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A new beginning for the Colman School

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Rico Quirindongo dreamed of bringing the Colman School building back to life for more than a decade.

As a UW architectural graduate student in the mid-1990s, he did his thesis on turning the former school into an African-American cultural center, and spent time advocating and fundraising for the already 15-year-old cause. Quirindongo was born in the central district, and used his thesis to propose a plan for community revitalization.

More than 13 years later, Quirindongo is preparing for this weekend's grand opening of the Northwest African American Museum at the Colman School, after serving as project architect for DKA.

The \$20 million project for the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle transformed the school, which wasn't maintained for 25 years, into a community keystone. It is now home to 36 mixed-income apartments called the Urban League Village at Colman School and the long-awaited museum. Housed in the ground floor of the building, the museum holds its grand opening at 11 a.m. Saturday.

"Because it went on for so long, having any project happen was a huge accomplishment," Quirindongo said. " (But) to think about this transformation that has happened. It looks like a beautiful new facility within the historic context of this shell."



Photo by Steve Keating Photography

The \$20 million project turned the old Colman School into apartments and a long-awaited Northwest African American Museum.

Closed in 1985

The Colman School was built in 1909 at 23rd Avenue South and South Massachusetts Street. It closed in 1985 when the Interstate 90 lid was expanded, and transportation officials helped foot the bill for a new school.

Plans to turn the school into an African-American museum or cultural center were seriously discussed as early as 1981, but took decades to get off the ground. The ball finally got rolling in earnest when the Urban League bought the school in 2001.

By then, Quirindongo had moved to San Francisco, but the promise of working on the school again brought him home.

“Getting people back into that building and having it be a living, breathing, destination location was hugely important from an urban planning standpoint, in addition to the social implications of it,” Quirindongo said. “It wasn’t a hard sell.”



King

Quirindongo

Quirindongo had begun his architectural career at DKA in 1996, having met principal Donald King at a discussion about the school held at Washington Middle School, but he moved to San Francisco a few years later.

King also had a long history with the project. In the early 1980’s, he was brought in to consult with organizers then occupying the school to advocate for the museum. When the Urban League bought the building, DKA was hired as the architect. King called Quirindongo and invited him back.

“I gave him a lot of freedom on this because not only was it his project, but I also wanted to bring him along in the firm and see his professional growth,” King said. “It’s really great, because I go back 40 years in this profession, and I see a lot of changes from the time where (African Americans) would be bluntly told ‘You can’t do this.’”

Building challenges

King and Quirindongo faced significant design challenges.

Decades without maintenance had accelerated corrosion, the roof leaked, toxic materials like asbestos needed to be removed and the boiler room needed to be abated. The nearly 100-year-old building was unreinforced, load-bearing masonry and unreinforced walls had varying heights, connections and materials, a precarious foundation in the earthquake-prone Northwest.

In the end, \$1.5 million was spent on seismic upgrades. The masonry walls also made design of the museum more difficult.

There were conflicts between modern codes and the building’s protected historical status. Quirindongo also had to adapt to a different role on the project. As architect, he was working to make the project actually happen, and that required a shift in focus from his original idealized vision of what the building might be.

“When I was working on it in 1996 it was very hands-on; I was out on a daily basis talking to the community and the people who were working on the project,” Quirindongo said. “Going back there was definitely a reeducation for me and a different role.”

King and Quirindongo were designing a cultural museum at a time when attendance at those mu-

seums, especially African American museums, was falling. The solution, Quirindongo said, was to make the museum's focus broader and more experiential, and to make sure it was always changing so people would come back.

A strong focus on community outreach and partnerships with groups like the Black Genealogy Research Group of Seattle and the Black Heritage Society of Washington State also ensured the design would fit with area needs, Quirindongo said.

The museum became financially viable thanks to the Urban League's decision to build apartments in the upper floors, Quirindongo said. But that also complicated the design and minimized space for the museum, which Quirindongo had once imagined would be larger than the Colman building.

"It was everyone's wish to have a larger museum and have a more expanded program of African American heritage, but the realities are different than the dreams," King said. "The Urban League had to really figure out how they were going to balance the financial."

Design challenges

One of the biggest design challenges, Quirindongo said, was bringing the building up to code without treading on landmark protections. The building was nominated for landmark status in 2003 and Quirindongo worked with the city's landmark board on the renovation.

DKA worked with the landmarks board and the city's Department of Planning and Development to expose

brick in the apartments, which was not an element of the original design or optimal from an insulation standpoint. But it added to the apartments aesthetically, he said, and more importantly, it improved air quality.



Another challenge was the windows. The city's energy codes call for double-glazed windows but the landmark status required maintaining the single-glazed windows. In the end, Quirindongo said the city let the project come in slightly below required

energy compliance levels because of a provision that lets them make such exceptions for historic landmarks. The single-glazed windows were kept, but they also had to install indoor storm windows to provide additional insulation.

Redesigning entrances and stairwells was complicated, Quirindongo said, because the existing stairwells were seen as important elements of the building's original design but did not fit with the new functions. Working with the board, DKA was able to lower the entryway elevation 4.5 feet to allow access to the building. Doors were brought down and an entry stair was removed to make the new museum entrance accessible.

In DKA's original design and in Quirindongo's thesis, the entrance would have been moved so the entire building faced south, toward the historically African-American portion of the city. Quirindongo said that would have given an African-American identity to an otherwise "Eurocentric" structure. But with the historical and access issues already complicating entries to the building, they decided to let that idea go.

"There was a decision that I had to make about whether we were going to fight for the original concept or help the board move forward," Quirindongo said. "The details would never outweigh the epic proportions of having the project be finished."

Quirindongo is now proud of the entry's personality. Fabric that gives the impression of quilting was worked into the tile in the entryway, and there is the potential to create a structural framework opposite the doors that allows the museum to install pieces of a "community quilt" over time.

Making a museum

King and Quirindongo strove to make the museum a usable, functional space for the community. In addition to a cafe, bookstore and genealogy center, there are artist studio spaces and spaces for community use.

Quirindongo said the museum will also work because of its ability to draw people back, with rotating exhibits and interactive features.

King's favorite part of the museum, "The Journey," is squeezed into a 12-foot hallway. Stories are told interactively, with portions of exhibits found within drawers of bureaus or within duffel bags, King said.

"It's jam-packed with information, so much so that one visit won't be enough," King said.

King donated some materials to the museum, including papers from 1969 when he was working as an architect in Southern California and consulted with the Black Panther Party on a design for a new building that would provide community services. King's wife, Carole Crower-King, provided information and materials on her brother John Hopkins, who was Washington's first ordained black priest.

Architects could soon have a place in the museum as well, King said, with plans for a retrospective on local African-American architects.

Looking back on the design process, King said he was proudest that members of the community remained active in the planning.

"It was not only successful in that we were able to accomplish this but we were able to involve the community," King said. "This was not something that was done for them, it was done with them, and Rico was very instrumental in that."

Rafn Co. was general contractor, Leajak Construction was museum contractor, Coughlin Porter Lundeen was structural engineer, Path Engineers was electrical engineer, Pressler Engineering was mechanical engineer, Taylor Engineering Consultants was civil engineer, Nakano Associates was landscape architect, and Weatherholt and Associates was exterior envelope consultant.