CENTER OF

San Francisco–based architect Allison Williams included several unique design elements in the August Wilson Center for African American Culture, not the least of which is its two-story, metal-and-glass sail that anchors one end of the building and represents the journeys of both Swahili traders and European slave merchants.

CELEBRATION

MORE THAN A DECADE IN THE MAKING, THE MUCH-HERALDED AUGUST WILSON CENTER FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE OPENS ITS DOORS WITH EQUALLY HERALDED EXPECTATIONS. CHIEF AMONG THEM IS FOLLOWING ITS FAMOUS NAMESAKE TO WIN BROAD AUDIENCES THAT APPRECIATE THE SPECIAL NATURE OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN PITTSBURGH. BY CHRISTINE H. O'TOOLE

Photos by Joshua Franzos

Artistic statements are made throughout the Wilson Center, including along the building's grand staircase, right, above, where photographs by the late Pittsburgh Courier photographer Charles "Teenie" Harris line one wall. The center also houses practice rooms where local and visiting performers can hone their craft. Below, dancers with Philadanco! The Philadelphia Dance Company, conduct a master class in the second-floor studio for more than 50 people. The company was in Pittsburgh for a performance at the center in September.

oodies, headphones and hip-hop: Those were the common elements of a fall Saturday morning workshop in a light-filled downtown room at Pittsburgh's August Wilson Center for African American Culture. Twenty would-be scratch-and-mix artists gathered around a table full of expensive turntables, drum machines and speakers the size of a waist-high African drum for a high-energy pop culture lesson. The group was listening to a self-described "audio hustler" nicknamed DJ Soy Sos teach a class on disc jockeying.

With fresh definitions of performance, the Wilson Center—so brand new that it is still completing finishing touches, like outlet covers—is welcoming a brand-new audience. These particular visitors had just passed walls hung with vibrant photographs by the late Charles "Teenie" Harris, legendary photographer for the Pittsburgh Courier newspaper. They had walked by an interactive, multimedia exhibit of the city's African American history, captured on clusters of computer monitors, projected on large screens and able to morph from story to story with the touch of a finger. They'd peeked into the center's curved 486-seat theater, accented in purple, and climbed its grand staircase to high-ceiling practice rooms that look out onto downtown through expansive panels of glass. And now the would-be DJs, a mix of high school students, college hipsters, middle-aged moms and white-bearded R&B fans, crowded around turntables, listening intently.

"You've got to have the latest cuts, you've got to blend your beats and you've got to be professional," Soy Sos, aka Herman Pearl, told the group, as a Mary J. Blige recording thumped through the room. "What can you provide that no one else can?"

The question that Pearl posed to his rapt audience is the same one that the new center has embraced since its inception among black community leaders in Pittsburgh more than a decade ago. A broad coalition of African American community leaders, political officials, foundation

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Melissa Farlow

Lois Greenfield

Above, left: Endowments board and staff members tour the center in October. Marva Harris, far left, the center's interim president, was among the organization officials who served as guides as Chairman Teresa Heinz, right center; Vice Chairman Jim Walton, far right; board member Carol Brown, who is also on the Wilson Center board; and others strolled through the building. The Endowments tour took place a few weeks after the center's opening in September that drew a packed house of local residents and community leaders, including Wilson Center board chairman and BNY Mellon senior vice president Oliver Byrd and his wife, Karla, right.

funders and cultural experts has bet that part of the answer lies in a $40 million institution in the city's Cultural District. The other part of the answer, something that money can't buy, is to become the premiere presenting institution for the African American cultural experience in Pittsburgh—an experience so distinct among American cities that its showcasing has the power to knock down racial and geographic boundaries.

Playwright August Wilson won critical acclaim and broad audiences for tapping into the special nature of the Pittsburgh urban black experience by way of extraordinary storytelling about the struggles of people from ordinary circumstances. The characters in his plays grow in emotional intensity to become iconic figures of the times—each play is set during a different decade of the 20th century—and the stories are profoundly affected by place: In all but one play, it is the poor, segregated, but always vibrant Hill District.

What Wilson achieved through the American theater, the Wilson Center ambitiously seeks to duplicate through multiple artistic forms and cultural presentations. Its mission is to tell the stories and celebrate the lives that highlight the richness of Pittsburgh's version of a cultural life derived from the African Diaspora: a community 90th birthday party for the city's first African American meter maid; a lecture on the history of American gospel music from a Pittsburgh perspective; an evening of poetry featuring readings by national and local artists; a dance company production choreographed to the music of Pittsburgh luminaries Billy Strayhorn, Mary Lou Williams, Phyllis Hyman and Ahmad Jamal.

"Our African American culture is rich and deep and historical and forward-looking. It's nationally and internationally recognized—but not recognized enough in its own backyard," says Janet Sarbaugh, senior director of The Heinz Endowments' Arts & Culture Program. "The Wilson Center building is a beautiful and worthy setting for realizing that long-deferred recognition. But the national experience tells us that long-term success will only be assured by programming that attracts strong audiences."

Born a generation after other cities' African American museums, Pittsburgh's Africentric center learned lessons from the others that were often cautionary tales. A slightly condescending 2001 New York Times report even contended that African American museums have often been founded "with more enthusiasm than savvy."

While that perspective might be debatable, these and other younger cultural organizations have had to compete with more established symphonies, ballet companies or regional theater groups, says Claudine Brown, arts and culture director for the Nathan Cummings Foundation and former deputy assistant secretary for the Smithsonian Institution. "Some African American institutions have struggled with fundraising, because of where they entered the landscape. Most of them were founded in the 1960s as a result of the civil rights movement, and they have not been around long enough to compete with other recognized establishments."

The newcomers share one fundamental bond with more venerable institutions: Every arts group depends on subsidies that have been severely eroded by the current recession. While the timing for launching an ambitious new cultural center couldn't be worse in financial terms, many supporters believe that providing a facility that does justice to an African American

cultural life that has been too-long ignored shouldn't depend on the perfect financial climate.

"We contributed to the creation of the center because African American culture has been profoundly significant to this city and region," says Benedum Foundation president and CEO William P. Getty. He adds that a number of Pittsburgh's African American musicians and other varied artists are giants in American culture. Because of the foundation's long commitment to Pittsburgh's Cultural District, Benedum officials believe that the district "can be greatly enhanced by this beautiful facility and the programs it can offer."

Even with philanthropic moral and financial support, the Wilson Center now faces its toughest challenge. It will have to light new fires under its capital campaign, book five-star performers at two-star ticket prices, find a dynamic permanent director and attract patrons of all races to its Liberty Avenue home.

> "The notion of a performing arts center fundamentally changed the perceived viability of the center. …The history of the African American community in Pittsburgh is a story about performing artists, and we really celebrate that contribution."
>
> **Neil Barclay,** former CEO of the August Wilson Center for African American Culture

More than $10 million in state, county and city monies and another $17.5 million from local foundations, including $7.5 million from the Endowments, gave the Wilson Center its handsome building and an anchor position in the city's cultural pantheon. There also are commitments for ongoing support, but the center's funders will expect it to work through its remaining financial problems with a detailed plan that sets a goal of increasing community loyalty and lessening foundation dependence in future years.

One important piece already is in place. The center's national advisory board has enlisted international artists with Pittsburgh connections—among them actor Charles Dutton and city natives Ahmad Jamal, a renowned jazz pianist, and John Edgar Wideman, a similarly well-regarded author. At $4.3 million, its annual budget is nearly 10 times the average size of other African American institutions, and its 23-person staff is both more numerous and more experienced than those at similar institutions elsewhere. But can those strengths steady the center past its inaugural season?

"Downtown was for everybody"

The 2001 news conference announcing the site of Pittsburgh's African American cultural center spoke volumes about the aspirations of its founders. Convening film crews and reporters on an upper floor of the Westin Convention Center hotel, city Urban Redevelopment Authority Director Mulugetta Birru pointed dramatically through the windows. On a triangular lot at the corner of 10th Street and Liberty Avenue clustered a clump of tired sliver-buildings that would make way for the center. Envisioned as a development that would host a theater, galleries and a hotel over an underground parking garage, the project was bold. "Everything was possible," remembers Birru, now an international consultant based in Detroit.

Oliver Byrd, the center's long-time board chairman, senior vice president of BNY Mellon and an avid trumpet player, recalls with a chuckle, "It was like the Bible. We were claiming our spot." But the determined board would continue its Biblical journey for another eight years before it reached the Promised Land a block away.

Sala Udin remembers his first conversation about an African American institution for Pittsburgh with then-Mayor Tom Murphy in 1996. "We had a conversation by the fifth floor elevators in the City–County Building," recalls the president of

The Wilson Center offers visitors a range of engaging experiences, such as the interactive, multimedia center, right, above, where guests, from left to right, Arlene Snipe, Barbara Anderson and Carol Williams can identify or learn about the cultural contributions of African Americans from the region in the Pittsburgh Reclaim Renew Remix exhibit. The center also adds to Pittsburgh's downtown performance space a 486-seat auditorium, where recent productions included "The Women of the Hill," set in Pittsburgh's Hill District.

the Coro Center for Civic Leadership, then a newly elected city councilman. "We wanted to bring the NAACP convention to Pittsburgh, and we needed to demonstrate a commitment to a plan for African American culture. We needed a large institution—a museum, we were thinking. We were starting from ground zero."

Murphy liked the idea. Birru, his URA director, loved it. Birru's commitment to the project was "invaluable," say Udin and others, both for the depth of downtown development experience he possessed and his passion for both the cause and the location.

"There was a belief in the African American community to [reclaim] what they had in the 1940s and '50s," Birru recalls, in a lilting Ethiopian accent. "Then, they stayed in their neighborhoods. But now"—with the development of the downtown Cultural District—"the famous artists were all downtown. That area [of the proposed site] was bad, but it was a critical center. It was close to the busway, where African Americans from the East End come into town. It was convenient to other communities, like the North Side. Downtown was for everybody."

The board was determined to learn from other cities' African American institutions. URA-funded visits showed the board that its original concept, a museum with Africentric collections, was faltering elsewhere for reasons that included lack of programming or an isolated location.

Numbers—both revenue and demographics—argued for dynamic events, rather than static collections. Blacks comprise only 12.3 percent of the population of Allegheny County, and the region's overall population remains stagnant. In this market, repeat visitors, tourism and an audience beyond the African American community would be essential. Also, a hybrid center appeared both unique and more economically sustainable than the financially struggling museums seen on fact-finding trips.

"The notion of a performing arts center fundamentally changed the perceived viability of the center," says Neil Barclay, who arrived in 2003 as the center's first CEO. "The choice made sense. The history of the African American community in Pittsburgh is a story about performing artists, and we really celebrate that contribution." By homing in on a specific identity, like Birmingham's Civil Rights Museum or the Underground Railroad Museum in Cincinnati, Pittsburgh was finding a path to connect its programming with its purpose.

But almost immediately, financial realities constrained the building's design and construction. The center had hoped to follow the lead of the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, which earned revenues through commercial real estate development. An underground parking garage proved too costly, however, and the proposed hotel development found no takers. While the building's signature design element provided by San Francisco–based architect Allison Williams—a curved, metal-and-glass sail suggesting the journeys of both Swahili traders and European slave merchants—was retained, the building's square footage shrank from three stories to two. Excavation at the site brought more bad news: Industrial pollution would require an additional $1 million in remediation and would delay construction for a full year. While funders fed the project, the center desperately needed capital and cash.

"It was a heavy lift," acknowledges Barclay, now director of the National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta. "It took six or seven years to pull $10 million together, and the last piece [a balance of $7 million for the $41.7 million capital campaign] is still not in. The foundations got us to the next stage, but it was piecemeal."

Board Chairman Byrd says the center set a fundraising target of $2 million from the African American community, which is within reach with $700,000 still needed. Early revenues have been less than expected, due to delays in opening the onsite café and a second exhibit gallery. On the plus side, Byrd notes that the facility's rental income, driven in large part by African American community groups, will exceed expectations, while early ticket sales show that "the programming is on target and the community will support it."

As the center strives to grow audiences and revenue, its staff expects that fully two-thirds of its funding will come from philanthropic and public sources, a mix that the Cummings Foundation's Brown says "puts them right where they ought to be." However, state allocations have been slashed, and Allegheny County's Regional Asset District will reduce the center's support from $275,000 in 2009 to $247,500 in 2010.

Despite those cuts, the center is sticking to a price range of $15 to $45 for its tickets. Marva Harris, who is heading the center while it conducts a national search for a permanent director, says that's important. "We want more people to enjoy the incredible offerings of the organization."

Photos by Joshua Franzos

Joshua Franzos

09.17.09

The Wilson Center's September grand opening was a gala in every sense of the word. Clockwise, beginning at top left, FashionAFRICANA model Ike Graham struck a regal pose at the entrance, wearing a story-quilt skirt created by Pittsburgh artists Tina Williams Brewer, Sandra German and Dale Kelly. Inside, festivities included opportunities for guests to do their own celebratory dance at the 3D party in the second-floor studio. Model Yarua Milano, bottom right, shown receiving finishing touches from FashionAFRICANA founder Demetria Gibson Boccella, also was part of the evening's living exhibit of African American culture, along with members of the August Wilson Center Dance Ensemble, bottom center. The glow of activity at the facility on opening night, bottom left, accentuated its innovative architectural design against the downtown Pittsburgh landscape.

Photos by Melissa Farlow

As part of its community outreach, the Wilson Center makes its facilities available for private rental. Family and friends of Willa Chandler, center, celebrated Chandler's 90th birthday in the building's Education Center. Chandler, the city's first African American meter maid, also is featured in the Pittsburgh Reclaim Renew Remix exhibit.

Joshua Franzos

A local icon inspires

Even before the sail-shaped façade of the center rose on Liberty Avenue, its already-assembled staff was earning revenue from works with national appeal.

Pittsburgh's legacy in the performing arts—accented by the naming of the center for Pulitzer Prize–winning playwright August Wilson after his death in 2005—was complemented by a major collection of African American photography. Some 80,000 images by Teenie Harris, the Pittsburgh Courier's gifted photographer, documented 40 years of African American life in the city from 1938 to 1975. The Wilson Center had negotiated an agreement with the Carnegie Museum of Art to exhibit the images. The photographs also inspired choreographer Ronald K. Brown, whom Barclay commissioned to create a piece based on Harris' work in 2007. In "One Shot," Brown interprets Harris' images, projected onstage. His troupe, Evidence, has toured the production nationally since then, accompanied by an exhibit of Harris' photos.

"It doesn't just earn revenue. It puts us out in the national landscape as a performing and visual arts center—and it's been hugely successful for Ronald K. Brown," Barclay notes. "[Though] there's not a lot of it being done, more and more African American institutions are collaborating, for a potential stream of revenue."

The center's inaugural season is an ambitious mix. Three full productions of Wilson's plays, set mostly in Pittsburgh's Hill District, formed the core of a two-week examination of the haunting wisdom of his Aunt Ester character. Local actresses gave voice to real-life memories in "The Women of the Hill." Readings, film festivals, debates on hip-hop and rap, and workshops such as the DJ session will continue. World-class performers like jazz violinist Regina Carter and electronic composer Daniel Bernard Roumaine will visit this winter, and the Pittsburgh Jazz Orchestra, the center's resident ensemble, will perform a commission by jazz elder statesman Jimmy Heath. In May, the center's first group of fellows will present their work during First Voice, Pittsburgh's International Black Arts Festival.

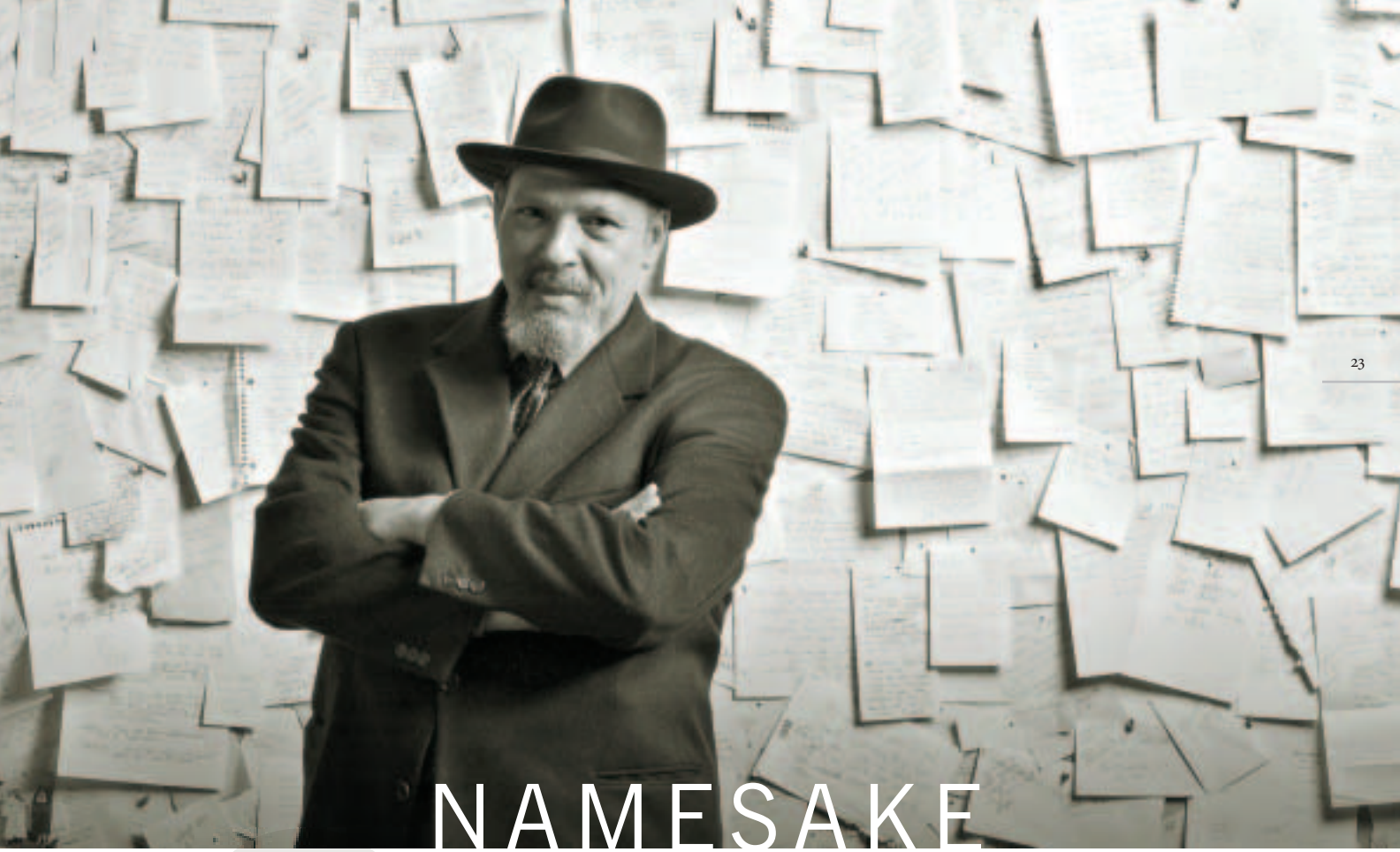
The city's Cultural Trust has admitted the center into its shared services program, with backroom and effective marketing efforts that allow downtown arts groups to cross-sell patrons. Board Chairman Byrd calls the Trust "an incredible database," but acknowledges that the Wilson audience may still be difficult to reach because, while some in the African American community are included in the database, a large segment is not.

The gulf between downtown and neighborhoods, and among opinions about which one the Wilson Center should serve, continues to exist. For Greer Reed Jones, who will form the center's resident dance ensemble this year, the facility "is creating opportunities to stay and create a professional company here instead of moving to New York, Chicago or Los Angeles."

Neighborhood-based arts groups that have served the black community for years are more skeptical, however. "The perception is that the center is more for the general public, rather than focusing on the black community," says James Johnson, who in 1982 founded the Afro-American Music Institute with his wife, Pamela, in Pittsburgh's largely poor Homewood neighborhood. "There's confusion about its intent, bringing in outside groups for programming and not including local organizations. It comes across as insensitive to the local black arts community." Johnson says that a new executive director must redouble the center's efforts to make sure its mission is in line with the local arts community.

Still, when the doors opened on Sept.17, Udin celebrated the memory of Wilson, his childhood friend, as crowds surged into the foyer. "We wanted to build something deserving of his memory," he says, "and we did."

Wilson's niece, Pittsburgh actress and producer Kimberly Ellis, agrees. "[Wilson] always wanted a place, many places, where people could come and create, that were as accessible as a church or local bar. He'd be extraordinarily pleased with the August Wilson Center having the ability to support that creation." *h*



David Cooper

NAMESAKE

Six years after founding Pittsburgh's African American cultural center, its creators crystallized their vision and aspirations when they chose a new name: the August Wilson Center for African American Culture. Wilson, who died at age 60 in October 2005, not only fashioned a much-heralded dramatic universe from his birthplace, the city's Hill District, he lyrically wove Pittsburgh's black music, art and pop culture into his plays.

"We know this name gives us a lot to live up to," said then–Wilson Center President Neil Barclay at the naming announcement. "But we recognize the perfect fit between our mission and August Wilson's life, art and all that he inspired."

Wilson's memory is still alive among those who knew him as a watchful youngster.

"He was the weirdest kid in the schoolyard," Sala Udin says laughing. As the president of the Coro Center for Civic Leadership and founding board member of the Wilson Center describes their long friendship, he can view the old Hill District neighborhood across the river from his office window. The actor and political activist remembers Wilson as a classmate at Holy Trinity elementary school in the 1950s. "No scrapping and wrestling for him. He was always watching and smiling."

Separated during the urban renewal projects that sundered their community, Udin reconnected with Wilson, a high school dropout, as the young men founded the Black Horizons Theater in 1967. The aspiring poets would gather at a smoky Hill District cafe, hung with a sign lettered "Pan Fried Fish," which stood alongside another neighborhood institution.

"August always got there a little early, and he'd be next door, sitting around at the jitney stand," Udin recalls. "He'd just be sitting there, listening to the drivers' conversations, watching, taking down notes. We wore dashikis. He always wore second-hand tweeds." Years later, Wilson would ask Udin to play the lead in his "Jitney." The eloquent work, first performed in 1982, won Wilson the best play award from the New York Drama Critics Circle in 2000.

Wilson's 10 dramas include two Pulitzer Prize winners, "The Piano Lesson" and "Fences," and span the 20th century. All reflect his passionate immersion in jazz and blues music. "Blues is the best literature we have," he told author Sandra Shannon, currently a professor of African American literature, criticism and drama at Howard University, during an interview in 1991 for a book on his works. "Blues and music have always been at the forefront in the development of character and consciousness of black America."

He also acknowledged the profound influence of visual artist Romare Bearden, probably best known for his unique collages. Fittingly, Bearden's "Pittsburgh's Reflections," a colorful 60-foot-long tile mural, is now being restored for installation at the Gateway Center subway station a few blocks from the Wilson Center.

And the new facility will continue to explore its namesake's work. Most recently, full productions of "Two Trains Running," "Gem of the Ocean" and "Radio Golf" were brought to the Wilson Center stage in November by black theater companies in Pittsburgh, Minneapolis and St. Louis. Those and other performances spotlighted the iconic character of wise woman Aunt Ester, who appears in many of Wilson's plays.