



The public housing projects of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) used to have a bad reputation. The towering high-rise buildings characteristic of Chicago's public housing have become symbols of modernist hubris and failed social policies. Based on unrealistic conceptions of how people live, these drab concrete buildings with chain link fenced corridors and steel windows did not instill pride in their residents. The high-rise buildings at Cabrini Green became a legendary tale of caution of what happens when the good intentions of public housing officials fail to deliver. Now roughly 50 years after being constructed, these buildings have weathered inadequate maintenance, race riots, drug wars, and unbelievable crime rates.

But CHA, the third largest public housing system in the nation, has a plan. The Chicago Housing Authority's Plan for Transformation is guiding the rehabilitation and demolition of more than 25,000 of its units. The goal is to create mixed-income communities comprising one-third public housing, one-third affordable housing, and one-third market-rate homes.

The redevelopment of Archer Courts now serves as a harbinger of hope for the projects that follow. Archer Courts is one of eight complexes ("Courts") to emerge from a city- and state-funded public housing program designed to house those displaced by the construction of the Eisenhower Expressway, a highway connecting the city to its western suburbs. Built in 1951, Archer Courts and its counterparts embodied the minimalist aesthetic of the modernists. Originally, Archer Courts consisted of two seven-story towers with a total of 147 units. One of the defining architectural features of these towers was the series of open-air corridors running the length of the buildings along the front facades. Chain link fences formed railings along these corridors.

Even before its rehabilitation, Archer Courts stood out from its counterparts. Although many of its counterparts became enveloped in terrible social issues, Archer Courts remained relatively safe, stable, and clean. Rather than tear down the buildings as recommended by both government officials and many neighborhood leaders, the Chicago Community Development Corporation saw in Archer Courts the chance to preserve a community comprising a unique mix of residents and a challenge to retrofit an aging utilitarian structure into a vibrant, safe, and attractive place.

Landon Bone Baker Architects incorporated input from community leaders and residents into its redesign and renovation of the complex. Feng Shui (a Chinese philosophy that the positioning of a building and all of its features can influence the lives of its residents) was employed in how the buildings and surrounding land were reconfigured. Primary elements of the interior rehabilitation include new elevators, mechanical systems, bathrooms, and kitchens. In addition, a wellness center is included for treatment of minor medical conditions, and a computer center offers classes and software in both English and Chinese. The landscaped grounds around the buildings provide a retreat from urban Chicago, with outdoor pavilions that provide space used for meditation and the practice of Tai Chi.

One of the biggest changes to the building was the enclosure of exposed corridors by a wall of glass. This glass "curtain wall" consists of many large panels of glass colored in a range of hues reflecting the colors of the interior doors. The result has dramatically changed aesthetic perceptions of the building from the inside and from afar. The front facade glistens in the sun, reflecting the light from the multicolored panels. Now that the corridors are shielded from the elements, their light and airy feeling has made them sites of informal socializing.

Photo (left): Peter Landon
Photo (right): Stankamp/Ballogg Photography, Inc.

