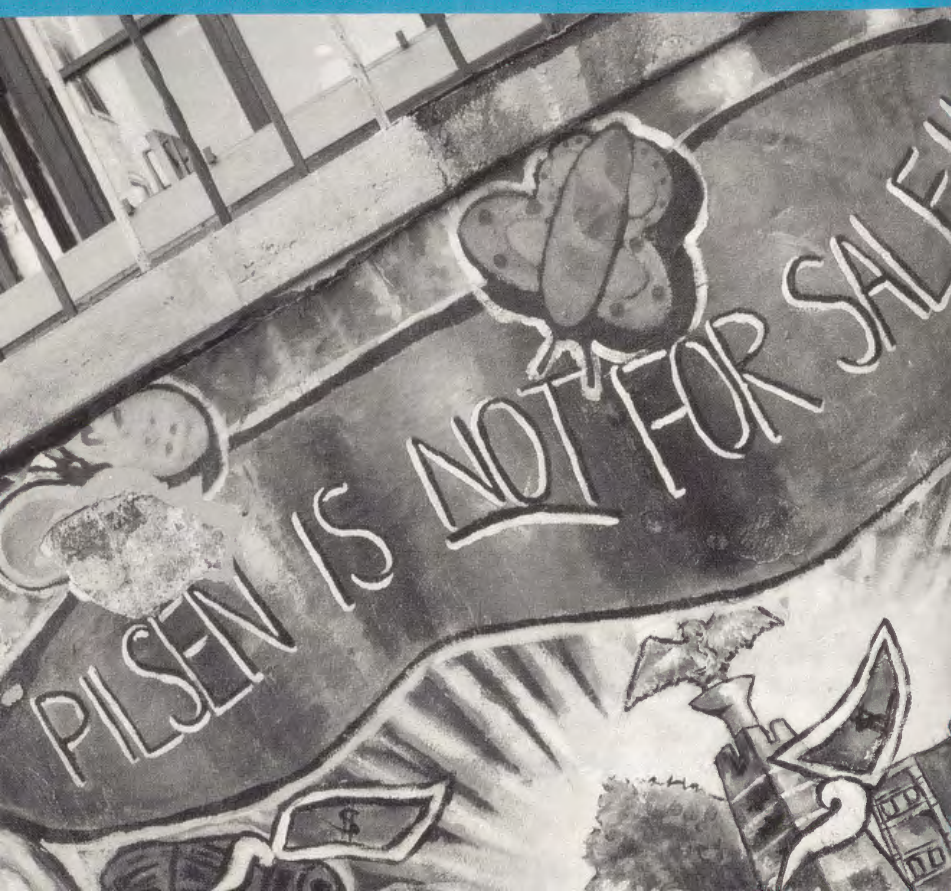


Seeking Authenticity in Chicago's Pilsen



Towards a More Nuanced Understanding of Gentrification

BY ANH-THU HUYNH

When I originally began to consider my research project in 2005, I was interested in writing about the origin and diffusion of trends. I had a hard time figuring out what specific research questions to ask in order to explore the issue — Does globalization make information travel faster? Is “coolness” rooted in the rejection of cultural norms? Do the things people buy reflect who they want to be? — and so for a long time, my project felt stalled at the gate.

Ultimately, I decided that looking at gentrification in its early stages would be a tangible way to examine some of my interests. It has often been written that artists and other creative populations are the first to move into cheap neighborhoods, and that their burgeoning presence spurs redevelopment. By looking at gentrification in a neighborhood in Chicago, I could test this theory while also tackling the question of consumption and its relationship to identity formation. Where someone chooses to live is an incredibly rich indicator of what she values in her surroundings, and perhaps by extension, whom she wants to be.

I chose Pilsen as my neighborhood of study because it seemed to be where all of my coolest friends went on the weekends. Before this project all I knew was that it was Chicago's Mexican neighborhood, and that it had a reputation for being "artsy." I also thought that it was close enough to Hyde Park that it would be easy to access (wrong!). Once I began to do some fieldwork and interviews, it became apparent that I was ill-equipped to discuss everything that I had observed.

When I began this project, I was only interested in exploring the idea of trendsetting. However, gentrification has its own complicated history. It is inextricably tied to race and class, two loaded topics that I did not feel ready to confront, particularly against the backdrop of Chicago's notorious history of segregation. I chose to deal with this by focusing on what my interview subjects, who are all undeniably gentrifiers, had to say about their choices, why they made them, and, perhaps most significantly, how they felt about the roles that they might be playing in neighborhood change. I got a lot of interesting answers, some expected and some surprising.

Introduction

Current theories about gentrification emphasize its large-scale economic and social causes. However, these theories do not address the motivations of individuals: why do certain neighborhoods and not others hold an appeal for the gentrifying population? Informally, we all have some notion that it has something to do with "hipness," perhaps, or "grittiness," or maybe even some sense of "authenticity"—but what does that mean, really?

To explore this question, I pursued several avenues of inquiry. Because I knew nothing about the history of Pilsen, I used historical and geographical research methods to try to place the neighborhood's devel-

opment in the wider context of globalization and gentrification theory. My ethnographic observations from 2006 until spring 2008 were also an invaluable source of information as I examined my own experiences and reactions to what I encountered. But the bulk of my data came from interviews with members of what I perceived to be the gentrifying class: young middle-class people who wanted to or already had moved to Pilsen. I wanted to understand their motivations, and could think of no better way than to ask.

What I discovered was that for my subjects, the primary appeal of Pilsen was not its low rents or how hip or gritty it seemed, but rather, the authenticity it could offer. Though authenticity in itself is a difficult concept to pin down, through my interview data I was able to isolate three dimensions in which authenticity is perceived for this particular group: (1) the ability to define oneself in opposition to a perceived materialist norm, (2) the search for a sense of history in one's living space, and (3) the longing for a sense of urban community. Therefore, the choice to gentrify can, in this very limited case, be read as a conscious (and often self-conscious) act of rebellion against the anomie and alienation characteristic of modern urban living, the expression of a "fantasy that the experience of an idealized reality might render our lives more meaningful" (Grazian, 2003, p. 241).

Data Collection

Methods

I conducted seven interviews (five men and two women, ranging in age from 21 to 24). All of the interviews were conducted during winter and spring 2008. All individuals interviewed had moved to Pilsen in the summer of 2007.

Interviews ranged from half an hour to an hour and 10 minutes, and the average length of each interview was about 40 minutes. I asked each respondent for some background information — “Where are you from originally?” “Are you in school? What are you studying?” “Where do you live currently and for how long have you lived there?” — but the bulk of the data came from more open-ended questions: “What made you decide to move to Pilsen? What about it appeals to you?” and “Do you think that the neighborhood is changing? What do you think about that?” Originally I had prepared a much longer list of questions to ask, but felt like leaving them more open would allow the interview subject to develop his or her own answer without my imposing a theoretical framework.

An obvious criticism of my sample would be that it is almost entirely white, and overwhelmingly male. I believe that part of the reason why my sample was so homogenous was because I found my respondents using a snowball sample technique, asking contacts to refer me to friends and acquaintances that may have been willing to participate. In an ideal world, I would have been able to conduct some interviews with older Pilsen residents, whether they were long-time residents or an older part of the gentrifying class, as well as more women and people of different ethnicities — but then, this would have become a very different project. I believe that this sample’s homogeneity is in fact one of its strengths: through conducting interviews with such a narrow demographic of people, I was able to observe the particular attitudes of what turned out to be a very specific group.

Interview Subjects

Will, 22, white male

I have known Will, a University of Chicago student, for several years, and he was integral to this project. Originally from the suburbs of

Chicago, he lived in Bridgeport from August 2006 until 2007, but decided to move back to Hyde Park. He spends most of his free time in Pilsen.

Tom, 23, white male

Tom is a University of Chicago graduate and socialist activist. He's originally from New Jersey but has been living in Pilsen since the beginning of September 2007.

Peter, 24, white male

Peter is a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago but describes himself first as a "painter." He is originally from Iowa City and lives in a loft in Pilsen, which also functions as his studio.

Evan, 22, biracial (white & Asian) male

Evan is a University of Chicago student and a musician/songwriter. He is originally from the suburbs of Chicago and has been living in Bridgeport since September 2007. His parents used to live in Pilsen, before they moved out to the suburbs.

Emily, 23, white female

Emily is a University of Chicago graduate and aspiring actress. She is originally from New York City (the Upper West Side) and has been living in Pilsen since mid-June 2007. Her roommate, Angie, is an actress, painter, and photographer, active in the Chicago avant-garde theater community.

Billy, 21, white male

Billy is a University of Illinois at Chicago student studying architecture. He is originally from the suburbs of Chicago and has been living in Pilsen since August 2007.

Erin, 22, white female

Erin is a University of Chicago student and self-described "wine profes-

sional." She is originally from "just outside of Philadelphia." Currently living in Rogers Park, she hopes to live in Pilsen after her lease ends in June 2008. She was also the only fluent Spanish-speaker interviewed.

A Brief History of Pilsen

Pilsen is one of the oldest communities on Chicago's Lower West Side. Its major development came after the Great Fire of 1871, when Eastern European immigrants began to move west of the South Branch of the Chicago River (Sinkevitch, 2004, p. 350). By 1875 it was one of Chicago's major industrial centers, a working-class neighborhood that was home to rail yards, manufacturing plants, lumberyards, and breweries that provided thousands of jobs to unskilled workers. Immigrants from Bohemia were its earliest settlers, naming the community for their homeland's second-largest city.

Although Pilsen was no longer predominantly Bohemian after 1900, it remained a Slavic community until the 1950s, as Polish and Yugoslavian immigrants followed the path of migration that the Bohemians had taken. During the 1950s and early 1960s, as urban renewal began to take place in the blocks around Halsted Street and Roosevelt Road (part of an area known as the Near West Side), Mexican families began to move to Pilsen (Pacyga, 1986, p. 250). The neighborhood's subsequent transformation was rapid: while Pilsen's population was only 0.5% Mexican in 1950, it had become 14% Mexican by 1960 and 55% Mexican by 1970. In 1980, this number reached over 77%, and by the year 2000 this number hovered somewhere around 89% (Genova, 2005, p. 269). While the majority of this population was composed of Mexicans who had been displaced from neighboring communities, its rapid growth can be traced to the 22% who had migrated from Mexico between 1965 and 1970. As

early as 1970, Pilsen was the largest Mexican neighborhood in Chicago, the only one in which the Latino population was an absolute majority, and also one of the city's poorest (Genova, 2005, p. 119). It has been referred to as an immigrant "port of entry" (Sinkevitch, 2004, p. 350), continuing the historic legacy started by waves of Eastern European migrants, but today serving that purpose for thousands of Spanish-speaking families from rural Mexico and Texas (Pacyga, 1986, p. 250).

Examining the 1970 Land Use Map for the area, we see that Pilsen at this time was largely characterized by medium- to high-density residential spaces. As one of the poorest areas of the city, it had its share of dilapidated housing (Pacyga, 1986, p. 252); the buildings that met the needs of generations of factory workers have come to suffer from decay and neglect (Sinkevitch, 2004, p. 350). More than half of Pilsen's homes were built between 1885 and 1895 (Pacyga, 1986, p. 249), with many dating from even earlier decades. An interesting feature of these buildings is their location relative to street level: Chicago's sewer project did not reach the Pilsen area until 1875, and the process of raising streets and sidewalks above the new sewer and drainage systems left many buildings with their first floors eight to ten feet below street level (Sinkevitch, 2004, p. 350).

By 1970, the manufacturing base that had allowed Pilsen to flourish as an industrial neighborhood had withered away (Sinkevitch, 2004, p. 350). Though some businesses had remained in the area, many had ceased their industrial operations in the neighborhood as early as the 1950s (Pacyga, 1986, p. 249). This trend continued through the following decades, as deindustrialization and environmental interests pushed manufacturing out of the city. Industrial buildings, remnants from Pilsen's original function as a manufacturing neighborhood, still line the areas from 21st Street to Cermak Road and along Sangamon Street,

but today many are not in use. This trend seems to indicate that in the coming decades the only legacy that Pilsen will have of its industrial roots are the empty spaces that vacant factories leave behind.

Looking at the 1990 land-use data for Chicago, we see that Pilsen has retained its primarily residential quality. More commercial thoroughfares have arisen, and many spaces that were once industrial have been transformed to retail and commercial areas. Today, Halsted Street is lined with art galleries and the eastern borders of Pilsen are home to various converted lofts and studio spaces.

For artists, finding affordable living and working spaces has historically been a problem. Therefore neighborhoods like Pilsen, which are former sites of industrial production, are often ideal for their needs—their history as working-class neighborhoods means that the rents are low and that there is an abundance of formerly industrial buildings. Old warehouses and factories make ideal artistic spaces because they are generally large and easily repurposed for this population's needs. However, the slow trickle of artists into Pilsen has driven rents up in recent years and caused demographic changes in the neighborhood.

In 2000, whites represented 8.1% of Pilsen's total population, which was 89% Latino. Interestingly, the largest concentrations of whites in Pilsen were confined to three census tracts located in the eastern section of the neighborhood, areas that have become known as part of the Chicago Arts District and have undergone significant gentrification (Genova, 2005, p. 119). The Podmajersky family, which is largely responsible for the Chicago Arts District, has been encouraging an artists' community in the area for generations. The original Pilsen East Artists Colony at 18th and Halsted streets was established in the 1960s, and since then the area has been transformed into a bustling commercial street, boasting galleries and coffee shops, and a monthly arts event called

Second Fridays. The Podmajersky mission has been to rehabilitate buildings along Halsted Street for use as artists' studios and lofts, encouraging the establishment of a supportive and sustainable environment for the creatively oriented individuals and businesses in the neighborhood.

The neighborhood changes of recent years have spurred much discussion about Pilsen's future. A 2004 guidebook to Chicago describes the area in the following terms:

Chicago's hipster underground has also been quietly relocating here for the last decade. The area around 18th Halstead [sic] Sts has become a hub for storefront art galleries and painter's spaces. Even the taste-making record label Thrill Jockey has its offices here. (Look for a vintage Mick Jagger poster in a window on 18th St and you've found them.) The mix of MFA-wielding sculptors and recent Spanish-speaking immigrants has been a mostly amiable one, and places like the Jumping Bean give both camps a place to eat, relax, and whup each other in games of chess (Baty, p. 88–89).

Pilsen is undeniably changing, but what remains to be seen is whether its demographic makeup will completely transform, as it did during the 1950s or 1960s, or whether these two very different communities will continue their "mostly amiable" coexistence.

Theories of Gentrification and Globalization

There are two prevailing schools of thought on gentrification. The first, production-side theory, focuses on the economic aspects of neighborhood change, while the second, consumption-side theory, emphasizes

the importance of social forces and the gentrifiers themselves. But neither theory directly addresses the question of why some neighborhoods have more appeal than others for the gentrifying class.

According to production-side theory, gentrification can be explained in economic terms. With the movement of capital out of the city, the inner city becomes devalued, and the price of property falls relative to the rising prices of suburban land. This “rent-gap” is one of the fundamental explanations for the process of gentrification. With the continued flow of capital out of the city, the rent-gap eventually reaches a turning point when land developers realize that the actual ground rent for land in the inner city is much lower than the potential rent that could be made if the location was appropriated for an alternative use. At this turning point, developers, landlords, and other individuals with an interest in land development invest in cheap inner-city properties and redevelop them for new inhabitants (Smith, 1995, p. 150–153). Their initial investment can snowball into more established forms of financial investment and political support. The sum of this process leads to higher inner-city rents and effectively closes the rent-gap. This increase in rent rates often displaces former working-class residents in favor of wealthier ones.

However, while gentrification was initially understood as the process of rehabilitation of decaying low-income housing, new scholarship in the 1980s linked it with various processes of spatial, economic, and social restructuring (Sassen, 2001, p. 261). New theories from the consumption-side school focus on the gentrifiers themselves to explain gentrification. Looking at “who moves in and who moves out” (Smith, 1995, p. 41), this theory places gentrification in the wider context of postindustrial production and the emergence of a new middle class that provides consumers for the new properties that gentrification supplies.

It argues that changes in the global economy and a general shift from industrial to postindustrial service economies has created more flexible populations of workers and a new cultural class that seeks an urban lifestyle within their means. Rather than industrial factories and factory workers, many cities are now primarily home to retail outlets, service centers, and sites of cultural production, such as media studios and offices. These forms of employment offer much more lifestyle flexibility than the traditional industrial production jobs, and this is reflected in the lifestyle choices of postindustrial workers.

Typical gentrifiers include students, artists, and professionals with similarly flexible lifestyles. Because one of the key means for landlords to increase rents is through tenant turnover, semi-transient populations are choice residents for neighborhoods still gentrifying. Willing to pay substantially higher rents than the indigenous working-class residents, but disinterested in or unable to afford the amenities offered in neighborhoods further along the curve of gentrifying development, these flexible tenants are often drawn to neighborhoods that are beginning to gentrify rather than ones further along in the process. They also have little long-term commitment to remaining in the neighborhood or in a single apartment, and often have a higher level of tolerance for the many "social problems" perceived in neighborhoods in transition (Mele, 1995, p. 185–186).

These first-stage gentrifiers, consumption-side theory argues, are actually those who prepare the way for later and more advanced gentrification. Their presence often creates a neighborhood's reputation as a place both conducive and receptive to alternative values and ways of life, lending the area an image of "youthfulness and alternative cultures" (Mele, 1995, p. 185–186). Neighborhoods known for their vibrant art communities become home to gallery and performance spaces, and as

they become more established, begin to appeal to those outside the initial gentrifying class for the cultural amenities that they offer.

Consumption-side theory emphasizes the active role of the gentrifier in the gentrification process, arguing that new postindustrial economies of production have created flexible workers that seek semi-transient and creative lifestyles, which in turn transform neighborhoods and make them into cultural sites ripe for commodification by land developers. However, what contemporary theorists have not adequately addressed is the question of what draws this gentrifying class to certain neighborhoods and not others in the first place.

While there are undeniably structural reasons behind neighborhood choice—proximity to social networks, ease of transportation, and rent rates being the most obvious—I found that, surprisingly, these factors were not the sole or even the primary reasons that the people I interviewed chose to move. Some decided to live in Pilsen despite the fact that their entire social network was located elsewhere in the city. Others decided to live in Pilsen despite working in neighborhoods that were nearly inaccessible from it by public transportation. Several had the financial support of their families but chose to live in Pilsen anyway, despite the fact that other equally cheap or “safer” neighborhoods were available to them.

When I tried to uncover the other aspects of neighborhood choice in interviews, many themes emerged, some expected and some surprising. Condo living was described as “hollow” and “soulless,” while Pilsen was cited as being “unique,” “colorful,” and “having character.” People who lived on the North Side were called “yuppies” and “douche bags,” while Pilsen residents were characterized as “spontaneous” and “open-minded.” For a long time I was not sure what greater trend these narrative threads revealed. Did the young gentrifying class move to Pilsen solely

in order to differentiate itself from “North Side douche bags” living in neighborhoods like Lincoln Park? Did the area’s appeal lie in the fact that it offered a “neighborhood feel”? What do people mean when they say that a place has “character”?

I concluded that responses could be broken down into three main categories: identity formation, the desire for a sense of history, and a longing for community. These categories can all be contained within a broader theme, that of the search for authenticity in the city.

Seeking Authenticity

We decided to move here because we thought that it was the cheapest neighborhood that we could afford. Both of our parents help us make rent, but we wanted to ask them for as little money as possible. And even though they, in fact, rather emphatically, were like, “No, no, live somewhere more safe, we’ll give you more money,” we were like, “No, we want to live here.”

We felt like other neighborhoods that a lot of our friends were moving into, like Logan Square and Wicker Park . . . we sort of felt like those neighborhoods were, um, I don’t know, they don’t have as much character as Pilsen does. . . . There is a sense of history, and, I don’t know—a sense of neighborhoodness in Pilsen which, for whatever reason—we liked the feel of it here. —Emily, interview, April 21, 2008

In Robert Park’s 1925 essay, “Community Organization and the Romantic Temper,” he argues, “modern conditions of life, where the division of labor has gone so far that—to cite a notorious instance—it

takes 150 separate operations to make a suit of clothes," most urban dwellers "lose sight altogether of the community in which [they] live" (p. 117). This is even more the case today, as global capitalism results in an ever-increasing division of labor. Such extensive specialization inevitably leads to increased alienation, as goods become more commodified and the process of their production more depersonalized. In today's globalized economy, not only might it take 150 separate operations to make a suit of clothes, but the physical bases for these operations might be scattered all over the world.

Ritzer calls this trend towards commodification and depersonalization a shift to "nothingness." He defines "nothing" as a social form devoid of distinctive substantive content, while "something" is a social form on the opposite end of the continuum that possesses it; one example of nothing versus something in his terms would be a credit card compared to a bar of gold (2000, p. 3). Value is concretely embodied in one but abstractly in the other. The increasing commodification and mass-production of goods can be characterized as a shift from something (the homemade tamales found at Pilsen's Los Comales restaurant) to nothing (Big Macs from the McDonald's one block down the street). This shift, in Grazian's terms, "[erases] age-old cultural differences" at the same time that it generates its own backlash, as local communities and peoples grow "ever more protective of their regional customs [and] collective identities" (2003, p. 6). The potential for the loss of authenticity or uniqueness in the face of ever-increasing commodification is a concern that plays a significant role in neighborhood choice.

The notion of seeking authenticity through consumption may seem paradoxical. However, as Holt points out, while authenticity means "avoiding contact with mass culture," its cousin, connoisseurship, involves "reconfiguring mass cultural objects" (2000, p. 241). Personal

style and identity can therefore be expressed through consumption practice in a variety of ways, ranging from the outright rejection of mass culture to the reappropriation and resignifying of mass cultural objects, to their acceptance. According to Douglas, consumption can therefore be read as a “cultural project”: “Everything that [the consumer] chooses to do or to buy is part of a project to choose other people to be with who will help him to make the kind of society he thinks he will like the best” (2003, p. 145).

In the case of gentrification, varying degrees of rejection of the mass consumer market—from refusing to live in a condo to boycotting chain supermarkets in favor of independent corner stores—is a way in which individuals seek to find or create a society with somethingness in a world where nothingness has become pervasive. This search is one centered on the idea of the unique, as the increasing standardization of urban consumption spaces works to “submerge” individual identities and diversities (Zukin, 2003, p. 129).

However, because perception of regionalism or uniqueness is subjective, there is no one true authenticity. Grazian suggests the concept of a “sliding scale of authenticity,” which ranges from the most commercial places and products to the most “authentic, exotic and hip.” These objects are positioned in relation to one another according to individually manufactured definitions of “subcultural cool”; hence, the “sliding scale” (2003, p. 72).

It is worth noting that those in a position of privilege—such as the gentrifying class—are usually those for whom the loss of somethingness is a concern. Cultural elites are particularly capable of seeking alternatives to materialism, because they have typically come from social environments where material scarcity is not a concern. In addition, individuals with an elite background can gain social prestige from idealist practices (Holt, 2000,

p. 248). By seeking areas that evoke the ideas of history and community, members of the gentrifying class position themselves in opposition to other groups who are perceived as buying into impersonal materialist culture.

Identity Formation

Through Oppositions

In *The Social Structure of Communities*, Suttles observes that residential groups gain their identities not through their internal cohesiveness, but rather “their most apparent differences from one another” (1972, p. 50). Often, my interview subjects would directly compare themselves to other groups in and around the city, from North Side yuppies to suburbanites who experience the city as tourists. Their choice to live in Pilsen and its surrounding neighborhoods was therefore in part an act of social differentiation.

When describing residents of the North Side, Peter calls them “douche bags”: “I definitely get a sense of superiority . . . from North Siders.” Erin had similar responses, admitting that she has a “knee-jerk reaction” to “the sorts of people who live in condos . . . like yuppies, and like, stroller Nazis.” Will perceived them as having an “urbane sophistication” that made them unwilling to experience South-Side neighborhoods, like Pilsen. “How many people on the North Side do get down to the near South Side often?” he asked. “Probably not a whole lot.” These comments, among others, indicate the prevalent view of North Side yuppies as condo-dwellers uninterested in experiencing the city beyond their luxury neighborhoods. Interview subjects expressed a strong urge to set themselves apart from this group, referring to them as “rich people” with “hollow” lifestyles.

Peter, in fact, described North Siders as operating under an “alien”

financial schema. In contrast, he described there being a sort of “humility” in living in a less affluent neighborhood, such as Pilsen, Bridgeport, or Logan Square. Will’s comments echoed these observations: while he acknowledged that Pilsen’s (white and middle-class) residents probably chose to live there primarily because it is a cheap urban neighborhood, he also described them as often “highly educated” and “willing to engage . . . to some extent, with the homeless people, or with the woman and her kids at the bodega.” This statement draws an unspoken contrast between the white Pilsenite and the North Side yuppie, implicitly accusing the yuppie of an *unwillingness* to engage with the environment and the people around him.

Evan, who is originally from the suburbs of Chicago, offered a different perspective. He described the majority of the people that he grew up with as “sheltered, affluent white people” whose parents were afraid to let them into “the city”:

They just know the suburbs, they don’t know anything else. I don’t know how much of it is conscious or unconscious, but there’s an effort on my part to not be — because those people, when they do go to school, when they go to live in Chicago, it’s specific, kind of, you know, yuppie, kind of — North Side neighborhoods. And they don’t venture on the South Side at all because they think it’s big and scary. I think that very subconsciously, there is a desire to say, “I am not those suburbanites.”

To Evan, suburbanites represent a very sheltered group that, even upon moving to Chicago, restrict their experiences to a very narrow geographic and cultural area of the city. By choosing to exist in the narrow safety of yuppie North-Side neighborhoods and avoiding other areas deemed

too “big and scary,” they voluntarily remain ignorant of the city at large.

Holt argues that the perceptions of and desires for that which differs from the norm are what differentiate “cosmopolitan” tastes from “local” ones (2000, p. 236). Here, the perceived norm is the yuppie’s desire to live in a commodified North-Side neighborhood, characterized by condos and chain stores. Therefore, to the gentrifier, his desire to live in a neighborhood that is “dirtier” and “a little gritty,” part of the “true” city rather than the clean and commodified version of the yuppie’s experience, also positions him as more worldly and open-minded. In contrast, the self-imposed ignorance of suburbanites and yuppies can be read by the gentrifier as provincial; their aspirations to “urbane sophistication” that are enacted by avoiding less affluent neighborhoods than their own actually characterize them as unable to see the value in diversity. Whether their narrow-mindedness stems from a snobishness that precludes going to the South Side or from an actual fear of the “wrong side of the tracks,” the effect is the same. Gentrifiers feel justified in looking down at yuppies and suburbanites, because their consumer choices are read as willfully ignorant.

In addition to a desire to be differentiated from the norm, whether that was read as snobby yuppies or fearful suburbanites, I also observed the desire to establish oneself as an individual. Interview subjects often cited the differences they perceived between Pilsen and other, more developed neighborhoods, particularly those that played home to major educational institutions, like University Village (the University of Illinois at Chicago) or Hyde Park (the University of Chicago). In a university neighborhood, other people of the same demographic — mostly young, white, and middle-class — “can basically be compared to you, in a very direct way,” commented Will. This statement seemed to reveal a sense of discomfort at one’s status and institutional affiliation being easily

legible, even while on the street. In a neighborhood dominated by a school, people who are a part of this demographic are automatically read as “rich college students.” Part of the appeal that Will saw in living in a neighborhood without such an affiliation was that “there still aren’t a whole lot of other, similar people in their twenties, . . . white middle-class people, living around you.” He commented that this new “minority” status seemed to lead to a greater sense of “connection to the space,” and allowed him and those like him to negotiate their own identities as individuals, rather than be stereotyped as college students. “In an ideal world,” said Will, people “might not think much of [my position] at all”; he would be just “another component” of the neighborhood.

Through Negotiating Danger

The simultaneous desires to differentiate oneself from the norm and to be regarded as an individual in the urban landscape came through particularly clearly when interview subjects discussed the idea of danger. The Lonely Planet guide to Chicago describes Pilsen as having “its rough spots,” but adds, “if you stick to the main drags, you’ll be fine” (Baty, 2004, p. 89). Statements like these glamorize the perceived dangers of a “rough” neighborhood and draw on the reader’s anxieties about its safety while acting to reassure him. The rest of Pilsen is still depicted as an unknown quantity, an area where, in Grazian’s analysis, “only the most daring and adventurous of middle-class whites might venture.” Guides like these incorporate fantasies of risk into their descriptions, drawing an association between danger and authenticity (Grazian, 2000, p. 237). Thus, the individual who is able to successfully navigate Pilsen is set apart from the disdainful yuppie or the fearful suburbanite, while also being able to be seen on his own terms as an individual “urban ‘pioneer,’” conquering previously unexplored frontiers of the city (p. 254–255).

Everyone that I interviewed agreed that the common perception of Pilsen was that of a dangerous neighborhood, but most dismissed it. In a quote cited above, Evan mocked suburbanites for avoiding the South Side because they consider it “scary”; this derision for fear seen as unwarranted was a commonly held sentiment. “A lot of people, I think, are afraid to go to Pilsen still, but it’s quite safe,” said Erin. A fluent Spanish-speaker, she acknowledges that knowing the language has gone a long way towards making her feel more secure in the neighborhood, but still affirms that she has never felt like she was in danger. However, I found Tom’s account of the perception of danger to be the most interesting:

I don’t have that perception at all. I haven’t perceived anything like that, you know. And still, I tell people I live in Pilsen, you know, and surprisingly, even among my Mexican coworkers, they would go, “Ah, it’s a terrible neighborhood, you gotta get out of there, man — you’re crazy! It’s crazy!”

I just have this real generic sense that people consider Pilsen a gang neighborhood that you don’t like going to after a certain hour. And to live there is — is — sort of insane, you know. People get that — I’ve gotten that, not just from middle-class whites who work at the University of Chicago, who will go, “Oh, you walk down Cottage Grove to get to work? You’re fucking nuts!” you know — but I’m talking about first-generation in this country, from Mexico, you know, who say this.

Tom’s report of being considered “crazy” and “insane” for living in Pilsen and his emphasis on the fact that these are comments he receives from his Mexican coworkers in particular reveals a certain contradic-

tion. While he affirms that he has never seen Pilsen as a dangerous neighborhood, he also stresses the “insider” status of those who have warned him of its dangers, implying that while the threat may be real, he himself has never felt unsafe, and perhaps even enjoys surprising his coworkers with his willingness to confront the dangers of a neighborhood they regard as “terrible.”

Other stories of negotiating Pilsen’s potential dangers focused less on the perceptions of others and more on the confidence earned through establishing oneself in the neighborhood. In Lloyd’s analysis of Wicker Park, he observed that his white-male informants often remarked that over time, they would be recognized by Hispanic locals and believed that this mutual recognition was what made them less likely to be hassled. These arrangements were generally implicit rather than explicit, and were read as signs of respect (2005, p. 80). Peter’s story of his experiences establishing himself with local residents was very similar:

People say, for example, that there’s gangs in the neighborhood. And you see them, but at the same time it’s a community-oriented thing. And like, for example, they’ve been seeing my face so the guys on the street may or may not be gang members, but they recognize me . . . I just feel like that’s a quality that I respect. Respect is what I respect, I don’t know. . . .

I definitely feel safer. I feel safer having established myself with the neighbors. And you know, I’m not a networker, I’m kind of an introvert myself, but just, for example, if I was outside and some hoodlums came in the neighborhood, I feel like if my neighbors saw, they would do something. . . . Rather than say, “Oh fuck that guy, he’s just some white guy.”

He acknowledges that the neighborhood could be dangerous (though he is not quite sure) but also finds security in the relationships of mutual recognition that he has established with his neighbors. Working to create these relationships has also given him the sense of being regarded as an individual, rather than “some white guy” to be dismissed. Therefore, rather than treating danger as a source of allure, as Tom has, Peter values the way in which he has constructed a sense of safety by creating ties with the local community, even if they are unspoken ones.

While Tom’s and Peter’s stories are relatively successful accounts of negotiating their identities in relation to the perception of urban danger, other interview subjects confessed having recently—and disconcertingly—experienced fear. In a quote given above, Emily described having had to convince her parents that Pilsen was a safe enough neighborhood, despite their willingness to pay for her to move somewhere they considered more acceptable. Emily had never felt unsafe in the neighborhood until a month before our interview, when two men attacked her roommate outside their apartment. They still do not know why she was a target. “They saw something. What was that thing? We don’t know,” Emily said. “Is it that she’s a white girl? Is it that she’s a person alone? Maybe she looks like—maybe they were gang members—and she looked like the girlfriend of someone in a rival gang. We don’t know. . . . But my immediate assumption was that it was because she was a white girl.”

Billy’s story was similar to Emily’s in that he, too, had never perceived danger in the neighborhood until very recently—in his case, a week before our interview, when he came home to find his neighbor digging a bullet from his dashboard. Later that week he and his roommate heard what they thought were more gunshots outside their apartment. “Up until a week ago, the only reason I would’ve left [Pilsen] would’ve

been a job," he said. "For the entire time I've been here, I've never ever seen or heard anything to make me feel like it wasn't safe. Like walking around at night no matter what time, I never, ever thought about [being in danger] . . . But I guess I didn't know too much about it."

Where Tom and Peter feel that they have earned a place in the neighborhood by having successfully avoided its dangers, Emily and Billy's recent experiences have made them reconsider their original feelings of safety and security. In Emily's case, she was painfully reminded of her own identity as an outsider in the community. Both have decided to move out when their leases end.

Finding a Sense of History

Aesthetic Dimensions of History

A sense of history is implicit in the notion of authenticity, because it differentiates a neighborhood with "character" from an artificial residential development. While new condominiums and shopping centers exist as monuments to modern industrial design, neighborhoods that have not yet been completely gentrified still boast a visible sense of architectural—and by extension, socioeconomic—history. The uneven and piecemeal renovations of existing building stock means that many structures can be seen as urban palimpsests, reflecting each stage in renovation and the history of the neighborhood as a whole. In addition, gentrifying neighborhoods generally do not boast as many commercial amenities as more affluent areas. While one might see this as an inconvenience, the subjects I interviewed all saw this lack of centralized commercial activity as a positive thing. Being able to physically read the ethnic and social history of a neighborhood in its architecture and its amenities is an

important way in which individuals can feel connected to a nostalgic, non-commodified past.

Suttles describes new residential developments as having “distinct boundaries,” “reinforced by a unified architectural design.” Each “possesses a ready-made name and an image or identity even before it is occupied,” often “manufactured by owners and advertising men” (1972, p. 31). In this way, both the condominium and the suburban home act as physical manifestations of architectural modernism. “Machines for living,” their interchangeable layouts and interiors are the result of architectural plans that have been imposed from the top-down. Ewen argues that these types of spaces are in-line with a philosophy that “presupposes daily life supplied and controlled by others” (1988, p. 221). These tendencies, he believes, and the anomie that they engender, have created a longing for a more organic and “simpler” way of life—a longing for what architectural historian László Moholy-Nagy calls a shift back to “vernacular” architecture. Rather than reflecting the design vision of one person, the vernacular is a representation of “the official . . . history of a culture” (p. 223). Both attempt to conceal their mass-produced nature by offering their residents personalized amenities, from the condodweller’s friendly doorman to the suburban home’s faux-naturalistic landscaping, but those seeking authenticity from their living surroundings dismiss these contrivances as part of the “hollow” and “optimized” lifestyle that these residences offer.

Peter characterized the North Side as a place where “everything’s just a dime a dozen,” from the architecture to the commodities for sale. “If you don’t like this pizza shop, go a block down the street and you can have something else,” he said. “I don’t know, maybe that’s—it’s not a bad thing, it’s just that because of that, everything is just kind of hollow. And there’s no real soul or unique draw to any one particular establishment.”

Condos and condo living were described by Billy as following “kind of a scripted formula.” He described University Village, the recently redeveloped neighborhood surrounding the UIC campus, as “really artificial”—a “theme park” of a neighborhood that reminds him of Disneyland. “They came in, they knocked everything down and built their master plan.” When I pointed out that the University Village website bills it as “Chicago’s Newest Neighborhood,” he agreed. “It seems exactly like that, it’s not like, welcome to a neighborhood that has this rich history. . . . It just feels like people came in with bulldozers and built their stupid condos, just monotonous, terrible condos, in kind of one fell swoop.” Evan, who lives in a condo, explained, “This brand new condo, it’s a little too squeaky clean for me, like soulless . . . it’s just pretty sterile.” For him, moving to a South Side or traditionally working-class neighborhood is partly motivated by a desire to feel an “authentic Chicago experience”—and “this brand new condo kind of betrays that.”

Billy comments that the buildings in Pilsen, while they may be “weird spaces,” offer a sense of history in a way that “optimized” “big box” condos cannot. “Not that I’m gonna say that this [my] building is beautiful, ‘cause it’s an ugly, ugly building. But it’s got, for lack of a better word, ‘character,’” whereas in University Village, “You can just tell from the outside that every single one of those units is exactly the same.” In Pilsen, Billy argues, you can find interesting spaces that never could have been designed consciously that way, because they are the result of evolution over time: warehouses being converted to lofts, houses split up into apartments. “If some developer came in, and was thinking of building some artists’ lofts, they’d never build it like that.” Condo design, in contrast, is an ahistorical process in which the whims of designers and focus groups dictate the living spaces of many. “It’s like somebody said, here’s the optimal amount of juice bars we need, here’s the optimal amount of coffee places, and you

know, like, here it is: optimized. . . . It's kind of dehumanizing."

Unlike the commodified and standardized aesthetic experience offered by the condominium, public spaces in Pilsen were described as having a very "independent feel." Tom, who admitted that he knew nothing about the area before he moved there, described seeing a church across the street from his home: "[It] has this total Bohemian look to it. But the graffiti — it's spray painted in Spanish, you see anti-yuppie remarks, you know, 'down with the yuppies,' things like that. The subway, the 18th Street El, is decked out with murals, those really wonderful murals." Even by passively experiencing the public spaces available for consumption in Pilsen, Tom was able to read Pilsen's entire history, from its status as a Bohemian immigrant enclave to its transition to a Hispanic population, and contemporary tensions about further neighborhood change.

Lloyd argues that working-class neighborhoods appeal to gentrifiers because their often run-down, derelict appearance is aestheticized in the middle-class imagination as "mysterious and desirable" (2007, p. 35). Such an analysis implies that the gentrifying class is aesthetically drawn to the decaying working-class neighborhood because they glamorize poverty and dilapidation. However, I believe the reality is that authenticity can be found through a sense of architectural history. Refurbished and repurposed spaces are unique in a way that new buildings cannot be because they can reflect change over time. While buildings in Pilsen are often "weird" and "ugly," their aesthetic connection to the neighborhood's history is perceived as more authentic and personal than the amenities that condo living has to offer.

Cultural Dimensions of History

Grazian argues that authenticity can be something located in time as well as space, "specifically in the recent historical past before the 'invasion' of the

conventioneer and the tourist" (2000, p. 184–185). Though she is not Hispanic, Erin said that one of the things that appealed to her the most about Pilsen was that "it's really representative of the Mexican and Mexican American experience in the United States." This sets it apart from other ethnic neighborhoods in Chicago, as Tom observed: "When you walk through Little Italy, you don't feel like it's very *Italian*. You walk through Greektown, it doesn't feel very *Greek*, you know. But you walk through Pilsen, and you see — you see Mexican flags. You see there are storefronts where people wait for the bus to go to Mexico." Pilsen as a community has not yet become appropriated by consumer culture as an Americanized tourist attraction, and thus can be seen as a more authentic space than other ethnic neighborhoods that *have* been commodified in this way.

Tom's comment about seeing people "wait for the bus to go to Mexico" only highlights the strong ties that exist — and are clearly legible, even to outsiders — between Pilsen and Mexico. These connections are characteristic of what Castles calls a "transnational community," a community formed when international migrants maintain recurring and significant links in multiple places, creating social and cultural identities which transcend national boundaries (2003, p. 45–47). These continued and sustained links to a historical point of origin are perhaps the very definition of what it means to be authentic. By reinforcing a "multicultural image of place," the neighborhood is perceived as an inherently more authentic space (Grazian, 2003, p. 207).

In short, Pilsen is Mexican in a sense that Greektown cannot be Greek, because a dense two-way flow of people, capital, and ideas exists between the immigrant community and its country of origin. Mexican culture in Pilsen has not been commodified or Americanized for the outside consumer; rather, it continues to evolve as the result of a long history of exchange between Mexican Chicago and Mexico itself.

Longing for a Sense of Community

Spontaneous Interactions and Diversity

In Grazian's analysis, the urban community is positioned in the mind of the cultural consumer as a symbolic space of authenticity, its legitimacy measured by its ability to project a sense of intimacy. The notion of community as safe haven for primary networks and personal connections is therefore positioned in opposition to perceptions of the urban world as a "normative. . . 'world of strangers'" characterized by anomie and alienation (2000, p. 255). Because the social networks in immigrant communities are often based on family ties as well as ethnic solidarity (Castells, 1978, p. 27–28), the ethnic enclave is often seen as an alternative to the estrangement of contemporary urban living. Park actually describes the immigrant community as "frequently nothing more than a transplanted village" (1925, p. 119).

For the gentrifying class, the heterogeneity created when sharing a living space with working-class and non-white residents is another part of a perceived authentic urban experience, even if personal interaction with the community remains superficial (Lloyd, 2002, p. 109). "There's definitely an appeal [to it]," said Peter. "I'm surrounded by people who are not necessarily like me, or from backgrounds like mine — and it could be just like, one of those white-guy slumming things, you know, but I think it's interesting, it keeps things interesting." "In my neighborhood, like walking down the street, I definitely notice that I get a lot more nods and smiles from people than in any other neighborhood," he said, whereas on the North Side, he felt that people just "shrug you off."

Will believed that this quality of diversity in Pilsen was what actually created the ability to connect with others. "There's just like this quirky . . . there's like a bunch of ridiculous people around," said Will.

“You’re not gonna have the same spontaneous conversation outside of J. Crew on North Avenue as you are just waiting for the bus or something.” In contrast, other neighborhoods in Chicago felt “a lot more established and less spontaneous” to him. He observed that even the outsider in Pilsen was generally more willing to engage with others — whether it was Pilsen’s homeless population, or “the woman and kids at the bodega” — while the social life of other neighborhoods felt less diverse and more “institutionalized.” Billy said, “I like it when people, random people, interact in public. It’s refreshing.” For the gentrifying class, living in a working-class or ethnic neighborhood gave individuals the opportunity to spontaneously connect with people different than themselves, an experience which this group has a predisposition to be open to and to value.

In addition to being able to have spontaneous interactions, many people I interviewed valued living in a neighborhood that they perceived to have a strong and public sense of community. “There’s like, a block party aspect to it,” Peter said. “Warmer weather, people on their stoops know each other, they gather, they have community events, the parks fill up with people who know each other.” Other comments were very similar. “I really like neighborhoods when there’s a lot of people out and walking around a lot,” said Erin, which she compared to areas dominated by condos, where “people tend to keep to themselves a lot more.” Billy told me, “There’s a lot more kids around than in a lot of neighborhoods, which is nice. And during summer there’s a lot of people out in the street, that’s nice to be around. . . . A street just feels a lot different when there are people on it versus when there isn’t, and it’s just, I don’t know, a different mood, almost.”

This block-party aspect is what Suttles calls the area’s “street life” (1968, p. 73). He argues that these interactions are a way for long-term residents of the area to build trust relationships, establishing a public moral

order by creating personal rather than formal relations with one another “where particularistic loyalties replace impersonal standards of worth” (p. 8). Though the informal and open nature of the street creates many opportunities for spontaneous interaction (p. 76), the highly personal and private nature of these conversations make it difficult for new members, particularly neighborhood outsiders, to enter in long-term relationships of any depth with local residents. While the gentrifying class values the ability to interact spontaneously with those not like themselves and values the perceptible community found in immigrant neighborhoods, this personal aspect of street life very often keeps them from being involved with the local community in anything more than a superficial way. The use of adjectives like “ridiculous” or “bizarre” or “random” by Will and Billy to describe spontaneous interactions with strangers indicates that these types of interactions are both highly uncommon and located very far outside their norms of urban social interaction.

Interview accounts of the value of community and the desire to connect with others were frequently complicated by feelings of not knowing how or whether to participate. “I dream about interacting with my neighbors, families that have been there for generations,” Evan said. “I’d love to be a total part of the neighborhood. But I sneak out the door and drive away, you know?” While Evan believed that his dream of joining the neighborhood community has been prevented because he lives in a condo and has few avenues through which he can encounter his neighbors, others saw it as characteristic of urban living in general. Billy remarked, “When I was living in Little Italy, which is mostly UIC students, I didn’t know my neighbors either. I guess that kind of random talking to people on the street, that’s something I kind of wish would happen more. I like it when people talk to me, but I don’t talk to people—I feel weird about it.” “This is probably true of most people who are

of a 'gentrifying class,'" said Will. "I don't think that we interact at all . . . we're not going to engage with them in any way. And that might be because of my shy self, or something."

Though none of the people I interviewed had been able to participate in the community at large, no one perceived any formal barriers to participation. Rather, being or not being a part of the community was a matter of personal choice, as Peter described: "Even though it's predominantly Latino, everybody's pretty much welcome, I guess. There's really no—I feel like if you're open to that community aspect, then they're open to you." Erin had a similar comment: "I think that in Pilsen and other Mexican neighborhoods, when you make the effort, you can go a lot further." "For the most part, these people are willing to engage with us," Will said. "But of course there's gonna be a disconnect, it's not like I'm gonna get together with the old Italian men and drink and have them over for dinner. Not that I wouldn't like that." He described feeling like an outsider as "unavoidable" due to the privilege of his class position. Overcoming the social "disconnect" of race, class, and age differences as a neighborhood outsider is therefore seen as difficult, but not impossible. Evan's choice to "sneak out the door," Will's self-described shyness, and Billy's admission of feeling uncomfortable initiating social interactions with strangers are all things that could be countered by leaving one's personal comfort zone and, as Erin described, "being proactive" and making an effort, whether this was through making conscious efforts to be a better neighbor, or learning to speak Spanish.

Participating in a local economy

Zukin argues that in the streets of ethnic neighborhoods, such as Pilsen, "'aestheticized' commodity worlds are not rejected, but are irrelevant." The juxtaposition of different urban lifestyles—immigrants, native-

born minorities, and gentrifiers—acts to create a “hybrid” urban culture” distinct from the mainstream, which is dominated by corporations and the middle class. In contrast, the ethnic neighborhood features independently run stores that cater to the area’s specific clientele, reinforcing a sense of community identity. The social interdependence and neighborhood solidarity perceived in the ethnic shopping district helps encourage trust among strangers (Zukin, 2003, p. 130). As a result, consumers who value community identity have an obligation to support small urban corner shops by refusing to shop in supermarkets (Douglas, 2003, p. 149).

Evan described himself as very “self-conscious” about his consumer habits. While “the desire to not contribute to certain corporate machines” is something that affects his day-to-day consumer choices, he also admits, “I know that it’s very easy for me to, like, buy my groceries at the Egg Store rather than Walmart and say ‘Oh,’ and pat myself on the back, instead of actually going out and campaigning or something. But at least it’s like, it’s something.” While he is aware that his daily consumption patterns are “only a small part of it,” he also has the desire to “differentiate” himself from others by being conscious of the impact of his individual decisions.

Other interviews revealed similar sentiments. While for convenience’s sake he patronizes supermarkets like Dominick’s, Billy said, “I do feel better about going to places around here. It’s nice that instead of Starbucks, there’s a café on 18th and Halsted [Kristoffer’s]”. Places that are “family-oriented” and “family-run” are more desirable places to patronize. However, though many respondents expressed an appreciation for the independent retail options available in Pilsen, they had a difficult time articulating why these consumer options appealed. The idea of uniqueness was definitely an aspect of it; at one point in our conversation Billy mused that part of the fun of shopping at independent retailers was that the experience is not standardized the way shopping at

a chain supermarket is, where you can be assured that the same brands and foods will be available at each.

Tom saw patronizing independent establishments as a way of supporting the larger community and expressing solidarity against undesirable changes in the neighborhood. "With Pilsen, the McDonald's opens up," he told me, "and there're gonna be a lot of people who don't want to patronize it because, I believe — Los Comales down the street, which is the fast food taco place, belongs to someone they know . . . That's the sense of neighborhood that you have there."

As Tom believed, many establishments have a regular and loyal clientele that supports the business. The personal foundation for loyal consumers also lends itself to informal social interactions not often seen in the contemporary commercial sphere, like bargaining over prices or opening a tab; the informality and personal basis of business relationships in Pilsen is a big part of what gives it a "neighborhood feel," removed from the competitive, impersonal capitalist economy. But the intimacy of these relationships can also make commerce with strangers unused to informal exchange and who have not been able to build these relationships "awkward" (Suttles, 1968, p. 85), reminding the stranger of his status as an outsider in the community. Will related a story of being in a bodega to me, explaining, "The clerk was trying to speak with us in Spanish, and I'm uncomfortable speaking Spanish with people, I don't know why," berating himself for not trying to hold a conversation because of this insecurity. Billy reported similar experiences of shopping at the corner store by his apartment, where he is unable to communicate with the employees: "They've never — I've tried speaking to them, putting my stuff on the counter, like . . . I've never gotten a word out of them. I look at the register and pay, and never make eye contact. The language barrier — there are places where it's an issue," though he concedes that it's not a

huge issue, just one that occasionally leads to discomfort.

Therefore, shopping at independent and neighborhood-oriented stores is a way both to reject the “corporate” and overly commodified mainstream, while supporting some of the aspects of what gives the neighborhood its particular “neighborhood feel”: specifically, its local economy and the personal ties connected with it. However, much like participating in the public life of the neighborhood community, outsiders perceive informal boundaries to communication that prevent them from fully integrating and making satisfying connections—unless they make the conscious effort to overcome these boundaries.

In this section I have broken the concept of authenticity down into three dimensions, arguing that members of the gentrifying class position themselves in opposition to the alienation engendered by mass consumer culture by seeking areas that have a tangible sense of history and a visible community.

The identity of the individual gentrifier depends on their opposition to a perceived hegemonic culture: the North Side yuppie’s or the suburbanite’s preference for condo living or a more affluent neighborhood is read as buying into the commodification and urban isolation that the gentrifier is actively working to reject. In choosing to live in a neighborhood like Pilsen, the gentrifying class positions itself as more “authentic” and concerned with issues of authenticity than the norm.

Neighborhoods like Pilsen are characterized in contrast to neighborhoods on the North Side as having a greater and more tangible sense of history, both aesthetic and cultural, and a sense of community that allows for more personal connections. However, the gentrifier’s inevitable status as an outsider in the community places him as a spectator to it rather than an active participant in it, a subject position that can lead to feelings of tension and discomfort.

Reflexivity

I think it's unavoidable though, I think that anywhere I was living — anywhere in the city I was living, probably because I'm from the suburbs, I would feel in some ways like an outsider. And maybe [it's also] because of my somewhat privileged position of being able to choose, without much restraint on which neighborhood I live in. — Will, interview, April 4, 2008

Everyone I spoke to acknowledged that Pilsen has been undergoing change in the past few years. In fact, the 2004 *Lonely Planet City Guide: Chicago* comments that while the “hipster underground” has been relocating here for years, “artists and the Latino residents are becoming nervous about the future of their neighborhood” (Baty, p. 88–89).

“I think that everyone there is conscious of the fact that it's, you know, it's said to be gentrifying,” said Will. “The students seem to be certainly conscious of it . . . And I think clearly these Mexican people see all these white kids moving in . . . Gentrification seems very much to be my demographic's consciousness, and [theirs]. Most college kids have been to Wicker Park, and most people understand that it wasn't like that fifteen years ago, you know.” His comments reveal both a consciousness that the neighborhood has been changing, and also the culpability of the gentrifying class's migration in this change, as he has recognized his own relative privilege and status as an outsider. No one wants Pilsen to gentrify, neither the gentrifiers nor the locals, but there seems to be contention over whether these changes are inevitable—and how guilty the gentrifying class should feel.

One interesting theme that came up in interviews was that the *type* of gentrification that is happening in Pilsen today might be different

from the “bad” kind, such as the institutionalized and rapid transformation seen in University Village during the 1990s or the intensive land development that is taking place in other, more affluent parts of the city. “Obviously, no one is excited about it [gentrification]. But some people think it’s inevitable. And the other, more rational thought, is that it’s different, it’s unique in Pilsen,” said Will. “You don’t see tear-downs and condos being built up, like you see everywhere on the North Side.” Billy commented, “It seems different than the gentrifying going on at Maxwell Street and Halsted. So I guess it’s not like the evil all-consuming gentrification that is kind of talked about . . . but it’s definitely a change in neighborhood.” Emily drew a distinction between the neighborhoods that are “rising up” in visibility in Chicago’s alternative culture and gentrification at large. Neighborhoods like Logan Square or Pilsen, she argued, are becoming—not gentrified per se—but gentrified in a very specific way, “by artists and hipsters and people who’re into this ‘scene.’” However, theories of gentrification all argue that it is this first wave of “artists and hipsters” that pave the way for later redevelopment. This fact is not lost on the gentrifying class, as Peter observed: “The Chicago Arts District [is] attracting investors and white people from all over Chicago. . . . My impression is that they’re [the Podmajersky family] really going for something more commercial, they really want to—they really want to commercialize bohemia, I guess.” Ultimately, there seemed to be a sense that if gentrification change *is* inevitable, individual choice could not change it either way. “What can I do against it, like a developer who’s gonna tear [something] down,” said Will. He argued that even if he chose not to live in a particular neighborhood, there were certainly other, less self-aware consumers that would.

Observations like these do raise the uncomfortable question of whether it is just a matter of time before the neighborhood begins to

undergo more significant changes, like the tear-downs and condo developments seen as characteristic of later stages in the gentrification process. Emily, who was abroad during the months of December and January, described being incredibly surprised upon her return to see what had changed in the short time that she'd been away. "I can't stress enough how much just living here for eight months I have noticed gentrification happening," she said. "We can see condos going up around us. And I'm not talking gentrification of, you know, young . . . artistic scenesters—I'm talking about people building condos for rich people." In just the past few months, the landlord of the building next door to hers has changed her renting policy to offer annual leases rather than rent by the month. "The more I look around—who's moving in where—the more I see UIC students and artists, and the less I see Mexican families," Emily said. After her roommate was attacked, she admitted that they wondered whether it was an act of aggression against the gentrifying class in general: "Maybe now people are starting to feel like there's more white people here . . . and so maybe it's like a backlash against that, it's like, hey, you guys are taking over everything." Erin described feeling uncomfortable when, a year or two ago, stickers began popping up all over Pilsen that said, "Keep the gringos out!" More explicit than the anti-yuppie graffiti Tom had encountered, these overt statements of hostility made her feel both "weird" and "annoyed." "From the individual perspective," she complained, "It's like, why can't . . . you shouldn't judge me! Because you don't know [me.]" Tom argued that "the point that is missed" by anti-gentrification activists is that taking it as "their moral responsibility to keep these neighborhoods as they are" is also an implicit endorsement of continued residential segregation.

Erin and others resented being seen as gentrifiers rather than individuals who had rational reasons for moving to Pilsen. There is a "discomfort,

and that uncertainty, should I feel bad about living there?" she asked. "No one wants to be like, 'another gentrifier!'" When discussing his own living situation, Evan said, "Even though it is gentrifying, and we are the face of gentrification—you go because you want to feel some kind of authentic Chicago experience," drawing a contrast between this desire and "the talk of stereotypical gentrifiers," which he characterized as a sort of ethnic fetishism, "this sort of like, 'Oh, I love the local *flavor!*'" This tension between recognizing one's own role in perpetuating neighborhood change and having to weigh it against the search for authenticity in the face of alienation is one that is difficult to overcome.

"You have to feel comfortable with yourself," Erin told me. "I know that I would make the effort to be neighborly and to be a positive rather than a negative addition. So that's just one of those things you have to do for yourself." To her, overcoming the informal barriers to participating in the local community and becoming an active member was the way in which she could be regarded as an individual, rather than a gentrifier. When asked to describe what being a "negative" addition to the neighborhood might be, she described someone that would keep to themselves, and not be proactive about being a good neighbor. Peter's earlier story about getting to know his neighbors implied that it was his active attempts to be polite and get to know them that changed their view of him from "just some white guy" to an individual.

Stereotypical gentrifiers are thus characterized as people who are *invading* the neighborhood, passively consuming the local culture rather than integrating—or trying to integrate—into it. In order to feel comfortable with their own, economically privileged outsider status, and the impact that their presence can have on larger trends of neighborhood change, the individuals that I interviewed situated their actions and their context in opposition to this perceived majority. The people I inter-

viewed did not identify themselves as stereotypical gentrifiers, nor did they believe that the neighborhood change happening in Pilsen could be said to be following the stereotypical path of development. Much like the way in which I observed my interview subjects' identities being formed in opposition to the yuppie or the suburbanite, who are perceived as consumers unconcerned with questions of authenticity or personal connection, the opposition I observed to the idea of the stereotypical gentrifier hinged on an aversion to this notion of passive spectatorship or consumption.

Conclusions

I came into this project with the question, "Why do gentrifiers move to some neighborhoods, and not others?" Throughout the research process, I was worried that I would come to the inevitable conclusions that I had seen made so many times in the literature: that middle-class gentrifiers glamorize poverty, that they were "slumming it," or that they were engaging in a kind of invasive cultural tourism. In my interviews, I heard claims that Pilsen's appeal lay in the fact that it is "colorful," and "vibrant," and "interesting" — that it "has character" — and I feared the worst.

But once I sat down with the data, an interesting new story emerged. Yes, class and race issues are inextricable from the processes of gentrification. But to ascribe the desire for "character" in one's surroundings simply to the aestheticization of poverty or the ethnic "Other" and leave it at that would be to do this group — the gentrifying class — an enormous injustice. What I found was that for the individuals I interviewed, the appeal of gentrifying areas was not a superficial one but rather, one based in a deep-seated desire for authenticity in the face of urban alienation, and the decision to move to a gentrifying neighborhood was not undertaken lightly.

As Charles Taylor has observed, modernity does not come without its costs, "People speak of a loss of resonance, depth, or richness in our human surroundings; both in the things we use and in the ties which bind us to others" (1989, p. 501). "In a world of changing affiliations and relationships, the loss of substance, the increasing thinness of ties and shallowness of the things we use, increases apace" (p. 508). Gentrification can therefore be read as this: a choice ultimately rooted in the desire to reject the alienation of mass consumer culture and spaces in favor of the opportunity to forge personal connections with a wider community. ■

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