

Planned museum would make public housing history

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The proposed site. / Photo by Richard Cahan

Sunny Fischer, bundled in a winter hat and coat, stood atop the roof of the last remaining building of the Jane Addams Homes in Little Italy recently, surveying the surroundings.

If an ambitious plan Fischer is spearheading succeeds, the building, at 1322-24 West Taylor St., will be the future home of a museum dedicated to preserving the history of public housing projects like this one.

If it doesn't, it's the wrecking ball.

Longtime Chicago radio personality Herb Kent, also known as the "Kool Gent," stood nearby, flashlight in hand, having trekked up three flights of stairs, past vacant and peeling apartments, dark and chilly in forty-degree temperature.

A block east on Taylor Street, a wrecking ball worked its way through what was the Jacob Riis Elementary School.

Nothing, it seems, is permanent in this Chicago neighborhood.

But plans to raise \$14 million for a museum dedicated to the history of public housing in the United States could change that.

The idea originated among members of a residents' advisory council which invited the Driehaus Foundation to get involved.

Fischer, executive director of the foundation started in 1983 by Driehaus Capital Management chairman Richard H. Driehaus, is charged with putting together a coalition of foundation directors, museum trustees, elected officials and public housing residents who want to help get the project off the ground.

The now-vacant, three-story building is the last of the Jane Addams Homes and occupies most of a city block. Part of the larger public housing development that included the Robert Brooks Homes, Loomis Courts and the Grace Abbott Apartments, it is built in a u-shape around a small central courtyard.

Chicago Housing Authority officials have given the museum's backers until June 30 to organize a board of directors and a financing plan. Otherwise the building will be demolished to make way for more homes in Roosevelt Square, the mixed-income development which has replaced the original Brooks, Loomis and Abbott housing units.

Museum organizers have raised about \$300,000 so far, including a \$100,000 donation from the Chicago-based Boeing company and a \$50,000 grant from Driehaus. Fischer estimates that it will take \$14 million to build the museum and keep it operating for the first five years.

In the meantime, however, the idea has garnered support from government officials and non-profit and educational institutions including

Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, 2nd

Ward Alderman Bob Fioretti, U.S. Rep. Danny Davis (D-Ill.), the Field Museum, the Spertus Institute and Roosevelt University. The Advisory Committee for the new museum includes noted Chicago author Alex Kotlowitz.

At the recent breakfast tour of the site, Kent spoke of growing up in the Ida B. Wells housing project in Chicago. "Seeing it being demolished tugged at my heart strings," Kent said.

The Rev. Marshall Hatch, of New Mt. Pilgrim Missionary Baptist Church in West Garfield Park, grew up in the Jane Addams Homes from the late 1950s to the mid 1970s and was also in attendance.

Hatch told the audience about reformers like his neighborhood's namesake Jane Addams, who worked to improve the living conditions of the city's poor at the turn of the century. He also spoke of Jacob Riis, an American journalist who drew attention to living conditions in New York City tenements.

Public housing in Chicago, Hatch said, "was part of the grand experiment in helping integrate immigrant and migrant families into the American mainstream."

Chicago photographer, historian and Driehaus program officer Richard Cahan told those gathered at the breakfast tour that the idea of a museum dedicated to public housing history elicits a "zealous response" suggestive of the mixed feelings that surround the idea of public housing itself.

Organizers plan to model the [Public Housing Museum](#) on New York City's [Lower East Side Tenement Museum](#), which opened in 1988.

The museum would feature renovated apartments depicting the story of public housing through the decades between 1930 and 1980.

The displays will be designed to provide visitors with an understanding of larger issues like public health and education through the viewpoint of individual families.

Like other museums of "conscience and tolerance," Fischer said the idea will be to spark frank conversations.

Museum backers are also seeking partnerships with area colleges and universities.

Fischer, who spent part of her childhood in New York City's Eastchester Projects, acknowledges that it is a big agenda.

"There are so many things this museum could do that would be helpful for conversations on poverty and race," she said.

Editor's Note: Chi-Town Daily News contributor Bill Healy made a personal donation of \$50 to the museum fund, but otherwise has no ties to the project or its organizers.