

Chicago

The lights go out on Cabrini-Green

LED installation dims as high-rise is demolished

CHICAGO. A public art project developed in response to the demolition of the final high-rise block remaining in a Chicago public housing development, Cabrini-Green, has been erased along with the building.

Project Cabrini-Green is a time-based light installation, conceived by artist Jan Tichy in collaboration with his partner, social worker Efrat Appel. They worked with community youth groups and students from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) as well as the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Chicago Housing Authority.

Building began on Cabrini-Green in 1942. Over the years, other structures were added and at its peak, 15,000 people lived there. Its demise is part of a new direction in public housing to eliminate the high-density buildings that home the urban poor.



Cabrini-Green is torn down

The Prague-born artist, who teaches at SAIC, said that the project arose from the question of how to capture “the historic moment”. The artist tackles social and political issues through the medium of reflected light. Previous projects include an illuminated paper model of a secret Israeli detention camp and light projections on the Mies van der Rohe-designed S.R. Crown Hall in Chicago.

Tichy said he decided immediately against “imposing” light on the building. “It was clear that

it had to come from inside,” he said. The artist spent two days alone inside the building installing 134 steel boxes containing LED kits. During the four-week demolition, the lights blinked from 7pm to 1am every night, gradually dimming as the building was knocked down.

Each light had a unique pattern based on poems written and recorded by local youths who attended workshops that were developed and instructed by Tichy, Appel, and students from the SAIC. “These kids will be the ones affected, they are the ones that should be heard,” said Tichy, who developed a software programme to translate the sound of their poetry into light.

As the debris from the demolition is sorted, Tichy hopes to salvage as many of the kits as possible. They will be sold as an editioned work by Richard Gray Gallery, with the proceeds covering the cost of the materials as well as books for the children.

Tichy spent every night of the demolition documenting the changes at the site. He said the demolition attracted new visitors each night, who responded to the piece in different ways. Some said the lights brought to mind gunfire, perhaps an obvious association to the estate’s notoriously violent past.

“That wasn’t my intention,” said Tichy. “Like many works that deal with light, it’s very abstract,” he said. “Some say it’s like a party, for some it is poetic.” Tichy has heard people describing the lights as screams. “That is the way it is supposed to work—you bring your own perceptions, and sometimes your misconceptions,” he said. ■

Ruth Lopez