

June 24, 2004

For African-Americans, a Chance to Draft History

By FRED A. BERNSTEIN

IN their light-filled office in Charleston, S.C., Ray Huff and Mario Gooden, partners in a seven-year-old architecture firm, were discussing their planned expansion of the California African American Museum in Los Angeles. Until now the firm has designed mostly schools, civic buildings and churches around Charleston, and this would be an important break. "It represents an affirmation of our capabilities as architects," Mr. Huff said.

Mr. Huff and Mr. Gooden are black — a rarity in the profession.

Charmaine Jefferson, executive director of the museum, said they are collaborating with a firm that has extensive experience designing museums, in this case the Minneapolis-based firm of Hammel, Green & Abrahamson. "Minority firms are going to have shorter résumés," she said. "Teaming with more experienced firms is a way for them to gain experience."

A new wave of heritage buildings celebrating black history is creating opportunities — and disappointments — for black architects at a time when they are struggling to gain a foothold in the profession. At least 25 African-American cultural buildings are being planned, said Bill Gwaltney, former president of the Association of African American Museums. They include a museum of African-American history in Washington; the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco; and the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial in Washington.

"Black America is in a mood these days to commemorate itself and its history," said Melvin Mitchell, president-elect of the National Organization of Minority Architects, an advocacy group. But only a few of the commissions have gone to African-Americans, he pointed out. And that, he said, represents "an opportunity lost."

The biggest challenge, educators say, is that the percentage of black architects hovers around 1 percent, or about 1,400 of the nation's 120,000 licensed architects. Last week, the American Institute of Architects, in its convention in Chicago, promised to take aggressive steps to increase diversity in the profession. Such steps will include mentoring programs for minority designers. The issue was also addressed at a conference in January at Yale, and dominates sometimes-angry meetings of groups like the New York Coalition of Black Architects. "I think it's absolutely imperative that African-American architects be given the chance to design buildings that are culturally specific to black heritage," said Victor Body-Lawson, an African-American architect in Harlem. "We have a cultural and spiritual link to the issues these institutions deal with."

In fact, some of the significant commissions have gone to black architects. The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, which opens on Aug. 23, was designed principally by an African-American architect, Walter Blackburn, who died in 2000. (His wife, Alpha, who is not an architect, still runs the firm they founded.)

Allison G. Williams, the managing principal of the San Francisco office of Ai, a large firm based in Washington, D.C., is an African-American architect who was chosen to design an African-American cultural center in Pittsburgh. She is giving it a curving wall inspired in part, she said, by sails of a Swahili trading ship. Philip G. Freelon of Durham, N.C., and his firm, the Freelon Group, are designing the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco and a museum of Maryland African-American history, planned for the Inner Harbor in Baltimore, which links the site to the historically black section of the city.

C. C. Pei, a Chinese-American partner in the Pei Partnership, which will design a planned slavery museum in Fredericksburg, Va., believes that he is qualified to design the museum despite his race. "The question of slavery extends beyond African-Americans in the United States," he said. "The museum needs to treat the issue broadly."

The Pei Partnership was appointed by the former governor of Virginia, L. Douglas Wilder, an African-American.

Asked how he won the commission to design the slavery museum, Mr. Pei — a son of the prominent architect I. M. Pei — said, "I had heard about the project, and I contacted a friend of mine who introduced me to the governor, and we established a very nice relationship. He said, 'We'd like you to help us out with the design.' It was not a competition."

Several dozen African-American architects who were interviewed said they do not feel that they belong to the club of prominent architects who traditionally receive the plum jobs. They also say that there are too few black architecture graduates and that there are not enough black architects in prominent firms to win career-making projects.

Dennis Mann, who runs the Center for the Study of the Practice of Architecture at the University of Cincinnati, said that his most recent count of 1,448 licensed black architects is up from about 1,200 five years ago. That 1 percent contrasts with the 5 percent of lawyers and 4 percent of doctors who are black, according to industry figures.

Only a trickle of African-Americans are choosing to become licensed architects. "We add about 40 or 50 a year," said Professor Mann. Mr. Huff says that when he speaks at career days at middle schools and high schools, "when students hear how little money architects make, you can see them losing interest."

The dean of the school of architecture at Florida A&M in Tallahassee, Rodner Wright, who is African-American, says he finds it difficult to nurture black architects even at a historically black university. In his office at the school, overlooking a courtyard filled with architectural models, Dean Wright spoke of the shortage of opportunities for architecture students. "The hard part isn't attracting students," he said. "It's keeping them."

Universities are eager to enlist prominent black architects on their faculties. Next spring, Mr. Gooden will be a visiting professor, and the only African-American faculty member, at Yale's school of architecture.

Jennifer Newsom, one of two black students in the school last year, said that during her undergraduate years she watched African-American classmates choose other professions.

"Doctors and lawyers make a lot more money," she said. Ms. Newsom organized the recent symposium, where students and faculty voiced concern about the number of African-Americans in the profession.

Ted Landsmark, chairman of the diversity committee of the American Institute of Architects and president of the Boston Architectural Center, said that a prospective architect must complete a three-year apprenticeship with an established firm. Mr. Landsmark said many African-American architecture students choose to work for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Army Corps of Engineers or other government agencies that have strict policies forbidding discrimination. As a result, he said, a high proportion of the nation's African-American architects work in the Washington area.

Nine states — including New Hampshire, Vermont, Idaho, Iowa and Maine — do not have any registered black architects, according to Professor Mann's Web site,

blackarch.uc.edu.

Reed Kroloff, the organizer of the competition that chose the designer for the Motown Center, a museum to be built in Detroit, said a number of African-American architects — including Huff & Gooden — were invited to compete.

Berry Gordy, the Motown records founder and the center's driving force, was determined to find the best designer, of

any color, according to its president, Tanya Heidelberg-Yopp. The winners were New York's Rockwell Group, led by David Rockwell, and Architecture Research Office. Both have white principals. Hamilton Anderson Associates, a local firm headed by African-Americans, will help with the plan.

Teamwork is becoming common on prestigious projects. Devroux & Purnell, a Washington firm with African-American partners, was recently brought in to help implement a design for the \$100 million Martin Luther King memorial in Washington by ROMA Design Group of San Francisco, which has no black partners. (The architects were chosen in an international competition.)

"We've taken heat for that," said Ed Jackson, an architect who works for the memorial foundation.

"Whenever I speak to an African-American audience, the first thing they want to know is whether the architect is African-American. When I say no, they want to know why not."

Mr. Jackson tells them that the competition was organized "the same way we believe Dr. King would have approached it — and that's total inclusion."

Mr. Mitchell's group, the National Organization of Minority Architects, is trying to ensure that an African-American is chosen as lead designer for the National Museum of African American History and Culture, authorized by Congress last year and expected to cost \$300 million.

Robert L. Wilkins, a lawyer who served on the commission that established the museum, part of the Smithsonian Institution, said that "a museum dedicated to countering the historic subjugation of African-Americans should do that, in part, by giving African-Americans prominent roles in deciding what it will look like." But, he added, the Smithsonian Institution has not established criteria for choosing a designer.

African-American cultural buildings have become a specialty of Mr. Freelon's firm, which employs 58 people.

Yet many African-American architects reject the notion that they should be doing a specifically black form of architecture. They point out that Julian Abele, who designed the Widener Library at Harvard, and Paul Revere Williams, the architect of numerous Hollywood mansions, were African-Americans.

Ms. Williams of Ai, who may be best known for her work on the new terminal at San Francisco International Airport, said it was important that African-American architects like herself not allow themselves "to be relegated to projects where the subject matter is black culture."

"To say that these museums and monuments are opportunities for black architects suggests that other projects are not opportunities for black architects, and I think that's dangerous," Ms. Williams said.

And others question whether giving preference to black architects is even necessary. Clement Price, an adviser to the Museum of African American Music in Newark, which has hired the Hillier Group, a Princeton-based firm, said: "We may have transitioned to a period when the race of the architect is not as much of an issue as in the heady days of black nationalism 25 years ago."