The concept of “the fieldhouse” is a Chicago invention, born as an agent of social reform that brought services like English lessons, indoor recreation, and hot meals to people in their community. These facilities also extended the seasonality of city parks. An unsung hero of Chicago architecture, the size, style, and ornamentation of local fieldhouses varied greatly based on prevailing tastes and the affluence of a particular neighborhood.

In the Douglas neighborhood, immediately north of Bronzeville, is the public housing complex Dearborn Homes dating to 1950. Recently, there have been numerous upgrades to the buildings and open space. Into this context enters a new prototype for the fieldhouse. Nestled alongside Dearborn Homes, the Williams Park Fieldhouse upholds a legacy of daring design. The building’s iridescent skin is a construct of stainless steel panels overlaid like reptilian scales. The steel is chromatic and reflective, rendering the building an ever-shifting composition of light, shadow, and color across the day and seasons. The designers put it best: “The architecture of the [surrounding community] has often been focused on providing protection and safety above all else… In addition to providing safe spaces, [our approach] also aims to inspire and transform the lives of its users.”

Williams Park itself, at 6.5 acres, is tasked with serving the more than 600 children that live at Dearborn Homes. As such, this new facility offers a basketball gym, community rooms, storage space, and more. The interior boasts an expressive wood structural system, referencing the exposed timber common to classic Chicago fieldhouses. Outdoor amenities include a new spray pool, bike racks, landscaping, and benches.

Further reading: