Our story starts with a simple truth — that all people have the right to a home.

The National Public Housing Museum preserves a key chapter in our nation’s history — the role of public housing in advancing this great, unfulfilled aspiration.
Who can call us back to the true meaning of ourselves as a nation in the caring for the least advantaged among us?

I believe it is the National Public Housing Museum.

Ruth Abram, Founder, Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York, NY

Why a public housing museum?

More than 10 million people across the United States have called public housing home: Liquita Saulter, a laundry attendant from Altgeld Gardens in Chicago, IL; Carl Lee, a fitness trainer from Nickerson Gardens in Los Angeles, CA; George Staples, a mechanic from Dunlap Creek Village in Fayette, PA; and the Museum’s founding board members, Sunny Fischer, a cultural activist from Eastchester Projects in the Bronx, NY, and Deverra Beverly, from the ABLA Homes in Chicago, IL.

Former housing residents also include public officials such as Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor and President Jimmy Carter, and corporate leaders such as Starbucks founder Howard Schultz and former Xerox CEO Ursula Burns. Performers like Barbra Streisand, Diana Ross, Elvis Presley, Thelonious Monk, Ramsey Lewis, Mary J. Blige, Queen Latifah, Jay-Z, and Chaka Khan and sports stars like NBA’s Tony Allen and baseball star Kirby Puckett are among the alumni whose experiences growing up in public housing shaped their lives.

Public housing has had an enormous and often controversial impact in our nation’s history. It has shaped our definition of the public good — in urban and rural communities alike — where ordinary people’s lives are affected by shifting national priorities.

The Museum will be a place to share these stories of hope and personal achievement, paired with those of struggle, resistance, and resilience. We need the NPHM — to honor the histories of everyday people and places and also to welcome a different future. Through arts and culture, the Museum will archive and share these stories, and create opportunities for visitors to understand and engage in innovative public policy reform in order to reimagine the future of our communities, our society, and the places we call home.
Since the 1990s, thousands of public housing units across the U.S. have been demolished. Housing insecurity is one of the preeminent issues of our time, cutting across boundaries of class, race, and region.
Exhibitions

Three uniquely restored apartments will interpret the nation’s public housing experience from the New Deal to the present day, connecting the intimate lives of diverse families to the national politics and culture that helped shape them.
Chicago’s Cabrini-Green: The last high-rise building was demolished in 2011. Courtesy of In These Times.
Chicago has built some of the largest and most significant public housing developments, which many — from new Americans and senior citizens to young families and artists — have called home.

Rahm Emanuel, Mayor, Chicago

Why Chicago?
More than any other city, Chicago is at the heart of an international dialogue about public housing’s founding aspirations, its tumultuous history, and its continued promise. Chicago, with some of the largest, most ambitious, and architecturally diverse public housing projects, is a microcosm of the national story. Chicago is also an international hub for innovation, cutting-edge museums, creative placemaking, civic dialogue, and the ongoing struggle for social justice — and NPHM will help lead the way by pushing the boundaries at these challenging and important intersections.

A living cultural experience
The Jane Addams Homes were named after the Nobel Prize-winning peace activist and social reformer who founded the Hull-House Settlement. Designed by John Holabird, one of the nation’s most respected architects at the time, the complex showcased a new vision for housing poor and working class people in need of homes. The Addams complex was home to tens of thousands of diverse, working-class families for more than six decades. Vacant since 2002, at the urgent requests of residents, the Chicago Housing Authority leadership agreed to save one building from demolition for the new museum.

Exhibitions and programs will be designed to encourage the public to discover, learn, and build a more just nation through a robust civic life.
Designed by John Holabird, one of the nation’s most respected architects, the Jane Addams Homes showcased the nation’s new vision for housing poor and working class families.
Bringing public art home

The enchanting government-funded Edgar Miller animal sculptures that once formed the focal point for community life will be beautifully restored and, after years in storage, returned to their original location at the Jane Addams Homes.
Children playing among the Edgar Miller animal sculptures in the courtyard of the Jane Addams Homes, circa 1940. Photo by Peter Sekaer. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ds-03659.
The National Public Housing Museum

Center for the Study of Housing and Society (4, 9)

The Center will draw global scholars, artists, designers, and community thought leaders to explore the history of social and public housing, consider its successes and failures, and debate solutions to the most pressing issues we face.

Oral History Archive and recording studios (6)
The Museum’s core collection is an archive and assemblage of stories that mine the rich and complex historical developments of public and publicly subsidized housing in America. The general public and our community members will come to better understand the value of an archive—the history it documents, the cultural products it creates and disseminates, and the policies the stories will help to shape and influence. The Museum is well positioned to have the country’s largest collection of oral histories and stories of public housing residents.

Exhibits and galleries

Three restored apartments are the core of the Museum. Site-specific exhibitions with historic artifacts and countless personal stories will interpret the nation’s public housing experience from the time of the New Deal to the present. The Rizzi family Christmas Tree provides a glimpse into life in Little Italy celebrating holidays and adapting to a changing neighborhood; Inez Turovitz Medor’s kosher kitchen tells important stories about Jewish community around historic Maxwell Street; and the Hatch family bookshelf, filled with the classics that all eight children read and studied while learning about Martin Luther King’s housing activism on the West Side of Chicago, illuminate the cultural and political context of residents.

Visitors will learn about the intense political struggles over the New Deal’s Housing Act of 1937 which created public housing as we know it and President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Second Bill of Rights” which included “the right of every family to a decent home;” the role of urban renewal, redlining, and racism that have shaped public housing demographics since its inception; and how efforts at racial desegregation, political pressure, and cost cutting led to the demolition of distressed high-rises and the displacement of tens of thousands of families.

Exhibits and galleries

Tours of the Museum will begin and end in a storytelling space where museum educators, many of whom will be former and current public housing residents, will have a unique role as provocateurs and prompt visitors to consider how aspects of daily domestic life connect to issues such as the politics of land use, the geography of race and class, and the way public and private sectors interact in our democracy.

A contemporary art gallery and space for participatory art projects and activities will bridge the divide between the arts, culture, and innovative public policy.
The Museum is a site of conscience—a historically significant site that links the past with today’s most urgent social issues.
Programming

Storytelling, art, entrepreneurship, and community engagement spaces will build on the Museum’s exhibitions to catalyze a civically engaged public to strive for social justice in housing and beyond.
For my mother, living in public housing meant having her first truly kosher kitchen — one never touched by pork.

Inez Turovitz Medor, retired bookkeeper, Jane Addams Homes, 1938–41

Origins
In the late 1990s, public housing residents began to dream about creating a museum to preserve their collective voices and memories, and the histories of public housing across the nation.

They wanted their children and grandchildren, and the public at large, to know more about their place in the American experience and the public policies that helped shape their families.

They believed that the stories of public housing residents — told in their own words — would resonate strongly with a wide audience across Chicago, the nation, and the world.

Civic leaders, preservationists, historians, cultural experts, and many others joined with residents to help incorporate the Museum in 2007. And since then, NPHM has offered transformative programs that connect the past with contemporary issues of social justice and human rights.

More than 49,000 visitors have been welcomed to programs and exhibits that include:

- Housing as a Human Right: Social Construction, part of the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial;
- Women’s Rights are Human Rights, challenging gender inequality and stereotypes about people living in poverty;
- The Sound, The Soul, and The Syncopation, an exhibition about the many musicians who have emerged from public housing;
- Shelter!: Architecture is Activism;
- 20 Years Later: A Journey through the Years with Alex Kotlowitz and Pharoah Rivers;
- the first mayoral candidate forum on public housing in more than three decades;
- a Youth Advisory Council of members from several Chicago public housing communities, formed to assist in the curation of museum exhibits and programs, participate in field trips to colleges and cultural institutions, and develop skills in leadership, advocacy, and healthy lifestyles;
- training the next generation of oral historians through our Oral History Camp with an intergenerational group of public housing residents; and
- compiling an oral history of current and past public housing residents from across the country.

“I learned so much about the power of stories as a student in the NPHM Oral History Summer School. As a longtime Cabrini Green resident and activist, I use my new skills as an oral historian to speak truth to power, and to document the history of public housing to inform our future.”

Raymond “Shaq” McDonald

Image, above: Raymond “Shaq” McDonald. Below: Shaq leading an NPHM walking tour.
We invite those who believe in the human right to housing to join us in preserving history, fostering dialogue, and creating change.