



LOCAL

# Phil Freelon, Durham architect of African-American History museum, dies

BY MARTHA QUILLIN AND JOE JOHNSON

JULY 09, 2019 01:12 PM, UPDATED JULY 10, 2019 09:39 PM



After graduating from NC State College of Design in 1975, Durham architect Phil Freelon earned national renown. Freelon died on July 9, 2019, after a three-year battle with ALS. He was 67. BY NC STATE UNIVERSITY

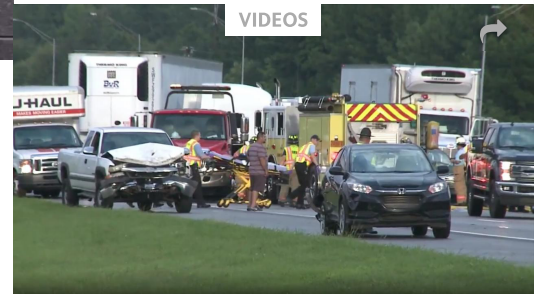
## DURHAM

Durham architect Phil Freelon, nationally known for designs that celebrate art, beauty and human achievement, even in the most utilitarian spaces, has died.

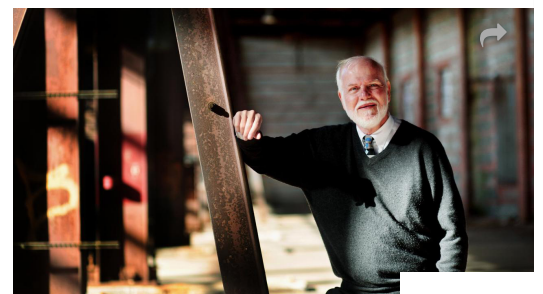
A [Facebook page message](#) on Tuesday from the North Star Church of the Arts that he founded with his wife, Nnenna, confirmed Freelon's passing.

Freelon believed that architecture is art, and that all buildings — and all the people who use them — deserve good design. His work demonstrated that belief whether it manifested as an elementary school library, an airport parking deck or a national museum.

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“This is a great loss,” said Michael Stevenson, who was a student of Freelon’s at N.C. State University in the 1980s and became a colleague at Freelon’s firm several years ago. “He understood the value of architecture as design, having a value to people, to all races and income levels. They all deserve to have good design.”

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“That’s what he strove for,” Stevenson said. “I think that was the breakthrough that he brought to the profession.”

Freelon, 66, was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS, in March 2016. That was six months ahead of the opening of one of his crowning achievements, the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, The News & Observer previously reported.

Freelon continued to work after his diagnosis, taking on in 2017 a redesign of North Carolina Freedom Park to be built just east of the N.C. Legislative Building in Raleigh. Reggie Hodges, former director of the Durham Literacy Center and a member of the Freedom Park board of directors, said the board chose Freelon’s design because it was so North Carolina, linking the struggles of African Americans in the state from slavery to emancipation to the civil rights movement to today, but with an uplifting tone that also acknowledged promise and progress.

Rather than featuring statues of individuals that could later become targets of controversy or vandalism, Hodges said, [the park will rely](#) on quotes from people with North Carolina connections, presented in a contemplative setting.

Planners had hoped that Freelon would live to see the park completed, but ground is not expected to be broken until October, with an opening in 2020.

“In talking to him, I got a feeling that his association with art was what drove his architecture,” Hodges said. “He was really into the way something was going to look, how things were going to relate to other things, how colors would be reflected when light shines on them and when water flowed past them. He loved to put holes in his designs so that when light came through his buildings they would create art in themselves, too.”

When Freelon talked about design, Hodges said, “A spirit came out of him that wasn’t there in his normal talk. He really loved to see the beauty that existed in architecture and nature.”

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Lead Designer, David Adjaye discusses the themes and inspirations behind the National Museum of African American History and Culture. The center was designed by acclaimed Durham, NC architect Phil Freelon.  
By Ali Rizvi/ McClatchy



In this November 2009 photo, Phil Freelon drops his Grammy Award nominated wife of 30 years, Nnenna, off at RDU airport as she heads to Italy for a performance. Corey Lowenstein *NEWS & OBSERVER FILE PHOTO*

Philip Goodwin Freelon was born in Philadelphia, the grandson of Harlem Renaissance artist Allan R. Freelon Jr.

He graduated from N.C. State University's College of Design in 1975 after beginning his college education at Hampton University in Hampton, Va. In 1989, he received a Loeb Fellowship for a year of independent study at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design.

Freelon founded the architectural firm The Freelon Group in 1990, growing the firm to more than 45 employees and working on notable projects such as the International Civil Rights Center and Museum in the former Woolworth store in Greensboro; the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta; and Emancipation Park in Houston, The News & Observer has previously reported.

Freelon embraced life in North Carolina and in Durham, where he and his wife raised their three children, Maya, Deen and Pierce. Freelon's work can be found throughout his adopted hometown.

*This firm helped design the Durham Bulls Athletic Park, which opened in 1995. He designed the*

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Carolina Central University, his firm designed the BRITE (Biomufacturing Research Institute and Technology Enterprise) building.

Freelon also designed the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture in Charlotte.



The Smithsonian's Museum of African American History and Culture is slated to open soon in Washington, D.C. EarthCam produced a video of the building's construction with high-definition imagery and gigapixel panoramas from May 2012 to November 201

By Time-Lapse Courtesy of EarthCam [www.earthcam.net](http://www.earthcam.net)

## TAR HEEL OF THE YEAR

Freelon was [The News & Observer's Tar Heel of the Year](#) in 2009, an honor given to residents who have made significant contributions to the region, North Carolina and beyond.

In 2010, when the civil rights museum opened in Greensboro, Freelon said in an email that it's important to remember history, even when it's painful.

"The story of the African American is the quintessential American story," he wrote. "Rising up from difficult circumstances, persevering against all odds, resiliency, thriving in the melting pot that is America, pursuing the 'American Dream.'

"African American culture is prevalent around the globe, from music to dance to literature to sports to politics and beyond," he said. "People around the world are fascinated and are drawn to this culture. These museums are for ALL people. Everyone can enjoy, learn from, be inspired by and revel in African American history and culture."

[Perkins&Will](#), which has more than 20 offices across the world, acquired Freelon's firm in 2014 and made Freelon managing director of both its Durham and Charlotte offices.



Representatives from The Smithsonian (from left) Jud McIntire, Brenda Sanchez, Mike Bellamy and Bruce Kendall get a tour of The Freelon Group architectural firm in Durham from Phil Freelon, far right in 2009. Corey Lowenstein *NEWS & OBSERVER FILE PHOTO*

In 2017, when Pierce Freelon was running for mayor of Durham, he sent out a fundraising pitch on Father's Day in which he cited his father's belief that anything is possible.

"Last year he was diagnosed with ALS," Pierce Freelon wrote. "While most of our family cried, prayed and struggled to make sense of the world, he expressed gratitude. At the time of his diagnosis, he was anticipating a career achievement: the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. He was thankful for the blessing of spending a lifetime pursuing his passion. He was thankful for a loving family and nurturing community. He was patient and poised, and approached the disease one day at a time — unwilling to throw in the towel without a fight.

"I'm so grateful to have him as a role model and mentor," Pierce Freelon wrote.

Congressman G.K. Butterfield, whose district includes Durham, called Freelon "a man of great vision and talent" in a statement Tuesday.

"I was greatly saddened to learn of the passing of North Carolina's own, Phil Freelon," Butterfield said. "Well-known for his architectural genius, creating projects across the country with a targeted focus on the story-telling of the African American experience. Phil Freelon will forever be immortalized by his incredible contributions to the state of North Carolina, his indelible mark left throughout the city of Durham and his monumental impact that continues its far and wide reach. Phil Freelon was a true treasure who will be dearly missed, but never forgotten."

In a tweet, N.C. Gov. Roy Cooper said Freelon would be missed.

"Today we lost a distinguished architect, husband, and father of three," Cooper said. "From his work on the world-renowned Smithsonian Museum of African-American History to his advocacy for the arts, Phil Freelon's impact on our country and our state will be missed."

Like the hidden structural elements that support a building, Freelon worked quietly to build up causes important to him. One was bringing more African Americans into the study of architecture, which he and his firm helped accomplish by creating a fellowship at Harvard.

After he was diagnosed with the disease, Freelon and his family also launched Design a World Without ALS, an effort to raise money for the Duke University Medical Center ALS Clinic,

where Freelon was being treated by Dr. Richard Bellack, a neurologist with more than 40

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articles published on the illness. In one night, Bedlack said, the family's efforts raised \$170,000.



In this December 2009 file photo, Phil Freelon stands silently on the bank of a friend's pond and fishes for bass. Although he came up empty handed for his 2-hour outing, he says it's not about catching fish but about enjoying the peace and quiet. "I'm not thinking about the office when I'm out here," he says. "I'm not thinking about anything at all." Corey Lowenstein *NEWS & OBSERVER FILE PHOTO*

## DEALING WITH ALS

ALS is a degenerative neurological disease that attacks nerve cells and pathways in the brain and spinal cord. Patients lose the ability to control muscle movements, eventually resulting in total paralysis, while their minds usually remain sharp. Also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease, it affects about five people per 100,000 in the U.S.

Patients deal with ALS in different ways, Bedlack said Tuesday by phone. Some patients live in denial, but not Freelon.

"He fought the whole way through," Bedlack said. "He tried more alternative therapies that probably anybody I knew. He did research. He came to clinic, and we talked about different things he could do."

And he was altruistic, Bedlack said, not only with the fundraising work he did but in giving his time to genetic research into ALS, "Even when he knew it could not benefit him."

When he was first diagnosed, Freelon's illness was moving slowly, Bedlack said, but it had accelerated in recent months.

To honor the architect, Bedlack said, Duke will conduct an ALS research trial involving curcumin using some of the money raised by Freelon's foundation. Freelon hated restrictions on who could participate in studies, and he didn't like placebo trials because they meant some patients went without potentially helpful therapies.

This study will be very open and without placebos, Bedlack said.

To the end, Freelon had his eye on design.

The family has said a memorial service is being planned for the fall.



North Star Church of the Arts  
about a month ago



A message from The Freelon Family:

This morning Philip Goodwin Freelon joined the ancestors.

Renowned architect, photographer, fisherman, husband and father of three, Phil and his wife Nnenna Freelon founded Northstar Church of the Arts in 2018, to be sacred space for healing, arts and spiritual connection. ... [See More](#)

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President Obama spoke at the grand opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. The museum is the 19th and the newest of the Smithsonians.  
By McClatchy

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