The Stories We Collect: Promoting Housing as a Human Right at the National Public Housing Museum

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Over the course of my last decade as a museum professional, I’ve heard intimate narratives that bear witness to an American history that is both brilliantly ambitious and deeply troubled—that includes, on the one hand, a democratic commitment to the public and common good and, on the other hand, dreams deferred. An elderly African American woman told me about five-year-old Eric Morse, who was dropped to his death from the 14th floor of the Ida B. Wells housing development on the South Side of Chicago. A Jewish Holocaust survivor described her beloved apartment in the Jane Addams Homes (JAH), where she had her first truly kosher kitchen, “never tainted by pork.” A retired Italian American repairman proudly described the many afternoons he spent fixing elevators intentionally broken by gang members at Cabrini Green Homes on the Near North Side of Chicago—and how he eventually befriended and mentored those same young men. An African American community activist was excited to share that she was the first baby born in a 1960s public health midwifery program that encouraged natural childbirth in public housing communities.

These stories and others like them are the foundation of the National Public Housing Museum’s (NPHM) exhibitions and programs. Such oral histories are among the most important artifacts in our
collection, which will soon be housed and interpreted within our largest artifact—the last remaining building of the JAH, located on the Near West Side of Chicago.

THE ORIGINS OF THE NPHM

After a decade-long process of what at times seemed to be insurmountable obstacles—including economic difficulties as well as ideological, political, and cultural challenges—the NPHM is finally slated to open at the end of 2018. While there have always been enthusiastic supporters of the NPHM, many others questioned the need for a museum that would be telling the stories of “poor, black, welfare mothers.” Still others believed that the money would be better spent on building more public housing. But it is the public housing residents who have always been at the core of the organization and whose inextinguishable dreams have kept alive the belief that the museum would eventually open. Lead by the indefatigable Commissioner Deverra Beverly, a founding board member of our institution, residents insisted on a museum that would preserve and tell their stories, particularly after a devastating period of urban renewal that dramatically erased many of their homes from the urban landscape.

At one point, the JAH consisted of 32 buildings, with more than 987 apartment units and 52 row houses. John Holabird\(^1\) headed the team of architects who designed the complex as a 1938 demonstration project under the Public Works Administration, intended to showcase visionary public housing ideas. The welcoming village of linked three-story brick buildings featured a beautiful “Animal Court” playground with concrete sculptures of dogs, peacocks, pumas, and other animals made by renowned Chicago artist Edgar Miller. The JAH provided a convivial home for tens of thousands of racially diverse working-class residents who were
chronically under- or unemployed. But the facility endured decades of escalating problems, including neglect and disrepair, gang and drug violence, and ill effects from gentrification. In 2000 the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) launched the “Plan for Transformation,” an ambitious effort to revitalize the city’s deteriorating public housing projects. The plan’s stated aims included building and strengthening communities by integrating public housing and its leaseholders into the larger social, economic, and physical fabric of Chicago.

Many advocates saw demolishing decrepit and dangerous housing stock in Chicago and replacing it with new mixed-income homes not only as necessary but also as an opportunity to encourage racial and class integration in one of the most highly segregated cities in the United States. For others, however, the plan—which sought to demolish 25,000 units of housing and 11 high-rise public housing developments, displacing thousands of families without any guarantee of an affordable replacement—seemed to extend the intentional neglect that the city’s most vulnerable citizens had already been suffering for decades. Many saw it as part of an effort to forcibly remove African Americans from targeted neighborhoods. As James Baldwin plainly and provocatively stated, “Urban renewal... means negro removal.”
It was during this period that public housing residents mobilized and organized to save one particular building in the JAH from demolition in order to create the NPHM. They profoundly understood the power of place and representation, tenaciously demanding a museum that would serve as a visible reminder of the history of public housing. They understood how a cultural institution might be a site for resistance against erasure and forgetting. They felt that there was an important role for a museum—one in which they could control the narrative—in their struggle for self-determination.

A MUSEUM IN THE STREETS
Due to a long and deeply racialized history, public housing and the people who live there have been represented in the popular imagination as an undifferentiated mass of poor black folk, regarded with deep suspicion and resentment. More than 40 years ago, at a campaign rally in 1976, Ronald Reagan introduced the term “welfare queen” into the public conversation about poverty, and this pernicious caricature has persisted. The mythical figure of someone living large and benefitting from government handouts has frequently eclipsed the glaring reality of actual families deeply in need of support, living in poverty due to misfortune, the injustices of capitalism, and the long-term effects of racism and the legacy of slavery.

An important part of the work of the NPHM is to counter the problematic narratives about public housing residents with more complicated ones that speak to the great diversity and daily reality of the people who have lived in public housing across our nation. During our decade without a dedicated building—we called ourselves a “museum in the streets”—we curated several exhibitions (History Coming Home and The Sound, The Soul, The Syncopation: Experience the Music of Public Housing) and presented many public programs intended to overturn long-held assumptions about public housing and its residents. I sometimes refer to this as the “I bet you didn’t know” period. We celebrated the great diversity of people living in public housing: “I bet you didn’t know that white people made up the majority of public housing residents in the
Jane Addams Homes when they first opened.” We also included plenty of stories of successful businessmen, sports icons, politicians, artists, and musicians who had grown up in and benefited from public housing: “I bet you didn’t know that Goldman Sachs CEO and chairman Lloyd Blankfein, President Jimmy Carter, NBA superstar Tony Allen, or Grammy and Academy Award winner Barbara Streisand all once lived in public housing.”

It’s hard to identify exactly when it happened, but at some point in this decade we may have overcorrected. Although the museum won the hearts, compassion, and support of the general public, several long-time housing advocates, activist journalists, and scholars became wary of our mission, concerned that a whitewashed presentation of the uplifting public housing stories would eclipse the critical and painful stories that also needed to be told.

But telling painful truths is challenging. It is important to present difficult stories of neglect, violence, and abandonment—which are all part of the troubling history of public housing—without caricature, without re-inscribing stereotypes, and without inviting the kind of poverty voyeurism that took place, for example, in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. In what became known as “disaster tourism,” buses drove gawking visitors through the Lower Ninth Ward to peer at the devastation and blight. Driven by profit and prioritizing consumption, this kind of poverty porn reduces poverty to observable suffering and allows visitors to conclude that it results simply from a lack of visible, material resources. While it may induce empathy, and even charity, it fails to educate the audience about the root cause of poverty—systemic social injustice—and thus misses the opportunity to build the kind of social consciousness that can spur activism.²

How, then, could the NPHM cultivate a space for curious and engaged museum visitors to understand public housing stories without fostering a fetishistic, voyeuristic attitude? How could we create narratives rooted in specificity and lived experience, narratives that represent residents in their full humanity—neither sugarcoated nor mired in misfortune?
INTERROGATING THE NARRATIVE
In addition to grappling with questions about how to interpret stories, and which stories to tell, I have also become increasingly concerned with why we tell stories—and just a little suspicious of the widespread embrace of storytelling in history museums. What makes a good, engaging story is not necessarily synonymous with what constitutes accurate history. Captivating stories rely on compelling subjects and gripping narratives with well-defined beginnings, middles, and ends; and they are most satisfying when there is development and progress. Through the formal demands of narrative structure, stories often erase ambiguities and contradictions, and reject elements that simply do not make sense. In literary theory, this is sometimes referred to as “the tyranny of narrative.” History, particularly this history of public housing, is made up of conflicting, complicated accounts that flout the rules of narrative. The characters are real people, sometimes sympathetic, but often not. Their actions are motivated by both systemic influences and personal choices, and it is often difficult to differentiate between the two. The powerful intersecting forces of race, gender, and class frequently preclude happy endings, and public policies that intrinsically impact the residents’ lives more often engender repetition and regression than anything that looks like narrative progression. Actual human lives rarely fit a traditional narrative mold, and at least in the case of public housing residents, manipulating the reality to fit the desired story amounts to an act of violence.

My interrogation of stories and storytelling is in the spirit of political theorist Antonio Gramsci’s famous dictum: “Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.” The aphorism suggests that, while we should see the world as it is, and not as we want it to be, we must act on the belief that we are capable of changing it. As sites of informal education, museums should raise critical questions, even when there are no easy answers. Practicing this “pessimism of the intellect,” however, should not lead us to become passive or apathetic about preserving objects or creating programming that enacts positive change for our communities. Instead, it should encourage an “optimism of the will” that produces
creative engagement, unleashing our radical imaginations in the service of creating a more just world.

Elaine Heuman Gurian’s 2010 article “Museum as Soup Kitchen” is one of the foundational texts for museum professionals working to make our institutions relevant and impactful, and Gurian continues to be one of the most provocative voices calling for museums to realize their fullest potential as socially responsible spaces. This article explores the potential for museums to respond to economically and socially disadvantaged communities. Gurian describes how little has changed in most museums, even during periods of economic downturn that may be increasingly precarious for certain populations, and wonders how cultural institutions might incorporate a broader palette of social services that could make them more useful and relevant in times of urgent need. This, of course, challenges our traditional sense of museums as sites that primarily collect, preserve, and display objects, encouraging us to think more expansively about how these institutions might become more essential to the public. For Gurian, the central issue is existential, interrogating what it means to be a museum:

_The question for us who work in and love museums is a definitional one. Given the current world economic crisis and the needs of the people in our communities, at what point do we begin to ask ourselves, “Is what we are contemplating doing—even though it’s consistent with our own institutional definition of museums—enough?” Or—if your museum chooses a more activist position—when are you forced to ask yourself the opposite question: “Is what we are doing no longer the business of museums?”_

I enthusiastically embrace Gurian’s provocations and analysis. During my time at the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, I helped start and run Re-Thinking Soup, a weekly soup kitchen and public program that fed both the literally hungry and the public’s appetite for community and knowledge about food justice. Not only did we serve meals but we also offered space for unions organizing for strikes and boycotts; declared ourselves a sanctuary space in solidarity with Flor Crisostomo, an immigrant who sought sanctuary
during a 2010 deportation crisis; and threw open our doors during brutally cold winters to offer homeless people daytime warmth and shelter. Engaging in these social struggles created opportunities for us to further research the history of our site and interpret our artifacts in new ways.

As the current director of the NPHM, I intend to ensure that the museum is a socially responsible site, while always keeping Gramsci’s aphorism in mind. To that end, we must include a nuanced analysis of when museum programs and projects that provide services and resources become part of the problem by making the state increasingly less responsible for providing for the basic human needs of the public. It is important to consider how the museum’s efforts to become more relevant to the communities it serves might contribute to the forces of privatization that weaken the public sphere, undermine the idea of a common good, and absolve the state of accountability. We must reimagine our exhibitions and programs as acts of resistance against these forces and turn our attention to making more, rather than fewer, demands of the state.

NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US

During the 1970s the disability rights movement adopted the slogan “Nothing about us without us!” to communicate that no policy should be decided without the full and direct participation of the group(s) affected by that policy.\(^4\) We have adopted this motto as part of our understanding of the work of the NPHM. While we were always committed to keeping public housing residents as a moral compass at the center of our organization, we were not always certain whether and how to enter the arena of public policy around fair and equitable housing.

Public housing residents have shared a deep reservoir of knowledge with us, providing insight at every turn, and we know that we must continually challenge ourselves to remain relevant to their community. We push ourselves to use residents’ stories in order to bridge our work as an arts and cultural institution with the work of advocacy around housing as a human right. For example, we recently used an oral history workshop offered through the University of Chicago. Dr. Charlie Barlow, NPHM board member
and professor at the university, trained an undergraduate public policy class to gather stories about housing voucher use, previously called “Section 8 policy.” These stories will be used to educate residents about their rights and to reimagine a more inclusive and fair voucher system, addressing both the CHA and landlords across the city.

Our commitment to preservation and interpretation must always include a commitment not only to telling a narrative or presenting a counter-narrative but also to meaningfully empowering people to change the narrative. I remember a time, not so long ago, when taking on this kind of advocacy was contentious and incited protest from board members who imagined that a museum could and should be objective and provide space for “all sides” of an issue. However, at our most recent meeting, the board embraced and adapted our mission to include efforts to “preserve, promote, and propel housing as a human right.” The NPHM has had a luxuriously unhurried planning process that has included collective imagining, discussion, and building partnerships with activists across the country. Over the course of creating this new cultural institution, the underlying vision, mission, and values have evolved to prioritize activism and advocacy. Bridging cultural work with policy reform will chart expansive new terrains for what it means to be a museum.

**POETIC RUIN**

The permanent core exhibitions in our space will be modeled on those of the [Lower East Side Tenement Museum](https://tenement.org) in Manhattan. [Ruth Abram](https://tenement.org/about-us/people/ruth-abram), the brilliant activist turned historian who founded the Tenement Museum in 1988 and also established the [International Coalition of Sites of Conscience](https://sitesofconscience.org) in 1999, was an early and passionate advisor to the NPHM. And just as the Tenement Museum did, we began our
planning process by earnestly collecting oral histories from several generations of public housing residents to interpret their lives in the apartments, some of which we plan to renovate and restore. The beautiful restoration of two apartments will intentionally freeze particular historical moments in order to capture the aspirations and resilience of the public housing residents who lived there during particular periods of time.

But the first exhibit that visitors encounter will be quite different. Poetic Ruin preserves a sealed-off area of the building in the condition in which it was left. While the construction, preservation, and restoration of architecture has a prominent place in architectural discourse, its destruction is often omitted, in part because it is incompatible with the dominant ideals of “culture,” “civilization,” and “society.” Poetic Ruin intentionally presents the deterioration of public housing architecture and artifacts to portray the abandonment that is as much a part of architectural history as are the triumphant narratives of modernist skyscrapers and pristinely restored historic buildings. Through the exhibit, we refuse to contribute to the erasure of difficult race and class narratives. Elements salvaged from the original building include multilayered paint samples that speak both to the aesthetics and politics of the CHA and to residents’ efforts to make the space their own; an entrance intercom that indicates safety concerns in response to growing gang activity; radiators and trash chutes installed in response to resident advocacy for public works and heat as rights rather than privileges; and medicine cabinets that evoke both public health concerns and resident-driven initiatives for self-determination and well-being. A closet door artfully tells the story of the devastating effects of the Brooke Amendment on mainstream ideas of “welfare families.” The salvaged door will include this label on the outside:

*What role did closets like these play in shaping survival strategies for some families in public housing? Open the closet door to learn more.*

And this one on the inside:

*“On many occasions my dad, like other dads I knew in the projects, would hide in the closet when Chicago Housing*
Authority inspectors arrived, because we needed to pretend that we were a single-mother home in order to continue to get much needed assistance.” – J. Taylor, Chicago Public Housing Resident, 1970

The exhibit draws on the power of the space to provide visitors with historical context for the neglect of the buildings—including the dismantling of the welfare state and the abandonment of large-scale projects due to shifts in public policy—as well as for the stories of individual residents making these apartments their homes. Poetic Ruin allows us to preserve a dimension of the history of public housing that would be lost in a total restoration. By telling the story of renewal and neglect, we situate debates about poverty in the United States and public investment in housing infrastructure in a broad and nuanced social and historical context in order to communicate the urgency of the issues we seek to address and emphasize our commitment to the public good.

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Stories can create important sites of resistance. They are at the nexus of the personal and the political. Focusing too much on the personal can lead to myopia, an inability to see how larger structures of the economy and the state impact the realm of the individual and the family. And focusing too much on structures can lead to a neglect of the agency of the people who create policy and the specificity of influence on individuals. The museum can be a space that bridges the gap between the personal and larger public policy. We might imagine this space as “the social” and “the “commons.” The social is a place where connections are forged across lines of difference, of resistance and struggle. It is the sphere in which claims against the political order are made in the name of justice. The museum, as a commons, is more than resistance against or a response to the forces of privatization. It is the space where we, through arts and culture, forge connections across difference to join the struggle for justice. At the NPHM, we ally ourselves with the radical dream of public housing and its potential to create deep-rooted communities, common history, and public good.
We seek to gather and present powerful stories that probe the systemic causes of poverty, acknowledge everyday struggles, advocate for social justice, illuminate the complexity and diversity of public housing residents, and celebrate their resilience and creativity and the joys of making a home in public housing. FJ

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1 John Holabird was a principal of the architectural firm co-founded by his father, William Holabird. Known as Holabird & Root after World War I, the firm is recognized for renowned Art Deco buildings, skyscrapers, and modern architecture—including the Palmolive Building, the Chicago Daily News Building, and the Chicago Board of Trade. Holabird is one of the firms contracted with the Chicago Housing Authority to help renovate the Jane Addams Homes for the National Public Housing Museum.


5 Written by Massachusetts Republican Senator Edward Brooke, the first African American to be elected to the U.S. Senate by popular vote, the Brooke Amendment was designed to protect the poorest residents from rental increases sought by cash-strapped local housing authorities, but the legislation had numerous unintended consequences.

The amendment introduced income-based rents capped at 25 percent of a household’s wages, a common affordable housing benchmark. Families that earned more paid more, so rents on working-class households with the highest incomes increased, which pushed those families toward the private housing market. This further concentrated poverty in public housing, and since tenant rents typically funded repairs and maintenance, the decreased revenue led to deteriorating conditions.

In order to survive during tough economic times, two-parent families sometimes strategically posed as single-parent households to keep their rents low and receive other benefits.

TAKEAWAY
“The Right to the City,” a 2015 Forum Journal article by Jamie Kalven.

VIDEO
Watch Jamie Kalven speak at PastForward 2015.