

These Walls: OIC building

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The Opportunities Industrialization Center building at 400 N. Walnut Ave. (Brent Fuchs)

OKLAHOMA CITY – Situated on a small hill overlooking the Deep Deuce neighborhood, the neoclassical facade of the Opportunities Industrialization Center building remains one of the few constants in an area that has seen rapid redevelopment over the past few years.

Today, a block of modern new apartments is under construction just across the street from the educational center and a new \$18-million loft hotel is rising down the street.

“We use to come in on Mondays and we would have to step over wine bottles and people would be in the dumpster,” said Patricia Kelly, executive director of the OIC. “This area has come full circle.”

A historical plaque at the front of the building commemorates the site as the place where the U.S. Department of War set up a military post to maintain order after the 1889 land run until a territorial government could be established.

The 16,000 square-foot brick building at 400 N. Walnut Ave. was built in 1919 and originally housed the city’s Board of Education, according to Sanborn Maps of the area. The building is just to the south of the original Irving School, which burned down in 1937 but was rebuilt in stages. The two buildings were once connected by a passageway that has long since been sealed up.

Over the years, the OIC building has housed several state and local government offices. It contained the Oklahoma Turnpike Authority before the OIC moved in during the mid 1970s.

With its nearly two-foot thick brick walls, the sturdy building was also used as a civil defense center during the Cold War era, said OIC counselor Betty Thornton, who has worked for OIC for the past 45 years. When OIC moved into the building, the basement was still filled with barrels of dry goods and other food items marked “CD” for civil defense.

The area was once a quiet residential neighborhood, much of which was bulldozed to make way for the construction of Interstate 235.

“A lot of it just sat vacant for a long time after that,” Thornton said. “And now we’re in the middle of the city again.”

The OIC of America Inc was founded in Philadelphia in 1964 by the Rev. Leon H. Sullivan as a program offer poor minorities a way to gain educational skills and training. Today, the nonprofit has 44 affiliates in 22 states.

Charles N. Atkins founded the Oklahoma City OIC branch in 1966. The program was originally housed in a warehouse downtown and offered occupational training programs like welding and auto mechanics.

Today, the OIC offers adult literacy programs, as well as GED preparatory course and computer classes that are funded through a blend of state funding and private donations.