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# Why a Historic Daniel Burnham Building Sits Empty on Chicago's

## South Side

[Chloe Riley](#) | March 7, 2016 8:37 am

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Washington Park Roundhouse (Courtesy of DuSable Museum)

A historic building sits vacant on the city's South Side. Designed by famed Chicago architect Daniel Burnham, the 61,000-square-foot structure, called the Roundhouse, was first a 19th century stable, later housing theatrical costumes and sets in the 1930s. But now it just looms, cold and vacant, staring across the street at its sister, the [DuSable Museum of African American History](#) – another Burnham original which has tried unsuccessfully for more than 10 years to bring the empty stable back to life.

The vacant building may as well be a symbol for the museum's own problems over the past decade – an era ripe with grand plans which have now largely dried up. One of the first African-American museums in U.S. history, the DuSable has been financially in the red for several years. A lack of major fundraising dollars and low attendance rates have only served to jeopardize its presence as a culturally significant institution on the city's South Side.

Co-founded by art historian Margaret Burroughs and her husband in 1961, the DuSable was originally run out of Burroughs' home before moving to Washington Park in 1971. Burroughs saw the museum as a kind of glue uniting the South Side – an institution celebrating black culture and artifacts. And this during a period marked by great civil unrest for the city: The same year DuSable opened, *Webb v. The Chicago Board of Education* accused Chicago Public Schools of blatant racial segregation. White flight swept much of the South Side throughout much of the 1950s, changing many neighborhoods from white to black. Chicago native Emmett Till had been brutally murdered just six years prior.

"The color of skin is a minor difference among men which has stretched beyond its importance," Burroughs said in a 1969 interview with the Chicago Tribune. "The majority of people [on the South Side] can't move out, so we must work from within to improve the situation."

While the museum has undergone some smaller renovations since moving to Washington Park, including the 1993 addition of the Harold Washington wing – which features an animatronic version of the [former Chicago mayor](#) – the Roundhouse would mark a significant addition, nearly doubling the museum's size and adding long-needed amenities like a library, classrooms, new exhibit and administrative spaces and 600-car underground parking lot.

## 'THE PERFECT STORM'

Initially, plans for the museum's major expansion moved quickly. In 2002, then State Sen. Emil Jones secured a \$10 million grant. A year later, the Park District agreed to lease the Roundhouse to the museum – it was being used by the district as a storage space. The rent-free deal was good for at least 45 years, with the option to extend another 10 years, according to a 2013 contract between the two entities.

At that time, the museum estimated the Roundhouse would be open to the public by 2007.

So what went wrong?

According to Jackie Williams, the museum's director of development – the economy happened. Oh, and Barack Obama.

"It was kind of a perfect storm of things. The economy crashed and Obama ran for the presidency," Williams said. "So really, from 2008 to 2012, many of our African-American Chicago leaders were heavily involved in the election and reelection of Barack Obama. So we lost a lot of key capital campaign members."

Williams pointed to prominent African-American Chicagoans like Frank Clark and Jim Reynolds – the Board of Education president and the CEO of investment banking group Loop Capital, respectively. The two originally co-chaired the Roundhouse's major capital campaign, which has since been temporarily suspended, Williams said. Neither Clark nor Reynolds responded to requests for comment on this story.



The DuSable Museum's Roundhouse (Chloe Riley)

But as plans for Chicago's historic [Barack Obama Library](#) shape up on the South Side, the pressure on the DuSable to complete the building – and reestablish its relevance as an African-American landmark – becomes more real by the day. The location of the [\\$500 million library](#) has already been narrowed down to two sites, one in Jackson Park and the other in Washington Park. Both sites flank the museum, which, if it can up its game and provide a higher caliber experience, will almost certainly benefit from the library's presence.



***Read: [South Side to Host Obama Presidential Library](#)***

Though the DuSable turned an almost million-dollar profit in 2011, it has since been in the red. In 2013, it spent about \$135,000 more than it earned and similarly failed to break even in 2015 and 2016, according to Williams. The museum has also had chronically low attendance rates. In 2015, attendance dropped by some

18,000, barely breaking 100,000 visitors and finishing almost dead last within the elite Museums in the Park collective to which the DuSable belongs (second only to the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts, a free museum in Humboldt Park). Currently, the museum lacks a restaurant and cafeteria – fundamentals that would allow visitors to spend the day there and which would both be included in the Roundhouse expansion if it's completed.

Additional factors impede the museum's growth. Due to the state budget impasse, the DuSable has also been unable to cash in on a \$750,000 state grant which would allow the museum to repair its roof, along with other fixes to the building. The museum also lacks accreditation, the highest mark of distinction in the museum field and one held by many other Chicago museums, including giants like the Art Institute and Field Museum, in addition to smaller institutions such as the National Hellenic Museum in Greektown and the Chicago Botanic Garden in suburban Glencoe.

## LEADERSHIP CHANGES

For six months, the DuSable was without leadership following the retirement of former president Carol Adams. In September, attorney and architect Perri Irmer was hired as the museum's president. Irmer was the former executive director of the Illinois Sports Facilities Authority, the organization that owns U.S. Cellular Field. Four months later, the museum hired a new head curator in Leslie Guy, a former director of curatorial services for Philadelphia's African-American museum.



The DuSable Museum of African American History (Chloe Riley)

Irmer said the Roundhouse was "an important asset" for the DuSable, but said there was no concrete timeline for the project's completion. Additionally, she said she hoped to relaunch the building's major capital campaign sometime this year.

"Of course, when the Obama presidential center comes in, it will come into this very rich, cultural environment," Irmer said. "I don't see any institution cannibalizing any other institution. I think that all of us together make for an even stronger, richer, more vibrant cultural atmosphere and I think that will be a benefit to both the DuSable and the Obama Library."

### **'WE DON'T WANT OUR HISTORY TO START WITH SLAVERY'**

In June, just prior to Irmer's hiring, University of Chicago arts professor and DuSable trustee Theaster Gates proposed a committee that would work with two U. of C. departments to recruit new artists and curators to the museum. That proposal was quickly shot down after striking some as controversial – the implication being that the university might try to take over DuSable's direction and programming. (Gates declined to comment for this story).

One of the groups which spoke out the loudest against Gates' proposal was the newly formed Concerned Committee for the Support of Independent Black Cultural Institutions, which believes in preserving Burroughs' original mission for the museum – a mission they claim is more rooted in Africa and less in America.

"We don't want our history to start with slavery. Or we don't want it to start with the [Great] Migration. 'Cause that's not who we are," said the committee's spokeswoman Yvette Moyo, who's also publisher of the South Shore Current magazine. "We were somebody before we were enslaved and brought to America. And to start the story anywhere but at the beginning is leaving out a big part of history."

Moyo, who said her group has been meeting regularly with the DuSable, said she also has concerns about the lack of corporate representation on DuSable's board of trustees. In the mid-'90s, then board chairman Earl Moore more successfully brought in those types – people like Frank Clark and James Reynolds who had connections and access outside the museum's South Side reach. But that kind of corporate representation has since fallen off.

As far as progress on the Roundhouse goes, the museum's initial \$10 million state grant has already gone to renovating the building's exterior, which was completed in 2009. But the campaign still requires another \$35 million, predominately for work on the interior. As Burnham once said: "Make no little plans." But plans need funding, which leaves a question for the DuSable. Will the money ultimately be there to expand and sustain this South Side African-American cultural institution?

"Listen, I was born and raised on the South Side of Chicago," Irmer told "Chicago Tonight." "I fully understand the longstanding perception of the South Side as someplace other than downtown. We wanna be thought of as we are, which is an amazing, vibrant, rich, beautiful community and again, we're looking to capitalize on all of the positive attention that's coming our way."

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