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Architecture for **change** Summit 

This September 22-24, architects, affordable

housing activists, developers, educators and government officials will be gathering at the University of Illinois at Chicago for the [Architecture for Change Summit](#). Aimed at addressing the affordable housing crisis, the summit will be linking together affordable housing design advocacy with the affordable housing movement.

I discussed some of the pressing issues to be addressed at the *Architecture for Change Summit* and how they relate to Chicago with Roberta Feldman, an architectural activist, educator, co-author of [The Dignity of Resistance: Women Residents Activism in Chicago Public Housing](#), and one of the summit's main organizers.

Your background is in architecture and you teach in the architecture school at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and you also have a rich background in activist architectural practice. But architects usually aren't viewed as activist. What attracted you to the idea of activist architectural practice?

Most people aren't activists, architects included.

I grew up in a family of activists. My brother, who was 10 years older than me, was active in the Civil Rights movement. My father, a lawyer, provided pro-bono services to all the maintenance and service staff of his office building -- about 10 percent of his legal services. I learned that whether as an individual or part of a larger social movement, people have the power to make a difference. The zeitgeist of the '60s further fed my activist leanings. I became involved in the anti-Vietnam and Women's Rights movements, and these experiences, in turn, framed my activist architectural practices.

Architects tend to serve one client on a project, which is typically the "main stake holder." How is activist architectural practice different?

There are many ways to engage in an activist architectural practice. Architects who provide pro bono services to people who cannot afford their services may engage in the same practices as with paying clients. I use a different practice model, one most closely associated with the community design movement (see [here](#)). Like others in this movement, I bring a social justice perspective to my practice. I broaden my skills and strategies beyond those conventionally used in architectural practices to assure that the people who have the least control over the design environments in which they live, work and play, gain this power. This takes engagement with all of the "stake holders" including the actual or potential, so-called "users," which often in the conventional architect-client relationship is not the case. I further rely on an empowerment approach that seeks to leave the users with more than a plan or designed and built place; that is, with knowledge and capabilities to work on their own behalf in future projects.

The theme of the summit is to address the affordable housing crisis. How do you think the housing crisis has affected Chicago?

The U.S. affordable housing model is based on subsidies to assist people who cannot afford housing in the private market. Yet the numbers of people in need of affordable housing, many who live in poor conditions and pay upwards of 70 percent of their income for housing, or have no housing at all is at an all time high. This situation is particularly extreme in Chicago. A study from more than a decade ago noted that there was only one affordable rental dwelling for every two households in need in Chicago. Add the current financial crisis and the affordable housing crisis is even more severe. Foreclosures have increased dramatically, with poor communities, especially those of color having been the hardest hit. There are over 74,000 Chicagoans who experience homelessness over the course of last year. And all the while, the number of affordable housing units in Chicago has been decreasing. Gentrification has taken a dramatic toll and so too has Chicago's Plan for Transformation. With the demolition of most public housing units, the planned replacement units in the new mixed income communities will amount to a fraction of the demolished units; for instance, at Robert Taylor, 14 percent of the original number of public housing units.

In Chicago, it is not only the very poor that need affordable housing. Moderate and middle income people are

similarly closed out of a very high priced market. Households with the median income cannot afford to own a home.

In addition to the pressing need for more units, there is an equally pressing need for appropriate and inclusive housing. Let me give just one example: The number of multi-generational households has been increasing in Chicago, especially among those families in need of affordable housing; yet nearly all of Chicago's affordable housing programs do not permit these types of families, nor is most of the housing designed to accommodate multigenerational living.

A major issue in Chicago over the last decade has been development that has led to the gentrification of neighborhoods, leaving many poor and usually minority residents displaced. This summit is bringing together groups of people who typically aren't sitting on the same side of the table in this battle, meaning developers and affordable housing activists. How do you think this can be beneficial? And are there any built structures in Chicago that have involved this process?

I have witnessed effective affordable housing initiatives coupled with historic preservation, for example, in particular where various parties sit at the same table with the goal to preserve the unique historic, cultural and architectural assets of a neighborhood and manage its affordability. Without this collaboration, the typical profit- driven gentrification process would result.

[The Historic Chicago Greystone Initiative](#) is a case in point. The initiative was instigated by a coalition of North Lawndale non-profit organizations representing a broad constituency of local residents; was developed by these organizations and additional, invited partners including staff from the Chicago Historical Society, Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois, Chicago Public Library, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and Chicago's Department of Housing and Department of the Environment, with UIC's City Design Center technical assistance; is supported with initial funding from the Department of Housing; and is being managed by NHS North Lawndale.

In Chicago the term "affordable housing" seems to have lost its meaning over the last decade, in many ways replacing both the idea of "public housing" and the physical structures. While "affordable housing" as defined by the CHA targets individuals up to 60 percent of the area median income, which leaves many who find themselves in the most severe need of housing out in the cold. Do you think there's a better way approach to the question of "affordable housing?"

Housing as a human right, guaranteed by the 1939 Housing Act -- which assured safe and descent housing for all Americans -- has been implemented half-heartedly. Only 3 percent of the nation's households who cannot afford to buy or rent housing in the private market have been served by US housing programs.

In Chicago, various housing programs have targeted households from the very poor who lived in public housing to those with incomes as high as 120 percent median. Most recently, following federal housing programs and funding, Chicago's affordable housing initiatives have favored moderate income families and home ownership over the very poor and rental tenure.

To fulfill the 1939 Housing Act's obligation, we need to address the housing needs of all people who cannot afford housing in the private market. This would take considerably more funding as well as cost containment strategies that do not compromise livability and sustainability.

So we've talked about affordable housing, but the summit is also going to address the issue of sustainable housing. However, due to the "greenwashing" of the environmental movement, terms like "sustainable" can vary drastically depending on who is addressing the issue. So how would you define sustainable as it applies to housing?

I respect and fully embrace the environmental movement, but I believe that we need to approach

sustainability holistically to also include social and economic sustainability. We also need to consider cost effectiveness as we devise strategies to promote these interrelated sustainability objectives.

Attention to environmentally sustainable affordable housing -- housing that conserves non-renewable resources, is non-polluting, and minimizes other negative impacts on the earth's eco-system -- unfortunately, has been sporadic particularly because of a perceived increase in development costs -- which need not be so. The cost containment needs of affordable housing construction and life cycle costs and environmental sustainability need to be in sync. Unfortunately, Chicago's affordable housing policy that requires [LEED](#) certification, for example, does not promote such an approach.

Economic sustainability must be understood in the US affordable housing context, which, as I noted above, is based on subsidies to assist people who cannot afford housing in the private market. In our current funding climate, a more economically sustainable strategy would be to focus on both spreading subsidies further and creating less subsidy-dependent affordable housing strategies. Conventional affordable housing development strategies, policies and regulations would have to become more flexible and reoriented to accommodate cost-containment strategies while assuring livability.

Government affordable housing policies, programs and regulations do not lend themselves to social sustainability because they are constrained by idealized notions of the American family and its proper home, a single family residence. The results are an emphasis on the private life of the household; a narrow range of living options, especially when compared with the diverse types of households in need of affordable housing; and residential communities that are segregated by household type, ethnicity, race, income, age and physical and mental abilities. Chicago's affordable housing policies also all too often encourage if not require households to change their residence when their income, household status, age and physical and mental abilities change rather than attending to the social as well as economic and environmental advantages of residential stability to individuals, households and communities.

No thanks to BP, it seems that oil will still be gushing into the Gulf of Mexico for the foreseeable future. It seems that for many people this crisis has brought the issue of environmental sustainability to the forefront. And any move to create a sustainable world would be a rethinking of how and where we live and what we build. Do you think architects and developers are up for the challenge?

Absolutely. We have effective strategies that do not require sophisticated technological advances or huge financial investments. We only need to make it a priority.

At the end of the day, what do you hope the summit will offer in terms of a way forward?

The aim of the summit is to inform the participants about the strategies architects and their collaborators have used to change conventional housing practices and policies; that is, how to make appropriate and effective changes in the way we design, develop, construct and manage affordable housing. My hope is that the summit inspires people to get involved to make a difference.

— *Bob Quellos*

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Stop...

[@Blue13Chicago](#)**John Laesch / [July 19, 2010 9:16 AM](#)**

I wanted to comment on this sentence: "The cost containment needs of affordable housing construction and life cycle costs and environmental sustainability need to be in sync. Unfortunately, Chicago's affordable housing policy that requires LEED certification, for example, does not promote such an approach."

I agree that LEED requirements/certification do not focus enough on energy savings. There is a better way to go green than LEED. The German Passive House uses little-to-no energy. There are several Passive House efforts right here in Illinois. One is Conservation Technologies International, that builds green passive homes. The other is the Passive House Institute at U of I in Champaign-Urbana.

The biggest difference between passive and LEED is that Passive focuses on energy savings. If a builder were to focus on reducing energy demand through advanced building envelope practices and mechanical systems, the end user would have little to no utility expenses. This is an effort that is much more stringent than simple weatherization.

It is true that a passive home will cost 15-20% more to construct, but because there is a return on investment, one can calculate the time it will take to repay that upfront investment.

A low income family would benefit most because they would be able to put more money towards groceries. Taxpayers would benefit because their upfront investment in passive construction would mean fewer dollars spent on LIHEAP.

The USGBC has misguided quite a few policy makers in Illinois. At the federal level, the Department of Energy is more scientifically focused on an approach that targets energy savings through HomeStar and Build America programs.

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