



New cultural institution to tell the story of public housing in Chicago and the nation.

For Deverra Beverly, president of the ABLA homes on Chicago's West Side, public housing is more than just the place where she goes to work each day. It is also the place she has called home her entire life. It was this experience that led Ms. Beverly, along with fellow lifetime ABLA resident and friend, Beatrice Jones, to conceive of the idea of a public housing museum more than a decade ago. Having witnessed generations of families come and go and having had a bird's-eye view of the transformations that have taken place in public housing throughout Chicago, the friends were convinced there was an important story to be told. Today, a board of directors has been assembled to guide the National Public Housing Museum, where Ms. Beverly serves as founding chair.

"For decades public housing has been portrayed as a bad environment, but that is not the place I know," says Ms. Beverly. "The public housing I know is a place where children play, neighbors talk to each other, and parents meet with teachers. It is a place that has produced doctors, lawyers, public officials, teachers, entertainers, ministers and other successful professionals."

Public housing has had a profound impact on hundreds of thousand of Americans. At the heart of these experiences is a rich 70-year story about home, family and community. Chicago has a unique opportunity to bring these stories to life through the creation of a new cultural institution. The Museum will be the voice of public housing residents past and present, providing

a forum for them to share their stories of triumph and challenges with the world. It will also examine public housing's impact on the larger patterns of community and urban development in Chicago and other U.S. cities.

"Many people don't realize that public housing has been in existence since the 1930s," says Kate Bensen, board member of the National Public Housing Museum and vice president of Conlon Public Strategies. "A key component to the Museum's success will be increasing public awareness about the history of public housing and how it has evolved since its original design."

It is fitting that Chicago will be home to the Museum, which is slated to open in 2011; Chicago was a pioneer in some of the first urban public housing efforts in the nation. Chicago had some of the largest and most significant developments, housing immigrants, migrants and thousands of families who were in need of subsidized housing. Historically, public housing has been called home by many ethnic groups, and the Museum will tell the stories of these families. In addition, it will be housed in a historic building designed by a team led by noted Chicago architect John Holabird. The structure itself is the sole remaining building at the former Jane Addams Homes, one of the city's earliest public housing residences.

Like other social history museums throughout the world, the National Public Housing Museum will foster the values of diversity, tolerance, citizen participation, and social reflection. By examining the many lessons of public housing, both its successes and failures, the Museum's exhibitions and public forums will make important connections to today's urban challenges. The site will draw on the power of place and memory to illuminate the experiences of poor and working class families who have struggled to realize the promise America offered. The Museum's board is hoping it will spark civic dialogue about historic and contemporary approaches to affordable housing and public policies that impact poor and working class citizens.

Using materials objects, artifacts, oral histories, and original documents, the Museum will recreate living

spaces of public housing apartments during eight consecutive decades (1938-2000).

“The education piece is critical,” adds Bensen. “We will work closely with schools, the community at large, and have formed a think tank of academics from local universities and others who are studying and will foster discussions regarding the issues of poverty, race and housing in the 21st century.”

The timing of the Museum is significant because public housing is undergoing a dramatic change in Chicago, across the country and around the world. On the local level, the Museum’s goal is to serve as an important community anchor and civic gathering place for a rapidly redeveloping neighborhood that is part of the Chicago Housing Authority’s Plan for Transformation. The Museum will be an integral part of the growing Roosevelt Square neighborhood, providing community meeting space and other retail and educational services that will enhance the quality of life of all its residents, old and new. Part of the Museum will be used as retail space that would infuse new employment opportunities into the community.

The Museum aims to attract regional, national and international visitors interested in urban and social history as well as contemporary social issues. In addition, the hope is that the Museum’s exhibitions and programs will resonate strongly with thousands of Chicago’s current and former public housing residents – and youth in particular – not just as visitors but as vital participants in collecting oral histories of the generations who have resided, and currently live, in public housing. The Museum plans to build an oral history archive that will record thousands of first-hand accounts of the role and impact of public housing in the lives of its residents, former residents, employees, activists, community leaders, policy makers, urban planners and others who are a large part of public housing history—both in Chicago and nationally. These accounts will provide rich new historical material for understanding an important part of American history.

National Public Housing Museum,
www.publichousingmuseum.org