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Art Museum at the University of Memphis Celebrates Architect Paul Williams

MEMPHIS, Tenn. - On Saturday, Aug. 29, the Art Museum of the University of Memphis (AMUM) opens a new exhibition reprising *Paul R Williams, American Architect*, the first major museum exhibition devoted to the achievements of the Black architect Paul R. Williams (1894-1980), which was launched by AMUM in 2010. A newly designed website will launch in tandem with the opening.

The upcoming exhibition presents over 200 photographs arranged by decade, from the 1920s through the 1960s, depicting interiors and exteriors of buildings. The images are by the photographer David Horan who, accompanied by Leslie Luebbers, AMUM director and exhibition curator, traveled over the course of two years to photograph as many homes and buildings in the LA area as possible. Together, his photographs convey Williams's mastery of detail and choreography of space and natural light.

There was a paucity of research on Williams after his death, even up to the years when the museum embarked on *American Architect*. The dominance of a narrative that valorized California architecture for its international "modernism" rendered Williams's stylistic versatility unfashionable. As well, after his death his office communications, contracts, and schedules were destroyed by a fire and its design plans lay in private hands.

"In the years after the exhibition, the foundational research on the project website became a key resource for scholars interested in Williams," said Luebbers. In 2020, Paul R. Williams's plans were acquired by the Getty Research Institute in partnership with the University of Southern California (USC) School of Architecture.

AMUM's early interest in Williams stems in part from the fact that his family came from Memphis, his father having worked at as a waiter at the Peabody Hotel before taking his family west. And, perhaps most significantly, it was Williams who designed the original St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, a five-pointed star-shaped building that has been lost as the complex has grown.

Paul R Williams, American Architect draws upon the holdings of the Paul Revere Williams Project (University of Memphis). The Paul R. Williams Project began in early 2006 in

partnership with the Memphis Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) as part of an initiative launched by the national AIA in honor of the organizations' 150th anniversary. AIA Memphis, the Memphis chapter of the National Organization of Minority Architecture (NOMA), and the University of Memphis' Benjamin Hooks Institute for Social Change were active partners in the project.

The upcoming exhibition also features a section that brings together a career spanning selection of Horan's work.

A Re-Animated Online Project

The *Paul R. Williams American Architect* website contains images of private residences that Williams designed for legends like Bert Lehr, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Bill (Bojangles) Robinson and Frank Sinatra as well as leaders in business and civic life. It documents corporate headquarters, schools, churches and even a memorial for Al Jolson, the greatest of the black-face vaudeville performers.

The wide range of styles and the mastery of detail for which the architect is celebrated are demonstrated with a closer look at seven projects: from the 1920s, the Baird/Stewart /Garza House in Glendale, Calif.; from the '30s, the Glen/Gindler house in Hancock Park, Los Angeles; from the '40s, Golden State Museum Building in Sacramento; Ritts/Kohl House in Chautauqua, N.Y.; from the '50s, Hillside Memorial Park, Culver City, Los Angeles; Marina de Rey Middle School, Los Angeles; and from the '60s, Seaview in Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif.

The new website is a redesign of the original one with the addition of K-12 lesson plans related to Paul Williams and architecture and a news feature. The original comprehensive bibliography is continually being updated. It encompasses specific references to Williams found in books, official permitting records, newspapers, scholarly, and architectural and popular publications. It is a resource for images and information about publicly accessible archives containing materials relating to Williams.

Paul R. Williams

Born in Los Angeles to Memphians Lila Wright Williams and Chester Stanley Williams, Paul Revere Williams studied at the Los Angeles atelier of the Beaux Arts Institute of New York and the University of Southern California. Having earned accolades in architectural competitions and the respect and encouragement of employers, Williams opened his own practice and become the first African American member of the AIA in 1923.

Over his five-decade career, Williams designed thousands of buildings, served on many municipal, state and federal commissions and was active in political and social organizations earning the admiration and respect of his peers. He frequently donated his time and skills to projects he believed furthered the health and welfare of young people, African Americans in

Southern California and greater society. In 1957, he was the first African American elected a Fellow of the AIA.

He retired from practice in 1973 and died in 1980 at the age of 85. He was awarded AIA's Gold Medal, the organization's highest annual honor, in 2017

AMUM

The Art Museum of the University of Memphis is a teaching museum where students and scholars work with art, objects and archival materials from diverse collections, researching individual works and developing exhibitions.

The museum hosts temporary exhibitions primarily of contemporary art and culture alongside selections from its permanent collections comprising Egyptian antiquities, tradition-based African art and contemporary prints and drawings. The 19th century to present-day print/drawing collection includes several strengths: the work of Samuel H. Crone, Carroll Cloar lithographs and drawings, Épinal prints depicting Napoleon Bonaparte's life, Beth Van Hoesen's drawings and prints, and Andy Warhol's polaroids, prints and silk screens.