

**CITY OF CHICAGO
COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS**

JULY 9, 2026

**RECOMMENDATION TO THE CITY COUNCIL OF CHICAGO THAT
CHICAGO LANDMARK DESIGNATION BE ADOPTED FOR THE**

SHOP BUILDING AT ALTGELD GARDENS

13100 S. ELLIS AVE.

Docket No. 2026-08

To the Mayor and Members of the City Council of the City of Chicago:

Pursuant to Section 2-120-690 of the Municipal Code of the City of Chicago (the “Municipal Code”), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks (the “Commission”) has determined that the Shop Building at Altgeld Gardens (the “Building”) is worthy of designation as a Chicago Landmark. On the basis of careful consideration of the history and architecture of the Building, the Commission has found that it satisfies the following five criteria set forth in Section 2-120-620 of the Municipal Code:

1. *Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*
3. *Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*
4. *Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.*
5. *Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*
7. *Its unique location or distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the City of Chicago.*

I. BACKGROUND

The formal landmark designation process for the Building began on June 4, 2026, when the Commission approved a preliminary landmark recommendation (the "Preliminary Recommendation") for the Building as a Chicago Landmark. The Commission found that the Building meets five of the seven criteria for designation, as well as the integrity criterion, identified in the Chicago Landmarks Ordinance (Municipal Code, Section 2-120-580 *et seq.*). As part of the Preliminary Recommendation, the Commission preliminarily identified the "significant historical and architectural features" of the Building as:

- All exterior elevations, including rooflines, of the Building.
- The memorial wall on the north wall of the covered breezeway.

Additional Guidelines—General

Pursuant to Section 2-120-740 of the Municipal Code, on April 2, 2026, the Permit Review Committee (P.R.C.) of the Commission approved, with conditions, a pre-permit submission, including drawings, renderings and photographs, for the exterior and interior rehabilitation of an existing one-story masonry building and construction of a new visible side addition (the "P.R.C. Project"). Notwithstanding the foregoing significant historical and architectural features listed above, the proposed scope of work contained in the P.R.C. Project shall be permitted.

Also, as part of the Preliminary Recommendation, the Commission adopted a Designation Report, dated June 4, 2026, the most current iteration of which is dated July 9, 2026, incorporated herein and attached hereto as **Exhibit A** (the "Designation Report").

On June 25, 2026, the Commission received written consent to landmark designation of the Building in a form dated June 25, 2026, and signed by Andraya Yousfi, representing the owner of the Building.

At its regular meeting of July 9, 2026, the Commission received a statement from Ciere Boatright, Commissioner of the Department of Planning and Development, stating that the proposed landmark designation of the Building supports the City's overall planning goals and is consistent with the City's governing policies and plans.

II. FINDINGS OF THE COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS

WHEREAS, pursuant to Section 2-120-690 of the Municipal Code, the Commission has reviewed the entire record of proceedings on the proposed Chicago Landmark designation, including the Designation Report and all the information on the proposed landmark designation of the Building; and

WHEREAS, the Building served as the commercial center and community hub for Altgeld Gardens, one of the largest and most self-contained public housing developments built in Chicago during the first half of the twentieth century. Constructed in a largely industrial area with few commercial businesses to serve Altgeld residents, the Shop Building provided easy access to critical community assets, including a grocery store, drug store, tailor shop, doctor's office, and beauty parlor; and

WHEREAS, between 1945 and 1951, the Building was home to the Altgeld Gardens Consumer Co-operative, a non-profit co-operative grocery store jointly owned and operated by Altgeld residents. Black-owned co-operatives, part of the larger co-operative movement that surged in Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s, were an important means of economic independence for African American communities. As a self-contained community of approximately 7,000 people, Altgeld Gardens was an ideal setting for a co-operative, and by 1947 the Altgeld Gardens Consumer Co-operative was the largest store of its kind in the country; and

WHEREAS, later known as the "Up Top" by Altgeld residents, the Building has also served since the late 1960s as a place of commemoration for community members who lived and died at Altgeld Gardens. After 17-year-old Sterling "Pinky" Jones—an active member of the Black Panther Party—was shot and killed at Altgeld in December 1969, his name was painted on the north wall of the Shop Building's breezeway along with a mural of Malcolm X. In subsequent decades, residents have added hundreds of names and messages to lost loved ones to the wall, making it an important memorial connecting the thousands of people that have called Altgeld Gardens home; and

WHEREAS, during the last decades of the twentieth century, the Building housed the offices of the People for Community Recovery (PCR), a grassroots environmental justice organization founded in 1979 by Altgeld resident and community activist Hazel Johnson (1935-2011). Under Johnson's tireless and determined leadership, PCR worked with residents and numerous stakeholders to document and address serious environmental issues at Altgeld Gardens, fight against the expansion of landfills and hazardous waste facilities on Chicago's Southeast Side, and bring training and workforce opportunities for the Altgeld community; and

WHEREAS, Hazel Johnson emerged as a nationally recognized leader in the environmental justice movement in the 1990s. Her activism helped lead to important federal changes in environmental policy, including the formation of the EPA's Office of Environmental Justice and the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council; and

WHEREAS, Johnson was awarded the President's Environmental and Conservation Challenge Award in 1992 by President George H.W. Bush. In 1994, she was one of a small number of stakeholders invited to witness President William J. Clinton sign Executive Order 12898, the first major federal action on environmental justice. Two years later, President Clinton honored 100 environmental groups, including PCR, at a White House ceremony. Johnson also served as an advisor for Vice President Al Gore's climate and environmental platform during his 2000 presidential campaign, and was one of eleven women of color honored at the 2002 People of Color Summit for her contributions to the environmental justice movement; and

WHEREAS, the Building is an early and unique example of modernist commercial architecture in Chicago, exemplifying Keck and Keck's affinity for contemporary, functional, and site-specific designs; and

WHEREAS, the Building, with its low-slung, curved form, its flat, unadorned wall surfaces, large expanses of glass, and swooping concrete canopy, reflects the influence of European modernism, which did not fully take hold in Chicago until after World War II; and

WHEREAS, the Building is important as an early example of a commercial building designed around the principles of passive solar heating. The Building's south-facing orientation, window placement, and canopies are all elements of solar design that Keck and Keck first developed for single family homes; and

WHEREAS, the Building is significant as one of the few commercial buildings designed by the architecture firm commonly known as Keck and Keck. The 50-year partnership of brothers George Fred Keck and William Keck produced many of best examples of early modernist residential design in Midwest and influenced a generation of Chicago architects; and

WHEREAS, George Fred Keck's avant-garde designs for the House of Tomorrow and the Crystal House at the 1933 A Century of Progress Exposition were a radical departure from any architecture built in Chicago at that time and helped open the public's eyes to modernism. Keck and Keck's subsequent commissions reflected the firm's commitment to creating functional, contemporary, and technologically advanced designs that met the specific needs of each client; and

WHEREAS, Keck and Keck were considered the foremost architects of high-quality solar homes, leading many advances in solar design and construction. The firm was among the first architects in the country to consistently incorporate energy efficient technologies in their designs; and

WHEREAS, the modern design of the Building stands in sharp contrast to the more traditional residential and community buildings at Altgeld Gardens. The Building, located in a prominent location within the commercial and administrative core of the project, is an established visual feature in Altgeld Gardens; and

WHEREAS, the memorial wall at the Building, created by residents to commemorate lost loved ones and former residents, is also a unique and important visual feature within Altgeld Gardens; and

WHEREAS, the Building meets five criteria for landmark designation set forth in Section 2-120-620 (1), (3), (4), (5) and (7) of the Municipal Code; and

WHEREAS, consistent with Section 2-120-630 of the Municipal Code, the Building has significant historic, community, architectural, or aesthetic interest or value, the integrity of which is preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, and ability to express such historic, community, architectural, or aesthetic interest or value; now, therefore,

THE COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS HEREBY:

1. Adopts the recitals, findings and statements of fact set forth in the preamble and Sections I and II hereof as the findings of the Commission; and
2. Adopts the Designation Report, as revised, and dated this July 9, 2026; and
3. Finds, based on the Designation Report and the entire record before the Commission, that the Building meets five criteria for landmark designation as set forth in Section 2-120-620 (1), (3), (4), (5) and (7) of the Municipal Code; and
4. Finds that the Building satisfies the "integrity" requirement set forth in Section 2-120-630 of the Municipal Code; and
5. Finds that the significant historical and architectural features of the Building are identified as follows:
 - All exterior elevations, including rooflines, of the Building.

- The memorial wall on the north wall of the covered breezeway.

Additional Guidelines—General

Pursuant to Section 2-120-740 of the Municipal Code, on April 2, 2026, the Permit Review Committee (P.R.C.) of the Commission approved, with conditions, a pre-permit submission, including drawings, renderings and photographs, for the exterior and interior rehabilitation of an existing one-story masonry building and construction of a new visible side addition (the “P.R.C. Project”). Notwithstanding the foregoing significant historical and architectural features listed above, the proposed scope of work contained in the P.R.C. Project shall be permitted.

6. Recommends designation of the Building a Chicago Landmark.

This recommendation was adopted unanimously (9-0).



Ernest C. Wong, Chair
Commission on Chicago Landmarks

Dated: July 9, 2026

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



THE SHOP BUILDING AT ALTGELD GARDENS **13100 S. ELLIS AVENUE**

**FINAL LANDMARK RECOMMENDATION ADOPTED BY THE COMMISSION
ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS, ON JULY 9, 2026.**



CITY OF CHICAGO
Brandon Johnson, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development
Ciere Boatright, Commissioner

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The Shop Building at Altgeld Gardens

13100 S. Ellis Avenue

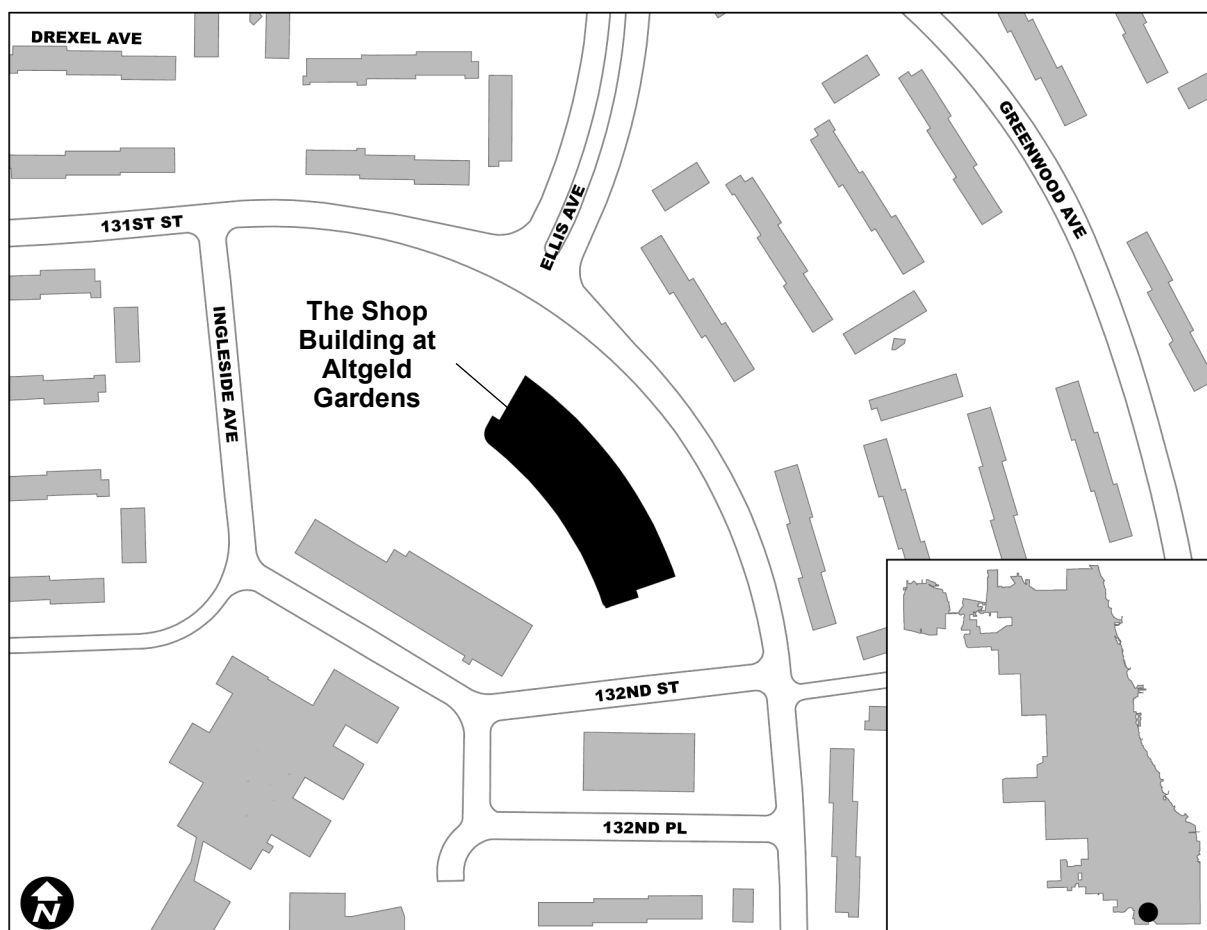
Constructed: 1945

Architect: George Fred Keck

The Shop Building at Altgeld Gardens, located at 13100 S. Ellis Avenue, is significant as a central component of Altgeld Gardens, a self-contained public housing project developed by the Chicago Housing Authority on the far South Side of Chicago and completed in 1945 during World War II. Constructed in a dense industrial area to house African American defense workers and their families, Altgeld Gardens was one of the largest and most comprehensive public housing projects built in Chicago in the first half of the twentieth century. Designed to be “a city within itself,” the project provided housing and a number of community facilities—including the Shop Building—that served the needs of Altgeld residents.

Through the end of the twentieth century, the Shop Building served as the commercial hub for Altgeld Gardens and an important space for community cooperation and organization. Between 1945 and 1951, the building was home to the Altgeld Consumer Co-operative, the largest Black-owned co-operative store in the country. In the late twentieth century, the Shop Building housed the offices of the People for Community Recovery (PCR), a grassroots organization founded by Altgeld resident Hazel Johnson to combat environmental injustice at Altgeld Gardens. During the 1980s and 1990s, Johnson would become a recognized leader in the national environmental justice movement through her work with PCR.

The Shop Building at Altgeld Gardens is also significant as one of the few commercial buildings designed by George Fred Keck, an influential modernist architect best known for his groundbreaking residential designs. Keck, who designed the House of Tomorrow for the 1933 Century of Progress Exhibition, was an early adopter of European modernism and a pioneer in the area of solar design, both of which he incorporated into the design for the Shop Building. With its low, curved form, unadorned surfaces, and swooping concrete canopy, the Shop Building stands in sharp contrast to the more traditional and conservative buildings at Altgeld Gardens, and reflects Keck and Keck’s unique and revolutionary approach to architecture.



The Shop Building at Altgeld Gardens is located at 13100 S. Ellis Avenue in the Riverdale community area on the far South Side of Chicago.

BUILDING DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

From the beginning, Altgeld Gardens was planned around a central core that housed shared community amenities to serve the self-contained development. Block 14, a fan-shaped parcel at the northeast corner of the central core, was delegated as the community’s commercial and administrative center. Original site plans showed an administration building at the south end of the block, and three buildings labeled “Future Stores” along South Ellis Avenue. Unlike the buildings in the rest of the complex, which were owned by the federal government and managed by CHA, the commercial buildings at Altgeld were always intended to be privately built, owned, and operated developments. Most likely this was done because CHA had no interest in being a retail landlord, and outsourcing the construction, maintenance, and operations to a private developer would bring much needed amenities at no additional cost to the project. A private developer would also not be as constrained by cost and so could presumably construct a more marketable and successful retail center.

On June 25, 1944, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that plans had been unveiled for a new “business center” to be constructed at Ellis and 131st Street in the Altgeld community. The \$250,000 center, designed by Chicago architect George Fred Keck, would be owned and operated by the Thaddeus Stevens Land Trust, which would lease the facilities to private business operators. “The operating of the commercial district by private business interests,” CHA Executive Secretary Elizabeth Wood told the *Tribune*, “is but another of the many ways by which public and private enterprise can work together for their mutual advantage and for the community they serve.” Initially, the business center was planned to include a wide variety of stores and commercial spaces, including “a supermarket and bakery, barber shop, beauty parlor, laundry and cleaning shop, secondary food stores, drug store, restaurant, professional offices, and a 900 seat movie theater.” An early rendering for the project showed a glassy one-story shop building with a much larger structure (presumably the movie theater) in the background.

By the time the trust filed for a building permit on April 6, 1945, plans for the business center had been scaled back. The theater building had been eliminated, and the footprint of the proposed one-story shop building did not extend the full length of the lot, as shown in the master plan. Plans for the building showed space for a modest supermarket, drug store, and variety store. Smaller slivers of the interior were given over to a tailor shop, tavern, doctor’s office, beauty parlor, barber, and delicatessen. The permit listed the total project costs at \$80,000. Construction began in mid-April 1945 and the building was completed by the end of October.

The Shop Building at Altgeld Gardens is a one-story modern commercial building with a curved, crescent-like footprint that follows the curvature of the north side of Block 14. The building has a concrete structure, brick exterior walls (now mostly painted), and a flat roof. A covered outdoor passageway cuts through the building near its east end, connecting the north parking lot to the open space at the interior of the block. A small, irregularly shaped brick addition extends from the building’s east elevation.

The primary façade of the building is the south elevation, which faces the interior of the block. A curving, concrete canopy cantilevers out dramatically from the roofline and extends along the entire south elevation, continuing around the rounded southwest corner of the building and onto the short west elevation. Historically, this elevation housed large, glazed storefronts set on brick bulkheads, with regularly spaced recessed storefront entrances. These glass storefronts have largely been removed and the openings infilled with brick. Two of the original recessed entrance bays remain, but the doors appear to be non-historic replacements.

The north elevation, facing the parking lot and 131st Street, features painted brick walls, bands of high clerestory windows (some of which have been infilled with brick), and a shallower projecting canopy. Doors along this elevations appear to be non-historic doors within original openings. East of the covered passageway, the north elevation features larger window openings

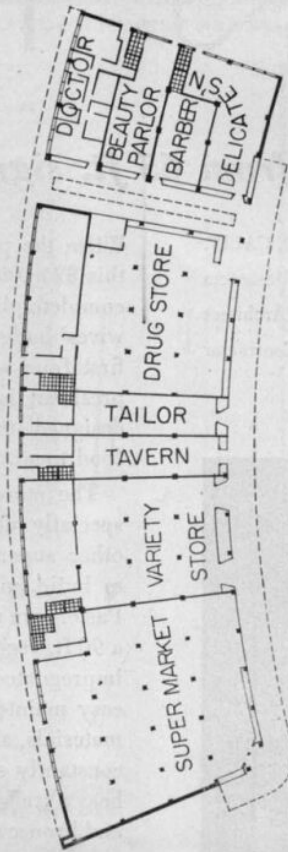
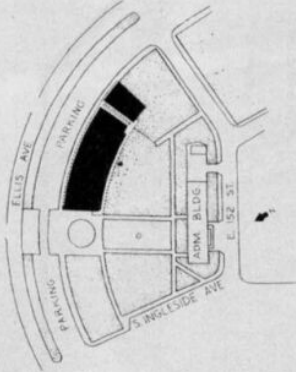
29. *Essential services for 1,500 families*

LOCATION: CHICAGO, ILL.

GEORGE FRED KECK & WILLIAM KECK, Architects

PERRY CONSTRUCTION CO.

General Contractors



The Chicago Housing Authority's Altgeld Gardens, a housing project for 1,500 families, was built—as so many such projects must be—in a rather isolated location near south-side manufacturing plants. The Authority wanted a set of necessary services available for residents of this project, and decided that the essentials were a supermarket, variety store, tailor and shoe repair shop, tavern, drug store, delicatessen, beauty parlor, barber shop and laundry. This building was then planned—to be privately owned and financed—for a prominent location in the project, to house these essentials and help create the full community. Architecture and materials were planned to conform with other buildings in the project. Chief decorative feature is the marquee which flares gracefully over the front sidewalk.

When completed in November 1945, the Shop Building provided essential services for Altgeld Garden's residents and served as an important community hub.

Source: *Architectural Forum*, May 1948.

flanking a storefront entrance, which houses a non-historic door.

The west elevation is painted brick and without windows. The east elevation is brick and houses three entrances, both of which have been infilled with metal panels. A small, irregularly shaped one-story brick addition extends from the southeast corner of the building.

When it was completed, the Shop Building stood in stark contrast to the more traditional, if spare, residential and community buildings at Altgeld Gardens designed by the architecture firm Naess & Murphy. George Fred Keck, who had designed the House of Tomorrow and the Crystal House for the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago, was an early adopter of European modernism and was best known for embracing innovative building technologies including prefabrication, radiant floor heating, and solar design. Rather than adhering to a specific architectural style, the firm of Keck and Keck approached each project as a set of problems to be solved, and the resulting buildings were primarily shaped by the best solutions to those problems.

While the Shop Building's low-slung, curved form, its flat, unadorned wall surfaces, large expanses of glass, and swooping concrete canopy are consistent with early twentieth century modernist buildings constructed in Europe, these elements also reflect Keck and Keck's unique approach to constructing a high-quality, cost efficient, and energy efficient commercial building at Altgeld Gardens. Utilizing the principles of passive solar heating that the firm first developed for single family homes, the Shop Building was oriented with the storefronts facing south to maximize heat gain during the winter and provide natural light into the retail spaces. The concrete canopy along the south elevation was designed to reduce heat gain in the summer, when the sun was higher in the sky. The exaggerated rounded corner of the canopy served as a visual cue for shoppers approaching the building from the parking lot. The thermal mass of the common brick walls, minimally fenestrated except for the south elevation, also helped regulate temperatures in the Shop Building by storing heat during the day and releasing it at night. Utility and back-of-house spaces were arranged along the back of the building, to allow efficient loading and unloading from the parking lot. Clerestory windows on this wall provided light into the back-of-house spaces.

The covered breezeway bisecting the building provided easy access from the parking lot to the retail entrances and space for additional storefronts. Monitor skylights provided natural light along the length of the passage. Since the Shop Building did not extend all the way to East 132nd Street, as originally intended in the master plan, the Kecks likely incorporated this breezeway to allow for easy expansion without landlocking any of the existing retail spaces. Later in the building's history, Altgeld residents transformed one wall of the breezeway into a memorial, commemorating members of the community who had died. As Imam Seth Ibrahim, former Altgeld resident, told the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the memorial started as a "Wall of Pride" during the 1960s. After 17-year old Sterling "Pinky" Jones, a member of the Illinois Chapter of the Black Panter Party, was shot and killed on Christmas Day in 1969, friends painted his name



Keck and Keck's design for the Shop Building, with its curving form, unadorned wall surfaces, and dramatic concrete canopy, incorporated elements of European modernism and solar design.

Top: Photograph of the Shop Building, 1945 Source: Chicago History Museum.

Bottom: Current view of the Shop Building.





The Shop Building's storefronts face south, toward the interior of Block 14. A covered breezeway provides access to the rear parking lot, and also houses a memorial wall where Altgeld residents honor lost loved ones and former residents.

Top: Looking northwest along the primary façade, with the breezeway and memorial wall at right.
 Bottom: Rear façade of the Shop Building.



in a prominent spot on the north wall of the passage, and CHA provided paint to install a large mural of Malcolm X. Over the coming years, residents added other “murals, political statements, poetry, and words of encouragement” to the brick walls of the Shop Building, which was known as “Up Top” by most residents. The names of Altgeld residents who had died were concentrated along the north wall of the passage, which today serves as an important touchstone connecting the thousands of people that have called Altgeld Gardens home.

THE ALTGELD GARDENS CONSUMER CO-OPERATIVE

The first and one of the most significant tenants to move into the Shop Building after its completion in 1945 was the Altgeld Consumer Co-Operative. Co-operatives, generally defined as businesses owned and democratically controlled by a group of producers or consumers for their benefit, first rose to prominence in the nineteenth century as a reaction against industrial capitalism, which prioritized profits for corporations over the needs and well-being of workers. Notable early efforts to form co-operatives were spearheaded by nineteenth century social reformers, including Welsh textile manufacturer Robert Owen (1771-1858) who founded the utopian community New Harmony in Indiana in 1825, and Dr. William King (1786-1865), a British physician and philanthropist who founded a co-operative store in Brighton and published *The Co-operator*, a paper that promoted the concepts of co-operative organizations. One of the first successful co-operatives, the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, was founded in 1844 in England by a group of Owen disciples and discontented flannel weavers. The organization began by establishing a store that sold various food items to its members at an affordable price, but their ultimate goal was to create a “self-supporting Home colony of united interests” that included “common housing, production cooperatives, and common land for collective agriculture.” Although the Rochdale Society never reached that goal, the success of its original store, organized around a set of clear democratic objectives, would become the established model for co-operatives across the globe through the twentieth century. The key tenants of what would become known by the 1930s as the “Rochdale Principles” were open and voluntary membership, democratic control (one person, one vote), the sale of all goods at prevailing local prices, distribution of profits to members based on their participation, and a commitment to teaching its members best co-operative practices.

In the United States, early co-operatives in the nineteenth century were also often associated with social reform and labor organizations, including the National Labor Union and the Knights of Labor. Beginning in 1867, formal co-operatives among farmers, most notably associated with The National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry (“the Grange”) were established across the country, allowing small farmers to pool their resources to gain greater access to markets and lower prices on supplies. By the early twentieth century, there was a dizzying array of worker, agricultural, and consumer co-operatives operated by various organizations across the country, all of which were united in their aim to abolish the abuses of the economic system by democratizing distribution. Co-operative stores were established in

urban areas as well as rural communities. In 1916, the Co-operative League was founded as a national organization of consumer co-operative societies in the United States, and became “the major umbrella organization for Rochdale Co-operatives in the country.” The first Co-operative League convention, held in Springfield, Illinois in 1918, attracted 386 co-operatives.

Although agricultural co-operatives expanded during the economic boom of the 1920s, higher incomes and a general sense of prosperity led to a precipitous decline in co-operative stores in urban areas. Between 1925 and 1929, almost 600 associations went out of business; co-operatives in the Midwest were particularly hard hit. The onset of the Great Depression in 1929, however, would lead to a resurgence in co-operative enterprises. Many of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs, including the Rural Electrification Act, the Tennessee Valley Authority Program, and the Farm Security Administration, supported the creation of co-operative enterprises. In 1933, James Warbasse (founder of the Co-operative League) and Mary Rumsey (founder of the Junior League for the Promotion of Settlement Movements) were appointed to the Consumer Advisory Board, formed under the New Deal National Recovery Act to protect consumer interests. Rumsey, who served as board chair, stressed that “the need is not for competition but a cooperative system.”

During the 1930s, the Co-operative League, whose members were primarily urban worker families operating co-operative stores, extended its organizational framework by creating National Cooperatives, Inc., a nationwide system of wholesale farm organizations that connected its member organizations directly to producers. The consumer co-operative movement continued to grow through the end of World War II, but most initiatives were only modestly successful and relatively short-lived. The 1950s were a period of marked decline for non-agricultural co-operatives across the country. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, a wave of social justice movements, the emergence of the “counterculture” movement, and a growing interest in natural and organic foods led to a revival of co-operative endeavors.

For African Americans through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, cooperative economic action was not merely a tool against unchecked capitalism, but a means in which to participate in an economic system that actively excluded them. Co-operative businesses, based on the values of “self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity,” were one strategy in a long history of collective resistance, organization, and collaboration that extended from the Underground Railroad to Civil Rights Movement. During the nineteenth century, free African American communities formed mutual-aid, beneficial societies, and fraternal organizations that provided for the educational, health, social welfare, and economic needs of its most vulnerable citizens. In 1855, there were 108 Black mutual aid societies in Philadelphia alone. After emancipation, these types of organizations spread across the country.

By the late 1800s, the growth of the Populist Movement in America briefly united poor Black and White farmers against northern industrialists and the southern plantation system. Integrated

labor unions, including the Knights of Labor and the Cooperative Workers of America, established co-operatives that accepted both Black and White members. However, after the Haymarket strike in Chicago in 1886 most were forced to close.

In the early twentieth century, prominent Black leaders including W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey promoted cooperatives as a critical path towards African American economic success and independence. Du Bois, a prolific writer and the editor of *The Crisis*, a monthly magazine published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), profiled numerous examples of economic cooperation in African American communities. In 1907, he published an academic report, *Economic Co-operation Among Negro Americans*, that documented “the existence of 154 African American-owned cooperatives: 14 “producer cooperatives,” 3 “transportation cooperatives,” 103 “distribution or consumer cooperatives,” and 34 “real state and credit cooperatives.” Many of these cooperative businesses, including the Mercantile Cooperative Company in Ruthville, Virginia, the Citizens’ Co-operative Stores in Memphis, Tennessee, and the Pioneer Cooperative Society in Harlem, New York City, were urban stores that followed the Rochdale principles.

African American communities that established successful co-operatives focused much of their time and energy on education and training, so that members understood the foundational principles of cooperative economics and were fully prepared for the work involved. “Study circles”—weekly group meetings that included readings and discussion—were commonly convened as the first step in the organization process. The founding members of the Consumers’ Cooperative Trading Company in Gary, Indiana organized a study circle and spent nearly a year engaged in research and discussion on economic coordination before opening their first store, a grocery and meat market, in December 1932. Jacob L. Reddix, a prominent member and a teacher at nearby Roosevelt High School, chaired the study group. Beginning in 1933, Reddix expanded the study group to include courses on the history and philosophy of cooperation and the organization and management of cooperatives, taught under the high school’s adult education night school. By the mid-1930s, the company had over 400 members and boasted annual sales of \$160,000.

By the time Altgeld Gardens was completed in 1945, Chicago had emerged as the center for the cooperative movement in the Midwest. The Central States Cooperative, a regional wholesale arm of the national Cooperative League that included Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan, was headquartered in Chicago, as well as Cooperative Wholesale Inc., the League’s national wholesale organization. In 1945, the Rochdale Institute, a national training school for consumer co-operatives that had recently been accredited under the new G.I. Bill of Rights, moved its headquarters from New York to Chicago.

Increased interest in co-operatives within Chicago’s African American communities during the 1940s was in large part due to the *Chicago Defender*, which regularly reported on the cooperative movement and its impact in African American neighborhoods. In 1942, the



"INVEST IN YOUR CO-OP"



THE ALTGELD CO-OPERATIVE
COMMUNITY OWNED

PROUDLY SERVES

- GROCERIES
- PRODUCE
- APPLIANCES
- PHONOGRAPH RECORDS
- MEATS
- NEWSPAPERS
- ICE CREAM
- NOTIONS
- FISH
- MAGAZINES
- BEVERAGES

ON A NON-PROFIT BASIS !!

OUR RECORD OF UNSELFISH SERVICE !

6% Interest ON SHARES AND NOTES

2% REBATE on purchases during FISCAL YEAR.

For the Board FRANK J. WILLIAMS - PRES

For the Staff WILMOTH BOWEN - MGR

Educational Dept. LENORE DAVIS

"BUY AT YOUR CO-OP"

The first major tenant in the Shop Building was the Altgeld Gardens Consumer Cooperative, a non-profit co-operative grocery store jointly owned and operated by Altgeld residents. Black-owned co-operatives, part of the larger co-operative movement that surged in Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s, were an important means of economic independence for African American communities.

Top: Member of the Altgeld Gardens Consumer Co-operative, c. 1945. Source: History of Altgeld Gardens

Middle: Flyer advertising the Altgeld Gardens Consumer Co-operative, c. 1947. Source: National Public Housing Museum.

Bottom: Photograph of the Shop Building showing the Altgeld Gardens Consumer Co-operative, c. 1947. Source: History Of Altgeld Gardens.



Defender hired S. I. Hayakawa, a Japanese American professor of English at the Armour Institute of Technology (now the Illinois Institute of Technology) to write a weekly column that was titled “Second Thoughts.” Hayakawa, the first non-African American to write regularly in the paper, was recruited by the *Defender*’s editor in chief, Metz Lochard, after he published his first book, *Language in Action*, which used the principles of general semantics to argue that “race as a human category was fundamentally irrational.”

As a leftist activist living on Chicago’s South Side and an enthusiastic supporter of the co-operative movement, Hayakawa used his column to educate the Black community on the possibilities of “economic emancipation” through consumer co-operation. Hayakawa and his wife, Marge, were members of the Hyde Park Co-op and the People’s Consumer Co-operative, a large Black cooperative store that was initially formed by residents of the Michigan Boulevard Garden Apartments. In July 1942, speaking to a large crowd of members from the Thrift Co-op Club, the Morgan Park Consumers Co-operative, and the Ida B. Wells Co-operative, Hayakawa declared, “Consumer co-operation is the most fruitful tool of American Negroes by which to gain economic security and equality of opportunity...they prove that industry can be run by the people for the people.” Hayakawa, an Asian American in a city that was primarily divided between Black and White, also served as a mediator who promoted cooperation among all members of the movement. In a column urging African American co-operatives to join the Central States Co-operatives (CSC), Hayakawa wrote:

Since the tie that binds consumers together in co-ops is the fact that they all eat, [the CSC] are not interested in any person’s race, color, or religion. They are interested only in pooling buying power in order to increase standards of living. In a tug-of-war, it doesn’t matter if the man next to you is black or white, so long as he is pulling on your side. The same is true in the economic tug-of-war in which co-ops are engaged...in co-ops the policy of non-discrimination is not just something to talk about; it is something that people live.

As a self-sustained community of approximately 7,000 people, Altgeld Gardens proved to be the ideal setting for a co-operative store. Fifteen weeks prior to opening, prospective tenants gathered at a meeting with CHA first discussed forming a co-operative “that would not only take care of their food needs but which would draw them closer to community thinking and community planning.” After consulting with numerous established co-operatives, including the Ida B. Wells Co-operative, the People’s Consumer Co-operative, and the Central States Co-operative, in June of 1944, a group of 30 men and women officially established the Altgeld Gardens Consumer Co-operative. Each member contributed \$1 for an educational fund, and in subsequent meetings the group established a constitution and by-laws, incorporating the co-operative as a non-profit. With the support of Elizabeth Wood and CHA, the Altgeld Co-operative opened in one of the complex’s unfinished residential buildings on September 30, 1944, ready to serve the first 100 families moving into the complex. The first week, the store brought in \$1,700. Hayakawa, in his reporting on the co-operative’s early days, could not

contain his excitement for the possibilities once the remaining residents arrived, writing that “Altgeld will not be plagued, as are other Negro communities, with absentee owners who siphon off the profits from Negro people and live in splendor elsewhere. Profits at the Co-op at Altgeld will remain with the people there and increase their own purchasing power.”

The construction of the Shop Building in the summer of 1945 created a unique opportunity for the Altgeld Consumer Co-operative, which had been operating in temporary quarters within the complex for nearly a year. Although the building was privately owned, it appears that there was an understanding between the owners (the Thaddues Stevens Land Trust) and CHA that the Altgeld co-operative would be given space in the building. On July 14, 1945, Hayawaka reported in the *Defender* that “many enterprising groups are vying for the concession [in the Shop Building] in order to exploit the residents,” but “the Housing Authorities, cognizant of the manner in which Negroes have been exploited in the past, are sympathetic toward having the Altgeld Consumer Co-Operative establish their business there.” The co-operative raised \$15,000 in two months to purchase equipment and provisions for the new store.

The new Altgeld Consumer Co-operatives store opened on November 17, 1945. The store included a self-service meat counter, “a complete stock of orchard and garden produce,” and shelves stocked with products supplied by the Central States Co-operative and the Farmers’ Co-operative. Wilmoth Bowen, well known in co-operative circles as the former manager of the successful Sumner Homes Co-op in Minneapolis, served as the store’s general manager, and Altgeld residents were hired to head various departments. Willie Lee, manager of the grocery department, had completed an advanced course in co-op management training at the Rochdale Institute. All of the store’s employees were members of the United Retail, Wholesale, and Warehouse Employee’s Union. A U.S. Department of Labor Report on developments in consumers’ cooperatives, published in 1946, noted that “in Chicago a store, described as the largest Negro-owned consumers’ cooperative store in America, was opened in Altgeld Gardens, a large housing project in that city.”

Less than three months after the Altgeld Co-operative moved into its new home, an incident with one of the co-operative’s suppliers illustrated that the store’s benefits to the community extended well beyond convenient shopping. In January of 1947, Altgeld resident Mary Blake applied for an office job with the Silvercup Bakery. Based on her qualifications, she was asked to come for a personal interview. However, after discovering that Blake was African American, the company withdrew the invitation, stating that they “did not employ Negroes as office help.” When Blake informed the co-op of the situation, store manager Wilmoth Bowen promptly placed a large sign in the store window that read:

No, neighbor. No Silvercup Bread. On Jan. 17, one of our Altgeld residents answered an ad for a typist at the Silvercup Bread Company. She is fully qualified to handle the job, but was advised that they don’t hire COLORED for



Members of the Altgeld Gardens Consumer Co-operative distributing food to underserved communities in 1947. Source: *The Chicago Defender*.



Willie Lee, manager of the Altgeld Gardens Co-operative, with a customer in 1950. Source: *The Chicago Defender*, December 16, 1968.

that type of work. Altgeld residents need employment. This bread concern collects over \$7,000 a year in this community. We, therefore, protest their employment practices by refusing to handle their bread.

The impact of the protest was immediate. As the second largest retail outlet for the company in Chicago, the Altgeld co-operative was in a powerful position to force change. To get their bread back on Altgeld's shelves, Silvercup Bakery hired Mary Blake as a demonstrator and comptometer operator, and at the insistence of Bowen, expanded their hiring practices to employ African Americans as sales managers, drivers, and salesmen.

Membership and sales at the Altgeld Consumer Co-operative continued to grow through the 1940s. In June of 1947, the store exceeded \$1,000,000 in total sales—Bowen presented the patron who broke the record, Charles Pressley, with fifty dollars, and employees celebrated with a party in the Block 12 social room at Altgeld. As a member of the Chicago Consumers' Cooperative, a city-wide organization founded in 1945, Altgeld partnered with the Chicago Urban League and the Industrial Union Council in the fall of 1947 to distribute food at cost to underserved communities, using a new two-ton truck that the co-operative had just purchased. In 1948, the *Chicago Defender* reported that the Altgeld Gardens Consumer Co-operative had surpassed the Palo Alto Co-operative in California as the largest co-operative food store in the United States, with annual sales of one million dollars. The article also reported that the co-operative was planning to open a new store at Ashland Avenue and 115th Street to serve a proposed new housing development in the area. Wilmoth Bowen told the *Defender*, "Honest value and progressive food store merchandizing has increased our sales 500% during the past three years."

After nearly seven years of successful operations in the Shop Building, the Altgeld Gardens co-operative was abruptly forced to vacate in June 1951. Rumors swirled that CHA was involved in the decision, but in an article published in the *Defender* on June 9, 1951, Altgeld manager Don R. Bonaparte denied that "Chicago Housing authority rules played any part in the closing of the Altgeld Gardens Co-op, or that the space would be leased to a private firm in accordance with CHA rules." Bonaparte went on to state that "commercial property within the boundaries of Altgeld Gardens is not owned by CHA, and therefore not subject to its control." Two weeks later, the *Defender* reported that the Meyer Brothers, a private, White-owned company, had leased the space with plans to remodel and open a new grocery store, Meyer's Food Fair, by July.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF GEORGE FRED KECK AND WILLIAM KECK

The Shop Building at Altgeld Gardens was one of only a handful of commercial buildings designed by the architecture firm commonly known as Keck and Keck, best known for their groundbreaking and unconventional approach to modern residential design. The 50-year

professional partnership of brothers George Fred Keck and William Keck brought about some of the most important contributions to the technological, aesthetic, and environmental issues that reshaped American lives immediately preceding and following the second World War.

To build things and construct them well came naturally to the Keck brothers. The eldest and fourth of five sons, George Fred (1895-1980) and William (1908-1995) Keck were born in the rural community of Waterton, Wisconsin. Here, their grandfather, a German cabinetmaker, had established a family furniture manufacturing business in 1848. If architecture was their vocation, each would privately pursue an artistic avocation as well—Fred as a watercolorist and William as a photographer.

Fred Keck, as the older brother preferred to be called, studied engineering for one year at the University of Wisconsin but then transferred to the University of Illinois to enroll in the architectural engineering program. After employment as a draftsman in a number of Chicago offices, Fred Keck opened a private practice under the name “George Fred Keck, Architect” at 612 N. Michigan Avenue in 1926. During the 1920s and 1930s, Keck adapted his personal taste for modern designs to the more conservative inclinations of his clients, designing eclectic houses inspired by American colonial and English rural architecture, albeit with much simplified forms. One notable exception was the Art Deco inspired 1929 Miralago Ballroom (destroyed by fire in 1932) in Wilmette, Illinois.

Fred Keck had a natural affinity for the European modernist design philosophy. He was a regular subscriber to *Pencil Points* and *Architectural Record*, two periodicals which exposed American architects to the European avant-garde. His library included recently released architectural publications in French, German, and English, including the 1910 Wasmuth edition of Frank Lloyd Wright’s work and the 1927 English translation of Le Corbusier’s *Towards a New Architecture*.

At the same time, Keck established a professional relationship with Austrian artist Marianne Willisch (1897-1984), a respected interior designer who introduced Keck to contemporary European decorative arts. Together, they created custom-built, modern furniture then not widely available.

Keck’s younger brother William joined the firm in 1931, after completing his architecture degree at the University of Illinois. The styles of the two men complemented each other well. As the partnership evolved, Fred was considered the more idealistic and aesthetically-minded, while William was known for his careful attention to detail. William developed the specifications for the houses, and did much of the field supervision. In 1946, after returning from Navy service during World War II, William became a partner in the firm, which became known as “George Fred Keck, William Keck, Architects.”

The work of Fred Keck first gained widespread attention with his revolutionary designs for the

House of Tomorrow and the Crystal House displayed at the 1933-34 A Century of Progress Exposition. Held on the 100th anniversary of Chicago's founding, the fair celebrated scientific advancements in transportation, communication, electricity, and agriculture of the previous century. The fair's popular Home and Industrial Arts Exhibit, where the two model homes were featured, showcased new directions in American housing design and embodied the latest in architectural thought and technology.

The House of Tomorrow, three-stories high with a twelve-sided floor plan, had sun decks with metal pipe railings, storefront plate glass windows, a fully electric kitchen, and wedge-shaped rooms. A garage with electrically operated doors housed a Silver Arrow automobile and, in a leap of faith in the future transportation needs of the average family, a Curtiss-Wright Sport Biplane in its own hanger. Even more astonishing was the Crystal House, sheathed entirely in glass supported by exterior steel trusses. The interior featured streamlined modern elegance with furniture inspired by Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and Marcel Breuer.

Both the House of Tomorrow (moved, following the fair, to Beverly Shores, Indiana, and now owned by the National Park Service) and the Crystal House (razed after the fair) were as radical as any architecture built in Chicago up to that time. Their avant-garde character helped open the public's eyes to modernism. While Keck's world's fair houses appeared unorthodox to the general public, they were not meant to startle. As Keck explained in a publicity statement issued at the time, "They were laboratory houses and were designed not to be different or tricky but to attempt seriously to determine whether better ideas and designs for living could be found."

The publicity generated by Fred Keck's Century of Progress houses led to a steady stream of residential commissions through the 1930s and early 1940s, which together formed one of the earliest and most significant collections of modernist houses in the country. Notable examples include the Herbert Bruning House in Wilmette, Illinois (1935-36), the Ana and Edward Morehouse House in Madison, Wisconsin (1936), the Bertram and Irma Cahn House in Lake Forest, Illinois (1936), the B. Lamar Johnson House in Columbia, Missouri (1938), and the William Kellett House in Menasha, Wisconsin (1939-1940, demolished), and the John L. Bennett Housing in Barrington, Illinois (1941). The firm's designs for these substantial suburban homes, which were generally set amid large lawns, portray some of its most visually stunning and sophisticated architecture. They featured oval or curved plans, rectangular forms, spatial fluidity, and large windows which, in effect, functioned as glass walls. According to historian Narciso Menocal, who helped organize a 1980 retrospective exhibit of the career of Keck and Keck, "Slab-like free-standing fireplaces of travertine marble, wide views opening into well-tended forest-like gardens, and sparse furnishings by the best modern designers give these homes an aura of restrained elegance that makes them important examples of what may well be the golden age of modern architecture in America."

The firm's most personal commission in the 1930s was the Keck-Gottschalk-Keck Apartments



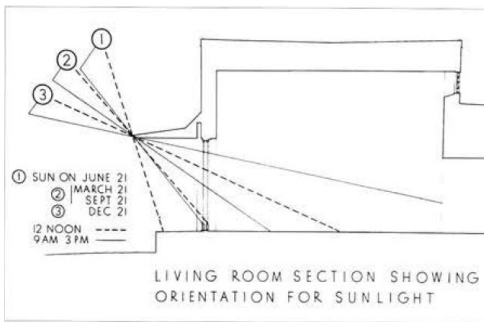
Brothers George Fred Keck and William Keck, architects of the Shop Building, were known for their ground breaking and unconventional approach to modern residential design. The firm first gained widespread attention with their revolutionary designs for the House of Tomorrow and the Crystal House at the 1933 A Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago.

Top left: George Fred Keck (right) and William Keck in 1947. Source: Chicago History Museum (Hedrich Blessing, photographer).

Top right: The Crystal House, 1934. Source: Chicago History Museum, (Raymond W. Trowbridge, photographer).

Bottom: The House of Tomorrow, 1933. Source: Chicago History Museum, (Raymond W. Trowbridge).





Keck and Keck were also pioneers in solar design, experimenting with site orientation, window size and placement, adjustable ventilating louvers and overhanging eaves to effectively heat and cool homes.

Top right: Bruning residence, 1937. Source: Chicago History Museum (Hedrich Blessing, photographer).

Top left: Kellett House, 1941. Source Chicago History Museum (Hedrich Blessing, photographer).

Middle left: Keck and Keck diagram for passive solar heating. Source: Keck and Keck, Robert Piper Boyce.

Bottom left: Keck-Gottschalk-Keck Apartments, 1937. Source: Chicago Landmarks Commission.

Bottom right: Cahn residence, 1938. Source: Chicago History Museum (Hedrich Blessing, photographer) .



in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago (1937, designated a Chicago Landmark in 1994). The three-story building, which was cooperatively owned by Fred Keck, William Keck, and Louis Gottschalk (a professor of art at the University of Chicago), was one of the earliest examples of modern residential architecture constructed in the city.

The Kecks were considered the foremost architects of high-quality solar homes, leading many advances in their design and construction. It was during the construction of the House of Tomorrow that the idea of using passive solar heat in residential architecture first came to Fred Keck. Although it was a typically cold February day outside, the men working inside the unheated building were comfortable in their shirtsleeves. It was then that Keck began seriously studying the potential for using a “greenhouse effect” to heat a house. The Kecks developed their format for effective solar heating through various stages of experimentation with site orientation, and the use of external blinds, large scale fixed windows in south walls, adjustable ventilating louvers, Thermopane (double-glazed) windows, and overhanging eaves. They also experimented with flat roofs that were designed to hold a thin sheet of water, which would reduce solar heat transmission through evaporation and reflection.

The firm’s first “comprehensive solar design” was constructed for real estate developer Howard Sloan in Glenview, Illinois and completed in 1940. The *Chicago Tribune* used the phrase “solar house” to describe the home, coining the term and establishing Keck and Keck as the fore front experts of American solar architecture. Sloan, convinced that his solar house represented the future of residential design, opened his home to public for four months and soon afterward developed Solar Park in Glenview, “the first completely sun oriented residential community in the United States.” Fred Keck designed at least twelve solar houses for the development.

While many of Keck and Keck’s homes were constructed for wealthier clients, the firm also had a longtime interest in improving the quality of handsome, livable, modestly priced housing for the mass market. This was made possible by prefabricated, ready-to-assemble building components, which effectively reduced production costs and lowered house purchase prices for the buyer. The Kecks joined forces with Edward Green and Alin Thor, homebuilders in Rockford, Illinois, to engineer a project called Green’s Ready-Built. Mass-produced beginning in 1947, well over a hundred of the firm’s designs were distributed throughout Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Missouri, and Minnesota.

The architecture of Keck and Keck was widely available to public. During World War II, Fred Keck consulted with companies that would be involved in peacetime construction. In 1942, he created “A Design for Better Living” for the Celotex Corporation and designed a “home for Tomorrow’s Happy Living” for Revere Cooper and Brass, Inc. He wrote about solar housing for the January 1944 issue of *Reader’s Digest* and received two magazine-sponsored house commissions from the widely read women’s magazines *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Mademoiselle*.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Kecks continued to design single-family residences for clients across the Chicago suburbs. In the city, however, they embarked on a series of large-scale urban renewal projects, designing several buildings and complexes for the Chicago Housing Authority, Chicago Dwelling Association, and the Hyde Park-Kenwood Redevelopment area. These multi-family commissions include the FHA-financed Pioneer Cooperative at 54th Street and Dorchester Street (1949), the Prairie Avenue Courts at 26th Street and Prairie Avenue (CHA, 1950), the Drexel Square Apartments on Hyde Park Boulevard (Chicago Dwellings Association, 1960), the University of Chicago Apartment Building at 57th Street and Dorchester Street (Hyde-Park Kenwood Redevelopment, 1966-67), and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Building at 48th Street and Dorchester Street (Hyde Park-Kenwood Redevelopment, 1967-1972). William Keck was named chairman of the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference Planning Committee in 1958, and Fred Keck was appointed to the CHA board by Mayor Richard J. Daley in 1963.

In addition to their revolutionary designs, the Keck and Keck office also served as a training ground for a number of important architects who admired their pioneering work. Among those who worked in the Keck office were Ralph Rapson and Stanley Tigerman. Rapson, a student at Eliel Saarinen at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Detroit and later as a professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, recalled that “working in the Keck office was relaxing and rewarding....Fred was a realist who was able to assimilate traditional technology with higher technology.” Bertrand Goldberg, the architect of Marina City and other influential buildings, never worked for the Kecks but was a frequent visitor to the office during the mid-1930s and has acknowledged Fred Keck’s influence on him.

Fred Keck’s credentials as a teacher and mentor were established early on in his career. From 1938 to 1944, he was the chairman of architecture for the New Bauhaus, a school founded in Chicago in 1937 by Hungarian artist and former Bauhaus instructor Lazlo Moholy-Nagy as a continuation of the German Bauhaus School. His association with the school, which was renamed the School of Design in Chicago in 1939, gave Keck the opportunity to rub elbows with important modernist writers, artists, and architects, including Walter Gropius, Alvar Aalto, R. Buckminster Fuller, Richard Neutra, Gregory Kepes, and Man Ray. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, Lazlo’s wife and an architectural and art historian in her own right, recalled that Keck “proved to be a convinced and trust-worthy comrade-at-arms....his questions stimulated thinking about the fundamentals of architecture and provoked creative communication and conceptual development.”

In his eulogy of Fred Keck in 1981, noted Chicago architect Stanley Tigerman described how he had come to the realization that his former employer “was by *far* the major figure who had been overlooked by the polemicists of modernism.” He also related how, during the 1970s, he constantly delighted in seeing how architects were stunned by their own “discovery” of Keck’s

work. “But then,” wrote Tigerman:

Wonderfully enough, in the winter of [Fred Keck’s] life, things began to change. In the end, the intelligentsia became aware of Keck’s historical importance, and as architects scurried to establish a serious energy policy, Keck became more interesting indeed.

ALTGELD GARDENS, A DEVELOPMENT OF WAR WORKER HOUSING

The modern-day concept of public housing in the United States originated in the 1930s during the Great Depression, first funded by the federal government under the New Deal economic recovery program initiated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In June 1933, the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) allotted \$3.3 billion to form the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works (also known as the Public Works Administration [PWA]), which was designed in part to alleviate unemployment and the housing crisis by coordinating the clearance of slums and the erection of low-income housing in cities throughout the nation.

Between 1933 and 1937, the PWA initiated the construction of 51 public housing developments across the country, which represented \$134 million in federal funding. Three PWA projects were built in Chicago—the Julia C. Lathrop Homes on the North Side, the Jane Addams Houses on the Near West Side, and the Trumbull Park Homes on the Southeast Side, all completed in 1938. Together, these projects provided 2,378 units of quality affordable housing, and nearly all of the units were available only to White families. Following the Neighborhood Composition Rule formulated by Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, which required that PWA-funded projects maintain the “racial character” of their existing neighborhoods, only 26 (or 2.5%) of the 1,027 units at the Jane Addams Houses were reserved for African Americans, and they were largely segregated into one section of the complex.

After the passage of the United States Housing Act of 1937, the federal government shifted construction and operation of federally funded public housing to state-chartered local housing authorities. The Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), a non-profit municipal corporation governed by a mayor-appointed executive secretary and board of commissioners, was formed in 1937. Social reformer Elizabeth Wood served as the CHA’s first executive secretary from 1937 until 1954. The first project completed by CHA, and the last public housing project completed before the United States entered World War II in 1941, was the Ida B. Wells Homes on the city’s South Side.

Although the United States did not formally enter World War II until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the federal government initiated several national defense initiatives following President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s National Emergency Proclamation in September 1939, after Nazi Germany invaded Poland. One important consideration was the

need for new housing in areas where defense workers would be concentrated if the country went to war. By June of 1940, the federal public housing program established in 1937 had been quietly shifted to a defense program, and the USHA was charged with re-routing funds for low-income housing towards the development of housing for defense workers. The National Housing for Defense Act (also known as the Lanham Act), passed by Congress on October 12, 1940, specifically prohibited new construction of public housing except for projects intended to house war workers. A provision to this ruling, however, stipulated “that in the case of projects planned for low-rent occupancy, but whose proposed sites were in areas with a real need for war-worker housing, construction might proceed, subject to the limitation that such projects would house war workers only.” With this provision, and with the desire to assist in the war effort, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) decided to move forward with the development of projects built specifically to house war workers while planning to eventually revert its primary focus back to low-income tenants after the war ended.

As a thriving center of industry before the war, Chicago became a critical base for war-time production after 1941. Thousands of defense workers flocked to the city, compounding the housing shortage of the 1920s and 1930s. In response, the CHA converted four planned low-income projects into defense worker housing per federal mandate and secured financing to build a fifth project. Between 1941 and 1945, the CHA completed 1) Frances Cabrini Homes (1941-1942, extant); 2) Lawndale Gardens (1942, extant); 3) Robert H. Brooks Homes (1943, extant); 4) Bridgeport Homes (1943, extant); and 5) Altgeld Gardens (1944). Two additional developments, the Collin P. Kelley Homes and Maurice J. Dorney Homes, were planned but never realized due to material shortages. The five completed projects were specifically intended to serve as housing for families. In addition to requiring that the wage-earner in each family was engaged in essential war work, CHA specified that eligible families had to have at least one child. Income limits established under the 1937 housing act were relaxed or eliminated, and immigrant war workers, who were thought to have the most difficulty finding housing, were given preference during the selection process.

Although CHA’s executive secretary, Elizabeth Wood, strongly believed that CHA should “design projects that were ‘assets to the community and integrated’[to] maintain racial balance in at least some of the buildings,” Chicago’s wartime developments continued to be racially segregated per the federal government’s Neighborhood Composition Rule; a brief attempt at integration as an emergency wartime measure led to violent confrontations and was quickly abandoned. In terms of design, the wartime projects were more stripped down and standardized than their pre-war counterparts to maximize speed and efficiency of construction. Nevertheless, they still maintained the low-rise, low-density character, building arrangement within superblocks, and integrated green spaces of the PWA-era developments.

Altgeld Gardens, completed in 1945, was the last and largest of the defense worker housing projects constructed in Chicago during World War II, and was, at the time of its completion, the largest public housing complex constructed specifically for African American families in the

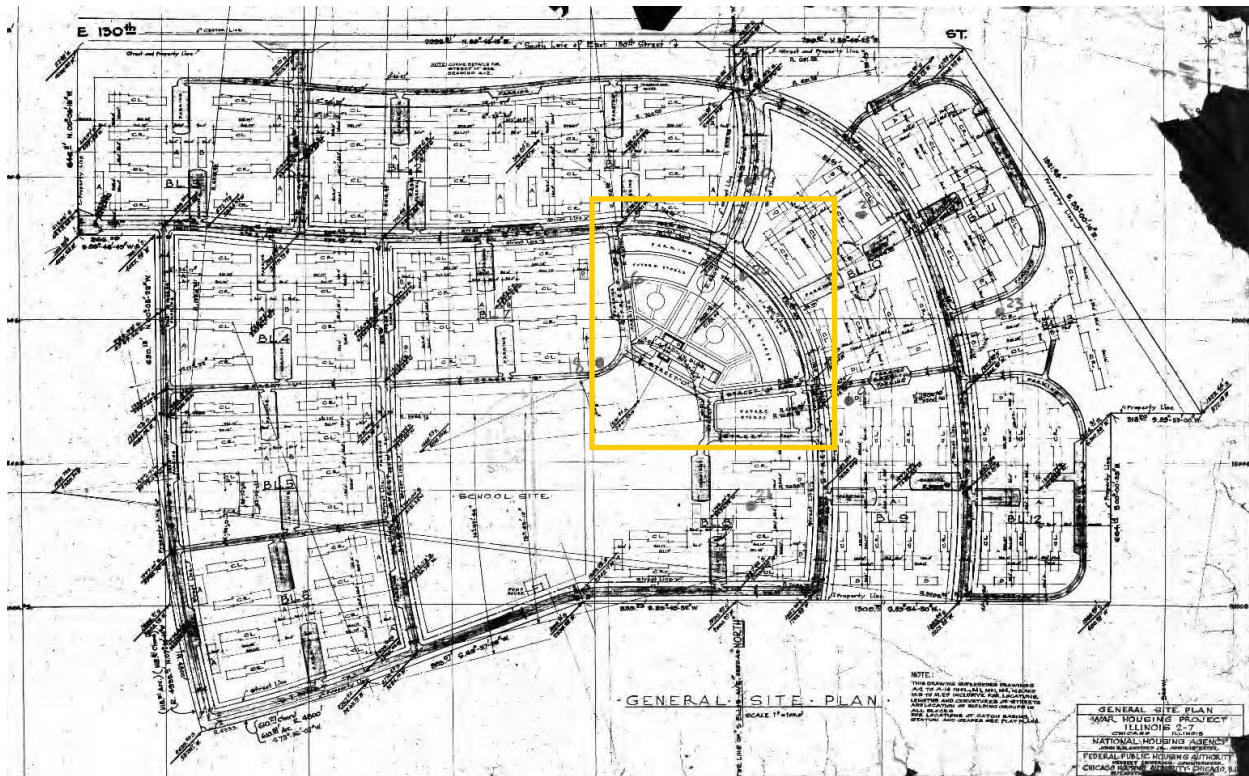
city. Designed by the architectural firm of Naess & Murphy, Altgeld Gardens was also the most ambitious and comprehensive war-time project constructed by CHA. Unlike the Ida B. Wells Homes, which were built in the heart of the Black Belt and replaced existing slum housing, Altgeld Gardens was sited on the far southeast side of the city on a vacant 157-acre parcel between Lake Calumet and the Calumet River, surrounded by industry. The Calumet region, which contained one of the largest concentrations of steel and iron production in the country, was critical to the war effort and employed a large number of African American workers. This made Altgeld Gardens unique among CHA's public housing projects. Construction could proceed quickly because no land clearance was required, and because the site was far from any substantially developed residential areas, there was little resistance from White communities.

The project's isolated location also meant that, more than any other CHA project, Altgeld Gardens was designed as a comprehensive, self-contained community. In addition to the 162 two-story brick row houses, the master plan for Altgeld included a number of community buildings that housed essential facilities, including "a Board of Health station, public library, a six-room nursery school...auditorium, club rooms, and a teachers lounge." The Chicago Board of Education constructed four Colonial Revival school buildings (designed by architect John C. Christensen), all of which faced a park located at the center of the complex. Provisions were also made for centrally located commercial buildings, which would house community essentials including a grocery store, drug store, beauty parlor, and laundromat. A handbook for Altgeld residents published by CHA in 1944 proclaimed that the project would be "a city within itself."

Altgeld Gardens was developed by CHA in conjunction with the National Housing Agency and the Federal Public Housing Authority. Ownership was initially held by the federal government, but transitioned to CHA in 1956. Work began at Altgeld Gardens in 1943, and the first 100 families moved into the complex on September 30, 1944. Construction was completed by the summer of 1945, and CHA held a formal dedication ceremony on August 27, 1945. The project was named in honor of John Peter Altgeld (1847-1902), a reformist politician and Progressive Movement leader who served as governor of Illinois from 1893-1897.

Naess and Murphy's design for the residential buildings at Altgeld was typical of the CHA prototype during the period, constructed of common brick with little ornamentation but well built. The low-rise rowhouse blocks were arranged in groupings of three around generous common greenspace, and each unit included front and rear lawns that were tended by the residents. Parking lots were also incorporated near the center of each block. Apartments ranged from 3 ½ rooms to 6 ½ rooms, larger on average than previous CHA projects to accommodate larger families—nearly two-thirds of the original tenants at Altgeld were children.

The plans for Altgeld Gardens aligned closely with concepts for public housing that CHA Executive Director Elizabeth Wood had been promoting since 1937. In addition to her progressive views on racial and economic integration in public housing projects, Wood also urged CHA planners to "include shops, churches, parks, and even pubs to turn housing



From the beginning, CHA envisioned Altgeld Gardens as a self-contained community that would provide a wide range of amenities in addition to housing. As shown in the original 1944 site plan, stores were planned for Block 14, located at the center of the complex. Source: CHA Archives.



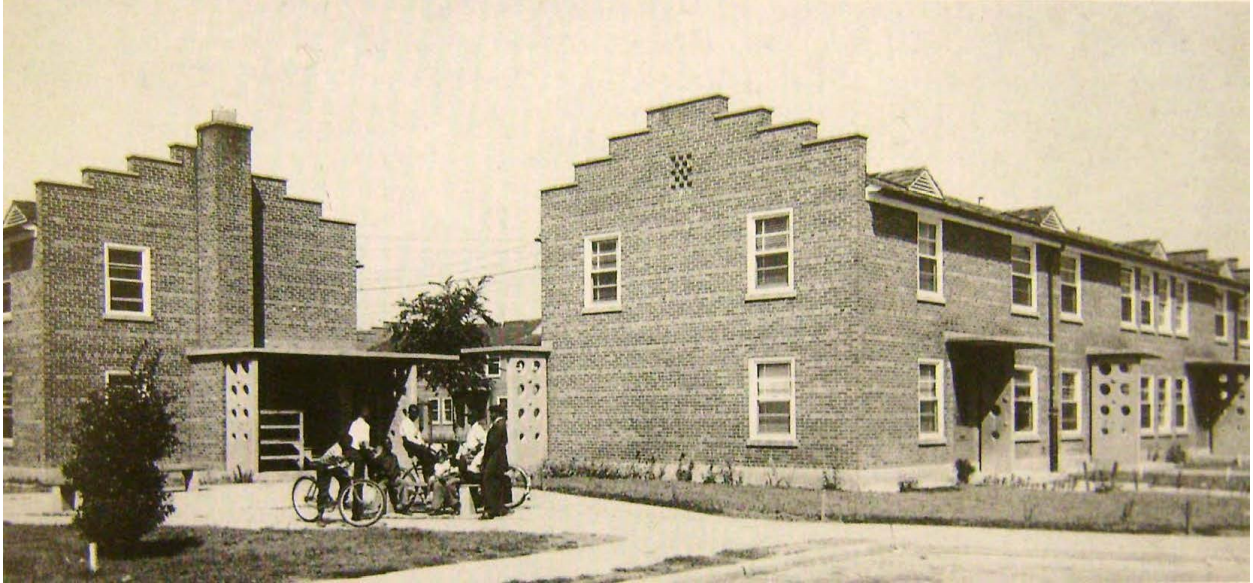
Elizabeth Wood, executive secretary of CHA, at the dedication of Altgeld Gardens on August 26, 1946. Source: *The Poorhouse: Subsidized Housing in Chicago*.

complexes into real neighborhoods instead of human warehouses.” CHA’s housing projects both before and after the war fell short of this vision, but Altgeld Gardens was a notable exception. The 7,000 residents who moved into Altgeld in the mid-1940s immediately recognized the special nature of the project, which encouraged and facilitated community engagement and pride of place. As former resident Roscoe King, who lived in Altgeld from 1945 to 1952, noted, “One thing that came out of Altgeld was community pride. See, the project wasn’t a ghetto. It was affordable housing—that’s exactly what it was...there was a pride in yourself, and a pride in your neighborhood.”

Residents formed a youth choir, a Boy Scout troop, a teenage canteen, block clubs, and social clubs for children and adults. Dances and skating nights were organized in the Children’s Building, and recreation rooms every four blocks accommodated smaller community activities. Contests were held for the best garden and most beautiful block. Bob and Bea Fairfax, who lived in the apartment at 966 E. 133rd Street, wrote a weekly column for the *Chicago Defender* to keep residents informed of the numerous activities in Altgeld. In interviews conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s by Loyola University professor J. S. Fuerst for his book, *When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago*, former residents spoke glowingly of their experiences living in Altgeld Gardens during the 1940s and 1950s. Hortense Irwin Bright, who moved to Altgeld with her mother and three sisters in 1945, recalled: “Easily some of the best years of my life were at Altgeld Gardens...My mother used to tease me because when I was twelve...I asked her, ‘Are we rich?’ I kind of felt we were, I had a sense of richness.” Claude Wyatt, who led the youth choral group at Altgeld Gardens with his wife, Addie, remembered the thrill of having a new, spacious home. “I was so excited when I first moved in there. I would put in my key, go through the back, come around to the front door again, and walk in and go through—again. I couldn’t believe it.”

In the decade after World War II, as Altgeld Gardens transitioned from defense housing to low-income housing, CHA constructed additional improvements and expansions to the original master plan under the direction of Elizabeth Wood. A children’s dental clinic was established in 1948; Carver High School at 801-831 East 133rd Place was designed by John C. Christensen, completed in 1950, and named for African American scientist and inventor George Washington Carver (1864-1943); and additions to the Administration Building and the Children’s Building were designed by Shaw, Naess & Murphy and completed in 1952. Also during 1952, Altgeld Gardens saw the construction of two houses of worship. On the western edge of the community, at 13300 South Langley Avenue, the Society of the Divine Word commissioned architect Edo Belli to design Our Lady of the Gardens Catholic church. The \$200,000 single-story building consisted of a chapel, auditorium, school, and a rectory. At the eastern end of the site, at 13015 South Ellis Avenue, the United Church of Altgeld Gardens was constructed in 1952 and designed by architectural firm of Michelsen, Rabig & Ramp. Both buildings are extant.

Plans for additional residential buildings at Altgeld Gardens began in 1950. The Philip Murray Homes, 500 apartments housed in two-story rowhouse blocks similar to the original Altgeld



Altgeld Garden apartment buildings, c. 1945. When it was completed, Altgeld Gardens provided housing for approximately 1,500 African American war workers and their families.
 Source: *Chicago Architecture and Design 1923-1993: Reconfiguration of an American Metropolis.*



Aerial view of Altgeld Gardens, c. 1953, showing the newly constructed Philip Murray Homes expansion at bottom left. Source: *The Poorhouse: Subsidized Housing in Chicago.*

residences and also designed by Naess and Murphy, were constructed on the west side of the complex and completed in 1954. That same year, Elizabeth Wood was pushed out of her position at CHA, following a failed attempt to integrate Trumbull Park Homes. In the decades following her departure, CHA largely abandoned the low-rise, low-density model of public housing and turned to large scale high-rise developments, with ultimately disastrous results. However, Altgeld remained a success story for low-rise public housing in the post-war period, and CHA continued to invest in improvements and new facilities at the complex. In 2022, the Altgeld Gardens-Philip Murray Homes Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AT ALTGELD GARDENS: HAZEL JOHNSON AND PEOPLE FOR COMMUNITY RECOVERY

Although the Altgeld Gardens Consumer Co-operative left the Shop Building in 1951, in the last decades of the twentieth century the building became home to another, equally important community organization. In 1979, Altgeld Gardens resident Hazel Johnson founded the People for Community Recovery (PCR), a grassroots organization that brought much needed attention to the environmental dangers surrounding Altgeld. Through her work with PCR, Johnson would emerge as a national leader in the Environmental Justice Movement in America.

Industry, Waste, and Contamination in the Calumet Lake Region

Although hailed by policy makers and the public as a model of post-war housing, Altgeld Gardens and the surrounding residential neighborhoods in the Calumet region of Chicago's far south side had been developed on top of land that had long been used as an unregulated landfill for the dozens of steel mills, chemical factories, and other industries lining the shores of the Calumet River and Lake Calumet. As early as 1880, the area had been used as dumping site and "sewage farm" by the Pullman Car Company, and through the late 19th and early 20th century by-products from iron and steel manufacturers, as well as liquid waste from chemical and paint companies, were regularly dumped in nearby waterways or in the marshes and numerous clay pits used by brick manufacturers.

Beginning in the 1940s, a growing awareness of the dangers of industrial waste led to the first state and federal legislation prohibiting waste disposal in waterways, and the open dumping grounds in the Calumet region were replaced with "sanitary" landfills where industrial waste was compacted and covered. Although critics argued that residential redevelopment was unwise, given that fills "continued to settle for up to thirty years" and gases such as carbon dioxide and methane could migrate into basements and cause explosions, after 1945 landfills in the Calumet region "received a huge share of municipal and industrial waste." Many of these landfills operated without permits to avoid regulation. Open dumping and burning of waste

were also permitted until 1966, when a state law was passed. Even after these practices became illegal, enforcement was lax and illegal and undocumented dumping continued to be a problem.

By the 1960s, federal and state agencies had begun to investigate the environmental impact of nearly a century of waste disposal in the Calumet region, and several reports documenting pollution in the Calumet River system found that all three rivers in the region were severely polluted. In most of these reports, investigations into the negative impacts of pollution and industrial waste in the Calumet region focused almost exclusively on the impact to the waterways, marshlands, and wildlife while characterizing the impact to public health as unknown or difficult to assess.

By the early 1970s, a century of unregulated and under-regulated waste disposal in the Calumet region had created what David N. Pellow, author and University of California Santa Barbara professor of Environmental Studies called “one of the greatest ecological disasters in the history of North America” and turned the dream of Altgeld Gardens into a public health crisis for its residents.

Human Sacrifice Zones: Origins of the Environmental Justice Movement

The initial investigations of the effects of industrial waste in the Calumet region took place during a period of growing public concern around the human health costs of environmental pollution. Rachel Carson’s seminal book, *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, had outlined the dangers of widespread use of the insecticide DDT, and national press coverage of the 1969 fire on an oil slick in the polluted Cuyahoga River in Cleveland became an arresting symbol of the dangers of industrial pollution. Public pressure for legislative action reached a tipping point in 1970, when President Richard Nixon established the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) with the stated mission to “protect human health by safeguarding the air we breathe, water we drink, and land on which we live.” A dizzying array of legislation, including the Clean Air Act (1970), the Clean Water Act (1972), and the Safe Drinking Water Act (1974), quickly followed through the early 1970s.

While the new legislation focused primarily on cleaning waterways and reducing air pollution and postconsumer waste, the regulation of industrial waste remained a back-burner issue until the late 1970s, when several high-profile toxic waste disasters—including Love Canal, where a record snowfall in 1977 allowed contaminated water from a covered chemical landfill to leach into the backyards and basements of thousands of residents—forced the federal government into action. In 1980, Congress passed the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (the Superfund Act), which authorized the EPA to identify parties responsible for the contamination and compel the parties to clean up the sites. By the mid-1980s, the EPA had identified tens of thousands of uncontrolled toxic waste sites throughout the United States. Many of these existing sites were in communities of color, as

were most of the new and proposed waste treatment and containment sites.

Although civil rights organizations had participated in isolated protests against hazardous waste facilities as early as the 1960s, the beginnings of a broader Environmental Justice Movement in the United States did not gain momentum until the Warren County Protests of 1982, when Black residents of Warren County, North Carolina joined forces to protest the construction of a chemical containment landfill in the town of Afton. While ultimately unsuccessful, the protests received national media coverage and served as a coalescing moment for grassroots organizations, civil rights activists, and scholars whose mission was to fight against what civil rights activist Reverend Benjamin F. Chavis Jr. would later label “environmental racism”—the discrimination in environmental policy-making, enforcement of regulations, siting of waste facilities and polluting industries, and the exclusion of minorities from the environmental decision making process. Through the 1980s and 1990s, members of the growing Environmental Justice Movement documented patterns of environmental racism and pushed for legislation that would protect communities most impacted by industrial pollution and hazardous waste.

Hazel Johnson and People for Community Recovery

While academics and civil rights organizations were (and continue to be) critical players in the environmental justice movement, local activists and grassroots organizations formed the backbone of the movement and were its most important stakeholders. Grassroots activists were the direct victims of environmental racism. They were motivated by deeply personal and immediate motives—the health of their families, the lives of their children, and the safety of their homes, schools, and neighborhoods. As people of color from largely poor and working-class communities, these grassroots advocates recognized that environmental racism was not an isolated issue but part of a larger system of institutional failings, which also included “inner-city disinvestment, residential segregation, lack of decent health care, joblessness, and unequal access to education.” In their eyes, environmental justice extended beyond “simply stopping a local polluter or toxic dumper” and necessitated broader structural reforms to improve the quality of life in their communities.

One of the earliest such grassroots organizations to form in the Midwest was People for Community recovery, founded in 1979 and led for over 30 years by Altgeld resident and activist Hazel Johnson. Johnson’s tireless work with PCR brought national attention to the impacts of environmental racism in Chicago and to the broader aims of the Environmental Justice Movement. Born on January 28, 1935 in New Orleans, Hazel Johnson moved to the Woodlawn neighborhood of Chicago with her husband, John Johnson in 1955. In 1962, the Johnsons relocated to Altgeld Gardens, and Hazel quickly became an active member of her new community, serving as a community representative, organizing summer field trips and block parties for neighborhood children, and volunteering with the local school council.

In 1969, Hazel Johnson's husband died at the age of 41, within weeks of receiving a diagnosis of lung cancer. His early death shocked Hazel and mystified doctors since he had been only an occasional smoker and had no other risk factors for the disease. As news of John's death spread through Altgeld Gardens, neighbors told Hazel similar stories of residents stricken with a myriad of health problems, including cancer, respiratory ailments, birth defects, and miscarriages.

These stories gnawed at Johnson, now a widow with seven children ranging in age from two to seventeen years, but her community activism in the early 1970s focused on issues related to the Chicago Housing Authority's poor maintenance of Altgeld Gardens. In 1970, she ran for office as block captain and gained a seat on the Altgeld Gardens Local Advisory Council (a position she would hold until 1979), organizing the community to force CHA to fix leaking roofs, peeling paint, and low water pressure.

In 1979, Johnson, along with a group of other women at Altgeld Gardens, formed the People for Community Recovery (PCR), a grassroots organization that was initially envisioned as an outgrowth of Johnson's efforts to compel CHA to maintain the buildings in the complex. Around the same time, however, several events caused Johnson to re-examine the pervasive and widespread health issues in Altgeld Gardens. First, she learned that four women who had grown up next door to each other in Altgeld had babies that were all diagnosed with cancer. None of the four girls lived past their seventh birthday. Soon after, Johnson was watching television when a news story reported that an Illinois Department of Health Study showed that cancer rates in the southeast side of Chicago were significantly higher than the rest of the city. The reporter listed Altgeld Gardens and Calumet City as the two residential areas with the highest rates of cancer. Suddenly, Johnson had the key piece of information that connected all the stories she had heard from residents. "I was stunned and angry," she told the *Chicago Tribune* in 1995. "I decided to make it my mission not only to find out what was really going on but also to do something about it."

Over the following months, Johnson called local and state public health authorities and environmental agencies, began researching environmental pollution and its health effects, and reached out to academics and activists in the environmental and public health fields. What she found was that Altgeld Gardens "lay in the center of a 140-square-mile ring of pollution stretching from Chicago's Southeast Side to Northwest Indiana," which housed over 50 landfills, a chemical incinerator, a water and sewage treatment facility, steel mills, paint factories, scrap yards, and abandoned industrial dump sites.

Armed with this knowledge and determined to act, Johnson shifted the focus of PCR's efforts to reducing or eliminating the environmental hazards surrounding her community, which she coined "the toxic doughnut." In 1982, PCR officially incorporated as a not-for-profit



Hazel Johnson standing in front of PCR's offices in the Shop Building, c. 1990. Source: *Earth Beat*, February 21, 2021. In 1979, Altgeld resident Hazel Johnson founded the People for Community Recovery (PCR), a grassroots environmental justice organization dedicated to addressing the negative environmental impacts caused by Altgeld Garden's industrial neighbors.



Hazel Johnson in PCR's office in 1994, showing a map of Altgeld Garden's "Toxic Neighbors." Source: People for Community Recovery.

organization, with Hazel Johnson serving as president and executive director. Working out of an office in the Altgeld Shop Building, over the next several decades Johnson and PCR waged the environmental justice war on multiple fronts and secured key victories for Altgeld residents and surrounding communities. In the process, Johnson worked in conjunction with other grassroots community organizations on the Southeast Side and brought national attention to the fight for environmental justice through her work with PCR.

In the years immediately following its incorporation, PCR focused its efforts on lobbying city and state officials to address hazardous waste in the community, documenting health issues at Altgeld Gardens, and directly confronting polluting industries. In the mid-1980s, the group successfully lobbied Chicago Mayor Harold Washington to create a Task Force on Solid Waste Management in 1985 and place a moratorium on the expansion of existing landfills and creation of new landfills in Chicago. Around the same time, Johnson joined forces with five other Southeast Side organizations to form Citizen's United to Reclaim the Environment (CURE). The organization continued to pressure the city on the issue of waste disposal and pollution in the Lake Calumet region. In 1987, a highly-publicized demonstration by CURE and other environmental organizations against Waste Management Inc.'s 32-acre toxic waste dump just east of Altgeld led the EPA to revoke temporary permits for the site, and Chicago Mayor Eugene Sawyer extended the moratorium on new landfills established by Harold Washington. Hazel Johnson, PCR, and CURE waged similar battles against other landfill operators in the Calumet region through the late 1980s and 1990s, as well as the Metropolitan Sanitary District (MSD), which operated a huge sewage treatment plant in the area. In addition to fighting the significant environmental threats that surrounded Altgeld Gardens, in the late 1980s Hazel Johnson and PCR waged a years-long campaign to force the Chicago Housing Authority and the city to remove asbestos from Altgeld Gardens and the Ida B. Wells Homes. After two years of constant pressure, CHA finally completed the abatement work in both developments in 1988.

By the early 1990s, Hazel Johnson had evolved into a seasoned and well-respected grassroots activist whose work with PCR earned her national attention within the Environmental Justice Movement. In 1991, Johnson attended the first National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington DC, where her work with PCR was lauded as "a postcard for environmental justice and racial justice" and she was hailed as the "mother of the environmental movement." The combined efforts of Johnson and other environmental justice leaders, united under the national movement, led to modest but significant changes in environmental policy at the federal level during the early 1990s, including the formation of the EPA's Office of Environmental Justice in 1992 and its National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC) in 1994. In recognition of PCR's role as a leading grassroots environmental justice organization, Hazel Johnson was invited to serve on NEJAC as a charter member and remained an active participant for several years.

The environmental justice movement secured a landmark victory on February 11, 1994, when President William J. Clinton issued Executive Order 12898, “Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations.” The order was the first major federal action on environmental justice and generated a number of EPA initiatives that activists were hopeful would lead to meaningful changes within their communities. PCR was an active participant in many of these programs, and Hazel Johnson was one of a small group of stakeholders invited to attend the signing of the order. In 1996, President Clinton invited Hazel Johnson back to the White House for a ceremony honoring the work of 100 environmental groups from across the country. PCR was the only Black-run grassroots organization among the groups that were recognized. Johnson later served as an advisor for former Vice President Al Gore’s climate and environmental platform during his presidential campaign in 2000 and was also one of eleven women of color to be honored at the Second People of Color Summit in 2002 for her contributions to the environmental justice movement.

In spite of the awards and accolades, Hazel’s work at PCR continued to be an arduous, and often frustrating, uphill battle. Undeterred, Johnson searched for creative ways to engage her community, focusing on programs that would not only address environmental issues but also provide concrete benefits to residents. The initiatives launched by PCR in the 1990s and early 2000s—including an environmental training program created in partnership with DePaul University’s Office of Applied Innovation and Laubach Literacy International’s Center for Workforce Education and the Residents Education About Lead (REAL) project, the first EPA-sponsored lead education and intervention program in the country—reflected Johnson’s belief that true environmental justice could not be achieved without also addressing issues of poverty, unemployment, and education. As she told the *Chicago Tribune*, “You have to motivate people, and economics motivates best. When you combine environmental activism with economic liberation, you have the recipe for real community recovery.”

Johnson and People for Community Recovery continued to collaborate with other environmental organizations and institutions to document and reduce environmental hazards throughout southeast Chicago, while also monitoring and applying persistent pressure on industries that posed an environmental threat to the community. The organization also continued to battle with CHA over the cleanup of toxic materials at Altgeld. In 1999, PCR worked with nearly 6,000 current and former residents to file a lawsuit against CHA over its failure to remove toxic PCB oils that had been released onto the site in the 1970s and 1980s. After years of litigation, CHA agreed to a \$10.5 million settlement in the form of rent abatement. Although the lawsuit brought much-needed attention to contamination in Chicago’s public housing, CHA was not found to be negligent, and the agency refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing.

The 2004 settlement with CHA reflected a hard reality that grassroots activists like Hazel



Hazel Johnson (fifth from right) at the UN Conference on Environment & Development Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, 1992. Source: People for Community Recovery.

By the early 1990s, Johnson work with PCR had made her a nationally recognized leader in the emerging environmental justice movement, which fought to end discriminatory practices that concentrated hazardous waste and polluting industries in communities of color.



Left: Hazel Johnson receiving the President's Environmental and Conservation Challenge Award from President George H. W. Bush in 1992. Source: PCR Archive, Woodson Regional Library
Right: Hazel Johnson (third from right) with President William J. Clinton at the signing of Executive Order 12898 in 1994. Source: PCR Archive, Woodson Regional Library.

Johnson faced when confronting environmental inequity, but Johnson's continued activism showed her remarkable ability to persevere against seemingly insurmountable odds. She told the *Chicago Tribune* in 1995:

Every day I complain, protest and object, but it takes such vigilance and activism to keep legislators on their toes and government accountable to the people on environmental issues. I've been thrown in jail twice for getting in the way of big business. But I don't regret anything I've ever done, and I don't think I'll ever stop as long as I'm breathing. We have abused the planet mercilessly for years, and now we are paying the price. If we want a safe environment for our children and grandchildren, we must clean up our act, no matter how hard a task it might be.

Despite an increasing number of health problems, Hazel Johnson remained actively engaged in PCR's work until her death from congestive heart failure on January 12, 2011 at the age of 75. Toward the end of Hazel's life, her daughter Cheryl Johnson gradually assumed responsibility for day-to-day operations of the organization, finally succeeding her mother as Executive Director of PCR in 2009. Reflecting on her mother's sacrifices, Cheryl Johnson told the *Chicago Tribune* in 2011, "My mother used her Social Security checks to educate herself about environmental issues. She paid for buses for residents to go down and protest. She paid to print flyers.... [She] didn't get involved in environmental justice to make money. She got involved to make change in people's lives."

In recognition of Hazel Johnson's significant contributions to the environmental justice movement, US Representative Bobby Rush (D-IL) introduced legislation in 2019 to honor Johnson's contributions by posthumously awarding her the Congressional Gold Medal, commissioning a commemorative stamp, and designating April as the Hazel M. Johnson Environmental Justice Month. The bill was reintroduced in April 2021, with Robert Bullard and Cheryl Johnson joining Rush in Washington DC to promote the legislation. "So often," Rush stated, "Black activists are overlooked for their contributions to the environmental and environmental justice movements. Ms. Johnson was a visionary who used her voice to shine a bright light on the environmental injustices suffered by low-income, minority communities."

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Section 2-120-690), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a recommendation of landmark designation for an area, district, place, building, structure, work of art, or other object within the City of Chicago if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated “criteria for landmark designation,” as well as possesses sufficient integrity to convey its significance. The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Shop Building at Altgeld Gardens be designated as a Chicago Landmark:

CRITERION 1: VALUE AS AN EXAMPLE OF CITY, STATE, OR NATIONAL HERITAGE

Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States .

- The Shop Building served as the commercial center and community hub for Altgeld Gardens, one of the largest and most self-contained public housing developments built in Chicago during the first half of the twentieth century. Constructed in a largely industrial area with few commercial business to serve Altgeld residents, the Shop Building provided easy access to critical community assets, including a grocery store, drug store, tailer shop, doctor’s office, and beauty parlor.
- Between 1945 and 1951, the Shop Building was home to the Altgeld Gardens Consumer Co-operative, a non-profit co-operative grocery store jointly owned and operated by Altgeld residents. Black-owned co-operatives, part of the larger co-operative movement that surged in Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s, were an important means of economic independence for African American communities. As a self-contained community of approximately 7,000 people, Altgeld Gardens was an ideal setting for a co-operative, and by 1947 the Altgeld Gardens Consumer Co-operative was the largest store of its kind in the country.
- Later known as the “Up Top” by Altgeld residents, the Shop Building has also served since the late 1960s as a place of commemoration for community members who lived and died at Altgeld Gardens. After 17-year-old Sterling “Pinky” Jones—an active member of the Black Panther Party—was shot and killed at Altgeld in December 1969, his name was painted on the north wall of the Shop Building’s breezeway along with a mural of Malcolm X. In subsequent decades, residents have added hundreds of names and messages to lost loved ones to the wall, making it an important memorial connecting the thousands of people that have called Altgeld Gardens home.

CRITERION 3: SIGNIFICANT PERSON

Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

- During the last decades of the twentieth century, the Shop Building housed the offices of the People for Community Recovery (PCR), a grassroots environmental justice organization founded in 1979 by Altgeld resident and community activist Hazel Johnson (1935-2011). Under Johnson's tireless and determined leadership, PCR worked with residents and numerous stakeholders to document and address serious environmental issues at Altgeld Gardens, fight against the expansion of landfills and hazardous waste facilities on Chicago's Southeast Side, and bring training and workforce opportunities for the Altgeld community.
- Hazel Johnson emerged as a nationally recognized leader in the environmental justice movement in the 1990s. Her activism helped lead to important federal changes in environmental policy, including the formation of the EPA's Office of Environmental Justice and the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council.
- Johnson was awarded the President's Environmental and Conservation Challenge Award in 1992 by President George H.W. Bush. In 1994, she was one of a small number of stakeholders invited to witness President William J. Clinton sign Executive Order 12898, the first major federal action on environmental justice. Two years later, President Clinton honored 100 environmental groups, including PCR, at a White House ceremony. Johnson also served as an advisor for Vice President Al Gore's climate and environmental platform during his 2000 presidential campaign, and was one of eleven women of color honored at the 2002 People of Color Summit for her contributions to the environmental justice movement.

CRITERION 4: EXEMPLARY ARCHITECTURE

Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.

- The Shop Building is an early and unique example of modernist commercial architecture in Chicago, exemplifying Keck and Keck's affinity for contemporary, functional, and site specific designs.
- The Shop Building, with its low-slung, curved form, its flat, unadorned wall surfaces, large expanses of glass, and swooping concrete canopy, reflects the influence of European modernism, which did not fully take hold in Chicago until after World War II.
- The Shop Building is also important as an early example of a commercial building

designed around the principles of passive solar heating. The Shop Building's south-facing orientation, window placement, and canopies are all elements of solar design that Keck and Keck first developed for single family homes.

CRITERION 5: IMPORTANT ARCHITECT

Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

- The Shop Building is significant as one of the few commercial buildings designed by the architecture firm commonly known as Keck and Keck. The 50-year partnership of brothers George Fred Keck and William Keck produced many of best examples of early modernist residential design in Midwest and influenced a generation of Chicago architects.
- George Fred Keck's avant-garde designs for the House of Tomorrow and the Crystal House at the 1933 A Century of Progress Exposition were a radical departure from any architecture built in Chicago at that time, and helped open the public's eyes to modernism. Keck and Keck's subsequent commissions reflected the firm's commitment to creating functional, contemporary, and technologically advanced designs that met the specific needs of each client.
- Keck and Keck were considered the foremost architects of high-quality solar homes, leading many advances in solar design and construction. The firm was among the first architects in the country to consistently incorporate energy efficient technologies in their designs.

CRITERION 7: UNIQUE VISUAL FEATURE

Its unique location or distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the City of Chicago.

- The modern design of the Shop Building stands in sharp contrast to the more traditional residential and community buildings at Altgeld Gardens. The building, located in a prominent location within the commercial and administrative core of the project, is an established visual feature in Altgeld Gardens.
- The memorial wall at the Shop Building, created by residents to commemorate lost loved ones and former residents, is also a unique and important visual feature within Altgeld Gardens.

INTEGRITY CRITERIA

The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic community, architectural, or aesthetic interest or value.

Although the glass storefronts along the primary façade were removed and the openings infilled with brick in the 1970s, overall the Shop Building retains sufficient integrity to express its significance as an important structure within the Altgeld Gardens community. The building remains in its original location and setting on Block 14, which was planned as the commercial and administrative core of the housing complex. The building retains its original curved footprint, brick exterior walls, flat roof, and concrete canopies. The rear façade of the building, facing the adjacent parking lot, retains its band of clerestory windows and rear entrance doors. The covered breezeway bisecting the building remains, with skylights and storefront entrance locations intact. The memorial wall within the breezeway, a significant feature in its own right, also remains intact.

SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

Whenever an area, district, place, building, structure, work of art, or other object is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the “significant historical and architectural features” of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based on its evaluation of the Shop Building at Altgeld Gardens, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- All exterior elevations, including rooflines, of the building.
- The memorial wall on the north wall of the covered breezeway.

Additional Guidelines—General

Pursuant to Section 2-120-740 of the Municipal Code, on April 2, 2026, the Permit Review Committee (P.R.C.) of the Commission approved, with conditions, a pre-permit submission, including drawings, renderings and photographs, for the exterior and interior rehabilitation of an existing one-story masonry building and construction of a new visible side addition (the “P.R.C. Project”). Notwithstanding the foregoing significant historical and architectural features listed above, the proposed scope of work contained in the P.R.C. Project shall be permitted.

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The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor and City Council, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council that individual building, sites, objects, or entire districts be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law. The Commission is staffed by the Chicago Department of Planning and Development, Bureau of Citywide Planning, Historic Preservation Division, City Hall, 121 North LaSalle Street, Room 905, Chicago, IL 60602; (312-744-3200); www.cityofchicago.org/landmarks

This Landmark Designation Report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation process. Only language contained within a designation ordinance adopted by the City Council should be regarded as final.

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