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CHA homes almost gone, but sculptures saved

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Soon, nearly every trace of a sprawling, 3,600-unit public housing project near the University of Illinois at Chicago will be gone, demolished to make way for a mixed-income community.

All, that is, save a key piece of its history, hidden away in a courtyard off Taylor Street.

Seven massive animal sculptures, designed in 1938 by famed New Deal artist Edgar Miller and lovingly used and protected by thousands of public housing families, will be saved and restored, Chicago Housing Authority officials plan to announce today at the ABLA public housing development.

They will become the centerpiece of a new \$3.5 million park nearby, paid for by Related Midwest, the private developer behind the new mixed-income community.

"It's so important because whatever happens in ABLA, this will always be a reminder for all the residents who ever lived in ABLA," Deverra Beverly, an ABLA resident leader, said Tuesday while touring the "Animal Court" sculpture garden. As she spoke, she leaned against one of the 700- to 800-pound sculptures, this one depicting two cuddling wolves.

The carved limestone sculptures feature rams, hippos, pumas, a bunny and panda, laid out in a rectangular courtyard amid the Jane Addams Homes. That's the nation's first public housing project and part of ABLA. Animal Court was the playground for generations of children and a hangout for adults.

Nearly all the Addams buildings are gone. New brick three-flats across the street are the start of a replacement community.

They 'represent the good times'

Miller created Animal Court, one of the CHA's only pieces of public art, while working for the Works Progress Administration, a New Deal agency that put thousands of Depression-era artists to work. He produced well-designed, whimsical sculptures that have stood the test of time, said sculptor and conservator Andrzej Dajnowski. He will restore Miller's sculptures, which have some chipped limestone and flaking paint.

The Chicago Conservation Center raised funds to remove the pieces, but needs \$110,000 more for restoration.

"Everything hasn't always been bad in public housing," said Beverly, a grandmother who has spent a lifetime at ABLA. "Lots of good things happened. These represent the good times."

Sculptor used nature images

Animal Court designer Edgar Miller is best known for the breadth and variety of his work and for integrating images of nature into his art.

"He was an amazing artist," said Heather Becker, CEO of the Chicago Conservation Center. Miller, a Works Progress Administration sculptor, also created stained glass, mosaics, woodcarving and watercolors. He painted china and worked as a graphic designer. Miller designed exterior bas reliefs on the Technology Institute at Northwestern University in Evanston and stained glass windows at Kelvyn Park High School, according to Becker and Miller's biographer, Larry Zgoda. He died in 1993.

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