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Cabrini-Green to Exit With Poetry and Lights

Chicago News Cooperative

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Mi'yanna Watkins, 16, records her story of living in the Cabrini-Green housing projects for a light show that will accompany the demolition of the complex's last high rise.

The last high-rise at Cabrini-Green is coming down starting Wednesday, stirring strong emotions among former residents who remember the troubled housing project as their home and community, as well as a place of menace. Those feelings will emerge in an unusual light display that will accompany the demolition.

Earlier this month, young people who lived in and around the project gathered nearby at the Seward Park field house to record poetry that will determine the rhythms of pulsating colored light beamed from the windows of the 15-story building. The lights will be extinguished, apartment by apartment, as the high-rise comes down.

Students and faculty members from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago developed the custom LED lights and computer software that fires the lights in sync with the teenagers' voices. Individually programmed lights in each apartment will reflect off the multicolored walls.

The project was created by Jan Tichy, an instructor at the Art Institute, and Efrat Appel, a social worker, to commemorate Cabrini and the experiences of former residents, most of whom are scattered throughout the city.



Students and former residents record their stories as the basis for the light show.
José Moré/Chicago News Cooperative

Although the housing project was dilapidated and infamous for violence, drugs and gangs, former residents also remember a strong sense of community.

“Cabrini wasn’t all that bad, even though now people make it seem like it was,” said Mi’Yanna Watkins, 16, a member of the Cabrini Marching Band who lived there until fifth grade. “There were block parties.

There were Old School Mondays, where everyone would come back; people who had been gone for 25 years would get together. I remember my first Christmas there. And this little area called the Blacktop, where I learned to ride a bike.”

Mr. Tichy and Ms. Appel helped teenagers from the marching band and several other after-school programs write poems about what Cabrini meant to them.

As he hunched over a microphone at the field house, Charles Kilpatrick, a lanky teenager, recited:

*When I moved in, I felt like I was already here;
But once it fell apart, I felt like shedding a tear.
They really don’t know what it feels like to be pushed away;
The government is taking our homes; they think it’s O.K.*

Some of the poems bemoan the city’s Plan for Transformation, which called for relocating displaced public-housing residents to mixed-income neighborhoods, including new developments at the same sites. Critics say the process has been poorly administered because it has placed some residents in far-flung, often high-crime neighborhoods or suburbs.

“My poem is about feeling lost, because they just spread people out everywhere,” said Raphael Garrett, 20.

Despite the biting edge to some poems, Jadine Chou, director of asset management for the Chicago Housing Authority, said agency officials were excited about the project.

“This is a wonderful way to let our young residents express themselves and say farewell to the final high-rise,” Ms. Chou said.

Real-time video of the building, at 1230 North Burling Street, and recordings of the teenagers' poetry will be available on a Web site (www.projectcabrinigreen.org) and in an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art for the duration of the demolition.

Evian Bridgeman, 18, a member of the Cabrini Marching Band who will attend Jackson State University in Mississippi on a scholarship, said he hoped the light display would make passers-by think about "the long legacy of Cabrini-Green in Chicago."

Mr. Bridgeman said he saw the demolition as a beginning both for the neighborhood and for the former residents who had started new lives throughout the city.

"It's bitter," he said. "And it's sweet."



Jan Tichy, center, developed the project. *José Moré/Chicago News Cooperative*

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