CHAPTER 6
A MUSEUM FOR THE FUTURE
The National Museum of
African American History and Culture

In transforming the museum profession, black museum leaders embraced
with creative verve the clarion call of activists such as June Jordan, Stokely
Carmichael, and Malcolm X to bring the doctrines of the Black Power
Movement—that is, black institutional capacity, self-sufficiency, and black
pride—to museums and other sites of public history. Positioning black power
as a subtext of the black museum movement reveals not only why, but how, these
institutions challenged and reinterpreted the traditional model of museum as a
repository for Eurocentric artifacts and narratives. African American neighbor-
hood museum founders like John Kinard, Margaret Burroughs, and Charles
Wright presented a new and public analysis of African American history and
heritage, one that not only focused on black achievement but also attempted to
unravel the charged interactions between African American and American his-
tory. No longer would those who refused to interrogate this relationship con-
trol the interpretation and presentation of the very American stories of slavery,
Jim Crow, and discrimination.

Black museum leaders employed the cultural constructions of white soci-
ety (i.e., the "museum") and the accepted artifices of these institutions (the
display of "artifacts") in order to challenge and remake what a museum could
be and represent. By exhibiting and interpreting nontraditional objects and cre-
ating innovative educational outreach programs, black museums delegitimized
the exist
designed
function
and to \text{ in}
museum
sent a q
ically in
and im

At th
power it
separat
sought t
black es
mine th
it comp
solely c
self-def
ships w

Inde
power : amon
African
larger s
a more
No ma
undesir
Americ
wanted
a loss c
ances t
for co
with th
museu
sured \text{ in}
tions fi
Succes
the bl
the existing narratives of African American history and culture that had been designed by the "white architects of black education." These narratives had long functioned to maintain (and later, excuse or mollify) the institution of slavery, and to perpetuate the innate superiority of whiteness. For leaders of the black museum movement, African American neighborhood museums did not represent a quaint institutional outgrowth of the black freedom struggle but a critically important component in how ordinary African Americans could absorb and impart the ideals and practice of civil rights and, especially, black power.

At the same time, black museum leaders had to modify the ideals of black power in order for their museums to function. Rather than pursue an exclusively separatist agenda, black museum leaders pressured, compromised, and at times sought out white supporters and politicians, as well as members of the so-called black establishment. Their adaptation of black power ideology did not undermine the black museum movement's potential for grassroots activism. Instead, it complicated the popular image of the Black Power Movement as comprised solely of aggressively militant separatists more prone to taking up arms in self-defense and wearing stylized clothing than engaging in practical relationships with those of differing viewpoints.

Indeed, the story of the black museum movement demonstrates that black power must also be seen in the context of black institutional development among black professionals and white institutional policymakers. In order for African American museums to move from their storefront beginnings into larger structures, from obscure exhibits to more comprehensive presentations, a more practical relationship between blacks and whites had to be developed. No matter how angry about white indifference and hostility, no matter how undesired whites were within the emerging black power philosophy, African Americans still needed to form coalitions in order to get what they needed and wanted. Black museum leaders often formed these alliances reluctantly, fearing a loss of control over the content and direction of their institutions if the alliances they made with the white establishment fell out of balance. The mandate for complete separation from white America, however, simply did not mesh with the environments in which black museum leaders worked. Consequently, museum leaders applied for state and federal grants, negotiated with and pressured politicians for financial support, and appealed to "white" cultural institutions for assistance in garnering artifacts and other forms of material assistance. Successful black museum makers understood that whites could be important to the black museum movement, though not central to its vision.
By the mid-1970s, the national Black Power Movement had faded, accelerated in part by the arrests, self-imposed isolation, or deaths of its charismatic leaders. Although these figures remain important touchstones in modern black political and cultural thought, the movement was left bereft without them. Yet even as the national movement declined, African American politicians began to secure greater access to political office—a direct result of the groundwork already paved by black activists. These newly minted politicians took office just as cities struggling with postindustrial transformation attempted to confront the challenges of unemployment, poverty, and industrial relocation. African American neighborhood museums, located in the hearts of these increasingly “black” metropolises, felt the full effects of this crisis, as evidenced by their constant financial battles during the last three decades of the twentieth century. Black urban poverty, community displacement engendered by urban renewal, and other external economic factors affected vital areas like museum membership, leadership, and finance. As such, the apparent disengagement between Detroit’s International Afro-American Museum in 1965 and the new Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in 1997—and, indeed, the distance between all of the museums in this study from their original manifestations in the 1960s and 1970s—was not simply a consequence of the passage of time or architectural transformation, but also a reflection of the ideological changes that encompassed and transformed the black freedom struggle in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Despite their troubles, African American neighborhood museums set a precedent that prominent public history sites could not continue to blithely ignore without being prepared to justify such practices. Renowned museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Smithsonian Institution began to respond—however tentatively and reluctantly at first—to this call for transformation by incorporating elements of African American history and culture once excluded from their own exhibits and programs. Many other mainstream museums and public history sites, even those once wholly devoted to the Anglo experience (such as Colonial Williamsburg), followed their lead during the last two decades of the twentieth century. By the time the Smithsonian Institution’s Board of Regents designated a final building site for the construction of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, D.C., in 2006, one could consider the black museum movement a success—even if that success had been tempered by knowledge of the numerous, and often divisive, external and internal difficulties that continued to chal-
acceler-rismandic tern black item. Yet began to mdwork office just confront African teasingly by their century. renewal, member-between Charles lead, the manifest-passage s: logical e in the t a precisely ignore s such as began to transformal culture instream ic Anglo the last titution’s n of the AHC) in vement a numer-to chal-

lenge the movement’s longevity. Although most African American museums remained at a distinct financial disadvantage compared to mainstream institutions like the Smithsonian, as well as smaller regional museums (with which they are more comparable), they nonetheless had exploded tradition-bound conceptions of what a “museum” can be and the audiences a museum may serve. While black neighborhood museums have evolved in mission and physical form since their inception, the grassroots applications of the Black Power Movement—those which call for knowledge and pride in one’s heritage—per-severe in their daily work.

The construction of the NMAAHC arguably brings the black museum movement into its most public and emblematic manifestation. Technically, of course, the NMAAHC does not represent the first, nor the only, African American museum to operate as a “national” institution. For example, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, which is an affiliate of the Smithsonian, opened in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 2004. The museum is positioned within a city and landscape that had been vital to the Underground Railroad’s operations. Yet the Freedom Center’s designation as a national museum, further reinforced by its relationship with the Smithsonian, does not necessarily command the same prominence as a museum situated on the National Mall. Indeed, it is possible that its “second-tier” national status might have contributed, at least in part, to the organization’s ongoing turmoil regarding its identity and finances.

The NMAAHC’s supporters believe that the museum’s location on the National Mall presents, both figuratively and literally, a monumental statement about the integral place of African Americans in the national landscape. Situating a national African American museum in Washington, D.C., is a natural fit, argues Alison Landsberg, because of the historic symbolism associated with the city. “If mass cultural sites do in fact have this pedagogical potential,” Landsberg posits, “should not such a museum be located in Washington D.C., the nation’s political and symbolic capital? . . . an African American history museum might make it possible for visitors of all backgrounds to take on the painful memories of racial oppression and, in so doing, challenge their own assumptions and ideologies.” Yet the existence of the NMAAHC may also constitute a step beyond the founding goals of the black museum movement, in that the museum, asserts Executive Director Lonnie Bunch, is “not being built as a museum by African-Americans for African-Americans. . . . The notion that is so important here is that African-American culture is used as a lens to understand what it means to be American.”
Bunch’s extraordinary statement in some ways breaks with the impetus that drove pioneers like Margaret Burroughs and Charles Wright, who transformed the postwar cultural landscape by building institutions responsive to the needs and interests of African Americans—“for us, by us.” The apparent disjuncture between these two ideals underlies the often difficult relationship that has historically existed between national museum advocates and leaders of black neighborhood museums. As such, in order to understand the challenges and opportunities presented by the NMAAHCP, we must also recognize its historic and contested bond with local African American museums.

“A Matter That Must Be Controlled By Black People Who Think Black”

The drive to establish a national museum of African American history began in the early twentieth century, when a group of African American Civil War veterans and their descendants pushed for the authorization of a federal memorial building that paid “tribute to the Negro’s contributions to the achievements of America.” Though their campaign was unsuccessful, calls for a national African American museum picked up speed during the 1960s. Yet within the black museum community, support for a federally sponsored African American museum was by no means unanimous. Several black museum leaders objected vehemently to the construction of a national museum, with the dispute reaching fractious heights during the 1960s and again during the 1980s. Indeed, during the mid-1960s, International Afro-American Museum founder Dr. Charles Wright campaigned to prevent the federal government from passing a national museum proposal, arguing that the government, as well as members of the “Black Establishment” who supported such a project, would inevitably compromise the integrity of the stories that a national African American museum must tell.

In 1965 Representative James Scheuer (D-NY) introduced federal bill H.R. 10638 to the House of Representatives, proposing an exploratory “Commission on Negro History and Culture” that would research the feasibility of establishing a “national Negro museum.” Suspicious of the bill’s implications, Wright called an emergency meeting of the International Afro-American Museum planning committee on September 26, 1965. Wright informed the committee that while Scheuer, who was white, may have introduced the bill because of a “desire to ‘do something’” for blacks, nevertheless the Congressman “did not ask the help of any Negroes in framing the bill . . . it might be better for Negroes
themselves to supply the initiative for such a bill.”10 The committee agreed that black museum advocates should author another bill and introduce it to both the House and Senate in order to “supersede” Scheuer’s proposal.

Prior to founding the International Afro-American Museum in Detroit, Wright had supported the idea of creating a national black history museum, whether in Detroit or in another city, such as Washington, D.C. Securing a national charter for the IAM, Wright argued, would “give the project the sort of status that would attract the support of the whole country.”11 Although Wright agreed that “everybody wants it in his own city,” Detroit Institute of Arts director Willis F. Woods, who served on the IAM planning committee, maintained that New York City or Washington, D.C., offered the best possible locations for a national museum. In the end, the group combined their interest in creating a national African American museum with their dedication to the local. The committee unanimously passed Wright’s proposal that “the people of Detroit will participate in it [the creation of a national black museum] and represent Michigan in whatever national effort there is” and then continued with their plans to build an African American museum in Detroit.12

Wright’s opposition to the bill thus did not stem from a total rejection of the concept of a national African American museum. Rather, he repeatedly stressed that the historical incompetence and bias shown by the federal government toward African American issues necessitated that such a bill—authored by a white politician, rather than by himself or other African American museum leaders—must not pass. Wright maintained that federal oversight of such a project removed control from the very people the museum purported to represent. In a letter to African American journalist Carl Rowan in March 1966, Wright explained: “You may know that there was a bill introduced in Congress, last August, for the Federal Government to set up a Negro History Commission. . . . We opposed such a bill, because we feel that the Negro, himself, must be a positive, creative force in such a project if it is to create for him the identification that is so vitally needed.”13 Despite Wright’s public crusade, however, support for a national African American museum gained momentum in Congress and among some African American cultural organizations, including the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.

Although Congressman Scheuer’s original proposal for a national African American museum failed to pass, he renewed the bill in 1968. Scheuer explained his persistence in a letter to Congress. Pointing to the “almost complete submergence of the American Negro’s historical and culture heritage,” he proposed
to remedy this "significant loss" by establishing a presidentially appointed Commission on Negro History and Culture. The commission would examine "all aspects of the problem of preserving, collecting, and ultimately integrating evidence of the Negro past into the mainstream of American history. To highlight the importance of this effort, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and I are co-sponsoring a one-day conference on February 15, scheduled to coincide with National Negro History Week. . .". The conference program for the conference featured panels on topics such as "What should be collected and why?" "Where should materials be placed—in a national museum/library, or in regional museums and libraries?" Conference attendees also debated issues such as "How can we get Negro history integrated into American history and our educational systems?" "Do TV, radio, and films adequately treat Negro history? If not, what can be done?"

Notwithstanding the conference's focus on issues deeply important to Wright, he and the staff of the International Afro-American Museum continued to object to the revived national museum proposal. In a letter to the editor of the Christian Science Monitor, IAM treasurer Oretta Todd declared that the government "must not play its habitual ugly-American role, giving to the black man what government thinks the black man needs." Likewise, in a March 1968 letter to the Select Sub-Committee on Education, Wright emphasized that "whether or not such a monument—a museum of Negro History—is constructed should depend on the Negroes themselves. The impetus must come from within the Negro community, not from outside it." Pointing to the existence of museums like the IAM and the DuSable, Wright argued that the black community clearly possessed the ability and momentum to create such a museum. Indeed, the passage of the Scheuer bill might ultimately detract from the success of these grassroots institutions, for, as Wright mentioned, "some are raising the question as to the wisdom of supporting a private organization if the federal government is going to do it for us."

If the government truly wanted to promote African American history, contended Wright, it should follow the three recommendations he presented during the Congressional hearings on the Scheuer Bill on March 18, 1968:

1. Assist in the immediate preparation of 100 Mobile Exhibits (similar to the IAM Exhibit). They would travel throughout the country, telling the story of Afro-Americans.

2. Assist in the establishment of a nation-wide system of Oral History committees to record for posterity the wealth of stories that elderly
Afro-Americans have to tell and, at the same time, seek out the many documents, artifacts, and so forth that are so necessary to tell our story.

3. Encourage and support grass-roots organizations that are already involved in Afro-American history. Some of these include: The Chicago African American Museum of History and Art; The American Negro History in Beacon Hill, Boston; and our International Afro-American Museum, Inc., Detroit.¹⁹

While Wright thus believed that federal moneys should be made available to assist local African American museums, none of the steps he proposed involved the government's taking control from community organizations already engaged in remembering and interpreting African American history and culture. Although Wright supported the construction of a "monument to the Afro-American's struggle for freedom," he reiterated that the historically conservative nature of the Smithsonian Institution mandated that such an organization could never be in charge of a national African American museum. "One of the early architects of this bill was asked," Wright reported, "'can you assure us that a federally-sponsored museum project would deal fairly with DuBois, Garvey, Robeson and Malcolm X?' Of course not. The Smithsonian Institute, to name just one example, has been more concerned with reptiles and birds than with Black Americans."²⁰

Wright's selection of past and present advocates of black power—Marcus Garvey, Paul Robeson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Malcolm X—is significant. These architects of twentieth-century black intellectual thought and activism shaped Wright's creation of the International Afro-American Museum far more than the "black establishment" leaders that he consistently challenged during his tenure at the museum.²¹ Wright mistrusted the government's ability to fairly address and incorporate the work of controversial black radicals into a national museum. For him, creating a national African American museum remained a "matter that must be controlled by black people who think black."²²

Wright's clash with the black establishment further unfolded in the numerous letters he composed against the national museum bill. In a June 1968 letter addressed to National Urban League executive director Whitney Young, African American social scientist and federal adviser Kenneth Clark, and NAACP executive director Roy Wilkins, Wright beseeched them to reconsider their support of the Scheuer bill. Citing the roadblocks the IAM and other black neighborhood museums faced, Wright maintained:
Our attempts to gain the interest and support of the black establishment throughout the country [have] failed. Yet many of these whom we have approached have given their support to Congressman Scheuer to gain passage of his bill, H.R. 12962. We, along with other organizations similar to ours in Chicago, Boston, and California, are opposed to this bill. . . . The bill, if passed, will duplicate the work of black controlled organizations that represent the will of the people. . . . It seems strange to us that Mr. Scheuer has been able to rally so many black people behind his bid for immortality behind an unnecessary bill that will cost the tax payers at least a half-million dollars, while the black sponsored project to get $50,000 to restore Frederick Douglass's other house in Washington has failed miserably. . . .

One year later, Kinard wrote to Henry Moon, editor of *Crisis* magazine, to complain about Wilkins's continued failure to speak out against the Scheuer bill, as well as the NAACP's lack of public support for the IAM. Wright wrote that an article Wilkins had published in *Crisis,* "Negro History or Mythology," repeated the "continuing complaint . . . about how the poor blacks fare at the hands of the white power structure. Yet they, the black leadership, frequently fail to assist black organizations that would make such complaints unnecessary. For four years we have tried to interest Mr. Wilkins and the NAACP in just a token of recognition of our efforts in the field of Negro history, without success."

Wilkins and his "establishment" colleagues likely supported the bill proposed by Scheuer because the construction of a national African American museum would undoubtedly bring a degree of prominence to black history and culture that small, regional museums like the IAM could not begin to match. Furthermore, although Wright's objections to the Scheuer bill revolved around his aversion to federal oversight of the interpretation of black history, he also realized that his museum would inevitably have to compete with a national museum for financial resources, artifacts, and public attention. In other words, he feared a loss of local power should a national museum be established. In many ways, Wright's conflict with national museum advocates paralleled the numerous clashes between the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum and the Smithsonian Institution, or the DuSable and the Chicago Historical Society during their battle over the Douglas/Grand Boulevard exhibit in the 1990s. This time, however, the conflict was writ large, on a national scale, resonating between a black-owned institution devoted to African American history and a nationally conceived museum that (presumably) touted the same goals, but with markedly different constituents.
By early April 1968, support for the revised Scheuer bill had progressed to the extent that Congressman Clarence Brown, Jr. (R-OH), introduced a new bill proposing that a national African American museum be located in Wilberforce, Ohio. While the city of Wilberforce might not automatically connote a “national” status in the way that a Washington, D.C., location would, Brown argued that it was an appropriate site because both Central State University and Wilberforce University (“the first Negro institution of higher learning in the United States”) were located there. In addition, the city had historically served as a hub for the Underground Railroad. In a letter to his congressional colleagues, Brown reasoned that a national African American museum in Wilberforce not only would function as a repository for artifacts and learning but would also “improve the Negro’s sense of pride and place as a responsible citizen in America. At a time when the Negro is reputedly becoming more and more alienated from our culture, I think that Congress should take a more affirmative role to emphasize the Negro’s participation in and influence on our Nation. Perhaps, this would help reduce the trend toward action outside our society.” Although it is unclear just when, exactly, Brown composed this letter, he distributed it on April 4, 1968. On this same day, James Earl Ray assassinated Martin Luther King on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Cities across the nation, including Washington, D.C., subsequently faced the violent and grief-stricken reaction to King’s murder.

The tenor of Brown’s proposal insinuates that no other museums dedicated to black history and culture had yet been established, when in fact not far from the U.S. Capitol Building the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum—itself a federally funded museum—had recently opened its doors. Charles Wright, then, had correctly assumed that the achievements of local African American museums went relatively unnoticed by prominent national museum advocates. Congressman Brown’s contention that a national black history museum would reduce “action outside our society” also meshed with the ways in which politicians applied the containment discourse of the Cold War as a way of understanding the motivations that ignited urban unrest; some believed that Communist-inspired “subversives” or “outside agitators” fueled the riots. If Brown did not specifically identify these elements in his letter, however, he did imply that those who expressed “alienation from our culture” (in this case, “our” should be read as “white”) operated against social norms. In this role, they were more likely to participate in “outsider” movements like black power. Brown assumed that creating a national African American museum would counter these outsider
tendencies by reinforcing responsible citizenship: the physical presence of a national African American museum would encourage black men to identify, and claim, a properly defined sense of place within American society. That Brown believed a national African American museum could begin to ameliorate such problems speaks to the rather remarkable power that he and his supporters were ready to confer upon a government-sanctioned cultural institution.

In September 1968, John Conyers (D-MI), an African American member of the House of Representatives who opposed the Scheuer bill, informed Charles Wright that the proposal to establish a Commission on Negro History and Culture (H.R. 12962) had passed the House by a “record vote of 263 yeas to 45 nays.” Yet though the House approved the proposal, a significant delay lapsed between the introduction of Brown’s legislation and the actual establishment of a national African American history museum in Wilberforce. Indeed, the Wilberforce National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center only opened its doors in 1987 after a series of financial and administrative difficulties. Primarily funded by the Ohio Historical Society and private donations, the museum’s exhibits and archives focus on the broad expanse of African American history, with a permanent exhibition titled From Victory to Freedom: Afro-American Life in the Fifties, as well as a smaller exhibition on Wilberforce’s role in the Underground Railroad.

As the Wilberforce museum began its operations, support resumed for the creation of a federally funded African American museum located at a site that automatically communicated a national significance and prominence: Washington, D.C. Members of the African American Museums Association continued to express their misgivings about the plan, however. At a 1988 association meeting, John Kinard took up Charles Wright’s earlier fight, contending that neighborhood African American museums would suffer, not only financially but also in terms of their ability to secure exhibitions and artifacts, if a national museum was established. As did several other members of the association, including Margaret Burroughs, Kinard proposed that any congressional resolution to create a national museum must also contain a provision to establish a $50 million endowment, which would be divided among local African American neighborhood museums.

Kinard’s long-standing unease about the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum’s position within the Smithsonian community of museums fueled his objections. Like Charles Wright, Kinard remained skeptical about the implications of federal control; he also believed that the ANM’s identity and independence in relation to the...
to the Smithsonian Institution continued to be precarious even twenty years after its founding. If a national African American museum finally took shape in Washington, D.C., rather than Wilberforce or other distant locales, the ANM’s independence and status might slip further. Media reports regarding the unsteady position of the ANM reinforced Kinard’s fears. A 1980 Smithsonian committee report questioned the Anacostia Museum’s ability to achieve national status and recommended instead that the museum remain neighborhood focused. Likewise, a 1984 Washington Post article reaffirmed the Smithsonian’s perception of the ANM as lacking in national potential, despite the museum’s groundbreaking work and the international attention it had received: “the political forces prevailing in the Smithsonian Institution and in Congress seemed to favor a more traditional national museum of African American history on the National Mall, with a small community museum remaining in Anacostia.”

To counteract the official pigeonholing of the ANM as an exclusively “neighborhood” institution, Kinard began to institute sweeping changes that appeared to shatter his original vision of the ANM as a community-focused museum. In addition to moving out of the former Carver Theater and constructing a new museum, Kinard approved a significant name change: the locally focused “Anacostia Neighborhood Museum” became the much broader “Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture.” In keeping with the name change, exhibitions once formerly devoted to immediately local concerns, such as The Rat: Man’s Invited Affliction (1968), became increasingly outnumbered by exhibitions that featured less local themes. Although Kinard continued to emphasize the museum’s ties to the community, ANM historian Portia James indicates that as early as 1982 the exhibition calendar featured just ten exhibits out of thirty-four that referenced subjects pertinent to the immediate neighborhood.

Kinard’s ability to follow through on the sweeping institutional changes he envisioned was short-lived. In 1989, at the age of fifty-three, he died of myelofibrosis. Museum staff and the community of Anacostia, bereft, prepared for a new decade without his visionary leadership, even as official movement toward creating a national African American museum in Washington, D.C., continued.

**Locating the NMAAHC**

Congressman James Scheuer’s proposal to launch an independent yet federally controlled African American museum had clashed with the views of some
museum professionals during the 1960s, who argued that black history must be integrated into existing museums in order to demonstrate how vital these narratives were in understanding American history. Even during the 1990s, the National Museum of American History director Roger Kennedy recommended that creating a black history wing within the NMAH was a better solution than building an entirely separate museum—a tactic he feared would ultimately "ghettoize" black history. Yet despite voices of opposition from people like Wright, Kinard, and Kennedy, by the 1990s many national black museum advocates increasingly maintained that creating an independent African American museum (albeit one overseen by the Smithsonian) would guarantee a degree of autonomy—indeed, black autonomy—that integration within an existing Smithsonian museum would not.

In 1991, the Smithsonian-appointed African American Institutional Study Advisory Committee published a report advocating the establishment of a national African American museum on the Mall overseen by the Smithsonian Institution. The committee, chaired by the former Studio Museum in Harlem director Mary Schmidt Campbell, did not fully agree on supporting the late John Kinard's idea of a "national trust" for existing African American museums. Their ambivalence distressed members of the African American Museums Association, who, upon reviewing the report, objected to the advisory committee's "profoundly disappointing" conclusions regarding the place and worth of local African American museums. As Charles Wright had repeatedly stressed during his battle against the national museum proposal in the 1960s, the AAMA contended that the advisory committee both diminished the work of local black museums and "appropriate[d]" to the proposed [national] museum roles which should be shared nationally by many Black museums or which have already been assumed by the AAMA. In order for the AAMA to publicly support the national museum, the organization argued that local African American museums must be ensured guaranteed access to an endowment.

Their insistent call for a multimillion dollar endowment accessible to local African American museums came during a particularly traumatic period for many cultural organizations, both public and private. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Congress slashed federal funding to the NEA and the NEH. Increasingly vitriolic "culture wars" encompassed public dialogue about any form of federal funding for museums and other cultural institutions, as conservative politicians spoke out against multicultural narratives that they decried as revisionist at best and potentially treasonous at worst. Senator Jesse Helms
(R-NC), who vehemently opposed the 1989 congressional act to establish the National Museum of the American Indian, purposefully delayed Senate discussion on a national African American museum proposal introduced by Senator Paul Simon (D-IL). Helms pondered the slippery slope he believed might result if a national African America museum were established: “Once Congress gives the go ahead for African-Americans ... how can Congress then say no to Hispanics, and the next group, and the next group after that?” Helms did not perceive multiculturalism as a unifying force but a divisive one. Congress, he claimed, should not tolerate what he saw as the cultural and national fragmentation being demanded by “the next group, and the next group after that.” In light of such fervent objections pouring forth from Congress and conservative commentators, to many advocates of the national African American museum it seemed highly unlikely that the federal government would both approve such a museum and grant millions of dollars to already existing African American community museums.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that in this contentious climate the national African American museum proposal languished. Disagreements regarding management and finances divided supporters, with some advocates continuing to support Smithsonian oversight while others insisted that a private, African American-controlled foundation should fund the museum. In 2001, a surge of renewed activism, led by veteran civil rights leader and Congressman John Lewis (D-GA) in 2001, enabled the passage of H.R. 3442, the National Museum of African American History and Culture Plan for Action Presidential Commission Act. The law, which authorized the commission to develop a plan to create a national museum in Washington, D.C., ultimately recommended that the Smithsonian Institution oversee the museum’s implementation. On January 30, 2006, after nearly a century of debate and setbacks, the Smithsonian’s Board of Regents chose a five-acre parcel of vacant land on 14th Street and Constitution Avenue, just northeast of the Washington Monument and adjacent to the National Museum of American History, as the final museum site. The museum, financed with a $250 million appropriation from Congress, and with $250 million being raised in private funds, began construction in 2012, with a targeted public opening in 2015.

Not surprisingly, choosing an appropriate site to build the national museum proved to be a difficult task fraught with questions about visibility, public access, and the symbolic import of the museum’s physical location in Washington. Initially, in 2003, the National Museum of African American History and Culture
Chapter 9

Plan for Action Presidential Commission recommended a “trapezoidal slice of land at the foot of the Senate side of the Capitol” for the museum’s construction, which museum advocates also approved.41 The symbolism of building a national African American museum within sight of the building where lawmakers had authorized the slave trade and reinforced Jim Crow policies was not lost on museum advocates—nor upon those who opposed the museum’s construction.42 As in the case of the African American Museum of Philadelphia, whose supporters lost their battle to build in Society Hill, strident vocal opposition to building a national African American museum on or near the grounds of the U.S. Capitol forced museum advocates to consider other sites.

Supporters of the national museum subsequently debated four other possible locales, including the Smithsonian’s Arts and Industries Building, which opened in 1881. Although the Arts and Industries Building is located on the Mall, its Victorian architecture and small rooms did not bode well for the development of a modern museum. The most promising site that remained, then, was located at 14th Street and Constitution Avenue. According to Executive Director Lonnie Bunch, this site represented “a place that will make sure most Americans have access to the rich story of African American culture. . . . And frankly, the visibility helps us with fundraising.”43 By literally positioning the NMAAHC next to the monuments and memorials on the National Mall, museum advocates hoped to bypass the spatial confinements historically experienced by many African American neighborhood museums, as their leaders strove to balance the restrictions of neighborhood boundaries, design guidelines, and, sometimes, local prejudices. Yet this site also presented limitations. By virtue of its designation as a branch of the Smithsonian Institution, coupled with its highly visible position on the National Mall, museum leaders had to parley between federal and private expectations. Negotiating this balance might result in conflicts of interest—a possibility realized by those, like John Kinard and Dr. Charles Wright, who opposed the national museum’s construction.

The NMAAHC Takes (Virtual) Shape

The NMAAHC’s public programming and temporary exhibitions began even before ground was broken for the building. For example, its “Save Our African American Treasures: A National Collections Initiative of Discovery and Preservation” program featured multicity workshops on topics such as local heritage, clothing and textile preservation, and digital history instruction. A June...
2011 session held in Dallas on "Building a National Collection" featured the curator of collections, Michele Gates Moresi, who discussed how the museum differed from other Smithsonian museums "in that it does not begin with a collection. Developing and caring for a collection of materials that reflects the diversity of the African American experience provides the Museum with an array of challenges and opportunities."44

Those who could not attend these sessions in person had the option of contributing to the nascent museum-community partnership through the NMAAHC’s digital “Memory Book,” which requested that users register and post their memories about their heritage, or about African American history and issues in general, as well as their reflections upon the NMAAHC.45 From 2007 to 2011, users submitted around one hundred personal stories, which ranged from memories of growing up in Atlanta during the 1950s to participating in the 2011 Million Woman March in Philadelphia. Museum staff then tagged each entry with key words, such as “activism” or “fashion,” allowing readers to click on the tag that would take them to additional stories with similar foci. A visual map of these tags further illustrated the connections between seemingly disparate stories.46 The success of this digital project was so great that the museum had to take down the site in early 2012 with plans to reopen it on a much larger software platform. With initiatives like “Memory Book,” the NMAAHC shares historical authority with their audiences, a tradition begun decades earlier by African American and ethnic neighborhood museums. Indeed, it is only relatively recently that mainstream museums and other public history sites have begun to consider this paradigm shift in conceptualizing their relationships with audiences.47

While the digital realm emphasizes the NMAAHC’s intent to connect with African American communities throughout the United States, its architectural design clearly showcases a significantly different facade from that of most African American neighborhood museums— institutions whose physical characteristics and institutional missions were, at least initially, often informed by the circumstances of their immediate surroundings in working-class and middle-class African American neighborhoods. The NMAAHC comprises approximately 315,000 square feet; during the design process, the lead architect, David Adjaye of the Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup, proposed large skylights, green space, a wraparound porch, and a walking bridge meant to symbolize the Middle Passage. According to National Planning Capital Commission member Ken Walton, the porch represents a crucial design element, in that it links the
grand, symbolic space of the National Mall with the intimacy of the African American vernacular: “the porch is seen as an iconic element in African American culture. . . . It’s a welcoming and gathering space.”

The dominant feature of the building initially consisted of three bronze “coronas” that invoked a crown motif derived from Yoruban sculpture; the motif would envelop the entire museum. When Adjaye unveiled the architectural plans, however, concerns regarding the building’s height, setback, and sight lines resulted in the reduction of the three coronas to a more streamlined two. Adjaye also downsized the museum by 17 percent of its originally proposed size. The building’s interior design, divided into thirds, will feature exhibits on slavery, sports, music, and visual arts. Interestingly, a significant portion of the interior will re-create sites from historically important local black communities across the nation, such as a fugitive slave settlement in the Great Dismal Swamps, and Moton Field in Tuskegee, Alabama, where black pilots trained during World War II. The museum’s interior layout is meant to encompass a sweeping representation of African American history and culture, while still paying heed to regionally specific history that might normally be overlooked in a national museum.

The methods by which the NMAAHC physically presents itself and the narratives that it communicates are inseparable. As such, criticism of the content of another Smithsonian Institution museum located on the National Mall—the National Museum of the American Indian—may prove instructive for NMAAHC staff as they forge an identity among the community of national museums in Washington. Among other faults, critics took the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), which opened in 2004, to task for the absence of explanatory text accompanying artifacts, as well as for the limited number of neatly packaged didactic lessons and linear narratives that typically comprise museum exhibits—particularly those on display in national museums. For some, the museum’s exhibitions failed in that they did not require visitors to think critically, but instead embodied what critic Tiffany Jenkins has characterized as the “cringe-making, sentimentalised exhibitions that are driven, not by knowledge, but by the identity-affirming imperatives of cultural politics.” Yet Amanda Cobb, editor of the American Indian Quarterly and former administrator of the Chickasaw Nation Division of History and Culture, has argued that it is unfair to portray the museum as a failure simply because it did not conform to “long-standing Western museological standards.” Indeed, Cobb asserts that “it does not seem to matter to these critics that those museological

stand: ways,”

tives a skewe

Sh to be
dare ti
muset
levele:
critic:
staff
public
NMA
wrote

Yet
nation
audier
maint
curate
and m
borho
subver
spaces
“prost
is at c
intima:
such c

To da
the N.
as the
same t
museu
tional.
African American bronze Are; the architectural sighted two opposed ibits on of the communities wamps, during sweep-paying ed a

and the complexional tractive national task for the limmat typ-national require skins has driven, al poli-former ure, has se it did, Cobb ological

standards have exploited and objectified Native Americans in very specific ways." In other words, while the NMAI may not present conventional narratives and displays, this was a conscious decision meant to counter centuries of skewed interpretations applied by outsiders to Native American cultures.

Should the NMAAHN's design and exhibits veer too far into what is deemed to be "nontraditional" for a museum on the National Mall, and if its curators dare to overemphasize the "sentimental" insistence on "identity affirmation," the museum will likely be subjected to the same sort of intense disapproval as that leveled at the NMAL. NMAAHN director Lonnie Bunch is keenly aware of such criticisms—e.g., that the NMAI's exhibits are overly romanticized, and that its staff eschewed scholarly input from those of non-native heritage. Bunch has publicly countered this particularly contentious point by asserting that the NMAAHN will "reflect the best scholarship on black history, no matter who wrote it, and . . . tell a sweeping narrative from slavery to the present."

Yet while Bunch may rightfully take a cautious approach in planning how the national museum will interpret and present African American history to mass audiences, the NMAAHN should not hesitate to build upon, and create, "non-mainstream" models for museum form and function—much as the NMAI's curators and educators intended with their own institution. In doing so, Bunch and museum staff will pay homage to the radical work initiated by their neighborhood museum predecessors during the 1960s and 1970s. By rejecting or subverting traditional methods of interpretation and design, the NMAAHN could forge an image as a twenty-first-century museum that operates in multiple spaces and among multiple audiences: local, international, and imagined, or "prosthetic." Although the museum must function within a national setting that is at once expansive and potentially limiting, its ability to connect with the intimacy of African American local histories may allow it to maneuver around such constrictions.

**Negotiating Tensions between Local and National**

To date, the broader African American museum community has largely embraced the NMAAHN. Nevertheless, the potential remains for tension over issues such as the distribution of finances and access to collections—in short, many of the same concerns that motivated Dr. Charles Wright's objections to the national museum campaign during the 1960s. A photograph that subtly (if unintentionally) highlighted this possibility of lingering conflict was prominently
framed in a January 2011 *New York Times* article on the history of the national African American museum. In the photograph, a woman named Katricia Gray is shown conversing with a researcher for the NMAAHC. Gray, who resides in Detroit, brought an African sculpture to be appraised as a possible donation to the NMAAHC. The reasons behind her decision to bring the artifact to this event, rather than donating it to the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, were not provided in the article nor was the often contested historic relationship between the NMAAHC and the MAAH mentioned.55

Lonnie Bunch has downplayed any residual conflict between local African American museums and the NMAAHC, contending that the stories the national museum will interpret are national in scope in a way that other museums, both African American and traditional, are unable to access. “We will be able to tell the full sweep of the African American experience,” Bunch assures audiences. “Whether it’s about slavery or civil rights or the migration of blacks form the South to the North, we can tie the story together in a way that other museums cannot.”56 The results of the 2003 survey of African American museums conducted by the Plan for Presidential Action Commission reinforced Bunch’s optimism, as the statistics indicated that 87 percent of respondents supported a national museum, while just 12.5 percent of respondents “expressed concern that a National Museum would compete for visitors, collections and/or funding.” Most respondents also conveyed interest in forming a collaborative relationship with a national museum, whether by sending staff to the NMAAHC for training (68 percent of respondents) or by housing temporary exhibitions produced by the national museum (65 percent).57

Still, despite the overwhelmingly positive response toward the NMAAHC, the survey results also produced a few handwritten comments that expressed reservations. For example, one stated, “I do not support a concept that a national . . . museum would be a centralized control center for [African American] museums as advanced by one of your spokespeople.” Another respondent admitted fears regarding funding. Their institution had received “over $1 million from the [government] over the last 3 years and [we] are scared the [national] museum may cause this funding to end.” Given the economic downturn of the late 2000s, these fears were not unreasonable.58

Rick Moss, director of The African American Museum and Library of Oakland, California, does not believe that the NMAAHC’s public programs and exhibits will conflict with the work, financial strength, and identity of local museums what we’re of [African responsibility public pr Moss indicates that] because with n point about interesting process c ing collect some mu black mu For exam of the W Carolina, the NMA maintain in the ci according the Woo its Africa Whil promote marginal
African American museums. Rather, Moss perceives the national museum as representative of the “ultimate in the evolution that started in the 1960s with public history and social history.” Furthermore, the national museum will act as the “hub of a wheel in which there is more cooperation, maybe the development of more regional associations among African American museums.”

Individual African American neighborhood museums, libraries, and historical societies will serve as the vital spokes that turn and balance this national “hub.” In order to maintain this mutually beneficial balance between local and national, Moss suggests that it is crucial to form regional associations of African American museums. As he argues, “Getting back to the subject of survival, I think that’s what we’re going to have to do. There’s going to have to be regional associations of [African American] museums so we can share the burden of our financial responsibilities, share in exhibition development and traveling shows, share in public programming.”

Moss also maintains that the Smithsonian Institution has succeeded in eliminating fears that a national African American museum intends to “rob your neighborhoods and your communities of all your artifacts and take them back, because we [the NMAAHC] have more than we can handle.” Instead, Moss states that the national museum wants to “share them [the artifacts] with you.” Moss’s point about the NMAAHC possessing “more artifacts than we can handle” is interesting, however, in that as of 2011 the national museum was in the active process of acquiring an additional twenty thousand artifacts to add to its existing collection of eleven thousand. As a result of this acquisition process, even some museums within the Smithsonian system, let alone smaller independent black museums, have hesitated to loan significant objects to the NMAAHC. For example, the National Museum of American History owns a large segment of the Woolworth’s lunch counter from the landmark 1960 Greensboro, North Carolina, sit-in movement. If this lunch counter were removed and donated to the NMAAHC, as some have expressed interest in doing, curators at the NMAH maintain that the museum’s ability to tell the full story of this crucial moment in the Civil Rights Movement would be compromised. Even more troublesome, according to Smithsonian Institution spokesperson Linda St. Thomas, removing the Woolworth’s lunch counter and “stripping the American history museum of its African-American material would leave [the NMAH] as the ‘white museum.’”

While this is a valid concern, until very recently the Smithsonian Institution promoted a version of American history that, whether intentionally or not, marginalized and excluded African American narratives. Only with the implicit
and explicit pressures applied by black neighborhood museums, along with the revolution in new social history, did the Smithsonian begin to reconsider its narrow focus. Although the theoretical absence of the Woolworth's lunch counter would certainly represent a loss for the National Museum of American History and its audiences, recasting their other exhibits to tell a fuller story of "nonwhite" history might alleviate the artifact's absence.

Jostling for Space on the National Mall

As the NMAAHC took shape in blueprints and in the digital realm, questions (and concerns) arose about whether this institution would truly be the "last" museum on the National Mall. In 2003, formal congressional hearings regarding the initiation of the National Museum of the American Latino (NMAL) began; in 2008, Congress authorized the creation of the Commission to Study the Potential Creation of a National Museum of the American Latino. The discourse surrounding the proposed museum shares many similarities with the historical debates around the establishment of the NMAAHC. For example, while largely supportive of the concept of a national Latino museum, Tey Marjanna Nunn, the director and chief curator of visual arts at the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico, questioned whether such a museum might not compress Latino history into a narrative that skims over complicated history in an effort to attract audiences and funding. Nunn admitted, "I am concerned that because of political pressure from multiple entities, a national Latino museum might commodify and ghettoize (or should I say barrio-ize?) the Latino experience into a vibrant, colorful, worry-free 'fiesta' in order to begin to teach a general museum visitor about Latino culture." Like Charles Wright and John Kinard, Nunn also wondered whether, and how, a national Latino museum would recognize and build upon the years of path-breaking work already conducted by local Latino museums and centros, many of which struggle to access funding and political support.

On the one hand, Nunn's concern that the future NMAL might detract from existing Latino cultural institutions, and potentially "barrio-ize" the Latino experience, might be alleviated if its leaders concurred with Lonnie Bunch's insistence that a national museum can avoid such "ghettoization." Bunch intends that the NMAAHC function, not as an intensely specialized, compartmentalized examination of black history and culture, but rather as a "lens to understand what it means to be American." If the leaders of the National Museum of the American Latino were to draw from Bunch's approach, their
institution would not marginalize the Latino experience, but rather contextualize it within the broader narrative of American history.

Another branch of the debate surrounding the “ghettoization” of racial and ethnic history, however, posits that building a separate African American or Latino museum will detract from the linear narrative of American history found in more general-purpose national museums, such as the National Museum of American History. In May 2011, for instance, Representative James Moran (D-VA) expressed anxiety “about the direction we are taking at the Smithsonian” and worried that, by establishing both the NMAAHC and the National Museum of the American Latino, “we are breaking up the American narrative.” While asserting that “every indigenous immigrant community” has a right to tell its story, separating these stories into museums based on race or ethnicity created a dilemma. Indeed, Moran speculated that, “as much as we would like to think that all Americans are going to go to the African American Museum, I’m afraid it’s not going to happen... The Museum of American History is where all the white folks are going to go, and the American Indian Museum is where Indians are going to feel at home. And African Americans are going to go to their own museum. And Latinos are going to go to their own museum. And that’s not what America is all about.”

Despite his differing political affiliation, Moran’s concerns were not so far removed from the more vehement sentiments expressed by the late Senator Jesse Helms during the culture wars of the 1990s. According to both Helms and Moran, if Congress continued to allow the creation of federally funded museums focusing on different ethnicities and races, the national story might irreparably fragment. Faced with a multitude of potentially competing narratives, those audiences visiting Washington, D.C., would be left unsure of the “correct” version of American history, and their role in shaping this story.

In rebuttal to these fears, however, critics like Moran would do well to examine the historic work and achievements of local neighborhood museums like the International Afro-American Museum and the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum. Rather than acting as divisive forces intent on rupturing a sense of community, these institutions have long attracted those who felt alienated from traditional interpretations of American history and the physical representations of those narratives. In short, black neighborhood museums have reinforced and cultivated a sense of citizenship and inclusion among those often desperately searching for this measure of belonging, even as museum leaders deftly probed and dismantled outmoded and exclusionary stereotypes.

A well-conceived national museum of African American history or Latino
history would, ideally, function in much the same fashion. Rather than disman-
tling a sense of community and the collective memory of a single “American
story,” such institutions aim to draw audiences together in appreciation of the
historical multiplicity of American stories and memories, and to reclaim the
ways in which these memories interweave throughout the diaspora. It is also
probable that museums like the National Museum of African American His-
tory and Culture and, potentially, the National Museum of the American
Latino will not be able to consistently interpret the regionally specific minutiae
of African American and Latino histories in same fashion as local museums
can. Because of this, community museums possess a unique opportunity to
emphasize their neighborhood-centered identities and revitalize their missions.
In some cases, though, their connection with the local and their dedication to
social change must be rediscovered.

In fact, when is swift
demol
later, J
a simi
need t
unity it
in the
one th
Cin
c
u
W
institu
nities,
convi
Oakla
releva
design
CONCLUSION

THE TIES THAT BIND

*Museums as Community Agents*

In the 1972 issue of *Museum News*, Anacostia Neighborhood Museum founder John Kinard spoke plainly about what he believed to be the responsibility of the museum profession toward underserved audiences: “The day when established institutions can deny their responsibilities and cheat the masses is swiftly coming to an end. If museum people do not realize this, they only demonstrate their blindness and lack of concern for humanity.”¹ Three decades later, John Fleming, vice president of the Cincinnati Museum Center, expressed a similar sentiment, arguing that the crucial question museum administrators need to ask is “whether the museum is relevant to the issues facing the community it serves.”² The ties that bind these two very different museums—one rooted in the culture, history, and politics of an African American neighborhood, and one that serves as an umbrella organization for multiple cultural institutions in Cincinnati, Ohio—testify to the profound impact black neighborhood museums have had upon the museum profession and its methodology.

While not all leaders of African American museums believed that their institutions had to function as instigators of social change within their communities, the core identity of the black museum movement centered upon this conviction. Yet the imperative to address and embrace this challenge (or, as Oakland Museum founder J. S. Holliday termed it, “tyranny”) of community relevance has not always been accepted by museums—even those institutions designated as “African American.” During the charged debates that took place
throughout the 1970s about whether the Studio Museum in Harlem should relocate, Richard Clarke, chair of the museum's board, offered a startling rebuttal to Executive Director Courtney Callendar's sense of obligation to the people of Harlem. Clarke contended that the Studio Museum must now concentrate solely on art rather than function as a "social service organization for the neighborhood." He thus questioned the museum's supposed obligation to address the needs of the local black community at the expense of fully developing its status and identity as a cultural institution that, ideally, was separate from, and even above, such mundane issues.

Richard Clarke's rejection of the Studio Museum as beholden to the African American community in Harlem clearly broke with the mission that had once fundamentally distinguished African American neighborhood museums from their mainstream counterparts. During the 1980s and 1990s, however, this reassessment of a museum's community obligations also took place at other African American and ethnic museums. For instance, in 1994 board members of New York City's El Museo del Barrio, originally conceived as a neighborhood museum devoted to Puerto Rican culture, introduced the term "Latin American" into the organization's mission statement. The revised statement subsequently read: "El Museo del Barrio's mission is to establish a forum that will preserve and project the dynamic cultural heritage of Puerto Ricans and all Latin Americans in the United States." As did the Studio Museum in Harlem and, for a time, the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, El Museo's board hoped to expand the museum's focus from local to global. By inserting the broad designation "Latin American" into its mission statement, El Museo del Barrio could significantly increase its collections and feature artists from throughout Latin America rather than limiting itself to those from Puerto Rico or those of Puerto Rican descent living in New York. Exhibitions featuring well-known Latin American artists such as Frida Kahlo or Diego Rivera were likely to draw more crowds—and thereby more funding.

The board went one step further in 1996 by completely removing "Puerto Ricans" from the museum's mission statement: "El Museo del Barrio will collect, preserve, exhibit, interpret and promote the artistic heritage of Latin Americans, primarily in the United States." For some critics, this deletion constituted a betrayal of the museum's original constituency. As one community member charged, "how can you change the mission of an institution without communicating to the community that created that institution?" Ceding to pressure in 2000, the board reinserted the denomination: "The mission of El
Museo del Barrio is to present and preserve the art and culture of Puerto Ricans and all Latin Americans in the United States.”

Despite El Museo del Barrio’s nominal reclamation of its original obligation to the Puerto Rican community, the breach between the museum and the people widened. In 2002, El Museo discarded its early exhibition catalogues in a dumpster behind the museum, which were later discovered by an outraged community member. This maneuver suggested to critics that El Museo had completely rejected its own history, for the exhibition catalogues contained vital information about the museum’s early years. In response, a museum watch group named “We Are Watching You” formed, claiming to represent the Puerto Rican community that El Museo had seemingly forgotten.

As Kevin Moore has argued, museums’ constant self-promotion as community leaders can mask the insidious fact that these same organizations may do little to effect actual change within the community. Thus, a presumed “museum for the people” may conceivably adopt the expansive identity of a “community museum,” even though its actual engagement with the community falls short of the community’s expectations. The outraged citizens who formed We Are Watching You sensed that the changes to El Museo del Barrio’s mission statement reflected this shallow understanding of the term “community.”

On the other hand, to what extent can institutions like El Museo del Barrio consistently represent community interests? How should a museum respond if the original community surrounding the institution has changed or been displaced, as can occur through processes such as urban renewal, immigration, and gentrification? Creating “a museum for the community” is an inherently difficult enterprise, argues Arlene Davila, for “community institutions are consistently valued on imposed standards, never on their own terms.” To claim the label of “community” museum and fulfill what may be, to some extent, the externally imposed obligations of the term demands a delicate balancing act. True, El Museo’s disposal of their archival records constituted a heinous breach of community trust. Failing to consult any community members regarding proposed mission statement changes contradicted the fundamental principles upon which this museum was founded. Yet to insist that a museum established in 1969 must still function, in terms of mission and identity, in the same manner ten or twenty years later is also problematic and may serve to strangle the institution’s creative capacity. To reject institutional change for the sake of holding onto—or placating—a museum’s original audience deprives it of the capacity to adapt, reinterpret, and challenge the institution.
What Richard Clarke also perhaps failed to consider when he rejected the Studio Museum of Harlem's social obligations was that to fully separate museums from community concerns while simultaneously ensuring that these institutions remain financially solvent, contextually groundbreaking, and favorably perceived, may be impossible. Because public history sites communicate distinct narratives about culture and society through their exhibits and programs, they are bound to promote certain perceptions about different groups of people. If one cannot separate museums from these dynamics, then by that reasoning museums cannot function as purist, isolated institutions. They must inevitably serve as active (or inactive) forces within the community, whether one defines the community geographically, or as the community of people constituting the museum's audience, or even as communities of which the museum is not yet aware. Therefore, a museum always possesses the intrinsic ability—if not the mandate—to positively affect the "lives of disadvantaged or marginalized individuals, act as a catalyst for social regeneration and as a vehicle for empowerment with specific communities and also contribute towards the creation of more equitable societies." The question, of course, is whether and to what extent museums and other public history sites recognize and act upon their innate capacities for activism.

**Toward a New Century of African American Museums**

Continual reinvention does not necessarily produce effective results for struggling museums or for public history sites in general. Indeed, African American museums that have constantly reinterpreted their approaches to conveying public history to a mass audience without surveying that audience about its needs and interests may have caused the connection between the grassroots spirit of the black museum movement and its modern embodiment to falter and widen.

As we have seen, one of the primary ways in which the black museum movement appeared to lose strength both publicly and privately stemmed from problems surrounding the intense relocation and expansion campaigns staged by many leaders of African American museums throughout the 1970s and 1990s. Chicago's DuSable Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, Detroit's Museum of African American History, and the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum expanded and relocated in an effort to attract new audiences, funding, and status. In conjunction with these efforts, these museums (as well as the African American Museum of Philadelphia, which has remained at its original site)
staged prominent fund-raising galas and underwent numerous shifts in administration. These types of public changes occasionally met with significant community resistance, even on the part of some museum staff members, who feared the disintegration of the grassroots spirit of their organizations. The physical manifestation of this grassroots spirit was embodied in the ordinariness of the very buildings and landscapes in which many of these museums were first housed—former movie theaters, modest apartment buildings, and clubhouses that historically catered to African Americans. Once museum leaders vacated their original buildings and began to alter mission statements, programs, and occasionally even the names of their organizations, their museums (some to a greater degree than others) experienced more problems connecting with audiences and maintaining financial solvency.

The decision to build new and costly museums to meet perceived audience demand contributed to the difficulties experienced by certain African American museums. In retrospect, reconsideration of the potential of a museum's existing location may have offered a better solution for museum leaders seeking to retain and attract audiences. For example, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit (MAAH) could have remained at its second location on Frederick Douglass Avenue during the 1980s and undergone the expansion and remodeling necessary to improve the space. Instead, the Douglass Avenue site barely had a chance to register with most Detroit residents before it was abandoned just a few short years later for the third, far more impressive (and expensive) incarnation of the museum.

It is also important to note that the successful expansion of African American neighborhood museums in their original locations is not without precedent. For instance, The National Great Blacks in Wax Museum in Baltimore, Maryland, founded in 1983, experienced increased attendance during the 1990s and 2000s despite the downward trend in attendance at other African American museums. Rather than pursue relocation to Baltimore's Inner Harbor District, which had become a thriving tourist destination, the museum continues to inhabit an "East Baltimore street corner across from a boarded-up shopping center" embedded in one of Baltimore's historically African American neighborhoods. In 1995 annual attendance at the 15,000-square-foot museum had reached 100,000; by 2004 it had doubled to more than 200,000. Based on the strength of these numbers, founder Joanne Martin is presently engaged in a $75-million-dollar capital campaign to increase the museum's size to 120,000 square feet (comparable with the dimensions of Detroit's Museum of African
American History) and to expand the existing museum to encompass an entire city block.  

When faced with declining attendance and budgets, museums often launch vigorous public outreach campaigns. Rather than focusing only on attracting audiences to the museum, African American museums that also work to bring their institution to the people have come full circle, back to the mobile exhibitions that galvanized institutions like the International Afro-American Museum during the 1960s. In the case of the IAM's descendant, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, most visitors are recruited to visit the museum in person or to virtually peruse their digital archives and online exhibits. Other than the use of traveling exhibits, which typically end up in other museums or more restricted spaces such as universities, airports, and libraries, physically bringing the MAAH into the working-class (and underclass) neighborhoods of Detroit does not appear to be a high priority. Consequently, Detroit residents may have little reason to care that the museum was created for and by them. Any lingering fissures between the MAAH and Detroit residents, however, might be bridged through the reinstallation of their innovative mobile exhibit van, thus continuing the spirit and practice of Charles Wright's original museum.  

The Black History 101 Mobile Museum, a popular traveling museum that Detroit schoolteacher Khalid el-Hakim created in 1991, might provide the MAAH with a unique model or potential collaborative partner to reach those seeking access to African American history—but not necessarily in the form of a “traditional” museum (even one that has been as consistently groundbreaking as the MAAH).  

Faced with the cumulative effects of decades of financial upheaval and, at times, uncertainty regarding their mission and relationship with the local community, several of the museums in this study, including the MAAH, have begun to implement important changes to exhibits, programs, and the physical structure of the buildings themselves. In 2011, for example, Chicago’s DuSable Museum addressed this problem of disconnect between the museum and underserved audiences by initiating a mobile exhibition titled Taking It to the Streets! The exhibit featured interactive displays on the life of Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable, together with related educational programs. In addition to creating a new mobile exhibit, the DuSable Museum underwent structural renovations focused on improving its archival and collections capacity—steps recommended by the 2004 Institute of Museum and Library Services report, which concluded that the infrastructure of African American museums was in dire condition.
The MAAH has also taken important steps to improve its approach and reception in the community. For example, after an emergency financial bailout from the city of Detroit in 2004, MAAH staff removed the exhibit Of the People: The African American Experience, which had been criticized for its reinforcement of African Americans as victims and its lack of vitality. In its place, curators began planning a permanent installation titled And Still We Rise: Our Journey through African American History and Culture. The well-received exhibit, which opened in November 2004, highlights the museum’s local roots through its examination and re-creation of sites historically significant to Detroit’s African American community, such as the Black Bottom neighborhood, the Paradise Valley business district, and the Ford Rouge Plant foundry. The museum also received a $2.5 million Kresge Foundation challenge grant in September 2006. Under the terms of the challenge, the MAAH was required to attract seventy thousand paid admissions and increase their membership to twenty thousand. The overwhelming response of Detroit’s residents and local African American business owners, who contributed $1 million during this process, helped the museum meet the Kresge Foundation’s requirements and thereby lessen their dependence, at least for a short time, upon city funding. Although the organization, like the city itself, continues to face significant financial challenges, this example of positive response from Detroit residents and museum supporters attests to the reservoir of goodwill the MAAH has accrued.

Even without the receipt of grants or other substantial funds, institutional change and acknowledgment of community needs may be achieved through the smallest measures, as the past and current histories of the black museum movement indicate. The symbiotic relationship between museum and community guided John Kinard during the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum’s early years as he produced renowned programs and exhibits, such as The Rat and Evolution of a Community. Kinard veered away from local themes during the 1980s due to concerns about the museum’s inferior status in relation to the rest of the Smithsonian system. In 2007, however, staff renewed the museum’s community focus by presenting East of the River: Continuity and Change (September 2007–November 2008), which explored the histories of neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River. Subsequent exhibitions also struck a more even balance between local, national, and international themes. Finally, in July 2006, the Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture (formerly the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum) changed its name to the Anacostia Community Museum. The museum’s director, Camille Giraud Akeju, instigated
this important shift toward (re)acknowledging the vital interaction between the museum and the community. The Anacostia Community Museum’s reclamation of its community identity may help it to redefine and secure its status as a vital African American cultural institution in Washington, D.C., even as a far grander museum of African American history carves out a space on the National Mall.

African American community museums founded during the 1960s and 1970s must also function in the midst of the second, ongoing phase of black public history, as sites of historical importance in modern African American history (such as the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee, or the historic highway leading from Selma to Montgomery) are converted into museums or otherwise officially commemorated. Historian Bernard Armada has raised several critical questions regarding the design and function of these new African American museums and historic sites, arguing that organizations such as the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis (NCRM) place too much emphasis on the audience’s sensory experiences and prioritize entertainment through consumption—in this case, the museum gift shop. Such comments are not unusual in the scholarly assessments of many modern museums, as critics have long accused these institutions, whether deservedly or not, of “dumbing down” their exhibits and programs in order to appeal to broader audiences. Indeed, this critique surfaced as early as the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s media-centric presentation of Harlem on My Mind in 1969. These perceived weaknesses detract from museums’ potential to act as effective agents of community change and, in the case of the NCRM, lessen their status as national sites of remembrance. Armada further maintains that, as a result of its design limitations, the NCRM “inadvertently has compromised the resistive and more radical edge that seems necessary for significant political progress for black civil rights.” In moving to the commodified center, the NCRM has fallen from the “peripheral edge”—an edge necessary to maintain and cultivate the grassroots energy that lies at the core of the black museum movement.

To achieve success comparable to that of early African American neighborhood museums—success not necessarily measured by monumental architecture or elaborate fund-raising galas, but rather by audience response and appreciation—all African American museums and public history sites must recognize this “peripheral edge” that pushed black museum movement leaders to challenge and refashion the staid conceptions of how a museum must function. The cultivation of this peripheral edge, engendered by their activism and adaptation of the id Movem
The Rat
verse the
periphera
leaders cl
of Art a
roughs’s |
dogma d
DuSable’
connecti
America
tory and
In bo
History
immedi
vigorate
museum
Under t
conteste
triumph
in the o
been th
provoke
black in
the mu
subject:
than ch
curator
The
no dou
ums th
bureau
NMA/
of the ideals of the Civil Rights Movement and, especially, the Black Power Movement, allowed leaders like John Kinard to present the grim narrative of The Rat and helped International Afro-American Museum volunteers to traverse the scarred landscapes of Detroit in their “museum on wheels.” The peripheral edge also shaped the Studio Museum in Harlem as its artists and leaders challenged tradition-bound institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Likewise, Margaret Burroughs’s long history of grassroots activism and willingness to subvert political dogma during her years as a teacher in Chicago’s public schools inspired the DuSable’s creation of groundbreaking educational outreach programs and its connection to international freedom movements. The advocates of the African American Museum of Philadelphia also stood on the peripheral edge when they forced city officials to acknowledge that they refused to tolerate a sanitized version of the Bicentennial that excluded discussion of African American history and culture.

In both design and operation, the National Museum of African American History and Culture intends to combine the grandeur of the iconic with the immediacy of the vernacular. Whether this museum can both match and reinvigorate the activist energy of the original African American neighborhood museums will serve as the next major test for the black museum movement. Under the protective mantle of the Smithsonian Institution and within the contested space of the National Mall, the NMAAHC cannot serve solely as a triumphant monument to African American history and culture, nor can it veer in the opposite direction and reinforce the sense that African Americans have been the perpetual victims of history. Instead, the museum should critically provoke diverse audiences to realize that the work begun by generations of black museum leaders and civil rights activists is not yet finished. In doing so, the museum must not hesitate to tackle what some deem to be controversial subjects. As NMAAHC director Lonnie Bunch himself has argued, “rather than champion limits on controversy and debate within exhibits, museums and curators must have the courage to embrace controversy.”29

The construction and debut of the national African American museum will no doubt ignite a potentially competitive spark; local African American museums that have become detached from their community origins and prone to bureaucratic stagnation may once again be reinvigorated. In turn, leaders of the NMAAHC, ideally, will remember and acknowledge the historically contested origins of their institution and work to build equitable partnerships with local
museums that, through both their support and their dissent, helped to ensure the creation of this national monument to black history. Many will scrutinize the ways in which the National Museum of African American History and Culture chooses to address the challenge of maintaining the historically community-based mission of African American neighborhood museums while simultaneously creating a national and international symbol of African American heritage. Among those watching will be those who began the black museum movement with little more than a space in which to display a few artifacts, together with a deep-rooted conviction about the vital importance of exhibiting and interpreting the hidden stories of African American—and American—history.