

Chicago Sun Times

CHA museum should tell both good, bad

{Editorial By Kate Grossman}

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Most of the Chicago Housing Authority's high-rises are gone.

Many of its residents are scattered to the winds.

New, mixed-income developments are going up, attempting to erase memories and rewrite history.

But where will the old history of the CHA go?

If we're lucky, it will live on in the National Public Housing Museum, proposed to be build at the site of one of the CHA's oldest developments.

For the last decade, since just before the CHA began tearing down its decaying projects, there's been a push to build this museum. On Tuesday, the CHA board is expected to give its backers a much-needed boost. They'll vote to donate a vacant building in the Jane Addams Home in Little Italy for the museum, so long as the group can raise \$13 million by December 2011 to develop it.

Now it's up to museum supporters to make their case.

They have a powerful one to make.

Without a museum, thousands of stories -- good and bad -- might be lost forever.

We might forget 69-year-old Deverra Beverly, a resident leader who dreamed up the museum idea with a friend. Beverly has lived since birth at the ABLA homes, which includes Addams.

"It was brand new when I came, it was just like having a community," Beverly said. "We had gardens, flower beds and a small community center. . . . We know there was lots of good in public housing."

Or this memory:

"I lived in Robert Taylor Homes from 1976-1995," Credell Walls wrote on the museum's Web site. "Despite the hardship and violence that has been advertised and spread via mouth and media, I miss my community. I've always dreamed about bringing my children by and saying to them 'this is where your daddy used to live.' "

Or this description of the ABLA Homes by former resident Darla Riley:

"It was complete madness," Riley said. "There were gangs, drugs, shootings, people kicking on your door. It was crazy!"

The museum backers plan to tell it all.

"We don't intend to avoid the horrible stories," said Sunny Fischer, director of the Driehaus Foundation and a museum board member. But "with a museum and education center, we felt we could expand people's perceptions of what public housing was, is and could be."

The museum, the first of its kind, will chronicle 70 years of public housing through the stories and artifacts of real families that lived in the red-brick Addams buildings along Taylor Street. It also will exhibit contemporary issues related to public housing, both in Chicago and nationally, including the CHA's Plan for Transformation, affordable housing, sustainable design and architecture.

The museum aims to be a national and international clearinghouse for information, stories and strategies around public housing. If it becomes a center to learn what has worked and what hasn't over the years, it will have served this city and nation well.

Remember, the CHA launched with high hopes in 1937, promising Chicagoans a better life. That ultimately unraveled, leading to the massive plan to overhaul public housing under way in Chicago today.

Have we really learned what went wrong? Are we really avoiding the same mistakes?

A public housing museum won't guarantee an end to our missteps.

But moving forward with an honest assessment of the past sure boosts the odds.