

# Members

## Remembering Robert Johnson Nash, FAIA: Renaissance Man

by Courtney M. Jamison

**B**orn in Memphis at the end of the 1920s, Robert J. Nash, FAIA, exhibited his propensity for architecture at a young age when he worked with his father on a variety of renovation and repair projects. Early on, Nash laid the groundwork that would develop into his extensive and highly respected career in architecture, for which he would be heralded a pioneer, leader, and advocate for the minority voice in the profession.

### Innovator

Nash was a leader and an innovator throughout his career, beginning with his days as an undergraduate. While attending Howard University's School of Architecture, in Washington, D.C., he and several classmates formed a business in Maryland that tested and produced alternative building materials. They parlayed the business into a successful venture, known as AFAMACO, that operated in Nigeria. After extending his academic career at Howard to pursue an interest in engineering, Nash was selected as the Gold Medal winner for his class.

Robert Traynham Coles, FAIA, of Buffalo, a long-time friend and former AIA Deputy Vice President of Minority Affairs, first met Nash at the 1968 AIA National Convention in Portland. Coles recalls the meeting as if it were yesterday. "I can remember vividly his walking across the plaza in a Thomas Wolfe-like suit. He was truly one of the leaders of the profession—an aristocrat, if you will," says Coles with a smile in his voice. "He was a leader in social efforts that the AIA made for black architects. A very strong, independent, and persistent person." Coles says that Nash's tenacity is demonstrated by his two-term tenure as president of the National Organization of



Minority Architects (NOMA), which he helped found and for which, it was originally intended, he served as president for only one year.

Architect Robert Wilson, a Stamford, Conn., native currently practicing in Miami, also knew Nash for over 30 years through his involvement in the AIA. "Bob was a real in-your-face type of guy who got things done. He was a true leader—he formed NOMA to foster our [black architects'] interests in the profession because we were tremendously ignored," Wilson recalled. "We figured it would be better to run things from the inside of the Institute rather than 'throw bats from the outside.' We made a lot of noise and had fun doing it. We wanted to make a name for ourselves."

### Professional

After a brief stint with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in England, Nash returned to Washington, D.C., to practice architecture. Leading his own firm, he offered services in architectural programming and design; community and urban planning; design/build construction management; historic preservation and restoration; transportation planning; energy conservation; feasibility studies; master planning; and interior design. Institutional architecture was Nash's primary architectural interest, though, and he designed more than 100 churches and related religious facilities. "He was a very competent architect and his influence brought some accountability into the profession that still exists today," says Wilson of his colleague.

"He was a gifted architect," says Leon Bridges, FAIA, TLBC Inc., in Baltimore. "I first met Robert at the [1968] Portland convention and was immediately struck with his strong emphasis on his black identity. But until we worked together on the Penn Station Restoration Project here in Baltimore, I never realized his

talent as an architect." Both were honored by the National Endowment for the Arts with the President's Award for Design Excellence for that project.

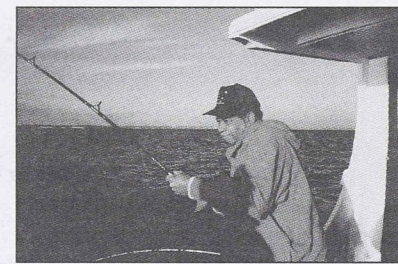
### Leader [Correction: first black director, not president, of the chapter. AIA Archives.]

The first black president of the AIA's Washington Metropolitan Chapter, Nash also served as the Institute's first black national vice president, the first black architect elected to its Board, its first Whitney M. Young Jr. Award recipient, and the eighth black Fellow.

Another distinguished AIA "first," Vernon Williams, AIA, Vernon Williams Architect PC, Chicago, met Nash in 1970, when Williams was serving as the first black architect on the AIA staff. Then responsible for establishing a national minority scholarship with Nash, Williams remembers his former coworker and friend as a compassionate, provocative, and diverse person. "I remember Bob was a member of a dining club that met at different restaurants monthly throughout the District. They would eat exotic wild game—such as elephant. I also recall how he would write and sketch in unusual colors of ink like teal or chartreuse. These were just some of his personality quirks," Williams said.

Once featured in *Ebony* magazine as one of the nine U.S. architects helping to shape urban America, Nash, according to Coles, "was a member of a unique group of about 1,000 black architects within the 100,000 architects in the country. He was also a member of an elite group in the AIA and was by many considered the 'Dean of Black Architecture.'"

Though Robert J. Nash, FAIA, passed away in December 1999, his legacy within the profession will live forever.



From his vocation to his hobbies, Nash gave his all to all he undertook. Thanks to Mrs. Robert Nash for sharing these photos for publication.

## Members' Voice

### What is a "must-see" spot for this year's convention-goers?

#### Joanne Aitken, AIA Dagit-Saylor Architects

Philadelphia

Experience the luxury of life without a car. Philadelphia is for walking. Here, more people walk to work than anywhere else in the country because streets filled with homes blend seamlessly with the central business district. It is these streets that define us: block upon block of historic structures, nearly all predating the last century, some on streets too small for a car to enter.

The tiniest streets have the "trinities" (three floors with winder stair), while the bigger streets have the mansions. Take the two-mile trek from river to river and see the evolution of the row house in all its glory as you pass through one "livable community for America's future" after another. Real urban living is one of the best-kept secrets in the country; come see how it works.



#### Mary Werner DeNadai, AIA John Milner Architects Inc.

Chadds Ford, Pa.

The Philadelphia area has an extensive collection of buildings representing the full range of architectural styles in America. Visits to many of these are included in the tours being scheduled during the convention (e.g., Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Eastern State Penitentiary, Bartram's Gardens, Fonthill, and the Fairmount Waterworks, to name some of my favorites).

One place in Philadelphia that would also be a wonderful experience is the Laurel Hill Cemetery, a National Historic Landmark in Fairmount Park. It is renowned for monuments designed by many talented architects and sculptors, beginning in 1839 and continuing into the 20th century. It is a must-see in my opinion.



Just outside Philadelphia, in neighboring Delaware, is the Winterthur Museum Library and Gardens. There visitors will find authentic period rooms representing the history of American domestic interiors and decorative arts. The experience will not disappoint anyone.

#### Oscar Howard Harris, AIA Mount Moriah

Philadelphia

Philadelphia has so much to offer that I can't think of just one place. Most everyone will arrive via the airport (Philadelphia International), so that's definitely an attraction you can see. The new Pennsylvania Convention Center is a focal point of the city. One should take time to enjoy the center where the convention is being held.

Then there's Independence Hall, the Art Museum, and the University of Pennsylvania. Despite the street renovations, Independence Hall is a good place to go. Enjoy Penn's Landing and the waterfront area, too. One of the most current and vibrant areas in the city is University City and



PHOTO BY MAQUINA BLOCK

Powelton Village, a residential park of one of the older areas here.

#### Robert Hilton, AIA Daroff Design Inc.

Philadelphia

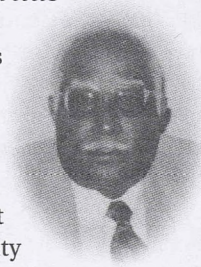
This city has so many historic sites, particularly in the downtown area. But if I were a first-timer here, I would see the zoo, which is one of the oldest in the country, and the Philadelphia Art Museum. We're one of two cities in the country hosting a major art exhibition of 18th-century Roman art. (You will need reservations and tickets, but it's well worth it.)

#### Curvin H. Hollimon, AIA Member Emeritus

Philadelphia

The city plan is the most impressive thing about Philadelphia. Although it's very broad, it really ties the city together historically and makes it very comprehensive and modern.

Our city is strong in architecture, especially from the 1950s to 1970s. If you missed the architecture offered during that era, then you've missed



good Philadelphia architecture.

The University of Pennsylvania has become a dominant figure here and is really a city within itself. Temple University is very impressive, and there's also the PSFS Building, City Hall, Bellevue Stratford and the Architects Building, Independence Square and Hall, Betsy Ross' House, Carpenter's Hall, and the Pennsylvania Art Museum.

#### Vincent Maiello, AIA Kelly/Maiello Inc.

Philadelphia

Visit the Mutter Museum at the College of Physicians of Philadelphia at 19 S. 22nd Street, where they have odd medical curiosities; the Court Tennis Court at the Racquet Club, located at 215 S. 16th Street; and the pond behind the Louis Kahn Science Building at the University of Pennsylvania campus in West Philadelphia. Or walk in the Wissahickon Valley in Northwest Philadelphia, about 20 minutes from Center City.



—compiled by Courtney M. Jamison