

They Will Come Here to See Themselves



Freelon / RTKL, Architects

THE REGINALD F. LEWIS MUSEUM
of **MARYLAND AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY & CULTURE**

Scaffold for Reflection and Perception

Essay by Jeremy Kargon, Architect
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The Language of Reflection

The word “reflection” is attractively complex. Although its most literal, physical meaning describes the path of an image modified by its trajectory, the common psychological usage connotes *introspection*.

That complexity is well-represented by Baltimore’s newest museum, the *Reginald F. Lewis Museum for Maryland African American History and Culture*. Opened at the end of June, 2005, the museum’s organizers hope that it will become that rare example among museums: An educational center whose institutional identity comes to embody *civic* identity. Doing so would be a rare achievement for a museum with such a clear, ethnically-defined curatorial mandate. Nonetheless, that achievement may yet be possible in large measure due to the success with which the museum building itself reflects and reflects upon Maryland’s cultural landscape.

Designed in joint venture between The Freelon Group (North Carolina) and RTKL (Maryland), the appearance of the Lewis Museum is at once unique and generic. Consistent use of saturated colors and special materials makes the Lewis Museum immediately recognizable. Those colors and materials are never, however, forced into images or patterns which might explicitly “tell the story.” If the Lewis Museum evokes sensations we seem to recognize, those sensations remain just that -- *evocative*. The architects have chosen to leave to the curators the story-telling itself.

How different this approach is from other memorial-type museums around the world. A clear contrast is with Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin, which uses intentionally-obscure, pseudo-historical “symbols” to preempt visitors’ attention towards whatever artifacts or exhibition the might be on display. Comparison



Reginald F. Lewis Museum, Entry Facade.
Originally designed to feature a colorful mural, the rectangular panel above the entrance serves simply as an abstract color field, part of the Museum’s formal composition.

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The Language of Reflection (Continued)



Reginald F. Lewis Museum, *Stair Volume*
The atrium skylight provides dramatic illumination for the central stairs.



Reginald F. Lewis Museum, *Stair and Screen Wall*
Perforated metal sheets allow transparency and catch the light.

might also be drawn with Pie Cobb Freed's more successful Holocaust Museum, the experience of which is almost entirely theatrical -- by curatorial intention. The Lewis Museum, on the other hand, has provided for its visitors an inspiring armature from which the material culture of African American history may be easily displayed.

This is not to say that the architects here are without their own artistic conceits. One of the strengths of the Lewis Museum's architecture is a sort of aesthetic economy, by which the architects have focused their efforts upon a few strategic elements. The main staircase is as muscular a piece of contemporary sculpture as one will find in any art gallery. Painted red, and distinct from the neutral-colored partitions of the rest of the building, two curved metal-framed walls form a tall and narrow space through which the staircase rises. Screened only by perforated metal sheets, lit by natural light from above, these walls define the figurative heart of the museum.

Although the symbolic strength of the design is intentional (both the architects and the museum organizers are eager to promote the experience: The Red Wall of Freedom), the extraordinary quality of the design belies attempts to define its meaning as one thing or another. The simple detailing of the steel, for instance, unexpectedly reminds visitors of scenes of *contemporary* city life. For many Marylanders, obviously, the subway, the marketplace, the parking lot, and the street are ubiquitous; but their material character is often ignored by institutional depictions of African American culture. Within the walls of the Lewis Museum, such aspects of contemporary experience are subtly woven together with the exhibits' presentation of historical subject matter.

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The Outside In



Reginald F. Lewis Museum, View from Pratt Street
The view most familiar to Baltimoreans -- from their commute home.

One first sees the Lewis Museum from a car: A car coming off the freeway, a car stuck in traffic, a car rushing home at the end of the day. There is hardly a more prominent location in Baltimore for commuter traffic.

A rectilinear lot at the corner of Baltimore's main East-West and North-South traffic arteries, the Museum's site is just over the eastern boundary of what Baltimore considers its central tourist district, the Inner Harbor. In choosing the site, the museum's planners obviously hoped that the Lewis Museum would extend the district eastward. Yet the Lewis Museum's site is also immediately adjacent to a dispersed collection of smaller museums and historical memorials. To the east sits Baltimore's Flag House, which commemorates the making of the flag which inspired The Star Spangled Banner. To the north are the historic Shot Tower and the City Life Museums. To the south are Italian-American memorials; further east is a Jewish historical museum. Instead of extending the Harbor outwards, the Lewis Museum may succeed in bringing this older neighborhood of Jonestown to greater prominence within the city. In commercial terms, the Lewis Museum might be considered the institutional "anchor" for what until now has been an incoherent strip of minor historic sites and neighborhood lots.

The building anchors this nascent museum "campus" in two contradictory ways.

Most obviously, the building's window openings and super-graphic billboards (familiar from commercial architecture) are oriented towards the large boulevards and their car traffic. The museum's main entrance inflects towards the south west corner, towards the Inner Harbor and towards Baltimore's evening commuters. That most of these openings are in fact sealed -- and that most visitors will actually approach the building from the east!-- are hardly relevant. These architectural

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The Outside In (Continued)



Reginald F. Lewis Museum, *Slemmer's Alley*
An intimate footpath with potential for Museum-sponsored activities.



Reginald F. Lewis Museum, *Flag House Garden*
The open space creates a central square among different museum themes.

features effect a large-scale, symbolic “gateway” for the reemerging Jonestown historic neighborhood behind the museum.

On the other hand, the planners have made a simple gesture towards the east which holds real potential for all the nearby museums: The refurbishment of an old alley as a pedestrian passageway between the Lewis Museum and the Flag House. Nestled between the building bulk and a landscaped courtyard, Slemmer’s Alley is suitably sheltered from the heavy traffic on the far side of the museum. Its scale is intimate. And its location affords a unique opportunity for a history-themed walkway among the several cultural attractions.

Ironically, the architects of the Lewis Museum have dealt with this passageway grudgingly. It is, in fact, the *real* entrance to the museum for group tours and student visits. And both the orientation center and the museum cafe are adjacent to Slemmer’s Alley. But the physical entrance is small, and the cafe has only a single fire exit to the exterior.

The design here should be better. Only simple changes could help realize more fully the Lewis Museum’s desired role as a major player in Baltimore’s cultural life. Opening the cafe more fully to the alley, providing outdoor “cafe” seating, and adding historical markers or exterior exhibits would better position the Lewis Museum itself as the lead cultural institution in the area. The success of a museum as an “urban attraction” is the ultimate test of the institution’s ambition to transcend its own curatorial mandate. (London’s Tate Modern and Frankfurt-am-Main’s Schirn Kunsthalle are two examples at different scales.) Doing so is an ambition implicit in the Lewis Museum’s own extroverted design.

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Interior Organization



Reginald F. Lewis Museum, View from Entrance
The stairs lead up to Exhibit spaces; the Gift Shop has its prime location.



Reginald F. Lewis Museum, Orientation Lobby
A dynamic, multipurpose space.

Once inside, both visitor and museum staff benefit from a clarity which is more characteristic of commercial buildings than of museums.

A top-lit atrium orients visitors on every floor. From the ground floor upwards, visitors can understand the flight of the bright red stair volume up through the height of the building. The surrounding walls, finished in a neutral tone, give the impression of corporate efficiency and restraint. Window openings from both offices *and* gallery spaces reinforce the feeling of a shared stake in the success of this museum.

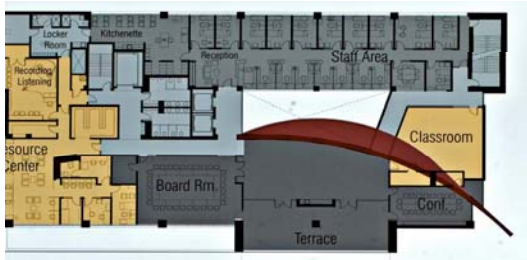
The ground floor lobby for visitors is dominated by the staircase. The information desk, elevators, gift shop, cafe, and toilets are all immediately accessible from the main entrance.

Visitors who choose to ascend the stairs enter not an exhibition space but a second “orientation” lobby. Served by a continuing multimedia installation, this room is open both to the Baltimore skyline and to the heart of the museum. Acting as a foyer for the temporary exhibit hall, this *piano nobile* is also adjacent to a multipurpose theater, the walls (and seating) of which pull away to create a single, continuous space with the rest of the floor.

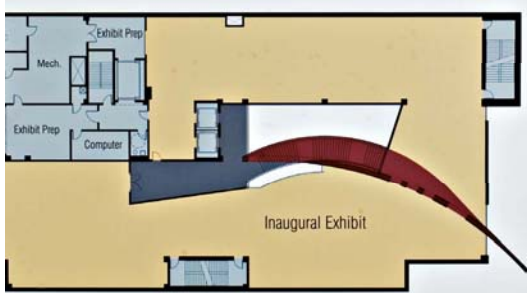
The location and significance of this space is puzzling in a *museum*; but within a *cultural center*, its planning could not be better realized. The commercial potential of both public and private events are here not shunted to the side. Their prominence announces, in fact, that diverse community activities might finally find a permanent home, with pride of place -- and an exuberance to match.

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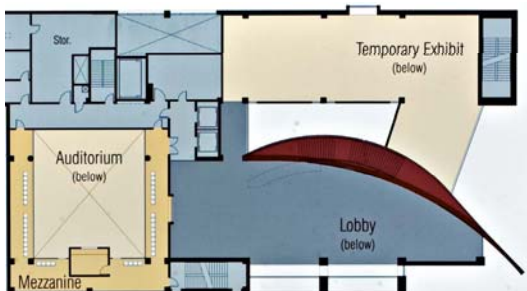
Interior Organization (Continued)



Fourth Floor: Administration and Learning



Third Floor: Permanent Collection



Second Floor: Orientation, Temporary Exhibits, and Auditorium

The temporary exhibit gallery is, on the other hand, separated functionally from this public space. The third floor is entirely given to the permanent collection. Like the other floors, these exhibit spaces form a ring of galleries around the central atrium; there is one additional room off the elevator core, to allow certain installations to be set off from the main line of visitors' traffic.

All exhibition galleries feature the neutral, flexible, and highly-controlled space beloved of museum curators. But not *too* controlled: the architects have somewhat courageously allowed well-situated window openings to the atrium for visitor's interest and comfort.

On all floors, "back-of-the-house" functions inhabit rooms behind the elevator core, away from visitors but close at hand for staff. The fourth floor houses clerical and administrative functions, as well as the facilities for in-house and distance learning. The fifth and topmost floor resolves a dilemma characteristic of most contemporary buildings: the "crown" of the building is also where, by necessity, the building's technical facilities need to be. In the Lewis Museum, the curatorial staff and the museum collection share top billing, as it were, with the air conditioning units. Considering the PR-savvy sensibility which informs the rest of the building, one is almost shocked not to find yet another events hall, overlooking the Inner Harbor. On the contrary (although subsequent growth of the collection may make the current configuration obsolete), for now the Lewis Museum conveys the hope that the collection and its curators will become the jewel in the crown.

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Scaffold for Perception



Reginald F. Lewis Museum, *View across Atrium*
Gallery walls and Main Staircase: Generic and Unique.

The opening of the *Lewis Museum for Maryland African American History and Culture* occurs slightly behind the huge wave of the last decade of museum development. This lag may be partially responsible (together with the personal qualities of the museum's founders, developers, and architects) for the simultaneous discretion and high quality of its architecture. The Lewis Museum seems to embody "lessons learned" from other architectural experiments both here and abroad:

The museum must appear iconic; yet its iconography must be widely appealing and not derivative.

The museum's facilities maybe exploited for commercial purposes; yet those activities can be explicitly part of the organization's charter.

The museum's architecture must provide a memorable "gestalt" attraction; but that phenomenon should be seamlessly integrated with the building's structure, and must not distract from the more traditional displays.

The museum collection must focus upon a single aspect of history and society; yet that focus must necessarily engage themes and studies drawn from all participants in history and society.

Museum-going has become popular entertainment; but its success must measures the depth of our own involvement.

In other words, the Lewis Museum may well incorporate many of the trends and fads which have changed fundamentally the museum "biz"; but those elements by now appear merely inevitable. Fortunately, the strength of the Lewis Museum's design is not in its own *innovation*, but in its studied *application* others'.

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Scaffold for Perception (Continued)



Artifact from the Collection
Oyster Basket and Oyster Shells (20th Century)

What, then, will visitors encounter when they come to *Lewis Museum for Maryland African American History and Culture*? Visitors will find History, no doubt, and they will find Culture -- however it might be packaged, presented, and put on display. The Lewis Museum is first of all a prime piece of intellectual real estate, the facilities for which are no more or less than state-of-the-art.

But they will also come here to see *themselves*, their faces reflected across the open museum atrium and peering up from the polished terrazzo floors. Visitors of diverse backgrounds will each find his or her own history as a trace (or lacuna) among the collection's artifacts. Visitors of diverse backgrounds will reflect upon their personal experiences upon the main stairs, rising up through the central atrium. And visitors of all backgrounds will enjoy this museum's exuberant role in a part of the city which, for now, remains vital.



Reginald F. Lewis Museum, Staircase Screen
Perceptual Framework: Reflection and Transmission

Through years of political and social turmoil, Maryland's African American community has emerged with a flagship institution well-funded both privately and publicly. It is readily apparent that the physical realization of that institution, the Lewis Museum building itself, has been designed to be more than a place of memory and reflection. It is itself the scaffolding upon which the *future* community might be built.