

Rendering of the new National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis. Below: the entrance lobby.



Memphis Makeover

The National Civil Rights Museum (NCRM), located at Memphis' Lorraine Motel where Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968, will undergo an estimated \$20 million renovation updating its facilities and exhibit spaces. Spearheaded by D.C.-based design firm Howard+Revis, the project marks the first renovation since the museum's opening nearly 20 years ago.

"When the museum opened in 1991, we were the first museum to chronicle the modern civil rights movement's history," said Tracy Lauritzen Wright, the muse-

um's director of administration and special projects. "Since it was the first exhibit to closely examine this history, there was a motivation on the part of the designers to put in a lot of information, so it is very text-heavy. It's time to update our presentation methods and tools."

Working with local firm Self +Tucker Architects, whose principal Juan Self worked on the original NCRM design for D.C. firm McKissack & McKissack, Howard+Revis will add the multimedia and artifact displays that have been lacking from the museum's exhibits, in spite of a sig-

nificant number of donations over the years. Although it was not conceived as a collecting institution, said Wright, "people felt compelled to donate and share their own experiences."

The museum is also developing its own oral history archive as a major part of the new exhibits. "It's unusual for a project to be put out and have the exhibit designers be the prime contractor, but they wanted the design to flow from what the exhibit and media needs are," said Howard+Revis principal Jeff Howard.

With nearly 220,000 visitors

last year, more than twice its initial numbers, the popular exhibits—the Rosa Parks bus and a sit-in lunch counter—may have to be rearranged to improve traffic flow. The museum's total footprint will remain around 60,000 square feet. In the theater, a new sliding screen will allow visitors to exit alongside photography of civil rights marchers after viewing an introductory film.

In 2002, the museum annexed the nearby Young and Morrow boarding house, in which King's convicted assassin James Earl Ray stayed, with a connecting underground tunnel and amphitheater. The design team will create a more cohesive campus for the two buildings, adding annex

facade signage to correspond with a new entry portal and second-story glass overlook on the motel side. Because the Lorraine facade—designated a historic site by the Tennessee Historical Commission—is the museum's most significant artifact, signs and pathways directing visitors to Room 306, where King was staying at the time of his assassination, will be improved. Outdoor listening posts, sculpture, and banners will give the museum more of a street presence, whether open or closed. "The site is a pilgrimage site and people show up when the museum is closed, or at night," said Howard.

Though some new exhibits will be open in time for the NCRM's 20th anniversary next

year, construction will be staggered over four years to allow the museum to remain open during much of the renovation. The goal is to keep the Room 306 exhibit open throughout, reinforcing the historic importance of the place where King was shot. "Our president Beverly Robertson likes to say that the site has transformed from a site of tragedy into an educational triumph," Wright said. **JKG**

