

## **ALTGELD GARDENS**

### **SHOP BUILDING (“Up-Top”) & SCHOOL BUILDINGS C & E**

*Chicago*



*Shop Building. Credit: Sean Reilly*

“This area is a gem of the community. It is a staple of the community. It is part of the history of this community. It is important to the community to have this commercial strip because it gives residents the opportunity to open businesses.”

**CHERYL JOHNSON**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PEOPLE FOR COMMUNITY RECOVERY



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### LOCATION

**Shop Building:** 13122 S. Ellis Ave.

**School Building C:** 839 E. 132<sup>nd</sup> St.

**Carver School (School Building E):** 801 E. 133rd Pl.  
Chicago, IL, 60827, Cook County

### YEAR BUILT

**Shop Building:** 1945

**School Building C:** 1944

**Carver School (School Building E):** 1950

### ARCHITECT

**Shop Building:** Keck and Keck

**School buildings:** John C. Christensen

### CURRENT OWNER

**Shop Building:** Privately owned commercial building

**School Building C & Carver School (School Building E):**  
Chicago Public Schools (CPS)

## WHY IT'S ENDANGERED

While Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) continues to make long overdue improvements at Altgeld Gardens, the community's privately-owned Shop Building and two vacant historic CPS schools are highly visible and are a reminder of the critical investment still needed. Decades of neglect and deterioration at Altgeld Gardens previously resulted in CHA leading the demolition of several blocks in the nationally recognized housing development on Chicago's South Side. The Shop Building (known by Altgeld residents as the “Up-Top”) currently faces a demolition threat and the private owner and City of Chicago are in demolition court. The two school buildings are vacant, need attention and in various stages of deterioration.

**Shop Building:** The City of Chicago is in demolition court with the private owner of the Shop Building/ the “Up-Top,” and the fate of the structure is uncertain. All but one of its retail spaces are currently vacant. The building is in need of substantial rehabilitation and its important community-made Memorial Wall needs protection.

With the recent completion of [the adjacent KOO-designed](#) Altgeld Family Resource Center and Chicago Public Library branch, which draws inspiration from Keck & Keck's curvilinear roof design, and the potential for a new nearby CTA Red Line rail station, now is the ideal time for new investment in the highly significant Shop Building. Residents anxiously await the rehabilitation of the structure, which could





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provide a home for a high-quality food store. A 2020 survey by grassroots environmental justice organization [People for Community Recovery](#) (PCR) reiterated the need for Altgeld residents to have access to quality food.

**School Building C & Carver School (School Building E):** CPS has not stated its intentions for the two vacant school buildings. School Building C is in severe deterioration after decades of neglect. Carver School Building E is in stable condition but it has remained unused for five years. The community would like to see School Buildings C and E rehabilitated and reused for jobs and vocational training opportunities for Altgeld residents. PCR’s 2020 summer survey of residents emphasized that with a local grocery store, the essential community need is for child programs and jobs training. (Source “[Build a Solar Farm in Altgeld: It’s time for CHA to Follow Through](#),” Cheryl Johnson, Sept. 2, 2020, South Side Weekly).



*School Building C. Credit: Sean Reilly*

## HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE & BACKGROUND

CHA’s [Altgeld Gardens](#) community was built during World War II to house the families of African American war workers and has been home to hundreds of families for the past nearly 80 years. Altgeld Gardens was first deemed eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places in 1994 by the Illinois State



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Historic Preservation Office (IL SHPO) due to its role in the history of community planning and development in public housing and for its distinctive architecture.

In 2015, IL SHPO also determined the Shop Building as individually eligible for listing in the National Register for its Midcentury Modern Style architecture, its association with the Altgeld Gardens housing complex and the cultural significance of its breezeway Memorial Wall created by Altgeld residents. Per a memorandum of agreement between CHA and the IL SHPO, a National Register of Historic Places historic district nomination is underway to give national recognition to Altgeld Gardens. This will provide the opportunity for private investment in the Shop Building using federal and state historic tax credits, a substantial economic incentive for rehabilitation.



*Bernadette Williams (left) and Cheryl Johnson in front of the Shop Building/ the “Up-Top.” Credit: Sean Reilly*

**Shop Building:** CHA originally envisioned a privately owned and operated commercial retail building for Altgeld Gardens’ town center. That vision was fulfilled by prominent Chicago architects [Keck & Keck](#). They designed the streamlined [Midcentury Modern Shop Building](#), completed in 1945 and distinguished by a dramatically sweeping, curvilinear and overhanging roof. The crescent-shaped Shop Building originally housed essential shops and services and, most importantly, a grocery store, but is now mostly vacant.





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According to Bernadette Williams, president of the tenants' Local Advisory Council, locals refer to this town center as “Up-Top” and despite being mostly vacant, the Shop Building remains a focal point for residents. Although located within the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA)-owned complex, Altgeld Gardens' Shop Building remains privately-owned and is currently in demolition court. The building's central location in Altgeld Gardens makes it highly accessible to the community and its deterioration highly visible. The Shop Building's rehabilitation and its potential to provide essential retail, especially a fresh food grocer, is critical for Altgeld residents' quality of life.

The commercial Shop Building also features a breezeway with a painted Memorial Wall created by residents in the early 1970s displaying names of Altgeld residents who have passed away due to pollution-related illnesses and violence. The environmental justice movement at Altgeld Gardens has its organized beginnings in 1979 with the founding of [People for Community Recovery](#) (PCR) by Hazel Johnson, who lived at Altgeld Gardens for 50 years. Johnson experienced firsthand the mental and physical toll of Altgeld residents living within the Lake Calumet and Little Calumet River industrial area of contaminated abandoned factories, landfills and a major sewage treatment plant. Johnson's PCR advocated for the closure and cleanup of facilities polluting Altgeld Gardens, as well as for the removal of asbestos and lead from residential buildings and for making corporate and government polluters accountable for the unjust polluting of minority communities.



Memorial Wall. Credit: Sean Reilly



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Environmental justice activism at Altgeld remains strong, and PCR’s work today is continued by her daughter Cheryl Johnson. One of PCR’s first offices was located in Altgeld’s Shop Building. In addition to rehabilitation of the Shop Building to bring in needed service-oriented retail, preservation of the Memorial Wall is extremely important as a remembrance of Altgeld family and friends whose lives have been lost.



*School Building C. Credit: Sean Reilly*

**School Building C:** The CPS-owned building was constructed in 1944 as one of four original school buildings designed by [John C. Christensen](#), long-time head architect of the Chicago Board of Education. The building was part of a complete educational campus planned by the site’s original architects centered on a park at the center of Altgeld Gardens. The building served as Altgeld’s high school until 1950 when the Christensen-designed Carver High School was built to relieve overcrowding. School Buildings A through D were T-shaped masonry buildings with classical ornament and entrances at their narrow ends. Vacant for over 30 years and extremely deteriorated, the architecturally impressive School Building C is boarded up but is open to the elements and in deteriorating condition.

**Carver School (School Building E):** The building, which is designed by architect John C. Christensen and owned by CPS, was built in 1950 to replace the site’s first high school, School Building C. It was designed in a restrained Moderne Style and was the community high school until a third high school opened in 1971. The original 1950 school was then used as a public middle school until becoming Chicago International Charter School - Larry Hawkins High School. CPS closed CICS-Larry Hawkins in 2016, and the building has sat vacant since.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

Help us spread the word on this vacant property! Outside investment is needed for the future of these important community buildings. A National Register district nomination underway could provide Federal historic tax credits to potential developers.

[Reach out to Alderman Anthony Beale](#), regarding interest in investment opportunities at Altgeld.

See how you can support local efforts at Altgeld by contacting:

- **Bernadette Williams**, President, Local Advisory Council: [bwilliams@lac.thecha.org](mailto:bwilliams@lac.thecha.org) 312-371-6065.
- **Cheryl Johnson**, Executive Director, People for Community Recovery: [cheryl@pcrchi.org](mailto:cheryl@pcrchi.org) 773-971-5028



## FURTHER READING

- [Hazel Johnson, the mother of environmental justice, was Catholic](#)  
EarthBeat, February 26, 2021
- [Op-Ed: Build a Solar Farm in Altgeld](#)  
South Side Weekly, September 2, 2020
- [Life in the Doughnut](#)  
South Side Weekly, April 16, 2019
- [Forgotten Chicago tour: Early Obama tour – Altgeld Gardens townhomes](#)  
August 26, 2017
- [Lost in the Shuffle](#)  
South Side Weekly, January 8, 2014