



National Public Housing Museum Partners With Residents in New Ways With “At Home” Exhibit

by April Doner

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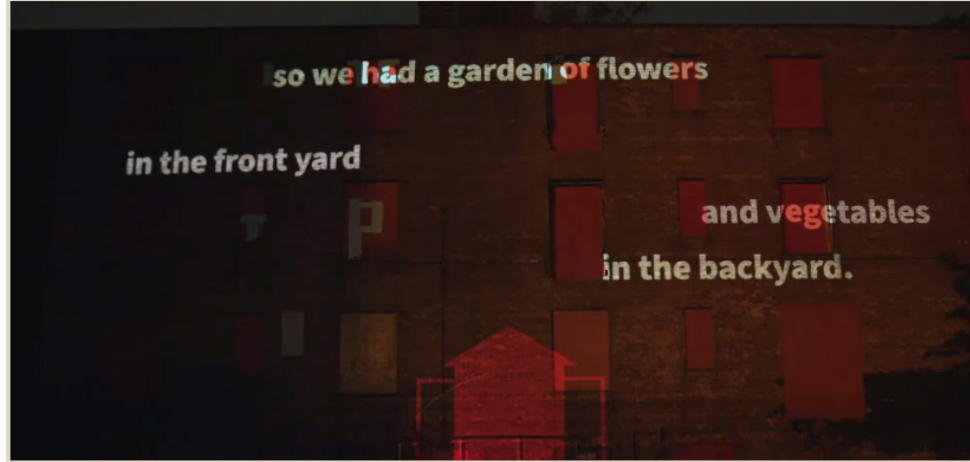
“Why can’t memorials and monuments be fleeting, slighter, less precious, less heroic?” asks Chicago-based academic and thought leader Romi Crawford. “And what if the deeper knowledge of our histories was deemed just as important as the markers that commemorate them?”

This was the spirit behind “At Home: Ephemeral Monuments to Public Housing Residents,” a temporary community-based art exhibit designed by the [National Public Housing Museum](#) (NPHM) in Chicago, Illinois, in partnership with current and former public housing residents. The exhibit took the form of a projection installation that acts as an ephemeral monument for the everyday lives and stories of public housing residents.

As a new and growing museum, NPHM’s mission is to be the first cultural institution to tell the story of the people of public housing through oral history. Tiff Beatty, program director of arts, culture and public policy, explains that this time is “a critical point for us as we are starting to design what our exhibition spaces will look like, what our programming spaces will look like, and thinking about oral history as a way to not only collect information but also to build relationships in the community for it to be community-centered with a social justice mission.”

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*Tiff Beatty, Program Director
National Public Housing Museum*



The development of the “At Home” exhibit overlapped with NPHM’s ongoing work with community members including former and current public housing residents as well as local organizations to form an Entrepreneurship Hub with the support of an Institute of Museum and Library Services Community Catalyst Initiative (CCI) grant. The Hub is designed to leverage what NPHM recognizes as one of its community’s most valuable resources: “the history of innovative entrepreneurship that has been used as a strategy of surviving and thriving for public housing residents, low-income people, and communities of color.”

As part of the Community Catalyst Initiative, the NPHM Entrepreneurship Hub grant team joined a cohort of other CCI grant recipients who received training and coaching in Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) with consultants and from the ABCD Institute at DePaul University while also engaging in peer learning with other cohort members throughout the course of their projects. Asset-based principles encourage organizations like libraries and museums to invite community members with lived experience to play leading roles as contributors and decision makers in projects that concern them or their neighborhoods, rather than just recipients or information sources.

Out of their commitment to honoring the lives and capacities of public housing residents, NPHM staff applied the learnings from the Entrepreneurship Hub to the “At Home” exhibit as well as their CCI grant. From the beginning, they sought out the insights and leadership of Shakira Johnson,



[IN THIS VIDEO](#), watch NPHM Community Catalyst project lead Tiff Beatty share the story of their journey to greater partnership with public housing residents in Chicago.



a former public housing resident, inviting her to become an official Oral Historian who would work alongside NPHM staff and local designer Lauren Meranda to collect, curate, and plan the exhibit, with the participation and contributions of former and current public housing residents. Johnson would later go on to join the museum’s staff as an employee.

In February 2021, Tiff Beatty shared the story (below) of this exhibit with the Community Catalyst Initiative cohort as part of a Storytelling Festival designed to celebrate both cohorts’ 4 years of innovation and experimentation around how to engage more deeply with their communities. Her presentation includes a moving video of community members who live or have lived in public housing sharing their impressions of what the exhibit and the opportunity to share their stories meant to them. (See video on page 2.)

The experience has impacted how Tiff views the museum’s role in community and how they relate to residents. “I started at the museum in June, and so I’m still thinking about all of our different strategies and how they support each other. And for me, I really came away thinking about how we are leveraging our archive and artists to bring people together in ways that are really low stakes in some ways: giving a gift, sharing something, starting with that generosity, and then just there’s really no limit to what can happen in those spaces.”

Staff were delighted to see some unexpected outcomes emerge through the conversations and relationship-building that naturally occurred while developing the exhibit. “Even after some of those conversations that you saw on video, there were more conversations off camera. Chalonda [one of the residents] actually asked if the museum would be interested in working together with her. I found out that she has a business, a housekeeping business, and she’s very interested in working with the museum. And so we started talking more about that. She had no idea that her brother actually is on the board at NPHM. So we had a fun conversation about that.”

Connections and opportunities for collaboration also emerged connected to current programming. “The program that we are working on with ABCD is our Entrepreneurship Hub. And so even though that conversation really wasn’t about the Entrepreneurship

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Resident Power Ladder

Residents in Control

Residents control goal setting, planning and implementation.

Residents as Advisors / Advocates

Residents participate in goal setting, planning & implementation. Residents may serve on governing body, advisory group, or as advocates for the organization.

Residents as Information Sources

Residents participate as part of focus groups. Staff consults with residents. Residents fill out surveys.

Residents as Recipients

Residents receive services or information.



source: The ABCD Institute

Hub, we started talking more about our resident-led working group to create a cooperative business, sponsored by the National Public Housing Museum. Chalonda and several other residents who attended that event have stayed in contact and they're actually a part of those groups now as well."

Tiff notes the asset-based principles at play in this process: "In terms of the ladder of engagement, just really moving those folks into more leadership positions and being able to participate on a deeper level with the work."

The "ladder of engagement" is a tool used within an asset-based, community-centered approach to find ways that everyday community members can be in control of local initiatives, projects, or efforts in their community that impact their lives (while encouraging staff of organizations to take a back seat as supporters of resident-led action.)

Prepared by the ABCD Evaluation Team with the NPHM Community Catalyst Grantee Team for the IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative.

For more information, visit:

["At Home" Exhibit website](#)

[National Public Housing Museum](#)

[Power Ladder Tool](#)

[IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative](#)

[The Asset-Based Community Development Institute](#)

