

'So Many Positives'

Area where King assassinated continues impressive transformation

By Sarah Baker

Tuesday, Jan. 15, would have been the Rev. [Martin Luther King Jr.](#)'s 84th birthday.

In the almost 45 years since his assassination at the Lorraine Motel, the South Main district and Downtown as a whole have certainly seen its ebbs and flows. But 2013 has the potential to be one of the years in which the civil rights icon would be most proud of the area's revitalization.

The National Civil Rights Museum is pumping \$27.5 million into renovations to the Lorraine Motel and its newly acquired administrative building on St. [Martin Street](#). The footprint of the facility won't change, but the way the space is used will be greatly enhanced by early 2014 when it reopens.

The museum's renovations mark the first since opening in July 1991. The National Civil Rights Museum expanded to South Main Street in 2002, and in the years since then the area began to see more aggressive and ambitious growth, said National Civil Rights Museum president [Beverly Robertson](#).

"The museum has been a dynamic economic catalyst for a lot of the redevelopment efforts that have gone on, which means that it's an even more exciting place to be because of what we will be doing with this major renovation," Robertson said. "It's going to be just absolutely incredible."

The South Main Historic Arts District is the subject of more than \$100 million in investment over the next few years. Ongoing projects include the \$30 million Main Street to Main Street Harahan Bridge initiative, the Chisca Hotel's \$20 million renovation, the Orpheum Theatre Memphis' \$10 million classroom expansion and ArtSpace's \$18 million live/work space behind the Arcade Restaurant.

That's in addition to multiple apartment rehabs taking place nearby the district, Memphis Area Transit Authority's recent request for proposals for Central Station, and the South End area's resurgence.

The National Civil Rights Museum projects its renovations will increase local spending and employment in preparation for the growing audiences of the future – the return on investment will be \$182 million. The museum attracts 200,000 plus visitors annually and has seen some 3.5 million visitors in its 21 years in operation.

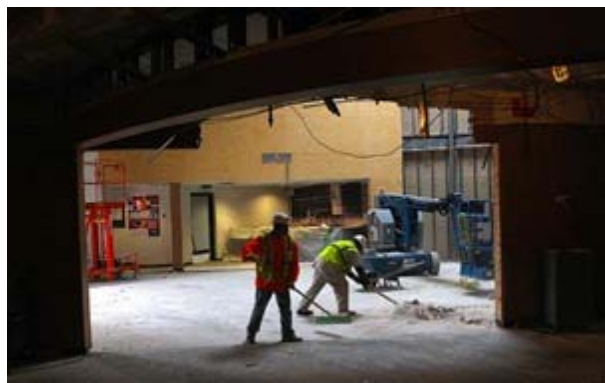
Robertson said she thinks King would be proud that the city has changed a great deal, including a lessening of divisiveness and an augmenting of relationship building.

"I think to some degree, he would be pleased with what our African-American mayors have been



Flintco Constructive Solutions is the general contractor for the renovation of the 44,500-square-foot Lorraine Motel building at the National Civil Rights Museum.

(Photos: Lance Murphey)



Renovations of the Lorraine Motel building at the National Civil Rights Museum are expected to last until the first quarter of 2014. It's just one part of the growth in the neighborhood where Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

able to accomplish over time, jumpstarting redevelopment efforts in the Downtown area and forging great public/private partnerships," Robertson said. "I think he would feel challenged because he'd like to see more progress in economic development and more focus on the issues of poverty, which really are the foundation for lots of the problems that most urban marketplaces have."

Something else other cities have – about 900 of them – is a street paying homage to King's legacy. But until last April, Memphis didn't have a designated street bearing his name, except for a section of Interstate 240.

That all changed thanks to former city councilman Berlin Boyd, and today, a nearly one-mile stretch of Linden Avenue has been renamed to Dr. Martin Luther King Avenue.

"Linden Avenue was technically the actual last street that Dr. King led his last march on," Boyd said. "They marched during the strike from Clayborn-Ball Temple down Linden to Main Street to City Hall and they came back."

The prominence of Dr. Martin Luther King Avenue will come even more into play during 2013 as the long-shuttered Chisca Hotel is converted into market rate apartments and retail space. It's also the street where FedExForum sits, it's in proximity to the Westin Hotel and the Memphis Rock 'n' Soul Museum, and it runs parallel to Beale Street, which houses the offices of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees – the union that King came to Memphis to defend.

"What you don't want to happen is to have a street that's bearing Dr. King's name that is not in a significant or decent part of town," Boyd said. "The fortunate thing is if you look at it, any tourist could possibly travel down Dr. Martin Luther King Avenue to get to their destinations."

And there's more activity on the way.

"You have Heritage Trails coming, a lot of great rehabilitations that are happening in that area with redevelopment of Church Park – there are so many positives that they could place in that area," Boyd said. "It's just really exciting."