

City of Charleston  
Board of Zoning Appeals  
2 George Street  
Charleston, SC 29401

Dear Board Members:

As a resident and property owner in the Mazyck-Wraggboro neighborhood, I have reviewed the concept proposal for the Amen Song development to be located at 49 Chapel Street. I believe it will be an architecturally unique, innovative, culturally and educationally diverse enhancement to our community. I wish to offer my support for it during your deliberations.

With thanks for your kind consideration.

Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_ (signature) \_\_\_\_\_ (date)

(printed)

\_\_\_\_\_ (address)



DEVELOPMENT PROPOSAL FOR  
**AMEN SONG**

49 Chapel Street | Charleston, South Carolina

OWNER/DEVELOPER:  
WILMOT A. FRASER, PhD



Architects

**JIRA**

John I. Rivers Architects, Inc.

## AmenSong Project History

Conceived to capture the sweep of history, utilizing design elements from ancient and traditional sources to the post-modern and futuristic - *AmenSong* – situated at 49 & 491/2 Chapel street in historic Mazyck-Wraggboro, downtown Charleston, SC, combines legend, historical preservation, renovation and sustainability techniques in a most remarkable architectural development.

The name, *AmenSong*, derives from the title of one of the oldest African American spirituals, and alludes to the name for God – *AMEN* – in ancient Egyptian religion, symbolized in hieroglyphs by the great disc of the sun. This heliocentric approach to construction design echoes geometrically through the ages in the pediments (pyramids) of the original Charleston single houses on which the project has been layered. *AmenSong*, designed to pass the tests of time, connects the genius of the ancients to historical Charleston architecture and to the solar-oriented ecology of the post modern world.

*AmenSong's* 3 solar powered structures house an art museum displaying Egyptian and Gullah coil basketry alongside the historic "Color of Money" collection by artist John Jones depicting scenes of slavery from Confederate currency; memorabilia from the US struggle for civil rights; and an exhibition of Gullah linguistic and musical behaviors that have mightily influenced American and world culture. Additionally, there are 4 one (and two) bedroom vacation villas for visitors, in a renovated outbuilding; and 2 three bedroom condominium residences in the newly designed Egyptian influenced scarab 'Beatle' building. All meet LEED certified standards for environmental sustainability.

The centerpiece, *AmenSong Museum*, at the Winstanley-Parker House built c. 1790-1810 by Thomas Winstanley, a Middlesex businessman and intendant (mayor) of the city in 1804, is an "asymmetrical, two-story weather boarded and hipped roof house, with a stair hall and three rooms on each floor", which will be restored and partially renovated for its new incarnation as an ecology based art museum. It was "one of the earliest structures" in what became Mazyckboro (1786) and probably pre-existed the Wraggboro neighborhood (1796). Originally, it faced southward "with an extensive front garden" toward what became Charlotte Street. A smaller 2-story gabled residence was added early in the 1800's along the eastern property line. The house belonged to various members of the Parker and Drayton families during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and during the 20<sup>th</sup> century to John L. Reenstjern and later Minnie Bostick LaRoche who sold it September 11, 1959, to Wilmot J. Fraser, a noted local educator for whom the school on Columbus Street is named, and his wife Mary Young Fraser. The Frasers renovated and expanded the house for use as apartments by Eastside black families too often confined then to substandard slum housing. The house was bequeathed by Mrs. Fraser in 1995 to their son Dr. Wilmot Alfred Fraser, a folklorist, historian and preservationist, who conceived and planned *AmenSong*, with the help of architects, Tom Baker, a Charlotte Street neighbor, and John I. Rivers, AIA, a friend and also a native of Charleston.

## **AMEN SONG MUSEUM**

### ***Engaging Audiences – Illuminating Gullah’s Artistic, Cultural and Historic Vitality***

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#### **VISION AND MISSION**

The Amen Song Initiative is a five year capital project designed to create a new “cultural district” of mixed-use private and public properties in Downtown Charleston, SC; proposed are condominiums and apartments (see *Schematic Rendering*) and the Amen Song Museum – a solar powered, economically and ecologically sustainable facility located in the vibrant tourist area of King, East Bay and Meeting Streets within historic Mazyck – Wraggboro at 49 & 49 1/2 Chapel Street.

The centerpiece of this effort – The Amen Song Museum – will draw upon the rich resources of ancient Africa and historic African derived artifacts of the South Carolina Lowcountry Gullah culture to educate the general public. Human origins and equality, slavery, freedom, justice, creativity, ingenuity and technology are among the interrelated themes that will be interpreted in the permanent exhibitions.

In addition to the onsite museum, a multi-dimensional website/virtual museum will serve as a portal of information to extend and expand audience engagement. Scholarly essays, close-up viewing of visual images, oral histories, podcasts, mobile apps, 3D virtual tours, animation and interactive options will allow viewers worldwide to “speak” to the exhibitions. The “cultural district” is expected to be fully operational by 2018. Currently underway is research and fundraising to support the virtual museum.

#### **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

In 2007, Dr. Wilmot Alfred Fraser, historian, folklore and folklife specialist, expert in jazz music culture, and other local residents, established a 501 (c) 3 organization – the Charleston County Civil Rights Museum (CCRM) - to bring recognition to the significant role of local African Americans in the civil rights struggle in South Carolina and the United States. Educational programming at churches and public libraries offered participants and viewers a deep and nuanced understanding of local impact upon social and ethnic history.

Between 2009 and 2010, a SWOT Analysis was conducted to evaluate CCRM’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The death of founding Board member and President, Raymond Gadsden, led to weaknesses in both leadership and fundraising; continued efforts of three other founding Board members Dr. Fraser, Frederick Douglas Dawson, Jr. and Francena Roche sustained the organization and led to the development of a strategic plan that was broader in scope. At Dr. Fraser’s initiative the completion of architectural plans for the energy efficient condos and apartments surrounding and supporting the museum became new strengths; the idea for the ecologically based Amen Song Museum emerged. A revitalized Board identified the need to implement a marketing plan that would lead to greater recognition through discussion and analysis of potential sources of support for core programs.

## AMEN SONG MUSEUM (2)

### Engaging Audiences – Illuminating Gullah's, Artistic, Cultural and Historic Vitality

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#### CORE PROGRAMS

***The Painting Gallery:*** a unique collection of acrylic paintings by South Carolina artist John W. Jones will include 126 images of slavery depicted on the money used by the Confederate and slave states. Jones used these images to make a powerful statement on the contribution of enslaved Africans to the American economy and culture.

***The Music Gallery:*** multimedia that show the relationship of various musical expressions including the spirituals, blues, jazz, gospel, rock, hip-hop and other African American originated musical genres and their relationship to traditional African music. The gallery will include visual and auditory segments as well as interactive performance experiences in music and dance.

***The Coiled Basketry Gallery:*** artifacts, documents and demonstrations will highlight the similarities and differences of materials used for weaving coiled baskets and the identity in art and design of baskets found in ancient Egypt, other parts of Africa and the Carolina Lowcountry.

***The Ornamental Ironwork Gallery:*** will explore the relationship between Africa and historic Charleston ornamental ironwork dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century through the lens of semiotics and the study of ancient African signs and symbols that show its meaning.

***The Civil Rights Gallery:*** memorabilia on civil rights will chronicle how Gullah culture, religion and freedom fighters influenced liberty and civil rights in America as far back as 1739, and highlight the development of the Freedom School in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century civil rights struggles.

***The Cultural Linguistics Gallery:*** oral histories will show the uniqueness of the language of the Carolina Lowcountry, its relationship to African tongues, and its synthesis with European and Native American language that has created the Gullah creole language and heavily influenced American linguistic culture in vocabulary, syntax and storytelling.

***The Solar Science Gallery:*** will show and explain the ecology of the Amen Song Project, its solar energy collection, water conservation and green roof technology components and demonstrate the nexus between science and art.

***Museum Viewer's Guide:*** To complement the web based experience, we will develop an Amen Song Museum Viewer's Guide – an easy to use resource that will guide individuals and groups through exhibition content by offering discussion questions and follow-up activities.

#### NEXT STEPS

A diverse group of stakeholders with the right combination of knowledge and skill is needed to make the Museum fully operational by 2018. Next steps:

- Create an Advisory Board to define, monitor and support the mission.
- Identify organizations and individuals to serve as “community anchors”.
- Establish and strengthen relationships with those organizations and persons critical to the effective creation of the virtual museum/website.