

# DuSable Museum of African American History

Chicago, Illinois

**Role:** Museum Planning and Conceptual Design for Expansion and Renovation

**Description:** The DuSable Museum of African American History was founded in 1961 by a group of Chicago educators, artists and civic leaders dedicated to the preservation of African American history, heritage and culture. In creating the DuSable Museum, the original seven founders established the first grass roots institution in the United States devoted solely to the subject of African American culture and history. In December of 1998 the museum retained Verner Johnson, Inc. to provide master planning and conceptual architectural design services for the expansion and renovation of the museum. The Master Plan calls for the development of a "Campus Plan". Closing 57th Street to through traffic is essential to the creation of the campus. A new public plaza is created over the new underground garage is necessary to knit the Banquet Facility together with the museum. We developed a series of conceptual design sketches for the ongoing fundraising efforts.

The building includes a number of symbolic elements which enrich its architecture and enhance the unique identity of the museum and the physical expression of its mission:

- The new facade that faces south to the proposed plaza is intended to symbolize the ascendancy of the DuSable Museum to its rightful stature as the greatest African American museum in the nation. Its image is one of confidence, strength, openness and accessibility. The new facade proclaims the museum as an established and significant institution in a welcoming public space.

- A long, sheltering, barrel vaulted roof of copper which can be interpreted as a reference to the great 17th century Benin palace, or as a form reminiscent of the trains that carried the Pullman Porters, or similar to the copper-wrapped artwork of the Ife, Benin and Bakota people.

- A syncopated rhythm of black and white columns running along the facade can be seen as a reference to piano keys and the great contribution to American music that has been made by black musicians (like piano keys, the columns can also imply ivory and ebony, two materials unique to Africa).

- The entry vestibule with its steeply pitched ornamental copper roof can be seen, like the main roof, as a reference to traditional copper-clad, African artwork; or as a small house (abstractly symbolizing the original home of the DuSable Museum); or as a treasure chest (symbolizing the value of preserving history and culture); or even as a small trading post (evoking DuSable's vocation).

- The transparency of the facade not only connects inside with the outside, the museum with the park, but also symbolizes an institutional clarity of vision and an openness to visitors and new ideas.

