

Architect Honored for Remarkable Achievements

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Before St. Jude Children's Research Hospital became the sprawling complex of medical buildings in Uptown Memphis, the original facility was more modest, but no less important to the city's landscape.

The original 1962 hospital had five wings branching out from a central hub, almost in the shape of a star.

Founder [Danny Thomas](#) called the hospital the "star of hope." For the era, it was visionary in purpose and design. The staff would be integrated, a new concept in segregated Memphis, and no child would be turned away because parents couldn't pay.



Shown is a 1960 architectural drawing of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. Courtesy of Memphis Press Scimitar, Special Collections, University of Memphis Libraries

Photos of the original architecture don't reveal the most intriguing facet of the building, however – one that is only now being fully explored by scholars.

The hospital was designed by America's most renowned black architect.

The legacy of Paul Revere Williams soon will be better understood once the University of Memphis exhibits its ongoing "Paul R. Williams Project" in September.

"We wanted to celebrate this very under-appreciated architect," said Dr. Leslie Luebbers, director of the Art Museum of the University of Memphis (AMUM). "Originally we intended to create an exhibition, but when we started looking into him we discovered we needed research even more. Nobody had gone to the trouble of assembling a bibliography about him."

Luebbers said Williams and his small firm likely designed 3,000 buildings during his career, an enormous number for any architect and certainly a feat for a man barred from living in the same neighborhoods as his wealthy white clients.

Williams designed schools, churches, mansions and even helped lay out the plans for Los Angeles International Airport.

The local project officially launched Feb. 18, the architect's birthday, when the University revealed its Web site paulrwilliamsproject.org, an online gallery of Williams' work.

Its conception, however, was in 2006, when the Memphis chapter of the American Institute of Architects proposed the idea in honor of the AIA's 150th anniversary.

In 1923, Williams was the first African-American member of AIA, and became the first black Fellow in 1954.

Williams was born in Los Angeles in 1894. His parents moved there the year before from Memphis. His father, [Chester Stanley Williams](#), was a waiter at The Peabody hotel, and partners in a Beale Street bakery.



Paul Revere Williams
Photo courtesy of Herald
Examiner Collection, Los
Angeles Public Library

“1893 was a good year to get out of Memphis,” Luebbers said of the tumultuous period, during which three prominent black grocers had been lynched by a mob, and the journalist Ida B. Wells saw her newspaper office burned.

California would provide opportunities for Williams that would have been denied him in the South.

His father died in 1896, and his mother in 1898, leaving Williams to live with his godmother, who took a special interest in the boy’s education and artistic development.

Williams flourished in California’s more liberal educational system, and once his career began, he worked hard to win contracts over other established firms.

He came to be known as the “Architect to the Hollywood Stars,” building mansions for celebrities such as Lon Chaney (the original “Phantom of the Opera”), Bert Lahr (famed as the Cowardly Lion), the swashbuckling [Tyrone Power](#), singer [Grace Moore](#), Johnny Weissmuller (“Tarzan”), Barbara Stanwyck and Lucy and Desi Arnaz.

Race never clouded his business lens, though irony appears often in his choice of projects, such as the massive Al Jolson Memorial Shrine in Hillside Memorial Park. Jolson was Vaudeville’s most famous wearer of blackface.

When actor Danny Thomas decided to build his hospital in Memphis, he turned to one of the most trusted names in Hollywood architecture.

During his career, Williams opened offices in Los Angeles, Washington, New York and Bogota, Colombia. In 1962, he made Ebony magazine’s list of “America’s 100 Richest Negroes.”

Yet his legacy remains scattered and incomplete. Memphis architect [Jimmie Tucker](#), a principal of Self Tucker Architects who is involved with the Paul R. Williams Project, said that he hadn’t even heard of Williams until college.

“I grew up in Memphis during the 1960s and ’70s and when I finally heard he had worked here, it kind of changed my perspective,” Tucker said. “You look at a certain time period and you see it in very stark images. But as you hear about the stories and achievements, you begin to see a different context.”

Tucker said one reason Williams might not be as famous today is that only about 1 percent of architects are black.

“I’m hoping that this project possibly begins to shed light on other minority architects that we don’t know about,” he said.

Tucker and Luebbers say that though Williams is not known for a signature innovation or architectural style, he helped to popularize the open-floor plan in California homes.

“He was an architect who understood what his clients wanted,” Tucker said. “At the same time, he also had a particular vision. He was able to express his philosophies in his work. He took buildings to a higher level.”