

Nation's first, only public housing museum coming to Taylor Street

By Sheila Elliott

The kaleidoscopic image of American public housing will enter a new era as an important part of national history with the advancement of plans for a National Public Housing Museum, which will be located on the Near West Side.

In 2006, the Chicago Housing Authority's (CHA's) Central Advisory Council, the residents' leadership group, gave the plan its support. On Aug. 13, CHA commissioners agreed to allow museum advocates to renovate a vacant, 70-year-old, three-story housing unit—a fragment of the once sizeable ABLA (Abbott-Brooks-Loomis-Addams) Homes—and turn it into a facility to document, explore, and interpret public housing's role American life.

The CHA agreed to turn over the property in 2011 if the museum organizers meet specific criteria, said CHA spokesperson Matthew Aguilar. They must raise \$3.2 million by May 2009, another \$1.5 million by December 2010, and the rest by December 2011.



An artist's rendering shows a new façade for an old ABLA building after it is turned into the nation's only public housing museum.

"It's more than a museum," said Sunny Fischer, executive director of the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, the proposed museum's primary backer. There is "tremendous opportunity for interpretation" and to explain this aspect of the American experience, she said.

Rather than a deterrent to creating the museum, presenting the complexities arising from the American public housing experience is the rationale for creating the museum in the first place. Public housing is "a part of the American way of life that may need better explanation and understanding," she said.

Fischer is herself a product of New York City's public housing projects.

With the site secured, the foundation can move ahead with other tasks in the development process, including fundraising. Fisher said a \$17 million campaign is underway; museum organizers envision a phased opening starting in 2012.

U.S. Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL) and Congressman Danny K. Davis (D-7th) hope to obtain \$5 million in federal funding.

Local, State, Federal input

Architects have completed renderings for the museum, and organizers have created a 15-member board of directors, advisory and steering committees, and a project team. In the process, the group is tapping the talents of individuals from the business community, the arts, the Chicago and New York museum communities, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, the State government, the media, universities, religious organizations, social service agencies, and residents and former residents of CHA housing. Deverra Beverly, longtime ABLA tenants' leader, is the founding chair of the museum.

"I am elated because a lot had thought that we couldn't have this museum," Beverly said. "It will keep the good memories alive."

The National Public Housing Museum will be located at 1322-24 W. Taylor St. at Ada Street, with the hulking, three-story remnant of the ABLA Homes as its nucleus. While workers will renovate and restore the former housing project, those changes will not alter the museum's goal of presenting life as it was lived in the projects throughout the building's long career with the CHA, said Fischer. Officials plan interpretive and educational facilities along with limited retail and perhaps dining options; they also may include space for academic research.

Today, the site makes a powerful visual statement about the Taylor Street community's changes over the last decade. Construction crews and homeowners go about their day-to-day lives in the new Roosevelt Square residential area to the east. When completed, the museum will join the area's new housing and thriving businesses.

These contrasting images represent the most recent incarnations of a neighborhood that offers a mother lode of Chicago history. Fischer said that, decades ago, social reformer Jane Addams spoke about the area's need for public housing; when the first units in the project opened in 1938, they bore her name. The project's association with famous names continued when the builders called on Chicago's renowned landscape artist, Jens Jensen, to design lawns and parkways and tapped Edgar Miller to create the "Animal Court," a charming arrangement of animal sculptures that beckoned children living there to play.

Born in the New Deal

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The ABLA Homes were born in the spirit of Depression-era President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, with its belief that providing a temporary housing solution for people when their lives were in crisis was far better than permitting them to be homeless. Pictures from the CHA archives from the project's earliest years, which are included in Fischer's research, provide glimpses into the lives of residents and reveal an orderly world of pleasant surroundings where smiling children play in a secure environment.

Profound changes in America were afoot, however. As the 1930s and 1940s passed, Chicago began to face significant the demographic shifts, with thousands of people moving from rural areas to the city. The city's manufacturing base boomed and then began a painful era of contraction. Unemployment, expensive upkeep and funding problems for housing projects, education woes, and racial division all played a part in the post-World War II era, each leaving its imprint on the public housing experience.

By the time the final decades of the 20th century approached, many people viewed public housing as a world



Youngsters play on the concrete animals at ABLA in the 1940s.

permeated by drugs, gangs, violence, and personal frustrations. To others, such as residents and local businesses who relied on residents as their customer base, the housing projects were a vital part of the community.

Far from avoiding negative stereotypes, Fischer sees the museum as an opportunity to meet difficult topics head on, explain them, and invite public discussion. Reconstructed housing units, memorabilia, displays, and personal recollections will provide explanations and insights; museum backers hope they will serve as a forum where challenging truths can be discussed and better understood.

For some people, Fischer admitted, simply the idea of opening a National Public Housing Museum elicits a negative reaction. "That's exactly why we need the museum," she said. "Housing issues have not gone away." Neither have many of the other social questions that formed part of the public housing experience: single-parent households, unemployment, and poor quality of education, Fischer

added.

Balanced picture

"Presenting a balanced picture of these complicated realities is important," Fischer explained, noting that means presenting the happy times but not ignoring the more painful memories, too. For residents, regardless of which public housing development they lived in, the small units, stairwells, balconies, and yards "were 'home' and for many still evoke feelings of affection," she said.

The National Public Housing Museum will be a "museum of conscience," she continued, not unlike the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City, which shows a rough but important part of the American experience.

For more information, contact the Driehaus Foundation at (312) 641-5772. The National Public Housing Museum website is www.publichousingmuseum.org.



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