

**Redefining Gentrification in Chicago's West Loop:  
How Commercialization Transformed a Desolate Meatpacking District into  
the City's Trendiest Consumption Destination**

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## **Abstract**

Gentrification literature focuses on a causes and consequences framework, with the displacement of residents being its key tenet. But what happens when private capital suddenly saturates a space that was never meant for residential functions? In this research paper, I explore the processes that drove growth and transformation in Chicago's West Loop, transforming the neighborhood from a once desolate meatpacking district that solely served industrial purposes into Chicago's consumption destination, where major streets are lined with high-end restaurants, retail, hotels, and Fortune 500 companies. Through in-depth interviews with West Loop stakeholders and participation in community meetings, I discover a tension between two groups of people who disagree on the extent that gentrification defines West Loop's transformation. The first group of people do not believe the West Loop gentrified because there was nothing and no one to displace. The second group of people believe that West Loop has and continues to gentrify because there are people still being driven out by sky-rocketing property values and taxes. I theorize that the West Loop's development was precedent on processual commercialization, instead of an explicit causes and consequences framework of gentrification. In my analysis, I discover that rapid commercialization in a space not originally meant for residential functions results in population transience and inadequate public resources and physical infrastructure to support the increasing residential density. Consequently, West Loop is increasingly resembling a consumption destination where community building capacities are limited.

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## Introduction

“Meat, drugs, and prostitution. That’s what the West Loop was known for even 10 years ago. Meat, drugs, and prostitution,” the Executive Director of the West Loop Community Organization recalls. Today, a West Loop mother says “the West Loop is definitely urban, becoming more and more family centric, with daycares everywhere. We have tons of Michelin star restaurants. Great parks but tiny sidewalks. It’s maybe one of the most expensive neighborhoods to live or be in the nation.”

Comparing these two sentiments, it is clear that the West Loop’s rapid transformation paved a once industrial, desolate, meatpacking and commercial warehouse district into a millennial’s haven, a neighborhood where one’s workplace at a Fortune 500 company and the country’s most reputable restaurants are all within walking distance of their luxury apartment buildings. Perhaps this is just another case of gentrification - inside and outside of academia, there is a ubiquitous narrative that defines gentrification: affluent populations displace lower income, working class populations. Ruth Glass poignantly coined this term in 1964, as “an invasion of the middle class - upper and lower... Once this process of ‘gentrification’ starts in a district it goes on rapidly until all or most of the working class is displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed.”<sup>1</sup> Particularly outside of academia, a simplified depiction of gentrification presents key consequences as escalating land values and exclusion of lower income classes from rooting themselves in these neighborhoods. There is a clear cause of gentrification: economic development coupled with residents pursuing certain taste preferences.

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<sup>1</sup> University College, London, Centre for Urban Studies, and Ruth Glass. 1964. *London: Aspects of Change*. London: MacGibbon & Kee.

Similarly, there is a clear consequence of gentrification: the displacement of original residents in those spaces.

However, in-depth research into the multitude of mechanisms that drove changes in the West Loop suggests a processual framework of ongoing transformation, rather than a case of clearly defined causes and consequences. Today, gentrification studies have generated abundant scholarly attention, especially as young adults continue to propagate a back to the city movement, preferring to live in high density urban areas than the suburbs<sup>2</sup>. Chicago is no exception to experiencing gentrification and the case study for this research paper, West Loop, located in the Near West Side community area directly West of the Chicago River, has been cited as an area with the highest rise in average income from 1990 to 2014<sup>3</sup>. However, it is important to note that rapid income growth is not always the dominant explanatory variable for gentrification. The forces that encompass gentrification have altered over the years, but the central tenet of gentrification has rarely wavered from its focus on the displacement of residents.

Chicago's West Loop, however, as an industrial district throughout the mid-19th to later-20th centuries did not originally have residents to displace. This research paper, focused on Chicago's West Loop, addresses the question "what happens when private capital suddenly concentrates in a space that was never meant for residential functions?" My research attempts to situate West Loop's developmental patterns within traditional and contemporary notions of gentrification. Simultaneously, it also discovers gaps in existing scholarship that provide

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<sup>2</sup> Lee, Yongsung, Bumsoo Lee, and Md Tanvir Hossain Shubho. "Urban Revival by Millennials? Intraurban Net Migration Patterns of Young Adults, 1980–2010." *Journal of Regional Science* 59, no. 3 (2019): 538–66. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jors.12445>.

<sup>3</sup> McClell, Edward. n.d. "Where Is Gentrification Happening? Follow the Mayors." Chicago Magazine. Accessed December 11, 2019. <http://www.chicagomag.com/city-life/April-2019/Where-Is-Gentrification-Happening-Follow-the-Mayors/>.

opportunities for intervention where residential displacement in a neighborhood was not an early indicator for gentrification. I discover that there are two groups of people who feel very differently about labeling West Loop's development as a process of gentrification. The first group of people are those benefiting from the neighborhood's commercialization to varied capacities and the second group of people are those who felt they were disadvantaged or feel pessimistic about the West Loop's trajectory.

My research attempts to build upon the central tenet of gentrification being displacement of residents and city as a growth machine theory while also challenging the contemporary idea of a need for the creative class to drive urban growth. Freeman (2016) describes 21st century gentrification being largely driven by the influx of young, highly educated white people into central business districts and their consumption patterns that support private amenities. While many neighborhood change studies focus on the influx and outflux of demographics, West Loop is a case of the change in businesses and not necessarily people. Abundant with Michelin star restaurants, yoga studios, and Fortune 500 companies including McDonald's global headquarters, Facebook, and Google since the 2010s, West Loop's once-known reputation as Chicago's meatpacking and warehouse district has been transcended as a hot and trendy consumption destination.

West Loop also captures the broader "return to the city" movement that involved scores of people and businesses leaving the suburbs and heading back into the city after a mid-20th century trend of flight to the suburbs. Uniquely, West Loop's case may not necessarily be one of neighborhood change, but rather, neighborhood creation. Because West Loop lacks adequate residential roots from the past century, I will be investigating the consequences of neighborhood

creation in a space that was never intended for residential functions. I will also examine how its recently developed identity as a consumption destination could create a positive feedback loop into catering transient and affluent clientele. Ultimately, I find how West Loop navigates through the numerous obstacles presented by commercialization in providing necessities of residential life for a neighborhood that was never built for residential life, how policies influence this growth, and what this might mean for neighborhoods that rapidly attract capital investments without paying adequate attention to providing public amenities and fostering an organic sense of community.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Currently, urban neighborhoods research is abundant with studies that involve a neighborhood's relationship with health, crime, education, and gentrification, just to name a few. This research will examine the West Loop through the scholarly lenses of neighborhood development and gentrification in particular. Although Ruth Glass (1964) originally coined the term "gentrification" in 1964 to describe the process of an upper-class gentry displacing lower class residents, that same term has become muddled with nuances in contemporary discourse. Since Glass's concept of gentrification, there have been multiple debates over what gentrification really entails and how the processes have changed over time. Primarily, academics have debated the costs and benefits of what gentrification brings to different groups of people and ultimately, whether gentrification is a "savior" or "destroyer of central city vitality" (Atkins, 2016).

First, I will discuss how initial academic notions of gentrification revolved around the displacement of the working class by middle- and upper-class white populations. Contemporary studies of gentrification have challenged the more simple, traditional mold by providing more in-depth economic and cultural analyses of gentrification processes. Despite the various

developments and alterations made, scholarly consensus around gentrification being a force that displaces residents has always been retained. Using Molotch's city as a growth machine theory to situate West Loop's case, I find that the nuances of West Loop's development does not explicitly adhere to displacement of residents as the key starting point of change. Instead, my findings question the West Loop's compatibility with existing gentrification literature and presents itself as a deviant case to rethink gentrification when its neighborhood creation origin is a result of a displacement of businesses instead of residents. I will further explore how West Loop's processual growth in its commercialization highlights a subsection of gentrification literature that is inadequately studied. The conflicting narrative between people who felt that commercialization was necessary for West Loop's growth and those who feel that only an exclusive population benefits highlights the ill-defined processes and that gentrification cannot be understood through a lens of clear causes and consequences for this study.

### *The City as a Growth Machine*

To appropriately situate the West Loop into larger urban sociological theory, it is important to highlight Harvey Molotch's city as a growth machine theory as a prominent model for urban growth. Molotch's (1976) city as a growth machine theory states that the "economic essence of virtually any locality, in the present American context, is *growth*." Molotch argues that land use parcels are driven by human economic interest, in which actors compete for parcels of land and then the real estate of the land reflects this competition. Therefore, real estate interests are extremely important drivers of urban land use and heavily affects the rate of urban growth. Molotch further argues that governmental bodies assist in achieving growth at competing localities. Because I am studying what happens when private capital suddenly



saturates a space that was never meant for residential function, the value of real estate and the consequences of real estate competition are highly relevant concerns.

### *Early Ideas on Gentrification*

Broadly, gentrification literature has been based on a discussion of the haves and have-nots and how those with more capital have pushed out those with fewer resources. The conversation has been largely politically and economically driven, aptly summarized by Clay's (1979) argument that reinvestment and rehabilitation of inner-city housing by upper class members of society created a private market for these practices, subsequently pushing out the working class. Henig (1980) defines gentrification as private market decisions producing displacement but suggests that the true lengths of displacement might be overstated in studies, by finding that the displaced typically tend to relocate within the same tract. His overall claim conveys a message about an overdramatization of gentrification as a massive assault on the urban poor. However, the process still aggravates economic and racial disparities and produces traditionally segregated ethnic enclaves even within a neighborhood that may appear integrated (LeGates and Hartsman, 1987). In a previous study of gentrification-caused displacement, LeGates and Hartsman (1982) found that the typical in-mover moves from within the city, a young adult, white, and belongs to the upper-middle income class. Their research also provided new ways of thinking about those displaced. While out-movers were conventionally portrayed as white, poor, blue collar workers, LeGates and Hartsman identified a much more diverse range of out-movers that even includes upper class residents. Even though they provide a more unconventional way of thinking about the people moving in and out of gentrifying

neighborhoods, their case for gentrification still heavily depends on displacement being the dominant driver of that process.

### *Contemporary Discourse on Gentrification*

While traditional gentrification scholarship had greater focus on the simpler notion of working-class displacement out of a neighborhood, contemporary gentrification explores factors that are specific to economic and cultural capital. Through this transition, contemporary gentrification has stepped out from being a localized process into one that encompasses global, national, and city dynamics (Hyra, 2012). However, contemporary gentrification discourse still largely agrees with more traditional definitions that a large proportion of in-movers remain educated millennials, aged 20s to 30s, moving to city centers to be closer to their jobs (Hwang and Lin, 2016). This movement is accompanied by a back to the city movement, also known as the “March of the Millennials” to the city center as journalists have described (Chang, Tucker, Goldstein, Yates, 2013). Ley (1980) was one of the first academics to capture the beginnings of urban gentrification and found that changing tastes among the “new” middle class meant this group of people preferred the amenities of central city living rather than the quiet suburbs. During this time, many workplaces also relocated to central business districts to appeal to the skilled labor force that favored urban centrality over the suburbs (Edlund, Machado, Sviatschi, 2016). Consequently, urban policies favored investment into these central business districts so that amenity rich urban centers could attract creative classes (Baum-Snow and Hartley, 2016; Clark, 2011).

This rise of the creative class, coined by Richard Florida (2002), is the argument that cities can no longer compete economically by simply attracting workplaces or investments for

downtown developments. Rather, to capitalize on the new economy, cities must garner strategies to attract a creative class such as bohemians, gays, youth, and artists in order to spur further economic development in the city. Thus, it is important for gentrification models to grapple with both demand and supply side explanations to more fully comprehend the multifaceted agents that drive neighborhood change (Brown-Saranchino, 2010). New analysis of gentrification must further incorporate social values such as the valorization of urban art and cultural constitutions (Zukin, 1987).

With broadening notions of what gentrification truly entails, scholars have become even more divided and uncertain about what is even appropriate to label as gentrification anymore (Brown-Saranchino, 2010). Dramatic rhetoric of gentrification's consequences aside, gentrification scholarship has established that the increasing cost of living that follows gentrification pushes out lower-income residents in favor of areas they can afford (Anderson, 1990; Davidson, 2008; Ehrenhalt, 2013). Even when the study of gentrification incorporates multiple new dimensions of economics, politics, and culture into the conversation, displacement remains a central tenet of gentrification (Billingham, 2015).

### *Gentrification and Placemaking*

When a neighborhood is newly established, what are the processes that institutionalize or legitimize their identities? Exploring placemaking literature for the West Loop is relevant in the sense that people are currently struggling to grapple their sense of place within the West Loop. Rather than placemaking, West Loop community organizers prioritize place branding but it is still too early to tell whether these efforts are sufficient to yield a larger sense of place and community are successful.

In conversation with gentrification and neighborhood revitalization, researchers have been particularly paying attention to public spaces, how people form them, and how public spaces are constantly evolving alongside the technological modernization of the city. Webster (2007) suggests there is a problem reconciling the demand for public space with the supply. The issue of property rights for public spaces between land owners, developers, financiers, and consumers positions public space into a competitive creative industry. He explores the urban designer's role and private developer's role in shaping the public space's essence, but neglects to look into the actual people who occupy those spaces. However, this research is reminiscent of findings I've gathered in the West Loop, where interviewees discuss businesses and design facades as being more prominent drivers of an identity than the actual residents.

Martin (2003), on the other hand, leverages neighborhood organizations that portray activism as the main mechanisms that foster neighborhood identity to obscure social differences. She describes that they do so by creating "place-frames" by describing the physical conditions of a neighborhood as well as ongoing daily life activities. These "place-frames" inform how activism occurs at different spatial-levels but fails to consider businesses as being included in her idea of a "neighborhood organization". Mehta's (2011) research on small business and the vitality of main street expanded understanding of how small businesses provide social value to the street and public spaces as a result of four qualities of small businesses: uniqueness, engagement, friendliness, and responsiveness. Meltzer (2016) also studied specifically small businesses and how they are impacted by gentrification. She finds the gentrification produces mixed results for different types of businesses. Although there is frequently a dichotomous

rhetoric associated with gentrification, she finds that no more businesses are displaced in gentrifying neighborhoods than non-gentrifying ones.

The space of commercialization in gentrification literature has not been adequately researched either, which is where my research on the West Loop hopes to add the most value. Research that is available is mostly confined to ethnic studies, which are not as relevant in the West Loop. Simpson (2008) explores how Portuguese colonial presence in Macau influenced cafes becoming an integral component of social fabric and how the increasing presence of global brands such as Starbucks further commercializes the cafe industry. In the Philippines, the linkage of a commercial economy to village-level social developments did not necessarily lead to a breakdown of indigenous communities and discovered that agricultural commercialization is possible on local levels and does not have to inevitably result in large-scale market economies (Lewis, 1989). In the United States, Smajda and Gerteis (2012) examined how increasing commercial values in Boston's North End began to challenge that area's ethnic boundary as an Italian community. They find that commercialization does imply a simple weakening of Italian roots in the North End, but ethnicity was now in a stage category of divergence. The closest research on neighborhood commercialization that resembles this study was done by Jeffrey Parker (2018) in research two attitudes of gentrification that pervade Wicker Park, Chicago. He asserts that merchants support gentrification if it helps their businesses while repudiates gentrification if it disrupts the neighborhood's aesthetic quality. Regardless, Wicker Park merchants orient themselves to Wicker Park's reputation as a hipster neighborhood in forming attitudes and making consequential decisions.

## *Interventions*

Circling this literature back with the city as a growth machine theory of urban growth, West Loop as a place undergoing neighborhood creation seems to appropriately fit this mold put forth by Harvey Molotch, even 40 years later. As a result of private capital and investments spearheading development in the area, I argue that the consequences of gentrification for the West Loop resembles a very top-down process, akin to the city as a growth machine theory, thus will be studying its gentrification with a top-down lens. Although Richard Florida's rise of the creative class argument sets a more contemporary precedent for gentrification literature, the absence of a clearly defined creative class in the West Loop somehow muddles Florida's theories. But perhaps restaurateurs are carving space for themselves in the category of the creative class, which could highlight their immense capability in cultivating identity, even if it's through private means. Thus, the West Loop strikes itself as a deviant case in that its identity and changes and the processes involved in creating the neighborhood have been aided through commercialization, which has been an understudied space in gentrification scholarship.

The West Loop further complicates notions of gentrification when considering that the central tenet of gentrification, displacement, is not thoroughly present in the process of becoming the hot and trendy neighborhood it is today. West Loop could not explicitly be a tale of gentrification because there were not any residents to displace in the first place. Overwhelming gentrification scholarship critically examines the displacement of people, but in the West Loop, the neighborhood could not begin creating itself until entire industries were displaced from the area. The data collected in this study has further confirmed uncertainty over how to exactly label West Loop's development story. If it is not a story about some clean cut version of gentrification

and neighborhood change, perhaps it is a story of neighborhood creation through commercialization.

Clearly, urban sociology literature is saturated with research on gentrification, displacement of populations, neighborhood placemaking efforts, and urban culture/identity. However, there is a dearth of neighborhood literature that focuses on private capital-backed creation and the displacement of businesses, rather than people. My research will provide a nuanced understanding of approaches to thinking about neighborhood change, how it seems that a neighborhood could purely exist as a consumption destination without much active efforts of placemaking, and the consequences this ultimately holds for the people who do live in the neighborhood. I attempt to blend early and contemporary gentrification discourse to examine how the West Loop clashes or conforms to Molotch's city as a growth machine model as well as Florida's critical theory of the creative class being pivotal to urban attraction and growth. While pieces of gentrification literature explains a part of West Loop's change and development, the absence of initial residential displacement has fostered circumstances in which the West Loop is now playing a game of perpetual catchup between public functions and private amenities. I am cautious about making generalizable conclusions, however, and will be careful to not extrapolate my claims beyond what my findings mean strictly for the West Loop.

### **Data**

The boundaries of the West Loop are generally considered to run from Grand Avenue on the north to I-290 on the south and from Ashland on the west to the Chicago River on the east. Even within the West Loop, there are distinct districts that exist within the boundaries. A

visualization of these districts is provided below. Generally, my data has been focused on the highlighted areas with emphasis on the Fulton Market District:

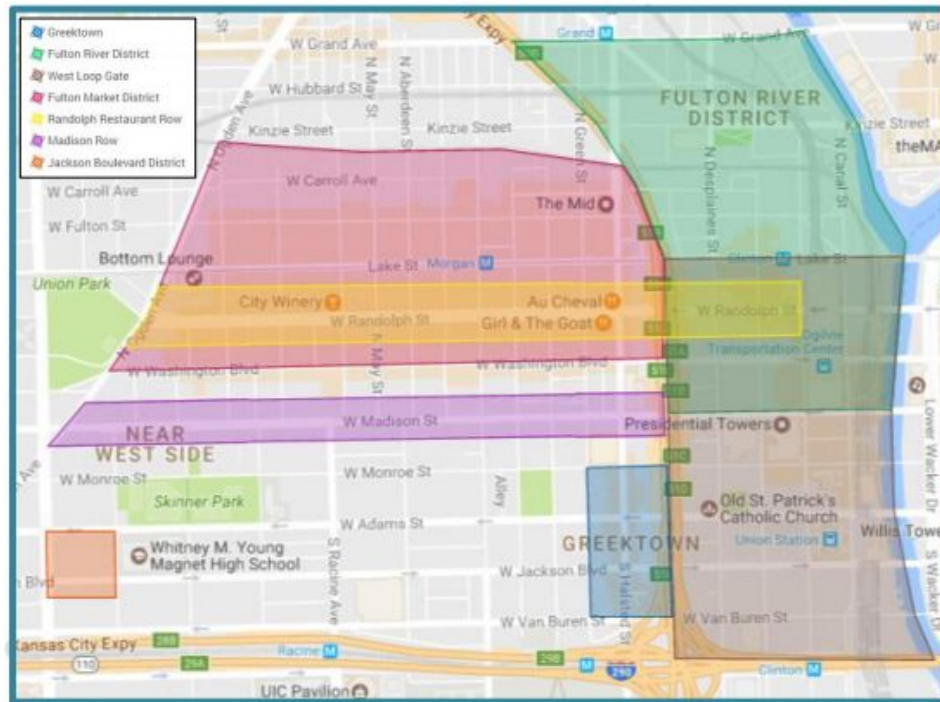


Figure 1: Existing West Loop neighborhoods and historical districts  
*Source: Neighbors of West Loop*

My research question tackles the case of neighborhood creation and the consequences of rapid growth in a space that never had a residential base. Though West Loop was known for its meat, drugs, and prostitution even just a decade ago, today it carries the distinct identity of being trendy, hip, and bustling with the hottest restaurants, bars, and major corporations. I collected data through interviews and observations at community meetings. Several methods for interview recruitment included networking at West Loop Community Organization meetings, referrals and word of mouth, and cold emailing. I have interviewed 18 individuals, received one email response, and sat in on three community organization meetings for a current total of 21 data pieces.



This change from x to y could not have happened overnight, although this seems like the case in many Chicagoans' minds. Consequently, it was important for me to recruit interviewees who have lived in the West Loop for both several decades and several months and everything in between. Those who have been in the West Loop for many years could enlighten me on the timeline of changes they've seen and how they perceive the neighborhood today versus when they first came. Those who have been in the West Loop for significantly less time could enlighten me on what brought them to the neighborhood and the challenges they perceive for the neighborhood at this moment. I initially recruited my interviewees broadly because this case involves many different organizational actors, from community organizers to residents to small business owners to commuters, among others.

It was important for me to achieve balance and variation in people's relationship to the neighborhood among my interviewees to initially gather a historical context and identify patterns for this case of neighborhood creation. This case does not just focus on one organization actor, whether it be small businesses or residents, so I wanted to gather a holistic context for West Loop's growth. My respondents ranged from individuals who simply lived in the West Loop, those who lived and/or worked in the neighborhood, owned businesses, or were actively involved in community improvement. Accordingly, some of my interviewees have included a restaurant owner, the president of a West Loop developing company, church employees, and community organization workers. Each respondent has provided a different sense of the West Loop they perceive and have all noted various "turning points" they believe catalyzed change in the neighborhood. Collecting data on these turning points has informed me what interests different community stakeholders and the communities (or lack of) they feel a part of during this

rapid growth. The holistic overview helps me perceive a more impartial story of who is most advantaged/disadvantaged from these developments. Additionally, I am part of two official West Loop community Facebook groups which provides tremendous insight into how residents talk about the neighborhood, what their unfiltered concerns are, and it keeps me updated on new developments and closings.

Though I conducted a few interviews in person, most of them were over the phone because of mutual convenience. A typical interview lasted from 30 minutes to an hour. Unsurprisingly, those who had more experience in the neighborhood had longer interviews. Several themes have emerged from the interviews conducted and most of these fall under two broad categories of “change” and “conflict”. Under change, corporations, restaurants, population, socioeconomic demographics appear as variables. Under challenges, rising costs, homogeneity, traffic, lack of community cohesion, and transience appear as variables. These variables have revealed how gentrification and commercialization continue to manifest on different levels, with mixed reactions to each change.

## **Methods**

Based on previous ethnography research and in consultation with Sociology Ph.D. students, I created a prospective interview guide to structure in-depth interviews. The questions addressed respondents’ attitudes towards past (“how has West Loop’s challenges changed over time), present (“how would you describe the West Loop to someone who’s never been there”), and future (“how do you see the West Loop’s identity changing”) circumstances in the neighborhood. Before each interview, I offered respondents the option of remaining anonymous or being identified by actual name, most of which agreed to the latter. All interviews have been

digitally recorded and transcribed through two artificial intelligence softwares, Otter.ai and Temi. I have edited the transcriptions for quality assurance purposes and stripped them of any identifying information, unless interviewees provided explicit permission to remain identifiable. I have also created a master spreadsheet that helps me analyze all of my qualitative data in one place to get a better sense of comparison without having to flip through tens of pages of transcriptions. Each row represents the individuals I interviewed and each column corresponds to interview questions that I asked in every interview. These columns include the interviewee's relationship to West Loop, how they describe the neighborhood, changes, challenges, identifying features, important organizations, discrepancies between external vs internal perception, key moments, as well as miscellaneous notes. This spreadsheet has helped me organize my thoughts and see emerging patterns better than actually hand-coding my data. Outside of these interviews, I have found several journalism articles that cover West Loop's developments as well as Facebook posts in the West Loop community groups that are highly relevant to my research.

### **Neighborhood Overview**

To provide an overview of the West Loop to a reader unfamiliar with the neighborhood, I begin by presenting demographic changes the neighborhood has undergone. In 2000, the West Loop (identified by its 60607 zip code) had a total population of 15,552 people<sup>4</sup>; in 2018 this number nearly doubled to 29,592 people<sup>5</sup>. In 2000, West Loop had a median income of \$40,972<sup>6</sup>; in 2018 this number shot up to \$93,508<sup>7</sup>. In 2000, West Loop had a White only population of

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. Population Density, 2000. Prepared by Social Explorer.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. Population Density, 2018. Prepared by Social Explorer.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. Median Household Income in 2000. Prepared by Social Explorer.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. Median Household Income in 2018. Prepared by Social Explorer.

47.63%<sup>8</sup>; in 2018, it was 58.17%<sup>9</sup>. In 2000, West Loop had a White only population of 47.63%<sup>10</sup>; in 2018, it was 58.17%<sup>11</sup>.

Jim, who owns a sandwich and deli shop on the West Loop’s “Restaurant Row” recalls the days he would drive a forklift down an empty street when he was 10 years old. This was in the 1990s, when the West Loop contained “unsavory characters” but also no shortage of the bustling meat and produce markets. Another man, who worked in the same office space in West Loop for 35 years, remembers the area as “depressed, shady, and dilapidated”. Sidewalks would be littered with bloody puddles from meatpacking activity and alcoholics passed out in front of buildings doors. After all, in a neighborhood that was almost exclusively populated by warehouses and meatpacking plants, where the life of the neighborhood closed up shop by 3 pm in the afternoon, what else would one expect? Some church employees at West Loop’s Old St. Patrick’s church, residing in Chicago’s oldest public building, recalls when some of the streets used to be cobblestone and Old St Patrick’s used to be a “destination church” because nobody lived in the West Loop. Today, Old St. Patrick’s faces the challenge of continually adjusting their local mission and visions to adapt to the West Loop’s ever evolving and transient residential population. This was the world of West Loop before the introduction of hefty real estate investments and global capital that have commercialized the neighborhood into a consumption destination. To the people who spent at least a couple decades in the West Loop, it was “country beyond what is here now” and “completely different universe” from what the West Loop has transformed into today.

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<sup>8</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. Race, White Alone, 2000. Prepared by Social Explorer.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. Race, White Alone, 2018. Prepared by Social Explorer.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. Race, White Alone, 2000. Prepared by Social Explorer.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. Race, White Alone, 2018. Prepared by Social Explorer.

Today, newspaper articles and real estate pitches are quick to describe the neighborhood as urban, trendy, hip, filled with cutting-edge restaurants - an emerging neighborhood bustling with millennials and empty nesters. In a November 2019 poll where members of the “True West Loop” Facebook community group were asked about their favorite thing about the Fulton Market, 86 people responded “restaurants”, 32 people responded “the history”, and 25 people responded “living close enough to walk and enjoy, but far enough to avoid the noise.”<sup>12</sup> In this new era of development booms and the exodus of global headquarters fleeing the suburbs and into the West Loop, its grimy history seems to have been quickly displaced, though it’s still pertinent enough for some residents to acknowledge its role in shaping the neighborhood. The physical facades of a meatpacking district era still remain, however, with the Fulton Market District instituting a design facade to preserve the neighborhood’s historical design integrity for purely aesthetic purposes. On a five minute walk around the Fulton Market, one will pass the newly established Time Out Market, featuring Chicago’s top restaurant vendors, Google, a full service bar salon, and no shortage of concrete barriers and traffic cones to physically mark construction sites. It’s hard to imagine that the same streets were once decorated with bloody puddles. In-depth interviews with various organizational actors of West Loop present conflicting accounts of “overnight” development and the impact it’s had on different stakeholders in the neighborhood. The primary challenges that West Loopers are grappling with at the moment seem to be private development outgrowing public space, price instability, transient communities, and the sustainability of West Loop existing primarily as a consumption destination for affluent populations without much focus on placemaking efforts.

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<sup>12</sup> “True West Loop: What Do You like about Fulton Market?” Accessed February 12, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/truwestloop/permalink/2540165082897345/>.

## The Transition

What were the processes and key moments that drove the rapid change and development into the trendy, hip, urban destination that West Loop is known as today? My interview respondents with different stakes in the community had very different responses to this question. To the business owners, they saw Girl and the Goat as putting Randolph Street on the map, spurring an introduction of Michelin-star restaurants to target West Loop as the new “place to be”. Others mentioned Harpo Studios which opened in 1990, where Oprah’s fame similarly placed West Loop on the map for tourists. Organizations like the Randolph Fulton Market Association view the opening of the Morgan Green Line stop as momentous for helping the West Loop feel more like a transit-oriented, pedestrian friendly neighborhood. Employees whose offices are in the West Loop have mentioned that the Post Office conversion produced a ripple effect for subsequent office conversions in the area.

Despite this variation, the 1996 Democratic National Convention stood out as a repeated response among respondents with the longest connection to the West Loop. A Director of Real Estate for a company in the West Loop said, “what really kind of charged the genesis of the development or the activation of the place itself was the Democratic National Convention in 1996. And so the city of Chicago and the mayor’s office wanted to create kind of like a gateway from the expressway to the United Center.” The West Loop alderman similarly mentioned:

*After the Democratic Convention in 96, a lot of things happened. We put the planners up on our streets, we tore down a lot of abandoned buildings. And we kind of spruced up the place for the nation, for the world. Once people started seeing that activity, investment started to come. People started turning buildings into residential areas.*

The “people” described above were the early investors who purchased old warehouse buildings, tore it down, and built homes. These accounts complement West Loop’s “official” history, as documented on the Neighbors of the West Loop website, which also lists Harpo Studios, Restaurant Row, the 1996 Democratic National Convention, and post-recession developments as key turning points that spurred the changes in the neighborhood<sup>13</sup>. The measures were effective in generating corporate presence and continue to be influential. As of 2010, 42 companies have acquired at least 10,000+ square feet of office in the West Loop<sup>14</sup>.

All of these factors, coupled with a trend for millennials to live in high-amenity urban areas, contributed favorably for the West Loop’s geographic proximity to the Loop in spurring an inevitable pattern of urban development. The West Loop then launched into becoming its urban own growth machine. The exodus of businesses that once occupied warehouses and old buildings prompted unparalleled potential for carving a new identity into the region. City officials and private developers actively channeled this potential by implementing tax increment financing (TIF) that would support building new spaces for retail and residential developments. However, these proposals and processes were not as thoughtful about creating public spaces, which were not already present due to the manufacturing district that used to exist.

Depending on the stakeholder, West Loop has multiple origin stories, none of which invalidate the other. However, if one were to walk around the West Loop today, one would notice an abundance of high-end restaurants and retail as well as prestigious corporations. They may also notice the lack of green space within the neighborhood. It is important to take note of

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<sup>13</sup> Neighbors of West Loop. “History of the West Loop.” Accessed February 12, 2020. <https://neighborsofwestloop.com/about-us/west-loop-history/>.

<sup>14</sup> “Neighbors of the West Loop Neighborhood Plan,” August 2018. <https://neighborsofwestloop.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/DRAFT-NoWL-Neighborhood-Plan-20180813-1.pdf>.

these discrepancies to highlight challenges that will follow in subsequent sections. Despite multiple origin stories, the real estate marketing and publicity that surrounds West Loop will largely discuss its newest restaurants and global quarters. The rapid transition from meatpacking district to consumption destination has neglected open discussion about basic public amenities, such as parks and schools, that its residents would like to see.

There is no clear start and end point to this transformation, nor is there even one transformation to track. The West Loop's development has been marked by processual turning points that each created its own legacy. The decline of the meatpacking industry in Chicago created vacant land that developers and city planners saw as an opportunity to re-assign the area's purpose. The 1996 Democratic National Convention was a catalyst for institutionally creating precedence for attracting residents and post-industrial businesses. Families and small businesses of diverse variety started establishing their roots in the 2000s because land was an affordable investment. Similarly, many art galleries were located in the West Loop during this time and private developers capitalized on their presence and the perception that these art galleries were re-branding the West Loop into a "hip" and "cool" place. Corporate headquarters, hotels, bars, restaurants, and high-end retail increasingly occupied refurbished warehouses in the 2010s. In 2015, the city of Chicago granted the Fulton Market District (highlighted in green on the map on page 15) landmark status, which recognized important historical elements and facades of the West Loops that must continue to be memorialized in future developments.

Development is far from complete. Since assuming his position in 2017, the Associate Director of the West Loop Community Organization oversaw and continues to oversee 52 development projects. He says that the developments have been moving westward, so while the



eastern portion of West Loop is slated to be more or less completely developed by 2022, that gentrification as a cultural and market force continues to shift westward.

## **Analysis**

The associate director's sentiment that the West Loop is a place of polarity and dichotomy succinctly describes the two groups of people differentiated by their attitudes towards the West Loop's changes. The first group is those who operate with the narrative that gentrification never happened because there was nothing and no one to displace and people who did leave left with generous payouts from the property they sold. The second group includes people who believe that gentrification in the West Loop started with the commercialization of restaurants and retail in the 2010s, leading to higher rents and property taxes, which drove the first early businesses and residents out. Though there is sufficient tension between respondents' attitudes towards the extent that the West Loop's growth has manifested through gentrification, there is mutual acknowledgement that private capital has guided more of this growth than public assistance. Gentrification literature assumes displacement of residents as a defining mechanism, but it does not take into account cases where rapid urban growth occurs in a neighborhood that did not have a residential base to begin with. I argue that processual commercialization might be more appropriate language to describe West Loop's transformation rather than gentrification. Processual commercialization is the pattern of development that emerges from this tension and accommodates both sentiments that West Loop did or did not gentrify.

### *The Effects of Commercialization*

It is entirely possible that the West Loop existed for commercialization purposes from the beginnings of its redevelopment, rather than create a community-based neighborhood.

Residential community did not ever appear to be much of a stronghold, even when the earliest residents were moving into the neighborhood. I interviewed Olivia, whose parents bought a condo in the West Loop in the 90s, who claimed she “didn’t really have any neighbors because there was so much house flipping.” She never felt a sense of a community while growing up because she was the only kid in the area. Many of the challenges she faced at that time “were more of just trying to make it through, it felt rural because it felt like no one was really looking and if somebody was, nobody really cared.” Even though the West Loop presented itself to the city as a “second chance to do neighborhood creation”, the effort did not reach its potential because land speculation was present from the very start. Many of her neighbors during her childhood were people who weren’t from Chicago and found the area to be a perfect investment opportunity because of the vacancy and its geographic proximity to the Loop. This could imply that few people intended to establish their “roots” in the West Loop, initializing difficulties to orient a strong sense of community. The West Loop’s creation was precedent on commercialization over community and Olivia believes that “the West Loop” was a brand created purely to commercialize the space and strategically market the neighborhood to real estate investors. Growing up, home was in the Near West Side for this woman. She realized people were calling her home neighborhood “the West Loop” after returning to Chicago from college. Even though she still considers the West Loop solely as the Near West Side, Olivia can understand why the area has rebranded itself as the West Loop. She explains, “the Loop has a reputation of being safer and more bustling, therefore that association is helpful to sell the neighborhood.”

Commercialization of the West Loop has spurred an abundance of private, commercial amenities and absence of public amenities, creating a conflict between transient versus steady populations who want to establish their roots in the West Loop. Commercial amenities would constitute restaurants, bars, cafes, and other privately-held businesses while public amenities would constitute schools, parks, public infrastructure and any other goods that add public value. When asked the question “how would you describe West Loop to someone who’s never been there before?” a majority of respondents have mentioned the bustling restaurant and bar scene, highlighting a particular “foodie” culture. Furthermore, when interviewees were asked to comment about the community they feel or what they notice about other West Loopers, about half of my respondents have mentioned the word “transient” or a phrase that provides similar meaning. When I asked why to an individual who works at Soul City Church, located in the heart of the West Loop, she said:

*I mean, I would say it's like rising housing costs is probably a big one. I would say not a ton of neighborhood schools. So kids are either at Skinn West for elementary or private schools kind of outside of the neighborhood. I would say because we're close to UIC and the medical district it's a pretty big like transient nature. There are people in and out. So I don't see a lot of people who live here long term and more people who live here for maybe a few years and then move.*

Other people have discussed a lot of people who would come to work in the West Loop and then commute home and other groups who come into West Loop after work to enjoy its nightlife amenities. Due to the high number of destination restaurants and businesses in West Loop in addition to countless offices, thousands of people are flowing in and out of West Loop at different times of the day. From my interviews, it seems like the West Loop’s sense of community and identity appear incohesive. Only Jim, a restaurant owner, was able to claim they feel like they belong to some kind of community, but this is also because he is a restaurant

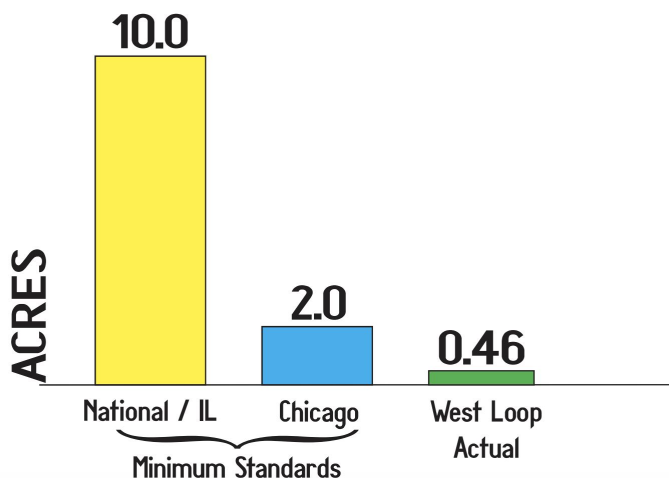
veteran who's been in the neighborhood for three decades. Most others had a difficult time answering "do you feel like there's any identity that unifies West Loopers?". One resident who's been living in the West Loop for 26 years claimed that there's a lot of anonymity in the neighborhood, especially because there are so many individuals who are in and out. However, two residents did claim some semblance of a community within their condo buildings which would host lunches and events to encourage residential interaction. Therefore, smaller communities among condo buildings or business owners seem to be more prevalent than a greater cohesive neighborhood community.

The lack of public amenities might be an explanation for the absence of that greater cohesive neighborhood community. Several people have mentioned the lack of public schools and green space which is understandable due to the infrastructure not originally being built for public uses. The alderman addressed the main challenges of lack of public space to create public amenities:

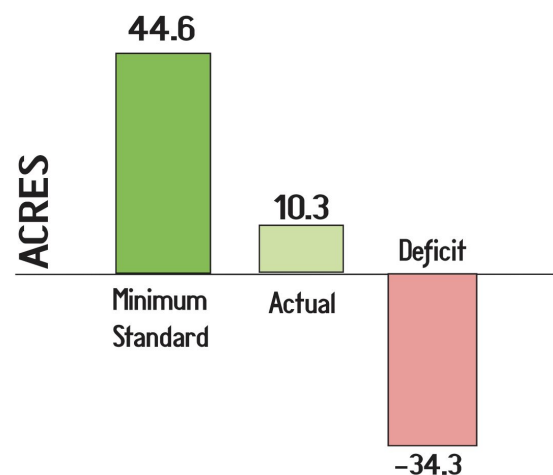
*We built one park and you know now land has become so expensive, you don't have enough land. You can't buy anything over there anymore. Not a lot of public land. We can't really enhance the park we added a track to the park already. So you know, we try to balance out as much as we can, but we kind of missed the boat on on the city acquiring property.*

The numbers prove the alderman's point:

### Open Space per 1,000 residents



### Open Space Deficit



*Source: Neighbors of the West Loop*

The challenge with West Loop is that the space was originally built for warehouse and manufacturing purposes and those spaces have been repurposed into office buildings and retail spaces. However, the influx of global capital in the neighborhood significantly increased property values and severely constrains the amount of public land available for public use. Making more land is not exactly a solution either so the neighborhood is challenged with working with the limited space they have.

Despite internal challenges for residents, the West Loop is thriving as a consumption destination even when it does not have a lot of public value to offer for the residents flocking to the neighborhood. Brandon, who attended high school in the West Loop from 2010-2014, has described the transformation of the West Loop from an area to THE area:

*I would think it's a lot of those high profile restaurants and bars that have kind of made it the area now because I think it went from just being an area to the area where the "higher class", the rich, the fancy spent a lot more of their time. And so I think as a couple of restaurants started to move down there, they saw a very different type of population than has ever been in the West Loop and they've built it up around those few restaurants that move there and it's kind of grown and become that place.*

The West Loop's brute commercialization has fostered the complex issue of trying to create public amenities that are well balanced with the private, commercial amenities that might be sufficient for an empty nester, but not for someone who would want to raise a family in the area. The absence of early community building efforts will significantly hinder present-day efforts to foster a sense sustained residential community, raising concerns over whether the

neighborhood will continue to feel transient and the implications that will have on long-term place and identity building efforts.

### *Predictability Precedes Preparation*

Even with early indicators that the West Loop would be rampantly commercialized, lack of preparation was another theme that emerged from respondents who discussed West Loop's development boom. The absence of measured plans to prepare for growth has created overlapping consequences, all with ambiguous start and indefinite end points, that continue today. An employee of Old St. Patrick's church who's been working in West Loop for 29 years commented:

*It is very different. It's just remarkable, the development and, you know, you could see it coming because the property was just too valuable. It's just too close to downtown, too close to the Lakefront, uh, too valuable to have sat vacant for all those years (in the late 1990s)*

Others have mentioned that the West Loop being a natural extension of downtown generated predictability that growth was inevitable. Additionally, a small business owner who has been in West Loop for 18 years decided to buy property in the early 2000s after noticing tremendous growth in River North and had a sense that westward expansion was the inevitable next step. While these various neighborhood actors collectively agree that West Loop's transformation from dilapidated warehouse district to eclectic urban destination is generally unsurprising, there's also collective agreement that there's a lot of "catch up" the neighborhood is playing, meaning that predictability does not imply preparation.

One of the largest examples of lack of preparedness for this change is the inadequacy of West Loop's physical infrastructure being able to accommodate exponentially growing foot and vehicle traffic. Since the neighborhood was originally intended for manufacturing and warehouse

purposes, West Loop sorely lacked street lights, stop signs, and pedestrian areas. In the last five years that a working mother has lived in West Loop, she noticed stop signs finally going up around her daughter's elementary school after months of them having to gamble with vehicle traffic. The executive director of the West Loop Community Organization (WLCO) further confirms the discrepancy, raising it as a main challenge for the neighborhood to reconcile:

*The way that the streets were designed, they were originally designed to service packers. Now we're kind of working backwards. Now the streetscape was no longer, I guess, purposeful because the intended use was gone and retail, that no longer had the streetscape at the time or even currently, were unusable for the new uses.*

Although her response aligns with many others' indicating the lack of proper infrastructure to support West Loop's growth despite the foresight for development, city planning records and developer perspectives conflict with that story. According to the City of Chicago website<sup>15</sup>, the 1999 Central West Tax Increment Financing (TIF) "intended to facilitate the preparation of vacant and underutilized sites for new retail, commercial and residential development, and off-street parking." It seems that a lot of efforts were focused on what to do with the warehouse spaces available and to make it more amenable to hosting retail. However, the TIF efforts did not invest as much into changing the layout of the streets to make it less for service packers and more for pedestrians. Perhaps this TIF contributed to a precedent of transforming West Loop into the consumption destination that it is today, and while the city provided efforts to commercialize the space, they did not bring as much focus into renovating neighborhood amenities that might better serve residents who live in the neighborhood.

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<sup>15</sup> "Central West TIF." n.d. Accessed December 11, 2019.  
[https://www.chicago.gov/content/city/en/depts/dcd/supp\\_info/tif/central\\_west\\_tif.html](https://www.chicago.gov/content/city/en/depts/dcd/supp_info/tif/central_west_tif.html).

This narrative, however, conflicts with a West Loop developer's account that "what is great about the Fulton Market is it's one of the few neighborhoods that's really a neighborhood where not only you can not only walk to train stations and restaurants but also to work". He praises his own developments as creating a truly neighborhood-y feel due to its walkability but also its unique position of having so many significant economic drivers of the city within walking distance, a true city within a city. Taking advantage of West Loop's easy zoning and density requirements in the early 2000's, he claims to have always planned the neighborhood with thoughtful measures that would truly ensure the transit and pedestrian-orientedness of the area. For the developer, predictability actually meant more preparation because he could be opportunistic about the empty/vacant spaces and lax regulations to create a neighborhood he envisions as a "true neighborhood lined with trees and beauty" rather than the traditional concrete urban jungle he uses as a juxtaposition.

The developer's perspective, however, is in the minority because it clashes with several other respondents who are concerned about how West Loop's growth seems to outpace not only public development and resources, but business as well. When I asked about changes that some residents pick up on in the neighborhood, several of them have mentioned the high turnover of businesses. While some business owners are hopeful about the more affluent clientele and higher volume of foot traffic that they view as tremendous business opportunities, many of them fail to keep up with how quickly rents rise. Others have noted the lack of public transportation options in the neighborhood, despite the opening of the Morgan green line stop.

This additionally highlights another factor in lag preparation despite predictability: city resources. Sometimes, the lack of preparation despite predictability is not a consequence of poor



foresight but because of bureaucratic instruments that significantly hinder West Loop from catching its public sphere to its private sphere. Two interview respondents mildly complained that West Loop's taxes do not proportionally go back into the neighborhood and instead are reallocated to economic development in South and West side neighborhoods. They also highlighted attitude differences between Rahm's mayorship and Lightfoot's mayorship, where Rahm felt proud of West Loop's development and proactively encouraged its growth while Lightfoot characterizes West Loop as an entitled neighborhood with too much cash flow. When speaking with the alderman about these complaints, he remarked that West Loop is the economic engine of the city, thus they have the obligation to help underserved neighborhoods.

Additionally, WLCO's Executive Director told me that West Loop voters vetoed the creation of a Special Service Area (SSA) tax financing initiative in their neighborhood because it would take the residents' personal taxes to be invested back into the neighborhood. The residents are reluctant to give back to the community in this sense because they feel that all of the taxes that should come out of global capital investments should be funding infrastructure projects, not the residents themselves. The clash reveals how progress and preparation is frequently muddled in disagreeing local politics and perpetuates the "catch up" that the neighborhood must play, despite their growth not being unprecedented. There is general agreement that predictability of development does not necessarily underscore thoughtful planning but there is unfortunate inevitability where constrained public resources introduces conflict of whether private development can even be sustainable, posing an interesting case study to watch in the next decade.

### *Is this Gentrification?*

Although academic literature might describe West Loop's rapid development as gentrification, a majority of my respondents seem to collectively agree that West Loop's development patterns do not follow the traditional pattern of "gentrification" because people, in their minds, were not really displaced. In the conversation about gentrification and West Loop, respondents seem to have been primarily focused on the meatpacking plants as the only neighborhood agents who faced potential displacement and repeat a 30 year restaurant owner's sentiment that "nobody was living in the West Loop, so there weren't residents to displace.". So then, one might wonder why the meatpacking plants seemed to suddenly exit the neighborhood in droves in order for global headquarters and luxury apartments to come in. Individuals who have been in the neighborhood for at least a couple decades informed me that the manufacturers chose to leave and were not pushed out. In a conversation with the alderman, who has been in his position for 25 years, he remarks:

*So I think the impetus for them moving out of the neighborhood...well first, we have something in place that protected them, wouldn't allow anyone to move them out. They started making \$40 million on the property and started making an economic choice. Do I hold on to this property or make a million, two million a year? Do I sell this property and make 40 million that another property somewhere else might make my two, three million a year and still put money in my pocket, so a lot of them moved because you know, values have gone up. They saw it as a good opportunity.*

This insight from the alderman presents one perspective to a denial that anybody was pushed out of West Loop and instead argues that the transition was "an evolution of new communities", likening the development to neighborhood creation rather than neighborhood change. A real estate director who's lived and worked in the West Loop since the 1990s also commented that a

community gel didn't exist during the meatpacking era and consequently is unsure whether he can say if there was "true gentrification displacement":

*So what you had from essentially Halsted all the way down to the United Center was a commercial and manufacturing base. You had some scattered like housing and it was pretty much shanty, the place was dubbed the red light district. So you didn't have much housing in this area, in what were dilapidated buildings. I would say to get to the true meaning of what gentrification seems to me is that you'd have to have a community base, you know, kind of a gel. It was all very transient.*

Jim, who's observed changes in West Loop and on its restaurant row for the past three decades, was even more persistent against the narrative that anyone was driven out of the neighborhood:

*There were maybe five to ten cases of people who were actually driven only because they didn't own the property. Back then, it was common for people to own the building their business was in because the property value was worth nothing. It wasn't a big deal to own a building. So now the people who've left, I would say 95% of them left very happy with big bags of money and either never have to work again a day in their life or took a path that helped their business to a completely new level.*

He believes it's inappropriate for a narrative that people were driven out to float around because the people who used to own property in the West Loop departed as very wealthy people. His frustration in the present is that property value has skyrocketed to the point that nationally recognized chains such as Starbucks are more likely to occupy the retail spaces than independent small businesses. One might confuse the arrivals of Starbucks, Whole Foods, and lululemon (where leggings cost an average of \$100) into the area as indicators that the West Loop has indeed gentrified. The individuals who do not acknowledge gentrification as the appropriate force driving change in the West Loop believe so because the businesses that exited the neighborhood chose to do so, nobody else was forcing these people out of the area.

There are clearly conflicting accounts on whether West Loop's transition constitutes gentrification. However, people not as connected to the planning and policy perspective do label the change as gentrification. For example, long-term employees at Old St. Patrick's church remarks how the newer restaurant and nightlife scene drove gentrification. A couple other people explicitly named gentrification as a concern that is driving people out of the neighborhood due to ballooning property values and rents.

However, there is a specific community actor that is often neglected in this conversation: social service agencies and non-profit organizations. A few long-term residents have mentioned that social services agencies like the Hull House and Mercy Home occupied West Loop alongside the meatpackers because the empty warehouses were inexpensive to occupy. Furthermore, these social service agencies were present in the neighborhood because it was riddled with crime and homelessness during the meatpacking era. But as rent started to multiply quickly, these organizations were pushed out of the neighborhood due to their inability to afford rents with their constrained budget. At a West Loop community organization meeting about a hotel-retail mixed use development, a representative from a nonprofit expressed frustration about her office's parking spaces being taken away from them. Although they have not been pushed out yet, the small grievances that these organizations face are still present.

Perhaps the conventional sense of gentrification does not account for organizations, and rather demographics, there seems to be a forgotten agent in West Loop's development story that is still important to acknowledge. As many social service organizations are displaced by businesses that are more catering to higher income clientele, the transition continues to displace diversity levels, which is another issue that respondents have addressed. West Loop's new era of

urban, hip, trendiness has come at the cost of reducing the number of social service and nonprofit organizations available, perpetuating a more homogenous socioeconomic mold of the neighborhood. Perhaps the reduced presence of social service and nonprofit organizations do not explain West Loop's changing demographic, but they could still serve as indicators for how commercialization efforts have prioritized private amenities over social service organizations. Without intentional effort to preserve the remaining social service organizations in the West Loop, this ongoing process of commercialization may displace such organizations because of the inability to afford rent or pay the increasing property taxes.

While interview data may not be independently reliable, the statistics presented in the beginning of the Neighborhood Overview section (page 19) underscores a shifting population base of wealthier, non-minority people. West Loop is still young in its new identity so it would be difficult to assess the consequences of demographic homogeneity, but these statistics nevertheless portray a West Loop that is at least statistically more white and affluent today than in 2000. Even if some West Loopers deny that the process of transition is actually gentrification, its consequences in later phases of commercialization still resemble the surface level consequences of gentrification. This reveals a tension where business displacement does not qualify as a conventional sense of gentrification, yet lower income and non-white populations were displaced in subsequent stages of development. A series of displacements occurred in the West Loop processually. Complication over the argument that residents are not featured as original displacement provokes uncertainty over whether gentrification is the accurate terminology to describe the West Loop's sweeping changes. Thus, processual commercialization might more accurately capture the whole story.

## **Policy Prescriptions**

Some problems identified in the analysis section relate to an issue of “catch up” where public resources cannot always accommodate the growth and demand that private investments generate. Other frustrations that West Loopers raised include the lack of green space, transient populations, traffic congestion, an unfair portrayal that West Loop has limitless cash flow, rampant development, and the absence of consistent placemaking efforts. An emerging pattern from these concerns pertain to the top-down structure that guides this growth which leads to the lack of resident-driven growth. Residents feel there is too much conversation happening between private developers and the community organization and not enough discussion being brought forward to the public. Although the West Loop Community Organization holds community meetings about development proposals to solicit feedback about plans that are undergoing revision, only one or two public meetings are held for each proposal. Representation at these meetings also does not properly reflect the West Loop’s demographics. At one particular meeting, there were only four females present, including myself, out of 29 individuals in the room. West Loopers and anyone else with stakes in this development is always free to convey their concerns to the West Loop Community Organization, but a lack of community-based decision making persists. For example, a Parks Council leader raised frustration that the community fund that private developers are obligated to provide do not actually go directly back into the community. Although transparency has become a buzzword within the public policy sphere, the considerable absence of input from residents raises questions about who these developments may ultimately be for. In a neighborhood as transient as the West Loop, policy must adequately address who are the main stakeholders in the neighborhood. It would make

sense if community organizers felt that people only planning to stay in the West Loop shouldn't have as much of a stake as a long-time small business owner so allocating stakes would certainly stir controversy.

Thus, I propose three policy interventions that all address closing the gap between stakeholders and private developers in hopes of making each significant decision in the neighborhood one that is more community based: (a) hold community meetings that coalesce around non-development issues as much as they already do around development proposals, (b) collaborate with private developers to enhance public spaces, (c) enforce measured growth.

#### *Community Building Meetings*

A frequent issue brought up in the True West Loop Facebook group is residents expressing desire to see meetings organized for non-development related issues. With each development permanently altering the streetscape and landscape of the property they occupy, soliciting and incorporating the residents' true demands and needs should be established as a priority before finalizing any proposals.

However, the neighborhood's transience and a lack of desire to participate in community building efforts that I've sensed from interviews poses a logistical challenge to actually bringing people to these meetings. Three millennials I interviewed for my research all communicated their apathy for participating in community building. When I asked one male in his late 20s why he chose to live in the West Loop he responded, "for me, it's an area that, I know I'll be out with my friends and in close proximity to work since I work in the Loop, it's a 10 minute walk and it's an area that I know has a lot of bars and restaurants in case I ever want to hang out with my friends. Having all those options within walking distance was important". When asked whether they've

noticed any kind of identity that unifies West Loopers, young urban professionals were mentioned once or twice, but they were honest about not being able to provide an answer for any kind of unifying identity. The community organizations in West Loop must maximize their outreach efforts in order to solicit feedback that is appropriately representative of the entire neighborhood, rather than for the 10-20 individuals who show up to community meetings to discuss development proposals. The first step might be creating focus groups throughout different sections of the West Loop and strategizing digital and flyer/sign marketing for these meetings. Outreach efforts must especially capitalize on the stakes involved for each organizational actor in the neighborhood, ranging from resident to business owner to developer.

Just because meetings are organized does not always mean that people will attend them. One woman particularly brought up a desire to see a meeting about increasing crime in the neighborhood. A respondent to that post, who is involved with the Neighbors of the West Loop community organization, responded with a reminder that the community has organized meetings in the past about crime but that these meetings were ultimately discontinued due to low attendance. Several more commented saying they were not aware of these meetings in the first place. Perhaps social media would be a great starting place for outreach. The “True West Loop” Facebook group has 10,400+ members while the “Real West Loop” Facebook group has 3,700+. Advertising community meetings in this space would be an inexpensive method to reach a large volume of West Loop residents.

Surveys should be distributed for West Loopers who do not have time to make it to the evening meetings. The more diverse pool of respondents community organizers can receive for feedback, the more knowledge is collected to assess the community’s true needs. These efforts



will help reinforce communication between key stakeholders, such as the residents, and the leaders making executive decisions. Community leaders must be purposeful about the objectives of each meeting and ensure that data, whether qualitative or quantitative, is collected from each meeting. These would be opportune times to collect concerns about traffic, parking, and other infrastructural concerns.

### *Collaboration with Private Developers*

The alderman that represents the West Loop raised that the key challenge to lack of public space in the West Loop today is that the land is too expensive to use as public domain. During his earlier years serving as alderman for 25 years, he said the city council didn't anticipate the explosive growth that the West Loop would see and "missed the boat on buying property", which is only affordable to private developers at this point. The community should obligate private developers to incorporate ample green space and mixed use functions for street level plans. Recommendations include creating ample sidewalk space around new buildings as well as affordable retail and service options that cater to neighborhood residents. When feasible, street-level development plans should activate the street and sidewalk around the building and integrate these infrastructures into an environment conducive to promoting community. Sidewalk benches, initiatives like Little Lending Library, and public art are just a few examples of "little things that could go a long way". Despite West Loop's increasing residential density, the growing feeling of anonymity that many respondents shared must be at the forefront of developers' minds. If they are truly genuine about creating intentional spaces that benefit the public as much as it raises private capital, developers need to prioritize plans that add public value, such as putting in place the structures for community building.

There is one counter argument, that community cannot be forced, and I acknowledge this is another obstacle that developers must be thoughtful about. However, a couple of respondents informed me that while they don't feel a sense of community within West Loop, they certainly feel it within their condo and apartment buildings. Management would provide free lunches and dinners once in a while as well as activities for kids on the weekends. These amenities bring people out of their homes and gather residents together, forging a level of connection that residents themselves might lack the initiative to forge. If a community is too difficult to cultivate at the neighborhood level, then private developers have the obligation to try to cultivate small-scale communities within their buildings.

### *Enforce Measured Growth*

Another recurring concern brought up at West Loop community meetings were frustrations that developments were proceeding untethered. I have discussed the perils of private development outpacing the availability of public resources in my analysis and residents expressed similar sentiments. One man raised the point that "all the battles 6 years ago were about 6-8 story buildings but now they're about 20 story buildings". Because land is a limited resource, developers are beginning to build higher and higher buildings, attempting to densify the neighborhood to levels that the West Loop's public infrastructure cannot support. The sewage and drainage system, which the real estate developer said was built during the Industrial Revolution, cannot physically support the amount of density that private developers want to bring to the neighborhood.

Growth does not have to be rapid and unprecedented if it is guided by a thoughtful plan of measured growth. In a private interview, the same man, a director of real estate at a company

in the West Loop, told me that property taxes have gone up 95% in the past decade. Consequently, “what comes with that is greater development because they want to increase the tax base but not the amenities.” There is a strategic plan between the developers and the City of Chicago to increase the tax base, but the residents are not seeing the return on investment in their communities. In one instance, a parcel of open land was acquired by Whitney Young Magnet School in the West Loop to refurbish it into a private sports field for the school and this money, \$3 million, came from TIFs. If the local government is increasing the tax base, it also has the obligation to be returning these taxes to the neighborhood whose tax base is increasing. There are many inadequate infrastructure problems such as lack of public transportation options, congested streets, small sidewalks, and insufficient traffic signals and stop signs. During the early 2000s, Chicago’s city planners were concerned about how to build a commercial base in the West Loop, believing that building this base would bring in the residents. With the commercial base sufficiently saturated with high-end retail and service stores as well as Michelin star restaurants, planners must be purposeful about taking adequate steps to securing a good balance of housing stock with the public amenities that are available in the neighborhood. Before approving proposals for buildings that keep adding more stories than the previous development, planners have to critically examine whether or not the neighborhood can actually support the density they’re proposing.

The neighborhood already feels at gridlock because of the egregious traffic congestion that continues to worsen. Several respondents have noted that what might have been a 4 minute drive from west end of the West Loop to the east end at the river has now become a 20 minute drive. The concentration of businesses in the neighborhood also brings thousands of commuters

into the area every day, many of them commuting in cars. A private developer seemed ignorant of this, citing that most West Loopers are foot pedestrians to justify the lack of parking spaces in his proposal at a meeting for his development. Even if his plan for private parking does not directly correlate to West Loop's traffic congestion problem, it highlights a misleading aspect of his perspective, to assert such a statement without the numbers to ground it, enforcing precisely why the need for measured growth is more pressing than ever. City planners have the obligation to collect inventory of public resources, ranging from traffic signals, garbage cans, the square footage of park space, the capacity of the West Loop's public schools so that developers have realistic data to inform their plans.

## **Conclusions**

Throughout this paper, I have described the West Loop's transition from being Chicago's meatpacking and warehouse district with no residents to one of the United States's top attractions for global capital and private investments. The commercialization and concentration of private amenities and corporations, ranging from Michelin star restaurants to McDonald's global headquarters, have attracted the largest proportion of millennials in the United States<sup>16</sup> and continue to spur luxury condominium and apartment developments. There was no singular turning point for the impetus of this change, but the 1996 Democratic National Convention that was hosted at the United Center in West Loop pressured policymakers to channel investments into transforming abundant warehouse space to a planned neighborhood that would support adequate retail, residential, and hospitality functions. The vacancy left by industrial operations that existed in the neighborhood further spurred land speculation from eager investors.

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<sup>16</sup> "This Chicago ZIP Code Has the Highest Concentration of Millennials in U.S." Accessed January 24, 2020. <https://www.chicagobusiness.com/residential-real-estate/chicago-zip-code-has-highest-concentration-millennials-us>.

Additionally, Google moving their Midwest headquarters to the West Loop in 2006 brought intense focus and publicity onto the neighborhood as the most “up-and-coming” in Chicago. West Loop’s attractive proximity to the downtown district and the river effectively facilitated this transition because this land was seen as “just too valuable to not do anything with it” following the decline of the meatpacking industry.

Today, West Loop garners praise for its unique host of private amenities, but the underlying conflict is that the overwhelming influx of global capital and private investments did not leave enough room for public investments. Community organizers are grappling with obsolete infrastructure that is not appropriate for accommodating West Loop’s increase in foot and vehicle traffic. Residents complain about the lack of green space and those with families complain about the lack of public schools in the neighborhood. Simultaneously, rent and property taxes for businesses and residents alike is rapidly increasing which selectively favors affluent demographics. Unfortunately, the West Loop Community Organization struggles to manage these complaints and lacks the capacity to focus on neighborhood placemaking because their work is inundated with managing private developers and real estate. Private investments continue to outpace public resources and necessities at overwhelming rates.

Tension over whether or not these developments constitute gentrification has divided two groups of people. One operates with the frame that gentrification never happened because (a) nothing was there to begin with and (b) people who left left with generous payouts. Another operates with the frame that gentrification started with the commercialization that drove up rents and property taxes, driving older residents and businesses out. Though many would identify West Loop as a thriving consumption destination and “the place to be” on any given night, few

would be able to realize the perpetual game of “catch up” that the neighborhood is playing. Even if the issues of the lack of appropriate infrastructure and public amenities are detailedly identified, the consequence of rapid growth means that property and land value is much too high for the city to be able to reclaim private space to make it public. Furthermore, West Loop residents are not interested in raising their own taxes to fund public projects because they feel that the businesses should be taxed instead.

Then, perhaps at this point, it is the developers’ obligation to fulfill both roles of mediating private resources to provide as many public amenities in their capacity to do so. At each of the community meetings I’ve observed, developers seemed earnest about creating green space within their developments. But could this adequately compensate for the larger parks and public schools that the residents would like to see? Or will West Loop remain a haven for empty nesters and what will it mean for a neighborhood to continue to accommodate transient populations? Given the relative recency of West Loop’s development boom, it is still too early to speculate. Perhaps placemaking efforts aren’t strictly necessary for a neighborhood to thrive and perhaps the private investments and the high quality of life that these developments deliver is sufficient to keep most residents happy. If a neighborhood’s inability to fulfill all the functions and demands of a community is inevitable, then West Loop’s identity as a consumption destination functions well for empty nesters and millennials who enjoy the luxuries of living next to luxury restaurants, retail, and the prestigious corporations they work at. Opportunities for future research could investigate the consequences of what placemaking means in a newly created neighborhood so that it fulfills the needs of diverse residents within a community, especially if powerful neighborhood-shaping forces seem to be coming from private investments

and global capital. Investigating whether commercialization, which is inherently a top-down process, could harmoniously coexist with community-based development, which focuses on a bottom-up process, could further contribute to the under-studied area that is neighborhood commercialization.

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## Appendix

### *List of Interviewees*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Type of Subject</b>	<b>Interview Length</b>	<b>Length of time in WL</b>
Carla	Executive Director of WLCO	1 hour	5 years
Jim	Owner of JP Graziano (Restaurant)	1 hour	30 years
Bess	Resident	30 min	5 years
Madeline	Works for Soul City Church	30 min	6 years
Roger	Executive Director of Fulton Market Association	email response	
Bob	Works for Old St. Patricks Church	1 hour	29 years
Bess	Works for Old St. Patricks Church	1 hour	19 years
Bene	Longtime resident and worker	1 hour	26 years
Sevy	Assistant Director of WLCO	44 min	2 years
Ankush	Shorttime resident	30 min	7-8 months
James	Longtime resident	1 hour	20 years
Esha	Shorttime resident and worker	30 min	5-6 months
Michael	Worked in the West Loop for 35 years	1 hour	35 years
Katalin	Business Owner and Resident in West Loop	45 min	18 years
Walter	Alderman	1 hour	25 years
Darren	West Loop Developer	30 min	20 years
Brandon	Attended High School in the West Loop	1 hour	4 years
Olivia	Grew up in West Loop	1 hour	15 years

All individuals consented to being identified by their first name.

## *Recruitment Script and Interview Guide*

Hello!

I'm Jein Park, a fourth year undergraduate at the University of Chicago majoring in Sociology and Public Policy Studies. I'm writing my Bachelor's thesis on the West Loop. The neighborhood has undergone immense changes in the past decade and I would love to interview individuals who live and/or work in the West Loop about the changes and challenges that have been occurring in the neighborhood. My interview questions will focus around your experiences of living/working in the West Loop and how these experiences have shaped how you perceive the neighborhood's culture. I'd also like to ask whether you've seen any "turning points" that, in your opinion, catalyzed change in the neighborhood. Some examples might include the opening of the Morgan Green Line stop or the opening of Girl & the Goat.

These interviews generally take around 30 minutes and I am happy to adjust the length according to your schedule. With your verbal consent, I will be voice recording the interview so I can transcribe and code the data for my analysis later. I will also be taking notes. These interviews can be conducted over the phone or in-person, depending on our mutual availability and your preference.

If you are willing to be interviewed, please contact me either through text message at (949) 701-0529 or reach me via email at [jeinpark@uchicago.edu](mailto:jeinpark@uchicago.edu)

I look forward to connecting soon and feel grateful for your help.

Jein

### Interview Questions

- How would you describe West Loop to someone who's never been there?
- What brought you to the West Loop?
- How long have you been in the neighborhood?
- What changes have you noticed since working with West Loop?
- What kinds of challenges do you see in the community these days? How have these challenges changed over time?
- What do you think are the other important organizations in West Loop?
- Have you noticed anything that unifies West Loopers? Is there any kind of shared identity?
- Who benefits most from these developments? Who's most disadvantaged?
- Do you feel there are discrepancies between how outsiders perceive West Loop and the West Loop you experience?
- Were there any key "moments" or turning points that catalyzed the change in the neighborhood?