By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife, 1991: 163.)


5. Adjaye, ibid.

6. Adjaye, ibid.


9. AA. Fragments of text from the lead designer’s firm and from the museum’s media materials are prompts for the following sections (“AA” refers to content from Adjaye Associates; “NM” refers to content from the museum’s publicity materials). Not all of the building’s main features will be examined in this essay, and the architectural renderings may not indicate the final version of a building feature.


11. AA.


19. AA.


24. AA.


27. AA.

28. Iain Jackson and Jessica Holland write, “A specific type of architecture was developed for these territories that incorporated perforated concrete screens, rainwater harvesting, window hoods and projecting roof eaves, attempting to passively modify the climate and to respond to the ‘local’ conditions.” [Jackson and Holland, The Architecture of Edwin Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2014:6.]


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