

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 12
Issue 1 March 2009

Article 12

3-1-2009

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Washington Post

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Recommended Citation

Trescott, Jacqueline (2009) "Six Finalists Vie to Design Black History Museum," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol12/iss1/12>

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Six Teams to Compete to Design National Museum of African American History and Culture



The future site of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, circled above, is on the Mall, 800 feet from the Washington Monument. (Smithsonian Institution)



By M.K. Cannistra — The Washington Post

By Jacqueline Trescott
Washington Post Staff Writer
Friday, January 30, 2009

The National Museum of African American History and Culture yesterday named six award-winning architecture teams that will compete to design its signature building on the Mall in the shadow of the Washington Monument.

The list includes luminaries of the field: I.M. Pei and Sir Norman Foster.

The final selection, based on a preliminary design, will be one of the most closely watched architectural contests in the city's recent history because of its location, the challenges of building in that historic area and the shrinking availability of land on the Mall. In addition, the architects were asked to demonstrate their own understanding and sensitivity to the African American experience, and many prominent supporters openly fought for a space on the Mall to emphasize the subject matter's importance.

Selected from a pool of 22 who submitted their qualifications to the Smithsonian Institution was a joint venture of Devroux & Purnell, the Washington firm that did the Washington Nationals Park, and Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, who designed the East Building of the National Gallery and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Pei won the Pritzker Architecture Prize, the industry's highest honor, in 1983.

Another team is Foster and Partners/URS, another joint venture, with the Foster firm as architect and URS handling the engineering design. The Foster company designed the enclosed Kogod Courtyard of the Smithsonian's Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture. Foster was the Pritzker recipient in 1999.

Also in the competition is Freelon Adjaye Bond in association with the SmithGroup. The Freelon Group designed the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture in Baltimore. David Adjaye was the architect of the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo. Davis Brody Bond is the executive architect for the National September 11 Memorial and Museum at the World Trade Center site in New York. Philip Freelon was named last week as a recipient of the American Institute of Architects' Thomas Jefferson Award for Public Architecture.

Diller Scofidio and Renfro in association with KlingStubbins is another selection. Diller Scofidio and Renfro was the architect for the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and the renovation of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York.

Moshe Safdie and Associates, in association with Sultan Campbell Britt & Associates, was also named a design finalist. Safdie is the architect of the U.S. Institute of Peace headquarters, now being built in Washington.

Moody Nolan, in association with Antoine Predock Architect, rounds out the contenders. Moody Nolan and Predock designed the Ohio State University Recreation and Physical Activity Center.

Antoine Predock, along with Pei and Foster, has received the American Institute of Architect's Gold Medal, its highest award for an individual. Predock designed the Austin City Hall and Public Plaza and was the co-designer of Petco Park, the baseball stadium in San Diego.

The museum's site, selected by the Smithsonian Board of Regents, is a five-acre parcel on the southwest corner of Constitution Avenue and 14th Street NW that has never had a permanent building on it. It is 800 feet from the monument and will sit next to the National Museum of American History.

"You want a building that is respectful of the Washington Monument and reflects the resilience, optimism and spirituality" of black life in America, said Lonnie G. Bunch III, the African American History Museum's director. He added it also has to "work as a museum."

Sheryl Kolasinski, an architect and the director of the Smithsonian's Office of Planning and Project Management, said the museum planners did not have a preconceived notion of what the building should look like. The architects have to consider several technical issues, such as the water table underneath the Mall, a 50-foot setback ordered by the federal government after the 2001 terrorist attacks, utility issues in an open space, and the height of a structure within sight of the Washington Monument and the White House. It is two blocks from the Federal Triangle Metro stop.

"It is not going to be a tall building," Kolasinski said. However, the building will be 300,000 to 350,000 square feet, roughly the size of the National Museum of the American Indian. Several large artifacts have already been identified by Bunch for the museum, such as a slave cabin and a Jim Crow railroad car.

Bunch said yesterday that this step in the museum's development is a turning point, and he has said in past that having a design in hand will accelerate the fundraising. "People are always asking me what is it going to look like," Bunch said. The estimated cost is \$500 million, with half of the amount coming from the federal government.

The museum staff has started several projects to let the public know it is an active enterprise, including a virtual museum online, shows in other parts of the Smithsonian and the recording of 1,800 oral-history interviews with StoryCorps.

Each architectural team is receiving a \$50,000 stipend from the Smithsonian. One of the hurdles is that the architects have to demonstrate they can complete the project in three years. Construction is to start in 2012, and the museum is scheduled to open in 2015.

The architect will be selected in mid-April by an 11-member jury that includes Robert Kogod, a Smithsonian regent and president of Charles E. Smith Management; Adela Naude Santos, dean of the MIT school of architecture; Richard D. Parsons, co-chair of the African American museum's council and former chairman of Time Warner; and two former chairmen of Fannie Mae, James A. Johnson and Franklin D. Raines.