

THE JOURNEY to NOW

Eighty Years in the Making of a Museum Part IV: Science Takes the Lead, 1980s to 2006



IMAGES COURTESY KANSAS CITY MUSEUM

1910 Drug Store and
Soda Fountain, c. 1985

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During the 1970s, the Kansas City Museum produced all new exhibits on Kansas City's history, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The plan was to continue the story of Kansas City on the third floor of the museum. However, the NEH funding dried up, and new exhibits became a moot point in the 1980s, when the third floor was shut down due to fire code issues.

In the early 1980s, the museum opened the 1910 Drug Store and Soda Fountain on the lower level of Corinthian Hall. This was the last "permanent" exhibition and became a beloved and iconic feature. The 1910 Drug Store and Soda Fountain made use of the furniture donated by the Kirby family of Modena, Missouri (northwest of KC), and included a working soda fountain. Keeping to the 1910 theme, the menu was small, and the museum ran the soda fountain with volunteers. By the 1990s, the popular space had fulltime staff and a growing menu of items that included Edy's ice cream and cookies baked in a small oven in the space, the smell of which permeated the museum. Despite the new amenities, visitors still asked for old-fashioned phosphates, which were big sellers.

Nearing its 50th anniversary in 1990, the Kansas City Museum staff began to envision a new future. The museum's board of directors had commissioned a report by the Midwest Research Institute surveying museums around the country and found that Kansas City was one of two cities in the country without a science museum. Therefore, the board hired David Ucko — previously at the California Museum of Science and Industry — as the new president of the Kansas City Museum to reevaluate all programs and find a new location for an innovative science center.

With this new direction, it became clear that many in the city assumed the museum would redevelop its plans to rehabilitate Union Station, a dream from the 1970s that never happened. Since the 1980s, a dedicated group called the Friends of Union Station had been working diligently to keep focus on restoring the building. By the end of the 1980s, the building was completely empty, and the infrastructure began to deteriorate. Tearing it down would cost more than shoring it up, and the Friends did their best to keep hope alive that something viable could live in that space.



An updated logo reflecting its multiple priorities shortly after Bi-State tax passed in 1996

Somewhat reluctantly, the Kansas City Museum began looking seriously into how it could create a science center within Union Station. At this time, a Canadian conglomerate owned Union Station after having been given major tax credits from the city with the promise of restoring or rehabbing the building. Instead, the conglomerate built Two Pershing Square. With no clear plan in sight for developing Union Station, the city of Kansas City took the Canadian firm to court and wrested ownership away, placing it in the hands of a new nonprofit called the Union Station Assistance Corporation. To create a space at Union Station that would include the Kansas City Museum's vision of a science center, the staff and stakeholders realized that major funding would be needed to make the building habitable. The historic Bi-State Culture District Compact passed in 1996 and represented the first time that two states cooperatively levied a tax to benefit citizens. The public funding was used to restore and renovate Union Station, and private funds were raised to create Science City.

When Union Station reopened in 1999, many wondered what would happen to the original Kansas City Museum in the Historic Northeast. While senior staff said it would remain open, it certainly looked as if there was no plan in place for the future. When would Corinthian Hall get its rehabilitation? That question became even more important when in 2001 the board of the museum voted to merge with Union Station Assistance Corporation to become Union Station Kansas City. The

Kansas City Museum Association, which had been in existence since 1939, was dissolved.

In the early 2000s, the Kansas City Museum remained open. It still had solid exhibits on Kansas City's history, and schools to serve. The loss of the Planetarium to Science City was felt, but the Natural History exhibits, looking a little old and tired, were still enjoyed by the museum visitors. With continued activity at the museum, a key question remained: What would Union Station Kansas City do with Corinthian Hall?

This question would linger through the next several years as Union Station — and Science City — struggled to remain viable. Suppositions made by staff and consultants in the 1990s didn't prove to be true in the 2000s. Union Station attracted one million visitors, but not everyone paid for the visit, so all that expected revenue to help pay the utility bills wasn't there. All eyes were focused on Union Station and whether it could survive; many were in doubt. If Union Station failed, what would happen to the Kansas City Museum? This question became more urgent as the years went by. City government began listening to those questions, as it had its own investment in the museum's buildings and grounds and how they were being managed.

In 2006, Mayor Barnes created two groups to study the management and finances of Union Station and the Kansas City Museum. Once the reports were done, the Union Station group disbanded. The museum's group did not; they felt the museum needed an ad hoc committee focused just on the management of the museum. This group became the Museum Advisory Board, and its purpose was to work with Union Station in an advisory capacity and prioritize Corinthian Hall. Their work together set the museum on a path toward a new interpretative plan and major, key renovations that would secure a dilapidating Corinthian Hall and prepare it for future comprehensive master planning.

Our journey on the life of the museum continues in the November/December issue.



Gutted Living Room of Corinthian Hall, c. 2008