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Economic and residential dynamics between University Village and Pilsen

Abstract

University Village is a neighborhood created from scratch - designed to be "perfect" you could say. It houses a few thousand university students who come and go on different daily and weekly schedules, as well as permanent homeowners population. Sprinkle in some restaurants, local and national retail firms, and essential services like dry cleaning and hair salons along two major and intersecting bus routes and you have a "perfect" neighborhood.

University Village, because of its newness and designed quality, lacks character, history, and can seem a bit sterile. That's where Pilsen can support the new neighborhood; Pilsen is over 100 years old, has seen major demographic, spatial, and physical changes, and heavily influenced by its majority Mexican population that it more than makes up for what University Village lacks

Major American cities are experiencing somewhat of an urban renaissance. People are moving back to cities. This is mainly spurred by immigrant migrations, but also new and better amenities. Cities offer people a lifestyle that no other form of town or village can offer. The largest cities have the best opportunities to attract new residents. Chicago is one of these cities experiencing major transformation of its housing, commercial enterprises, resident attitudes, and entertainment and recreational offerings.

Cities have found that they need to develop methods to attract and retain residents. There are many creative ways to do this as well as several obvious and pragmatic strategies.

Creative plans in Chicago have been making the city a friendlier, more hospitable place to live for a bigger variety of people. It also means comparing the city to others, internationally as well as within the United States, to find best practices. Hundreds of miles of bike lanes exist in Chicago. This helps increase recreational bicycling as well as raises the safety levels for those who must ride their bicycle: those who commute to work. Tax increment financing districts help specific neighborhoods improve by redirecting tax revenues to the area for use in particular projects. New and updated playgrounds of art have been built in the city at which people can spend their leisure time. I'm talking expressly about Millennium and Grant Parks.

Pragmatic strategies include programs to increase the quality of a locally and publicly provided education, upgrading the condition of mass transit as well as enhancing mobility (sidewalks, road enhancements). Cities can also improve their value by overhauling archaic zoning laws that define what type of businesses can be run in the districts where many residents live. Even better management of resident parking and enforcement of parking laws can improve the quality of life a city can offer. What it comes down to is a better understanding of who lives in a city and what they need. Chicagoans need lots of social services and education opportunities, as well as plenty of things to do. All are improving, even if at a seemingly glacial pace. One element of living in Chicago which residents and city government acknowledge is the importance of our neighborhoods.

The University of Illinois at Chicago has a critical and important history with the city and many of its residents. A large percentage of Chicagoans are graduates of the university. The university's relocation from Navy Pier to the Circle Campus was a contested move because of the new location's current condition: slum. However, cities are required to make unpopular decisions that will improve life for a majority of people. The University of Illinois at Chicago Circle Campus was one of these decisions. At its creation, the campus was designed to be mainly hosting commuter students and not house. Planners intended the school to be for the use of Chicago residents. Decades later, change is inevitable and the needs of the students are reshaped.

Many students desire to live on campus or near campus. The demand of UIC for student housing continues to escalate. The school recognized this and in the late 1980s contacted and worked with Chicago-based housing developers to integrate apartment-style student dormitories within a mixed-use retail and housing project on land just south of Roosevelt and the school's east campus. This development is called University Village. The goal of University Village is to build a new community from the ground up and at the same time provide students and faculty with a new environment in which to live, eat, and play. The center of the development is Maxwell and Halsted Sts., just one block south of Roosevelt Rd. Included in the development were new soccer, softball, and baseball fields, open to the public. Being a new community, built on top of an old, precipitates challenges to its growth and identity. University Village will have to form its own local customs and space design. The homeowners and students must be able to express ownership of their neighborhood. Additionally, with the right marketing plan and

ardent local business managers and enthusiastic residents, University Village will generate a name for itself and secure its place in the Chicago neighborhood system.

The community that existed prior to University Village's takeover of the area was the Maxwell St. Market. Taking place was an open-air market that started the retailing businesses of immigrants, starting in the 1870s. UIC, with the city of Chicago's help, planned a move for the market in the early 1990s to a larger space on the street at Roosevelt and Canal. (Spielman 2005)

The Maxwell St market, where it stands today and where it was once located, is a major economic link to the residents of Pilsen, a neighboring community. Residents come here to buy and sell their wares but also their food. It is well known that Maxwell St. has transitioned to being an open-air market for all varieties of vending to one that also includes a Mexican food market. (Baker 1995: 159)

Pilsen is a Chicago neighborhood that has already established its identity in the city. As it stands now, Pilsen is a Mexican enclave. Previously, Eastern European workers inhabited the community – the name Pilsen is rooted in this region. Pilsen has an extremely active street life happening alongside its many restaurants and locally-owned businesses. Chain stores are rare and are mainly banks. The neighborhood has its own library, post office, a Mexican fine arts museum, and independent grocery store. “[18th] Street is the main street of Pilsen and the sights and sounds of the street makes any visitor feel like they are in Mexico.” (Baker 1995: 157)

Pilsen hasn't always had the attention of city politicians and in some places, neighborhood problems have sometimes gone unheeded. Pilsen's rat problem has finally been contained with the city's help. However, “with the rising power of the Mexican, and

Latino voting blocks, politicians have had to pay more attention lately to improving services.” Pilsen has relatively little gang-activity, which I think can be attributed to its recognition as an important family-centered neighborhood. Gang activity would completely disrupt the quiet, positive atmosphere. (Baker 1995: 158)

Pilsen’s boundaries enclose the community tightly. Its boundaries on the north and south ends give the neighborhood a six block span on the east end, and only slightly longer on the west end. On the north, Pilsen is bordered by a railroad viaduct at 16th St.; on the south the border is Cermak Rd., Blue Island Ave. and the Chicago River. Not every north-south street penetrates the railroad viaduct to connect to the neighborhoods just north of Pilsen – these being University Village and Little Italy, the Barbara Jean Wright Courts apartment complex, and a public housing village. The Chicago River also abuts the east side of Pilsen, but Halsted St. creates a small division between “East Pilsen,” a tiny community of mostly-white artists, and the rest of Pilsen. Marking the west end of Pilsen is Damen Ave. and Harrison Park.

Pilsen and University Village, because of their proximity and the former use of the land on which UIC’s housing development now sits, are economically and spatially connected. One building the housing development was not able to push out was the St. Francis of Assisi Catholic church. But the church has still felt the developmental squeeze. Gone are one hundred parking spaces, a circumstance the church fears will lower attendance. (Lewis 2001)

Outside developers and ideas have encroached on Pilsen before – the community is not a stranger to these events. As Mexicans were moving into the community in the 1960s, “a coalition of artists and activists mounted a cultural and political... This

movement fought successfully at least two urban renewal plans that threatened the neighborhood space...” (Baker 1995:155). As a result of the neighborhood coming together at this time, city leaders built new schools and improved social services. In the midst of the current Chicago housing boom, many developers are coming into Pilsen and buying old buildings to demolish – in order to build condos – but rarely renovate.

One major developer, who has been a fixture of the community area since the 1960s, is John Podmajersky. He was able to buy up many properties scheduled for demolition. He modernized them and sold them to artists. “My whole idea was to keep the area from being torn down, to stabilize it, ‘rebirth’ it and create a sense of community,” he said. (Richardson 2002)

In 1993, a division of UIC’s College of Urban Planning released a small-scale review of the relationship between Pilsen and UIC. This report included interviews with community members as well as an investigation into the unmet needs of Pilsen regarding education and public schools, planning and development, and health necessities. The Eighteenth Street Development Corporation “thinks Maxwell St. has to be seen as part of the economic flow of Pilsen” (Voorhees 1993). ESDC is a non-profit community development corporation serving businesses and residents of Pilsen. I could not agree more with the findings of the study. “ESDC would like UIC to adopt a view of Maxwell St. as an incubator of minority businesses” (Voorhees 1993). Being that these findings are fourteen years, some of the comments are not as relevant. Maxwell St. market has been moved and the new Maxwell St. is completely different. This, however, has not removed the links between the school and Pilsen.

An official partnership between the school and community organizations, such as the ESDC and the local Chamber of Commerce, should be formed so that the residents of Pilsen have a clear understanding of what resources UIC can offer them. (Voorhees 1993) There are several unofficial relationships between UIC, University Village and Pilsen. One I mentioned is Pilsen residents' involvement in the Maxwell St. market. A second is Pilsen attracting tourists from within the city to its many art galleries and authentic restaurants. The local alderman, Danny Solis, agrees that the building of University Village will only serve to benefit Pilsen. "This will provide an economic stimulus for the existing businesses in Pilsen – for the restaurants and stores. It will also create jobs for people in the community."

Nevertheless, University Village is practically complete – most retail spaces are filled, and all the restaurants that were planned to be opened are open or will open later this year. And there is still room for improvement. University Village has a weak local identity – its place in the Chicago neighborhood network is not as concrete or secure as Pilsen's. It's difficult to achieve a local identity when the entire community is manufactured. The area does have many of the elements necessary for a completed neighborhood: retail shopping, a variety of cuisines at locally-owned and corporate-owned restaurants, permanent residents in the townhomes, natural spaces, as well as some community art. Having a revolving population of students living here adds to the local cultural dynamic: the neighborhood, as a result, continues to exude positive energy.

For University Village to take its place in the neighborhood structure for which Chicago is well known, it will have to align itself with the surrounding neighborhoods. One of these is obviously Pilsen to the south. Pilsen, as mentioned before, maintains a

very strong local identity. Mexican families overwhelmingly populate the locale. A walking tour down 18th St. will provide one with a sense of the local pride and heritage. The walls on neighborhood buildings are decorated with bright, colorful murals; churches once attended by Eastern European Catholics have been turned over to Spanish-speaking congregations. The feel of Mexico and resident pride is intense and unmistakable.

However, there are some blocks between University Village and Pilsen. Using some creative planning techniques, the two communities can overcome these blocks and enhance the association between them. Railroads sometimes act as major barriers in the same ways highways, cemeteries, and water features do – each with different impacts. A study of Chicago barriers and the effect they have on racial similarity in adjoining neighborhoods found a positive relationship between racial dissimilarity and the barrier's role in the adjoining communities. This finding goes to show the major influence barriers, such as the 16th St. railroad viaduct, have on communities in Chicago. (Noonan 2005)

Racial dissimilarity between University Village, Pilsen and other previously mentioned surrounding communities is not a problem I have identified. Individually, University Village is still working on its local identity, and Pilsen is trying to expand its influence on the city (by way of customs and food) without compromising its neighborhood pride and composition. Together, though, the two must work to overcome Pilsen's apprehension of University Village's placement and function and Pilsen's naming of University Village as a possible force of gentrification, something that can hurt the Mexican community. University Village needs to share what it has, and borrow what is insufficient. UIC's housing development has many affluent residents but needs a

diverse crowd of new users. Barriers to this neighborhood “trade” are not only 16th St. viaduct, but also direction finding and local planning, as well as cultural sensitivity.

While walking between the two communities, one must pass under the railroad viaduct. This railroad viaduct is a permanent feature in the cityscape and has been around for decades. The tracks here are heavily used by Amtrak, Metra and freight trains. It leads right into a major freight yard – fitting, seeing as Chicago is the nation’s rail capital. The viaduct is quite wide, constructed of concrete and takes command of one’s sense. At a couple crossing points, the viaduct splits into two bridges and lengthens the trip underneath it. The viaduct has a unique smell, color, temperature and spatial representation. Its presence is not particularly inviting to walkers. The tunnel is very dark, and the frequency of support columns compounds the problem that it can be hard to see sidewalk hazards (such as bird droppings, cracks, and ice) and other people walking.

There is only one way to avoid crossing under this viaduct on the way from northern neighborhoods to Pilsen – going out of the way east to Canal St, which crosses *over* the railroad tracks. Traveling under the tunnel from University Village to Pilsen, one emerges into a completely different neighborhood. No longer do you see modern condo buildings and apartment complexes; housing from the late 1800s, early 1900s crowds your view.

Direction finding involves signage telling walkers and cyclists how to discover certain points of interest in addition to the right transportation routing. There are questions that neighborhood planners need to answer in order to remove these directional and transportation obstacles: Do residents of University Village know how to find Pilsen, its restaurants and local points of interest? Do residents of Pilsen know the best way to

get the retail and restaurants in University Village? Are there signs telling drivers on which street to turn to find the Mexican art museum or public library or simply what Pilsen is? How easy is it to walk and bike between the two neighborhoods?

In regards to local cultural sensitivity, University Village is a major target of preservationists. As mentioned earlier, an entire open-air market, popular with citizens from all over Chicago, was picked up and moved a few blocks away. The homeless were relocated. Many buildings were demolished. To remember what the street was like, the University has placed signs indicating the neighborhood's historical importance. Bronze statues representing players from the market stand on the sidewalks. But is this enough to shake off the negative view of the University on behalf of preservationists and displaced residents? It's most likely not – not everyone can be pleased. It is, however, one small step UIC made in recognizing the history.

University Village is a perfect example of the city of Chicago as a growth machine. The city is still in a building boom, and UIC is also growing. The city is on a mission to beautify, improve neighborhoods, increase economic opportunities and revenues, and remove blight. University Village helps accomplish all of these things for part of the city's near southwest side. The development also goes to show that 360 degree renovations need to be completed sensitively. In the past, and still a bit today, major developments are not always reined in from their destructive path – planning in the United States and in Chicago has progressed.

Not every city is as ambitious as Chicago, nor are many universities as heavily expanding as UIC. University Village is definitely part of a demand for close-in upscale housing, and high-end dormitories.

A second application of urban sociological theory can be made in regards to University Village: historical and institutional perspectives, grounded and concrete attention to history and places. UIC and the partner developers knew they were treading in murky waters when they started building University Village. Maxwell St. is still deeply ingrained in Chicago's history and place. It is an immigrant marketplace to buy and sell anything. UIC obviously worked with the city to transplant the market so that it could take over the desolate and blighted street where the market once stood.

To what extent does the past explain the present? A traditional, open-air marketplace replaced by the modern urban market – a strip of retail stores, chain restaurants and the rare local business – seems to be a phenomenon occurring all over the country. Money talks. However, another question should be asked: To what extent does the present explain the past? The historical markers mentioned above bring awareness of the past to the newcomers visiting University Village. Several of the buildings from the original market still stand, rehabilitated and renovated façades as planned in the project.

When University Village and its outer-neighborhood spatial links are improved, the infantile neighborhood will be better integrated into the city's neighborhood fabric. Pilsen will require the help of UIC to improve living conditions and to send more potential consumers of its local goods. An updated and safer physical crossing underneath the 16th St. railroad viaduct, in addition to new direction finding signs and information, and transportation planning, will help both neighborhoods evolve. Time will be needed to erase the feeling of cultural insensitivity on the part of UIC. With these changes, and the positive results they will bring about, University Village will be able to create its own identity and attract new users, while Pilsen will no longer feel threatened

by UIC and use University Village residents to its advantage to increase its economic virility.

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