

# SMOKETOWN

The Other Great Black Renaissance. An Alternate-Reality August Wilson Center

## HAL HAYES

**“Black Pittsburgh once had an impact that rivalled the far larger black worlds of Harlem and Chicago. Smoketown tells the extraordinary story of the people and forces that made the black population of the city, for a glorious stretch of the twentieth century, one of the most vibrant and consequential communities of color in US history. From the 1920s to the 1960s this community created a miraculous flowering of social and cultural achievement.”** *Mark Whitaker, Smoketown*



### Précis

This studio will be based in an alternative history where Pittsburgh's Lower Hill District was not bulldozed, the heart of its black community was not eviscerated, and the collapse of its industrial economy did not drive a large segment of that population away. Instead, the physical, social and cultural fabric of the Hill District is intact and continues to thrive, partaking fully in the Pittsburgh Renaissance.

We will study this community as it existed before the abject failures of urban renewal through research in comparative urbanism, the music of its vibrant jazz venues, the journalism of its nationally renowned newspaper and the plays of August Wilson, “The Bard of a Broken World.”

**“You have to be taught to be second class, you’re not born that way.”** *Lena Horne*



IMAGE CREDITS  
LEFT Pittsburgh Area and freeways laid over Hill District 1965  
TOP Elks Ball, Penn Sheraton Hotel 1962, Charles “Teenie” Harris  
RIGHT Pittsburgh Crawfords @ Forbes Field, 1945, Charles “Teenie” Harris

## Projects

Two design projects will challenge students to create richly meaningful narrative concepts that embrace this history and rekindle the embers of the Hill's heyday through architectural interventions at real sites.

**The August Wilson House Amphitheater.** The first six weeks will be devoted to the design of an amphitheater in the back yard of the childhood home of Pittsburgh and Black America's greatest playwright. Dubbed "The Bard of a Broken World" by Mark Whitaker, Wilson conceived the Century Cycle of 10 plays, one in each decade of the 20th Century, several of which were set in this very backyard. Abandoned during his life, it is now a local landmark. A design team including SoA's UDBS addressed the stabilization of the structure and possible concepts for future development and programming.

**New Granada Performance & Community Center.** The remaining 10 weeks will be devoted to the design of a new mixed-use center with multiple performance venues, including the renovation of this 1000-seat theater and the Savoy Ballroom jazz club, which were the hub of Hill District social and cultural life. Also a local landmark, a master plan has been completed by Evolve EA, led by SoA's Christine Mondor.



IMAGE CREDITS  
 ABOVE LEFT August Wilson House  
 LEFT New Granada Theatre  
 OPPOSITE  
 TOP Piano Lesson, Signature Theater 2012  
 MIDDLE King Hedley II, Theater Royal  
 Stratford East, 2019  
 BOTTOM Radio Golf, Goodman Theater  
 2006



## August Wilson's Pittsburgh "Century Cycle"

This ten-play series documents the Black experience in the twentieth century. All but one are set in the Hill District. Students will select one play to use as a preliminary framework in the development of their design narrative.

**Gem of the Ocean** (2003) – 1900s. Citizen Barlow enters the home of the 285-year-old Aunt Ester who guides him on a spiritual journey to the City of Bones.

**Joe Turner's Come and Gone** (1988) – 1910s. The themes of racism and discrimination come to the fore in this play about a few freed African American slaves.

**Ma Rainey's Black Bottom** (1984) – 1920s. Ma Rainey's ambitions of recording an album of songs are jeopardized by the ambitions and decisions of her band.

**The Piano Lesson** (1990) – 1930s. Brother and sister Boy Willie and Berniece clash over whether or not they should sell an ancient piano that was exchanged for their great grandfather's wife and son in the days of slavery.

**Seven Guitars** (1995) – 1940s. Starting with the funeral of one of the seven characters, the play tracks the events that lead to the death.

**Fences** (1987) – 1950s. Race relations are explored again in this tale which starts with a couple of garbage men who wonder why they can't become garbage truck drivers.

**Two Trains Running** (1991) – 1960s. Looking at the Civil Rights movement of the sixties, this play details the uncertain future promised to African Americans at the time.

**Jitney** (1982) – 1970s. Jitneys are unlicensed cab drivers operating in Pittsburgh's Hill District when legal cabs won't cover that area, the play follows the hustle and bustle of their lives.

**King Hedley II** (1999) – 1980s. One of Wilson's darkest plays, an ex-con tries to start afresh by selling refrigerators with the intent of buying a video store. Characters from *Seven Guitars* reappear throughout.

**Radio Golf** (2005) – 1990s. Aunt Ester returns in this modern story of city politics and the quest from two moneyed Pittsburgh men to try and redevelop an area of Pittsburgh.

