FROM STOREFRONT TO MONUMENT

Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement

Andrea A. Burns
Introduction

MUSEUMS ON THE FRONT LINES

Confronting the "Conspiracy of Silence"

In November 1969, at the end of what had been a tumultuous decade across the United States, museum professionals and community activists gathered at the Bedford Lincoln Neighborhood Museum in Brooklyn, New York. Conference organizers intended to solicit discussion about how traditional museums could remain relevant in the context of recent social and political upheavals as well as explore the groundswell of interest regarding how, and whether, mainstream museums should open small branches in neighborhoods historically neglected by these institutions. Although the seminar's leaders originally expected just twenty to thirty participants from the New York City area, they were startled when the seminar drew over two hundred people from nineteen states.¹

Emily Harvey, director of an eighteen-member New York City museum group known as the Museums Collaborative, or MUSE, compiled the conference proceedings. As she chronicled the multiple and conflicting ideas about the role and place of museums that emerged during the seminar dialogue, Harvey noted that, at times, unexpected voices of a "militant minority" threatened to overturn the scheduled agenda, eclipsing those who supported the concept of decentralized, "neighborhood" museums. Indeed, the seemingly innovative concept of decentralization was "overshadowed by the realization, brought home at times with brutal force, that such discussions are premature until more basic issues that concern minority groups have been dealt with."²
Harvey also observed with some dismay that “there were almost no rebuttals to scathing accusations that were sometimes accurate, at other times unjust and ill-informed. If museums have something to defend, why weren’t they defending it?”

Who was this “militant minority,” and why did they levy such “scathing accusations” against museums—instincts often perceived as standing above the fray of political and social debate? The words of African American poet June Jordan, who attended the conference, offer a revealing glimpse of these unexpected dissidents:

Take me into the museum and show me myself, show me my people, show me soul America. If you cannot show me myself, if you cannot teach my people what they need to know—and they need to know the truth, and they need to know that nothing is more important than human life—then why shouldn’t I attack the temples of America and blow them up? This is one America, and after black cities have been manipulated and after something like a nigger room has been reserved in the basement of the Metropolitan Museum for us, the people who have the power and the people who count the pennies and the people who hold the keys better start thinking it all over again.4

If, as Jordan argued, cultural institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art did not and would not tell the stories of African Americans, then such places were denying the very lives and histories of African Americans themselves. Merely setting aside a room or a portion of an exhibit hall for artifacts related to black history would not suffice if the institution continued to blindly (or intentionally) neglect this community. Those in power had constructed these sites of “imagined belonging.” In doing so, they rendered African American history and culture invisible, thereby deleting African Americans from the historical narrative.5 If Jordan could neither see herself nor “soul America” in the powerful spaces set aside for national memory and identity, what should prevent her from attacking—in words and action—these ultimately meaningless temples to Euro-American hegemony?

Colin “Topper” Carew, African American director of the New Thing Art and Architecture Center in Washington, D.C., added his voice to the debate, accusing white museum professionals of being uninterested in real change and attending the seminar only for its political expediency: “You white people are here to get your rhetoric so you can go out and help your own hustle. . . . if this is a session, and there are those of you here who know it is, where all of
you in museums are trying to find out how to get hip to run your own exhibitions for minority groups, forget it, because you can't and I won't help you. The only people you want are the ones who tell you what you want to hear; and those days are gone." Carew and Jordan directed their anger at those who might be overly comfortable with the goals and pace of their museums, despite the charged and changing dynamics of race in America in the late 1960s. Indeed, many black activists believed that it was simply too late for these institutions to instigate real change in good faith—as Carew declared, "those days are gone." Carew and Jordan joined a host of other African American participants at the seminar in holding museums, long considered part and parcel of the white "establishment," accountable for their centuries-long practice of misrepresenting and denying black history and culture. In their view, white museum professionals continued to maintain and reinforce stereotypical depictions of black history even as they offered shallow gestures towards inclusivity.

Jordan's and Carew's heated commentaries drew from the often combative discourse of the Black Power Movement, which by 1969 had become a full-fledged undertaking in cities across the United States. Yet although they derided the offensively slow pace of change in the museum field, there were in fact a small but growing number of newly created African American neighborhood museums, such as the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago (founded in 1961), the International Afro-American Museum of Detroit (1965), and the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in Washington, D.C. (1967), that had already begun to challenge this stagnancy. This study explores that phenomenon. Before most mainstream museums acknowledged that African American history and culture must be addressed in their exhibits and programs, leaders of the "black museum movement"—some of whom were represented at the seminar—were contesting and reinterpreting traditional depictions of African and African American history and culture.7

Cultural sites like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Smithsonian Institution represented grand paens to European culture, with neoclassic architecture and extensive collections of objects categorized as either "high culture" or "primitive." African American neighborhood museums, on the other hand, took root in urban neighborhoods across the country after World War II and were created and staffed primarily by black community leaders rather than museum professionals. Born out of numerous meetings held by local activists and community leaders, these institutions were more likely to
be situated in a former store or apartment building than in an imposing structure. Their collections, usually drew from neighborhood contributions and donations from other cultural organizations. Most crucially, the content of their collections offered a distinct rebuttal to the narrative of invisibility practiced by mainstream museums with regard to the presence and historical agency of African Americans.

During their early years, African American neighborhood museums typically had shortened hours, limited financial resources, and featured only temporary exhibits. Still, we should question the supposed “humbleness” of their origins and operations. In her analysis of New York City’s El Museo del Barrio, founded as a neighborhood museum of Puerto Rican culture in 1969, Arlene Davila contends that the museum’s “original mission as an institution... run by and for working-class people of El Barrio and that would provide alternative avenues of validation for local artists, was never a humble mission. On the contrary, it was an empowering and cosmopolitan vision.” Like El Museo del Barrio, the museums created by African American leaders presented institutional missions, exhibits, and educational programs that countered the skewed impressions of black history and culture that audiences absorbed when visiting traditional museums. If mainstream museums perpetuated white America’s power over the historical narrative, then African American neighborhood museums must disrupt this exclusive, and excluding, account.

**Reading Black Power within the History of the Black Museum Movement**

Museums, of course, have never functioned simply as repositories for dusty artifacts. Rather, they and their collections are a product of social relations, both past and present. The creators of African American neighborhood museums understood this, believing that their institutions communicated a radical new agenda about power, memory, and identity. The African American museums that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s challenged and re-created new national memories and identities that incorporated the ideas, events, objects, and places tied to black history. Many African American museum leaders also maintained that their institutions should serve as conduits for the needs of the black community—a characteristic noted by the African American Museums Association (founded in 1978), which observed that “a distinguishing trait of Black museums is the intimate relationship which they enjoy with their com-
munities.” In this case, “community” may be identified both in terms of the physical—that is, the predominantly African American neighborhoods that typically surrounded these early museums—and the global community that comprises the African Diaspora.

Museums devoted to African and African American history represent alternative or “free” spaces carved out of a cultural landscape that has consistently marginalized minorities. Free spaces offer a location where marginalized groups can acquire greater self-respect, strengthen their sense of dignity and independence, and work toward a heightened sense of communal and civic identity. Located in the nexus between private life and the public sphere, churches, clubs, self-help groups, and other voluntary organizations all represent some examples of these democratic free spaces. African American churches, in particular, have long acted as places for self-expression and community organization during periods in which those who feared black resistance forcibly prohibited or outlawed these activities. Black neighborhood museums like the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago, the International Afro-American Museum in Detroit, the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in Washington, D.C., and the African American Museum of Philadelphia (founded in 1976) all function as examples of free space. While battling often adverse conditions, the leaders of these institutions elevated the recognition of black history and culture, provided space for community gatherings and attempted to develop a strong sense of identity and self-affirmation among African American audiences.

It was no coincidence that many who initiated African American neighborhood museums also played an active role in the groundswell of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Yet it was more than just integration and equal treatment under the law that fueled the leaders of the black museum movement. Rather, black museum leaders interpreted African American culture and history as standing separate from, but grimly intertwined with, Euro-American culture. They encouraged a uniquely “black” identity and consciousness through exhibits and educational programs, and emphasized the vital need for interaction between the museum and the local African American community. While African American museum leaders drew from the tradition of racial uplift exemplified by W. E. B. Du Bois's “Talented Tenth,” they also grounded their institutions in the ideology of cultural black nationalism being promoted by the Black Power Movement.

Stokely Carmichael's and Charles Hamilton's arguments in Black Power: The
Politics of Liberation in America (1967) articulated the direct relationship black museum leaders saw between the Black Power Movement and the reclamation of black history: “African American history means a long history beginning on the continent of Africa, a history not taught in the standard textbooks of this country. It is absolutely essential that black people know this history, that they know their roots, that they develop an awareness of their cultural heritage.”


In order for African Americans to fight this “conspiracy of silence,” black power advocates like Del Rio, Malcolm X, and June Jordan demanded that the institutions and values of old be interrogated. And if these organizations were found to be unresponsive, African Americans must create new ones—political, cultural, religious, and economic—to replace them. Black museum leaders believed that their institutions could, if not supplant mainstream museums, at the very least offer African Americans—particularly those who lived in deteriorating urban neighborhoods beset by municipal and federal neglect—a meaningful alternative to mainstream America's insistence on black history's invisibility and misrepresentation.

Linking the black museum movement with the Black Power Movement necessitates a more expansive definition of black power, however. Coined by Stokely Carmichael in 1966, the term “black power” in contemporary popular culture frequently recalls a series of iconic images (Afros, dashikis, the raised fists of Black Panthers) and the charisma of black militants like Huey Newton and Carmichael himself. These narratives typically reduce the movement's core beliefs to the constant necessity for racial struggle and black separatism from white America. Indeed, the Black Power Movement “most often serves as a twisted folklore, a cautionary tale featuring gun-toting militants who practiced politics without portfolio, vowed to die in the name of revolution, and who dragged down more promising movements for social justice.”

Broadening the chronology and definition of black power, on the other hand, allows us to better understand the black museum movement that began in the early 1960s. Black museum leaders consciously cultivated an assertive identity and cultural pride through exhibits, educational programs, and outreach to audiences “on the
ground.” Successful black museum makers understood that whites could be important to the black museum movement, though they were not central to its vision, mission, or execution. As a result, black museum leaders both confronted and negotiated with white politicians and mainstream cultural institutions even as they posited alternatives to the traditional model of museum as Eurocentric mausoleum.

The national Black Power Movement began to disintegrate during the mid-1970s; internal friction regarding the movement’s ideological direction, coupled with municipal and federal harassment of its leaders, hastened its retreat from the national stage. Nevertheless, black power persisted in various forms on a local level, with its cultural impact resonating well beyond the narrow time line typically ascribed to the movement’s duration. The continued popularity of Kwanzaa, an Afro-centered holiday created by Maulana (Ron) Karenga in 1966, attests to the lasting cultural, and local, legacy of Black Power. In a sense, while Kwanzaa may be seen as the “cultural offspring” of the Black Power Movement, the black museum movement may be cast as both the movement’s ancestor and its offspring, or beneficiary. Along with more readily known markers of cultural black power such the Black Arts Movement, clothing and hairstyles derived from African fashions, and holiday celebrations rooted in African traditions, the black museum movement contained the message of black cultural liberation and perpetuated the ideological goals of the Black Power Movement.

The Historical Roots of Black Public History

The presence of African American public history sites on the cultural landscape is clearly not a twentieth-century phenomenon, since African Americans have practiced what might be defined as “public history” since at least the early nineteenth century. The first era of black public history is generally said to fall between the late 1820s and the early 1900s, when African American elites in cities such as Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Washington, D.C., started to establish churches, benevolent associations, and improvement and literary societies. In Washington, D.C., black bibliophiles began contributing to Howard University’s Moorland-Spingarn Library shortly after the African American university was chartered in 1873. The library became world-renowned after the Reverend Jesse Moorland’s donation of three thousand books and pamphlets in 1914. Other prominent organizations launched during this era include the Bethel Literary and Historical Association, founded in Washington, D.C., in
1881; Philadelphia’s American Negro Historical Society (1897); and the Negro Society for Historical Research, cofounded by Arthur Schomburg and John E. Bruce in 1911. African Americans also produced exhibits and created museums during this period. For example, African American curators at the Hampton University Museum, founded in 1868 as part of the Hampton Normal Agricultural Institute in Virginia (Booker T. Washington’s alma mater), collected art and artifacts from cultures around the globe, with an early focus on African, Pacific Islander, and African American fine art. Still in operation, it is considered the oldest African American museum in the United States.

At the 1895 Cotton States International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, Washington served as the spokesman for black-produced displays on African American culture and history. Exposition organizers, however, kept these exhibits segregated from the other displays. By their very existence, it seems, black-produced exhibits such as those at the Exposition challenged the dominant cultural representations of African Americans and criticized the absence of African and African American historical and cultural artifacts from mainstream museums. Still, like the early African American literary and benevolent associations, these exhibits were primarily intended to serve as an avenue for the intellectual and spiritual improvement of middle-class African Americans.

During the early 1900s, W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson began to promote the rich history of black folk culture rather than focusing exclusively upon the achievements and potential of the black elite. Because Du Bois and Woodson were excluded from mainstream (i.e., white) scholarly organizations and associations, they necessarily had to construct “viable, productive autonomous academic institutions, scholarly approaches, and practical strategies for black mental and psychological liberation.” Du Bois’s groundbreaking Souls of Black Folk (1903) and establishment of the NAACP, as well as Woodson’s creation of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915 and his initiation of Negro History Week in 1926, criticized the intentional “whitewashing” of collective memory regarding slavery and its legacy while celebrating African American accomplishments, history, and culture.

Black public historians like Woodson still drew from the nineteenth-century intellectual tradition known as vindicationism, which historian Thomas J. Davis has defined as akin to the “we, too, were here” syndrome—an approach that “reveals itself in static, undifferentiated, impersonal exhibitions that sweep across time with the aim of showing that black people, like whites, were also here.” Although many academics today deem vindicationism to be intellectu-
ally stale, it should not be dismissed as an unimportant or unnecessary approach. Black museum leaders who employed this "we, too, were here" tactic in their exhibits demonstrated to audiences, both black and white, that African and African American history were worthy of respectful public representation and dialogue, and that historical discourse about black inferiority was dangerously incorrect. As black museums evolved throughout the twentieth century, their exhibits and outreach programs often (but not always, and not consistently) began to reflect a more complex methodology motivated less by the need to "vindicate the race" and more by the imperative to address and confront the ongoing economic, social, legal, and political issues facing the African American community.


The number of African American museums steadily increased over the next several decades, which may have also reflected, in part, the growing public and scholarly interest in slavery. Books like Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), Dorothy Spruill Redford's *Somerset Homecoming: Recovering a Lost Heritage* (1989), and, more recently, James Oliver Horton and Lois Horton's *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (2008) contributed to this trend. By 1988, the African American Museums Association could publish a survey based on the responses of fifty-two African American museums located in twenty-three states and Canada. Eighty-nine percent of these museums were located in cities, and 82.6 percent were based in the East (and of those, 58 percent were located in the Northeast). In a significantly smaller survey conducted in 1989, Azade Ardali found that, out of twenty-nine black and Hispanic art museums, the African American ones were mostly concentrated in the Northeast (38 percent). All five of the African American museums in the South that Ardali surveyed were attached to historically black colleges, such as Hampton University.

By the early twenty-first century, well over two hundred African American
museums could be found scattered across the United States and Canada. In 2003, to prepare for the creation of a national African American museum in Washington, D.C., the National Museum of African American History and Culture Plan for Action Presidential Commission distributed surveys to 237 African American museums in thirty-seven states, as well as Canada. Based on the responses from seventy-two museums (just under 30 percent of the total number of museum surveyed), African American stand-alone museums, university museums, and libraries were found to be heavily represented in both the South and the West. While smaller in number, the presence of museums focused on black history and culture in Canada reflects the range of the diasporic experience, as African Americans both voluntarily and involuntarily migrated to Canada throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in response to conditions in the United States. More recently, significant numbers of migrants from the Caribbean and Africa have settled in Canada. Incorporating the stories and voices of these migrants presents a challenge for Canadian public history sites, but also offers a path for future comparative research with black public history sites in the United States.\textsuperscript{35}

\textit{Approaching the Black Museum Movement}

The geographic breadth and the varying economic, sociocultural, and political dynamics that shaped the black museum movement as it developed in disparate cities and towns across North America make it challenging to fully assess their collective histories and impact. Still, all of the museums featured in this study share several thematic characteristics that exerted a profound impact upon the development of these institutions and their work. First, all were based in major metropolises undergoing various degrees of postindustrial transformation after World War II. Factors such as “white flight,” urban renewal and gentrification, housing shortages, skirmishes between the police and the black community, and unemployment all converged to exacerbate racial and class tensions. Second, as the black population in each of these cities steadily increased, more and more African Americans began holding local, state, and federal offices.\textsuperscript{37} Indeed, fewer than two decades after these museums opened, voters in each of these cities would elect an African American mayor: Coleman A. Young (Detroit, 1974); Walter Washington (Washington, D.C., 1975); Harold Washington (Chicago, 1975); and Wilson Goode (Philadelphia, 1983). Though each of these cities claimed different traditions of black activism, an examination of how and why
their respective African American museums emerged reflects the cities' shared history of increasing black political power during the late twentieth century.

Chapter 1 surveys the origin stories of three prominent African American neighborhood museums founded between 1961 and 1967: the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago; the International Afro-American Museum in Detroit; and the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in Washington, D.C. While single individuals, such as Margaret Burroughs in Chicago or Charles Wright in Detroit, may have spearheaded the creation of these museums, the institutions emerged as a culmination of the spaces carved out by generations of local black community organizations. Because of this, the stories of these museums must be considered in the context of the neighborhoods and cities in which they originated. African Americans shaped these urban landscapes through their migrations, their labor (both slave and free), and their cultural and political evolutions. By examining how and why each of these museums began, it is possible to identify the historical contingencies that framed the process by which black neighborhood museums came into existence: civil rights, but especially the Black Power Movement; the African American search for a viable and meaningful public history; urban renewal and the transformation of central cities; and the black desire for institutional development.

Chapter 2 examines the genesis of the African American Museum of Philadelphia (AAMP), which opened in 1976. The AAMP is unique among the museums in this study, in that it was formed as a direct response to a specific event: the celebration of the American Bicentennial in 1976. The national celebration of the Bicentennial was supposed to signal the end of a long period of social and political unrest in the United States. Yet activists in Philadelphia and across the country believed that the Bicentennial programs planned by municipal leaders would not fairly or accurately represent the history and culture of African Americans and other minority groups. Consequently, in Philadelphia, black activists pressured municipal officials to create an African American museum, funded largely by the city, which would open in time for the celebrations. The museum's opening and success were by no means guaranteed, however, as numerous controversies—most notably, the site where the building was to be located—threatened to derail the project. Given its distinctive origin story and chronological distance from the other museums in the study, two separate chapters are devoted to this museum's emergence and work.

Chapter 3 transitions from the origin stories of African American neighborhood museums by exploring how three of these institutions functioned within
their communities. The educational outreach programs initiated by Chicago’s DuSable Museum, the International Afro-American Museum’s innovative mobile unit, and the production of groundbreaking exhibits such as the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum’s The Rat: Man’s Invited Affliction (1968) publicly challenged the profoundly embedded sense of cultural and racial entitlement granted to those who ran traditional museums. Yet while some mainstream museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Smithsonian Institution, began to reexamine their collections and exhibits in response to the attention-garnering work of African American museums, this process was by no means swift or consensual.

Chapter 4 focuses on the African American Museum of Philadelphia and its uncertain reception after opening in the summer of 1976. Like its predecessors, the new museum challenged the politics of representation through African and African American-centered exhibits and outreach programs. Other African American museums across the country also seized upon the Bicentennial as a way to counter publicly the official narratives of American history promoted by city, state, and federal officials. For the AAMP, however, forging a positive relationship with Philadelphia’s black community was a task made far more complicated because of the controversial circumstances in which the museum had been created, its complex administrative structure, and the compromised physical location of the museum itself. Internal financial and leadership struggles, played out in bold headlines, threatened to undermine the museum’s achievements in the years after its opening.

Even taking into account its unique origins, chapter 5 underscores that the African American Museum of Philadelphia’s difficulty in establishing itself as a viable institution was by no means an isolated problem within the black museum community. Factors such as unstable leadership and declining finances threatened to close black museums across the country during the 1980s and 1990s, while critics—some who worked in these very museums—charged that certain black museum leaders had lost touch with the needs of the African American community, as evidenced by their “elitist” fundraising and relocation or expansion campaigns. The black museum movement’s shift from a nascent social movement largely driven by volunteers to its increased professionalization (and subsequent bureaucratization) played an important role in the frictions that developed both within and between African American museums and museum advocates during this period.40

Some of the struggles black museums faced during the 1980s and 1990s
the new institution might threaten some smaller African American museums. Leaders of the new museum, however, were not just clear about the cultural institution and in addition to the usual problems that occur in curating African American history for a public audience, they also had to be clear about the need for a museum dedicated to a historically significant event.

The third phase of the black museum movement developed in a highly public forum. The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) on the Mall in Washington, D.C., was the result of the Museum Act of 1998, which provided the second and (one of) the longest phase of recent African American past. This phase of the museum was created in recognition of the need to preserve and display African American history. The museum opened in 1996 and 1970s. The expansion of the neighborhood museums during the 1960s and 1970s, the expansion of these neighborhood museums, and the creation of many of these neighborhood museums, as well as the creation of the museum of African American History and Culture, is the result of the national movement of African American neighborhood museums. The first phase of the modern black museum movement is now underway.
which shared neither the NMAAHC’s financial resources nor its capacity for growth. The founder of Detroit's International Afro-American Museum, Charles Wright (1918–2002), campaigned throughout the 1960s to prevent the federal government from having any part in creating a national museum, arguing that its involvement would guarantee that black history and black voices would continue to be misrepresented and diminished. Other museum leaders, including Anacostia Neighborhood Museum director John Kinard, took up Wright's opposition in the 1980s. Determining the bases of their objections may prove instructive, as the national museum's advocates operate from within one of the most symbolic public sites in America, even as they solicit intensely personal stories and artifacts from African Americans who historically have been excluded from this very space.

As African American neighborhood museums continue to evolve, with many choosing to expand from their original identities as community centers to large-scale institutions intent on bringing black history to national and international audiences, it is inevitable that their ties to the ongoing national and local legacy of the Black Power Movement will persevere, change, and, at times, falter. Understanding the origins of this evolution helps us contextualize and historicize black public history, from its modest but courageous beginnings to its present-day manifestation as a bold and highly visible movement. Throughout this process, it is clear that the complex institutional histories of African American museums and other public history sites will become as vital for historians to preserve, document, and analyze as the artifacts that the public sees and interprets on a daily basis.
CHAPTER 1
WHEN “CIVIL RIGHTS ARE NOT ENOUGH”
Building the Black Museum Movement

In a 2007 interview with The Public Historian, African American scholar John Hope Franklin deemed the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago to be “one of the pioneer African American museums in the country.”¹ It is in the DuSable, which opened its doors in 1961 as the Ebony Museum of History and Art, that we may begin to identify the distinctive qualities that characterized many of the other African American museums established during the mid-late 1960s: the presentation of full-scale exhibits whose themes centered upon African and African American history and culture; the pursuit of a collections policy meant to challenge and remedy the absence of African American history and culture from mainstream institutions; and an emphasis on educational outreach to local black communities. Above all, these museums strove to instill the conviction that black art and history could communicate a message of identity and self-worth.² In all of these respects, the DuSable functioned as an African American “neighborhood” museum.

In 1972, the director of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in Washington, D.C., John Kinard, defined the neighborhood museum as an entity that “encompasses the life of the people of the neighborhood—people who are vitally concerned about who they are, where they came from, what they have accomplished, their values and their most pressing needs.”³ Kinard argued that the neighborhood museum’s mission had to reject the traditional image of a
museum as an elite cultural institution dedicated solely to collecting and displaying valuable artifacts. Rather, a museum’s employees and volunteers ought to come from the very neighborhood in which the museum was located. Likewise, exhibits and collections should draw their inspiration from the present-day concerns and forgotten histories of the neighborhood, and the black community as a whole.

The successful emergence and institutionalization of African American neighborhood museums like the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum and the DuSable depended in varying degrees upon the groundwork laid by the preexisting “black places” of a city or a neighborhood. Just as African American churches provided a source of leadership and spiritual camaraderie for the growth of the Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s, so a neighborhood’s black organizations and places—churches, black history and literary associations, and more informal gathering spaces—inspired and often funneled volunteers into newly emerging black museums. For example, Philadelphia’s wealth of black literary, historical, and social organizations, created in part by the migration of African Americans to the city during the early nineteenth century, preceded the institutional spaces forged by the city’s civil rights and black power campaigns during the 1960s and 1970s and the creation of the African American Museum of Philadelphia in 1976. Likewise, it was only through the strenuous activism of black community organizations in Anacostia, such as the Greater Anacostia People’s Organization, that the Anacostia community ensured that their neighborhood would serve as the site of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum.

In Detroit, numerous “black places” paved the way for the creation of the International Afro-American Museum (IAM), among them the black-owned Broadside Press, established in 1965; the black-owned radio station WCHB; and the Freedom Now Party, which emerged in 1963 as the “first all black political party in the country.” Many of Detroit’s black churches served as ground central for social and religious activism and in turn forged a connection with the museum. Indeed, the link between the African American church and the museum was strong enough that several churches volunteered to host IAM’s mobile museum during the late 1960s.

In Chicago in 1915, Carter G. Woodson began the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH). The ASNLH led a movement to establish local and federal recognition of “Negro History Week” in 1926. Subsequent African American organizations built upon the work of the ASNLH (which later relocated to Washington, D.C.) by adopting the ideological and organizational premise of Negro History Week—that is, the public
recognition of the history and the achievements of African Americans. As such, long before a group of concerned persons gathered at their home in 1960 to discuss the possible founding of an African American museum, Chicago's numerous black history clubs and associations shaped the activism of the DuSable's founders, Margaret and Charles Burroughs.

Born in Louisiana in 1915, DuSable Museum founder Margaret Burroughs moved to Chicago in 1922 with her parents, and graduated from Chicago Normal College (later known as Chicago State University) in 1937. By the early 1930s, she had become known as an accomplished artist, and received a master's degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; her work would later be purchased and displayed by the Chicago Art Institute, as well as at other cultural organizations throughout the United States and abroad. Burroughs, together with her first husband, Bernard Goss, played an integral role in developing connections among Chicago's radical activists during the Great Depression. For example, Burroughs, who often wrote for the Chicago Defender, participated in interracial forums with artists and writers in Washington Park, located in the predominantly black area of Chicago known as the "South Side." She also helped form the South Side Community Art Center, the largest Federal Art Project supported by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Established in 1941 in a brownstone mansion located on Michigan Avenue, volunteers transformed the site into a space dedicated to the creative work of black artists. In confluence with the work of African American activists like the poet Gwendolyn Brooks and the actor and singer Paul Robeson, the center translated Communist Party dogma into a "model and inspiration for cultural insurrection created and led by African Americans."10

During the early 1940s, Burroughs served as a secretary for the newly formed National Negro Museum and Historical Foundation in Chicago (NNMHF). Headed by black labor activist Ishmael F. Flory, the foundation featured black history exhibits at a former packinghouse workers' hall on 49th Street and Wabash Avenue. The group's promotion of black history was so successful that Chicago mayor Martin H. Kennelly proclaimed the city's first "Negro History Week" in the late 1940s.12 In the 1950s, a group known as the African American Heritage Association (AAHA) evolved out of the NNMHF, which had ceased to function. The AAHA engaged in immediate local activities to increase awareness of black history, such as helping DuSable Senior High School students raise funds for a sculpture of the school's namesake, Jean Baptiste Point DuSable (a black Haitian believed to be the first permanent settler of Chicago). The AAHA's members, who included Margaret and her second husband, artist Charles Burroughs, also pressured local organizations and the Illinois State government to continue
their recognition of Negro History Week through financial and other material contributions, such as the distribution of hundreds of black history pamphlets to churches, schools, and other organizations.\textsuperscript{13}

During the 1950s, McCarthyism threatened to dissolve the Chicago branch of the ASNLH and other local black organizations, including the South Side Community Art Center, for appearing to engage in activities or affiliations deemed to be "subversive." Burroughs recalled the internal divisions that developed between her local branch of the ASNLH and the national organization when a representative for the national ASNLH pressed its Chicago chapter to turn over their membership lists; the reason given, according to Burroughs, was to enable them to "screen our group to eliminate the 'subversives.'" Upon their refusal, the national ASNLH revoked the Chicago branch's charter.\textsuperscript{14}

Yet despite the fragmentation experienced by some local African American organizations, accelerated by the federal government's prosecution of prominent black civil rights activists such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson, the Burroughses continued to pressure local and state officials to recognize black history. In a 1961 letter to Illinois governor Otto Kerner, for example, Margaret Burroughs argued that the legislature's planned observation of the one hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1963 should also include African Americans; indeed, the Centennial must belong to "all of the people of Illinois and not [be] engineered by any one small, unrepresentative, sectarian group organized for opportunistic purposes."\textsuperscript{15} The commemoration of historically significant national anniversaries, such as the Centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation or the Bicentennial in 1976, offered unique opportunities for advocates of black history, as well other underrepresented ethnic and cultural organizations, to demand a more publicly inclusive narrative of American history.

\textit{Beginning the DuSable Museum}

By 1960, Margaret Burroughs perceived that Chicago needed a more comprehensive institution devoted to both the preservation and the public presentation of black history and culture. Although starting a museum "seemed like such a daunting task," she began to explore possibilities of opening such a space.\textsuperscript{16} Like International Afro-American Museum founder Charles Wright, Burroughs visited small ethnic museums such as the Jewish Museum in New York City (founded 1904) and the Polish Museum of America in Chicago (1935) in search of insight prior to starting the DuSable.
Burroughs also drew intellectual inspiration from and made important contacts in the informal “salons” she had been hosting in her home for several years. During the 1940s–50s, the Burroughses lived in a coach house behind a large mansion on 3806 South Michigan Avenue in Chicago’s South Side. The coach house became known among their friends as the “Chicago Salon” for its role in playing host to gatherings of prominent (and increasingly controversial) black intellectuals, teachers, and artists, including Du Bois, Robeson, Gwendolyn Brooks, and the author James Baldwin. In many ways, the salon-like function of their home paralleled Carter G. Woodson’s use of his residence in the Shaw neighborhood of Washington, D.C. Woodson operated his home, which he purchased in 1922, primarily as a meeting space and a storage facility for thousands of artifacts related to African and African American history and culture. Black intellectuals (including historian Lawrence Reddick, who would play a prominent role in contesting Philadelphia’s interpretation of the Bicentennial), visited and conferred with Woodson in his home until Woodson’s death in 1950.
Like Woodson, Burroughs held her meetings in a space that encouraged intellectual freedom, as opposed to the restrictive environment imposed by the Chicago public school system. As an art teacher at DuSable High School, Burroughs always had to remain on guard for potential investigation into her political sympathies, particularly as she staunchly supported Paul Robeson even as the government blacklisted him. She remembered, "God forbid that you would teach Harriet Tubman or Sojourner Truth in class... While my students were painting, I would be in the middle of a discussion about the Scottsboro boys and I'd look over and see the white principal appear at the classroom door. Turning back to the class I'd say, 'And that's how Betsy Ross came to sew the flag. Now boys and girls, let's talk about Patrick Henry.'"20 At the Chicago Salon, in contrast, there were no such limits to the conversation. Topics at the salon "routinely ran into the areas of black culture and black history... For years I had been 'bootlegging' such information to my DuSable High School art students, after discovering how dangerous it could be to talk about black history around walls that could 'grow ears.'"

The Chicago Salon's dialogue coalesced around one goal: on December 20, 1960, a group of people from the salon "initiated the first structured, though informal, discussion on establishing a museum of Negro history."21 Shortly thereafter, the Burroughses moved out of the coach house and into the adjacent mansion that had formerly been owned by a group of African American Pullman porters, railway operators, and waiters. The porters had used the mansion, constructed by architect Solon S. Beman in 1892, as a social club and boardinghouse. Thus, the physical site of what would soon become the Ebony Museum of Art and History could already claim a history of serving the black community.22 Margaret Burroughs began to give informal tours of the African American–related books and artifacts that she displayed in the first floor of the mansion and offered to transform the floor into a temporary museum in January 1961.23

Under her leadership, the DuSable moved toward a radical ideology that deviated from the outwardly cautious politics assumed by earlier black cultural institutions and organizations, such as the NAACP, during the McCarthy era. Instead, the DuSable's programs and exhibits aimed to raise black consciousness, and emphasized that "art and history should teach racial self-appreciation."24 In a 1965 interview with the Nation of Islam's newspaper, _Muhammad Speaks_, Burroughs affirmed her philosophy about the need to make black pride the focal point of the DuSable's mission: "African history and the true history
of black people in America are the most vital studies a Negro can undertake, yet these subjects are almost totally neglected in the education of our youths.” Because of the “low morale caused by a lack of pride and knowledge [of black history],” Burroughs argued, “Negro youths have tended to become the potential school dropouts and juvenile delinquents.” Burroughs’s interview, together with Article III of the DuSable’s first Constitution—“The Museum, gallery and research library shall be dedicated to the preservation of the culture and history of Americans of African descent, and Africans. Primarily, it shall emphasize the contributions of the Negro to American History, Life, and Democracy”—anticipated the core doctrines of the Black Power Movement as well as the mission of the Black Studies programs that sprung up on college campuses across the nation during the late 1960s and 1970s. Chicago’s Black Power activists intended to reorganize school curricula by rejecting concepts of black inferiority and promoting ideas about the worth of black history and culture. In subverting traditional educational curricula, activists hoped that they could enact “blueprints for change” within the Chicago school system. The DuSable, then, helped establish the groundwork for these changes.

Securing the necessary equipment and finances for the opening and maintenance of the new Ebony Museum of Art and History presented a significant challenge. Burroughs recalled that “all of the expenses of the museum such as stationary [sic], telephone bills and stamps were paid out of my teacher’s salary and Charles’ salary as a laundry truck driver.” Thus, the networks Margaret and Charles Burroughs established through their prior activism in organizations like the NNMHF and the ASNLH became crucial resources. Local businesses, libraries, and art museums donated equipment and other items that helped build the nascent museum’s collection. A 4,000-volume book donation on “the Negro in Africa and the United States” from the estate of the labor leader Pettis Perry constituted one of the more substantial gifts, while well-known African American writers and artists, including Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, also contributed their own materials. Cultural institutions outside Chicago also began to donate items to the new museum; for instance, the Baltimore Museum of Art provided African art catalogues. As the museum matured, fund-raising events included activities such as a press and radio cocktail party in December 1966, a book sale benefit, a Negro History Week benefit dinner dance, and the dedication of the DuSable Museum Library in March 1966.

The DuSable sought to build recognition within the greater African American community in Chicago. By placing ads in local black newspapers that
MAKE NEGRO HISTORY LIVE!

VISIT

Bring Your Friends To

The Museum Of Negro History
3500 S. Michigan Ave. Chicago 33, Illinois
DR 3-6034

OPEN
Friday, Saturday, Sunday 2–4 P. M.
Other Times By Appointment
Clubs, Schools, and Church Groups Welcome

Y

Donations
Adults .25
Children .10

BE A MUSEUM SCOUT!

Help to find Negro family relics from slavery time.

WANTED: Negro Americana, Books, Old Photos, Old Papers, Phonograph Records, Art, letters, Costumes and Accessories Dolls, Music Boxes, Woodworks, Embroidery, Weaving, Fine Sewing, etc.

If you have or know someone who has these items, write to the museum.

Help Preserve Our History!
Contributions Welcomed.


solicited donations of artifacts, DuSable staff and volunteers hoped that individuals normally unconnected with established cultural institutions could be informed about the new museum's mission. For example, a 1967 Chicago Daily Defender advertisement solicited readers to "Make Negro History Live! Be a Museum Scout!" The ad called for donations of "Negro family relics from slavery time," including books, photos, and costumes. Modest monetary contributions were also welcomed: adults could donate twenty-five cents, and children ten cents. While the donation success rate for this particular ad is unknown, it is clear that these advertisements worked on two levels: not only did they draw attention to the DuSable, but they also informed audiences that the ordinary material objects and artifacts of African American history—whether photographs or manumission papers or quilts—were in fact objects of immense power, worthy of inclusion in a museum. An individual who took the first step of donating an artifact might then become a museum member, further bolstering finances and increasing public recognition of the new museum.

Other African American museums that emerged after the DuSable adapted its modest donation policies and grassroots community outreach efforts. "Show and Tell" demonstrations at community meetings, for instance, helped to garner artifact donations for the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum exhibit. The Anacostia...
costia Story (1977). As staff member Louise Daniel Hutchinson remembered, “We would take what we had gotten and bring it to the next meeting, and say, ‘This is what so-and-so brought. . . . Now, what do you have?’ They would produce Grandma’s dishes, and somebody would have an aunt’s favorite pair of kid gloves with the little buttons and the button hook. All kinds of things came out that we never could have gotten if we had not developed this mechanism for communicating with the community.”

These Anacostia community gatherings began to evolve beyond their initial purpose: “show and tell” transformed into a social event for local residents, particularly the elderly, at a time when such interactions were made difficult because of a sense of alienation and fear concerning the changes that had taken place in the neighborhood—especially after the violent unrest that broke out in Washington, D.C., when Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968. According to Hutchinson, “Gentlemen were getting their hair cut, ladies were getting their hair fixed, putting a little rouge on their faces, greeting one another. . . . As a result of the riot, many of the elderly were intimidated by what was going on and didn’t come out as frequently. . . . But now they had a reason to come out, and they had a reason to spruce up, and they had a reason to smile and become articulate.”33 The effort that these museums made to reach the black community and the process through which museum staff persuaded neighborhood residents that they might have something valuable to contribute—even if it was a seemingly ordinary object or an old family story—speak to the shifting notions of artifact acquisition and community outreach taking place at a grassroots level in the museum field.

**Black Museums and the Fight for the Neighborhood**

In terms of its potential for attracting African American visitors, the DuSable Museum seemed perfectly situated because of its accessible location in the city’s South Side. Better known as “Bronzeville,” the South Side had long been considered the “cultural heart of black Chicago.”34 The large number of South Side schools and organizations that toured the museum during its first year, including the South Park YMCA, Wendell Phillips High School, and Dunbar Vocational High School, illustrate the appeal exerted by an African American museum in this area.

Yet there were drawbacks to the DuSable’s seemingly ideal location, since the museum (and Bronzeville itself) also lay directly in the path of Chicago’s
ambitious urban renewal policies. After World War II, Chicago's city planners implemented programs that targeted issues such as transportation, slum clearance, and construction of public housing. White-owned businesses and factories in the South Side tried to use legislation to protect their properties from deterioration and, especially, from the migration of African Americans into the areas surrounding these institutions. Mayor Richard Daley's plan for the modernization of core areas of Chicago, particularly the business district just south of the Chicago River known as "The Loop," meant that the building and neighborhood in which the DuSable had taken root were in danger of destruction.35 Embedded as they were within their changing neighborhoods, black neighborhood museums like the DuSable could not help but confront the changes inflicted by both segregation and urban renewal.

In 1964, Margaret Burroughs found herself fighting to prevent the city's bulldozers from tearing down the museum. Through her strenuous efforts, she ultimately saved the mansion that originally housed the DuSable, and it has since been placed upon the National Register of Historic Places.36 Yet though Burroughs had rescued the building, urban renewal's impact upon the museum continued to reverberate in other, less immediately tangible ways. The implementation of policies such as the 1947 Relocation Act resulted in the eviction of thousands of African American residents from their homes and businesses in the South Side. Older single-family homes or low-rise apartments that lay in the path of these construction projects were torn down and replaced (although not immediately) with public housing complexes, such as the Robert Taylor Homes in the South Side and the Cabrini-Green complex in the North Side. These projects became notorious for their crime and dilapidated conditions, and the inability of residents to relocate from these often dangerous places.37

High levels of poverty and residential displacement, coupled with a reduction in vital city services such as trash collection, further marred Bronzeville's image. As the Chicago Sun-Times journalist Lillian Calhoun noted in 1966, "the [DuSable] museum is in the heart of the so-called 'Negro ghetto.' Mrs. Burroughs notes that many white visitors take pains to come early so they can leave before dark."38 Burroughs recognized that museum visitors, especially those who were white, were likely to characterize the deteriorating neighborhood that surrounded the DuSable as dangerous or inhospitable, particularly in light of the urban uprisings that spread through American cities during the mid-late 1960s. Like the archetypal neighborhoods located on the "wrong side of the tracks," the marginalized urban space inhabited by the DuSable—or, for that
matter, by the International Afro-American Museum or the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum—gave white visitors reason to avoid visiting these neighborhoods, and thereby permission to ignore the struggling institutions and people within them.39

Building the International Afro-American Museum of Detroit: A Black Museum for a “Black City”

In one sense, however, black museums like the DuSable offered their own form of urban renewal. In 1967, black power activists Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton argued in their missive Black Power that “Black people have seen the city planning commissions, the urban renewal commissions, the boards of education and the police departments fail to speak to their needs in a meaningful way. We must devise new structures, new institutions to replace those forms or to make them responsive.” During the postwar era, African American residents in cities like Chicago and Detroit increasingly witnessed this municipal failure. With Dr. Charles Wright’s creation of the International Afro-American Museum (IAM) of Detroit, they responded in kind, thus following Carmichael and Hamilton’s decree.

Once praised as a city that powered the nation through times of war and shepherded the American consumer through seemingly limitless periods of prosperity, Detroit has since became more recognized, both in popular culture and in scholarly study, for its transformation from an industrial powerhouse to an often desperately struggling postindustrial city. Like the DuSable, the IAM emerged in an environment shaped by the city’s implementation of postwar urban renewal programs, as well as by its long history of racial skirmishes and economic surge and decline. Dr. Charles H. Wright, who founded the museum in an apartment in downtown Detroit in 1965, acknowledged that the IAM had to function in a city both physically and psychologically marked by these dynamics, even as he imbued the museum’s mission and outreach programs with the agenda of black empowerment.

Although the much scrutinized riot that took place in 1967 helped to define Detroit’s transformation from a “Model City” to a place the media would later dub “Murder City,” racial tensions were simmering there long before 1967.40 During World War II, Detroit’s population swelled as both blacks and whites migrated from the South to work in the city’s factories. The population explosion spawned conflicts over the intertwined issues of employment and housing.
African Americans, restricted by discriminatory real-estate and banking policies, faced limited choices of where they could live; resistance to black employment in factories prompted multiple clashes between white and black workers. Tensions reached a height in June 1943, when federal troops suppressed a riot that erupted on Woodward Avenue, one of the main thoroughfares bisecting the city. Thirty-four people—nine whites and twenty-five African Americans—died.

Detroit’s conflicts over labor, housing, and race continued after World War II. In pursuit of more and cheaper land, the “Big Three” automakers—Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors—relocated their factories to the suburbs and, increasingly, outside of Michigan altogether. City planners designed massive freeways that followed the relocation of these factories; construction that cut through the hearts of formerly self-sustaining communities had a particularly devastating effect upon black and ethnic neighborhoods. The opening of the Chrysler Freeway in 1963 virtually obliterated the African American enclave known as Paradise Valley, destroying black-owned theaters, businesses, and homes. What remained, historian Thomas Sugrue lamented, was a “‘no man’s land’ of deterioration and abandonment.”

Following the movement of auto factories was the decline of auto-related industries such as machine tool manufacturers. With the relocation of jobs and
the construction of newer homes in the suburbs, white residents followed, and
Detroit’s neighborhoods began to change. Between 1950 and 1960, for example,
eighty-three census tracts became at least 50 percent black, whereas during the
1940s–1950s, just twenty-four census tracts were listed as 50 percent African
American. Clearly, the shifting demographics of Detroit’s neighborhoods were
not simply the result of racial tensions between blacks and whites, although this
certainly contributed to “white flight.” In cities like Detroit, Oakland, and Chi-
icago, white families settled in the burgeoning suburbs because of financial in-
centives to do so: the federal government helped subsidize the construction of new
housing, and industries that relocated to the suburbs kept taxes low. So, too, the
mantra of “space”—a larger home, a larger yard, a larger car, and increased dis-
tance from those of lower incomes and darker skin—signified to white families
that they had achieved the American dream.

By the mid-1960s, the downward turn in Detroit’s economy, coupled with
its demographic shifts, seemed to indicate that the formerly prosperous metrop-
olis had slipped out of white control. A pattern of national events, such as the
increasing prominence of the Black Power Movement in urban areas, reaffirmed
the perception—if not the reality—of a changing balance of power between
whites and blacks. Nor should the growing national and international recog-
nition of the city’s cultural scene be underestimated as a major factor in the
equation of Detroit as a “black” city. In 1959, Berry Gordy’s creation of Motor
City Records—or, as it became more popularly known, Motown—marked
Detroit as a cultural beacon powered by African Americans despite, and even
because of, the city’s sometimes violent racial instability. The development of
Detroit’s black museum movement represents a lesser known but crucial cul-
tural parallel to Motown as representative of African Americans’ assertion of
cultural power and political authority during the 1960s and 1970s. The birth
of the IAM, and the black museum movement as a whole, constituted a defiant
response to a most pressing question: Who would control the presentation and
preservation of black culture, history, and identity?

As Charles Wright conceptualized the museum’s mission and programs, he
adapted many of the methods implemented by the DuSable Museum. In 1967,
Wright cofounded the Association of African American Museums with Margare-
ter Burroughs, who recalled in a 2004 interview with the Chicago Tribune that, “for
many [museum founders], I met and told them how to get started. So they didn’t
have to reinvent the wheel.” As did the DuSable, the IAM received financial and
material support from external organizations, including the Michigan Council
for the Arts, the Detroit Public School System, and the Detroit Historical Museum. The museum also relied predominantly on volunteers for labor, financial support, and their knowledge of black history. Still, Wright's museum differed from the DuSable in several important ways. For instance, although the DuSable may have helped to define, and been defined by, Chicago's South Side, the museum did not substantially affect the popular "image" of Chicago itself. On the other hand, the creation and evolution of the IAM, along with more prominent African American organizations such as Motown, arguably played a crucial role in shaping Detroit's image as a "black" city.

Beyond "Whitewashing": Planning the IAM

The foundation of the International Afro-American Museum served as a personal milestone in Dr. Charles Wright's work as a pioneering African American doctor and civil rights activist. Born in 1918, Wright graduated from Nashville's Meharry Medical School in 1939 and served as an intern and pathology resident at Harlem Hospital in 1943 and 1944. After practicing general medicine in Detroit from 1946 to 1950, he returned to Harlem and completed an obstetrics and gynecology program in 1953, becoming a certified ob-gyn specialist and general surgeon in 1955. As an ob-gyn, Wright served a population that the professional medical community often neglected. A self-described "whistle-blower," he successfully campaigned to integrate the staff of Hutzel Woman's Hospital in Detroit during the 1950s. Wright recalled that "they wouldn't allow my patient to come into the hospital if there was not a vacancy in a room [where] another black patient was. And they didn't accept black interns and residents.

Wright's medical training informed his commitment to civil rights activism in Detroit and around the globe. In 1960, he and the Detroit Medical Society began the African Medical Education Fund, which funded medical training for African Americans. In 1965, he traveled to the South to serve as a resident physician during the civil rights marches in Selma, Alabama:

The civil rights movement started ... while I was at Harlem, and this was around the time of the [Montgomery] bus boycott. [From that] developed the Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR), and it was designed to involve doctors. We agreed that we would voluntarily go to any portion of the south where we anticipated trouble, to be on hand to give support to the civil rights workers ... actually this is what got me involved in the Selma March incident when [we] had
Wright's conviction that a black museum in Detroit could advance the civil rights battles being waged in Selma signals how one form of activism—direct protest—could influence another—institution building. His experiences as an activist shaped his understanding of what an African American history museum must accomplish and the obstacles that it would face in rectifying traditional narratives of black history and culture.

Wright believed that the deliberate "whitewashing" of American history affected blacks and whites alike, arguing in March 1965 that "the white man in the South sincerely believes he is right. Unless the Negro can accept this concept, he cannot deal with the Southern white man. The white man is the victim of the misrepresentations of history, as well as the Negro." In this, Wright must surely have been aware of James Baldwin's pronouncement in *The Fire Next Time* (1963) that whites were "still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it."

Yet while changing the belief system of whites was important, Wright and other black museum founders did not view this as their primary task. Rather, it was influencing the psychology of African Americans that was paramount. As Wright explained, "we are trying to erase 350 years of dehumanizing brain washing and civil rights are not enough. Something has to occur inside the Negro to erase those self-degrading ideas that he has been taught." That "something," necessarily more concrete and visible than the abstract concept of "civil rights for all," could be the mission of a black history museum.

Wright held the first planning meeting for the "development of a museum devoted to the past and present fight for the freedom of the American Negro" in Detroit in March 1965. The attendees represented an interracial cross-section of Detroit's cultural and political leaders; even those who had previously clashed with Wright over the apparent exclusion of black history and culture from their own institutions attended. Dr. Henry Brown, director of the Detroit Historical Museum, and Willis F. Woods, director of the Detroit Institute of Arts, were among those in attendance, together with several Tuskegee Institute and Wayne State University professors. Interestingly, the turnout at these planning meetings soon dwindled to about fifteen people, according to a 1975 report on the museum's first ten years. One museum advocate posited that the reason for this drop lay in the internal power struggles between white and black...
committee members: “When the whites at the meeting found out that some of our black members weren’t going to let them make all the policy, they dropped out. . .”59

The museum’s planning documents from March, June, and September 1965 illuminate how Wright and the planning committee shaped and altered the museum’s mission during these first few crucial meetings. Although the group strongly supported the idea of a museum devoted to African American history, Wright expressed concern that there would not be enough material related to black history for the museum to collect and present. The lack of usable artifacts, he recognized, stemmed from the persistent neglect and diminishment of black history by most mainstream institutions: “there is a dearth of material because the Negro has been told that nothing he knows and nothing he has is of any importance.”60

Committee members also hesitated to make the creation of an archive one of the museum’s primary goals. Not surprisingly, committee member James Babcock, chief of the Burton Historical Collection at the Detroit Public Library, stressed that the collection and preservation of archival material should be a crucial task for the proposed museum. Yet while the group agreed that building an archive was necessary, “it was pointed out that we are overlooking the psychological effect. The Negro needs something grand and an archives is not an image provoking type of institution.”61 Museum planners believed that creating an archive should not constitute the museum’s primary purpose; rather, in order to secure the support of Detroit’s black community, the image of the museum must be promoted and cultivated.

The group approved Wright’s suggestion to name the museum the International Afro-American Museum, abbreviated IAM. The choice of abbreviation was not accidental: Wright explained that it stood not only for the declarative statement “I AM” but also for “I Am a Man.” The abbreviation’s dual meaning reverberates with an ideal that would exert a strong hold within the Black Power Movement: the reclamation of African American identity, intertwined with an assertion of black masculinity. In 1968, three years after this meeting—and just one month before Martin Luther King’s assassination—striking sanitation workers and their supporters in Memphis wore placards affirming what Wright had previously articulated: “I AM A Man.” Although the slogan, as well as King’s accompanying speeches during the Memphis rallies, may be equated with an assertion of human rights, historian Steve Estes contends that strike leaders defined the slogan “in the strict sense of men’s rights rather than the broader
me of opped

1965 ed the group history, used to be atienent of material has is

ive one: James Public said that,ooking hives is ed that, rather, of the

intervention clarative meaning k Power with an and just nitation: Wright well as ted with leaders broader

construction of human rights. . . . The sanitation workers' slogan was a direct response to the verbal and physical emasculation of black men. 62 The gendering of the IAM, then, corresponded with an emphasis on black masculinity that characterized many aspects of the black museum movement—even despite the fact that, as a female staff member later charged, it was women who ran many of the IAM's daily operations. 63

Wright included a more comprehensive proposal for the creation of the IAM in the minutes of the June 16, 1965, meeting. The new proposal expanded upon the tentative ideas discussed in March and addressed a topic central to the black museum movement: the importance of grassroots participation from the black community. Community participation must be an absolute priority lest the project succumb to the fate of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty programs, which the museum planning group criticized as having been built "from the top downward." 64 The proposal's introduction also linked the black freedom struggle with the drive to create an African American museum. Its authors again drew a strong connection between the reclamation of black manhood and the establishment of a museum, or rather, a national monument to all African Americans—one with global ties to the emergent internationalism of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements: "We are here proposing a national monument to correct the false and distorted history of the Black Man, and to give him a symbol of his own identity and worth. . . . We are involved in a revolutionary movement for freedom in the United States, a struggle which is greatly affecting the rest of the world. 65 The fact that the planning group used the terms "museum" and "monument" interchangeably to describe their vision for the museum is telling. More than just a repository for documents and artifacts, the museum would serve as a monumental representation of African and African American ingenuity in the face of hundreds of years of oppression. Echoing the affirmation of identity embedded in the name's initials, the proposal concluded that the museum must present "a grand, awe-inspiring, emotion-evoking portrayal of the Negroes in the Americas. It should and must inspire respect, wonder and a sense of 'Self.'" 66

The revised June proposal articulated five goals for the museum and placed the greatest emphasis upon the first: the museum must "dramatize the constructive existence/contribution of America's black citizens." African American audiences who came to the museum would realize not only a renewed "sense of 'Self'" but also their role in the grand trajectory of the black freedom movement. Ranked last, as per the sentiments Wright expressed in March, was the museum's
goal to “provide a storehouse for artifacts and heirlooms that may otherwise be lost to history” and to “provide a valid source for research on the Negro history of the Western Hemisphere.”

There was little debate about what role whites should play in planning for the new museum. Sympathetic whites were not to be excluded from the process; indeed, the museum planning group welcomed their financial assistance, as well as other public displays of support. Their acknowledgment and acceptance of white support distinguishes the planning group from the defiantly separatist factions that would emerge within the Black Power Movement. Yet the group also maintained that even if whites did not offer any assistance, the project would go forth without them. For museum planners, “management must be in the hands of the Negro. Otherwise, this could become another charity that would do nothing for the Negro’s image of himself.”

In September, the planning committee decided to significantly revise the IAM’s mission statement. In the March 1965 statement of purpose, the writers had employed vivid words to illustrate the vicious impact of racism upon black men, specifically. As they maintained, “the Negro in the Americas has been denied his heritage; his skills, talents and manhood have been brutally suppressed, and his material and spiritual contributions to human culture unacknowledged. . . . We protest the distortions of our history, and of our Self, and propose to change this image.” After reviewing this description, however, the planning committee decided to revise the introduction and exclude charged words such as “brutally.” Consequently, the September 1965 proposal features marked changes in the choice of words the committee used to describe the impact of racism upon African Americans, with the authors eliminating language that could be perceived as overtly accusatory. The revised proposal read: “For over three hundred years, ‘Racism’ for Negroes in America has meant a denial of an identity and heritage. In the light of racist beliefs about the inferiority of Negroes, the material and spiritual contribution made by Black Men to human culture and civilization went unacknowledged. . . . As a consequence, the image of Negro peoples in history has been distorted. We feel that the time has come to correct this image.”

The March and June proposal drafts corresponded with the more self-consciously “militant” ideology and discourse of black power, but the September 1965 proposal, its blunt language purposefully tempered (perhaps in an effort to appeal to more conservative white supporters who might be turned off by accusations that they had “brutally suppressed” black men), echoed the dis-
course of the mainstream Civil Rights Movement and changed the entire tenor of the museum’s approach.

Still, while the committee moderated some of the power embedded in their first declarative proposal, the museum’s mission continued to reinforce the core goals of the Black Power Movement. For instance, discussion regarding museum membership centered not simply upon its role in obtaining much needed funds; rather, the weighted significance of what it meant to belong to a black museum was of first importance to committee members. Becoming a member was an action fraught with significance, for it signaled an individual’s core belief not only in the black freedom struggle but in “human freedom.” Choosing to join the museum signified not just your support of such an organization but your “personal conviction that Afro-Americans are a people of worth and dignity.”

The committee also suggested that membership should be open to everyone—even those who could not afford it. One committee member thought that the museum should “issue a membership card to everyone who contributes any money, even if it is just a penny. Dr. Wright agreed and suggested selling one share for one cent, so that each member knows he has an investment in the organization. He is interested in the school children.”

Ultimately, membership in the International Afro-American Museum served as a declaration of revolutionary intent, “a revolutionary movement that will help to free mankind from the bonds of racism, and establish once and for all the essential equality of all men.” The ways in which the museum communicated this message, as we shall see, moved well beyond the language of gradualism and conciliation suggested by the IAM’s revised mission statements.

Anacostia: “In the Shadow of the National Spotlight”

If Detroit was the Motor City that powered the nation, Washington, D.C., the touchstone of American nationalism, represents a loftier side of American identity. Countless local historians and city boosters, along with millions of tourists, celebrate its monuments, museums, and memorials. Yet it also has a second, far less scrutinized identity—Washington, D.C., the city. Comprised of numerous and distinctive neighborhoods, from wealthy Georgetown to the less affluent, mostly African American areas like Anacostia, Barry Farms, and Congress Heights, these Washington neighborhoods have most often existed in the shadows cast by their powerful national twin. As a result, the spaces and neighborhoods of Washington not populated by national monuments and other
popular destinations may go unnoticed by both tourists and urban planners. Even in 1995, decades after the destruction wrought by the District’s urban renewal programs upon poor neighborhoods like Anacostia, the architect Robert Peck concurred that, “if it is not a monumental space like the Mall or Pennsylvania Avenue, an urban space in this town is an afterthought.”

One of the best illustrations of the conflict between Washington’s dual identities may be found in the city’s history as a slave market. During the 1840s and 1850s, slave auctions operated in the very heart of the nation’s capital, until abolitionist groups, aghast at the irony of slavery literally coexisting with the democratic image that Washington supposedly represented, pressured the city to end its trade in human flesh. Almost a century later, with the black population constituting around 25 percent of the city’s total population by 1920 (surpassed only by New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia), the enforcement of segregation and the passage of urban renewal policies continued to affect those who inhabited the District’s marginal spaces.

Yet Anacostia’s residences, streets, and storefronts have not always been in a state of deterioration. Prior to World War II, both African Americans and some white working-class families lived in this area located in this southeast region of Washington, D.C. Single-family homes with small plots of land dominated, and early twentieth-century photographs depict a thriving main street. Mr. and Mrs. John W. Southall, Anacostia residents since 1919, remembered that “there were virtually no large apartment complexes for black citizens in Anacostia until [real-estate developer Morris] Cafritz built Parklands in 1951–52. . . . Most black citizens of Anacostia owned their homes and had gardens in which they raised vegetables and they also raised chickens.”

Jim Crow–era segregation placed severe restrictions on Anacostia’s black community, leaving its inhabitants with limited mobility to navigate beyond, and even within, the boundaries of their neighborhood. Percy Battle, who moved from Richmond, Virginia, to Anacostia in 1937 and resided there for most of his life, reflected: “I guess when they built the Carver Theater . . . that was the only entertainment that we had. . . . Although there were two theaters that we could walk to very easily, one down on Good Hope Road and one up at Martin Luther King and Portland Street. And we weren’t allowed to go to those theaters.”

Segregation also imposed barriers beyond the pursuit of leisure. Before World War II, Anacostia’s black residents mostly worked in construction or as domestic laborers. The war opened up a few more occupations in the city; for
example, the Government Printing Office and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing employed African Americans as messengers and office cleaners. Celebrated African American photographer Gordon Parks, who conducted a survey of the “back alleys” of Washington, D.C., transformed an African American charwoman laboring to clean the offices of powerful white men in the nation’s capital into an iconic figure in one of his most famous photographs. Many African Americans had difficulty traveling to these new places of employment, for there were only one or two crowded busses available to transport blacks to their jobs in other parts of Washington.

Discriminatory education policies also affected Anacostia’s black community. During the Depression, African American children could only attend certain schools in the neighborhood, such as the Birney School, located on Nichols Avenue. When they reached junior high, black students had to attend a school in the northwestern area of the District. Similarly, rather than attend the predominantly white Anacostia High School, African American students traveled to Dunbar, Armstrong, and Cardozo Senior Highs, located in other parts of the city. Anacostia resident Erma Katherine Simon remembered that black teachers at the Birney School tried to make the best of the situation: “And we... were not aware that some of the books we got were sent down from other schools, from other white schools that is. But we got a lot of new books at Birney School also... the leaders at Birney Schools were strong, determined people because they saw to it that the children at Birney School had the things they needed.”

The constraints imposed by Jim Crow helped instill a sense of community among Anacostia’s black residents. Rather than wholly depending on the outside world for goods and services, African Americans relied on black businesses and interacted primarily with black families. For instance, Erma Katherine Simon reminisced about her family’s garden plot, which allowed them to reduce their reliance on grocery stores that might have refused them service. Despite the obvious hardships faced by Anacostians during the days of Jim Crow, a strain of optimism and even nostalgia runs through many of these oral histories. As Simon further explained, “Then families were families. Everybody was your mother or your father. Everybody was respected... So, all and all, Anacostia was like a village. Everybody—all for one, and one for all.”

Urban renewal disrupted this sense of community by displacing Washington, D.C.’s black citizens from one region to another and transforming Anacostia’s isolation from the rest of the District into something more entrenched.
After World War II, developers razed many of Anacostia’s older homes and constructed closely situated apartment buildings (with a parallel reduction in green space) to take their place. In 1970, the D.C. Office of Community Renewal reported that apartments constituted 85 percent of the 38,900 dwelling units in Anacostia—an extremely high percentage indicating a lack of single-family and duplex owner-occupied housing. Significant alterations in the structure and design of Anacostia’s roadways also contributed to the region’s housing and population changes. Highway construction projects cut through formerly cohesive neighborhoods in southwestern and southeastern D.C., thus allowing Washington’s middle-class residents to speed around Anacostia without stopping.

Urban renewal’s destruction contributed to the characterization of Anacostia’s residents as the “other” Washingtonians: poor, different, isolated. A taxi driver’s comments in a 1966 Washington Post article reflected this sense that Anacostia’s residents were inaccessible and immobile by choice, not by circumstance: “Almost nobody goes to Southeast. But sometimes, when I’m over past the Capitol, I get ’em. I hate it when that happens. Hate to go over there. Those people over there, they don’t travel much. The travelin’ folks, they’re downtown. You come back alone when you get one to Southeast.” A decade after John Kinard founded the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, staff member Louise Daniel Hutchinson recalled that this image of Anacostia’s isolation persisted even among Smithsonian Institution staff members—an issue that endlessly frustrated ANM staff in their efforts to promote the museum. During her research for the ANM exhibit The Anacostia Story (1977), she visited Smithsonian staff member Silvio A. Bendini. According to Hutchinson, Bendini “was pleasantly surprised that I called and came to see him, because he had a notion that somehow we in Anacostia were black, they on the Mall were white, and we should isolate ourselves or that we desired to isolate ourselves. A part of my role... was to begin building some bridges to the octopus on the Mall.”

“*For This Is No Ordinary Museum*:
*Creating the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum*

For the African American residents of Anacostia, long rendered invisible because of race, class, and separation from the heart of the city, there seemed little reason to visit the very places that granted Washington, D.C., its powerful image in American culture. The opening of the Anacostia Neighborhood
er homes and the reduction in the number of single-family dwellings in the region's cut through D.C., thus exacerbating the isolation of Anacostia. A taxi ride from downtown past there. Those who 2 there. After John ember Louise tion persisted that endlessly. During her visit to the Smithsonian Institution Archives, she had a notion that she was looking at a museum and we had a part of history. She was a Mall.”

Anacostia Historical Society members gather for a photograph in front of the new Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in Washington, D.C., 1967. The Carver Theater on Nichols Avenue was one of the few theaters African Americans were permitted to enter during segregation. Community volunteers transformed the theater into the museum. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Archives. Image no. 92-1705.

Museum (ANM) on September 15, 1967, in the former Carver Theater on Nichols Avenue was thus a watershed event meant to change this perception. During the opening ceremonies, Smithsonian Institution Secretary Sidney Dillon Ripley spoke with almost extraordinary optimism about the ANM's potential to transform not only museums but cities themselves. “For this is no ordinary museum,” Ripley opined, “indeed it is an extraordinary museum, and because it is, it speaks to us from more than art and history, technology and natural history. . . . I suspect that museums will never quite be the same again, and perhaps our cities won't be either.” Two decades later, Kenneth Hudson concurred with Ripley's assessment of the museum's potential, maintaining that the ANM “must be given the credit of pioneering the concept of a museum without walls to keep it within bounds, a museum with a creative flow of ideas, exhibits and people between itself and the outside world.”

Ripley's welcome served as the culmination of an “experiment” he had proposed at a meeting of museum directors in Aspen, Colorado, in 1966. Ripley explained that the Smithsonian Institution must establish an experimental
neighborhood museum, somewhere in Washington, D.C., as a way to entice more African Americans to visit museums. As evidence of Smithsonian's neglect of this audience, he pointed to the startling results of a recent survey of visiting school groups. During the 1965–66 school year, 32,909 students from the D.C. metro area took guided tours of the Smithsonian museums, but only 1,871 of those children attended schools in Washington, D.C., itself. Thus, children who visited the Smithsonian did not attend the mostly black, less affluent inner-city schools, but rather those located in the wealthier, mostly white outer-ring suburbs. Likewise, a single day-long survey (c. 1966–67) conducted at the Museum of Natural History revealed that out of 1,558 visitors, only 43 were African American. The survey admitted that "the pattern of Smithsonian visitors in no way reflects the city's actual population characteristics; in a city whose population is predominantly Negro (62%), more than 90% of the visitors to the Museum of Natural History on a recent holiday were white."

As an explanation for these jarring statistics, Ripley contended that the people who usually lived in "rundown parts of cities" (which he described as often "gently dilapidated," and occasionally "violent, and, to us, jungly") generally avoided museums because they "may feel awkward going out of their district, badly dressed or ill at ease. They may easily feel lost as they wend their way along an unfamiliar sidewalk toward a vast monumental marble palace. They may even feel hostile." Yet Ripley's portrayal of inner-city African Americans as naïve "city bumpkins," unaccustomed to travel and easily intimidated by the physical spaces of whiteness, was complicated by Anacostia Neighborhood Museum director John Kinard. Kinard argued that African Americans eschewed the Smithsonian not simply because of the lack of time, money, the proper clothes, or because they felt intimidated—although these factors did play some role. Rather, African Americans avoided museums like the Smithsonian because "the black man did not see himself in those jobs or in those exhibits, so he wasn't going to embarrass himself by paying respect to what essentially represented cultural pressure."

Since its creation in the early nineteenth century, the Smithsonian Institution has been considered an esteemed caretaker of the nation's cultural heritage. Kinard recognized, however, that the stories its curators told about history, science, and art had long been exclusive rather than inclusive; the Smithsonian's exhibits, collections, and programs insinuated, at times boldly and at other times subtly, that only certain people made valuable contributions, while others—African Americans, women, and other minority groups—remained entrapped in
marginal and stereotyped roles. Indeed, the Smithsonian Institution did not systematically begin to collect artifacts relating to African American history until the 1960s. Prior to that, their only effort to do so was at special request. Given this history, it is not entirely surprising that when local community organizations approached Kinard, then a pastor at the John Wesley African Methodist Zion Church in Washington, to direct the new museum, he admitted that “I don’t see how a museum could have any redeeming factor in the development of this community.” Nor, initially, did the community of Anacostia itself.

Although the museum’s grand opening sparked excitement and anticipation among museum staff and neighborhood residents, they also expressed “fear and uncertainty” about whether it would truly serve as a neighborhood museum. Some residents believed that Ripley wanted to create a neighborhood museum in order to prevent them from visiting the more prestigious ones that lined the National Mall; even some Smithsonian staff members, Kinard remembered, thought that the ANM “was a half-baked Ripley idea, that they weren’t for it, didn’t think it would last two weeks, and weren’t going to help, anyhow.” While Kinard acknowledged the validity of the skepticism surrounding Ripley’s proposal, he emphasized that Ripley’s intentions were sincere and were not, at least consciously, driven by racism: “No, I never saw that. I don’t think anybody in his right mind, who knew Ripley, thought that, either, you know.”

Another major concern was whether the museum would provide jobs to Anacostia’s residents, regardless of skill level. Since other Anacostia community organizations employed people from the neighborhood, it was “expected that any new project would serve the same purpose.” Many community members, not surprisingly, also believed that money should be spent on more practical needs than a museum. Kinard recalled, “it was felt that a museum was just not the kind of institution the neighborhood needed, that it would prove to be not only irrelevant to the issues of concern to the community but totally alien, and judging from what was known about museums, it might be so highbrow as to be an embarrassment or downright insult.” If the museum was to serve as a welcoming place for community members, then Kinard believed that its mission must extend beyond simply collecting and displaying objects. Instead, it must reflect the priorities of the Anacostia community and reinforce a sense of place, purpose, and history for its residents.

Under Kinard’s direction, together with staff and volunteers, the ANM would soon begin to tell the stories of African American life and attempt to reclaim a sense of place and belonging for the city’s literally and metaphorically
displaced African Americans residents. Kinard’s own extensive background as a young community activist in southeast Washington with the Neighborhood Youth Corps, as well as his prior work in Africa with the Operation Crossroads Africa program and the U.S. State Department, contributed to the museum’s visionary mission and strengthened the ties between museum and the Anacostia community. The collaboration between S. Dillon Ripley and John Kinard also marked a period of introspective and not necessarily mutually agreeable change for the Smithsonian and, later, other mainstream museums as they began to move away from their roots as nineteenth-century institutions devoted solely to the collection and preservation of artifacts, and instead consider how to (re)-interpret once “forgotten” histories. A major impetus for these changes sprang from the groundbreaking work of African American neighborhood museums located in the marginalized black places of the nation’s metropolises. African American leaders who founded these museums intended to represent and instill empowerment, self-sufficiency, and assertive pride in one’s heritage. Although these institutions, and their audiences, were seemingly invisible to most white Americans, they vibrated with an undeniable energy as they carved out unique cultural and social spaces for black activism.