

## A New Legacy for North Carolina

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Three recent museums mark what many believe is the beginning of an era in the fastest growing state east of the Mississippi River. By J. Michael Welton



Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts and Culture. Alan Karchmer, photographer.

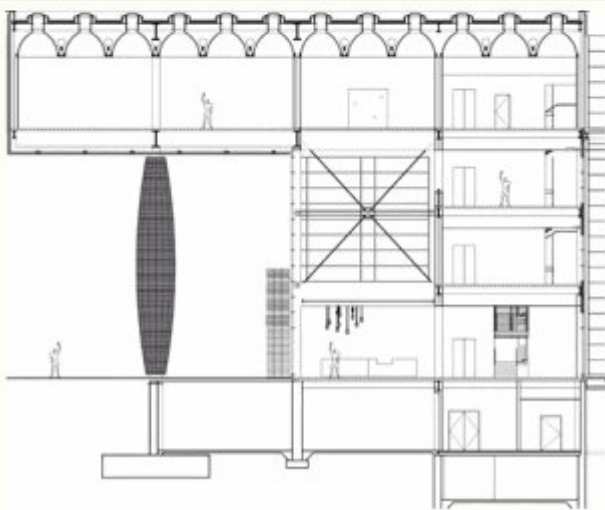


Bechtler Museum of Modern Art. Gary O'Brien, photographer.

In North Carolina, 2010 may be remembered as the year the cultural sound barrier was shattered with a collective boom.

In Charlotte and Raleigh, the Tar Heel State is moving forward with a series of status-changing advances that lay down a new legacy for art and architecture.

These are no small or inexpensive endeavors. In downtown Charlotte, the \$1 billion Wells Fargo Cultural Campus, with its theater, museums and 48-story retail/commercial tower, is nearing completion. On the outskirts of Raleigh, a \$100 million publicly funded museum, dedicated to illuminating a world-class art collection, has taken shape while working hard to disappear into its 164-acre landscape.



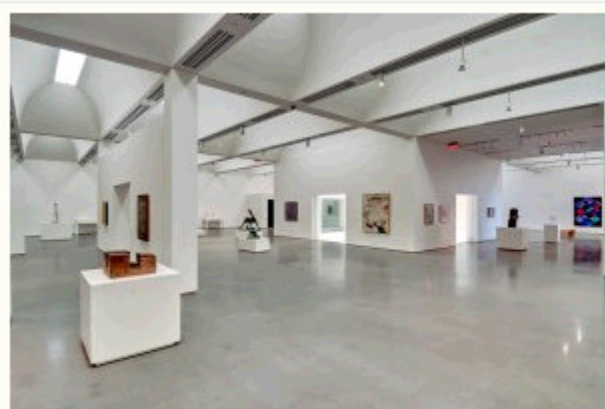
Bechtler Museum section courtesy Wagner Murray.

The state, once considered a cultural backwater by some, now stands at the forefront of design with bold works by respected architects—one by Switzerland's **Mario Botta**, another by Durham's **Freelon Group** and a third by New York's **Thomas Phifer and Partners**.

"North Carolina has reached a tipping point," said Dan Gottlieb, director of planning and design at the North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA).

"It's an attractive place to live and it has a fairly progressive social outlook as a leader of the New South."

John Boyer, president and CEO at the \$21 million Bechtler Museum on Charlotte's cultural campus, said the complex evolved from a decades-old, ongoing strategic plan. "While it's fair to say that the Wells Fargo Cultural Center is a significant step in Charlotte's rise as a cultural community, it's also just another step," he said.



Bechtler Museum of Modern Art. Gary O'Brien, photographer.

His new museum's 1,400 works of contemporary art are the fruits of one family's friendship with leading artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For 70 years,

the Bechtlers collected pieces by Picasso, Giacometti, Miró, Calder, Warhol and artists from *l'École de Paris*.

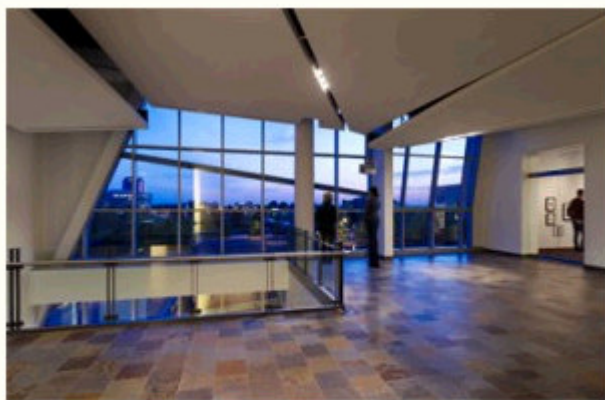


Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts+Culture. Alan Karchmer, photographer.

Their collection of 60 works by the Swiss master Le Corbusier alone is breathtaking. It includes prints, a tapestry, and a pair of “LC1” chairs from 1929, with chromed tubular steel, leather straps, and pony skin backs. There’s also one of the painting he created while working on the Villa Savoy between 1928 and 1931.

The family originally intended to place their Botta-designed museum on a site overlooking the Catawba River outside Charlotte. When civic leaders heard of it, they dispatched emissaries bearing a proposal for a location on the four-acre downtown cultural campus. Andreas Bechtler rethought his plans, then committed with a proviso stipulating Botta as architect.

The result is a four-story cantilevered building, clad in monochromatic terra cotta, overlooking South Tryon Street. Its interior is a crisp palette of white walls, black granite and reinforced concrete floors, with maple trim. At its forefront is a four-story atrium opening up to vistas of Charlotte’s skyline, its main galleries on the top floor.



Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts+Culture. Alan Karchmer, photographer.

Across Tryon, The Freelon Group faced a complex set of challenges for the \$18.8 million Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts and Culture. At 60 by 400 feet, the site straddles a commercial tower’s below-grade entrance ramp for cars and trucks. “It’s a very narrow, difficult, leftover site,” Phil Freelon said.

No small amount of social zeitgeist accompanied it. The neighborhood where the center now stands was once part of a thriving black community called Brooklyn. With its own hospitals, offices and churches, it was Charlotte’s iteration of the Jim Crow-era “separate-but-equal” law. It was also home to an African-American public school known as “Jacob’s Ladder,” because the exterior stairs raised students up, a metaphor equating education with progress.

“Two things happened in the 60s—racial desegregation and urban renewal,” Freelon said. “The entire community in this area was wiped out. There were no remnants.”

His firm responded to history and site alike with a thoughtful iconography. They lifted the center’s main lobby up above the entry ramp, using escalators and stairs for access. “People enter at the end of this very narrow building and go up by escalator, by Jacob’s Ladder. That’s the *parti*, the idea,” Freelon said.

An exterior metal skin weaves a second strand of history. The team looked at African-American quilting patterns and West African textiles to arrive at the idea of a quilt. “The stitching together of these rain screens—that’s the pattern of the exterior,” Freelon said. “It’s subtle, but there are two different colors of brown.”



North Carolina Museum of Art. Scott Frances, photographer.

In Raleigh, architect Thomas Phifer spent five years contemplating a new home for the NCMA’s permanent collection. Already on his drawing board: a public sculpture garden inspired by Olmsted’s ideas about landscape and democracy, a brick and glass museum built by Edward Durell Stone in 1983, and a collection of art reaching back 5,000 years.

He placed the art at the center of his design.

“This building pushes the collection together, and lets the gardens take over,” he said. “Over time, the landscaping will come up and envelop the building.”

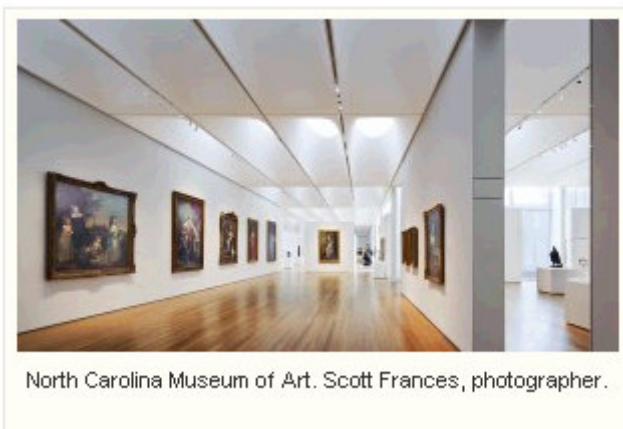
A series of subtractive courtyards pierces his 127,000 square-foot, box-like form. In a gesture reminiscent of James Wines' groundbreaking 1970s designs, Phifer seeks to take the art outside—and allow an invasive nature almost inside. At the edge of one gallery jam-packed with 24 Rodin studies, a pair of doors swings open to a gravel-floored, bamboo-forested courtyard populated by six of the artist's larger-than-life sculptures.

To pursue what he calls a cathedral of light—where ambient daylight sanctifies a structure inside and out—Phifer sought inspiration from a trio of Texas museums: Renzo Piano's Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, his Menil Collection in Houston, and Louis Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth.

“Louis Kahn made the advancement with the Kimbell to open up lighting from above,” he said. “We've taken it a little further. We're the first with vertical windows, plus letting the gardens in.”



North Carolina Museum of Art. Scott Frances, photographer.



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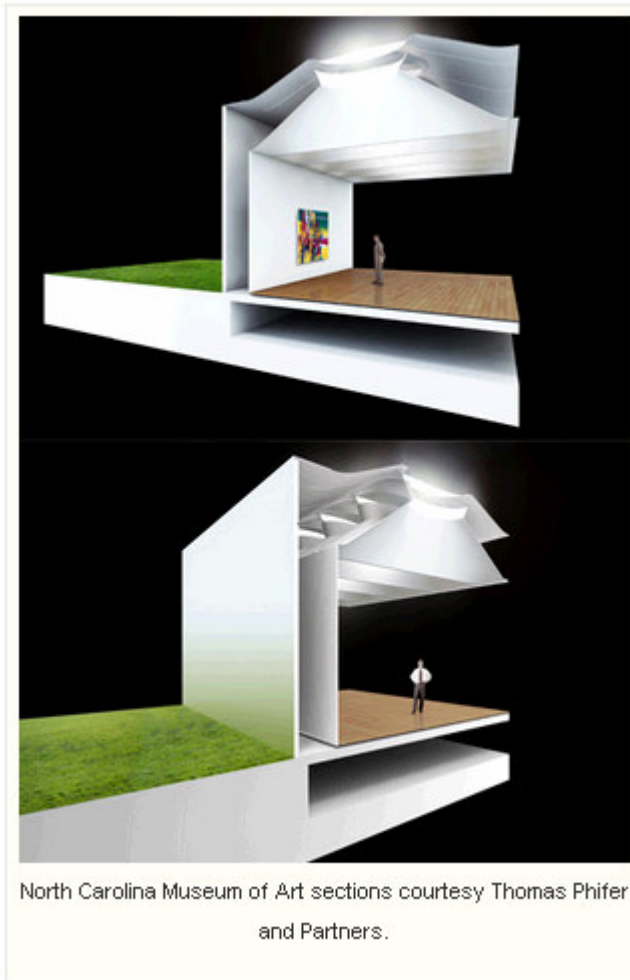
An exterior skin of 50 percent glass permits a selective spectrum of light inside, through screens and curtains. With elliptical skylights in ceiling coffers and computer chips to control track lighting, a one-of-a-kind filtering system delivers light without shadows onto walls of art. Above the coffers hover fixed louvers on the roof, their spooned shapes aligned with the arc of the sun, quietly recalling the Kimbell's barrel vaults.

“It's harnessing natural light,” Phifer said.

“Light is joy—it's uplifting. It illuminates the art spaces, the café and the living room.” But the architect has magnified its power here too, projecting a riotous explosion of color off his Benjamin Moore Super White walls.

“It's a Jetsons kind of building,” Gottlieb said. “We're putting old masters in a silver spaceship.”

Where floor-to-ceiling glass does not cover the exterior, anodized aluminum does. Other parts of the exterior are clad in quarter-inch thick, 5.5 foot by 24.5 foot panels of the metal, tiled one on top of another, then tilted two degrees back and six degrees off of polished stainless steel. The effect on the human eye is that of a building in transition. “The aluminum changes morning, day and night, just as the galleries do,” Gottlieb said. “On a gray day, the building almost disappears.”



One of the crowning achievements of Phifer's scheme is its respectful nod to Stone's original 184,000 square-foot building. He aligns new and old on a diagonal axis, placing a Henry Moore sculpture midway between the two, on a generous piazza. By limiting the new museum to one level, he's complemented the Stone building in scale and perspective—and made it look better than ever.

Some say that the nation's recent explosion of cultural centers is officially over—that there will be no more to come. Many in North Carolina, however, may disagree. In fact, these three designs in Charlotte and Raleigh could be harbingers of others to follow.

Stay tuned.

*J. Michael Welton writes on architecture and design for regional and national publications, and at [www.architectsandartisans.com](http://www.architectsandartisans.com)*

**Project:** Bechtler Museum of Modern Art

**Architect:** Mario Botta Architetto (Mario Botta, Hon. FAIA, Principal-in-Charge) with Wagner Murray Architects: (David Wagner, AIA, Principal-in-Charge)

**Contractor:** Rodgers Builders, Inc. (John Taylor)

**Owner:** Bechtler Museum of Modern Art

**GENERAL CONTRACTOR:** Rodgers Builders, Inc.; **STRUCTURAL ENGINEER:** King Guinn Associates, PA; **SKYLIGHT COVERS:** Fisher Products; **CERAMIC**

**CLADDING/RAINSCREEN SYSTEM:** Boston Valley Terra Cotta; **LIGHTING**

**CONSULTANT:** Hefferan Partnership, Inc.; **TILE & STONE FLOORING:** Lomax Tile & Marble, Inc.; **SITWORK:** Showalter Construction Company, Inc.

**Project:** Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts+Culture

**Architect:** The Freelon Group, Architects (Philip G. Freelon, FAIA, Principal-in-Charge; Kevin Turner, AIA, Cassandra L. Gooding, and Frank Jackson, Project Team Members)

**Contractor:** Batson-Cook Construction; H.J. Russell & Company; R.J. Leeper Construction, LLC

**Owner:** Afro-American Cultural Center

ASSOCIATE ARCHITECT: Neighboring Concepts; LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: Hughes Good O'Leary & Ryan; STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: TRC International, Ltd.; CIVIL ENGINEER: Geoscience Group, Inc.; LIGHTING CONSULTANT: Horton Lees Brogden Lighting Design, Inc.; A/V CONSULTANT: The Sextant Group; PROGRAMMING CONSULTANT: Kimberly Camp

**Project:** North Carolina Museum of Art

**Architect:** Thomas Phifer and Partners (Thomas Phifer, FAIA, Principal-in-Charge; Gabe Smith, AIA, Project Architect) with Pearce Brinkley Cease + Lee Architecture (Jeffrey Lee, FAIA, Principal-in-Charge)

**Contractor:** Balfour Beatty Construction (Bill Blank, President; Tony Stoneking, Project Manager)

**Owner:** North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources

MECHANICAL, ELECTRICAL, & PLUMBING ENGINEERS: Altieri Sebor Wieber;

GENERAL CONTRACTOR: Balfour Beatty Construction; LANDSCAPE

ARCHITECT: Lappas & Havener, PA; ACOUSTICAL CONSULTANT: Creative Acoustics,

LLC; DAYLIGHTING: ARUP; STRUCTURAL ENGINEERS: Lasater Hopkins Chang PC and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, LLP.