

Builders tear into Colman School's challenges

Team with 40% minority contractors creates African-American museum, apartments out of school

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STORY IMAGES



Seattle's abandoned Colman School, site of one of the longest illegal occupations of a building in U.S. history, will be reoccupied -- legally -- when the Urban League finishes its ambitious reconstruction in December.

Opened in 1910, the brick building sits on a hill south of Interstate 90 between the Central District and Rainier Valley. The Seattle Public Schools closed the elementary school in 1979, and Colman became an alternative school site until the district abandoned it in 1985. That's when four community activists broke in and stayed in the building -- with no electricity, heat or water -- for eight years.

The activists wanted the school to become an African-American cultural center. They didn't leave until the city of Seattle finally agreed to back the project.

Still, the empty building deteriorated for more than two decades until the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle acquired it for \$804,000 in 2003. The organization is creating an "Urban League Village" anchored by an African-American museum and residential units.

"Many of the city's first black teachers were at Colman and a lot of black students went there," said James Kelly, president and CEO of the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle. "Colman had been an icon for the community, and it will be again. Finally."

The \$17 million project provides 36 units of moderate- to low-income housing on the top two floors, with residents moving in as early as January. The target family income for housing is between \$24,000 and \$42,000 per year, with rents starting at \$620 a month for studios and \$940 for two-bedroom apartments.

The ground floor offers 17,000 square feet of museum space with additional areas for a gift shop, cafe and sculpture garden. A grand opening of the Northwest African American Museum is planned for March.

The community activists who occupied Colman have been critical of the project because they wanted the entire facility to become a museum. Kelly said it was not economically feasible to have 70,000 square feet of gallery space.

Contractors and designers had "more than a fair amount" of challenges with Colman, according to Rico Quirindongo, project manager with Donald King Architects (DKA), of Seattle, the largest African American-owned architectural firm in the Northwest.

The exterior of Colman School is designated a historical landmark. That meant the developers could gut the interior, except for load-bearing walls, but they couldn't change the building's

roofline or any external features. A brick chimney on the west side of the roof, for example, had to be rebuilt to look like the original even though it is fake and won't be connected to the new heating system.

Demolition was "straight ahead," considering the project started in November and workers endured one of the wettest winters on record in Seattle, said Gregg George, project superintendent with Rafn Co., the Bellevue-based general contractor.

The Urban League said it chose Rafn as the general contractor because it had the best plan for including minority-owned businesses -- about 40 percent -- on the project.

"We're the Urban League, creating an African-American museum," Kelly said. "You can bet diversity was important to us."

Robots --- essentially a hydraulic arm on a backhoe mounted on wheels and controlled remotely -- were used to pull down ceilings. Specialists removed hazardous materials from the attic area and boiler room. The building was "split open" to retrofit it for earthquakes. A steel structure extends from the first floor to the roof.

Some of the project's surprises included rotten floors and subfloors, which varied in depth by as much as 6 inches. Contractors also had to drill through 21-inch-thick concrete walls to make new doorways. It took professional cutters, using blades that were almost 4 feet long, five months to carve the openings.

The architects also had to deal with the challenge of putting apartments --with kitchens, bathrooms and lots of running water -- above a museum space with priceless items that must be preserved.

"The tug of war between the museum space and living space was challenging," said Quirindongo. "We're trying to keep the ceiling of the gallery area high, and normally we would need about 18 inches of space to route the plumbing and waste lines."

DKA and Rafn managed to squeeze the needed utilities into a 4-inch ceiling space by routing each unit's utilities separately through the ceiling joists.

A slight setback occurred in late May, when hot embers from tar work caught fire and caused about \$2,000 damage. Such is the project's tense political background that some initially suspected arson.

Although construction is slightly ahead of schedule and within budget, the Urban League's Kelly said it would have been easier and less expensive to build a new structure rather than restore the dilapidated school.

"After the Nisqually Earthquake, my prayer was, 'Lord, let it fall down.' And I went out there and it was still standing," Kelly joked. "Then I said, 'Lord, give me the strength of Samson to push it over,' but that didn't happen either. After all it's been through, this building is definitely resilient."

When the Urban League Village at Colman School opens, Kelly hopes it will become a resilient symbol in the community. The building's location near the I-90 lid makes it a "cultural gateway," he said.

"It connects North and South Seattle, and Seattle with the Eastside," said Kelly. "It is the centerpiece of a rich history."