

# **Saving public housing's legacy -- warts and all**

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Eight faces, white, brown and black. The bright grins and lively eyes leap from the plain white banner that hangs from a boarded-up, ramshackle walk-up on West Taylor Street. A graying Asian matron, a Latino gent sporting a broad-rimmed hat, a brown-skinned girl in cornrows. The banner's caption reads, "The stories we will tell...."

With about \$14 million, and plenty of moxie, Chicago's Public Housing Museum will tell their stories, warts and all.

A group of civic leaders, community activists and public housing residents have convened to plan a cultural landmark that will be the first of its kind in the nation. It will be housed in the only remaining building in the historic Jane Addams Homes development in rapidly gentrifying Little Italy. Opened in 1938, the Addams Homes were designed by the famed architect John Holabird of Holabird and Root.

The Chicago Housing Authority says it will donate the property -- if the organizers can show the project is viable.

That's a tough sell. Public housing was birthed with the noblest of intentions. Then it went terribly awry.

Still, you cannot demolish history. The effort to get the drills and hammers stirring again on Taylor Street is off to a remarkable start. The cause is honchoed by Sunny Fischer, a respected nonprofit leader and longtime executive director of the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation.

The museum has been embraced by Mayor Daley. That's the same mayor whose father, Richard J., was vilified for erecting the notorious high-rise ghettos that housed Chicago's poor. That's the same mayor who is behind the CHA's Plan for Transformation, the massive and controversial reinvention of Chicago's public housing community.

The project is backed by people who sit in high places and those who toil at the grass roots. Political heavyweights on board include U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin and U.S. Rep. Danny K. Davis. Other notable supporters will have their own stories to tell. Former public housing residents who are backing the effort include radio personality Herb Kent, "The Kool Gent," who grew up in Harold Ickes Homes; Black Ensemble Theatre Founder Jackie Taylor and 27th Ward Ald. Walter Burnett, both from Cabrini-Green, and state Sen. Mattie Hunter, who hails from Robert Taylor Homes.

Crystal Palmer, a longtime public housing resident, is the vice president of the museum's board of directors. She moved into the Henry Horner Homes as a child. Palmer says she represents hundreds of families who say public housing is a "friend."

Some may see Palmer's life through a harsher lens. They see decades of the worst of America's urban ills -- abject poverty, squalor, violence, drugs, hopelessness.

Palmer, 47, moved out in 1989 after her mother died but returned in 1997 to West Haven, the mixed-income development that was built in Horner's footprint. "This is where I got my roots, this is where I got my support, this is my family," she said. She wouldn't live anywhere else.

Museums are about setting the record straight.

Did you know that by 1955, the CHA knew that its original strategy to house the poor in isolated phalanxes of 16-story high-rise towers was a terrible mistake? Did you know that in 1959, Mayor Richard J. Daley traveled to Washington, not once, but twice, to argue that the feds should eschew the high-rise model and make Robert Taylor as a low-rise, people-friendly community? That's according to research by D. Bradford Hunt, an associate professor at Roosevelt University and adviser to the museum.

Daley lost the argument. The rest is history.

The high-rises have disappeared. Chicago's Public Housing Museum will ensure that their stories -- warts and all -- will not.