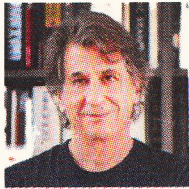


# In Transit

TRAVEL NEWS, DEALS AND TIPS

## Q&A

### DAVID ROCKWELL on designing a civil rights spotlight.



The National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta, which opens to the public on June 23, is one of several new museums in the South dedicated to civil rights.

To David Rockwell, the president of the Rockwell Group, which designed its exhibition spaces, the center stands out because it aims to capture the experience of Jim Crow South rather than just collect artifacts from it.

“It’s about creating a sense of that world, and immersing yourself in it,” he said.

To do so, though, he looked at many an artifact when he toured Atlanta and museums in other parts of the country.

“Traveling is critical,” he added. “From your desk you can Google anything, but there’s something about touching and feeling.”

Below are edited excerpts from a conversation with Mr. Rockwell on the trips he took from his New York office to Atlanta and elsewhere to learn about the civil rights movement and find inspiration for making it come alive. *EMILY BRENNAN*

#### Q. What historical sites did you visit in Atlanta?

A. We started with the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site, which includes his boyhood home on Auburn Avenue; the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, where M.L.K. Sr. preached and where M.L.K. Jr. was baptized and



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The home in Atlanta where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was born.

served as a pastor; the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change; and the visitor center. The exhibits throughout the site are more conventional than ours — photos, text, artifacts — but it’s incredible to see that collection, something like the wooden cart that carried M.L.K.’s coffin.

#### How did visiting Ebenezer influence your designs?

Ebenezer is a simple, Late Gothic Revival brick building, architect unknown. It’s much more Methodist than what a Baptist church would be like,

meaning restrained, very straight lines, very conventional. But we were struck by the use of local materials. There are rows of oak pews, and you’re surrounded by stained-glass windows. Sitting in them, looking at that stained glass, became an inspiration for our exhibit on M.L.K.’s funeral, in which you get to sit in pews and view never-before-seen footage from the services.

#### what about the historic Auburn district?

The civil rights part of the center looks at what was happening in pre-civil-rights Atlanta. Auburn — Sweet Auburn, as it was called — was a thriving

African-American community during Jim Crow, with many African-American-owned businesses, churches. We went to see what Auburn Avenue was like now. Sadly, it’s quite rundown. It’s missing a lot of teeth, as you say. With the gain of civil rights, there was a loss of that particular community and culture. When you gain something, you lose something.

#### Did you go outside of Atlanta for inspiration?

The Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., which is a huge museum with lots of things to see, had one thing that really inspired us: the actual Greensboro Woolworth’s lunch counter. We had been talking about how difficult it was to defy the Jim Crow laws, and seeing the lunch counter was fascinating because on its own it’s just chairs, but understanding how it became a symbol helped us develop our exhibit, which is quite interactive.

#### Anywhere else?

For our Human Rights Gallery, we took inspiration, in fact, from Dia: Beacon, in New York State. It’s an old printing plant, about 300,000 square feet, big, broad spans and a huge amount of skylights. It’s an open-ended environment perfect for artists to experiment. And whereas the civil rights part of our center is a black-box theatrical setup, we wanted the human rights part to be a daylight museum and use light in different ways.

So for one exhibit called “Who Like Me,” we created a large, round space with a series of faceted life-size mirrors where you answer a bunch of questions about your gender, race, background. Then there’s a rear-projected image of a real person who meets that criteria and is oppressed in some way in the world. It makes the whole issue of human rights local; it’s not about other people. And it’s about what’s happening right now.