Directions: Read the following article. Get on the internet and look up photos before, during, or after you read the article if you need to get some context. Also look up any words you may not know as you read.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture

A curated walk through the hallways of the newest Smithsonian museum before it opens next week. 13 years in the making, it attempts to depict the pain and pride of the black experience in America.

The first really fine major public building of the century to rise in the nation’s capital, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, opening on Saturday, fills the last prime plot of land along the National Mall in Washington and, with it, a gaping hole in the American story. Its three-tier bronzed aluminum skin, burnished and intricate, rising as if from out of the earth, contrasts with the white marble, concrete and glass palaces telling other chapters in that story.

The building was designed by a consortium of firms, led by David Adjaye, the London-based, Ghanaian-British architect, who sat down recently to talk about the project, its structure, setbacks and symbolism. Here are edited excerpts from the conversation.

**Looking back, are you happy?**

Fundamentally, really happy, yeah. There have been many trials and mutations. I’m really happy we didn’t lose the key form of the building.

**Which is?**

I wanted to see if we could make the silhouette of the building the beginning of the narrative.

**You’re talking about the three-tier facade of bronzed, canted panels, which become a sort of inverted triple pyramid. It draws on the shape of a Yoruban caryatid, a traditional West African column with a corona at the top.**

I was completely moved by the corona motif. It seemed like a way to start to tell a story that moves from one continent, where people were taken, along with their cultures, and used as labor, then contributed towards making another country and new cultures. That history then continues in the decorative patterning of those panels.

**The patterns riff on the ironwork of a former African-American slave from Charleston, South Carolina. Am I right?**

People keep thinking that the slave trade was about cotton picking. It was also about bridge building, canals, house making. Labor in all its forms. So, I suddenly went, ‘Oh my God, well, let’s really talk about architecture and African-American history, let’s go back and look at Georgia and Charleston, you know, all these places, through a different lens. There, the history is right in front of you — this incredible tradition of metalsmithing by freed slaves. There were no molds. They learned all this by hand. It is part of the history of American architecture.

**So how did this notion of modernity enter into the design of the building?**

The building is classical in its inspiration, with a base and capital, but it’s also not a classical building. It’s a very modern building in how contemporary thinking has been applied to material science and circulation. We wanted a building that wasn’t just about itself, but about its context and about the experience of consuming information in the museum.

**You’re talking about the layout of the building, the ways you move through it?**

I think about the building in three parts. There are the historical galleries, which make a kind of crypt, in an underground space. Then a second part deals with migration from the South to urban centers and the beginning of the professional classes. I wanted the journey from that crypt up into the corona to be analogous to history, as a kind of migratory process, toward the light. Then you go up to the uppermost level; I call it “Now.” It’s about the arts. So this tripartite structure relates to the corona’s three tiers. It’s meant to suggest the link between symbolic form and the museum’s content.

**You also orchestrate views, through the facade, with cutouts, and through windows in the galleries, onto the National Mall.**

You’re looking at the Jefferson Memorial, you’re looking at the Washington Monument, you’re looking at the Lincoln Memorial. You’re looking at Congress. You’re looking at the National Archives and the White House. History is played out in front of your eyes.

**And you wanted all this to be visible from within, as you move through the museum.**

From within, yeah, through what can sometimes look like strange apertures on the outside. People say to me, “Is that your idea of stylish architecture?” This is not a project about intuitive whimsy. Everything here is driven by research, which creates its own kind of poetry, I hope. Most museums on the Mall are closed to the outside in the sense that they take you to another world. They function a bit like cinema: You go into a different world and then you come back out. I didn’t want that. The experience of being black is not a fiction. There’s something important about always coming back to the light of day.

**The ground floor is basically a transparent container, a sort of glass box, open all around, letting light in. Outside the entrance facing the Mall there’s a water feature, which you cross, making a kind of symbolic passage, to a porch, beneath the bronzed facade, that I gather alludes to the Southern tradition of porches.**

It’s a building that I was clear from the start was not going to be white marble. It needed to speak a different language. Bronze is a material for both memorials and monuments. I thought bronze was perfect for the panels on the outside. The thing is that the Smithsonian has this extraordinary thing of wanting its buildings to be guaranteed for 50 years. You could make a bronze building cost-effective, but the problem was that we couldn’t get anyone to guarantee it would have no problems for 50 years. Bronze was not a price issue. The problem was that the weight of bronze is onerous. This is a mechanically fixed system: trusses support these things, and they all have mechanical fixings. It was the potential failure of the fixings that posed the challenge. You have to be able to access any of those panels, meaning you have to be able to get to each panel, be able to take it off and not disrupt the functionality of the building or its safety. Aluminum solved the problem. With these panels, four men can basically unbolt a panel and take it off.

**The panels are light?**

By comparison with bronze. They are in the safety limits of allowing four strong men to be able to fix one — like glass, like the weight of a big, heavy double-glazed panel of glass. Whereas, bronze would be 10, 20 times as heavy. We talked with foundries and they said, “Look, recycled aluminum is incredibly sustainable. And we can use a bronze alloy finish that is exactly the same as bronze.” So we said great. And on a sunny day — I will show you an image, you’ll freak — people go, “It’s on fire!”

**Your museum is at one of the ends of the Mall, where the Mall pivots toward the Washington Monument. An end and a beginning.**

Yeah, it is the end, full stop, turn, go.

**In a sense, your building completes the Mall, filling a last, empty space.**

You know the Mall is set up for the people of the country to understand the fundamental nature of the country. There is already a museum that talks about space and exploration. Another museum talks about natural history. Another, about the founding of the nation, another showing portraits of the people. It became very clear at the end of the 20th century that there were still missing chapters, about peoples displaced by early settlers, whose lands were taken from them, and about peoples brought here as slaves. Their stories are fundamental to the DNA of this country. Creating museums for their stories is not about serving special interests. It’s about celebrating the true diversity of the country, showing how people, even people who moved here under the most traumatic conditions, ultimately thrived.

**You see the museum as a celebration of African-American history.**

It’s a memorial and also a monument to an incredible contribution

Questions for discussion:

In your words, what is the intention of the architect?

What are some examples of PROOF of this intent?