



Building A Dream

Death of
Dr. King
created
indelible
mark here

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The Lorraine Motel in 1968 was cheap, it was handy, it was black-owned and it was the kind of no-frills place where the leader of the poor could stay without being called a fat cat or "de Lawd." It was for these reasons that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. checked into a \$13-a-night room at the seedy, third-rate motel in a raggedy section of downtown Memphis. Outside, it hasn't changed that much. Inside, they're perma-pressing the history that altered America.

What's happening, on one hand, is this week's dedication of the National Civil Rights Museum within the motel complex. What's happening on the other is the recognition that this obscure corner at Mulberry and Butler is cherished

ground that must be preserved, celebrated and remembered if we are to learn anything about ourselves, our town and a past that haunts us.

It's about time, too.

More than 23 years have passed since Dr. King fell mortally wounded on the narrow cement balcony outside the second-floor suite — Rooms 306-7 — where he spent his final hours.

Though motel owner Walter Bailey turned the room into a modest shrine after the assassination, the Lorraine sank steadily toward oblivion until 1982. That's when D'Army Bailey and a nonprofit foundation rescued it from prostitutes, pimps, drug dealers and financial defeat.

Dr. King's green-painted, rust-spotted room and the balcony where he died will be the high point of the museum's civil rights re-experience when it opens later this summer.

What many have forgotten — or never knew — is that Dr. King stayed in the classier Rivermont Hotel when he first came to Memphis to help striking sanitation workers. The Rivermont was a secure high-rise Holiday Inn that charged \$29 a night — a steep rate for someone trying to identify with garbage collectors and lead a poor people's march on Washington, as Dr. King planned to do.

Thus, it was to clarify his image that Dr. King and his staff checked into the Lorraine in early April and planned a march to offset the disastrous effects of a previous demonstration that ended in riot. More than anything else, this riot was responsible for the breakup of Beale Street, a few blocks away, a shattering event from which the street never fully recovered.

Although his life had been

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