

Shuttered CHA complex gets new life as artists' home



On the Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative, a former CHA housing project in Chicago's Grand Crossing neighborhood, which noted artist Theaster Gates helped convert into mixed-income housing, with some of units reserved for artists.

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Chicago Tribune

NOVEMBER 11, 2014, 3:37 PM

When the Chicago Housing Authority's Dante Harper Townhomes closed in 2007, it seemed to be another symbol of the continued decline of the once solidly working-class Grand Crossing neighborhood on the city's South Side.

"They were nice buildings when they were open, but when it closed, they had squatters moving in, and people were stealing things out of the vacant units," said Judy Brakes-Battle, a 19-year resident in Grand Crossing. "It was definitely an eyesore for the community."

But today these town homes, located on a stretch of Dorchester and Dante avenues between 69th and 70th streets, have a decidedly different reputation. That's due to an innovative plan to reopen the complex as a mixed-income development where artists have been recruited to live in some of the 32 units.

The plan was hatched in 2011 by artist and urban planner Theaster Gates and his not-for-profit Rebuild Foundation, working in conjunction with the CHA, Brinshore Development and architectural firm Landon Bone Baker.

Now the complex, known as the Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative, is open to residents, who began moving in last month as the \$11 million renovation project entered the home stretch.

The ribbon-cutting for a new arts center on the complex's grounds will take place Nov. 19. That arts center, which is the only completely new construction on the property, was created after the developers removed four units in the center of the complex.

"(The arts center) will primarily house a dance studio," said Catherine Baker, principal architect on the project with Landon Bone Baker. "Theaster was adamant that we have a real dance floor in the studio, so the floor will have springs underneath."

Artists will occupy five units at the housing collaborative. Twelve units will be reserved for CHA residents on the agency's waiting list, while another 11 units are being rented at affordable rates. Nine are being offered at market rate, according to CHA officials.

"The artists will be a key part of the project," said Lauren Williams, the Rebuild Foundation's community and artist engagement manager, who will live at the complex. "We don't want them working in isolation. They will be collaborating with each other and their neighbors."

It is the latest attempt by Gates to use art as a way to revitalize the Grand Crossing neighborhood, where 18 percent of adult residents are unemployed and 25 percent of households are below poverty level, according to city of Chicago data.

The Chicago Police Department's Grand Crossing District, which includes the Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative, is tied at fifth place for the most violent crimes among the city's 22 police districts, according to department statistics.

Back in 2009, Gates renovated three abandoned buildings in the 6900 block of South Dorchester Avenue, and turned them into a combination of living quarters and art space called the Dorchester Projects.

In addition to the living quarters for Gates and others, Dorchester Projects holds a repository with more than 14,000 volumes of art and architecture books from the now-closed Prairie Avenue Bookshop in the Loop; 60,000 glass lantern slides from the late 19th and early 20th centuries donated by the University of Chicago; and, until recently, space for the Black Cinema House, which just moved to 72nd Street and Kimbark Avenue, in an abandoned factory rehabilitated by the Rebuild Foundation.

And Gates also is behind the ongoing renovation of the abandoned Stony Island Trust & Savings Bank building at 68th Street and Stony Island Avenue (built in 1923), which he wants to convert into a public arts space and facility to house the 10,000-book library of late Ebony magazine founder John H. Johnson, which was donated to the Rebuild Foundation by Johnson's daughter, Linda Johnson Rice.

Gates, who is also working with the CTA to create and design artwork for its planned \$240 million renovation of the 95th Street Red Line station, says his ultimate goal is to bring artists and community residents together to transform their neighborhoods.

"There are lots of people who do affordable housing much better than I ever can," Gates said in an email. "At the end of the day, it's not just about housing. It's about the city as form and sculpture. It's about how artists see things differently and as a result can make much more complicated considerations of race, class, gender, space and culture."

Gates' idea to embed artists in the Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative wasn't developed in a vacuum. He says major influences include the late journalist and urban activist Jane Jacobs and the late artist Gordon Matta-Clark, who specialized in renovating abandoned properties for artists in 1970s New York.

But it is probably Houston artist Rick Lowe and his Project Row Houses that had the most impact on Gates. In 1993, Lowe and his colleagues began the process of renovating 22 abandoned shotgun-style houses in Houston's lower-income 3rd Ward. He invited artists to live in some of the structures. Those artists then began working with other residents on arts-related programming at the site.

"We're not gentrifying neighborhoods — we're keeping the original identity of the neighborhood," Lowe said, referring to himself and Gates. "And we're trying to create a positive identity in our neighborhoods, so people will want to invest in our communities in the future."

But the Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative is different, even for Gates, because of the combination of a not-for-profit joining forces with a private developer and a bureaucracy like the

CHA.

"The Chicago Housing Authority, with tremendous support of (former CHA chairman) Jim Reynolds ... made the process highly successful," Gates said. "My hope is that for Rebuild, this is the first of several partnerships between our organization and creative and community-engaged developers."

The CHA still owns the land on which the Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative sits, while the redeveloped buildings are owned by Brinshore Development and Gates' Rebuild Foundation. A property manager hired by Brinshore Development is responsible for doing drug screenings and criminal background screenings for all residents.

The Rebuild Foundation recruited artists interested in living at the collaborative, and interviewed them to make sure that they were a good fit.

"I thought the interview process was great because it shows how careful they are about who will be living here," said Edward Steave, a videographer for the Nation of Islam's Final Call newspaper who is one of the artists who will be living in the facility.

Steave said he, like most residents, has a one-year lease. He is paying \$910 a month for his two-bedroom home.

"It's an OK neighborhood, not terrible, but I'll admit it does have its bad elements at night," Steave said. "But you always have to be mindful of your surroundings, so I don't think safety is a major issue."

The rehab process, which was launched in 2013, took time because of the poor initial construction of the complex, which was built in the late 1970s.

"We ended up building additional walls between the brick veneer (and the interior layer of masonry) to help reinforce the floors and ceiling," said Baker, of the architecture firm.

But the architect did not add any major flourishes to the units.

"After talking with Theaster, we decided to keep things simple, and make it look very finished, but leave things open so as the artists and residents move in, they can start to personalize it and change their spaces," Baker said.

The architects did add a landscaped courtyard next to the new arts center, adjacent public meeting space and community garden, which will be an area for residents and other members of the community to congregate.

"It's a pretty rough neighborhood, and you can't ignore that," said Jack Schroeder, another Landon Bone Baker architect who worked on the project. "But from our early meetings with the community, we always wanted to make sure that this area was open and available to everyone."

The artists in the complex say they haven't been given specific instructions yet on how to interact and work with the other residents. Nor do they have any specific plans. But they say that's the nature of being an artist.

"I can see myself documenting the progress of the facility," Steave said. "There are a lot of stories here, and I probably can uncover those stories just by interviewing some of the new residents."

One thing is for certain: The complex will be accessible to outside organizations. Rebuild's Williams said the Hyde Park School of Dance will use the dance studio. The nearby South Shore Fine Arts Academy — which shared building space with Fermi Elementary School until Fermi was closed by Chicago Public Schools last year — will use the arts center for after-school programs.

"What we're telling people is that we want you to stay in this neighborhood and grow with us," said Darren Pollard, an artist who is working with the Rebuild Foundation on arts programs in the complex. "Just show us what you're interested in, allow us to participate and share some of our stories with you, and hopefully we can build a beautiful community."

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