

## Preview of renovated National Civil Rights Museum shows changes, interactivity

By Linda A. Moore

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Many of the exhibits at the newly renovated [National Civil Rights Museum](#) were [still unfinished](#). But there was enough in place to give the more than 30 journalists who previewed the museum Wednesday an understanding of the new methods officials have found to educate visitors.

The \$28-million refurbishment has created a museum that is now bright, more open and mostly interactive. The museum at the Lorraine Motel where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968 reopens April 5 with a \$5 admission price.

Gone is the “book on a wall” concept that required visitors to read text, said Beverly Robertson, museum president.

It has instead become a museum where visitors see videos, hear speeches and use multilevel touchscreen technology to delve as deeply as they like into an exhibit topic or just to learn the basics.

“One of the things that we observed for a while is how young people were experiencing the museum,” Robertson said. “And what we noticed is that they would quickly go through and they might look at the pictures passing by, but we’re not sure they read a lot of the words.”

What they realized is that today, young people engage electronically in the learning experience through computers and interactives.

“And so we knew if this history were to really resonate, we needed to change the vehicles through which we delivered the information,” Robertson said. “And so we set out on the front end to identify ways to make this history viscerally resonate with young people.”

Visitors can now sit at a segregated lunch counter and watch video of actual sit-in interactions or listen to speeches from the March on Washington.

A new exhibit chronicling school desegregation includes an old-style classroom where, instead of a blackboard, a touchscreen with a map of the United States allows visitors to read about integration efforts across the country, not just in the South.

That exhibit has special meaning for Daniel Kiel, an associate law professor at the

University of Memphis.

He has done extensive research on school desegregation in Memphis and produced the documentary "The Memphis 13" on the 13 first-graders who desegregated Memphis City Schools in 1961.

"It's really good to see it come to life. This was an important redo from the old museum," Kiel said. "The old museum was created in the early '90s when some of the stories are still untold, unfinished. So they've really done a good job of updating this particular part of it."

The old exhibit focused on the Brown vs. the Board of Education and the Little Rock Central High School, he said, while the new one speaks to the breadth of the movement's impact.

"And it's really good to see Memphis up on the wall," Kiel said.

It was especially important that Memphis be included in as many of the exhibits as possible, said Dr. Earnestine Jenkins, an associate professor of art history at U of M and another renovation scholar.

"Memphis has a long history of civil rights activity. That was the reason Ida B. Wells came here," Jenkins said, referring to the African American journalist who came to Memphis in the 1800s and spoke out against lynchings.

Jenkins was also a contributor to the exhibit on the black power movement that began after King's assassination and included demands by African Americans to participate in the nation's decision-making process.

That exhibit includes a 5-foot-by-12-foot touch table and displays that show black pop culture in the late 1960s and into the 1970s.

Overall, Jenkins said, the civil rights struggle has become global and has been modeled by the women's rights movement, the gay rights and human rights movements around the world.

"Everybody's borrowed from it," she said.

For Self+Tucker Architects, the reopening of the museum marks the end of more than a three-year journey, said principal Juan Self.

"It's a long time to have a baby. We've been in labor a long time, but it's finally happened," Self said.

But because technology continues to change and the civil rights issues will continue, future updates are inevitable.

"Because it's not only racial, it's also gender, age discrimination, so many different battles that have to be fought," Self said. "So there's a story that's ongoing that ultimately will have to be told."



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