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Chicago museum to meld public housing's past and present

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BY ADRIAN G. URIBARRI

June 15, 2009 | 11:10 AM

The walls of 1322 W. Taylor St. are crumbling. Chips of plaster peel from brick. Rusty metal sheets shutter the windows. The third floor is off limits.

More than 70 years ago, this building was a vision, part of a grand plan to build the Jane Addams Homes. All-star architects, light on work during the Great Depression, took on a government-funded project to shelter the poor. Today, the building on Taylor Street stands as the lone remnant of the housing project, named for the Nobel Prize-winning activist.

Over the weekend, officials detailed their vision for the building's future -- as the home of the National Public Housing Museum.

The event featured an exhibit called "Inside Out," which chronicles the lives of former Jane Addams residents.

One is P.J. Fitzgerald, who sat by her mother's kitchen table, bought more than 60 years ago to furnish Apartment 281. She told the story of her life inside these walls.

"It started in August of 1948, when my mother moved us into Jane Addams," Fitzgerald says. "It was not easy then. They had strict rules, and only certain people got accepted."

They were single mothers, like hers. They were veterans and immigrants. The Jane Addams buildings would eventually house 1,000 families at a time over several blocks in what is now Little Italy. For the most part, Fitzgerald says, they were happy to be there.

Her building, vacant since 2002, is a ghost of its former glory. When built, the project was a shining example of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. To design it, the Public Works Administration hired a team led by John Holabird, the famed architect behind the Chicago Board of Trade.

For several years, officials have demolished every other building in the project, replacing debris with lush grass in this gentrifying neighborhood.

Keith Magee, executive director of the future National Public Housing Museum, says some nearby residents still question why any of it remains. He says one passed by on Friday and said, "We finally got them out of here." Another yelled at the Taylor Street building, "Tear it down."

"Unfortunately, public housing is often code for 'black,'" Magee says. "There's a stigma that's gone with it that needs to be dispelled."

Plans for the museum include seven rooms, each to represent a decade of public housing since the Jane Addams Homes went up in 1938. To counter racial stereotypes, Magee says, the earliest room will have furnishings typical of a working-class Italian-American family — a nod to the project's first immigrant residents and the neighborhood's Italian culture.

"Every race and ethnicity has come to realize the promise of America through public housing," he says. "We will be the narrator of their stories."

Magee says officials have so far raised about $1 million for the museum, scheduled to open in 2012. Most of its $17 million budget will go toward renovating the building, ravaged by years of neglect.

The model for the museum includes a modernist facade that screens the front of the building, still owned by the Chicago Housing Authority. Architect Peter Landon says his challenge was to lend the structure a contemporary, urban appearance without diminishing its historic design.

"What do you do? Try to mimic what's there? That's not right," Landon says. "To try to add on to that would have damaged the building. A better response to a historic structure is to do something completely different."

The dramatic contrast between past and present in Landon's design could be a metaphor for public housing's history.

Sunny Fischer, executive director of the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, is one of the museum's earliest supporters. She says she was inspired to help partly by the Tenement Museum in her hometown of New York City.

Fischer says one objective of the Chicago museum will be to showcase the humanitarian importance of public housing, where her family lived as medical bills piled up for her mother's cancer treatments. She says that aspect of the issue faded as housing projects became increasingly associated with violence rather than empathy.

"This was decent housing," Fischer says, standing near a tarnished doorway of the Taylor Street building. "The government was saying, poor people need decent housing. The perception became, it's just a pit."

She says that shift in public housing's image owed a lot to a growing drug culture during the late 20th century, but that politics also played a major role.

Mary Pattillo, a professor of sociology and African American studies at Northwestern University, says funding for public housing fell as the middle class and elites moved into suburbs, away from the urban poor.

"By the 1970s, whites had moved out of the city, so political support dried up," Pattillo says.

Federal funds that formerly paid for housing projects instead helped subsidize homeownership, she says. As more families gained access to suburban homes, public housing became a place for only the poorest of the poor.

Crystal Palmer, president of the local advisory council at Horner/Westhaven, an experimental mixed-income community on Chicago's near West Side, says she supports the museum.

"The perception is that public housing is a bad thing," she says. "It wasn't for numbers of residents that called public housing 'home.' It's a place where our roots are, our families are, our connections are. It's home."

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