PRIDE in Heritage

It’s not often that you come across a job you feel you just have to have. But one that wall and ceiling contractor Brinker Team Construction Co., MBE, knew was important to it was the Museum of African American History, which was to become one of the most important cultural marks of Detroit and the largest African American museum anywhere in the world.

“From a cultural point of view, we knew what it would mean to us as a minority owned company to be a part of that project,” says Rodney Prater, estimator/project manager. “We understood the heritage aspect and knew the project fit the description of the work we did. To have been a part of that project says a lot about our personality and reputation and gives us a good deal of pride.”

It’s also given the company the 1997 INTEX Achievement Award, which is presented annually by the Architectural Contractors Trade Association of Michigan.

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In addition to the heritage of African American culture, there is also a heritage of family and craft. Both co-owners, Larry Brinker and Donald Miller, came from large families and worked themselves up from tradesmen to managers to executive owners.

For Miller, the lathering trade goes back four generations. There is also the heritage of Detroit, a major city whose deterioration has led it to be called everything from a “Midwestern rust belt” to “murder city.” But the city is making a comeback. The Museum of African American History is one expression of this comeback. Another is the Brinker team.

“Other firms might put a satellite in Detroit, but our meat and potatoes are here,” Miller says. “When we started the business in 1989, we made a commitment to the city. Detroit is a place to build and renovate. We’re going to live with it or die with it.”

The Museum Comes to Life

The museum was originally established in 1965 through the efforts of a Detroit physician, Dr. Charles Wright, who got the idea of preserving black history after visiting a memorial to Danish World War II heroes. The growth of the museum’s collections necessitated a new building. Through a partnership with the city, the museum was allotted a block grant to build a new facility in the city’s University Cultural Center.

The new $38.4 million structure, financed through the sale of municipal bonds and a federal block grant, includes expanded exhibition galleries, an orientation theater, classrooms, multipurpose rooms, a research library and a museum store. The museum’s continual presentation of major in-house and national traveling exhibitions fulfill its mission to present the African culture. Through historic, artistic, scientific and social themes, the exhibitions explore the struggle and achievement of both African and African-American heritages.

The Brinker Team’s contract for its
work on the 119,000 square foot facility was for $2.5 million.

“It was probably the most complex project we ever worked on,” Rater says.

On the exterior, the wall and ceiling completed traditional three coat plaster in conjunction with a series of tiered circular canopies. But the biggest challenge was the center rotunda area, the architectural centerpiece of the museum, topped by a monumental translucent dome. There is a very intricate three-tiered soffit which goes around the metal framing.

“It was a real challenge, for we had to work off a boom lift some 30 feet in the air,” Rater says. “There was no floor on the perimeter overlooking the lower level so we were just out there working up in the air.”

Complicating matters still further were the 6 by 6-feet acoustical ceilings. Except for the ones in the center, every single piece of tile had to be cut to fit the radius.

Brinker did all the light gauge steel engineering, design, layout and framing for this rotunda, much of which is clad with custom stone facing. One of the most interesting features in this space are the 4-foot diameter ribbed columns that were framed in light gauge steel and clad with carved stone. Studs were placed every 6 inches, stepping around in a circle to create the steel skeleton. Most of the framing consisted of 14- and 16-gauge steel to support the weight of the stone facing.

“The entire building is very uniform, so what you see on one side, you see on the other,” Rater says. He adds that the 317-seat theater created the same challenge in miniature, with the three-tiered soffit built on a radius.

The multi-purpose gallery areas, with their high walls and requirements for precise lighting to accommodate the paintings, were also a difficult challenge. Drywall partitions required additional bracing to accommodate the wall-mounted display. Also, above the ceilings, a suspended structural sub-ceiling was constructed using Unistrut
steel framing. Brinker also fabricated a series of 15-foot wide eyebrow arches that serve as canopies at the entrance. The firm did the fireproofing as well.

Because Brinker did such a good job in meeting all these challenges in a timely fashion, it was given additional scopes of work not included in the original contract. These included features such as the Unistruts, hardwood floors, finished carpentry, all the interior glass and the hand-painted flag baffles with 92 flags from around the world.

**How Brinker Works**

Pushing itself into new areas is typical of the Brinker Team. It’s basically an interior finishing group specializing in drywall, interior partitioned metal studs and acoustical ceilings. But it’s grown, on customer demand, to offer all sorts of other services, as in the museum job.

How does the company meet the multiple challenges rising from difficult, complex jobs and the requirements for new areas of expertise?

“We sit down as a team and do a lot of pre-planning on how to construct any particular project,” Miller says. “Countless hour go into planning the different areas, how to approach and execute the job. The foreman and project managers are all involved, so the materials, scheduling and just who is going to perform any particular task are all worked out.”

Miller adds that he looks it like a football team working out its strategic plan before it ever gets to the field. If we face a unique challenge we’ve not encountered before, we’ll send a tradesperson
out to another state in the union to research a special application and see how it’s been done before. I don’t know of any other company that is willing to make that kind of effort.”

Pre-Planning Pays Off

Another challenging job is the firm’s current work on the Wayne County Juvenile Detention Center. Brinker is doing all the metal stud, drywall, lath and conventional plaster work for a contract close to $2 million. A formidable task here is the steel security ceiling. Unlike drywall plaster, which can go on almost any which way and still be made to fit, the 1-foot wide 16-gauge steel panels have to be pre-cut and made to fit each particular area. Only one panel can go up at a time, and care must be taken not to scratch the paint core on this finished project.

“It’s a challenge to make these ceilings both strong and aesthetically appealing,” Miller says. He adds that this project, like many others, combines new expertise with old. These new steel ceilings represent state-of-the-art construction. Yet, at the same time, the company is applying $800,000 worth of wet plaster in a process that goes back 100 years.

In addition to doing quality work, Rater says, “We’ve earned a reputation throughout the city for doing work on tight schedules, coming through in the crunch and pulling it off.” Although the company will work overtime if need be, most of the timeliness of the work is made possible by the extensive preplanning. The museum project was completed over a one and one-half year schedule, but a $1 million contract for the Renaissance Center was completed in just 10 weeks.

Other Detroit landmark structures the company is working on include the new Tiger Stadium Baseball Park, the Ford Automotive Hall of Fame and the new Hudson’s department store in Somerset. The company does a variety of office buildings, high-rise apartments, jails, hospitals, churches and industrial projects, especially for the three major automakers. Annual volume is in the $10 million to $15 million volume range.

Who Works at Brinker?

Brinker employs about 17 in the office and about 100 carpenters in the field. The company is a union shop, and all apprentices go through a four-year training course plus 16 hours of classroom work. In an industry often characterized by a difficulty in attracting and retaining good help, Brinker doesn’t have this problem.
“When we look at possible hirees, we take a close look at background and attitude,” Rater says. “We believe that someone with the work ethic and eagerness to work hard will want to stick around and work his way up to the opportunities we provide. We have minimum turnover.”

Rater also emphasizes that, although the firm’s employees are primarily African American, it is truly an interra-
cial company that is made up of several races, including whites, Mexicans and American Indians.

“We look beyond color and see the person as an individual,” Rater says. “If he’s a good worker and has the right attitude, we want him on our team.”

About the Author
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