

Housing residents face uncertain future

Story by Michael Neary
Photos by Jean Young

Stan West pointed to a pile of clothing and other items in the corner of the 15th floor on 1230 N. Burling St., one of the last three high-rise apartment complexes still standing in Cabrini-Green.

"All my belongings are right here," he said.

The 49-year-old West may not have an apartment of his own, but he is intimately familiar with the neighborhood of Cabrini-Green. He's lived here all his life; he's developed romantic relationships and fathered several children in the neighborhood. He's also watched people die here.

He said that his sister was killed in one of the high-rise buildings a few years ago and that his mother, devastated by the tragedy, died a year later. His voice - slow, smooth and clear - flowed with grief as he recalled those days.

West said he'd been staying at a woman-friend's apartment in the neighborhood when he was incarcerated in March 2007. He said he was released from prison in April 2008 and has lived in the corner of the hallway ever since.

"I did what I basically had to [in order to] survive," he said, explaining in general terms what landed him in prison. "I had to take things - physically take things. It's something I'm not proud of."

The problem of finding and maintaining good public housing may be taking poignant form in Chicago, but it ranges far beyond the city, according to Deidre Brewster, a community organizer in the city.

"This isn't just a CHA [Chicago Housing Authority] issue or a Chicago issue," said Brewster. "This is a systemic issue that America has got to take a look at."

Brewster said the problem of housing was particularly salient for residents with disabilities.

At Cabrini-Green, West talked with visitors working for *StreetWise* on two separate occasions recently, contending the respect he'd developed in the neighborhood made him a savvy and effective guide. He is one of many Cabrini-Green residents bracing for the day the building where he stays will be torn down. But since West doesn't have a place of his own, he faces even more uncertainty than the average resident.

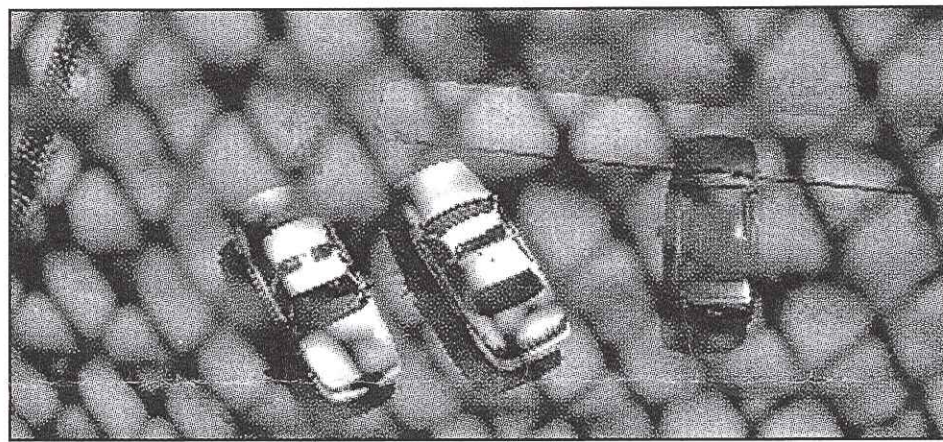
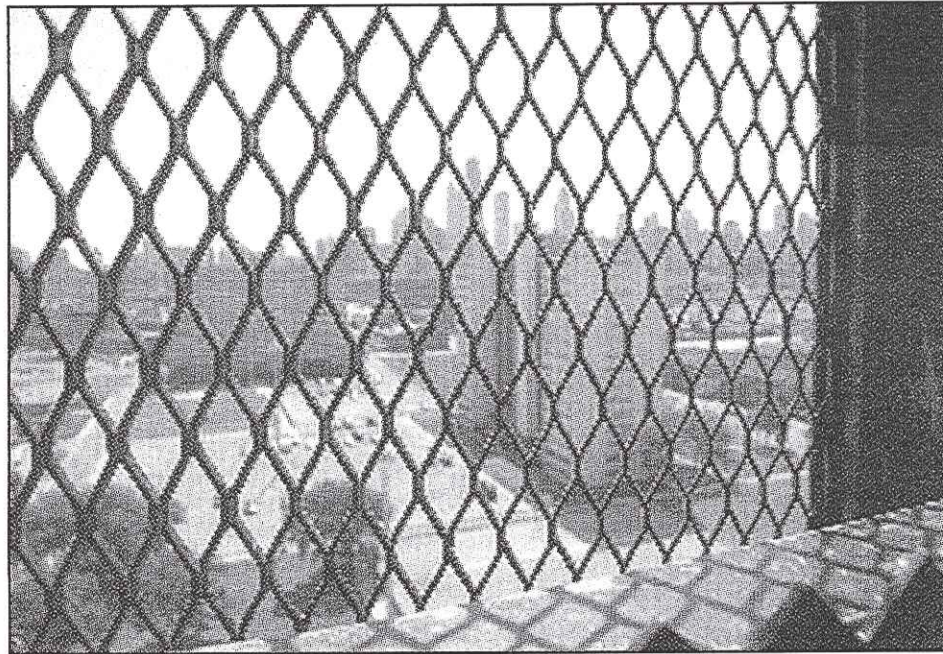
Cabrini-Green is moving toward mixed-income housing, following the CHA's "Plan for Transformation." That means the building where West stays will be razed soon - within a couple of years, according to a CHA official - and he will need to find somewhere else to live.

"Basically, I have no place to go," he said. The impending move will be tough on all residents, but those staying with friends or relatives - or in the hallways - find themselves in especially tight straits. Robert Sargent, 43, stays with his aunt in one of the buildings at Cabrini-Green.

"I lost my job," he said. "I resigned from my job to go to Wisconsin to be with my wife and kids." That was in 2005, he said, and when things didn't work out in Wisconsin, he returned to Cabrini-Green and moved in with his aunt.

For Sargent, the main obstacle lies with the dire employment situation surrounding the neighborhood.

"Economics kills us over here," he said. Sargent said that he has worked as a cook and that he has strong communication skills. "I'm good at stuff like that," he said.



On a sunny morning, this is the view from the 15th floor of the 1230 N. Burling St. building - one of three remaining high-rises at Cabrini-Green.

West said he searches for work every day but faces the tough task of landing a job with a prison record.

"It has to start with a job," he said. "Why would I look for a place if I didn't have a way of paying for it?"

The CHA's "Plan for Transformation" targets 2015 - extended from the end of 2009 - as the year to have about 25,000 units of new public housing created. The units will be part of mixed-income communities. By the end of 2007, the CHA had completed 16,172 new public housing units - or about 65 percent of the project - according to the online publication, *Medill Reports*.

One of the reasons for the delay is the cutting back of federal funding, according to Matthew Aguilar, the CHA manager of media relations. Aguilar also attributed the delay to the rise in building costs and a higher-quality design in units



Stan West

under construction than previously anticipated. He said CHA officials are also developing their connections with "public and private partners" to help fund the project.

Extending the deadline, Aguilar contended, will allow the CHA to benefit from new work requirements for residents, since employment would increase the amount of rent they are able to pay. He said the CHA will also continue to pursue grant money from the MacArthur

Foundation and other organizations and will lease vacant land.

Funding is an issue that weighs heavily on the minds of those following the plan.

"That's where a lot of people are very nervous," said Janet Smith, an associate professor in the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "The money isn't there, necessarily." Smith, who has conducted extensive research on public housing, co-edited the 2006 book, *Where Are Poor People to Live?: Transforming Public Housing Communities*.

As for those staying in public housing without leases, Aguilar said the CHA has encountered a number of them during the relocation process, though he did not have an estimate.

"Certainly we've come across squatters and non-lease-holders," said Aguilar. He added that the CHA works with the Chicago Department of Human Services to try to locate shelter and other resources for them.

Even residents with their own apartments don't want to wait until they're relocated by CHA, according to Norris Butler, 28. Butler lives in a three-bedroom apartment with his wife and two sons, ages 10 and 11. The apartment is tucked in a corner of the 15th floor of the building on Burling Street, on the opposite end of the hallway where West stays. Like many of the residents, Butler has spent his whole life at Cabrini-Green, and he talks about moving with an already-acute sense of nostalgia.

"I wouldn't give it up for the world, but it's going to go," he said of the building.

He said he and his family are already searching for a place before they find

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Richard Cahan, program officer for The Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, surveys the site of the planned public housing museum during a June tour.

A look at the proposed public housing museum

Story and photos by Michael Neary

Miniature flashlights in hand, a group of advocates for the nascent National Public Housing Museum probed the dusty, cavernous corners of the last Jane Addams building on Taylor Street as if they were excavators. And excavation, of a kind, is exactly what the group has in mind.

Organizers planning the museum to commemorate public housing say they want to bring to daylight an issue that's often relegated to the shadows - or to the courts.

"We have said, 'It's such a distasteful subject, we're going to let the courts decide,'" said Richard Cahan, program officer for The Richard H. Driehaus Foundation and a museum supporter. Cahan spoke before a June 5 tour of the last building in the 70-year-old Jane Addams Homes, 1322 W. Taylor St. That's where supporters hope to create a National Public Housing Museum, which would be the first such museum in the country. They're busy exploring other museums - particularly The Lower Eastside Tenement Museum in New York - as they conceive possible designs.

Cahan and other museum supporters say they want to carve a space for discussion of public housing in a climate where it is diminishing, giving way to "mixed-income" buildings that include free-market units as well as federally-subsidized ones. While they stop short of forging a policy position, they do call themselves advocates.

"Even if we don't do any overt advocacy, we're advocating," Cahan said.

So far, the museum's literature emphasizes public housing's deeper past, though supporters say the current conditions will also gain a candid representation.

The photographs on the brochure and on the group's Web site come from the 1950s. One contains a scene of four children frolicking atop a mammoth animal sculpture at the Jane Addams Homes, while another reveals five children romping (with one on a bicycle) on an elevated fenced-in sidewalk at Loomis Courts. The first group of children is white, reflecting the legislated racial quotas of the time. The second group's ethnicity is less easily characterized.

Sunny Fischer, a member of the museum project's board of directors and steering committee, said she does not want the museum to look away from the racial discrimination or other tortured turns of public housing, even as it celebrates the families who have lived in the units.

The Concept

"One of the things we want to do with the museum is to connect the past with what's happening right now," noted Fischer, who said Deverra

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Beverly, local advisory council president for ABLA Homes, initially presented the idea for a museum.

Before the tour in June, Fischer, the executive director of The Richard Driehaus Foundation, recalled visiting two museums in Georgia where the docents "never once mentioned slavery."

But while she wants the museum to expose the injustices associated with public housing, she also says she wants it to show public housing's successes.

"We would be doing society a real disservice if we said, 'We tried public housing and it failed,'" she said at the meeting.

Fischer, who herself once lived in public housing in Eastchester, New York, envisions recreated apartments from each of the seven decades in which public housing has existed in Chicago. She said planners may try, for instance, to recapture a snatch of time in the life of a family on the day Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. They might also try to reconstruct an account sketched by a former resident who recalled the day his mother died, during a blizzard, as an ambulance failed to penetrate the heavy snowfall on the way to his apartment.

A current public housing resident not associated with the museum thinks the idea is a good one. Norris Butler, who lives with his wife and two sons in one of the last three Cabrini-Green high-rise apartment buildings, said the museum can rekindle memories for residents who used to live in public housing. He said former residents, years down the road, could visit an exhibit and say, "I used to live here; I used to hang out here."

"People need history," Butler added.

The Logistics

Fischer estimated the "hard costs" of the museum, or the expenses surrounding its construction, at about \$13 million. She also noted some deadlines, extended from earlier ones, set by the Chicago Housing Authority.

She said about \$3.1 million had to be raised by May 31, 2009. Organizers must reach half the hard costs - \$6.5 million - in summer 2010, and the remaining \$6.5 million 12 to 14 months later.

So far, museum proponents have received donations from a host of foundations for organizing costs. These include \$50,000 from the Joyce Foundation to fund an executive director, \$50,000 in grant money from the Driehaus Foundation and \$100,000 from the Boeing Foundation.

About two-thirds of the remaining Jane Addams building will be devoted to the museum if plans ultimately work out, said Fischer. The remaining third would harbor retail outlets.

Susanne Schnell, the project director of the museum's planning phase, said museum supporters had chosen Peter Landon of Landon Bone Baker Architects to head up the construction. Schnell noted the firm's ability to keep costs reasonable and to accentuate the identity of a building, particularly when "others wouldn't have seen the beauty and value of it."

The Reservations

"Not everyone," Fischer said, "thinks it is a fabulous idea."

She said museum supporters have held several community meetings in the neighborhood and have contacted a host of organizations. During that whole process she said a person asked, "Why do you want to build a memorial to unwed mothers?"

Others harbor reservations for vastly different reasons.

Janet L. Smith, the co-director of the Nathalie P. Voorhees Center for Neighborhood and Community Improvement at the University of Illinois in Chicago, said the energy and political clout - as well as the money - could be devoted more effectively to ameliorating housing conditions. She said she could support such a project if there were already enough direct efforts underway to improve affordable housing, but that, she said, is not the case.

"There's a lot of energy going into this [museum project]," she said. "There's a lot of fund-raising, there's a lot of political clout being used, and to me it's like, why aren't we putting that into making sure there's more housing for people?"

The names of Mayor Richard M. Daley, U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin and U.S. Rep. Danny K. Davis dot a long list of powerful supporters, political and otherwise. Smith said that she would also like to see a firmer policy position associated with the museum. She cited a phrase on the project's brochure that calls for a "lively forum where we could discuss the key issues surrounding public housing - including race, class, the culture, citizenship, immigration, and the still-burning question of the role of government in the creation of decent housing for all."

"It's saying we believe in a debate about it," said Smith, an associate professor in the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at UIC. "I'd rather have a stronger statement."

Fischer said planners stopped short of a more direct statement through what she called an "uneasy consensus" in order to attract a larger audience - including visitors who might disagree with the whole concept of public housing. "What we're trying to do is say, 'If you disagree, let's discuss this,'" Fischer said. "We're trying to prevent people from saying, 'We're not going to set foot in this place.'"

A housing museum and a housing crisis

Smith says the sort of discussion a museum might spark would have been more valuable 10 years ago, when the Chicago Housing Authority was still in the midst of forging its "Plan for Transformation" - a plan that ultimately called for more mixed-income housing and resulted in the tearing down of much of the city's public housing.

A decade ago, the economy also created a better climate for hatching plans to create affordable housing, Smith said.

"The economic conditions were better, and developers were hungry to do development," she said. That, she explained, created the chance to say, "You know what we really believe in is mixed-income housing. We're not going to just do it in public housing, which represents [about] 4 percent of our housing stock. Let's do it in any new development that comes into place."

Smith said that now, with a bleak overall economy, a disastrous housing environment and public housing buildings already torn down, important chances for influencing policy have slipped away.

In her UIC office, Smith also spoke passionately about the need to preserve public housing and to scrutinize the social conditions - like racism - that created deep disparities and that preserve those disparities in the present. She noted that the description in the museum's brochure stops in the 1960s, just when public housing became largely African-American, thanks to a racism that prevented black residents from living elsewhere. A museum, Smith suggested, will not illuminate those still persistent



[above] The last standing building of the 70-year-old Jane Addams Homes may provide a site for a National Public Housing Museum



[right] Jennifer Mau, left, operations and administration consultant for the planned National Public Housing Museum, talks with Sunny Fischer on the roof of the last standing Jane Addams building - the possible site of the museum. Fischer is the executive director of The Richard H. Driehaus Foundation.

injustices if it fixes its gaze too deeply on the past.

But Smith considered a potentially positive outcome from the museum as well.

The housing crisis, though it discourages new construction, drops the whole issue of affordable housing on the doorsteps of the middle class. Housing advocates, says Smith, can raise consciousness by taking advantage "of the terrible housing conditions that are basically affecting everybody now."

And now that the public housing buildings have been torn down?

"Who knows," said Smith. "A lot of these condos, they're not selling. They're going to have to do something with them."

The culture of city life

Crystal Palmer agrees that for the museum to work it must tell not only the residents' stories, but also the misfires that occurred throughout public housing's history - particularly in the later chapters.

"It's not only going to tell the story of our lives," said Palmer, Henry Horner Homes/West Haven Local Advisory Council president. "It's also going to tell the whole political aspect... Things have to come out in order for you to learn a lesson." Palmer moved into Henry Horner in 1968, lived there until 1989, and then returned in 1997.

The proposed museum could take a hard look at the way residents were relocated after the buildings were torn down, said Palmer, who is also vice-president of its board of directors. She noted, among other problems, a lack of knowledge about public housing on the part of people who came into the new, mixed-income units created as part of the Chicago Housing Authority's "Plan for Transformation."

When residents moved (sometimes from the suburbs) to mixed-income buildings, they struggled to adapt to the behavior of public housing residents, Palmer said.

Palmer said the culture of public housing, and urban life in general, frequently seeps into public space. That may mean children gathering on a corner, or a group of friends lingering on the sidewalk in front of a courtyard.

"It's a level of noise, a level of activity they [people new to city life] are not familiar with," she said.

Palmer also said the museum needs to document the decline - and neglect - of

public housing in the last few decades.

"When I moved to public housing it was a beautiful place," she said, describing an environment with grass, flowers and gardens and even contests to see who boasted the most dazzling flowers. That had changed, she said, by the late 1980s or early 1990s, and she said part of the museum's task is to probe why the conditions changed.

Reaching beyond housing advocates

In order to prod the public to reconsider the value of public housing, Fischer said planners hope to use the space for community meetings and other sorts of activities that could bring people in - and expose them to the museum. She said the museum also could act as a more general portal to history, an attraction for those who simply want to absorb images from past decades. Other specialty museums possess a similar power, she said.

"I went to the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland," she recalled, "and there it was: my childhood."

Fischer said her husband, Paul Fischer, a professor of politics at Lake Forest College who's done extensive research on public housing in Chicago, may also participate in the programming. Fischer is among those planning an organization called the International Institute for the Study of Housing and Society - a group that may install an office at the museum.

Schnell added that the museum's programs could extend well beyond the museum's walls. She said that within the next year, museum planners and some Chicago Public School Teachers could collaborate to create a public housing curriculum that could be incorporated at pilot schools into social studies or other courses.

That focus on learning is how Glenance Green, a Loyola University undergraduate - and a fellow at the University's Center for Urban Research and Learning - says she looks at the museum. Green is working as the museum's investigative researcher, preparing to assemble oral histories of residents who have lived in Chicago's public housing over the years.

"We want people to leave with the same consciousness as when they leave the Holocaust Museum," said Green, a sociology major. "We don't want people to leave and to say, 'That's nice.' We want them to leave and say, 'I didn't know that.'"