

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

Center for Civil and Human Rights Opens Its Doors to Atlanta

By Gray Chapman

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Designed for LEED Gold certification, the Center is set into a hillside facing Atlanta's Pemberton Place, a pedestrian park.

Five decades ago, the powerful sermons of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reverberated inside the halls of Ebenezer Baptist Church, inspiring a generation of civil rights activists who shared his dreams of equality. This summer, less than 2 miles from the neighborhood where Dr. King made history, the civil rights movement is experiencing a rebirth with the opening of the long-awaited National Center for Civil and Human Rights. The 43,000-square foot Center, designed by The Freelon Group and HOK, opened to the public on June 23 with three exhibitions connecting the legacy of the American civil rights movement to the modern-day fight for human rights around the world. In addition to the Center's galleries, the building also houses conference rooms and special--event space.





The Freelon Group, led by founder Phil Freelon, was selected from a pool of top-tier architects after an international design competition. Freelon himself is no stranger to projects rooted in history and culture: the architect has worked on buildings such as the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. (currently under construction), and the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco. “I established my firm based on several tenets and ideals, and one of them was that we were about knowledge-sharing, education, and creating environments that enhance the communities in which they’re built,” says Freelon. (The Freelon Group merged with Perkins+Will this spring.)

The project has encountered challenges along the way, mostly because the financial collapse hit at the height of fundraising efforts, around 2008. Ultimately, Freelon’s original design, a scheme inspired by interlocking arms, had to be shaved down to about half its size, but Freelon doesn’t find the final product any less meaningful. In fact, he says, “it was really a process of focusing and distilling the idea into something even more powerful.” Despite the roadblocks, Freelon and his team produced a design conducive to the Center’s mission: to provide a visitor experience that uplifts and inspires while lending gravity to serious and often violent stories.



That experience begins when one first catches a glimpse of the three-story building from across the site’s lawn. The Center’s angled exterior facade, composed of a mosaic of earth-toned phenolic-resin panels, frames a glass curtain wall through which the lobby’s vibrant mural (a montage of human-rights posters) can be seen. Situated on the north end of Pemberton Place, a 20-acre tourism hub that’s also home to World of Coca-Cola and the Georgia Aquarium, the building’s curvilinear form is immediately distinctive. “It’s exuberant, but also dignified,” says Freelon.

Inside, that distinctive shape is echoed by a gently bending path guiding visitors through the exhibitions. The anchor exhibition on the lower level contains a rotating display of papers and artifacts from the

Morehouse College Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection. The struggles and triumphs of the American civil rights movement are presented in often dark detail in another exhibition (designed by the Rockwell Group), where visitors meander through dark, dramatically lit corridors to explore the defining moments of the movement. Here visitors can relive the harassment endured by the Greensboro lunch-counter sit-in protestors, in 1960, via headsets, and experience the moment when Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination hit the news on April 4, 1968. "There's this narrative power that builds and builds," says David Mandel, director of exhibitions and design. "But at the end, in one of the darkest moments, with the funeral of Dr. King, you ascend."



A monumental stair leads visitors from the lower level to the lobby and then to a bright balcony level, where a wall details all of the reform legislation. At the top-floor gallery, where visitors arrive after the culmination of the civil rights exhibition, the struggle for equality is given contemporary context by a setting reminiscent of a modern art gallery. This space, Freelon says, is where the form of the building is expressed on the interior. An exposed ceiling, brushed-concrete columns, and angled walls lend a sense of gravity to the stories being told. "These issues are overbearing, they're repressive, they're literally leaning in on you," says Freelon.

From the outset, those behind the Center—who included civil rights luminaries Andrew Young and Evelyn Lowery, along with former Atlanta mayor Shirley Franklin—wanted this to be a place that paid homage to history while looking forward. "We want this to be a magnet, drawing in the thinkers and the doers and the activists—sparking the kind of dialogue that makes a longstanding difference in our world culture," Freelon says. If that becomes the case, the Center will truly transform its touristy environs.



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