

Civil Rights Museum Debuts in Memphis

By Anne Funderburg

MEMPHIS, TENN.—The National Civil Rights Museum opened to the public here on September 28, 12 weeks after its formal dedication ceremony on July 4. The culmination of a \$9.25-million project that has weathered delays and criticism, the museum was launched in 1982 when a group of black civic leaders purchased at a foreclosure sale the Lorraine Motel, the site of the April 1968 assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. The motel—located not far from Mem-



D'Army Bailey, who led the effort to establish the National Civil Rights Museum, speaks at its opening.

phis's historic Beale Street, downtown's famous entertainment district—had become a seedy place frequented by prostitutes and drug users. But the Lorraine also attracted visitors who viewed the building, because of its association with King's death, as a symbol of the civil rights movement. One of these individuals was D'Army Bailey, then a Memphis attorney and now a Tennessee circuit court judge.

"We felt that because the Lorraine drew people from all over the world, this was a unique opportunity for this city to initiate a campaign to transform it into a facility that would teach about (Continued on Page 2)

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the civil rights struggle," says Bailey, who has led the preservation effort as the president of the Lorraine Civil Rights Museum Foundation.

Because the motel was deteriorating, the architects recommended that most of the building be razed, with the exception of the wing that contains Rooms 306 and 307, where King had stayed and outside of which he was killed. They decided to save the motel facade so that the new construction could be attached to it, incorporating the facade and King's rooms into the museum building.

Rooms 306 and 307 were restored to their

appearance at the time of King's death, using photographs taken by the police and by a local photographer. Some of the original furnishings were still in the motel. Other furnishings "were re-created as much as feasibly possible [to appear as they did on] April 4, 1968," says Fred Royals of McKissack McKissack & Thompson, the museum's architects. "The key area is all as original as possible."

The motel signs "were put back in the same exact location," says Royals. "They're not the originals because they were in such bad condition. We have re-created them, using the old ones as templates, although some of the old pieces and parts were used."

In addition to King's rooms, the museum features 14 exhibits that trace the evolution of the civil rights movement. Chronologically,

the major exhibits progress from the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 to the Memphis sanitation workers' strike and King's death in 1968.

"Most of the main exhibits feature a set piece that tries to give people a feeling of what the scenario was and where it took place. Played against that is an interpretive exhibit that explains the sequence of events and their significance," explains exhibit designer Gerard Eisterhold.

One exhibit re-creates King's cell in the Birmingham jail, and a videotape shows demonstrators clashing with Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor, Birmingham's public safety commissioner and a staunch segregationist who was King's chief antagonist. To evoke the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, designers built a scale model of the

Edmund Pettus Bridge, which has become a symbol of that march.

In an exhibit representing student sit-ins, mannequins are seated at a lunch counter while the taunts of white segregationists—actual voices from the 1960s—are broadcast through speakers behind them.

A restored 1955 Montgomery city bus commemorates Rosa Parks's refusal to sit in the back of the bus. Parks and the bus driver are portrayed by mannequins. When the driver's prerecorded "voice" demands that Parks give up her seat, she remains motionless.

Because the exhibits rely heavily on audio-visual multimedia effects, some people have criticized them. *Time*, for example, has said that the "museum will push the barriers of good taste in its quest to create a sense of historical immediacy and emotional context for