Rolling through Chicago projects' past

The 'Ghetto Bus Tour' is bringing visitors, mostly local and white, to the sites of infamous public housing.

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Photographs by Stephen J. Carrera For The Times

"I SEE IT AS THE DEATH OF A COMMUNITY": *Tour guide Beauty Turner used to live at the Robert Taylor Homes, whose ominous concrete high-rises stood here.*

CHICAGO — The tourists sitting in the aging school bus pressed their noses to the glass, eager to catch a glimpse of the modern face of Chicago's infamous public housing projects.

There wasn't much left to see.

Along South State Street, tour guide Beauty Turner pointed out the empty dirt lots where the ominous concrete high-rises of the Robert Taylor Homes once stood.

Down the road, she nodded toward construction crews building new brick-and-glass condominiums in the shadows of the Ida B. Wells complex — where drug dealers waged war. Now, white-collar families in gleaming SUVs fill the streets.

Nearby, picnicking couples and Little League baseball games filled a park — an expanse of lush green, Turner noted, that replaced graffiti-covered shops that once catered to the city's poor.

"You may see all this new money, all these new buildings, as a good thing," said Turner, 50, a former public housing resident. But what was here before, she says, was not all bad — it was a place where families lived, children played and meals were shared.

As for the transformation?

"I see it as the death of a community."

Since January, the monthly "Ghetto Bus Tour," as the three-hour outing is known, has been bringing scores of visitors to what were some of the nation's most notoriously crime-ridden areas.

For $20, the curious can wander through the remaining projects and talk to the residents, most of whom are black, about what life there is and was like.

Most of the tourists are white, live locally, and range in age from students in their 20s to retirees in their 70s. Some have rarely ventured this far south of Madison Street, which physically and philosophically divides the city.

"I've read about how awful life was for people here, and I've read about how the city's plans have changed the South Side," said Molly Lazar, 73, who lives in the northern suburb of Winnetka. "I've lived in this city for years, and figured it was about time I see what's happening down here for myself."

Indeed, the city's South Side landscape has radically changed in recent years, thanks to the Plan for Transformation.

Since 1999, the Chicago Housing Authority has been gradually emptying dozens of high-rises as part of a 15-year, multibillion-dollar plan to redesign public housing and create mixed-income neighborhoods.

City and federal officials had deemed the towers of poverty throughout Chicago unlivable. The public housing overhaul is the largest in the country: Nearly 39,000 apartments are being replaced by about 25,000 new or re-

NOT REHABBED YET: *Dearborn Homes still stands where projects used to line nearly two miles of expressway.*

The plan has also generated an enormous amount of controversy. Some who left, and many in the remaining projects, say the process has been alienating and hostile.

That has inspired Turner to launch the tour, as a way to preserve a slice of Chicago's history that few want to remember.

"Our people grew up here, lived and died here. They went to church here, celebrated Christmas and birthdays here," Turner said. "The world needs to know that there was a community in public housing, not just a list of horror stories in the newspapers."

The tours were spearheaded current housing residents and distributed free across the city. Initially part of the Chicago Housing Authority, the paper has run as an independent venture since 2000 and is published by We the People Media, a nonprofit group that teaches journalism to inner-city youth. Turner is an assistant editor.

The paper's mission is, in part, to keep track of what's happened to the families that have been moved, said Residents' Journal Publisher Ethan Michaeli.

"This is a population that the city is trying to make invisible," Michaeli said. "But everyone knows Beauty, and she knows

REACHING OUT: *The hand of a Dearborn Homes resident pokes through to open a security barrier, left, as Beauty Turner addresses her group. Tourists often ask how bad the area really was.*

to anyone who asked — of her former home at the Robert Taylor complex. Word of mouth about Turner's escorted tours spread among journalists, filmmakers and local politicians.

By late last year, larger groups began calling the paper's offices, asking for someone to lead them through the South Side. The paper's staff decided to formalize the tour and open it to the public.

A recent tour started at the site of the drab high-rises where Turner used to live. At one time they were known as the world's largest and most violent public housing projects. They lined the expressway for nearly two miles.

Today they are gone.

Standing on a cracked slab of concrete, the two dozen people on the tour listened as Turner told of life here, weaving a narrative of difficulties and misery along with moments of simple sweetness.

Consulting a homemade notebook filled with typed notes, Turner spoke of hot summer afternoons, when children would gather on the lawn and play baseball. On weekends, when the sun set and the temperatures cooled, the air would fill with the

she had seen a teenage boy gunned down. Moments before, he had been flirting with his girlfriend. "It happened. A lot," Turner said. "The police? They never came until the shooting was over. Or when they came, they made things worse."

The crowd peppered her with questions: How often were there shootings? How many people died here? What were the living conditions like? What happened in the summer when the electricity went out? Or in the winter when the water pipes burst?

"How bad was it really?" wondered Erika Enk, 28, a cancer researcher with the University of Illinois at Chicago. "And where are all your neighbors now?"

City housing officials treat the tours with resignation and a certain amount of disdain. They say the tour guides and residents paint a grim picture of current public housing that doesn't match the reality.

"We're proud of our work," Zises said. "Our new developments look great. Our rehabilitation of the existing units looks great. And everyone's doing much, much better."

A recent report by the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan eco-

ments slated for revitalization across the nation, including one in Chicago.

"For the most part, former residents are living in neighborhoods that are dramatically safer and offer a far healthier environment for themselves and their children," the report said. But it also found that many of the residents were having difficulty making ends meet and struggled to find employment.

For people like Carol Wallace, 63, Chicago's remaining projects are still home.

Her apartment at Dearborn Homes, which hasn't yet been rehabbed, was among the stops on the tour. Turner led the crowd up a flight of stairs. The scarred concrete walls, covered in faded graffiti, smelled of urine. A few steps later, the tour reached Wallace's front door. Instead of a screen, a heavy, padlocked steel cage door stood between Wallace and the outside world.

Turner politely greeted Wallace through the bars.

"Hang on a moment! I'll be right back!" Wallace said. A few moments later, she returned with a key and unlocked the cage.

Then, with a grin, she told the