THE JOURNEY to NOW

Eighty Years in the Making of a Museum
Part V: Restoration, Renovation & Rebirth, 2006 to 2020

By Denise Morrison and Anna Marie Tutera

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”
– Lao Tzu

In 2006, the Kansas City Museum took its first step on a long journey toward the restoration and renovation of Corinthian Hall. Christopher Leitch was hired as the new museum director, bringing vast experience as a professional artist, educator and arts administrator. Under his leadership and with support from the Museum Advisory Board, Corinthian Hall was made a priority: exterior masonry and roof restoration, new and restored windows and doors (including all art glass), an HVAC system, a strategic plan and interpretive plan, exhibits and programs, publications, community engagement and collecting initiatives—all accomplished to secure a dilapidating Corinthian Hall, build organizational capacity and prepare for the future.

From 2006 to 2013, the museum was active and on track, and resident and stakeholder participation were strong. Yet, as the museum geared up for comprehensive planning, the city recognized that it needed to step up and assume a larger role in management and public support to achieve the dream of renovation. In 2014, the Kansas City, Missouri, Parks and Recreation Department took over the management and operations of the museum, marking the first time in the museum’s history that it was solely city-owned (the city took over ownership in 1948) and operated. Anna Marie Tutera was hired as the new executive director, and a stellar team was assembled, led by International Architects Atelier, to create a multi-staged, multi-year master plan and begin architectural design for Corinthian Hall.

From 2015 to 2017, the museum remained opened to visitors with regular operating hours and tours, public programs, exhibits and events. Meanwhile, the museum staff and project team were working on architectural design, exhibit and digital media development with museum design firm Gallagher & Associates, visitor experience planning and institutional planning, including a business plan and economic impact study.

Core to all this work was the new mission and vision of the museum created during the strategic planning process. The Museum’s mission is to preserve, interpret and celebrate Kansas City through Eighty Years in the Making of a Museum Part V: Restoration, Renovation & Rebirth, 2006 to 2020
collections, exhibitions and bold programs that reflect the City’s evolution and spirit and engage visitors in unfolding stories about Kansas City’s vibrant history, cultural heritage and pride. The Museum’s vision is to be a hub of learning, creativity and collaboration, where individuals and communities innovate and inspire engagement and civic unity.

In 2017, JE Dunn began construction on Corinthian Hall, and during this process, the museum staff and project team continued exhibits, programs and events — in the community, on the museum grounds and in the Historic Garment District. Public funding for the restoration and renovation of Corinthian Hall was secured through General Obligation Bonds, and a new Board of Directors came together under the nonprofit Kansas City Museum Foundation to launch Making A Museum KC (#MakingAMuseumKC), a capital campaign and fundraising initiative to raise awareness and private funds for the restoration and renovation of Corinthian Hall.

In 2019, JE Dunn completed construction, creating a new, state-of-the-art building for a 21st-century city museum of history and cultural heritage. Today, the museum’s small but mighty staff of six, along with the project team, are preparing exhibits for fabrication and installation, led by Kubik Maltbie. Education and public programs are being developed, cultural events reimagined, and operational preparation in full swing for a café, soda fountain and retail store — all to reopen Corinthian Hall by fall 2021.

In addition, the Kansas City Museum Foundation is working to raise the remaining private funds and prepare the nonprofit to assume governance, management and operations of the museum by May 1, 2022. At this time, the #MakingAMuseumKC campaign has become more than a capital improvement project — it is an expansive action in community building toward social and economic cohesion and investment with the museum working to support the resilient and vibrant community it serves.

During this global pandemic, sociopolitical reckoning and economic crisis, the museum continues its journey one step at a time — a little weary but always willing. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “If you can’t fly, then run, if you can’t run, then walk, if you can’t walk, then crawl, but whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward.” All involved keep moving forward because they believe that history- and humanities-based experiences are needed now more than ever to create new opportunities for equity, justice, collaborative action and solidarity for the city we love.

To learn more about #MakingAMuseumKC, visit makingamuseumkc.org.