



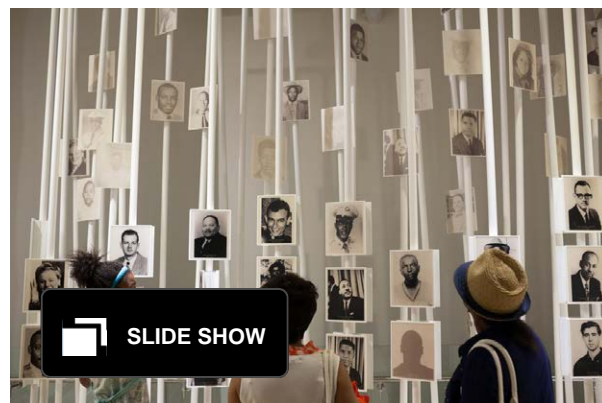
ART & DESIGN | MUSEUM REVIEW

National Center for Civil and Human Rights Opens in Atlanta

By **EDWARD ROTHSTEIN** JUNE 22, 2014

ATLANTA — It isn't that great a distance from the [birthplace of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.](#) on Auburn Avenue here to the \$68 million, 42,000 square-foot [National Center for Civil and Human Rights](#) that is opening on Monday near Centennial Olympic Park. The two sites, though, seem as if they've emerged not just from different time periods, but from different and incompatible universes.

In the first universe, into which Dr. King was born, there were Jim Crow laws like this Georgia statute: "The marriage of a white person with a Negro or Mulatto or a person who shall have one eighth or more of Negro blood, shall be unlawful and void." Or this one: "It shall be unlawful for any amateur White baseball team to play baseball on any vacant lot within two blocks of a playground devoted to the Negro race."



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Dustin Chambers for The New York Times

In the other universe — our own — is this new museum whose main exhibition recalls those Jim Crow laws but whose very presence shows how much has changed. It has been built alongside the main tourist attractions of Atlanta's downtown on land donated by the Coca-Cola Company, which runs the nearby [World of Coca-Cola](#) museum. Across a plaza is the immense [Georgia Aquarium](#) which has become an international destination. And across the park is the [Inside CNN](#) studio tour.

The world of Jim Crow is unimaginable here. If anything, the risk is not that the new center's narrative will be isolated like some Mulatto intrusion, but that it might become as commercial and sensational as the nearby attractions. And I do have misgivings about the center's populist political expansiveness: the way in which the struggle for human rights eventually becomes treated in its halls as a newer, broader case of the fight for civil rights.

I will return to that issue, but the overall achievement here is imposing. The building, whose design architect is [Phil Freelon](#) (who worked with [HOK](#)) uses two curved exterior walls to partly wrap a glass-paneled central part. The building has been compared to two hands cupped to hold something precious. Under its president, Doug Shipman, the center is becoming another landmark in a generation-long transformation of the South, which now hosts the nation's most important museums chronicling a movement the region once demonized.

In April, for example, the vigorously conceived [National Civil Rights Museum](#) reopened in the former Lorraine Motel in Memphis, where Dr. King was assassinated. Now, in the city where Dr. King was born, the movement's story is again powerfully told (with slightly different emphases) by the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, which has received both public and private support.

And in a special display space, the center also shows a selection of Dr. King's manuscripts and artifacts, rotating from the 13,000 items of the Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection. That collection — housed at the Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library — was bought for Morehouse for \$32 million. Twelve million dollars of that sum came from the new center for the purchase of exclusive display rights for the collection, which was first [sampled in New York in](#)

[2006 at Sotheby's.](#)

The main source of the center's appeal, though, will lie in its main first floor exhibition, "Rolls Down Like Water: The American Civil Rights Movement," which follows the doctrines of a museum of experience rather than a museum of objects. It was created by the Tony Award-winning playwright and director, George C. Wolfe with exhibit design by [the Rockwell Group](#).

You begin by passing through a corridor whose two sides are labeled in neon like the signs of the Jim Crow era, showing the "White" and "Colored" worlds of Atlanta in the 1950s — separate and unequal (including segregated baseball teams, the Atlanta Crackers and the Black Crackers).

A wall devoted to portraits of segregationists chillingly cites beliefs once proudly proclaimed. ("There's not enough troops in the Army to force the Southern people to break down segregation." — Strom Thurmond.) A display of Jim Crow laws, with panels that change like railroad timetables, outline the onetime laws of each Southern state. (Florida: "The county superintendent shall store separately the books which have been used in White and Negro schools.")

The main interactive is a mock lunch counter on which you sit like the protesters of the late 1950s, wearing headphones that evoke the tumult they faced: taunts, knocks (physically felt from vibrating stools), insults — temptations to give up on nonviolent protest.

The exhibition asserts that Atlanta was a special case in the South for its tolerance. In part, that was because of the strength of black institutions including [Spelman](#) and [Morehouse College](#) and one of the earliest and most influential black newspapers, the [Atlanta Daily World](#). There was also an important black middle and professional class. Out of this culture came the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as well as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Even Ivan Allen, Jr., the white mayor of Atlanta from 1962-1970, shows something about the city's exceptionalism. On his first day of office, we learn, he removed all "white" and "colored" signs in City Hall, and helped desegregate the building's cafeteria.

But it is not quite true, as one display claims, that Atlanta was "too busy to hate." Peculiarly, the [1906 Atlanta white race riot](#) does not seem to make an appearance in this exhibition. And we learn that after Dr. King

received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, tickets to the mayor's formal celebratory dinner were not being purchased. The event was apparently rescued when the president of the Coca-Cola Company, J. Paul Austin, called an emergency meeting of the city's business leaders, declaring: "The Coca-Cola Company does not need Atlanta. You all need to decide whether Atlanta needs the Coca-Cola Company." Two hours later, the dinner sold out.

At any rate, the exhibition itself is finely executed. It ends with a display of martyrs to the movement, some well known, others more obscure: Lamar Smith in Brookhaven, Miss., shot dead in 1955 on the courthouse lawn by a white man — no witnesses would testify, no convictions; Clarence Triggs a bricklayer who had attended a civil rights meeting in Bogalusa, La., found dead in 1966 on a roadside, shot through the head; after protests two men charged with the crime; both acquitted. And of course, the murder of Dr. King himself.

But this martyrology, which is accompanied by a wall listing the civil rights legislation of recent decades, is presented as a kind of closure. It even inspires a form of exhilaration about how much was accomplished in what is, in the scheme of human injustice, a very short time.

We are then led into another exhibition: "Spark of Conviction: The Global Human Rights Movement." It is based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that Eleanor Roosevelt was instrumental in establishing as a guidepost for the United Nations in the aftermath of [World War II](#). There are video statements by people who have had their rights violated: a lesbian from Nicaragua, a blogger from Iran, a white farmer from Zimbabwe. There is a wall of mass murderers: Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Idi Amin, Pol Pot, Pinochet. There are portraits of individuals who have undertaken, sometimes at great risks, fights for disability rights, immigrants' rights, H.I.V./AIDS advocacy, and "L.G.B.T. Rights."

And there are displays that challenge us to identify our "ethical footprint": "Human rights issues are all around us — in kitchens, and even in our pockets — though sometimes they are hard to see." The examples include workers in the flower industry exposed to toxic

pesticides and children sold into servitude on cacao plantations.

But this exhibition, whose curator is Jill Savitt, ends up leaving us with more questions than understanding. The choices made, the rights advocated, the causes honored, become so sweeping they start to seem arbitrary. Pinochet? He is responsible for fewer than 4,000 dead not the millions or tens of millions like the adjacent felons. So why were these killers chosen, and why were they restricted to the 20th century?

Is it a “right” to “enjoy personal privacy” as the Universal Declaration has it, or is it rather something to be greatly desired?

We would like there to be a “right” to have a “decent education,” but does that have the same status as the right to a fair trial? And what does “decent” mean?

Are children’s rights, outlined here, so inviolable? What parent has not restricted, on occasion, many, including “the right to express their opinion?”

And if we are meant to connect all of this with the fight for civil rights in the South during the 1950s and 1960s, doesn’t it seem to devalue the nature of that fight, by associating it with every other perceived injustice? Others, I am sure, will find the continuity apparent; I found it like a message from a distant third universe when I was still immersed in the two surrounding me, which are still being unveiled.

Correction: June 24, 2014

A museum review on Monday about the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, in Atlanta, omitted a word — “devoted” — from the center’s text quoting from a Jim Crow law about baseball. The center’s text reads, “It shall be unlawful for any amateur White baseball team to play baseball on any vacant lot within two blocks of a playground devoted to the Negro race.”

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The National Center for Civil and Human Rights is open Monday through Sunday at 100 Ivan Allen Jr. Boulevard, Atlanta; 678-999-8990; civilandhumanrights.org

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