The New York Times | http://nyti.ms/ObYCbh

ART & DESIGN | MUSEUM REVIEW

From Slave Ship Shackles to the Mountaintop

National Civil Rights Museum to Reopen After Reconstruction

By **EDWARD ROTHSTEIN** APRIL 1, 2014

MEMPHIS — The climax of the sweeping new exhibition at the National Civil Rights Museum here is almost painfully mundane. An open container of milk and a half-drunk cup of coffee sit on a table near a 1960s television topped by rabbit-ear antennas. A peach-colored bedspread is pulled back, and the remains of a catfish lunch are nearby. Pale yellow curtains are open to the balcony outside. We are looking at Room 306 of the Lorraine Motel.

This is the room that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. left for a moment on April 4, 1968, to go to the balcony. That was when James Earl Ray, an escaped convict with a heritage of hatred, aimed a rifle and took his shot.

The museum, which opened in 1991 as one of the nation's first civil rights museums, was constructed around the room that was left behind, its contents reproduced behind glass. The entire museum is also inside the former motel. But, mostly, you would hardly know it. Though the exterior shows the Lorraine pretty much as it once was — a flat-roofed, two-story black-owned motel, where black travelers regularly stayed — the exhibition leaves that world far behind, taking us on a long and compelling journey, now reinterpreted for the first time in a generation.

A $28 million reconstruction of the museum will open on Saturday,

the day after the assassination's 46th anniversary, with a new two-story-high lobby, exhibits with archival videos and touch screens, 52,000 square feet of new and altered exhibition space and outdoor audio-video pillars that introduce passers-by to the historic site.

The narrative still leads to the same room, but the result, despite some flaws, is now among the best we can find, setting a standard for museums exploring civil rights. (Firms involved included Howard & Revis Design Services and Self & Tucker Architects).

While establishing a museum where Dr. King was killed once inspired criticism, now some 200,000 people visit each year. In 2002, the museum expanded, with new exhibitions in two annex buildings, incorporating the fleabag rooming house from which Ray had stalked his prey. With the rethinking of the main exhibition space, the museum is building on a trend it also helped inspire: Multiple museums in the South are beginning to confront the region's troubled racial past at sites and in cities where history is still memory.

In 2010 in Greensboro, N.C., for example, the International Civil Rights Center and Museum opened in a former Woolworths, where the lunch counter once excluded blacks, inspiring protests that ignited a national movement.

In Atlanta, the National Park Service, in conjunction with the Martin Luther King Center, has established a network of preserved buildings and exhibitions associated with Dr. King's birth, his preaching and the movement's evolution. This June, also in Atlanta, the $100 million Center for Civil and Human Rights is scheduled to open. And Mississippi, which led the nation with lynchings between 1882 and 1964, plans a major civil rights museum for 2017.

This is an amazing transformation in a region where, a half-century ago, commentary about racial civil liberties was often made with hoses, truncheons, jail cells and knotted ropes. These museums have also received widespread support. Beverly Robertson, the president of the National Civil Rights Museum here, said it has raised all the money for its reconstruction,

along with $2.5 million of a planned $12 million endowment. The museum's team of scholars, led by the historians Hasan Kwame Jeffries and Stephanie J. Shaw, both of Ohio State University, have overseen a narrative that has belatedly become a core part of American history.

We begin with a survey of the slave trade, including a partial reproduction of a slave ship galley in which visitors can crouch beside cramped, shackled figures. Then, in glimpses of the Jim Crow years, restrictions undermine hard-won reforms, while the achievements of remarkable black men and women counter violence and humiliation.

By the time the civil rights movement begins, we feel wonder both at what once existed and at how difficult it was to overturn. In a mock courtroom, a video describes how Charles Hamilton Houston, the first black editor of Harvard Law Review and later dean of Howard University's law school, strategized legal challenges to the Jim Crow doctrine of "separate but equal." His campaign led to the 1954 landmark ruling Brown v. Board of Education.

A touch-screen map mounted like a blackboard in a Jim Crow schoolroom shows how geographically widespread the problems were. A map in another gallery illustrates how sit-ins and boycotts spread beyond the best-known examples: In 1964 a "whites only" beach in St. Augustine, Fla., became a scene of violence as black protesters staged a "wade-in."

Some highlights from the museum's old incarnation show life-size figures in the midst of protest: a lunch counter like the one in Greensboro's Woolworths, or a Montgomery bus in which a sculpture of Rosa Parks defiantly sits. Other galleries feature the Freedom Riders, the Freedom Summer, the Selma to Montgomery March.

It is as if we were witnessing Stations of the Cross. In one gallery, visitors can sing along with videos of protesters in a church in Albany, Ga. ("Oh, Freedom"). When the journey is nearly done, you can hear Dr. King's speech delivered the night before he was murdered — "I've Been to the Mountaintop" — in which he seemed to anticipate his death.

This epic is also a tale of mundane places: lunch counters, buses,

motels, schoolrooms. Yet lives were sacrificed over the right to use them, one reason Room 306, with its portrayal of life interrupted, is so affecting.

Given the museum's accomplishments and the likelihood that other institutions will follow its lead, its flaws are also worth attending to. The museum approaches its subject as an advocate — it would have to — but it is overly wary of complication. We learn little, for example, about movement schisms. There are some signs of disagreement — particularly in a few discussions of Malcolm X or the black power movement — but more detail would have illuminated Dr. King's own evolution and shed light on debates that followed.

The museum's advocacy can also distort: The Black Panther Party is portrayed as a victim of governmental sabotage, without a hint of what the writer Stanley Crouch described as its descent into violence to feed a "lucrative criminal enterprise."

And it is taken for granted that early racial restrictions are analogous to later inequities and differences. In the Jim Crow gallery, for example, contemporary maps showing racial distributions in New York City, Kansas City, Memphis and Atlanta are labeled "Jim Crow Today" because they demonstrate "de facto segregation." In addition, we read, "The high percentage of people of color in the criminal justice system can be linked to discrimination in policing — much like during the heyday of Jim Crow." Don't these assertions deserve more complex analysis?

Such considerations are clearly for another day. Now, the point is commemoration, accompanied by activist passion. Just before his murder, Dr. King asked that "Take My Hand, Precious Lord," be sung at a dinner he was about to attend. It was sung at his funeral instead. We hear it as we gaze at Room 306. The song's pleas for guidance and strength, the room's frozen tableau and the museum's survey of riots and mourning — all point to a project left unfinished.

A version of this review appears in print on April 2, 2014, on page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: From Slave Ship Shackles to the Mountaintop.

© 2014 The New York Times Company