Three innovative affordable housing projects co-located with branch libraries opened across Chicago in early 2019: Taylor Street Apartments and the Roosevelt Branch Library on the Near West Side, designed by SOM; Independence Apartments and Independence Branch in Irving Park, by John Ronan Architects; and Northtown Apartments and Northtown Branch in West Ridge, by Ralph Johnson of Perkins + Will. Breaking from design convention, each represents a beacon and an anchor for its neighborhood, connecting vulnerable populations to a valued resource. In total, 161 apartments link to the three libraries. All but seven units offer heavily subsidized rents with an emphasis on senior housing.

A number of cities have toyed with this so-called co-location model, developed through public-private partnership, but Chicago was the first to tout the pilot as advancing a future for public housing married to community resources and progressive design. Critics have lined up in praise of all three projects’ expressive designs, and the City’s willingness to spend up front in order to ensure the long-term viability of the buildings and instill pride among residents. In terms of solving the massive citywide—and nationwide—shortfall in affordable housing, it is a drop in the bucket. Still, cities like New York and Los Angeles have taken note.

Further reading:
Cities are tackling the housing crunch by building above the library. Kathleen McCormick, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, September 27, 2019.
Chicago shows how public housing and libraries can coexist. Blair Kamin, Chicago Tribune, August 22, 2019.