

# Charting a course for Chicago's historic Pullman neighborhood



The temporary visitors center at the Pullman National Monument features a mural depicting the important labor history of the neighborhood.

By Kathleen M. O'Donnell

President Barack Obama's dedication of the [Pullman National Monument](#) in February 2015 signified a new move for the National Park Service. A major win after decades of work by Pullman neighborhood leaders, architects, and officials, the precedent-setting designation meant that planned urban areas could now be recognized as vital pieces in the fabric of our country's landscape.

Built under the leadership of architect Solon Spencer Beman, a 300-acre model town for the Pullman Palace Car Company arose on Chicago's south side in 1881. Simply dubbed "Pullman," the city within a city was home to manufacturing facilities as well as housing and public space for employees and their families. Collaborating with company founder George Pullman, landscape architect Nathan F. Barrett, and civil engineer Benzette Williams, Beman envisioned a town that would support a thriving professional and civic life for factory workers, craftsman, and administrators moving to Chicago from around the world to build the opulent railway cars that carried passengers from coast to coast.

Pullman's history is singular; there's no other part of the country quite like it. As the nation's first company town with an official urban plan, it was a "grand experiment that lasted about 18 years," according to architect Michael Shymanski, AIA, president of the Historic Pullman Foundation, a nonprofit organization that facilitates preservation and education in the neighborhood.



On a tour hosted by Chicago Ideas and AIA, Chicago residents learned about Pullman's historic Hotel Florence and the rehabilitation project underway there.

The story of Pullman, like many others associated with the industrial-age corporatism, isn't fully sunny. Slightly more than a decade after the town was built, an economic downturn led to the Pullman Strike of 1894, where workers whose wages had been drastically cut, but whose rental fees had not been, walked off the factory floors and sparked a national movement that quickly led Congress to pass an act establishing Labor Day. The Pullman Company continued to produce cars into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in the 1930s African-American activist A. Philip Randolph led efforts to establish and gain bargaining rights for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a union comprised of individuals who worked aboard Pullman trains. Though its factories were all closed by 1955, Pullman has lived on as a national symbol of labor and civil rights.

## 20<sup>th</sup> century activism saves the neighborhood

From the large brick administration building and clock tower and the beloved Hotel Florence to the small blocks of row homes and a public market square, Pullman's sprawling 19<sup>th</sup> century brick buildings remained beautiful, but somewhat neglected by a city unsure of what to do with them after the Pullman Company officially closed. True to Pullman's spirit of activism earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the community banded together to save their home in 1960 when a new industrial park was proposed in the area. In 1970, Pullman was established as a National Historic Landmark District and over the next 25 years, collective efforts further established the lands and buildings of Pullman as official Chicago landmark districts and Illinois state historic sites. "Thanks to the leadership of architects, urban planners, and artists, we were able to achieve those designations," says Shymanski. The decades of activism and concerted collaboration led to the National Monument designation, which President Obama enacted through the Antiquities Act.

Fueled by the 2015 designation, AIA Chicago and the National Parks Conservation Association sprang into action, strategizing a sustainable future for Pullman. With the support of local foundations and non-profits, the two organizations hosted a design workshop and developed a vision and plan called "[Positioning Pullman](#)," which has served as a guidepost in the four years since.



The Pullman National Monument, now undergoing extensive renovations, is comprised of the former administration headquarters of the Pullman Company.

Today, buildings and land throughout Pullman are owned and/or protected by state, local, and federal government as well as private citizens, which means that not only is the site "very complex," as architect Ed Torrez, AIA, says, but also one that requires immense cooperation among a variety of stakeholders. Torrez's firm, [Bauer Latoza Studio](#), is serving as architect of record for the transformation of the Pullman administration building and clock tower, which is the single piece of property that comprises the federally designated Pullman National Monument.

"There are a lot of firms working on this project, each with a different component," Torrez says, indicating that his team is one of more than 10 main contributors to the project at the monument's site including a variety of other design companies and non-profit organizations. The renovation will include exhibits that illuminate the neighborhood's history and special legacy. "We want the visitors to really experience what was going on here. We want them to see it," he says. "Once we have lights on and life in there, I hope will spark bigger momentum." The National Monument is one of many renovation and construction endeavors happening in Pullman today. Other projects in the neighborhood include a full restoration of the Hotel Florence and a large-scale tenement overhaul which will create 38 live/work units for artists.



Former tenement buildings in Pullman are currently being converted into live/work spaces for artists.

## Moving forward for all of Chicago

While Pullman residents themselves are aware of their home's history and can see the changes taking shape outside their front doors every day, to some Chicagoan's, Pullman is a distant neighborhood about a 40-minute train ride south from the Loop. That's why Chicago Ideas, a nonprofit with a mission to foster meaningful, creative connections worked with The American Institute of Architects to host a walking tour of the area in July 2019. Led by Shymanski with Torrez' help, individuals from across the city learned about Pullman's history and massive transformational undertakings, all while getting the chance to experience the streets and public spaces much in the way Pullman residents do.

"The tour gave some of Chicago Ideas' most engaged supporters the opportunity to go to the Pullman neighborhood for the first time and learn about the history and architecture of this community," says Amanda Salhoot, the organization's vice president of strategic partnerships. Though they were just visitors that day, the tour attendees left with a deeper appreciation of their city, excited to take part in supporting the future of Pullman.

As Pullman moves forward, the sense of pride and collaboration demonstrated by residents, local organizations, and government agencies will ensure that generations to come will honor its past as it moves toward becoming a visionary center of public life in Chicago. "The future role of this place is for young people and adults to realize there are several unfulfilled promises of America," Shymanski says.

*AIA is a proud sponsor of Chicago Ideas' programs including [educational youth labs](#) and public events in conjunction with the [AIA Film Challenge](#). Learn more about [Chicago Ideas](#) and AIA's public awareness campaign, [Blueprint for Better](#).*

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