

This new international museum is devoted to telling the story of the passage of African peoples from slavery to emancipation and freedom in the South. The purpose of the museum is to be a valuable, lasting resource where residents and visitors alike can learn the history of how Africans, people of the South and all of their descendants, shaped – even through the experience of enslavement – successive eras.

Up to 80% of African Americans in the United States today can trace their roots to Charleston, as it was a major port of entry for Africans during the transatlantic importation of enslaved laborers. More than 40% of the enslaved Africans who were brought to the United States between 1700 and 1775 were transported through Charleston.

In response to this, the idea behind the Conceptual Design portrays a journey: the movement through the building represents the journey from the origins of Africa, across the Atlantic Ocean and to and through America, tracing the paths and patterns that enslaved Africans and subsequently, African Americans followed and made for themselves. Visually, the museum form translates cultural ideas of weaving, braiding, and the “Sankofa” bird’s wing into experiential space.

Visitors travel a meandering path along a waterway connecting the museum to the ocean. Symbolically, this path translates a timeline of historic events throughout African American history connecting a diaspora’s experience across an ocean. This path also ties into the branching of a tree which relates to the connection of the Live Oaks, and the branching of the waterways which were also used as routes of escape. It grasps the inner feelings of African Americans, past and present as it relates to the connection of the natural environment that we experienced during the journey; The waterways; The marshes – escape; The branching of movement.

From the lower level, visitors go up to the entrance lobby on the first level by means of a grand staircase or elevator. From this welcoming space, visitors ascend through the building in a “Storyvator”: a large elevator that sets the stage for the journey of a lifetime as they are carried to the top of the building on the 3rd floor. As the doors of the “Storyvator” open, visitors are oriented towards and get a view of the Charleston Harbour, Sullivan Island and Africa. The journey begins with the “IAAM African” Gallery, meandering through the Middle Passage to the “IAAM of African Descent” Gallery. From there, visitors further travel to the “IAAM Segregated” Gallery before finally moving to the “IAAM American” Gallery, and eventually ending up back to the main building façade orienting back to views of the Charleston Harbour, Sullivan Island, and Africa.

The essence of the design captures the spirit of the international connection with the collection and distribution of enslaved Africans throughout the American continent. This museum is international because the trading of African human beings spanning Africa, the Caribbean and both American continents was economically linked to European industrial expansion. This all comes back to a spiritual connection; the stone and rock as the solidarity of the church and the African American community.

The building weaves in artistic expressions of the cultural aspects of the Gullah/Lowcountry community and their artistry in sweet grass basket weaving, a craft that was brought over from Africa and preserved over the centuries. The unique quality about the siting of this museum in Charleston is that South Carolina continues to show evidence of its African heritage through surviving sites, customs and culture of the Gullah and Lowcountry peoples.

The movement of and within the building also recognizes the talents and contributions of African Americans in dance and music, as is expressed in the collage, the galleries, symbolism, imagery, patterns color and textures within and on the exterior of the building. This expressed energy is meant to incite the innermost feelings of visitors to actually have a spiritual awakening, thereby fully participating in the journey with every twist and turn.