

**Urban Renewal in Hyde Park-Kenwood: Revisiting the Past or Living in It?**

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*“ Hyde Park has not yet been invaded by that debilitating commercialism, and it is still possible to sit over a beer or a cup of coffee and not be harried to buy more. The community is a blend of ivory tower and rawness...” Robert Kaplan, 1959*

“Fuck!”

“What happened?”

“Wrong turn.”

"It's fine, you can just go straight and take a left up there."

"No, I can't— it's a one-way. I have to go around."

If you drive around Hyde Park, you'll notice that walking to your destination might actually save you time. A series of *take a left and then two right turns* followed by a sigh of relief from seeing a lack of a rectangular "ONE WAY" sign screaming at you to turn around, leaves you wondering why neighborhood street patterns were designed in such a confusing fashion.

Hyde Park is scattered with several one-way streets and dead ends. While newcomers find them to be nothing more than an inconvenience, they are a forgotten remnant of the 1950s urban renewal plan, an era of “reconstructing” several South Side neighborhoods initiated by wealthy and primarily white institutions (Hyde Park History, 2024). Urban renewal drastically changed the spatial layout of many neighborhoods, and with it, who could live where.

Urban renewal was not confined to Hyde Park. It happened in several neighborhoods, from Bronzeville to Englewood, displacing primarily low-income Black families. Hyde-Park Kenwood comprised the most extensive set of projects, displacing 4,000 families—the most of any plan in Chicago. Along with the Lake Meadows project, these two sweeping urban renewal plans made up one-third of all displacement in Chicago (Moser, 2018). Moreover, the Hyde Park-Kenwood renewal is unique due to the University of Chicago’s location in the heart of the neighborhood. This distinctive combination of forces and actors created a relatively diverse population in terms of race and income compared to neighborhoods on the South Side or up in the northern suburbs.

When urban renewal is discussed today, it is often referred to it in the past tense. In some ways, this is accurate. The extent and intentions of modern development plans are less extreme. In some location, these plans build upon the foundation that urban renewal provided, rather than providing *a series* of reconstructions as 1950s-style renewal did. However, the effects of the plan linger—in individuals’ histories and in current attitudes about Hyde Park. The legacy of urban renewal is still very much present today.

### **The Hyde Park-Kenwood Urban Renewal Plan**

The 1950s marked a period of rising racial tensions and transitions, partially due to declining housing conditions in the Hyde Park-Kenwood and Woodlawn communities. As a result, many middle and upper-class white families moved out (Tax, 1959). This is what is considered a "white flight." The University of Chicago, located in Hyde Park, had a large stake in maintaining its reputation as an intellectual institution. With student enrollment dropping and the surrounding community "deteriorating," the University sponsored the urban renewal plan, along with the City of Chicago and community organizations such as the South East Chicago Commission (SECC)

and Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference (HPKCC). In July of 1953, the Program of Education and Research in Planning published a report based on faculty-student workshop studies; it has no official connection with university policy, but is conducted by University employees. Examples of deterioration cited by them include increasing crime, overcrowding, poor maintenance and physical deterioration of housing structures, and a shortage of adequate community services and facilities. These “patterns of living by the surrounding community” were used as a reason for the University to reshape the demographic composition of its surrounding neighborhoods to create a “middle-class” environment (Program of Education and Research in Planning, 1953).

Perhaps what many people would find alarming today, cited as the fifth and last reason of evidence for deterioration is "the accelerated immigration of lower-income families, including lower-income Negro families settling in concentrated groups" (Program of Education and Research in Planning, 1953). Reasons like this were surrounded by language denying the exclusion of African Americans in the community, promising to maintain a diverse neighborhood.

The plan consisted of demolishing and rebuilding entire blocks of Hyde Park, with the general goal to “keep white people from moving away, to welcome black residents into all community activities, and to maintain community property standards" (Hirsch, 1983). In other words, a well-off, racially integrated neighborhood built on a foundation of middle-class and wealthy homeowners.

While the plan denied it aimed to exclude African Americans, the demographic makeup of Hyde Park drastically changed after urban renewal. The Black population decreased by 40 percent while the average income of Hyde Park increased by 70 percent following the plan's execution (Guide to the Hyde Park Collections, 1883-2004).

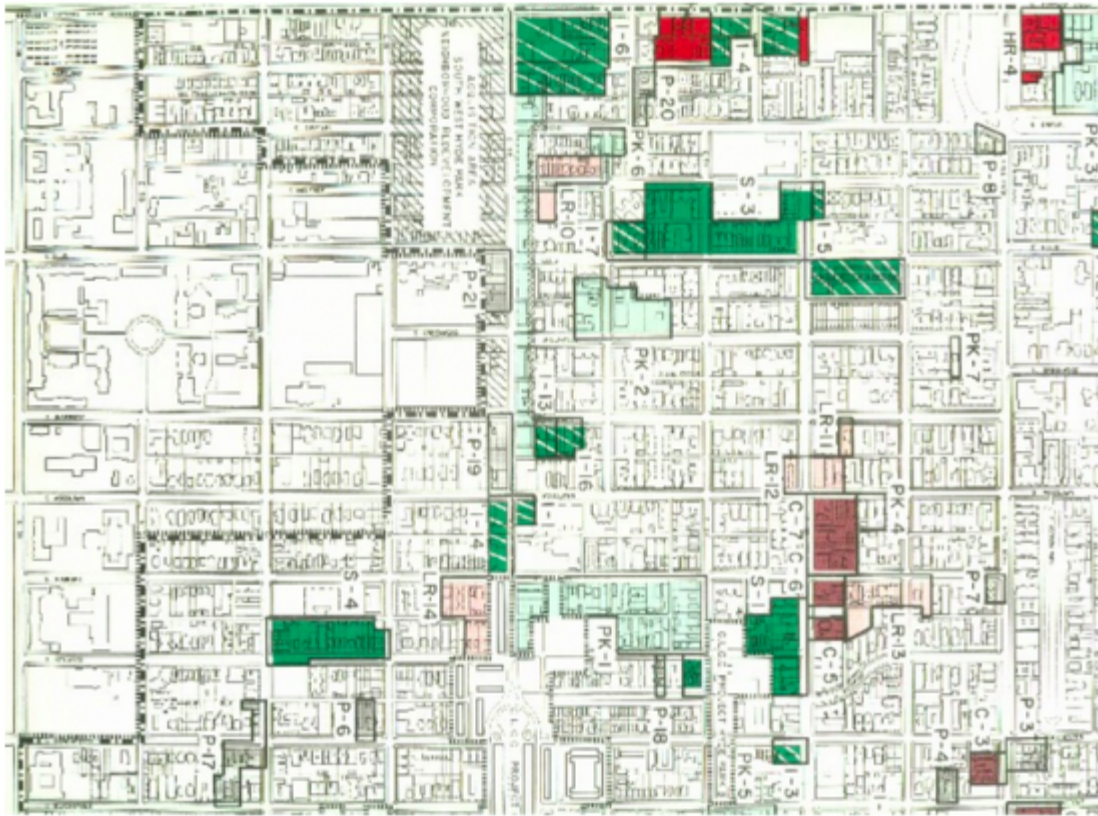


Figure 1: Map of Hyde Park Kenwood Urban Renewal Plan as of December 1960 Retrieved by the Hyde Park Historical Society from the Hyde Park Kenwood Community Conference. Green zones represent schools, green striped zones represent private institutions, red zones represent retail commercial, pink zones represent low density residential zones. The thick dotted line represents the borders of the project area.

### **“As if by Magic”: A Neighborhood Transformed**

As a student at the University, I am lucky to have access to special collections documenting urban renewal through newspaper article archives, University reports, op-eds, and other sources. As I was skimming through all of these materials (imagine a silent room with four white walls, and giant boxes of century-old documents...I felt like I was in an episode of Criminal Minds), I couldn't help but notice that practically all of the materials were pro-urban renewal. This was an opinion I frankly was not used to hearing around campus. Many of my professors swing left—the most common adjective I have heard used to describe this plan is “controversial.” Paying closer attention to the stakeholders publishing these materials indicated that it was primarily wealthy, white folks living in Kenwood involved with the HPKCC and SECC driving the narrative of a “new” Hyde Park. For instance, here's a description of the urban renewal plan by John Drury, a Chicago television anchor and journalist in the 70s:

Now in the midst of its \$175,000,000 Hyde Park-Kenwood Urban Redevelopment Project, the famed old university neighborhood is being transformed, as if by magic, into a new

community—an area of gleaming, modern, high-rise apartment houses; open grassy plazas; rows of townhouses; shopping centers; wide driveways and spacious parking lots. Here, in fact, is one of America’s largest urban renewal undertakings, and, as such, is being closely watched by the nation and the world (Drury, 1959).

Painting this project as “magic” ignores the fact that citizens were displaced in order to build these modern, high-rise apartment houses with empty promises of affordable housing; it skips over the part where the development of shopping centers and townhouses caused a surge in prices throughout Hyde Park; it skips over the part where the plan essentially drove out a population that doesn’t get their *bibbidi bobbidi boo* of a Cinderella story. It’s a kind of magic the less fortunate could have done without.

Ads to raise money for urban renewal were promoted as a way to protect the city through creating a makeup of “good neighbors.” The following are a few examples of pamphlets and flyers distributed.



Figure 2: ad distributed by neighbors and HPKCC in favor of urban renewal

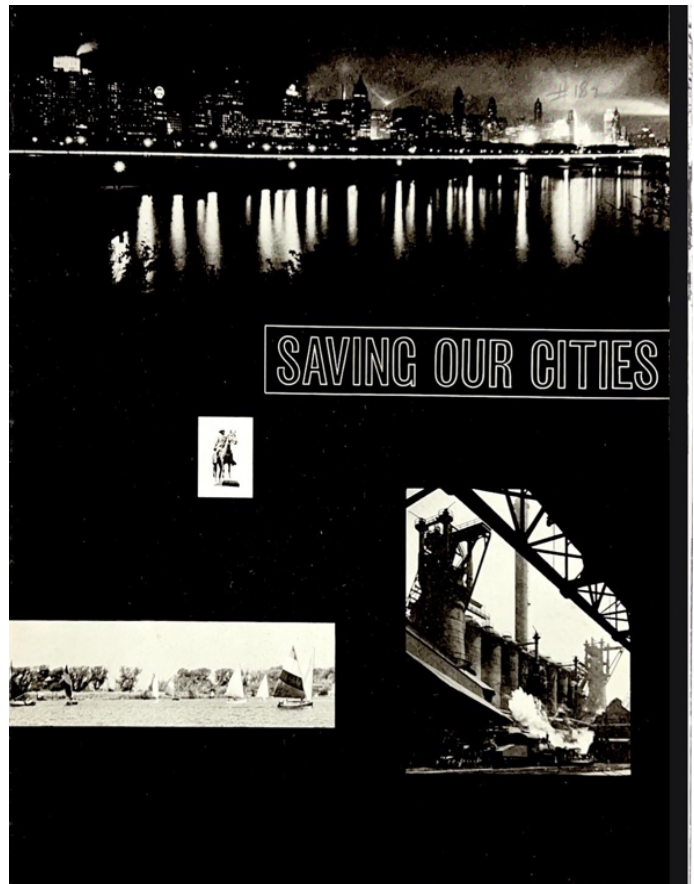


Figure 3: pamphlet distributed containing depictions of deterioration in Hyde Park and drawings of urban renewal's planned reconstruction

While white media was heavily in support of the “renovation,” concerns about its consequences were voiced by Black publications. *The Chicago Defender* was considered one of the nation’s most influential Black weekly newspapers. It played a large role in supporting the Great Migration of African Americans in the early 1900s. *The Defender* had originally provided some support for the urban renewal plan as a way to make the community more accessible to the middle-class Black community and provide much-needed improvement to living conditions. The newspaper found that if their readers benefitted from public housing that was supposed to be included in the urban renewal plan, they would be serving their audience (Amatullah, 2021).

Yet, after the Lake Meadows project, the largest urban renewal project in Chicago that was built north of Hyde Park, many Black Americans were pushed out to surrounding neighborhoods, including Hyde Park-Kenwood. The reconstruction of Hyde Park-Kenwood occurred partially as a response to the flood of African Americans moving in, causing city leaders to install further housing restrictions through clearance of property and displacement (Moser, 2018). As a result, Black Americans were then incentivized to move to more racially diverse communities.

On March 10, 1958, *The Chicago Defender* published a column piece, calling out the plan’s thinly veiled strategy of promoting gentrification:

There is a better way of preventing "Open Occupancy" without stirring up the ire of the unsuspected public. That is: make the rentals high enough to be beyond the income range of the average Negro family. This is a clever prohibition. But, it doesn't fool anybody...Viewed in this light, the Hyde Park-Kenwood intensifies this problem and makes it more difficult of a solution (The Chicago Defender, 1958).

The Defender withdrew its support, capturing racial and political tensions that were not being voiced by white, centrist media. It shed light on racialized rhetoric being used in Hyde Park to increase support for the Hyde Park-Kenwood plan. In fact, one renewal supporter stated that Blacks were “screaming, brawling, whining ‘low incomes’ who make a slum wherever they light’ (Amatullah, 2021).

Looking at other media outlets at the time illuminates the discrepancy in perspective across racial lines. The Tribune has a mixed racial history and was both supported and criticized by *The Defender*. In the context of urban renewal, the Tribune emphasized that the plan was not intended to create a luxurious neighborhood that would be “Chicago’s answer to the suburbs” (Tribune, 1997). This occurred while *The Defender* was simultaneously calling out the Chicago Housing Authority for creating a “Jim Crow pattern” of segregating Blacks (Amatullah, 2021).

When one thinks about urban renewal today, there often is not a clear conclusion. With development or even gentrification comes investment that can dramatically improve the physical infrastructure of a neighborhood. While I wasn’t surprised at the power imbalance found in media narratives, going through the physical evidence did shed a lot of light on the *power* of having a platform to voice concerns for minority groups.

### **The Fort Around the Castle**

I’ve only lived in Hyde Park since I started college here four years ago, but have already witnessed a few community changes driven by the University’s ongoing mission to keep Hyde

Park attractive to students and faculty. For example, *The Study* was being constructed next to my dorm room during my first year, and is now considered to be the first luxury hotels in Woodlawn, with mixed reviews on whether it promotes employment for the South Side or simply further gentrifies east Woodlawn.)

Inspired by *The Defender's* role in promoting minority voices during urban renewal, I was eager to explore current voices of Hyde Park, both old and young. Hearing their opinions on both past and future development of the neighborhood can indicate whether history is repeating itself.

Over the past couple of years, the Public Policy department has been a bridge to the Hyde Park community for me. It's taught me to take time to learn about the community I live in and the importance of oral histories, those voices often left out of documented history. As such, I thought it would be fitting to start with talking to one of my advisors who is also a Hyde Park resident living on Drexel, Susan.

I asked her about to her dual perspective as both a faculty member of the University and a Hyde Parker. "I'm here for the students—not the University," she replied forcefully.

In her interactions with students, Susan is surprised at how little they explore the area. She notes how many University buildings, such as Woodlawn Student Housing dormitory and the Harris School of Public Policy, are on 60th street. Yet, many students never cross 61st. I myself remember when I was assigned Woodlawn as my student dorm in my first year. The very first piece of advice I had gotten from a family friend who had attended the Booth School was to *not go south of 60th street*.

Susan went on to recount a conversation she had with a woman working in the University Provost office who had lived in Hyde Park all her life and had gotten both her undergraduate and Master's degree at the University. "A true lifer at the University," Susan chuckled. "When she was little her mom used to take her to the Midway and walk around the quad. She called the University the castle. She felt like she was going to a different world even though she was from the community."

If you eavesdrop on campus tours, you will find they promote the same fantasy this little girl had. Harper Library is advertised as "the one from Harry Potter." The movie *Divergent* was filmed inside Mansueto. Ivory quite literally grows on the numerous towers rising above campus. And this is an image the University has worked hard to build and is boastful of. I would be lying if I didn't sometimes feel moments of pride in its beauty too.

### **Community, Centers, and Cutoffs**

Yet, as one goes from the heart of campus to its exteriors, there are very clear (and somewhat awkward) cutoffs. As I walk along Woodlawn, I notice the giant red brick mansions with double (and some with triple) car parking lots located next to renovated churches and billowing trees in front lawns. Once I hit the Starbucks and keep walking north, large front yards turn into cramped apartment buildings. I mapped out the neighborhood by income and 55th Street does indeed mark a very stark boundary of two different income classes with the area closer to the University having household that earn \$130,000 per year and higher and the area north of 55th having households of \$0 to 75,000 per year in 2022.

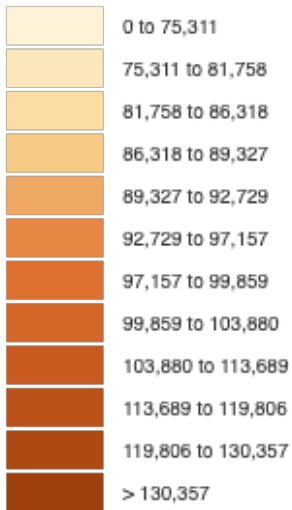
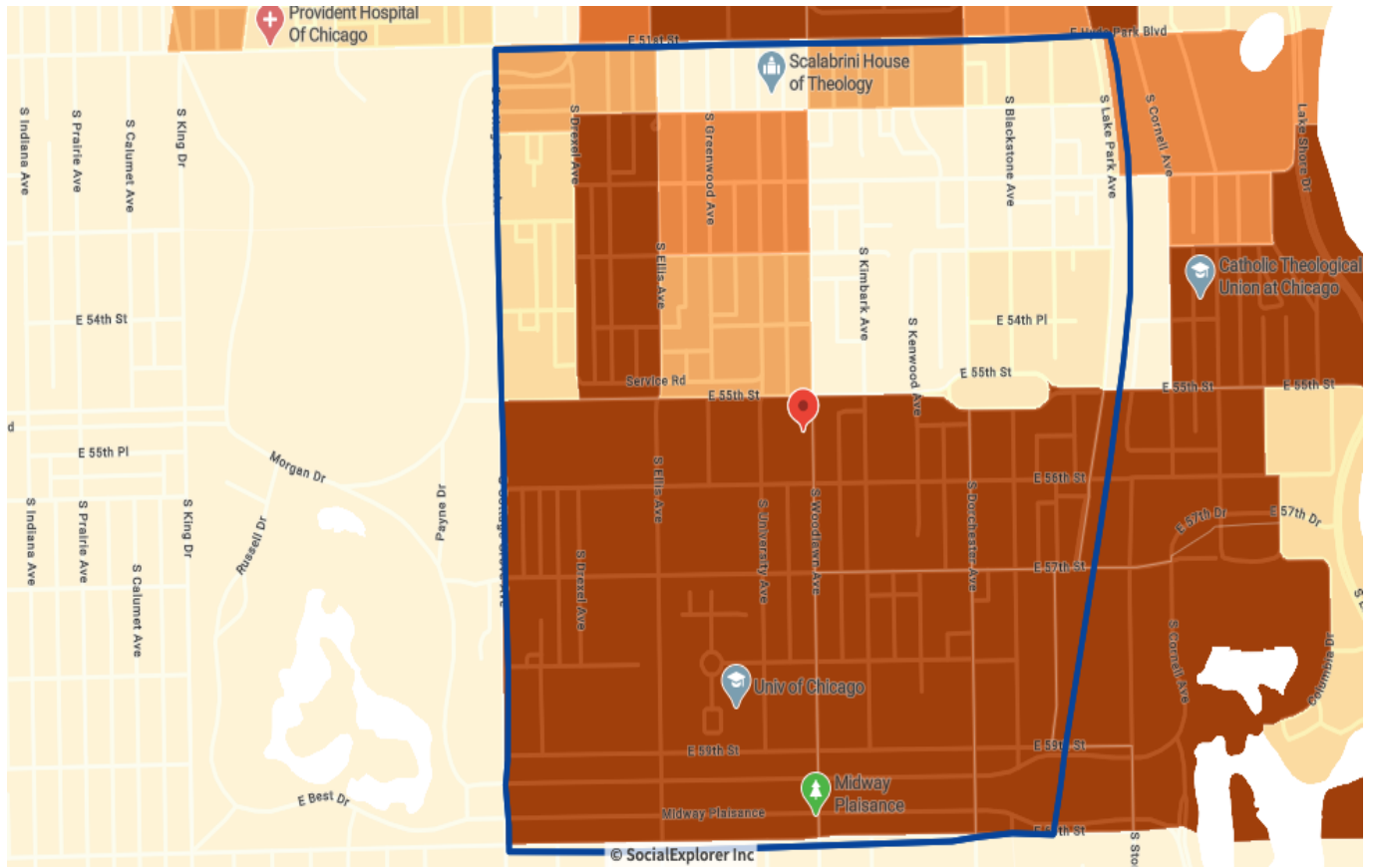


Figure 4: Map of Hyde Park generated on Social Explorer mapping blocks by household income levels in 2022; the darker the color, the higher the income level is. The location pin parks 55<sup>th</sup> street

This map from the archival collection below indicates where University of Chicago faculty and staff lived in 1951. The circle marks 55<sup>th</sup> to 61<sup>st</sup> street, the area where majority of them resided—the same observable cutoff seen above today. This partially explains the makeup of high income residents and their affiliations—important to understanding the incentives behind urban renewal.

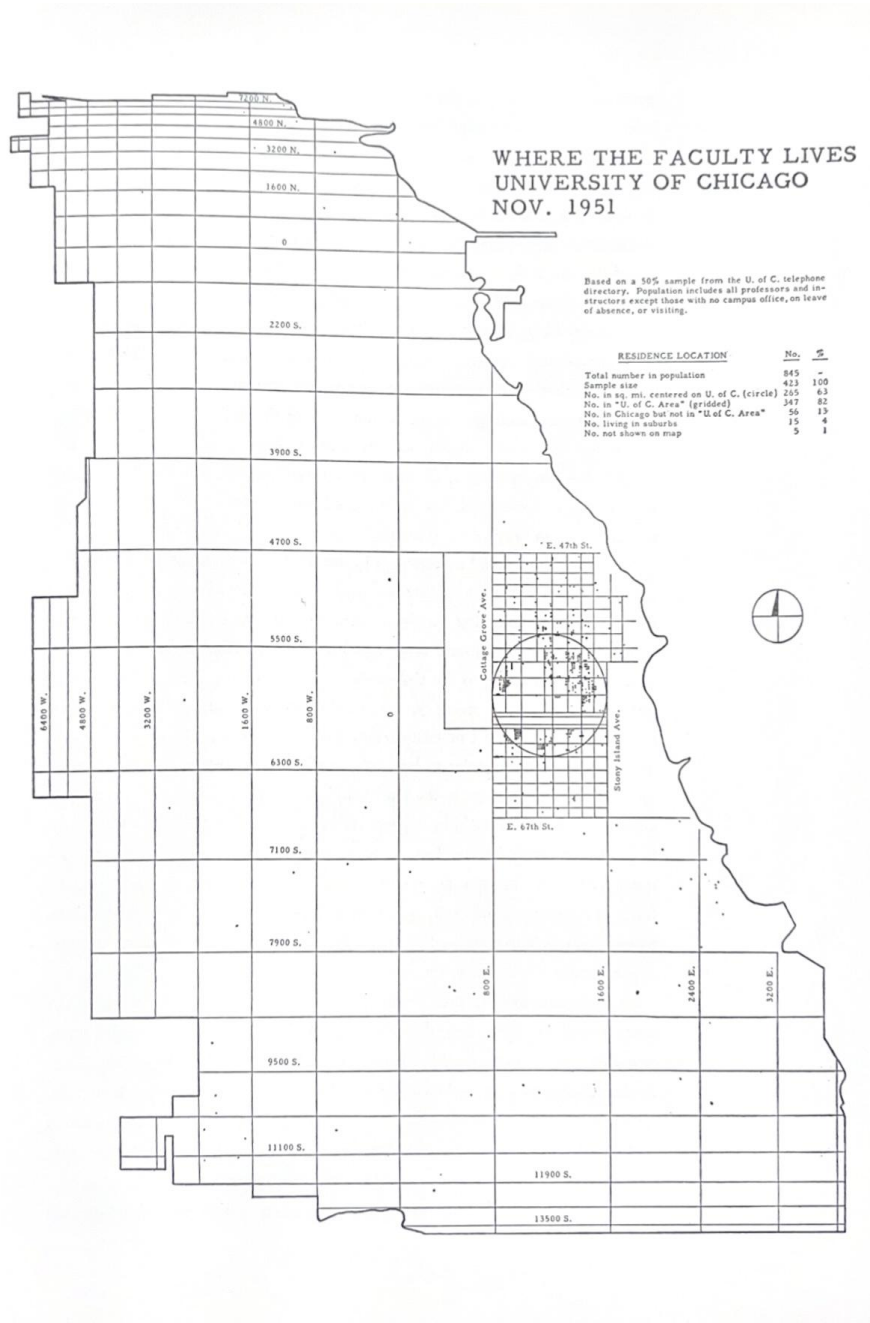


Figure 5: This map from the Program of Research and Planning in 1953 highlights where faculty lived in 1951 in Hyde Park. The circle maps out an area between 53<sup>rd</sup> street and 61<sup>st</sup>.

From Woodlawn, take a right and start striding towards Kimbark street. You'll notice a large park with several play structures that never seems to end. Welcome to Nichols Park! Hyde Park is dotted with several parks that provide green outdoor spaces for children and families to gather. Many social events ranging from live music to farmers' markets take place here, especially during the summer months.

Beyond grounds like these however, Susan mentions the lack of community centers and facilities present in Hyde Park. For instance, there aren't many grocery stores in bordering neighborhoods such as Woodlawn—and some say, within Hyde Park itself. How inconvenient, I thought. It wasn't until Susan softly remarks, "That tells you what their priorities are... it's not the community growing together, but rather the University," that I realize the subtle violence behind this expansion.

Despite this, she emphasizes the home she has found in her neighbors, rather than the physical location. She shares several stories with me. On the more humorous side, she mentions a neighbor going as far as climbing through a window to retrieve her keys when she got locked out of her apartment. However, as we kept talking, Susan shares an anecdote that revealed the solidarity within her neighborhood.

There is a guy around here who is mentally ill... we make sure that he's ok and one time he was having a crisis...He was wailing really loud and he was moving nonstop. I was keeping an eye on him, but I was afraid that he was going to fall from the second floor. I called the number for mental health. They still didn't send an ambulance, they sent the police. As soon as I saw the police car, I came out to the street..it was *not just me, but five or six neighbors that came out at the same time. Everyone was watching and everyone had the same fear.* There is an investment in safety without the violence that comes with it.

I walked away from that interview knowing that Susan thought of Hyde Park as home, not because of the resources available to her (or lack thereof), but because of the people; a narrative that urban renewal often tried to flip by boiling a "good" neighbor down to their income and race rather than their actions and character.

### **54th and Ingleside**

Were these consequences foreseeable by urban renewal proponents? Surely, people didn't solely have to rely on each other instead of its physical infrastructure to create a home? True, the urban renewal plan was largely launched because many buildings *were* physically deteriorating and living conditions were becoming health hazards for those who lived there. Stuart Rosenthal, an economist specializing in urban economics, explains why reconstruction is sometimes necessary, stating that neighborhoods go through cycles of decline and renewal. In some cases, renovation and investment into neighborhoods can help increase the welfare of *all* residents and not just the upper class (Rosenthal, 2008).

Eager to hear the perspective of a long-time resident of Hyde Park who had lived through urban renewal, I talked to Janice Jones, a 74-year-old resident of Hyde Park who grew up in the neighborhood, as well as surrounding ones such as Woodlawn. She was briefly the former

principal of Elihu Yale Elementary School, a Chicago Public School, for three years in Englewood before retiring in 2009. She offered a snapshot of Hyde Park in the 1960s.

Quite a few years ago, the Hyde Park neighborhood club... a lot used to go on there in terms of activities for seniors, etc. My dad had Alzheimer's and I used to take him over there for activities. When I was a teenager there was a Hyde Park YMCA where Baskin-Robbins and that little strip used to be. That was a community center. In high school we belonged to a Tri-Hi-Y club. There were a lot of youth who met there for a lot of different things.

In contrast to Susan, Jones doesn't mind there being less centers now—as an older adult, she finds that she doesn't miss it. However, she does notice that the community used to be much more tight-knit, whether it was spending time with neighbors and hosting gatherings such as barbeques (without being facilitated by a center.)

I wondered how her perspective of urban renewal might differ compared to many younger professionals who had only recently moved to the neighborhood. Despite urban renewal being infamous to Hyde Park's history, many people who discuss it haven't actually lived through it. Since Jones had taught in Englewood, another community impacted by urban renewal, my guess was that she would also be very disapproving of the reconstruction.

To my surprise, it was the opposite. Jones' stepfather was a design engineer at the University of Chicago Lab of Astrophysics and Space Research, enabling him to purchase one of the town homes that the university had built when Jones was a teenager. She lived on 54th place in between Ingleside and Drexel—coincidentally, half a block from my current college apartment.

I'm not seeing any intentional segregation in the area. My parents would talk about the fact that this was a great integrated community. Just like other communities, crime has gone up and you don't have control over that but you do the best you can. Gentrification in my mind in this Hyde Park Kenwood community has been wonderful.

This seemed to support Rosenthal's claim in the sense that crime going up could be thought of as a period of decline in a larger cycle of ups and downs—from someone who had actually lived through such cycles.

She does acknowledge that this wasn't a universal experience.

I don't look at the University as the enemy so to speak, that they are just willy nilly displacing people. But I can understand from the people who have been displaced. To me, it's almost comparable to what happened on State Street when they tore down all of that public housing. Often times people are promised that there will be mixed income housing or that they can move back into affordable housing but it is unrealistic

Shortly after talking to Jones, I joined UChicago's WYSE club, a national mentoring organization dedicated to strengthening and empowering the lives of young women and their communities, for a day on their weekly tutoring sessions at Ray Elementary School, a public school located on 57<sup>th</sup> street. Ray's student body is very diverse: 62 percent of students are

African American, 17 percent are Caucasian, 7 percent are Asian and 8 percent are Hispanic. Moreover, 58 percent of students come from lower income backgrounds (About Us, 2024). All gathered in the cafeteria at the end of the school day, many of the kids were chatting and giggling with their WYSE mentors. I talked to several of the seventh graders about what they liked about Hyde Park. These were some of my favorite answers:

“I like that I can see the bunnies here!”

“Definitely, recess.”

There was a common consensus that the go to after school spot was grabbing fries and milkshakes at Medici (a Hyde Park tradition amongst people of all ages), a bakery located across the street. Other kids preferred going to 53<sup>rd</sup> street and visiting all of the small boutiques or walking around the many parks in the area. I noticed that the kids didn’t really care about *where* they hung out as much as simply hanging out with their friends. This reminded me a lot about what Susan had said about the community being about your people and not the place.

I ended my conversations asking the students what they could change about Hyde Park if they could. I was surprised at how perceptive many of them were (I certainly wasn’t at 12 years old). Many stated gun violence, a sad truth not specific to Hyde Park, but to schools across the country. Karim, an eighth grade girl made a very astute observation about how growing crime in Hyde Park changed the people in it:

I would change the crime rate as well as...just the people here in general. There’s a lot of people here who have snobby attitudes and I honestly think its because of fear.

This particularly struck me because even a middle schooler could notice the same sentiment that drove urban renewal almost 70 years ago.

### **Reopening 57<sup>th</sup> Street**

While I had expected there to be a large generational gap between the various residents I talked to, there were quite a few similarities in what they pointed out. It was evident that the community here was truly tied by the people and *not* the physical infrastructure of Hyde Park, even though the reconstruction of Hyde Park is what defined its new demographic makeup. However, every interviewee, regardless of their age, had observed crime in the area driving tensions between residents—yet another shadow of urban renewal.

When I started this project, I expected to have a clearer consensus of whether urban renewal in the area had been on net beneficial or costly for the Hyde Park- Kenwood community. My conversations and research indicated how reductive that would be, both to the history of Hyde Park and its residents. Several dynamics contribute to residents’ feelings about urban renewal: displacement caused by renewal, ties to the University and benefits received because of development driven by the plan, socioeconomic status, and community resources available after reconstruction was complete, along with several others. A single factor such as race or income

was not as telling to individuals' beliefs as I may have thought entering the project, highlighting the importance of capturing voices in a way statistics will never be able to.

There *is* a gap between who the residents consider to be their community and the decision-makers of that community. The University remains a large driver in development of the Hyde Park community, sparking tensions amongst some and applause from others.

Recently in August of 2022, the University of Chicago engaged in discussions with Hyde Park residents and businesses about the prospect of opening up 57<sup>th</sup> street from a one-way to a two-way between Lake Park Avenue and Stony Island Avenue. *This stretch of 57<sup>th</sup> street was originally made a one-way street as a part of urban renewal.* These talks were fueled by changes coming to Jackson Park with the University stating that it would ease traffic flow and increase access to small businesses, the campus and the Obama Presidential Center. More than 40 residents and participants from local groups such as the Hyde Park Town House Corporations and the Museum of Science and Industry, along with many schools in the area were involved in these discussions. Majority of residents *strongly oppose* the proposal, stating drivers in the area already disobey the traffic laws on their street and the reopening would be a safety concern for pedestrians and bikers. Moreover, it would add traffic and noise pollution to a serene street, a reason why many of the residents chose to live there (Discussion, 2022).

While the University continues to push for the proposal, Alderman Hairston has declared that it will not be pursued at this time.

This begs the question: do residents of Hyde Park Kenwood now have more agency in making decisions that affect their community? Or, is history repeating itself?

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