

FACE OF THE AIA

Monty Freeman Among Members Honored with Induction into the College of Fellows

by John Gendall

Summary: Many architects have a range of diverse interests, but Belmont Freeman, FAIA, is one of those rare individuals whose interests are many, but who has cultivated them with such vigor and success that most people would be satisfied calling any one of them a full career unto itself. And he has done this while overseeing an impressive record of built work.



This month, Freeman will be inducted into AIA College of Fellows at the AIA annual convention, in San Francisco. Signaling his varied achievements, the AIA, in electing him, specifically cited his longstanding civic service to Storefront for Art and Architecture, a New York-based non-profit organization that presents programs and exhibitions across the fields of art, architecture and design. From 1998 to 2007, Freeman served as President of its Board of Directors, joining it in the midst of financial and organizational uncertainty, and helping to resuscitate it into the vibrant institution New Yorkers now know.

"In many ways Storefront owes its continued existence to Monty," claims Joseph Grima, the organization's current Director. (Freeman is known professionally and personally as "Monty.") "He guided the institution through an incredibly difficult transitional moment, when the easiest option would certainly have been to give in and close down. His endurance, perseverance, and a passionate belief in what Storefront stands for is the reason we are still here today."

"By bringing together artists and architects, Storefront is incredibly valuable," says Freeman, who continues to sit on its Board of Directors. For him, it occupied an important personal role as well. "You can easily become bogged down in an architectural practice, so you need something to keep the intellect nourished," he explains. "Rather than teaching, I became involved with Storefront, and it was incredibly gratifying that the AIA would honor that service."

A broad range of program types

His impressive record of built work was, of course, another important factor in becoming a Fellow. His eponymous 5-person firm remains active across a broad range of program types—academic, residential, commercial, and historic preservation.

He is now wrapping up a restoration design for Philip Johnson's Four Seasons restaurant, an iconic Mid-Century Modernist space tucked into the Seagram Tower. "We are doing this very carefully, and, over the last year, we have done a lot of research looking into original materials, fabrics, custom-made fabrication, and an elaborate lighting design by Richard Kelly."

"After 22 years, I finally built my first single-family house," he says, referring to a recently completed design in Atlantic Beach, a community on New York's Long Island. The Modernist white cube (set within a community of traditional Tudor houses) has been critically acclaimed. For Freeman, this is a big moment: "It's a thrill to get a house built."

This, along with other restorations projects, such as the Zilkha Gallery at Wesleyan University, is distinguishing Freeman in yet another area. "This is moving me into a sub-specialization of historic preservation of Modernist architecture," he says. "There is a lot of interesting work going on in that field right now."

In addition to his design and service work, Freeman has long been a leader in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) architectural issues. He will participate on a panel discussion engaging that subject during this year's AIA convention in San Francisco.

An inclusive design world

His design for an LGBT Carriage House at the University of Pennsylvania earned him widespread recognition in this field. "We made a conscious effort to make it stylistically unlike other traditional spaces on campus," he explains. "Ivy League schools have an expected definition of public spaces to serve the traditional student life functions. We strove to create a different atmosphere to announce the possibility of having a different lifestyle on an Ivy League campus."

"We've moved beyond the rawness of identity politics of the 1970s," he explains. "The design world seems to be so inclusive now, so it becomes a tricky question if there is any specific approach to LGBT design. In the past, these programs would have been tucked away clandestinely, but now they're more public. The carriage house at Penn is at the center of campus."

In the midst of this work, he has also managed to make landmark contributions to the study of Cuban architecture. In 2004, he collaborated with Cuban architect and historian Eduardo Luis Rodriguez on an exhibition, "Architecture and Revolution in Cuba, 1959-1969," which opened at Storefront, and which Actar will soon release as a book.

"When the US embargo is lifted—which I expect to happen during the Obama presidency—there will be a flood of investment from the USA," he explains. "My hope is that the inevitable development can be controlled so that it doesn't overwhelm and wreck the environment, and that it can be directed both to the rehabilitation of Cuba's amazing architectural heritage and the construction of good, modern architecture."

Freeman hopes to participate in that effort, intending, at some point, to divide his time between design offices in New York and Havana. "It's a nice dream," he says.

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