



Smithsonian

*National Museum of African American History and Culture*

## Philip G. Freelon Architectural Archive

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March 2022

National Museum of African American History and Culture  
Washington, D.C. 20004  
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<https://nmaahc.si.edu>

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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	National Museum of African American History and Culture
<b>Title:</b>	Philip G. Freelon Architectural Archive
<b>Date:</b>	(bulk 1939-2017)
<b>Identifier:</b>	NMAAHC.A2017.51
<b>Creator:</b>	Freelon, Philip G., 1953-2019
<b>Extent:</b>	5.1 Cubic feet
<b>Language:</b>	English .

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## Administrative Information

### Acquisition Information

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Philip G. Freelon.

### Related Materials

Phil Freelon Papers, 1975-2019 at North Carolina State University Libraries.

### Processing Information

Collection processed, arranged, and described by Alana Donocoff, Ja-Zette Marshburn and Ronald Jorgenson in 2021.

### Preferred Citation

Philip G. Freelon Archival Collection, 1939-2017. National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution.

### Restrictions

Collection is open for research. Access to collection materials requires an appointment.

### Conditions Governing Use

The NMAAHC Archives can provide reproductions of some materials for research and educational use. Copyright and right to publicity restrictions apply and limit reproduction for other purposes.

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## Biographical / Historical

Philip Goodwin Freelon was born March 26, 1953, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Allan Freelon, Jr. and Elizabeth Neal Freelon. Freelon was greatly influenced by his grandfather, Allan Freelon Sr., a notable Harlem Renaissance visual artist, educator, and civil rights activist. His grandfather's values and artistry inspired him to create a career that focused on creating historical and cultural spaces in African American communities. Freelon attended high school at the former predominantly white elite all-boys school, Central High School located in upper North Philadelphia from 1967 to 1971. His attendance at this school during of the Civil Rights Movement afforded him the unique experience that inspired him to attend a historically Black

college (HBCU). Freelon selected Hampton Institute (Hampton University) to develop his veneration of the composition and design of the buildings that held cultural and artistic treasures. Located in the Tidewater area of Virginia, Hampton was renowned among HBCUs for its architecture program. His professor and mentor at Hampton, John Spencer, pushed Freelon academically as he moved easily through the school's curriculum. After two years at Hampton, Spencer helped Freelon transition to a more challenging program at North Carolina State University (NCSU) in Raleigh, North Carolina. Freelon graduated in 1975 with a bachelor's in environmental design in architecture.

Later in the fall of 1975, Freelon enrolled at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to pursue a master's in architecture. During the summers, Freelon worked with one of former his NC State professors at the architectural firm of John D. Latimer and Associates. After graduating from MIT in 1977, Freelon returned to North Carolina to take his Architecture Registration Examination (ARE), becoming the firm's youngest person to receive licensure. He also began teaching classes at his alma mater, NC State. It was there that Freelon met his future wife, Nnenna Pierce. Pierce, a Massachusetts native was attending Simmons College in Boston at the time. The connection was immediate, and the pair was married in 1979 and welcomed their first son, Deen in 1980. After a brief employment for a large Texas firm 3/D International, Freelon returned to Durham to join O'Brien Atkins Associates. He was the firm's youngest partner, eventually serving as principal and vice president of architecture. Freelon worked on a wide variety of projects throughout the state including learning centers, university buildings, churches, and parking garages. Along with Freelon's budding career, his family was expanding as well. Phil and Nnenna welcomed their daughter Maya in 1982 and their son, Pierce in 1983. During this time, Freelon was being highly recognized for his work. The American Institute of Architects (AIA) awarded him the Honor Award for his design of Terminal 2 of the Raleigh-Durham International Airport, which has since been rebuilt.

By the end of the decade, Freelon and his wife Nnenna needed a change of pace. Nnenna pursued a professional career in music while Phil took a break from his career to expand his skillset and reinforce his intellectual approach to design. In 1989, Freelon was granted the Loeb Fellowship for one year of independent study at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. He also pursued a longtime hobby of furniture design, calling the practice "small architecture". He received industry awards like first prize in the PPG Industries, Inc. Furniture Design Competition as well as AIA Honor Award for conference table designs. With a year away from the field to clarify his vision, Freelon opened his own firm, simply titled, the Freelon Group in 1990. Beginning as a one-man operation, the Freelon Group grew to become one of the largest African American owned architectural firms in the country with over 50 employees, forty percent of which were women, and thirty percent were people of color. With freedom within his own firm, Freelon focused on designing learning centers, libraries and museums and vowed to never build anything that did not bring cultural and intellectual value to a community.

Over the next twenty years, Freelon would assert himself as a force in designing notable cultural institutions and community-driven projects in and around the country including the Sonja Haynes Stone Center at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill (Chapel Hill, NC), Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture (Baltimore, MD), Museum of African Diaspora (San Francisco, CA), Harvey B. Gantt for African American Arts and Culture (Charlotte, NC), the Anacostia and Tenley-Friendship branches of the District of Columbia Public Library, National Center for Civil Rights and Human Rights (Atlanta, GA), Mississippi Civil Rights Museum (Jackson, MS) and Emancipation Park (Houston, TX). Alongside his architectural career, Freelon served as a lecturer and adjunct professor at several colleges and universities including North Carolina State University, Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), University of Maryland College Park, New Jersey Institute of Technology, Syracuse University, and the Florence, Italy program at Kent State University. Freelon was awarded a full-time appointment as professor of Professional Practice at MIT in 2008. The Professional Practice (4.222) course was a requirement for the master's in architecture and he used examples from his extensive career and personal experience to illustrate legal, ethical, and management concepts. Nnenna's music career was also thriving. She would go on to record twelve albums and be nominated for six Grammys. This fusion of education, the arts, and music inspired another generation of Freelons: their son, Pierce Freelon is a hip-hop artist, educator, and political activist; daughter Maya Freelon is a visual artist; and son Deen Freelon is a professor.

In 2001, George W. Bush established a commission to create a new museum on the National Mall. Freelon wanted to enter his firm to participate in the international design competition. Freelon would partner with famed African American New York City architect, J. Max Bond, Jr. and by 2006 the two officially formed the Freelon Bond Architects. The Freelon Bond group submitted their proposal and soon after were elected to create programming and pre-design work for the museum. When the official design competition for the museum was announced in 2008, UK-based architect David Adjaye joined the team as the lead designer, and along with the partnering firm SmithGroup, the new architectural team became Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup. The three black architects combined a variety of distinctive elements from Africa and the Americas to create the building's unique, historically significant design. The Freelon Group served as the "architect of record" and were responsible for ensuring that key design ideas were upheld. Freelon and key firm members such as Zena Howard were active as on-site project managers during the museum's construction process to certify that the building would be developed according to plan. Freelon, Adjaye, and Bond were tasked with taking the collective history of the African American experience-- generations of pain, triumph, and perseverance-- and forming it into a structure. The team looked to African sources, such as Yoruban architecture, for inspiration. They sought to connect the building's design to the geographic and cultural roots of African Americans. Their design choices also reference the contributions of enslaved and free black metalworkers made to the landscape of the American South. Their goal was to make the museum an extension of its contents, and an expression of the stories told inside. By the groundbreaking for NMAAHC in 2012, Freelon had been appointed to the U.S. Commission of the Fine Arts by President Barack Obama. In an effort to broaden his resources and expand his firm, The Freelon Group merged with Perkins & Will, a firm originating in Chicago that grew to have offices across the United States. Freelon was appointed the managing director and later lead design director at the firm's North Carolina offices in Charlotte and Durham in 2014. By the next year, Freelon understood that his work in architecture and education was a necessary voice to preserve, which he did through donation of the bulk of his personal papers to his alma mater, NC State University. The year 2016 proved to be a year of triumph for Freelon as NMAAHC opened its doors on September 24th to much jubilation and celebration. That same year, Freelon's legacy was further cemented as the Phil Freelon Fellowship Fund was established at Harvard University Graduate School of Design, a fellowship designed to broaden opportunities for African Americans and other underrepresented communities in architecture and design.

Unfortunately, this triumphant year was met with difficulty as Freelon was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a progressive disease that affects the nervous system. He would continue to work and lecture for the next two years until it became too challenging. One of those projects was the renovation and opening of The NorthStar Church of the Arts in early 2019. A passion project with his wife and son, Pierce, a former church was renovated and repurposed as an arts and cultural space for all. This space was created in an effort to support the Durham cultural community as it began to feel the effects of gentrification. When Freelon lost his battle with ALS on July 9, 2019, in his home in Durham, North Carolina, the family requested that in lieu of flowers that donations be sent to the NorthStar Church to continue the center's mission and Phil's dream to give back to the Durham community.

#### **Historical Timeline**

<b>1953</b>	Philip Goodwin Freelon was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Allan Freelon Jr. and Elizabeth Neal Freelon.
<b>1971</b>	Freelon graduated from Central High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and entered School of Architecture, Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia as a design student.
<b>1973</b>	Freelon transferred to College of Design at the North Carolina State University in Raleigh.
<b>1975</b>	Graduated with a Bachelor's in Environmental Design in Architecture from NC State University. He received the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Book Award for Outstanding Work in Architectural Design. In the fall, he began his master's program in architecture at MIT.

- 1976 Began working as aide for architectural firm, John D. Latimer and Associates.
- 1977 Graduated with a Master's in Architecture and Design from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT.)
- 1978 Freelon became youngest architect to pass the North Carolina Architecture Registration Exam. Freelon started teaching at North Carolina State University.
- 1979 Married Chinyere "Nnenna" Pierce. Freelon began working for, 3/D International in Houston, Texas.
- 1980 Son Deen Freelon was born.
- 1981 Freelon returned to Durham, NC to join O'Brien Atkins Associates as the firm's youngest partner.
- 1982 Daughter Maya Freelon was born.
- 1983 Son Pierce Freelon was born.
- 1989-1990 Received Loeb Fellowship for independent study at Harvard University. Freelon received AIA Honor Award for American Airlines Terminal 2 at Raleigh-Durham Airport, NC (RDU).
- 1990 Freelon left O'Brien Atkins Associates to open his own firm The Freelon Group.
- 1991 Won first prize in the PPG Furniture Design Competition.
- 1992 Won the AIA Honor Award for Conference Table Designs.
- 2001 Won the AIA Firm Award for The Freelon Group and the AIA Design Award for Parking Structure, RDU Airport. Began attending meetings of President George W. Bush's commission on new National Mall museum dedicated to African American history and culture.
- 2003 Freelon merged his firm with New York architect Max Bond to create Freelon Bond Architects.
- 2004 Sonja Haynes Stone Center at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill (Chapel Hill, NC) was completed.
- 2005 Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture (Baltimore, MD) and Museum of African Diaspora (San Francisco, CA) were both completed.
- 2008 UK-based architect David Adjaye and Washington, DC based architecture firm, Smithgroup joined the team, creating the Freelon Adjaye Bond Group/SmithGroup. Freelon began teaching at MIT's school of Architecture and Design.
- 2009 Freelon Adjaye Bond/Smithgroup won the official design for the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). Harvey B. Gantt for African American Arts and Culture (Charlotte, NC) was completed.
- 2010 Anacostia branch of the District of Columbia Public Library (Washington, DC) was completed.
- 2011 Tenley-Friendship branch of the District of Columbia Public Library (Washington, DC) was completed.
- 2012 Construction began on NMAAHC.

2014	The Freelon Group merged with Perkins & Will, a much larger architectural firm. Freelon became managing director and lead design director of the North Carolina branches in Durham and Charlotte. National Center for Civil Rights and Human Rights (Atlanta, GA) was completed.
2016	Freelon was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).
2017	Mississippi Civil Rights Museum (Jackson, MS) and Emancipation Park (Houston, TX) were completed.
2019	Freelon died in his home in Durham, North Carolina at age 66 on July 9.

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## Scope and Contents

The Philip G. Freelon Architectural Archival Collection documents the life and career of architect, educator, cultural heritage preservation advocate and artist Philip G. Freelon. The collection highlights his distinguished career from its inception to his role as the "architect of record" for the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Freelon was one of the leading African American architects of his generation and he created a focus designing and constructing buildings that paid reverence to African Americans and other underrepresented communities. This collection is comprised of business records, photographic materials, ephemera, correspondence, architectural drawings, and clippings.

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## Arrangement

The materials in this collection have been separated into seven series. The materials have been ordered and organized based on the content and chronology. Within each series and sub-series, the folders are organized as close to the collection's original order as when it was acquired.

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## Bibliography

Czarnecki, John. "Illuminating a Culture Through Architecture." *Contract*. October 2016, Vol. 57, Iss. 8, p. 18.

Genzlinger, Neil "Philip Freelon, African-American Museum Architect, Dies at 66." *The New York Times*. July 10, 2019. (accessed October 2021). <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/10/arts/philip-freelon-dead.html>.

Hunter-Pillion, M. (Ed.). *Phil Freelon: An American Story*. North Carolina Museum of History. (accessed October 2021). <https://www.ncmuseumofhistory.org/a-storied-past/phil-freelon>.

"New Faculty: Philip Freelon: Award-Winning Architect Appointed Professor of Practice." *MIT School of Architecture + Planning*. April 2009. (accessed October 2021). <https://sap.mit.edu/article/standard/new-faculty-philip-freelon>.

"In Memoriam Philip Goodwin Freelon, 1952-2019." *African American Design Nexus*. (accessed October 2021). <https://aadn.gsd.harvard.edu/people/phil-freelon/>.

Lakin, Jan. "Dream Team." *Contract*. July 2009, Vol. 51 Issue 7, p62-63.

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School of Architecture and Planning. "Philip Freelon, Professor of the Practice and Champion of Diversity in Architecture, Dies at 66." MIT News: Massachusetts Institute of Technology. July 15, 2009. (accessed October 2021). <https://news.mit.edu/2019/philip-reelon-professor-practice-champion-diversity-architecture-dies-0715>.

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Wachter, Paul. "Phil Freelon, America's Most Prominent Black Architect, Designs for the Culture." *The Undefeated*. February 12, 2019. (accessed October 2021). <https://theundefeated.com/features/phil-freelon-americas-most-prominent-black-architect-designs-smithsonian-african-american-history-museum-atlanta-center-for-civil-rights/>.

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Williamson, Don. "The Profound, Introspective and Supremely Talented, Nnenna Freelon." *Jazz Review*. (accessed October 2021). <http://jazzreview.com/article/details.cfm?ID=544>.

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## Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

### Subjects:

- Architecture
- Business
- Construction
- Design
- Education
- Entrepreneurship
- Local and Regional
- Museums
- Photographs

### Types of Materials:

- Correspondence

### Names:

- Adjaye, David, 1966-
- American Institute of Architects
- Bond, J. Max, Jr.
- Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup
- Freelon Bond Architects
- Freelon Group
- Freelon, Allan Randall, 1895-1960
- Hampton University (Va.)
- Harvard University
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology. School of Architecture
- National Organization of Minority Architects (U.S.)
- North Carolina Board of Architecture
- NorthStar Church of the Arts



PPG Industries, Inc.  
Perkins & Will

Places:

North Carolina -- United States  
United States of America -- Massachusetts -- Suffolk County -- Boston  
United States of America -- New York -- New York  
United States of America -- North Carolina -- Durham County -- Durham  
United States of America -- Pennsylvania -- Philadelphia County -- Philadelphia

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## Container Listing

### Series 1: Career and Business Records c. 1975-2009; undated

Scope and Contents: Materials in this series include educational material, agendas and calendars, resumes, portfolios, and business cards.

Box 1, Folder 1 Educational material, c. 1975

Box 5 Daily Appointment Calendar, 1995-1997

Box 5 Daily Appointment Calendar, 1998  
Notes: Some material has been removed due to PII.

Box 1, Folder 2 Business Cards and Curriculum Vitae, 2009; undated

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## Series 2: Photographs, 1998; undated

Scope and Contents: Materials in this series include images of Phil Freelon in various work environments including the Freelon Group offices, museum and galleries. Also included are construction photographs during the building of NMAAHC. He is featured with his work associates and his children, Pierce, Deen and Maya.

Box 1, Folder 4	Photographs, 1998; undated
Box 4	Construction Site Photographs of NMAAHC by Phil Freelon, c. 2012-2015

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## Series 3: Correspondence, 1986-2016; undated

Scope and Contents: Materials in this series include correspondence related to Freelon's architectural projects, his work as a professor, and various awards he received.

Box 1, Folder 5 Teaching positions, 1987, 2011

Box 1, Folder 6 Museum Work and Awards, 1986-2016; undated

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## Series 4: Ephemera, 1990-2013; undated

Scope and Contents: Materials in this series include advertisements, press releases, invitations, and pamphlets related to Freelon's architectural firms. Included is a declaration signed by the designers of NMAAHC.

Box 1, Folder 7	Advertisements and Announcements, 1990-2012; undated
Box 5	Grand Opening Badge to Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture, 2005
Box 6	LP "The Freelon Group: National Center for Rhythm and Blues", 2007
Box 1, Folder 8	Invitations and Pamphlets, 2009; undated
Box 4	Signed dedication to designing NMAAHC through "inclusive and collaborative process..."; undated
Box 5	Center For Civil and Human Rights Promotional Object and Model; undated

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## Series 5: Architecture and Design Records, 2008; undated

Scope and Contents: This series is divided into two sub-series, Architectural Renderings and Tools and Furniture Designs. The first sub-series includes architectural drawings and a tool designed by Freelon. The second sub-series includes architectural drawings of a table and confidential disclosure agreements for Freelon's designs.

### 1: Architectural Renderings and Tools; undated

Box 1, Folder 9	Architectural Sketches; undated
Box 6	Architectural Sketches; undated
Box 3, Folder 20	Desk design sketch; undated
Box 5	Architectural Tool; undated

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### 2: Furniture Designs; 2008; undated

Box 1, Folder 10	Confidential disclosure agreements, furniture sketches, and photographs, 2008; undated
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**Series 6: Periodicals and Publications, 1939-2017; undated**

Scope and Contents: This series has been subdivided into four sub-series including Books, Periodicals, Newspaper Clippings and Reference Material. The bulk of the material relates to Freelon's career as an architect and his multiple projects throughout the years.

**1: Books, 2015; undated**

Box 5	Drawing From Practice: Architects and the Meaning of Freehand by J. Michael Welton, 2015
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Box 5	A Light by AmerillumBrands and The Luminaires Group; undated
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**2: Periodicals, 1989-2017; undated**

Box 2, Folder 1	Architectural Record Business Design Engineering, 1989
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Box 3, Folder 1	Architectural Record "Hitting the Roof", 1989
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Box 2, Folder 2	Black Enterprise magazine with article, "Blueprints for Success," 1991
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Box 2, Folder 3	PA Progressive Architecture, 1992
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Box 3, Folder 2	North Carolina: The Voice of North Carolina Citizens for Business and Industry with article "The Freelon Group", 1991
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Box 3, Folder 3	African American Architect Magazine of the National Organization of Minority Architects with article "The Freelon Group", 2005
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Box 3, Folder 4	NOMA Magazine with article, "DC NOMA Presents the Focus On Design Lifetime Achievement Design Award," 2005
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Box 2, Folder 4	Urbanland with article "The Community Design Review Process", 2007
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Box 3, Folder 5	NOMA Magazine with article, "People Making News", 2008
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Box 2, Folder 5	Contract with article "Designer of the Year: Philip G. Freelon", 2008
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Box 3, Folder 6	South Atlantic Region Architect "2009 Design Awards", 2009
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Box 3, Folder 7	NC State Alumni Magazine with article "New Smithsonian Museum is His Latest Project", 2011
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**3: Newspaper Clippings, 1992-2017**

Box 3, Folder 8	The Herald Sun with article "Architectural firm seeks out niches it can feel good about", 2000
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Box 3, Folder 9	The News and Observer with article "Stone Center Takes New Step", 2004
Box 3, Folder 10	The Sun with article "Two Men One Vision", 2005
Box 3, Folder 11	The New York Times with article "Anecdotal Evidence of Homesick Mankind", 2006
Box 3, Folder 12	The Herald Times "Freelon Wins Bid for National Museum", 2009
Box 3, Folder 13	The Herald Times "Local Architects Win National Prize", 2009
Box 3, Folder 14	The New York Times with article "Tracing the Threads That Join America and Africa", 2009
Box 3, Folder 15	The Herald-Sun with article "Building on Inspiration Familiar Names, Everyday people", 2009
Box 3, Folder 16	The News & Observer with article "Phil Freelon 2009 Tar Heel of the Year Architect", 2010
Box 3, Folder 17	The Herald Sun with article "Building Bridges", 2017
Box 3, Folder 18	USA Today with article "Pittsburgh Opens New Landmark"; undated

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#### 4: Reference Materials, 1939-2000

Box 1, Folder 11	Newspaper and Magazine Clippings, 1939-2000
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## Series 7: Awards, 1975

Scope and Contents: This series contains an award given to Freelon for Architectural Design from the North Carolina Chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

Box 1, Folder 12 Newspaper and Magazine Clippings, 1939-2000

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