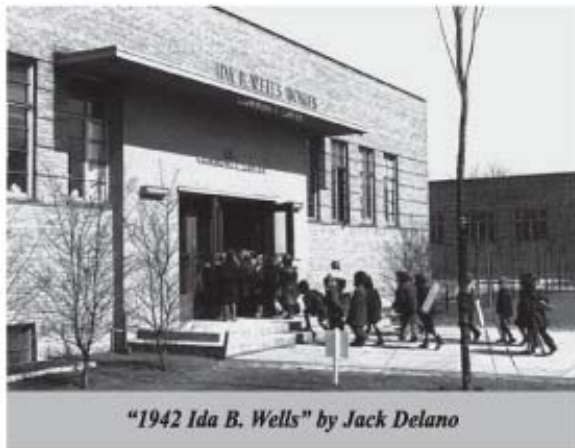


METRO NEWS



"1942 Ida B. Wells" by Jack Delano

HOUSING MUSEUM PLANNED

By James G. Muhammad

Deverra Beverly knows the image of public housing is not what it used to be. That's why she's working hard to bring her vision for a public housing museum into reality.

"There are lots of people who came out of public housing who now are people of renown, but they don't always say they came from public housing," says Beverly, a life-long resident of the Abla Homes who, with friend Beatrice Jones, conceived the museum idea. Today, Beverly is the museum's founder and chair.

She recalls the days when public housing areas were cohesive communities of residents in transition – working families who needed housing and a supporting hand from government to then move on. Due mostly to political decisions, conditions in public housing were allowed to deteriorate, she says.

After gaining consensus for the need of such an institution from resident-members of the Local Advisory Council of Abla Homes, Beverly began shopping the museum idea around to potential donors and civic leaders. That was about 10 years ago.

Today there's a public housing museum board of directors and steering and advisory committees composed of heavy-

weight philanthropic organizations, business leaders, and present and former public housing residents.

The Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) has committed to donating a building if organizers show the viability of the project by raising \$14 million by summer. In addition to raising funds, organizers are looking for people to share their stories, memories, and memorabilia about public housing life.

The museum would be located at 1322-24 W. Taylor Street, in a near-West Side remnant of the Jane Addams Homes. Part of the building would be refurbished to replicate public housing living spaces of the 1930s and '40s.

The facility also would include permanent and special exhibition space, a visitor's center, a museum retail shop, museum offices, and space for complimentary uses, such as an affordable housing research and policy center that offers educational programs and workshops. Independently leased retail space also would generate revenue to operate the museum.

"The idea for this museum is important for many reasons," says Sunny Fischer, executive director of the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation and a member of the museum project team. "It will help us to learn which public policies were helpful and how people created communities in

public housing. Without the museum, people will assume that public housing was a failure."

A former resident of New York public housing, Fischer says it's "easy to blame the victims" for problems caused mostly by government policies of disinvestment that produced concentrated poverty.

"People saw the buildings become horrible places to live without examining why it was happening. They didn't see the communities that used to be there," she says, adding that a public housing museum would be an additional treasure for the city as it courts the 2016 Olympics.



Members of Earth, Wind & Fire lived in public housing.

Indeed, public housing has produced notables such as legendary radio personality Herb "the Cool Gent" Kent; members of R&B legends Earth, Wind and Fire; activist Rev. Marshall Hatch, and many others.

Recalling better days, Hatch, a member of the steering committee, comments

on the public museum's website: "The custodian and his family lived in the same complex he served. The average family was a two-parent household, with one or both parents in low-level government jobs. Through summer time, the community was safe and secure; we children lived daily for the privilege of being able to go outside to play."

As for the future of public housing, Beverly and Fisher are optimistic that the CHA's touted Plan for Transformation will reverse conditions. The plan has eliminated high-rise housing and seeks to rebuild communities with mixed-income housing units.

Critics say the plan has permanently displaced many former residents.

"Transformation can work as long as they get input from those that live here," Beverly says. "I have a problem when outsiders don't make sure those who live here have input. To them it's a job. With us, it's more than a job."

"This museum will be the only one of its kind, and we're hoping that it will open up a lot of understanding about public housing," Beverly continues. "We want to get rid of the negative stereotypes."

For more information, visit www.publichousingmuseum.org.