

Statement by Landmarks Illinois December 2, 2009

The Julia C. Lathrop Homes, quite simply, is one of the most architecturally significant public housing projects in the United States. Its design—both the buildings themselves as well as the overall site plan of the complex—is the work of a “dream team” of famous architects and landscape architects who were hired with federal funding from the Depression-era Works Progress Administration.

The humanistically-designed housing project they produced was beautifully sited, with expansive open spaces, curving roads and walkways, and dramatic vistas created by an innovative site plan and unique building forms. Although the project received widespread coverage in architectural publications at the time of its completion, its design lessons unfortunately were largely forgotten in the housing projects that were built in the 1960s and 70s.

Three years ago, however, the Chicago Housing Authority announced plans to demolish all 30 historic buildings in Lathrop Homes. Soon thereafter, our organization—which is a statewide nonprofit advocacy group for historic preservation—named the 75-year old Lathrop Homes to our list of the “Ten Most Endangered Places in Illinois.” Among the other buildings that have been on this list are: Cook County Hospital, the Loop elevated, the section of Michigan Avenue facing Grant Park, the Uptown Theater, and Wrigley Field.

In this case, however, instead of simply arguing against demolition, we decided to present an alternative plan. With help from Antunovich Architects and ideas from Lathrop Home residents and other concerned groups, we prepared a reuse study—summarized in some of the drawings behind me—that showed how instead of being demolished, these buildings could be retained and rehabilitated. Not only would this result in brand new units for the current residents, but each of the units would be larger and more responsive to the current needs of various family sizes..

We believe this reuse plan makes sense for a variety of reasons:

1. The historic brick buildings at Lathrop Homes are still structurally sound and, our analysis showed, they can easily be reconfigured for larger housing units. Because of their exterior brick structural walls, both the rowhouses and apartment blocks lend themselves well to gut rehabilitation solutions.
2. Because the entire complex is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, a developer reusing these buildings would be able to take advantage of Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credits, which would not be available for new construction. Rehab tax credits have been used for countless other projects across the country, including the recent renovation of an affordable housing project in Memphis, Tenn., whose former residents included music legend Elvis Presley.
3. The current site plan of Lathrop Homes also lends itself well to reuse. The apartment blocks in Lathrop are arranged in such a way that the open spaces between the buildings provide both natural light to the units and, we believe, a far more humane pedestrian experience at ground level than most new comparable developments.
4. In this era of more sustainable “green” developments, we don’t think it makes any sense to demolish and dispose of 30 structurally sound brick buildings into the landfill—only to replace them with buildings constructed of brand new materials. The generous open spaces between the buildings, flat roofs readily converted to green roofs, and pedestrian scale of the entire complex makes the existing Lathrop Homes an excellent candidate for a LEED-certified development project.