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: 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, program officer for The Richard H. Driehaus Foundation and a museum supporter. Cahlan spoke before a June 5 tour of the last building in the "40 by 120" Jane Addams Homes, 1532 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 East Side Tenement Museum in New York — as they conceive possible designs.

Cahlan and other museum supporters say they want to carve a space for discussion of public housing in a climate where it's diminishing, giving way to "mixed-income" buildings that include free-market units as well as federal-subsidized ones. While they stop short of forging a policy position, they do tell themselves advocacy can't hurt.

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

So far, the museum's literature committee continues publicizing the project, with law student 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 fence in sidewalk in Loomis Courts. The first group of children is white, reflecting the legitimized racial quotas of the time. The second group's ethnicity is less easily characterized.

"Sunny Fischer, a member of the museum's project board of directors and steering committee, said she does not want the museum to look away from the racial discrimination or other forms of public housing trauma of 2005, because 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 Deveraux Museum continued on page 3
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**The last standing building of the 70-year-old Jane Addams Houses may provide a site for a National Public Housing Museum**

**The culture of city life**

Crystal Palmier agrees that for the museum to work it must tell not only the residents’ stories, but also the mistakes 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 Palmier, Henry Horner’s 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.”

Palmier moved into Henry Horner in 1958, lived there until 1989, and then returned in 1997. The proposed museum could take a hard look at how the way residents were relocated after the buildings were torn down, said Palmier, 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, Palmier said.

Palmier 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 side- walk 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.

Palmier 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.

**Teaching beyond housing advocates**

In order to prof public the 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, who teaches urban planning 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 Glenence Green, a Loyola University undergraduate – and a fellow at the University’s Center for Urban Research and Learning – says she looks at the museum’s work as working at 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.’”

**The reservations**

“Not everyone,” Fischer said, “thinks it’s a fabulous idea.”

She said museum supporters have held several 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 your mothers?”

Others harbor reservations for vastly different reasons.

Jared L. Smith, the co-director of the Nathalie P. Dornsife Center for Neighborhood and Community Improvement at the University of Illinois in Chicago, said the energy and political clout that a museum could bring was needed as the city could be devoting more effectively to ameliorating housing conditions. She said she could support such a project, but that any already-strengthened efforts underway to improve affordable housing, but that, she 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 this energy towards 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 along with a list of powerful supporters, politicians, and otherwise. Smith said that she would also like to see a femer policy position associated with the museum. She cited a phrase on the project’s brochure that calls for a “sively forum where we can discuss the key issues surrounding housing, including race, class, the culture, citizenship, immigration, and the still-burning question of the role of government in the conversation about the future for all.”

“It’s saying we believe in a debate about it,” said Smith, an associate professor of urban planning and public affairs at UIC. “It’d rather have a stronger statement”. Fischer said planners stopped short of a more direct statement through what she called an “unconscious consensus” in order to attract a larger audience – including visitors who may not agree 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 not trying to prevent people from being.”

A housing museum and a housing elite

Smith says the sort of discussion a museum might spark would have been more valuable 10 years ago. Chicago Housing Authority was still in the midst of forging its “Plan for Transformation” – a plan that ultimately led to the demolition of public housing and 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 development that comes through in place.”

Smith said that now, with a bleak overall economy, a disordered housing envi- ronment and public housing already torn down, important changes for influencing policy have slipped away.

In her UIC office, Smith also spoke passionately about the need for public housing and to scrutinize the social conditions – like racism – that created deep disparities and that preserve those disparities today. She noted that the description in the museum’s brochure stops in the 1950s, just when African-American, thanks to a racism that prevented black residents from living elsewhere. A museum, Smith suggested, will not illuminate those still persistent injustices if it fixes its gaze too deeply on the past.

Smith considered a potentially pos- sible outcome from the museum as well. The housing crisis, though it discour- ages new construction, drops the whole new issue of affordable housing on the doorstep of the middle class. Housing advocates, says Smith, can rise con- sciousness by taking advantage of “the terrible housing conditions that are basi- cally affecting everyone 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.”