



The projects project

PROMINENT CHICAGOANS ARE RAISING MILLIONS FOR A PUBLIC HOUSING MUSEUM

When you have been a newspaper reporter or a photographer in Chicago for many years, you have had more than a few occasions to enter one of the now-mostly-vanished high-rise buildings that dotted the city and served, for better and worse, as public housing.

Osgood and I did so together one day in 1999 and the memory is still with us. We were writing about a teacher at a school in the middle of the two-mile State Street corridor that was the Robert Taylor Homes. Then the largest continuous stretch of public housing in the nation, it contained six of the United States' 10 poorest areas with populations of at least 2,500. The other statistics were equally sad: the Chicago Housing Authority estimated that \$45,000 worth of drug business was done there each day; 95.5 percent of the households were headed by women; 41 percent of adult residents had incomes of less than \$5,000 a year; 4 percent were employed.

We were visiting the apartment of one of the 7-year-olds in teacher Karla Kelly's class and when we asked her why her mattress was on the floor, she said, with chilling matter-of-factness, "Oh, that's for when the people start shooting guns. We won't get killed if we're on the floor."

It is safe to say that many of the memories people have of public housing are not pleasant. But not all was nightmares and hopelessness. For

thousands, public housing was salvation. It was home.

Rich Cahan, the author, photographer and historian facing you in the background of Osgood's photo, is standing in the last remaining building of what was the Jane Addams Homes, at 1322 W. Taylor St. It doesn't look like much now but Cahan, and many others, hope that this building will one day be the home of the National Public Housing Museum.

Understandably, this plan strikes some as misguided. As my colleague Blair Kamin recently wrote, there are those who might deem the plan "a gruesome joke—a museum celebrating hellish high-rises?"

The low-rise Addams building, built in 1938, was the first federal government housing project in Chicago. It has been vacant since 2002, ravaged by the elements. It will take a lot of work and money and commitment to transform it but the non-profit group spearheading the effort is loaded with important people and ardent supporters, including former CHA residents, U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin and U.S. Rep. Danny Davis. The mayor likes the idea.

Much money is needed, \$17 million. The hope is a 2012 opening.

For generations, politicians and developers have had their way with erasing a lot of the city's past; see Maxwell Street.

But those who lived and worked and slept in public housing should be able to have a place where memories can be evoked. The rest of us need a place to learn. □

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