

Black History

The Architecture of White Supremacy Still Evokes Pain

Historians struggle with questions of how to preserve, present previously segregated institutions

By Jay Reeves
Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM, Ala.— Growing up in the 1950s, William Bell had to enter Birmingham's segregated Lyric Theatre through a side entrance, marked "COLORED," that was walled-off from the elegant lobby. He climbed a dimly lit stairwell to watch movies from the steep balcony where black patrons had to sit for generations.

Now the mayor of Birmingham, Bell recalls the Lyric's beauty, but also the way it isolated Black people.

The inequity built into The Lyric Theatre's very architecture is a painful reminder of the city's ugly past as one of the



In this Thursday, Jan. 7, 2016 photo, a woman stands in the doorway of the new Historic Colored Entrance at the Lyric Theatre, in Birmingham, Ala. Preservationists had to decide whether to keep reminders of The Lyric's discarded color line before they unveiled an \$11 million restoration of the 102-year-old theater, which had been closed for decades. In this case, they chose to highlight the history, installing a glass door with the etched words "Historic Colored Entrance" in the lobby wall so patrons can peer into the past.

how the Deep South has changed since the courts ended discriminatory Jim Crow laws.

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This photo taken Monday, Jan. 18, 2016 shows a wreath decorating a grave in the black section of once-segregated Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta. Opened in the 1850s as the city's main burial ground, the cemetery wasn't desegregated legally until the 1960s. Today, tours and educational materials highlight the vestiges of Jim Crow still visible in the cemetery.

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Across the South, people are struggling with similar questions: What does a changing region do with the vestiges of

shire, includes all-Black burial grounds and a plaque explaining that blacks had to sit in designated pews in New England churches through the mid-1800s. In Detroit, murals decorate a 6-foot-tall concrete wall built in 1941 to separate a new development meant for whites from an existing black neighborhood.

But the issue has become particularly acute in the South, where millions still remember living through segregation. More so than in the past, many older people and younger generations feel a need now to discuss the legacy of Jim Crow, said Robert Weyeneth, a University of South Carolina history professor who

specializes in preservation.

"It has become more complicated today because people are more willing to think about the preservation of the architecture of White supremacy," Weyeneth said. "Initially, no one wanted to save these things."

It makes some people uncomfortable to be reminded of segregation at the Lyric, but the mayor believes people must see history as it really was, even if that means glancing up at the segregated balcony where he sat as a young boy. The ornate theater was beautiful, he recalls, but Blacks up there could never mingle with the White patrons far below.

"The best seats were on the front row of the balcony because you could flick popcorn or peanuts down and it would land in their hair," said Bell, now 66, grinning at the memory.

"We should not shield ourselves from our past," he added.

Some other places where communities have had to come to terms with the physical reminders of segregation:

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most segregated places in America. But it also serves as a living history lesson, a symbol of

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back-alley service windows, segregated waiting rooms, dual water fountains and abandoned schools that once formed the skeleton of a society built on oppression?

Northern states have such reminders, too. A Black heritage trail in Portsmouth, New Hamp-

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