

- **Introduction** - The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture is undoubtedly one of the most significant modern buildings in America.

Case Study - Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, D.C. by David Adjaye



National Museum of African American History and Culture © Frank Schulenberg

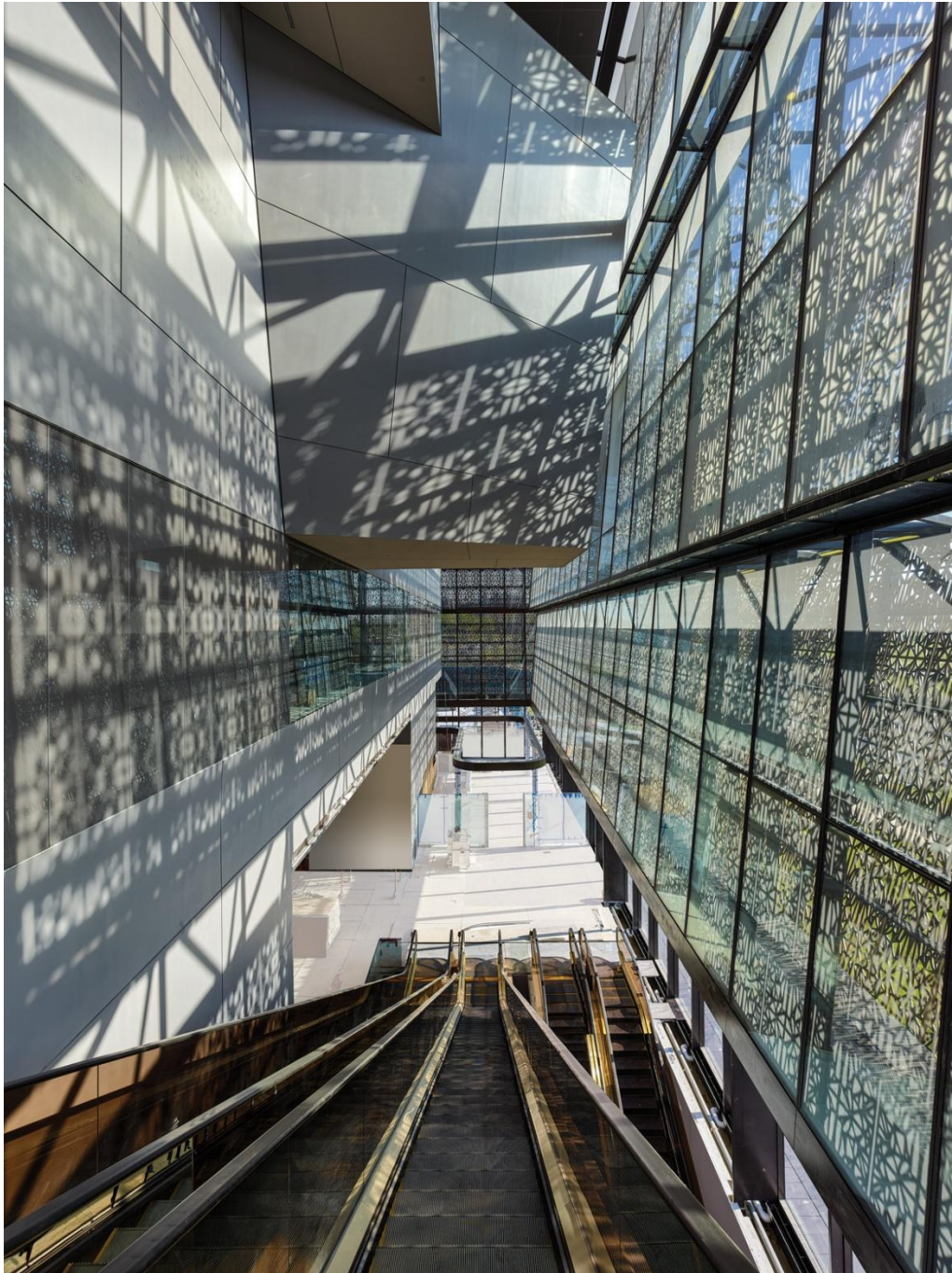
The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture is undoubtedly one of the most [significant](#) modern buildings in America. Inaugurated in September 2016 by the then-President Barack Obama, the [magnificent](#) structure is located [symbolically](#) on Constitution Avenue, Washington D.C., with the Washington Monument to its west and the National Museum of American History to the east. Its lead designer, the [renowned](#) Tanzanian-British architect, Sir David Adjaye, considers it to be both a [monument and a museum](#). The structure is the first of its kind, [commemorating](#) America's Black heritage, thereby filling in a critical void within the country's built narrative. The project was realized by a four-firm architectural team – the Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup.



The Museum and Washington Memorial © Alan Karchmer/NMAAHC

According to Sir Adjaye, the edifice, arguably his magnum opus, is not merely functional, but also, equally representational. The four-storied building, occupying an area of about five acres, rests upon three important cornerstones^[2]- the built-form and its 'corona' shape, the porch that is a built extension onto the landscape, and the

ornamental bronze-coloured, cast aluminium envelope. The three-tiered façade is tilted to match the angle of the Washington Memorial capstone. It is inspired by the traditional motifs on the royal three-tiered crowns of the Yoruba people, a culturally rich ethnic group in Africa. Metallic screens on the exterior represent the ironwork that would be traditionally forged by enslaved African Americans. The pattern density on the façade can be varied to regulate its transparency and daylighting. A porch to the south defines a building entry. It also acts as a transitory space from the exterior to the interior. It has a central water feature that creates a cooling effect.



Light Filtering Through the Metal Screen © Alan Karchmer/NMAAHC

The exterior stands out amongst its more traditional, classical, static, and visually heavier white-marbled neighbours. The interiors take you on a journey of evolving

history and changing emotion across time. A dramatic play of light and shade is observed as light filters through the metal screens. It is characterized by large, flanking column-less areas, with the space alternating between light and dark as one moves towards the center from the edge of the space, in addition to the alluring exhibits, thereby completely engaging the senses. Multiple materials are used on the inside, such as timber, glass, and concrete. It is a steel-framed structure with pre-cast concrete walls and transparent glazing towards the interior, adjacent to the patterned metallic screen.



Oculus With Cascading Water © Alan Karchmer/NMAAHC

Starting from the lowermost level, one works their way to the top. There is a thematic vertical division of spaces[3], such that below the street levels are the concourse and the historical galleries, which also contains a symbolic oculus from which light enters after being filtered through a curtain of cascading water – as a space for being and contemplation. The four stories above include a Heritage Hall, interactive exhibits area, community galleries, and culture galleries, from the lowermost to the uppermost levels, respectively. There are fixed building cores containing toilets, lifts, and staircases across floors. The historical galleries below recounting the story of slavery are darker, more enclosed, and as one move above, more light is found entering the space- and also so in the nature of history marked by a celebration of the astounding achievements of African Americans across fields such as- sports, literature, and music.

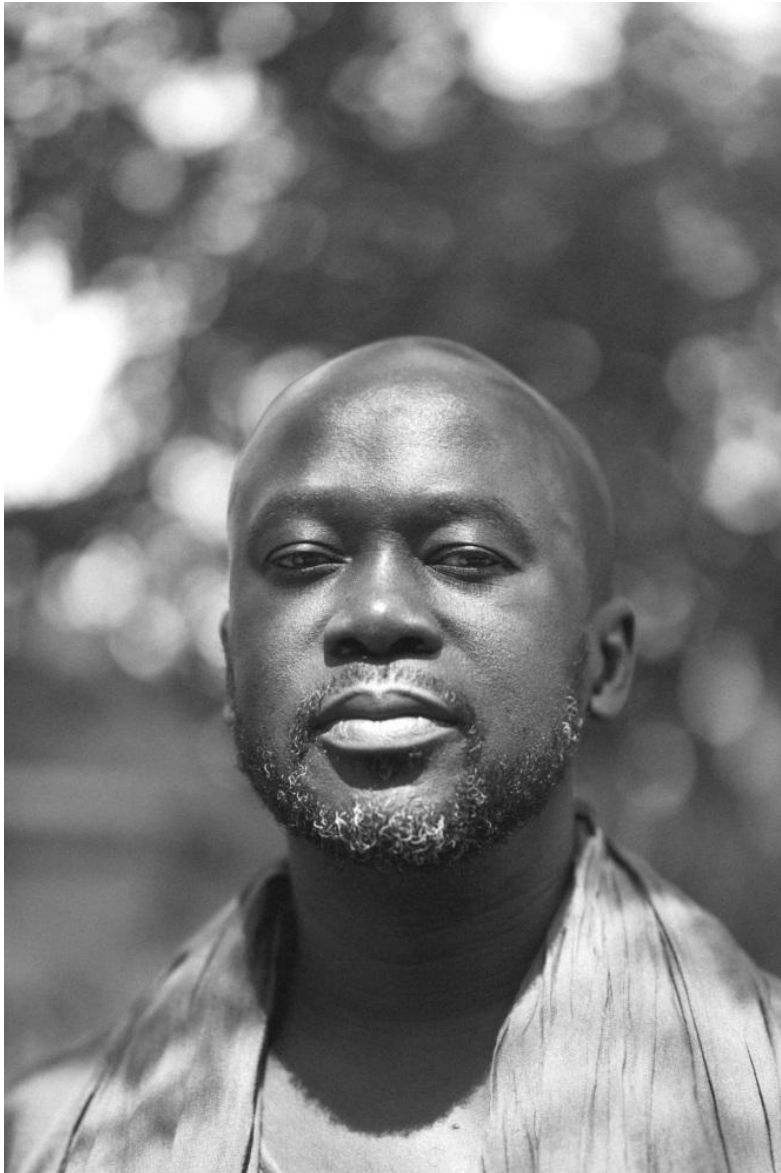


Image Sources:

1. Musical Crossroads Exhibit © Alan Karchmer/NMAAHC
2. Slavery and Freedom Exhibit © Alan Karchmer/NMAAHC

The collection of over 36,000 exhibits spans centuries, the oldest ones dating from 400 years in history. A [guide to the museum](#)^[4] sheds light on some of the most spectacular exhibits. The '[Musical Crossroads](#)^[5]' exhibit showcases and celebrates the evolution of African American music and its widespread influence in American culture, such as Jazz and Hip-hop. Another important one is the '[Slavery and Freedom](#)^[6]' exhibit that navigates the African American history from the era of

slavery to the modern era- a story not easily foretold with all its complexity. In addition to the exhibits, other spaces include- restaurants, storage, a theatre, etc.



Sir David Adjaye © Adjaye Associates

In an interview with the BBC[\[7\]](#), Sir David Adjaye talks about how the building allows people to understand each other, how they are inter-related, and that moving forward doesn't comprise segregation, but understanding and co-existence. Both through its contents and in its design, the building conveys how America is not a sacrosanct, one-dimensional entity. Rather it is an agglomeration and a vehement celebration of diverse cultures and histories. Encapsulating the spirit of the building in another interview[\[8\]](#), Sir Adjaye says, "The form of the building suggests very upward mobility. It's a ziggurat that moves upward into the sky, rather than downward into the ground... This is not a story about past trauma. For me, the story is one that's extremely uplifting, as a kind of world story. It's not a story of a people that were taken down, but actually, a people that overcame and transformed an entire superpower into what it is today. The sacrifices of the African-American people have made America better."

Endnotes:

- [1] <https://www.architecturalrecord.com/articles/11964-national-museum-of-african-american-history-and-culture>
- [2] <https://www.adjaye.com/work/smithsonian-national-museum-of-african-american-history-and-culture-nmaahc/>
- [3] <https://nmaahc.si.edu/visit/maps>
- [4] <https://washington.org/visit-dc/guide-to-smithsonian-national-museum-african-american-history-culture>
- [5] <https://nmaahc.si.edu/musical-crossroads>
- [6] <https://nmaahc.si.edu/slavery-and-freedom>
- [7] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-37461048>
- [8] <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/q-and-a-with-architect-david-adjaye-18968512/>

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