



National
Public Housing
Museum

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**NATIONAL PUBLIC HOUSING MUSEUM HOSTS NEW EXHIBITION
AND EXPERIMENTAL HOUSING PROTOTYPE, RETHINKING
FUTURE OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING**

*“BREAKTHROUGH: Housing Futures” Presented in Alignment With
Sixth Chicago Architecture Biennial*

Chicago, Illinois (November 13, 2025)—The National Public Housing Museum, the first museum dedicated to telling the stories and sharing the history of public housing in the United States, today announced **BREAKTHROUGH: Housing Futures**, running November 19, 2025 - April 19, 2026. The exhibition looks back at the historical Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) program “Operation Breakthrough” and presents experimental housing prototypes from the **Housing Futures Initiative**. It is organized by **Alexander Eisenschmidt**, a designer, writer, and professor of architecture at the University of Illinois at Chicago.



Still from the HUD film “Operation Breakthrough,” 1976.

In 1969, HUD initiated “Operation Breakthrough,” a wildly ambitious project that challenged the building industry to develop alternative ways to design and construct millions of housing units. Housing Secretary George Romney described Operation Breakthrough as “not a program designed to see just how cheaply we can build a house, but is a way to break through to total new systems of housing production, financing, marketing, management, and land use.”

This historical effort by the US government to produce “quality housing for all income groups” through experimentation inspires a new exhibition, program series, and demonstration project at the **National Public Housing Museum**. Learning from, responding to, and expanding on the lessons of the program, **BREAKTHROUGH: Housing Futures** presents an immersive living and learning environment created by **The Housing Futures Initiative** and aims to question the social, cultural, and economic conventions of housing by rethinking the design, material, and construction of urban living.

BREAKTHROUGH is both an exhibition and an invitation to the visiting public, housing advocates, scholars, and architects to learn together and generate new insights into the future of affordable housing. It opens against the backdrop of a persistent housing crisis: there is not a single county in the US where a full-time minimum wage worker can afford to rent a modest apartment. Chicago, for example, has a shortage of 120,000 units, and Illinois has a deficit of some 300,000 units for extremely low-income renters. One result of this is rising homelessness.

“The housing situation should provoke all of us to demand new solutions to an ongoing crisis,” said exhibition curator **Alexander Eisenschmidt**, a designer, writer, and professor of architecture at the University of Illinois at Chicago. “Yet room layouts, building materials, and construction techniques in the U.S. have largely remained unchanged for more than a century.”

Presented in alignment with the sixth **Chicago Architecture Biennial**, **BREAKTHROUGH** challenges visitors to reconsider how we live with one another. It juxtaposes historical documentation of Operation Breakthrough housing projects with newly designed prototypes to create a living room and learning space for exploration and conversation about affordable housing futures, past and present.

“The National Public Housing Museum is committed to bridging arts, culture, and public policy in a way that brings people together to grapple with the question of how we can advance the future of housing in our nation,” said **Lisa Yun Lee**, Executive Director and Chief Curator of the National Public Housing Museum.

BREAKTHROUGH offers a space and opportunity to question established norms of living, address different models of homeownership, and explore innovative policies, with the goal of generating new knowledge that can confront the current housing crisis and speak to the potential of housing as a human right.

During its six-month run, **BREAKTHROUGH** will serve as a site for programs, a gathering space, and a classroom for exploration and conversation about housing affordability and design.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the National Public Housing Museum will also host a robust series of free public programs, including a housing summit produced in collaboration with the Chicago Architecture Biennial. Other events will explore the history of Operation Breakthrough, its connections to a brain trust of former NASA scientists like Harold Finger, and the ways in which adjacent disciplines can work together to produce new knowledge around building materials and address construction challenges for affordable housing.

Highlighting new unit prototypes designed by the **Housing Futures Initiative**, the installation explores new spatial layouts and features transformable furniture—such as a rotating shelf wall, a sofa-bed-chair, and a curtain column—that adapt to changing needs and alternative family structures that depart from the nuclear family. All are built with materials that are both sustainable and afford speed and ease of construction. The design is not only economical but aims to be scalable (from house to housing), communal (from single to collective), adaptive (from bachelor to granny), and beautiful (from “existence minimum” to quality of life).

BREAKTHROUGH culminates with the construction of a full-scale demonstration project designed by the Housing Futures Initiative, led by Eisenschmidt, with architect **Kelly Bair**, lawyer **Allison Bethel**, and planner **April Jackson**, who all teach at the University of Illinois at Chicago. In Spring 2026, the project plans to migrate the exhibition’s furniture to the prototype that will have a future home in one of Chicago’s neighborhoods. There, it will be utilized as a demonstration project and home for a residency program for the study of the advancement of housing.

“Housing is one of the most urgent and generative research axes of *SHIFT*,” said **Florencia Rodriguez**, Artistic Director of the Chicago Architecture Biennial. “Our partnership with the National Public Housing Museum and Alexander Eisenschmidt’s ongoing research allows the Biennial to expand its platform toward the real, to engage with ideas that can meaningfully contribute to better, more equitable futures.”

The exhibition is free and open to the public. Additional information about related programs will be posted at nphm.org/events.

Support

Lead support for **BREAKTHROUGH** and related programming is provided by the Alvin H. Baum Family Fund. Through innovative grants and collaborations, the Fund helps ignite new ideas and promote solutions to ensure healthier, more equitable, and peaceful communities.

Additional support for the Housing Futures Initiative’s demonstration project is provided in part by the University of Illinois Chicago and Alphawood Foundation Chicago.

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About The Housing Futures Initiative

The Housing Futures Initiative (HFI) identifies housing as a primary form of architecture and one of its main responsibilities, if not today's most crucial task. It targets the current crisis by prototyping advanced, affordable, and sustainable housing designs through spatial, material, and construction innovation. Its interdisciplinary team aims at a radical rethinking and remaking of collective urban living and the politics and economies that surround them.

About the Chicago Architecture Biennial

The Chicago Architecture Biennial is celebrating 10 years as North America's largest international showcase of new ideas in architecture and design—and it's open to everyone. From September 19, 2025 to February 28, 2026, the Biennial's sixth edition, *SHIFT: Architecture in Times of Radical Change*, will feature more than 100 events and exhibits by artists, designers, and architects from over 30 countries. Installations are open across Chicago and programs will take place in public spaces, cultural centers, and museums all across the greater Chicago area. Together, these projects explore how design can help us face big issues—like climate change, affordable housing, and community wellbeing—and imagine new ways to build better cities for all. Learn more at chicagoarchitecturebiennial.org.

About the National Public Housing Museum

Our story starts with a simple truth: that all people have the right to a home. Founded by public housing residents, the National Public Housing Museum is the first cultural institution dedicated to interpreting the American experience in public housing. Filled with history, memories, music, and art, the Museum is a welcoming community gathering place that honors the stories and experiences of public housing residents. Through partnerships and programs, the Museum also serves as a civic incubator that inspires visitors to take informed action to advance housing justice.

National Public Housing Museum

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