

# **BACKSTREET CULTURAL MUSEUM**

Renovation and addition proposal by the Tulane City Center







## Introductory Overview

The Backstreet Cultural Museum preserves and perpetuates New Orleans' African American parading traditions through collections, exhibitions and publications, public programs, and performances. These cultural traditions include Mardi Gras Indians, Skull and Bone gangs, Baby Dolls, jazz funerals, social aid and pleasure clubs, and other related rituals.

Founded in 1999, the Backstreet Cultural Museum features a permanent collection of Mardi Gras Indian suits, parade costumes, photographs, and artifacts. The museum holds the largest collection of Mardi Gras Indian suits, which are gaining recognition for their aesthetic importance and artistic power.

The museum is also the repository of a remarkable film collection created by the organization's founder, Sylvester Francis, which is the world's most comprehensive filmed record of New Orleans' jazz funerals and second line parades. The museum is dedicated to making available this historically and culturally significant film archive for education, research, and exhibition.

The Backstreet Cultural Museum is rooted in New Orleans' historic Faubourg Tremé, the nation's oldest African American neighborhood and the focal point for local parading arts. The Tremé is a neighborhood in transition, and poised for development built on the community's distinctive cultural heritage.

To ensure sustainability in this rapidly changing neighborhood and accommodate future growth, the Backstreet Cultural Museum seeks to acquire and renovate the property in which it is currently housed. The museum rents gallery and office space in the former Blandin Funeral Home building, an iconic institution that served the city's African American community. This building has not been modified significantly since it was originally constructed in 1932.

The rear section of the building is not in use because it is in serious disrepair and must be entirely reconstructed. Therefore, the Backstreet Cultural Museum's capital project will entail renovating its existing footprint and rebuilding the back section to develop a new multi-purpose community space. The museum's expansion will meet the demand for space to hold large-scale exhibits, community celebrations, and educational programs. Since Hurricane Katrina, many community centers serving the Tremé neighborhood have closed permanently, thus increasing the need for the museum's new community space.

Although the museum staff has attempted to make necessary repairs, the building's dilapidated condition will require fundamental improvements, including new roofing and plumbing, as well as modern ventilation, heating, cooling, and mechanical systems that will vastly improve energy efficiency and protect the collections. The facility must also provide for the handicapped according to ADA requirements.

Maintaining a steady indoor climate is necessary to preserve the museum's collections of delicate textiles and artifacts, manuscripts, photographs, and recorded media, and to provide a healthy environment for occupants. Controlling the indoor air quality and humidity in the existing facility has been a challenge because the building is not sealed and watertight. To protect the collections from moisture and enhance the property's longevity, the building's exterior will receive necessary improvements.

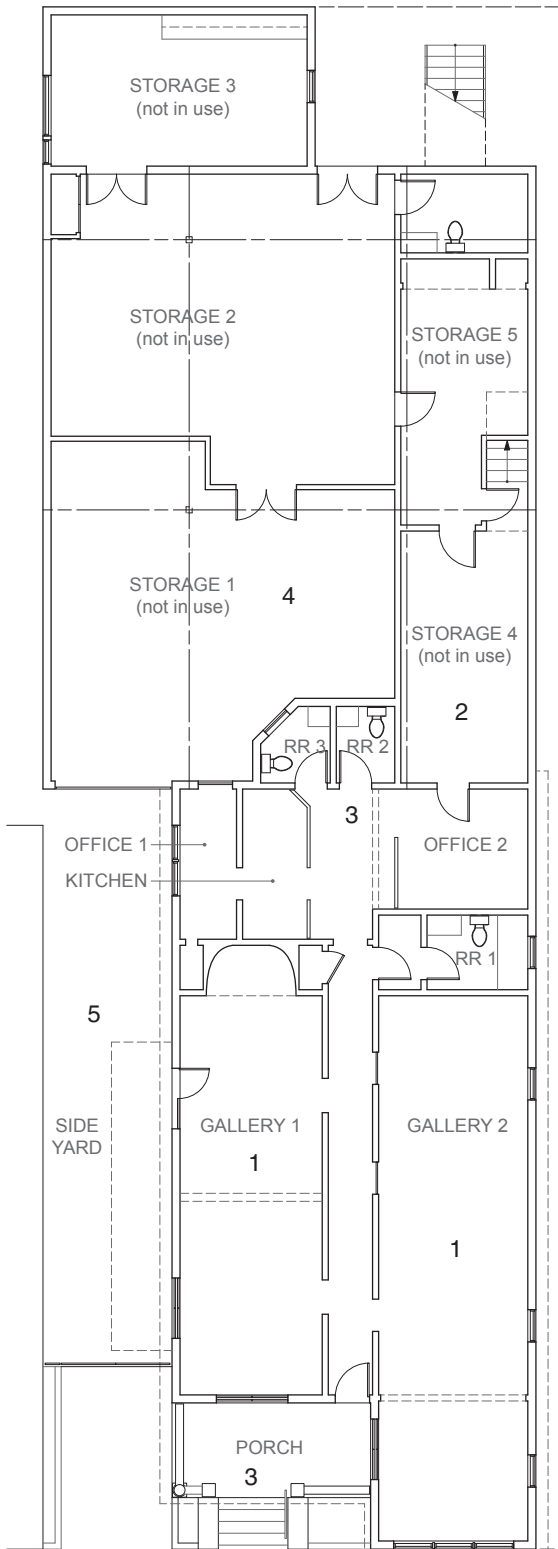
This renovation project will enable the Backstreet Cultural Museum to more adequately care for its collections and preserve New Orleans' African American parading traditions for future generations.



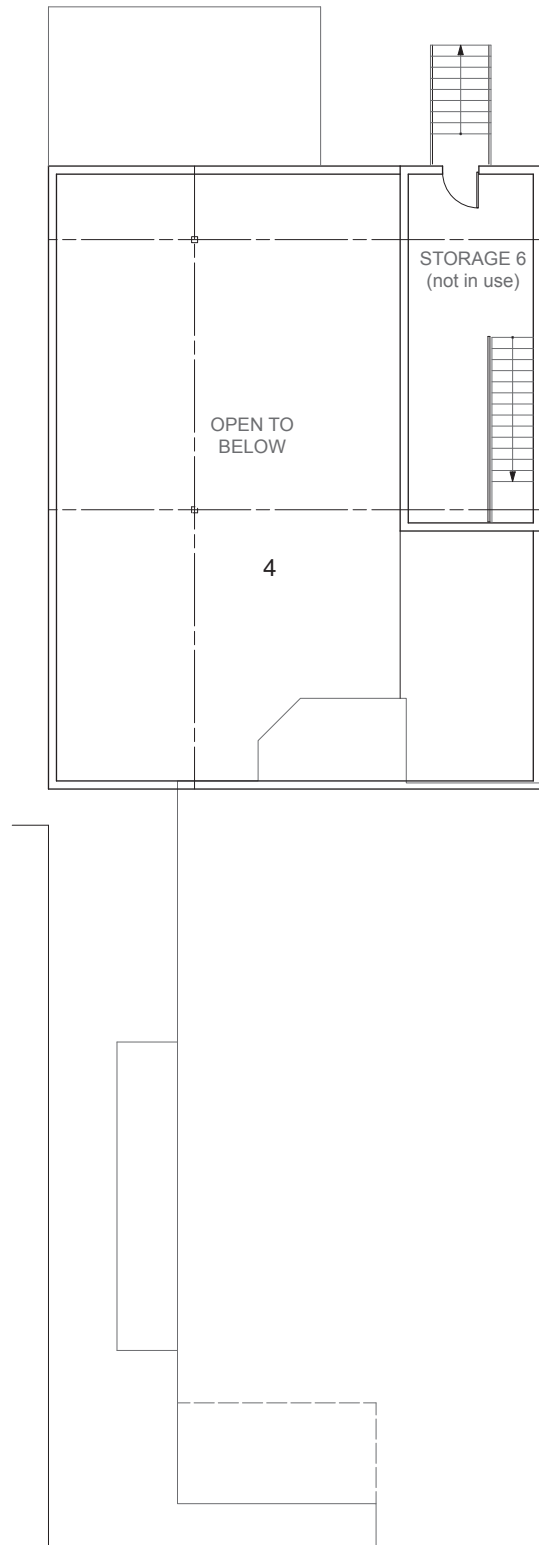
## Existing Conditions

The existing structure is comprised of a former residence and a large addition in the rear. The museum currently occupies the original residence section only, comprising galleries, office space and assorted support facilities. The rear section is unused and considered un-repairable due to extensive water damage and decay. The side yard is being used as exterior storage for non-museum related materials.

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1. Housing most of the museum's collections, the galleries lack adequate heating and cooling, lighting and proper weatherproofing.
  2. The primary storage area was damaged during Hurricane Katrina and is now unusable.
  3. Entrance and restrooms do not meet ADA requirements.
  4. The rear addition, while not in use at the moment, occupies a large percentage of the site.
  5. The entrance side yard for the rear building is currently used as storage.



Ground Floor Plan



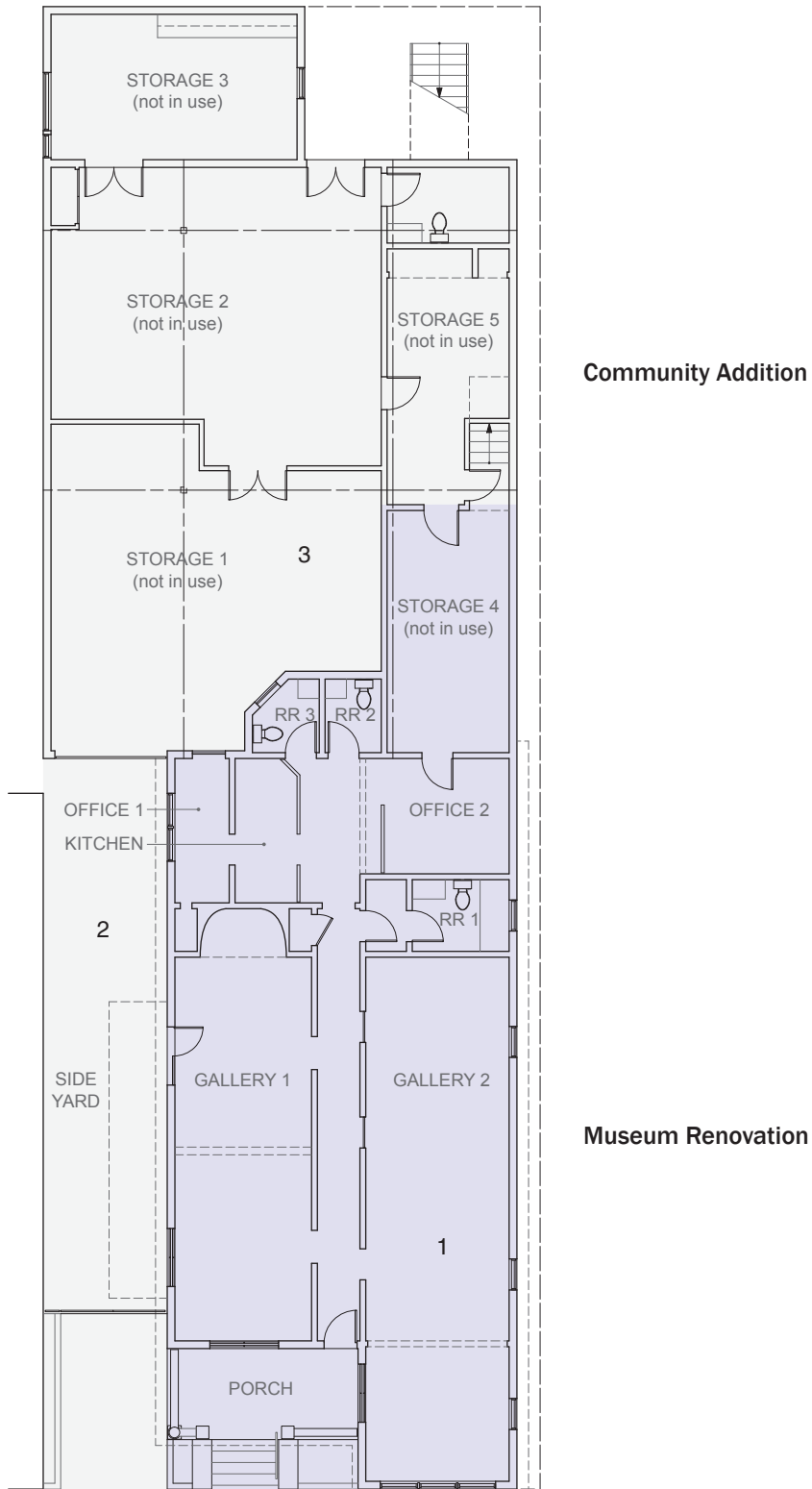
Upper Floor Plan

## Programmatic Division

Considering the existing division of space, the proposal calls for a two-part renovation and addition. The museum space is to be renovated and expanded to address space, environmental and accessibility concerns. The rear section is to be demolished and rebuilt as a community space, with accompanying accessory program. While maintaining the needed distinction between functions, the two-part proposal allows the project to be developed in phases or all at once.

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1. The museum will occupy a similar footprint.
  2. Side yard will function as the main entrance to community space.
  3. The new community space will replace the rear section and occupy a similar footprint.





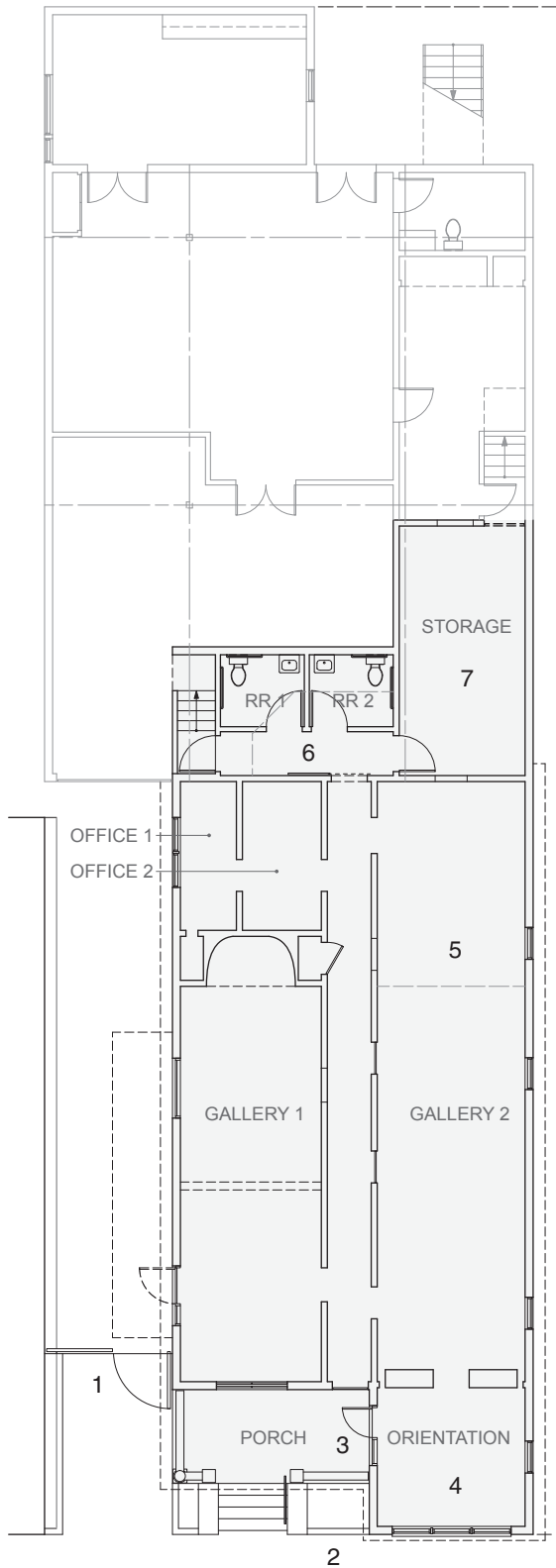
Ground Floor Plan

## Museum Renovation

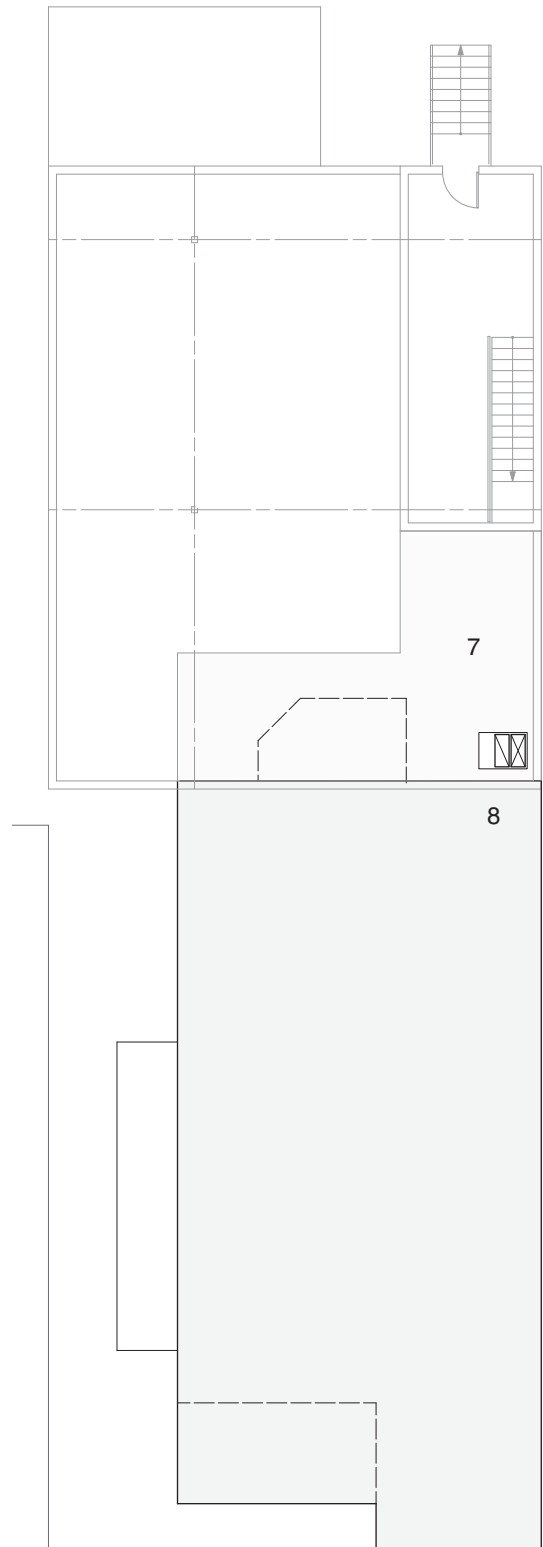
The museum renovation will provide a new orientation room located just off the front porch. The space will offer a more formal entrance sequence for the museum, while also supplying a location for gift items. The side yard will be cleaned and a ramp will be installed to provide an accessible entrance to the museum. With the removal of an existing bathroom, the Mardi Gras Indian gallery will increase in size by approximately 20 percent. New, fully ADA compliant, restrooms will be added to the rear of the museum, along with a doorway to the future community space. Office area will increase slightly and a new wall will be constructed to provide privacy. The roof will be repaired in the storage room so it can safely hold excess museum materials.

Minor improvements will be made to the museum's exterior to assure it is sealed and watertight. A new heating and cooling system will be installed to provide consistent temperatures, a necessity for the collection. Other modifications will be made to improve lighting for the galleries and increase the environmental efficiency of the building.

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1. The side gate will be replaced allowing easy access to the entrance at the side door.
  2. Exterior improvements will include façade cleanup and repairing planting beds.
  3. The entrance will now be through the double side doors, providing a more open and inviting space.
  4. Windows in the orientation room will have screening removed to allow for daylighting, while new display cases provide separation from the gallery and storage for gift items.
  5. Existing walls and bathroom removed to enlarge gallery, which will be refurbished with improved lighting.
  6. Existing facilities will be removed and new, fully ADA compliant, restrooms will be constructed in their place.
  7. Roofing will be repaired as required for dry, conditioned storage.
  8. A new, highly efficient, heating and cooling unit will be located at the second level for ease of ducting through attic space.



Ground Floor Plan



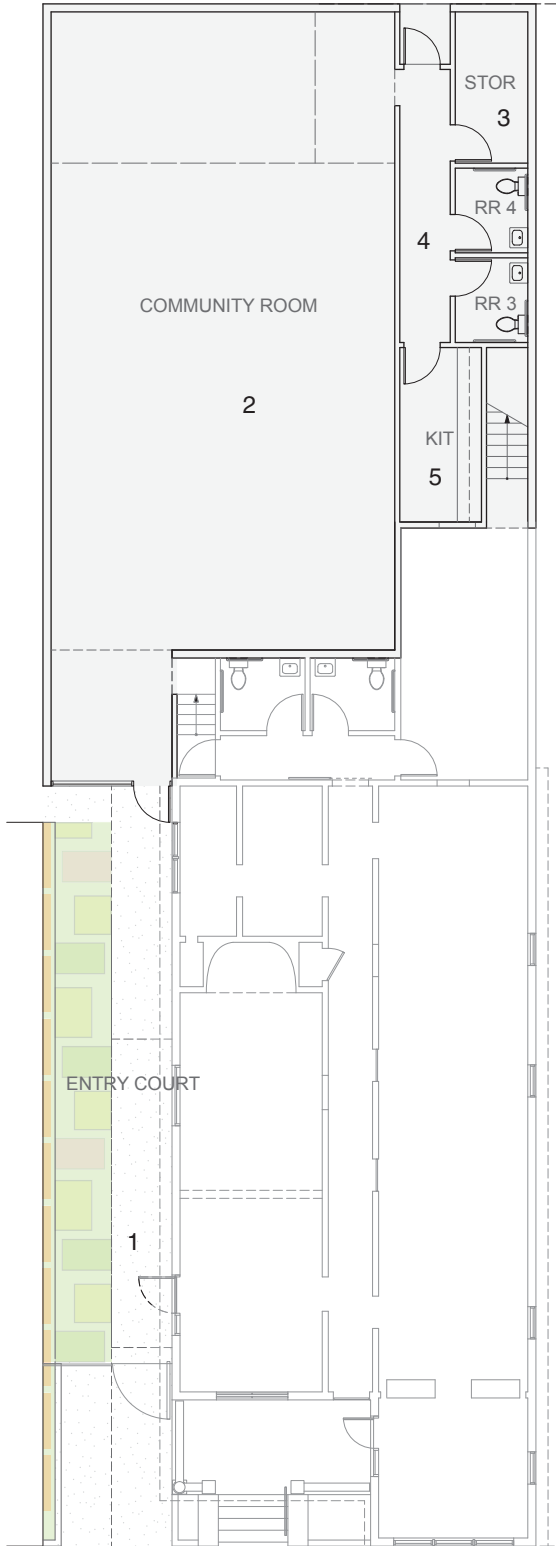
Upper Floor Plan

## Community Addition

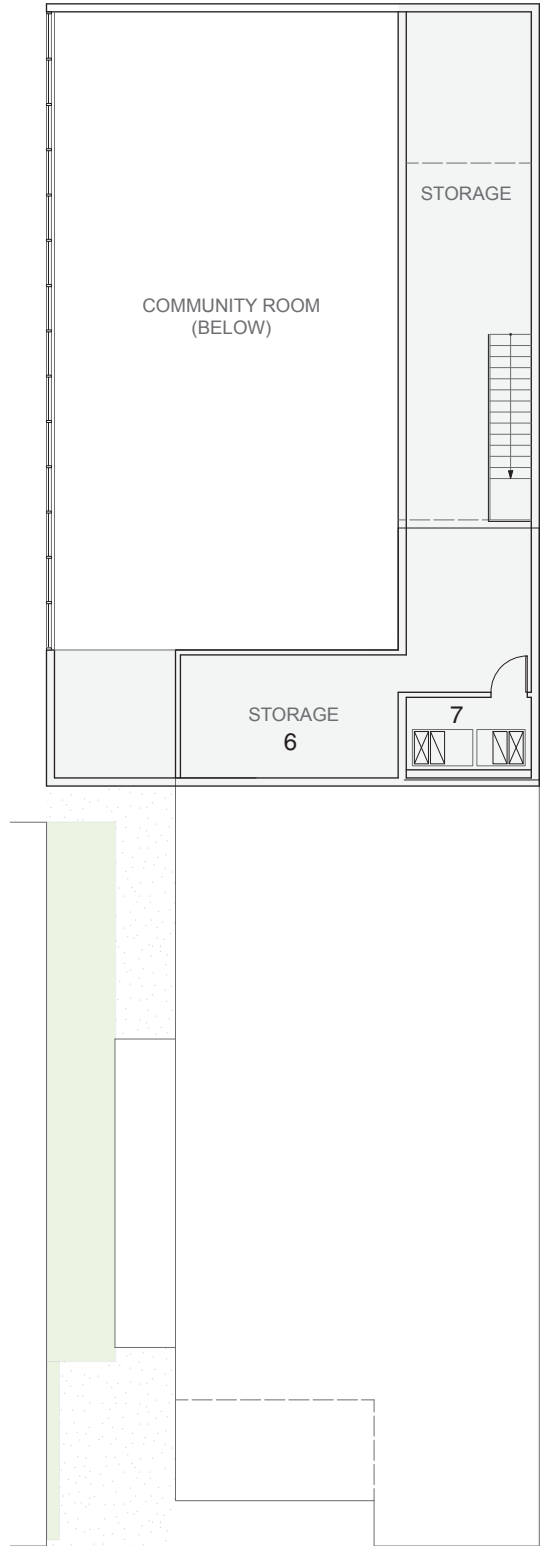
For the community addition, the side yard will be transformed into a garden courtyard entrance. The new community space is conceived as a large, open room that can accommodate multiple uses: community meetings, gallery exhibits and film screenings. Restrooms, storage and a caterer's kitchen accommodate the many needs for these functions. Ceiling rigging in the space will allow for easy repositioning of lighting. Above the service areas is an expanded storage space, which is accessed from the museum.

Replacing the existing structure, the new building, which utilizes all available area on the site, will be constructed using highly efficient materials and technologies. Heating and cooling systems will be zoned so the space can effectively be shut down when not in use. Daylighting will come from a tall, north-facing clerestory to limit heat gain while providing consistent light.

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1. New planting in side yard for courtyard-like entrance to the community room.
  2. The community space is a large, open room (28' x 52') with ceiling rigging that can accommodate many types of functions.
  3. Storage area for tables, chairs and other equipment needs for the community space.
  4. New bathrooms meeting all ADA requirements.
  5. Catering kitchen for support of community space.
  6. Large, conditioned, and elevated long-term storage for future museum holdings.
  7. New, highly efficient heating and cooling unit for the community space.



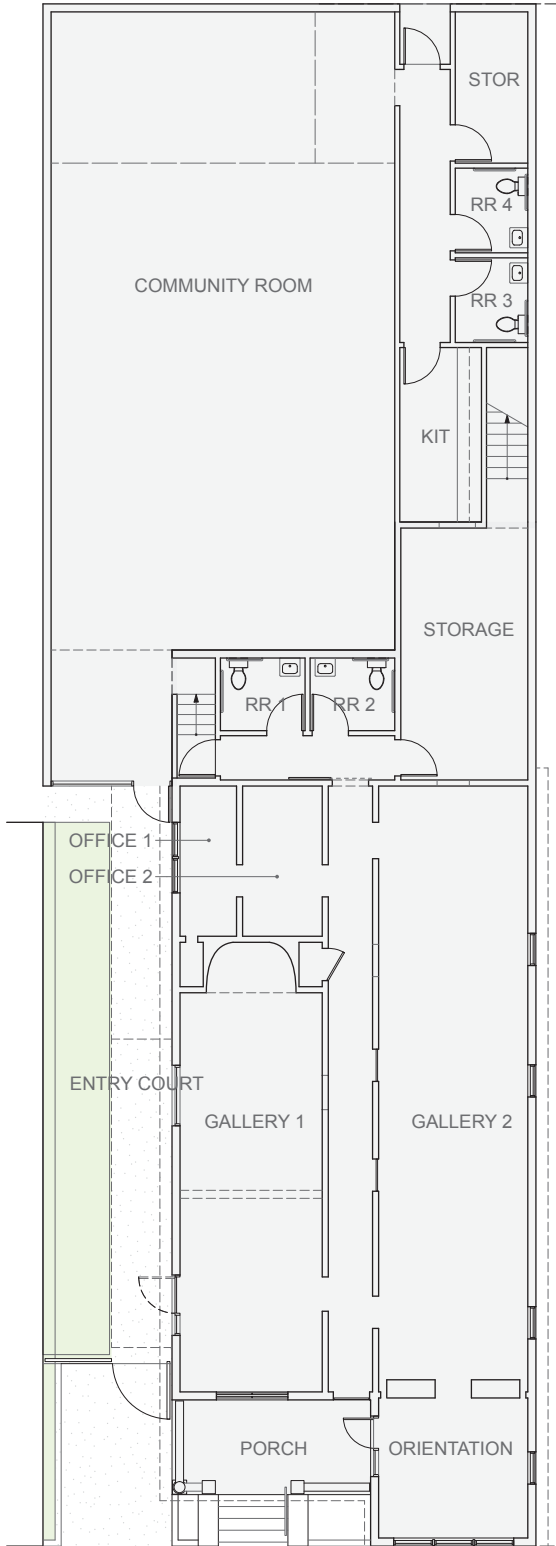
Ground Floor Plan



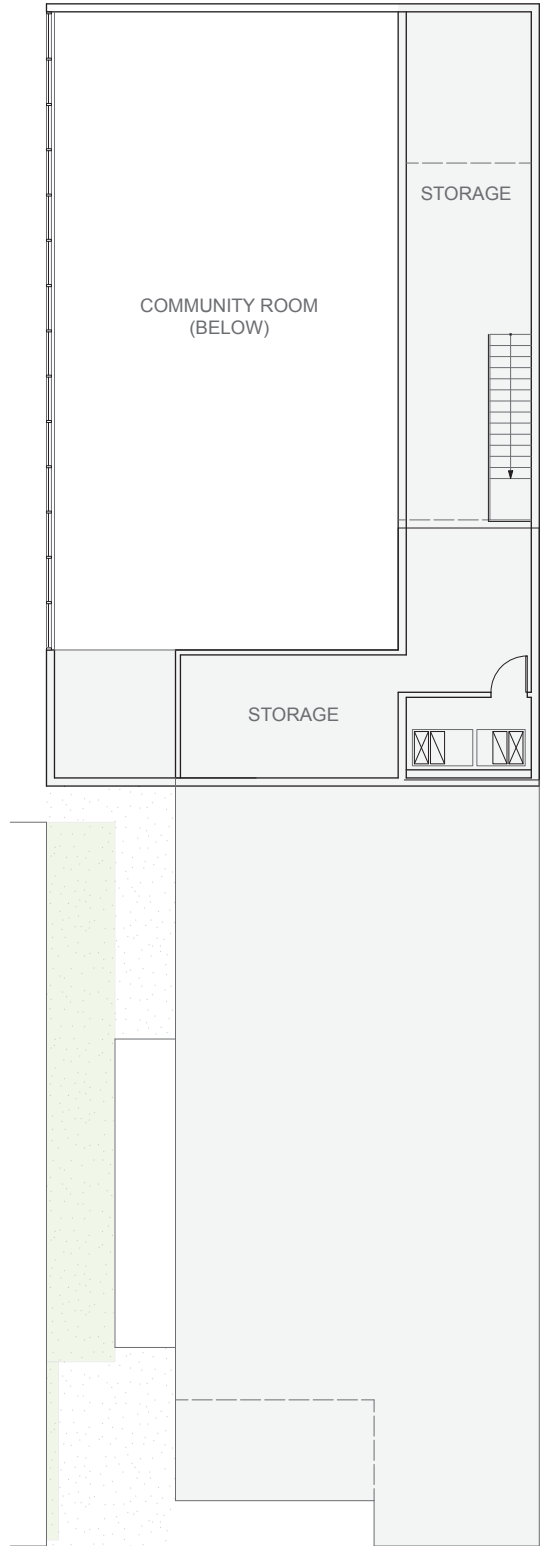
Upper Floor Plan

## **Complete Project**

Shown here as a completed work, the proposal respects the need for separation between the museum and community space. However, there are controlled connections between the programs to allow for sharing of services when needed: museum bathrooms can be used during a large gathering; the long term storage area can be converted to a viewing platform for film screenings; and, with the opening of side doors from the museum, the courtyard becomes a visual amenity for the gallery space.



Ground Floor Plan



Upper Floor Plan



Exterior improvements are subtle – planting, fresh paint – so as to not lose the current charm of the museum.



The landscaped side yard, like a New Orleans courtyard, provides a formal entry to the community room.





Conceived of as a true multi-purpose space, the community room can be used for many types of gatherings.



The community room functions as a space to showcase videos of Mr. Francis, and to host other film screenings.

## Acknowledgements

### Partner

#### **Backstreet Cultural Museum**

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[www.backstreetmuseum.org](http://www.backstreetmuseum.org)

Sylvester Francis, Executive Director  
Kimberly Waggoner, Board President

### Project Team

#### **Tulane City Center**

Jonathan Tate, Adjunct Assistant Professor, Tulane School of Architecture  
Dan Etheridge, Associate Director, Tulane City Center

Student Team: Adriana Camacho, Whitney Huver, Kristian Mizes, Allison Popper

The Tulane City Center houses the Tulane School of Architecture's applied urban research and outreach programs. Programs of the City Center vary over time, but share a focus on improving cities — particularly our home city of New Orleans — through fostering global urban research, the development of flexible and innovative urban strategies, and the provision of environmentally and culturally informed principles to guide the design and revitalization of the contemporary metropolis. An important aspect of our work is to ensure that, where appropriate, our research is activated through design and construction and/or advocacy and education.

As the primary venue for outreach projects at the Tulane School of Architecture, the Tulane City Center — along with our primary collaborator the Tulane/Xavier Center for Bioenvironmental Research — enjoys a broad range of partnerships with numerous off campus community based and civic organizations. Each of these partnerships provides opportunities for faculty and students to engage real issues in real communities and participate in the life of our city. Projects we have been involved with in the past have ranged in scale from street furniture to urban scale neighborhood planning processes. We work in the realm of both private and public spaces and always recognize the importance of thinking beyond the scale at which a given project is expressed.





