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Public housing will be put back on display in 2010, when the new museum situated in the former Jane Addams homes opens its doors.

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## New Museum to tell old stories

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**Posted: 3/31/08**

The National Public Housing Museum, scheduled to open its doors in 2010, presents a fascinating and exciting opportunity for Chicago. Not only will the museum provide an opportunity for visitors to see and experience one of the oldest public housing establishments in the United States, it will also be a place where visitors will be encouraged to participate in a dialogue about culture, class, race and immigration, and their roles in adequate housing.

The museum will be located in the oldest - and last standing - building of the Jane Addams Homes at 1322-24 W. Taylor St. The Jane Addams Homes (named after the Nobel Prize-winning social worker) were the first public housing units in Chicago. Unlike most public housing, which came into existence after the passing of the 1937 Housing Act, the Jane Addams Homes were initiated under the Public Works Administration.

The museum will reconstruct the homes of a number of families and inhabitants; each unit will represent a different point in the history of the Jane Addams Homes (late 1930s-2002). Exhibits will include music and artwork, oral history and documents that detail the lives and the stories of the families who lived there. Docents will lead tour groups, discussing the history of the occupants of the Jane Addams Homes and tying history in to the political and social climate of the times.

Discussion is perhaps the most important element of the purpose driving the creation of the National Public Housing Museum. Not only will the museum seek to maintain and honor the memories of people's experiences with public housing in Chicago, but it will also be a place where we can learn the history and then use it to enrich our current understanding of public housing and of housing problems in general.

Chicago was among the first cities in the U.S. to establish public housing. Over the years, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) has provided homes for people from a wide range of social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. For example, public housing was not initially intended for the poor so much as it was used to remedy the lack of rentable housing that resulted from the creation of steel mills and other factory work in and around Chicago, the various migrations to Chicago for work in the factories and the return of veterans from the war.

The museum has many important supporters: Mayor Daley, Sen. Dick Durbin, Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr., the Field Museum and the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, just to name a few.

Katharine L. Bensen, secretary of the museum's board of directors and vice president of Conlon Public Strategies, says, "We're doing significant community outreach, primarily at sites around or near public housing. We hope to work with UIC and help finalize the plans for getting input on the museum."

Bensen discusses the nature of the museum itself, "It's both reflective and forward-looking. It's reflective in the sense that we're going to tell the stories of the families that have lived in public housing for many generations. It's forward-looking because we also have a 'think tank' whose participants are academics from the leading universities in Chicago, researching issues of housing, race and poverty, and talking about public housing in the 21st century."

Although it will not be the very first museum of its kind - the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City and the District Six Museum in Cape Town in South Africa provide two other examples - it certainly will be the first of its kind in the region. The National Public Housing Museum will undoubtedly be a highly original and valuable asset to Chicago that will teach and reflect upon our rich cultural history, and help generate understanding from people of all walks of life.

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