

Near North SRO

Biography

Project Type: Single Resident Occupancy (SRO)
Project Context: Urban Fringe
Completion: 2007
Budget: \$11.2 million
Building Size: 45,810 square feet
Cost per Square Foot: ~\$244 USD

Chicago, which is often described as one of the world's great architecture capitals, also has a strong tradition — dating back to 1889 when Jane Addams founded the Hull House settlement community — of innovative housing projects aimed at improving the lives of the disadvantaged. The Near North SRO by Helmut Jahn, is a 96-unit project aimed at homeless people (the project uses the phrase supportive housing, a social services term for housing that provides access to services like mental health assistance and vocational guidance, in addition to shelter.)

Cindy M. Holler, director of Mercy Housing Lakefront, said one of the advantages of the building is the way it challenges traditional notions of what housing for the homeless should be. "Some very poor people are going to get beautiful views of downtown Chicago here, and that's O.K.," she said.

Charles Hoch, professor of urban planning at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a member of Mercy Housing Lakefront's board of directors, went even further. "The building is a stigma smasher," he said, "We are borrowing the cachet of Mr. Jahn to send a message to the larger society and that message is that homeless people have value, they have a role to play in society."

Indeed the building is one of the more distinctive apartment buildings in Chicago. The loaf-shaped stainless-steel structure recalls an earlier project by Mr. Jahn: a student dormitory complex at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago that he completed in 2003. "I always looked at the I.I.T. building as kind of a **prototype for low-rise urban housing**," Mr. Jahn said. "The Mercy SRO project is a way to introduce the concept on the north side."

The units in the five-story building average about 300 square feet, and all are equipped with private baths and kitchenettes. Although finishes are basic, the overall feel is closer to a hip hotel than the numbing blandness one associates with subsidized housing.

Context

The building, which is at the intersection of Clybourn Avenue and Division Street and within blocks of the notorious Cabrini Green public housing project, was developed by Mercy Housing Lakefront, a division of Mercy Housing, a nonprofit group that owns and manages about 19,000 units of supportive housing nationwide. Fronted to the east by busy Clybourn Avenue and to the south by Division Street, the Near North SRO's **urban location** and proximity to **public transportation** means its residents epitomize mobility and independence. On the small triangular plot of land the rests to the south of the building, you'll find an "urban farm" for growing fresh produce and spices.

Sustainability

The project also showcases what is turning into another tradition in Chicago, that of sustainable, or green, design.

Over the last half-dozen years, the city has begun urging developers to incorporate sustainable elements into their projects. The city's efforts include expediting construction permits for projects that meet the certification standards for the United States Green Building Council, and providing matching grants of up to \$100,000 for projects that involve green roofs, which use plantings to aid insulation. So far, the city has about 350 green roofs, more than any other American city. "This building proves that even nonprofit organizations can have very cool sustainable designs without a huge capital investment," said Lori T. Healey, the city's planning commissioner.

One of the building's most interesting features is an elaborate network of **wind turbines and solar panels** on the rounded roof that together will generate about 15 percent of the building's power requirements. The building also had the city's first so-called **gray water system**, which captures and recycles runoff from sinks and showers. The total cost of the building was about \$18 million, with the largest portion of financing coming from the National Equity Fund. The sustainable features accounted for about \$1 million of the total cost of the building.

"Because many of the sustainable features were funded by grants, we were able to try some things that would not be possible in a more commercially driven project," Mr. Jahn said.



Helmut Jahn's Near North SRO in Chicago, Illinois

