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## **Space and Place: Building Community in Little Village**

### **Introduction**

Social interactions create connections between people, developing networks of support essential for individuals and groups. The formation of collectives like local communities rely on social interactions to foster friendships, networks of support, and build a larger sense of community. Considering the importance of socialization in the construction of communities: where do these quintessential interactions unfold in the physical environment?

Looking at the scale of a neighborhood, this paper will explore Chicago's Little Village, and the physical manifestation of community in the built environment. In other words, where does the local community gather to build connections to people and place? Through detailed in-person observation and interviews with local residents, this research will unveil how community is created in this Chicago neighborhood, both in specific locations and in a broader sense.

This paper is organized to present background information, followed by analysis, and concludes with a reflection on the prevalence of Latinidad for Little Village community members. First, I frame the research in the context of Latino Urbanism and urban design. Then I present the history and present state of the Little Village neighborhood as an immigrant

neighborhood and Mexican American enclave in Chicago. Next, I highlight how locals have created a sense of place aesthetically along with how locals experience community in these spaces. Finally, I conclude by emphasizing the role of latino heritage in creating a sense of community in Little Village. The research concludes La Villita Park is the primary location that creates a sense of community in Chicago's Little Village.

## **Literature Review**

### *Essentials*

A few conceptual frameworks are applicable to the Little Village neighborhood, including the ideas of community, place-making, New Urbanism, Latino Urbanism, and Barrioization. These concepts in urban studies and planning help identify the typology of an urban neighborhood with a predominantly latino population, like Little Village. Understanding the implications of these concepts will aid especially in identifying pieces of the built environment especially apt to build community.

Across the literature, there are many terms thrown around to describe the overall idea of making people feel part of something larger, or a community. The idea is that physical and social environments can shape the way an individual feels part of a larger group. In this case, Little Village residents feeling part of a Little Village community. This phenomenon where place connects to a sense of belonging is often referred to as a sense of community. This sense of community represents the strength of bonding among community members (Townley 2010). The process of placemaking (Schneekloth 1995) is a mechanism where people and specific spaces create a sense of community. Common cultural identity can enhance a sense of community as

community members can relate to one another through common experiences and upbringings (Townley 2010).

Understanding these questions starts with defining community, as well as essential concepts recurring across this paper. In urban studies, generally, community implies a connection to others through circumstance, networks, or beliefs (Chaskin 1997). Communities can form around common identities, memberships, use of space, and more. A workplace where staff share common spaces, work towards a collective goal and regularly interact can create a community, but spaces without any physical interaction, such as communities on the internet can also form. Generally, building community emphasizes the connections between people within their locale (McMillan 1996). This paper focuses on how people who live in a defined geographical area interact with each other and the built environment to develop a feeling that they are part of a community.

In forming community, planners often refer to the process of place-making. When people interact with each other and their environment, their experiences become tied with their geographies. Place-making is when socio-spatial relations bond individuals through a physical space (Pierce 2011). Place-making is a tool to create community by creating common experiences of place and feeling users develop towards each other within their geography (Friedman 2010). Place-making leads to social cohesion, by tying people to a place, and making that place more familiar, friendly, and evoke a feeling of home. Additionally, place-making is common in the dimensions of planning as a way to engage local citizens to work to create new spaces or re-invent existing places to better serve their needs. The work of this paper places

heavy emphasis on the existing places in the neighborhood that are markedly factors in the building of community.

New Urbanism posits that the neighborhood is the most essential building block of the city, and should be the focus in many planning and design issues, as these areas are where people spend the bulk of their time. In new urbanism, street design is crucial to the formation of public life, as the street itself is viewed as a public space, where the mixing of people occurs in movement, commercial transactions, and casual use of space on the street. In order to maximize this mixing of people, mixed use buildings are called for, as they encourage people to use the street. Additionally, parks and natural spaces also provide modes for people to connect to each other and nature, building a sense of community (Leccese 2000).

The philosophy of New Urbanism is present in many new developments across The United States, but its principles are also already present in many towns and cities. The tenants of New Urbanism promote a communal spirit and sense of community in local residents (Lucka 2018). Commercial corridors are existing spaces in the city that fit within the New Urbanist framework. They are clusters of mixed use development busy with pedestrian traffic, and oftentimes are aligned with transit routes. While these spaces encourage people to mix, interact, and engage with their built environment, design factors do not alone create community, but they can encourage a sense of community to take hold (Talen 1999).

These ideas within New Urbanism point to streets like 26th as especially able to foster the connections needed to contribute to building community. The commercial corridor runs through Little Village, home to businesses and homes, and pushes traffic through the

neighborhood on a daily basis. Along with the streetscape, any parks and natural greenspaces in the vicinity will also be magnets for the formation of community.

Specific to the ethnic makeup of Little Village, Latino Urbanism and Barrioization inform the way Latinidad itself contributes to the formation of community in Little Village. In short, Latino Urbanism looks at how urban form changes in an effort to create social interactions and transactions more familiar to latinos (Talen 2012). This typically manifests with principles aligned with New Urbanism, where the street and public space the nexus of these processes. Additionally, the physical appearance of the neighborhood is influenced by Latino Urbanism, often manifested as common themes amongst housescapescapes, including typologies, decorative ornaments, color choice, and more (Arreola 2012). Barrioization is the process in which a neighborhood becomes a barrio via the concentration of Latinos in the area. A barrio type neighborhood is associated with latinos feeling a sense of ownership and belonging in the neighborhood, creating a cultural identity leading to more cohesive spatial identity, economic integration, and governance empowerment (Irazábal 2008). Barrios protect cultures of origin, and are attractive landing points for latino immigrants. Barrios are generally recognized as areas with more than 50% latino populations within census tracts (Sandoval 2012). While these conceptions are helpful, they are also challenged by pushes to move towards many “ethno urbanisms” (Irazábal 2012) that are specific to their site and people. Barrios are a instances of Latino Urbanism. In the barrio, there is development, commerce, actively utilized open spaces, gardens and a lively street scene. (Diaz 2012). In this way, they are not places for New Urbanism to take root, but places where the tenants of New Urbanism are already in play.

In communities where Latino Urbanism is prevalent, cultural ties are outwardly expressed in the built environment. These neighborhoods have streetscapes reminiscent of countries of origin, with many colonial Spanish motifs, plazas, tiled roofs etc. The streets are filled with culturally relevant businesses, usually with signage in Spanish. Latino Urbanism encourages people on the street (Talen 1999). Since these neighborhoods coalesce after years of changing demographics and urban change over time, they often lack formally planned plazas or markets you may find in a Latin American neighborhood. Latinos adapt and transform their spaces to claim spaces they want to use, since they typically inherit their built environment (Rojas 1999). Without plazas, sidewalks are activated as sites of commerce and informal markets. Vendors roam the streets selling goods from carts. A connection between culture and form begins to manifest (Talen 1999). This paper will show how Latino Urbanism promotes a sense of community in Chicago's Little Village.

### *Little Village*

Understanding the history and current state of the Little Village neighborhood is fundamental in approaching understanding where community is centered. Nestled in the South Lawndale community area, Little Village finds its roots in the industrial history of Chicago. Sprung up as a consequence of forced movement because of the Chicago fire, people built their homes in the area which was once just outside the city. As industrialization crept in, those with means fled the area and it became rich with Eastern European immigrants. South Lawndale has a significant Czech concentration, who filled the neighborhood with businesses and cultural institutions. After World War II, many of these people fled to the suburbs as African Americans moved to North Lawndale, just adjacent to this area. In the late 1960s The University of Illinois

at Chicago was built in West Town, pushing many Mexicans into the neighborhood. Since then, many immigrants of Latino descent (largely Mexican) have come to Little Village to work towards achieving the American Dream. In fact, Little Village has the largest total foreign-born population in the city (Butler Et. al. 2018). However, this population faces problems associated with poverty, discrimination, and environmental degradation. Little Village is also impacted by violence from gang activity (Vargas 2016).

United by common culture, community certainly thrives in Little Village. However, public space is less abundant in the neighborhood compared to more affluent areas in the city. In the search for identifying the physical center of community in Little Village, public spaces like plazas, squares, streets, and parks are common places to look towards. Observing these types of spaces in Little Village, along with interviewing community members and stakeholders will reveal where community is made in Little Village.

Knowing that the community is centered in a particular place we both better understand what matters to community members, have a place to target for engaging community stakeholders with the future of their neighborhood (planning) and can better fund that space as it holds so much importance to the neighborhood. The center of the community can be activated much like Paseo Boricua in Logan Square, and serve as a symbol of refusal to be pushed out of the area (Flores-Gonzalez 2001).

### *Types of Spaces*

Several urban spaces have the potential to be the center of communities. Whether public or private, inside or outside, people create connections and bonds across a neighborhood. To get

Public spaces come in a variety of forms, and have different ownership and ease of access. These spaces are distinguished by their ability to provide a physical dimension for social interactions amongst community members and visitors alike. Existing scholarship cites public spaces as locales where socioeconomic mixing occurs, where ideas are exchanged, and where democracy unfolds. Through the medium of urban space, the priorities of society are revealed, through design and use. This general concept guides the importance of public space as a spot for communities to be made through the mixing of people (Khristova 2018). Public space encourages informal ties between people, and these gathering places became the heart of the community (Lucka 2018). These attributes of public space encourage looking to them for signs of community in Chicago's Little Village.

Within public space, some may be defined as identity space (Talen 2012), or environments that bring together people who have a common identity, that may be cultural or geographic. Public plazas with art or events that are specific to some identity are identity spaces. Some relevant spaces are only activated at specific times by events and festivals that may be held. These temporary spaces provide the setting for fairs and other events that bring the community out to celebrate an occasion, or interact with one another over food or entertainment (McClinchey 2008). Generally, public space is "open to the public, which generates public use, and active or passive social behavior, and where people are subject to the general regulations that govern the use of the space" (Mehta 20). Oftentimes, these fall into the category of third places, or somewhere that isn't work or home where people engage with their community (Mehta). Looking for these third places, where people spend their time away from personal lives and professional lives reveals where the community may grow. It's important to note that different

people will perceive different spaces as community gathering places, as every individual is influenced by their residency status, class, and attitudes.

Third places are those where people spend time that is neither work or home (Oldenburg 1982). These are centers of leisure activity (Yuen 2017), and can have public or private ownership. The best third places bring people together and foster connections within communities, and sometimes reach outward as well. Third places can be cafés, restaurants, libraries, or other fixed establishments where people tend to frequent. As casual hangouts, third places may host events that encourage traffic, or interaction amongst guests. In other cases, the shared experience of simply being in a common location may be sufficient to develop community bonds, like seeing the same people daily where you get your morning coffee. In Little Village, many of the businesses and centers that may be third places provide culturally relevant goods and services, such as panaderias (bakeries).

Arts also support a sense of community (McMillan 1996). Whether public murals make a space more inviting or art spaces for the creation of art, these parts of the city can foster community. Art spaces are a semi-public forum for community engagement through practice and observation of art. Public Art spaces use art to connect people to place (Pachenkov), fostering difficult discussions on the state of the community, or simple everyday interactions by getting people together to do art (Grodach 2010). The arts are a key player in the long term health of a community, as the arts can encourage creative place-making, where locals are engaged with the process of changing the built environment to build a sense of community (Schupbach 2015). Little Village has an array of murals throughout the neighborhood, especially on the commercial

corridor. These public spaces with art are likely to be more trafficked and utilized by community members, and in any case can highlight the values of community members and their cultural ties.

Streets are public spaces that are often ignored for their social qualities. By moving people through an area, pedestrian traffic can encourage social interactions. Sociable streets are where the street is in constant use in a multitude of ways, both neighborhood residents and visitors use this subset of streets. A sense of belonging is fostered by a good street, in this way, the street can very well be a place where community is made (Mehta 2013). This feeling of belonging can come from a variety of place types, from businesses to plazas, and is echoed throughout the literature on good public space and evidence of community making.

Urban parks are phenomenal public spaces that achieve connections between people and nature, along with people and others. Considering Chicago's status as "the city in a garden" derived from its latin motto "urbs in horto" the inclusion of parks in the cityscape is commonplace. Generally, parks are gathering places for people that bond people and provide a democratic space. Parks often have so much importance that citizens get involved with creating public greenspace to improve their quality of life (Hyden 2016). In Little Village, this process of local citizens fighting for a park recently unfolded, and a brownfields site once home to manufacturing has been transformed into a large park known as "La Villita Park." Even with this development, parks are scarce in Little Village compared to neighborhoods in the north side of Chicago or those with easy access to the lakefront.

### *Actors*

Locals, developers, and government are the major actors in the development of public space, and with it, the development of community. For developers, the public realm is often

secondary to the development of a new building or complex, its left as an afterthought, impacting its utility (Madanipour 2010). In recent years, responsibility has especially shifted to the public to take charge of their places and guide the future of public space in local contexts (Lepovsky 2003). In the case of a latino neighborhood like Little Village, this usually means a model that resembles the cultures of peoples home countries. In this way, a foreign place becomes familiar and inviting (Irvine 2012). While the responsibility has shifted, resources have not. As such, there are opportunities to build place but not space (Lepovsky 2003). This unveils itself as places become used or modified by locals, but the capital to transform spaces largely fails to exist. The city expects people to perform activities in the name of civic engagement, a passing of duty to people, but the power isn't fully aligned (Lepovsky 2003).

Business owners are also major players in the creation of community. As economic drivers, businesses create job opportunities that support the local economy. Additionally, local business owners that are immigrants or local residents, also provide goods and services that promote the culture of a community (Schuch 2015, Lui 2014). The choices businesses make with their signage and products influences how people interact with their businesses and the larger neighborhood. Signage, music, or window displays are especially prevalent tools available to business owners in influencing the neighborhood aesthetic. These factors are especially pertinent in immigrant and minority businesses, where languages and aesthetics are specific to specific cultural groups , like Mexicans in Little Village.

### *Similar Studies*

Previous investigations on the built environment's role in creating community have taken a variety of approaches to the topic. Overall, through various methods, studies have looked to

assess the built environment for places that foster community, and relied on the experience of community members to understand how people engage with the built environment. Many studies specifically study neighborhoods with dominating cultural heritages or changing demographics.

Looking at other minority communities, interviewing community members is a common approach to understand how locals interact with the built environment. In a study on Little Saigon in Westminster, CA: architecture, social interaction, and events in the neighborhood are the basis for better understanding the neighborhood. This study then takes observation of the physical environment, participation in the community, and interviews, plus supplementary archival material to gather data on the neighborhood (Mazumdar). Another study of Little Saigon utilized interviews of users of the main commercial corridor to understand how an ethnic business center creates a sense of community, eventually concluding the ethnic urban village provides employment for newcomers, sanctuary for older folks, and cultural connections for youth (McLaughlin 2002).

Cultural heritage is a prominent characteristic social sciences researchers study in examining neighborhood sense of community. In the case of majority latino areas, Latino Urbanism develops and creates a sense of community. Looking at Latinidad in the city, many studies have used the built environment and resident interviews to understand Latino Urbanism in context. Through visual documentation and landscape study (Arreola 2012) along with participant observation, news archives, and informal interviews (Lodoño 2012) researchers glimpse important attributes of the built environment along with experiences associated with spaces.

In a review of the literature on community, mental maps are seen as an excellent way to understand the concept of neighborhood, and understand how individuals perceive their community (Chaskin 1997). In a criticism of how developers take to “improving cities” one researcher looks to community members, through conversations and observations as the data for his critique of centering investment in downtown areas (Montgomery 2016). An anthropologist calls ethnography to best understand a place, stating the ethnographer is to “consider how she or he is emplaced, and her or his role in the constitution of that place” (Pink 2008) in order to fully understand a community. Elements such as design characteristics, or morphological patterns are called for to measure the public realm from a design perspective (Talen 2000).

Urban design has been the subject of many studies unpacking how to create better communities. Design may not create community outright (Talen 1999), but well thought design can encourage residents to use their civic spaces and have interactions and develop community. The formal characteristics of the built environment from street patterns to storefronts and building heights can encourage movement, comfort, and familiarity to a place. In a comprehensive study of urban design focused in Chicago, Emily Talen and Sungduck Lee analyze design factors like housing mix, lot size, civic space, and connectivity to see how design impacts social diversity (Talen 2018). Notably, design can promote inclusion, which applied to this study, encourages residents to feel part of a larger community.

Takeaways from these studies are vast, but for the most part localized studies provide localized solutions and conclusions. There is a call for the study of other ethnic enclaves (Mazumdar 2000) and an overall call for research on community making (Talen 1999). This paper seeks to leverage existing scholarship on public space, and connect this to the community

in Little Village. This work searches for built space that is symbolic of the community being built and maintained in the predominantly latino neighborhood.

### *Relevance of Study*

This examination of community building in Little Village develops the understanding of a single Chicago neighborhood, as it faces pressures of gentrification in a constantly changing urban environment. This minority community is a gateway into the workforce and larger community for many Mexican (and other latino) immigrants. As market based approaches that currently exist are large power structures that influence how public space develops, for who, and why (Madanipour 2010). This research will inform the places in Little Village that should be enhanced for the community, and protected from influence by looming development pressures. As public spaces should be equitable and participatory in nature (Madanipour) this study will identify where these spaces exists in Chicago's Little Village

### **Data & Methods**

This research relies on empirical data in the form of observations and interviews. The data collected pieces together a detailed understanding of the physical and social world of Little Village and reveals where this community is made in the built environment. Informal Interviews provide personal narratives along with delineated answers for where community is built, observation will unpack how community is built across the neighborhood, while other data provides context to the neighborhood generally.

### *Interviews*

Interviews were conducted in three segments, along with a brief survey of demographic information. The first portion focused on preliminary and straightforward questions, the middle used a mapping exercise, and the tail-end was an open ended conversation to create a narrative where stakeholders were invited to tell the story of their involvement with spaces, and the building of community in Little Village. Interviews were conducted with Little Village residents, customers at local shops and visitors. This mix of respondents aims to capture residents who may commute to other parts of the city, those whose economic well-being depends on the Little Village community, as well as those engaged in making the neighborhood stronger and more resilient. 11 interviews were conducted over a month, typically lasting around 15 minutes each. Interviews were chosen in an effort to gather personal anecdotes, and fuller descriptions of how spaces are engaged by community members. Due to COVID-19, less interviews were conducted than anticipated. With a smaller sample size, this paper now relies on few interview responses to make claims, but rather inform the lived experience in Little Village.

The first section relied on a set of questions asking respondents what community means, how community is developed, where community is engaged, the types of community gatherings, and led to an exercise asking respondents to identify Little Village's community center on a map. The latter part of the interview dived deeper and was more open ended. Leading questions centered on personal connections to the identified center of community, and invited respondents to tell the story of their involvement with spaces, and the building of community in Little Village. Interviewees were also asked how the space could be better, and what an ideal space looks like.

Table 1 - Interview Structure

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Part 1 (Understanding of Community)	<p>What is community to you?</p> <p>Where are community events?</p> <p>Where do people hang out?</p> <p>What types of events engage the community?</p>
Part 2 (Mapping Exercise)	<p>Where is the heart of community here in Little Village?</p> <p>Can you label it on this map?</p>
Part 3 (Engagement with Community)	<p>How have you engaged in the Little Village community? How do you serve the community?</p> <p>What communities are you a part of in Little Village? Chicago?</p> <p>What do you do in the place you picked? What is special about it? Does this change seasonally?</p> <p>Can the space you identified better serve the community? Are there alternatives?</p>
Demographics	Age, gender, race, education level

The interview data especially focuses on finding the physical center of the Little Village neighborhood, searching for an answer to where placemaking and the creation of a sense of community manifests in the neighborhood. Responses from the mapping exercise were used to produce a map visualizing these findings. The locations people identify as where community is made influenced places to observe more carefully.

### *Observation*

As an observer, immersion into the Little Village community informs the makeup of the community, and the mixing and movements of community members, along with the architecture of the community. In-person observations detail how community members interact, where people spend time, and what people do in different spaces. Observations include those on physical settings, social interactions, public events, and commerce. Specifically, observations recorded form, accessibility, aesthetics, activities, sociability, comfort, ownership, and control. This breaks down the use of identified spaces, the number of people occupying the space, what they are doing, and mechanisms controlling the environment (fences, operating hours, etc). These observations were conducted across Little Village, especially across the 26th street commercial strip and area parks, across 7 instances in the winter of 2020. This information was used to assess the physical state of community space in Little Village. Focusing on public space, community organizations, and third places contributes to a better picture of where Little Village residents mix and engage with one another, and how the built world can encourage community making.

Additionally, more general observations on architectural trends in the neighborhood provide an overarching idea of how cultural identity manifests into the built environment. Language in signage points to dominating cultures. The placement and content of murals and public art demonstrate cultural values. Types of architecture that are referential to other regions, and are atypical of Chicago show ties to architectures of other places. Imposing architectures like those of heavy industry and the correction facility in the area push oppressive structures onto the

community. These architectural elements are important to understand how the built environment influences the sense of community in Little Village.

By coupling observations of these spaces with interviews a rich description (cite) of centers of community, and the social interactions in these spaces was produced. Its on the basis of these observations and interviews that 26th and Albany was identified as the physical center of community making in Little Village. Looking at Little Village as a case study informs the larger goal of this research to identify where the community develops within an urban neighborhood.

#### *Case Study Location*

This study is centered in the Southwest Chicago Little Village neighborhood because of its ethnic makeup and distinction as a highly Mexican urban neighborhood. There is a general lack of inclusion of Latinos in the planning literature, so this paper works to shed light on these communities. Many other neighborhoods studied in research on Latino Urbanism is grounded in places that more closely fit into the category of suburbs. Additionally, research again and again looks towards communities in the Southwestern United States, and occasionally near New York City for their abundant Latino populations. The midwest lacks representation in the literature, and the neighborhoods proximity to UChicago makes it a stand out choice. Additionally, other neighborhoods like Pilsen or Logan Square have potential for similar studies, but these communities have been pressured by gentrification in recent years. Little Village provides a case study for a neighborhood not yet significantly challenged by development pressures.

## Results

### *Overview*

Interviews and observation yield aesthetic, social, and spatial answers to how community forms in Little Village. The literature suggests architectural style and social interactions will contribute to creating a sense of community at a larger scale, and suggests public spaces like parks will serve as centers of community making because of their accessibility and tendency to be centers of activities and social mixing. In Little Village, places like [La Villita Park] and [some other place] were frequently cited as centers of community making by local residents. While the park space is aligned with the literature, [place] is more in tune with literature looking at private businesses to serve as third places.

### *Visual Sense of Community*

While the architecture of the Little Village community is typical of greater Chicago, the ornamentation and decorative aspects of homes, as well as distinctive public art contribute to a manifestation of the community's identity as a predominantly Mexican-American community. The neighborhood presents an aesthetic of latinidad. Attributes like color, typography, murals, building material, and other features mirror motifs from Latin America (Lodoño 2012).

Walking along W 26th St, the city comes alive with Latinidad. A commercial corridor, both sides of the street are lined with two to four story buildings home to businesses and some residences. Two lanes of traffic are straddled by street parking and wide sidewalks. The corridor is busy with the traffic of passing cars, meandering pedestrians, and the occasional #60 CTA bus.

Establishments lure in customers with loud spanish music, the smells of fresh tacos, and windows filled with vibrant merchandise. Everything here is catering to a latino demographic.



Figure 1 - Bienvenidos A Little Village

Coming from the East, motorists and pedestrians are greeted by a prominent archway (Figure 1) spanning the width of W 26th St. The arch reads “Bienvenidos a Little Village” welcoming visitors to the neighborhood. Adorned with banners representing the Mexican flag, the arch signals the connection between Little Village and Mexico. The arch is reminiscent to those in many pueblos across Mexico, with characteristic stucco adobe walls, and red terracotta tiled roofing. These Spanish architectural elements recur across the cityscape in Little Village (Figures 2&3). These features are all additions and adornments, evidence of modification of

existing infrastructure to reflect the architecture and forms locals are more familiar with from places they have lived before immigrating to Chicago.

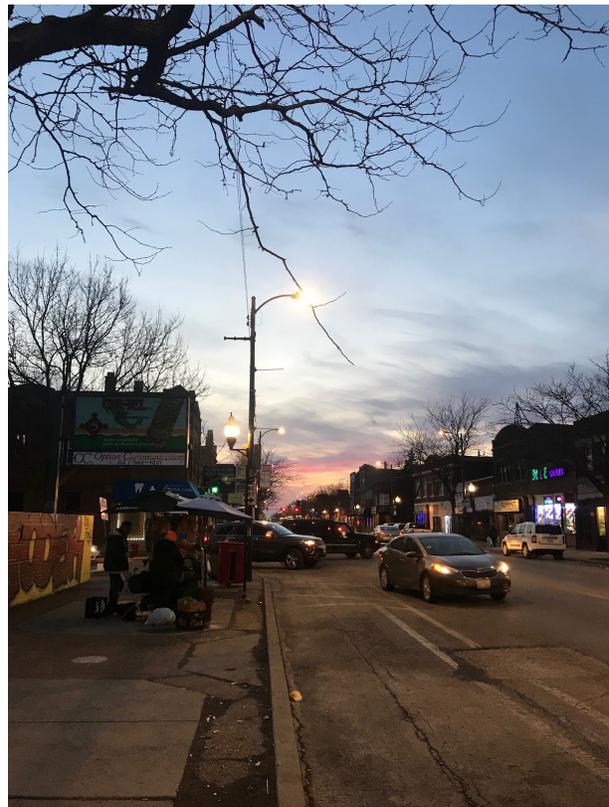


Figure 2 & 3 - Spanish Texture on 26th Street

The Little Village sign is written in spanglish, reflecting the linguistics of the built environment in the area. Most businesses advertise their goods in Spanish, while labeling themselves in Spanish as panaderias, zapaterias, groceria, and the like. These Spanish market types simply reflect the product types they sell, but highlight the dominance of Spanish language and latinidad in the neighborhood. Spanish signage is dominant, putting English in second place, only really used by chain establishments.

Besides fixed buildings and businesses, many entrepreneurs use public space across the neighborhood. While this type of commerce isn't very common in other parts of the city, in Little Village you can find vendors selling goods off carts, their cars, and mats on the sidewalk (Figure 4). The most common informal vendors are those selling fruits out of mobile carts (Figure 5). These *fruterios* set up shop along W 26th St, offering fresh cut fruit, with the option to add Tajin

or Chamoy, some spicy seasonings. While not permanent parts of the built environment, these businesses crop up along the entire W 26th St commercial corridor. Four separate times I surveyed how many there were and counted an average of 8 vendors scattered about. Many had small crowds of customers waiting to order, and some lingered nearby consuming their purchases.



Figures 4 & 5 - A Fruit Vendor on 26th St, A pop up market on the 26th St sidewalk

Many facades across Little Village are painted in vibrant colors, with detailing reminiscent of Spanish architectural forms. Additionally, murals and tiling are a common strategy to showcase latinidad. Illustrative tiles adorn many buildings, with whimsical patterns lining storefronts (Figure 6). At least 26 murals are scattered around the neighborhood (Ballesteros 2019) touching on many social themes, many fulling art from Mexican and latino

artistic motifs. One of the largest murals in the area covers three stories of a corner building (Figure 7), focused on themes connected to the Mexican holiday of Día de los Muertos. The paint is colorful, and skeleton figures dominate the piece. Marigolds and candles are included, and the mural commemorates dead ancestors of the Mexican community. Other murals contain figures like La Virgen de Guadalupe (Figure 8) and a couple in traditional folk dress (Figure 9). The themes and symbols explicitly connect to Mexican heritage.



Figures 6, 7, 8, & 9 Tiles and varied murals across Little Village

Observing the use of Plazas and Public Space created a deeper understanding of the types of activities users of the spaces in Little Village performed. The most active space was La Villita park, with countless users over the course of the observation period. The sidewalks of 26th Street and Piotrowski park were also notably used public spaces in the area. The below chart (Table 2) highlights the various features of public spaces across Little Village.

Table 2 - Little Village Public Spaces

<p>La Villita Park</p>			<p>Type: Park</p> <p>Location: 27th &amp; Whipple</p> <p>Features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Skate area</li> <li>- Many ball fields</li> <li>- Basketball courts</li> <li>- Seating</li> <li>- Landscaping</li> <li>- Field House</li> <li>- Playground</li> </ul>
<p>Semillas de Justicia</p>			<p>Type: Community Garden</p> <p>Location: 28th &amp; Troy</p> <p>Features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Garden beds</li> <li>- Fenced in</li> </ul>

<p>Manuel Perez Plaza</p>			<p>Type: Plaza</p> <p>Location: 26th &amp; Kolin</p> <p>Features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Trees</li> <li>- Seating</li> <li>- Tables</li> </ul>
<p>Piotrowski Park</p>			<p>Type: Park</p> <p>Location: 31st &amp; Keller</p> <p>Features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Seating</li> <li>- Ball Fields</li> <li>- Landscaping</li> </ul>
<p>26th and Avers</p>			<p>Type: Pseudo Plaza</p> <p>Location: 26th &amp; Avers</p> <p>Features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Wider Sidewalk</li> <li>- Seating</li> </ul>

Little Village Academy Playground		Type - Park Location: 26th & Lawndale Features: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Field</li> <li>- Playset</li> </ul>
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La Villita Park is by far the most busy community space across the neighborhood. On any given day residents walk through the vast complex, and many practice their sports on the sprawling fields. The basketball courts buzz with pickup games, skaters shred concrete, and children clamour about the playsets as their parents watch on from a distance. Many set up shop on benches scattered about the park, and some sit on the grass enjoying picnics. Occasionally vendors pass through, offering goods like churros and elotes for purchase. Most appear to be among families or friends, with the most mixing happening on the playground and in the skating section. The space is immense, bordered by residences to the west, commerce to the north, industry to the south, and the Cook County Jail to the east. This unique position places the park in an awkward position, and the fairly new vegetation fails to fully seclude the park grounds, after all the park is only a few years old. The starkest contrast is between the open ball fields where youth play games against the background of an immense correctional facility. The green fields clash with the large metal fences, and monolithic structures signaling isolation and exclusion. The jail is a symbol of the violence that plagues the community, and the culture of mass incarceration that has a physical presence to community members.

While Manuel Perez Plaza seems like a great candidate for a vibrant public life, its location on the western edge of Little Village puts it in the periphery of most activity in the neighborhood. A few people loiter in the space, but at most three people were in the space at any point of observation. It is full of open seating, and an extensive tree canopy, but it fails to attract users. It's interesting to note the plaza is painted red white and blue, and ode to the US as opposed to a nod to Mexican ties.

Piotrowski Park is a large area also home to the Little Village Skate Park. The area is most notable for the skate park, the busiest subsection of the complex. A handful of skaters are regularly around, and some other people can be found meandering through the park's trails. Over 4 observations of this space, nobody was ever playing any games on any of the ball fields. While on a busy traffic street, the park is isolated from any commerce, and a thick tree canopy makes it appear secluded from the main thoroughfare (31st St).

The community appears to center around the eastern edge of 26th Street, rich with commerce, street vendors, pedestrian traffic and a major Park. The physical environment in Little Village provides many spaces for people to spend time in the public sphere. At the same time, Spanish language signage and architectural styles taken from Mexican tradition reflect the cultural ties of the Little Village community. Together, these aspects create a built environment that fosters a connected community of immigrants in this Chicago neighborhood.

### *Social Life and a Sense of Community*

Interviews have gleaned stories of the importance of social life in Little Village. Being a community of immigrants, social ties create a strong network of support for community

members. These ties are primarily in the private realm, but public events bring much of the neighborhood to celebrate a common culture. Both types of sociability influence how community is made in Little Village.

Little Village is home to many street festivals across the year, including Festival de La Villita celebrating Mexico's independence from Spain, Taste of Mexico at the start of summer, and Villapalooza in August (Figure 10). These festivals transform segments of 26th street into public space. Vendors line the street, stages get set up for live performances, and crowds of people fill the street. The festivals are very popular, and several informants note that they attend these festivals every year, bringing their extended families out to enjoy the summer days and the cultural food and music. These festivals were noted as chances to get out of the house, try out food from new restaurants, and enjoy good music. Many say they don't interact explicitly with other families, but do enjoying sharing a common experience, and camaraderie around Mexican heritage.



Figure 10 - Mural advertising Villapalooza

Carla, a young woman, noted that Little Village has been her home for all her life. She now raises her daughter in the neighborhood, just as her parents did. La Villita Park was her favorite space in Little Village, and she noted that she prefers its proximity to her home, and the crowds it attracts. She feels it's a great space to spend time outside while her daughter enjoys the playground. However, Carla noted the Discount Mall as the heart of the Little Village community. She emphasized the shopping center's location in the neighborhood as valuable, and its products as relevant and inexpensive, and "you can't get these things anywhere else." Many of her friends and family who live outside of Little Village come to the community to shop there, and she has met many friends to shop at the Discount Mall. For Carla, the volume of traffic and the relevance of goods and services is what makes a space a community center.

Skaters are a common sight across Little Village, especially near the skating parks within La Villita Park and Piotrowski Park. One local skater, Andrew, is a teen native to Little Village. He says the skate community is what he loves about Little Village, so the natural heart of his community is at La Villita Park, where he can practice his moves, and hangout with his friends. He also notes that La Villita Park is valuable because of its array of facilities, and on nice days many families come to the park, and during the spring and summer its especially busy when children have sporting events.

While it wasn't growing season during the interview, an older woman, Olga, noted that she has been involved with the community garden adjacent to La Villita Park. While in the winter the space is not active, she was enamoured by the ability to come together around food,

and grow her own crops. The Semillas de Justicia garden is run by Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO). Olga appreciates the space as an enjoyable activity, that yields valuable food, and the work that LVEJO does to organize the community and fight for a better quality of life in the city.

Most respondents noted that they really feel at home in Little Village. They love having their food, their art, and their language represented in the neighborhood. Carla noted that you don't get that in many other parts of Chicago. These anecdotes from community members show how social events and social ties influence a sense of community in Little Village.

### *Hotspots of Community Making*

At the center of this project, is the question of where community is made in Little Village. After interviews with residents, and a mapping exercise, La Villita Park is most commonly identified as the center of the Little Village neighborhood (Table 3). Additionally, spaces like 26th Street and Semillas de Justicia have notable roles as places for gathering, community engagement, place-making, and organizing. The mapped observations are tabled below, counting the locations identified as hotspots of community making.

Table 3 - Mapping Exercise Results

Place	Instances
La Villita Park	5
Latinos Progresando	2
Semillas de Justicia	2
26th Street Commercial Corridor	1

The map shows 5 different places identified as centers of community making by local residents. The majority of spaces chosen were public spaces, but many a couple of private businesses and one community organization were also identified as centers of community. The variety of places seen as centers of community making reveals the preference of individuals for different place types. Both public and private spaces can serve as places where community can grow.

## **Discussion**

While Little Village is a culturally vibrant community, most literature on the community focuses on the history of the neighborhood's immigrant populations (Magallon 2010, Necoechea 2015), the violence present today (Vargas 2016), or the environmental injustices plaguing residents (Butler et. al. 2016). In contrast, this paper explores the cultural strength of Little Village, as seen through the built spaces that bring residents together, and build a sense of community. This paper takes Little Village and engages with people and the place to figure out how the Chicago neighborhood creates a sense of community. This knowledge can then be leveraged to organize community members, improve living conditions, and maintain its unique identity.

Through assessment of the built environment and personal stories on community in Little Village La Villita Park was most commonly identified as a place where community is made. This

public area is complete with open space, seating, and vegetation, creating a valuable social space for community to grow. This park is constantly activated by everyday interactions, occasional high profile community events, and recreational sporting tournaments. The lively activities held on this site make it a center point of the community, bringing people together for all sorts of reasons.

Most people identifying this public space as the center of community making is anticipated by existing scholarship. Public spaces are frequently valued for their roles as places for engagement and mixing. A link between public space and sense of community is expected (Talen 2000). Specifically, public open space has a positive impact on community (Francis 2012) so it makes sense that people view park spaces like La Villita Park as having a central role in developing a sense of community.

Beyond the everyday, cultural events are often held in the public sphere (McClinchey 2008). These public places like 26th Street are used for events and festivals like Villapalooza. These cultural events bring the neighborhood together, and are central to the creation of community in Little Village.

However, other spaces including Latinos Progresando and the Discount Mall were also identified as centers of the Little Village community. These spaces are privately owned, but operate in a pseudo public manner. These types of establishments are expected to be centers of community through the lens of the New Urbanism. These third places (*Oldenburg 1982, Yuen 2017*) are broadly defined as spaces where people spend leisure time that is not work or home. They are successful community spaces because people want to spend their free time in these

places, and their social environments along with them . These places cater to locals, offering relevant services like organizing and activism in spanish at Latinos Progresando, and distinctly Mexican goods at the Discount Mall

Third places can be anything from bowling alleys to zoos. Regardless of ownership, what makes a space a third place is its value to users as a place for leisure activities. Often, these places also function for events and gatherings that are more intentional. As such, it makes sense that a community organization like Latinos Progresando or a community garden like Semillas de Justicia are central to community-making according to locals. This is in line with the phenomenon of place-making (Schneekloth 1995), where establishments like these are recommended in tandem with public plazas for developments that will create a sense of community in a neighborhood, while also creating space for local businesses (Walljasper 2007).

La Villita Park as the center of Little Village aligns with the literature that predicts a public open space to play a substantial role in place-making. This reinforces the value of public space and its role in providing physical space for communities to come together, making connections, becoming closer, and understanding one another. Latinos Progresando and Discount Mall as alternative centers of community making in Little Village align with another set of literature that looks to private spaces to fulfill the need for gathering spaces in urban areas. In having public and private epicenters for community making, the complexity of personal preferences, importance in diversity of spaces within the built environment comes to light. Both of these place types work for a common purpose, and will continue to shape the future of communities like Little Village.

## *Culture & Sense of Place*

Cultural ties are also critical to the formation of community in Little Village. From Spanish language signage, culturally specific businesses, and architecture evocative of a cultural history all manifest latino culture into the physical environment. Cultural events bring people together across the neighborhood, and especially to the 26th Street commercial corridor. Meanwhile, businesses like Discount Mall bring relevant products, and create visibility (Schuch 2015). Immigrant businesses like these create community-level cohesion (Lui 2014). These types of third places both create interactions, and support a local economy that frequently also employs local residents.

## *Limitations*

The spaces found to be centers of community are limited in the scope by the actual engagement of locals with their immediate community in an age of digital hyperconnectivity, where many commute to other areas of the city, or have closer ties to other neighborhoods than their own. Additionally, the scope of this study was limited in its sampling of people, due to the inability to interview locals in the wake of COVID-19. With only 11 individuals interviewed, generalizations on the whole community are impossible to claim. However, this sample size was reached because in later interviews the same places were being identified. There are also limitations as this focused on ties to the wider community, rather than looking at possible familial and friendly ties that may lead people to see family or friend residences as the center of their own Little Village. More interviews should also include members of local community organizations and businesses for their perspective on the Little Village community.

### *Further study*

This specific case study of Little Village reinforces the idea that third places and public space are a nexus for local community making. At the same time, the legibility of the neighborhood's culture contributes to the sense of community. This case study can be interpreted to other similarly situated urban neighborhoods, and provides specific places for more intimate scholarship on placemaking. Further scholarship on community making and its value generally would prove very helpful in providing direction for investment in the creation and maintenance of spaces like those identified in this study.

### **Conclusion**

This paper investigates where a sense of community is created in Little Village. La Villita Park, Semillas de Justicia community garden, and Latinos Progresando were identified by local residents as centers where community is made in Little Village. This demonstrates the capabilities of public space and private space to both work in bringing people together, creating connections, and ultimately make people feel part of a larger community. Additionally, from an aesthetic and general perspective, the outward latino character of 26th street significantly contributes to a sense of community in Little Village. This research provides better ideas of spaces that matter most for communities, as well as a better idea of how community manifests in the built environment, specifically in a latino majority neighborhood.

Through the case study of Little Village, this research provides guidance for the preservation of a strong sense of community in this Chicago neighborhood. Spaces like those identified along with others similar can be targeted for investment to enhance the spaces and

create other spaces that use these as a model. Further research on these specific places or their place types can help develop a more full understanding of how these spaces create community. Additionally, similar studies applied to other neighborhoods, both similar to and different than Little Village would be useful in finding broader trends in spaces that foster community. Studies on sense of community and its importance more generally would also be beneficial in giving importance and meaning to the study of community making.

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