

"How a Neighborhood Like Ours Thrives":
Community Engagement in Design in Rogers Park

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:

BACHELOR OF ARTS
IN GEOGRAPHICAL SCIENCES
at THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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May 13, 2022

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Thank You

I want to thank Luke Joyner, who introduced me to this project and advised me on every aspect of this paper. Thank you, Luke, for trusting me to think and write about Howard/Ashland, and for reminding me, when the story became overwhelming, that it is in the details of our experiences—of our lives, of the built environment—that we find the most meaning.

This entire paper is rooted in a group of Rogers Park residents who came together with tremendous energy to write Alderwoman Hadden's office, develop specific design ideas for the Howard/Ashland site, and in general dedicate their significant bodies of personal experience and insight to try to make this process one that worked for all Rogers Parkers. Thank you, Tammy, Molly, and Simone, for letting me in on *your* process and for answering my many questions.

Thank you to Dr. Demetra Kasimis and Matthew Johnson, who oversaw an early draft of this paper, as well as Jamie Countryman, my preceptor and a Rogers Park resident and Hello Howard gardener themselves. Your feedback was critical as I shaped this paper at every stage.

And thank you, An, Julia, Jennifer, Emma, Rory, and Dimitriy, my brilliant friends, for listening to me talk about this project, with all of its frustrations and joys, for the last year. I couldn't have done any of this without y'all.

Prologue

On a recent day in early April, I joined a class of architecture students on their field trip to the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago. I had been taking the Red Line from Garfield up to the Howard “L” stop for nearly a year at that point, first out of my own interest and then, as my curiosity deepened, as a researcher. For an hour we wandered through the neighborhood in small groups, observing how the residential landscape evolved as we moved from the serene lakefront and busy Sheridan Road corridor in the east to the quieter streets in the west. Rows of single-family homes with long front walkways and lawns yielded to dense blocks of courtyard apartments. While we could have walked right up to the doors of the homes near the lake, more buildings were gated, and their gates grew taller, the further west we walked.

We soon arrived at the large lot on the southeastern corner of Howard Street and Ashland Avenue in the very north of Rogers Park, which has been my primary object of investigation over the past year. Depending on your perspective, the lot might appear as a vacant, underutilized space in an otherwise dense neighborhood, or as the site of the thriving Hello Howard Community Garden. On this particular day, which was cloudless and sunny despite the early spring chill, at least two dozen gardeners were there preparing their raised beds for the coming season. Tammy Besser, a Rogers Park resident and one of Hello Howard’s leaders, paused her work to speak with us about the garden and its role in the neighborhood.

Tammy explained that since it was established in 2014, Hello Howard has become a critical site for community building and connection for many in Rogers Park, particularly during the prior two years of pandemic. Some of the gardeners are refugees who cultivate varieties of vegetables from their countries of origin, both as sources of food and as a way to maintain some

connection with their homes and past ways of life. Other gardeners donate a portion of their yield to a community organization, which distributes it to neighbors who need food.

Almost as an aside, Tammy mentioned that some gardeners had developed a special variety of parsley. Several years ago, a neighbor who collects seeds donated some to the garden. The parsley variety was so successful that the gardeners saved the seeds from the first season's crop to plant the next, and over the years, the herb has adapted to the micro-climate of the neighborhood. Jokingly, Tammy referred to the new variety as "Rogers Parsley."

Rogers Parsley is a small example, I think, of the intentional community and close attention to place gardeners at Hello Howard have cultivated over the years. One dedicated group of gardeners took the time to select and save the best seeds year after year to create a plant that is particularly attuned to the Howard/Ashland site. The exact same process in another location, with different inputs of soil, water, and air, would yield a different result; it is the specific adaptation of the parsley to the conditions of the site that makes it so successful.

Tammy went on to explain that the City owns the lot and has long been interested in selling it. Several development companies have proposed ideas for it over the years, but none have moved forward. In late 2020, the 49th Ward Office, led by newly elected Alderwoman Maria Hadden, initiated a community engagement process to collect input from Rogers Park residents on what they might want to see at Howard/Ashland long-term. I first learned of the site as a participant in this process. While I am not a Rogers Park resident, I attended the third of the three public meetings because I wanted to learn about development processes in Chicago and how community members can help shape them. It was after attending this meeting and speaking casually with other participants that I decided to research the site and how it fits into the larger picture of Rogers Park as a neighborhood.

My engagement with the process quickly expanded to encompass not only Howard/Ashland and Rogers Park but current development processes in other parts of Chicago, and alternative community engagement methods from other places and historical moments. More than what any individual or group wants to see happen at Howard/Ashland, the story of the engagement process around it opens up questions like: what does it mean to design something for this site, in *this* time and in *this* community? How do Rogers Parkers want their neighborhood to evolve in response to profound issues like inequality and climate change? How can a development process help them do that?

As of May 2022, there are no public plans to sell the Howard/Ashland lot, and that suits Tammy and many of the other gardeners just fine. She is skeptical that a developer or the City would take the contributions of Hello Howard to the community seriously, and she doesn't think that a new development would be as valuable to Rogers Park as the garden is. She's also confident that, if a developer presented a plan for the site that didn't suit the needs of the neighborhood, the neighborhood would rally to prevent it. "Rogers Parkers," Tammy emphasized, "are very good at resisting bad development."



Hello Howard Community Garden, looking north

Introduction

I came to explore the wreck.
 The words are purposes.
 The words are maps.
 I came to see the damage that was done
 and the treasures that prevail.
 I stroke the beam of my lamp
 slowly along the flank
 of something more permanent
 than fish or weed...

...the thing I came for:
 the wreck and not the story of the wreck
 the thing itself and not the myth

- Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck"

knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless,
 impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world,
 and with each other

- Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

On October 1, 2020, the Chicago 49th Ward Office, in cooperation with the Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC), convened a community meeting¹ over Zoom to initiate a public engagement process to decide the fate of the city-owned lot on the southeastern corner of Howard Street and Ashland Avenue in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago. At the meeting, 49th Ward Alderwoman Maria Hadden introduced the engagement process, formally named the Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative (CDI), as an attempt to preempt a for-

¹ Metropolitan Planning Council, *Rogers Park Corridor Development: Community Kick Off*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TyPr8LpyM1o>.

profit developer from bypassing community needs and approaching the city with a plan for the site that would not take residents' opinions into account:

I want to make sure that we're not caught off guard or left just reacting to someone else's proposal. Even in my short time in office, we've received three proposals [for buildings on this site] that developers or community organizations have wanted to submit to my office or submitted to the City...So, going through this community development process, through the Corridor Development Initiative, we're really going to be putting first: what do Rogers Park residents want to see? What do Howard Area residents want to see in this space? What's the best use we can make of it? And how do we want to present ourselves so that we've got developers and companies reacting and responding to us, rather than the other way around?²

Development-as-usual, Alderwoman Hadden argues, in which developers come knocking to check the "community engagement" box after the bulk of the project proposal is already set in stone, isn't what the Rogers Park community wants or deserves. The 49th Ward Office and representatives of MPC said they intended the CDI to facilitate a more open and creative discussion among neighbors about their ideas for the site, without the primary emphasis on profit-maximization commonly brought in by developers.

Over the past several years, the Chicago Department of Planning and Development, through urban planning initiatives like We Will Chicago³ and INVEST South/West,⁴ has invited residents to attend meetings and give their opinions on what their neighborhoods need so that City officials can incorporate that input into new development. The Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative is one of these programs, which I'll refer to as "participatory planning processes," with the explicit goal of using community engagement to build a more equitable Chicago and address the inequalities created by urban planners failing to account for, and often

² Metropolitan Planning Council, 00:10:37-00:11:27.

³ Chicago Department of Planning and Development, "We Will Chicago," We Will Chicago, accessed December 8, 2021, <https://wewillchicago.us.engagementhq.com/projects>.

⁴ Chicago Department of Planning and Development, "INVEST South/West," accessed December 8, 2021, https://www.chicago.gov/content/city/en/sites/invest_sw/home.html.

explicitly ignoring or undermining, community needs.⁵ But despite this important goal, it is not clear how effective these participatory processes are at meaningfully integrating community opinion into final plans and designs.

To that end, I have two primary research questions. First, did the Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative accomplish its goal of prioritizing the opinions of Rogers Park residents over profit maximization for developers? To answer this question, I analyze the recordings of the three public community meetings held during the CDI, placing official statements and resident feedback into context with the City of Chicago's contemporary development practices and the primary debates surrounding development in Rogers Park. I employ City of Chicago reports, newspaper articles, maps of Rogers Park, and secondary historical literature to construct the narrative of the Howard/Ashland site and the extent to which the CDI process accomplished its goals on its own terms.

Second, and in response to my first question, how could the *goals* of the CDI—and by extension, those of public participation processes in the City of Chicago—expand to be even more specific and supportive of community development ideas and collective discussion? Here I employ secondary literature on public engagement strategies within the subfields of community geography and placemaking, as well as two case studies of alternative community-based development processes, to contextualize and investigate the terms that the CDI set for itself. I do not propose fixes to the CDI, but rather identify points in the process that illuminate the limitations and assumptions of its premises as Alderwoman Hadden and MPC presented them. I

⁵ Chicago Department of Planning and Development, "We Will Chicago," https://ehq-production-us-california.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/619b733895c1b692f9c63fb698c44d96a31661a0/original/1620226640/7450b390b556c3183cf2b3f059a993d5_Citywide_Plan_KickoffEvent_4.29.21.pdf?X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Credential=AKIAIBJCUK4ZO4WUUA%2F20211208%2Fus-west-1%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Date=20211208T164038Z&X-Amz-Expires=300&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Signature=2f6ba999c2ea1cdacc1835d48868e68e88f38d185efb7f8b9106a73cbe5c127e.

then place those moments into conversation with alternative public engagement methods in order to dream a little about what might be possible if we expand our idea of what community engagement in development looks like.

My emphasis throughout this investigation is on process. While I do outline the ideas for the site put forth by residents, the 49th Ward Office, and the Metropolitan Planning Council, I do not aim to make a normative claim about what should or should not happen at Howard and Ashland. What I propose is not a solution for the site, but a way of thinking about it and other available pieces of the City of Chicago that values wide-ranging community input and a generous, highly specific design process over the logics of developer-driven economics.

There are four categories of source materials I draw on in my analysis of the Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative. The first comprises archival documents and secondary literature on Rogers Park, which I use to contextualize the ideological divides present in the neighborhood. The second comprises the video recordings from the CDI process. The third comprises the literature of the emerging subfield of community geography in which I am situating this analysis, and the fourth literature on placemaking and community engagement processes. Here I give an overview of those third and fourth categories, which form the paper's academic roots. I engage the Rogers Park literature and the CDI recordings—the primary sources specific to this example—in the “Understanding Development in Rogers Park and Chicago” and “The Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative” sections, respectively.

Community Geography

This research rests upon community geography, an emerging subfield of human geography defined as “a praxis rooted in collaborations between academic and public scholars

resulting in mutually beneficial and co-produced knowledge. Community geography draws from and contributes to geographic theorizations of space and place, engaging with research in fields including development, urban geography, political ecology, critical food studies, and health geography.”⁶ I employ community geography not only as a set of methods to guide my engagement as a researcher in Rogers Park,⁷ but also as an instructive framework through which to assess the Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative. That is, if I am the academic scholar, I interpret the role of the urban planner as a kind of “public scholar” and a public engagement initiative like the CDI as a research process. This connection is explicit. The CDI sought to gather public input on the Howard/Ashland site. Representatives of MPC surveyed and hosted feedback sessions with community members to gather this input, then summarized their findings in a report and communicated their conclusions in public meetings. That is research, and the tenets of community geography illuminate an alternative approach to this kind of engagement.

The primary tenet of community geography is that community-based research allows researchers to facilitate knowledge *production*, rather than knowledge *collection*. Community geographers draw on the tradition of participatory action research⁸ to move the site of knowledge production away from the scholar and into the community. Shannon et al. frame this form of engagement not only as a set of methods for research but as *praxis*, a way of putting theory into practice. They draw on scholar-educator Paulo Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where in his definition of praxis he emphasizes that “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings

⁶ Jerry Shannon et al., “Community Geography: Toward a Disciplinary Framework,” *Progress in Human Geography* 45, no. 5 (October 1, 2021): 1147–68, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132520961468>.

⁷ Kate Driscoll Derickson and Paul Routledge, “Resourcing Scholar-Activism: Collaboration, Transformation, and the Production of Knowledge,” *The Professional Geographer* 67, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2014.883958>.

⁸ Sara Kinson, Rachel Pain, and Mike Kesby, eds., *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting People, Participation and Place* (Routledge, 2012), <https://www.routledge.com/Participatory-Action-Research-Approaches-and-Methods-Connecting-People/Kinson-Pain-Kesby/p/book/9780415599764>.

pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.”⁹ Community geography also draws on the work of (Chicago’s own) John Dewey and his writings on the practical exercise of democracy, in that community geographers consider it the job of the researcher to engage with members of the public and help them facilitate a discussion on the political life of their place.¹⁰ Those discussions will always be imperfect, and they are unlikely to result in quantifiable survey responses that researchers can easily translate into digestible conclusions. However, community geography proposes that through those discussions, community members can begin to develop collective responses to profound political problems like environmental degradation and economic inequality, and those responses should be the end goal of research.

This focus on public participation as a particularly sharp instrument of democracy is reflected in the work of political theorist Susan Bickford in her article “Constructing Inequality: City Spaces and the Architecture of Citizenship”¹¹ and Candace Rai in her book *Democracy’s Lot: Rhetoric, Publics, and the Places of Invention*.¹² Bickford argues that when we include the built environment—what we build, where, and for whom—in our consideration of democracy, “we can see that it is also significant as a space of attention orientation, a space that shifts citizens’ sense of what people, perspectives, and problems are present in the democratic public.”¹³ Rai argues that the democratic development of space, particularly in a neighborhood like Chicago’s Uptown, her area of study, with a large income gap between its wealthiest and poorest residents, can be messy and even brutal as group conversations illuminate deep ideological divides between neighbors with differing access to resources. But it is in these

⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000), 53.

¹⁰ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press, 2016).

¹¹ Susan Bickford, “Constructing Inequality: City Spaces and the Architecture of Citizenship,” *Political Theory* 28, no. 3 (2000): 355–76.

¹² Candace Rai, *Democracy’s Lot: Rhetoric, Publics, and the Places of Invention*, Rhetoric, Culture, and Social Critique (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016), <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/11383469>.

¹³ Bickford, “Constructing Inequality,” 356.

circumstances—where individual community member experiences are most likely to diverge from statistical averages, particularly if the neighborhood demographics are rapidly changing—that public participation matters the most. It is also critical to remember that public participation processes like the Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative and the one Rai outlines are not just political insofar as they deal with political issues, but also because they are conducted by or on behalf of government entities, and thus carry all of the burdens associated with bureaucracy and politicians seeking reelection.

It is also important to remember that there is no one definition of community, and facilitators of any community process need to be careful not to create a false consensus where none exists.¹⁴ That is, we cannot assume a “pre-existing public awaiting engagement.”¹⁵ Rather, community geography recognizes that—in the case of this investigation—residents of Rogers Park, even those who live right next to each other near the Howard/Ashland site, are going to disagree about what should happen to it.¹⁶ I argue that the job of the researcher, or the planner, is thus not to uncover the latent truth of what a community wants in order to funnel that information into a design, but to facilitate a process that allows residents with disparate viewpoints to discuss and collectively decide what kind of community they want to live in.

Placemaking

Community geography finds its origins in the geographic concept of “placemaking,” which finds its roots in the writing of activist-journalist Jane Jacobs. In her landmark book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs advocates for planning cities around social,

¹⁴ Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Shannon et al, 1149.

¹⁶ Liam Harney et al., “Developing ‘Process Pragmatism’ to Underpin Engaged Research in Human Geography,” *Progress in Human Geography* 40, no. 3 (June 1, 2016): 316–33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515623367>.

visual, and economic complexity, within and from below, rather than by forcing an artificial order onto existing communities from above.¹⁷ She lambasts post-war urban renewal policies that privileged automobile transport and suburban homogeneity over latent density and diversity of uses. Such policies did not, for Jacobs, lead to the harmonious utopian neighborhoods that their designers imagined, but rather visually boring and socially dead cities, neighborhoods, and suburbs.

Instead of continuing along that failed line, Jacobs argues for planning cities around “a most intricate and close-grained diversity of uses that give each other constant mutual support, both economically and socially.”¹⁸ She argues that the activities of people, rather than the siloed visions of architects and urban planners, or politicians and speculators, should guide the design and planning of urban spaces. Her arguments pose an interesting contradiction. While her distaste for abrupt changes to a place from above can be seen as a politically progressive defense of residents against government and corporate powers, her distaste for abrupt changes to a place from *anywhere* could also be viewed as a conservative stance that would prevent cities from evolving to comfortably accommodate increasing numbers of people. To take her argument in the spirit in which she wrote it, I argue that development should balance a concern for the character of a place with a recognition of a residents’ current social conditions and needs, in order to not turn cities into places that are too precious to alter.

Other scholars have continued Jacobs’s thread, developing the idea of placemaking as a cooperative design process shared between communities and professionals. William H. Whyte’s *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*¹⁹ builds off of Jacobs and develops observational research

¹⁷ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Vintage Books, 1961).

¹⁸ Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 14.

¹⁹ William Hollingsworth Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (The Conservation Foundation, 1980).

methods to understand how people carve out spaces for themselves within the built landscape over time. Like *Death and Life*, *Social Life* is similarly cited as an original text in the development of placemaking as a geographical concept, although Whyte, like Jacobs, does not use the term himself. Exactly how placemaking is defined today is an ongoing debate in the literature. Lynda H. Schneekloth and Robert G. Shibley, in their book *Placemaking: The Art and Practice of Building Communities*²⁰ define placemaking as “daily acts of renovating, maintaining, and representing the places that sustain us.”²¹ They interrogate the role of design professionals in placemaking, and the extent to which collaborations between professionals and the public are possible and worthwhile. Community members, they argue, should set the priorities of a project and designers should consolidate and execute that input. For them, placemaking is not only a type of design process, but a method for cultivating democracy through the built environment. It is an opinion they share with community geographers. “If we open the dialogue in each placemaking activity to multiple and contradictory knowledges, we are truly engaged in democratic action,” in the creation of a truly public space.²²

Jeffrey Hou’s article “Bottom-up Placemaking,”²³ Karen Schmelzkopf’s article “Urban Community Gardens as Contested Space,”²⁴ and Rebecca L. Rutt’s article “Cultivating Urban Conviviality”²⁵ present increasingly elaborate portraits of garden spaces and how they are created and stewarded by their communities. These analyses of placemaking processes within green spaces are particularly important to this study given the current use of the Howard/Ashland

²⁰ Lynda H. Schneekloth and Robert G. Shibley, *Placemaking: The Art and Practice of Building Communities* (New York: Wiley, 1995), <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/1707897>.

²¹ Schneekloth and Shibley, *Placemaking*, 1.

²² Lynda H. Schneekloth and Robert G. Shibley, “Implacing Architecture into the Practice of Placemaking,” *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-) 53, no. 3 (2000): 130–40.

²³ Jeffrey Hou, “Bottom-up Placemaking,” *Landscape Architecture Australia*, no. 157 (2018): 77–81.

²⁴ Karen Schmelzkopf, “Urban Community Gardens as Contested Space,” *Geographical Review* 85, no. 3 (1995): 364–81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/215279>.

²⁵ Rebecca L. Rutt, “Cultivating Urban Conviviality: Urban Farming in the Shadows of Copenhagen’s Neoliberalisms,” *Journal of Political Ecology* 27, no. 1 (January 20, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2458/v27i1.23749>.

lot as a community garden. Though Hou does not offer a specific definition, he ties the three gardens he analyzes explicitly to placemaking and explains the community desire to cultivate these places as “working to mitigate the impacts of rapid urbanization from the bottom up.”²⁶ In his framework, gardens are small-scale placemaking initiatives that offer city dwellers refuge from industry and pollution. Schmelzkopf offers a similar analysis of a network of seventy-five garden spaces at varying levels of formality in the Loisaída neighborhood on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Like Bickford, she examines the political nature of these spaces, specifically tying them to local land use policies:

[Community gardening] has often been subsidized by local and federal governments, so that residents can produce foodstuffs for themselves. The typical scenario has been for gardens to be established on land that is considered to have little market value. At the end of the crisis, although the problems of the urban poor persist, governments generally withdraw their support and focus instead on profitable real estate development on the former garden plots...Several of the large gardens [in Loisaída] have become politically contested spaces, and conflicting community needs have led to a dilemma of whether to develop the land for low-income or market-rate housing or to preserve the gardens.²⁷

The same could be said verbatim of the Hello Howard Community Garden on the Howard/Ashland lot. Through the Rutt, Hou, and Schmelzkopf case studies, we can distinguish two parallel placemaking processes at work. First, there is the creation and stewardship of a garden by unrelated individuals, an informal group of individuals, or a formal private organization. The garden can transition between all three of those types of networks over time as it grows in popularity and capacity. Second, there is the *de jure* control of the space by a government entity who can decide how and for how long the garden can legally operate. Schneekloth and Shibley elucidate a similar tension between community members and design

²⁶ Hou, “Bottom-up Placemaking,” 77.

²⁷ Schmelzkopf, “Urban Community Gardens as Contested Space,” 364.

professionals, and argue that the collaboration between the two groups is what constitutes the placemaking process.²⁸

In the context of the garden placemaking and development case studies, I argue that what we actually see throughout the CDI are two distinct, often contradictory kinds of placemaking—one that is professional and grounded in technical knowledge, and the other less formal but grounded in lived experience—that cannot easily be reconciled into a unified placemaking process that satisfies both groups. An analysis of the role of private property and the commons within cities illuminates that this conflict between a technocratic process and a community one is not incidental, but intrinsic. Silke Helfrich and David Bollier define the commons as “a vast array of self-provisioning and governance systems that flourish mainly outside of both the market and the State” and that are stewarded by the communities that draw resources from them.²⁹ The commons denies the “infinite growth” mentality of modern capitalism and encourages “conviviality,” or the monopoly-disrupting shared use—not ownership—of the means of production.³⁰ Isabelle Anguelovski’s essay from the same collection explicitly ties the future of urban gardening to the commons, writing that “urban gardening is a response to the social rift by cultivating under-exploited land...so that the market does not fully control the soil and the people.”³¹ Taken together, these analyses propose a view of urban farming as resource sharing that does not just provide gardeners food or a refuge from the city, but that transforms their relationships to resources and each other. A development process that does not recognize or value those relationships and the ways in which communities can develop places organically thus

²⁸ Schneekloth and Shibley, *Placemaking*.

²⁹ Silke Helfrich and David Bollier, “Commons,” in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. Giacomo D’Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 75, <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/10113893>.

³⁰ Marco Deriu, “Conviviality,” in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. Giacomo D’Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/10113893>.

³¹ Anguelovski, “Urban Gardening,” 193.

forfeits its opportunity to substantively engage community members and incorporate their knowledge and insights into the built environment.

Understanding Development in Rogers Park and Chicago

Rogers Park

It is important to understand the Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative both as a somewhat generic design process, and one that occurs in the specific context of the Rogers Park neighborhood. Residents of Rogers Park like to talk about their neighborhood as a model of community pluralism, a place that welcomes immigrants and refugees and where no racial or ethnic group has held the majority since the 1960s.³² It is, in many ways, true. However, this narrative of unity and strength in diversity conceals several important spatial and ideological divides, some clear, others harder to characterize. Ellen Berrey's 2015 book *The Enigma of Diversity: The Language of Race and the Limits of Racial Justice* sheds light on these conflicts and the hierarchies they create within the neighborhood.³³

The first divide is geographical. While Rogers Park's racial and ethnic diversity is almost universally celebrated by residents and officials as one of its strengths, some residents talk about the area along and north of Howard Street—where the Howard/Ashland lot is situated—as dangerous and blighted. It wasn't always the case. A 1982 study of the Rogers Park community from Loyola University Chicago found that the North of Howard area—defined as the area north of Howard Street, east of the “L” tracks, and south of the Calvary Catholic Cemetery—was once “a fashionable area in Chicago but, in part because of neglect by both building owners and tenants, the area has become a problem for Rogers Park.”³⁴ (Because the Howard/Ashland lot is not strictly in the North of Howard area, I define the larger “Howard area” of which it is a part as

³² Gail Danks Welter, *The Rogers Park Community: A Study of Social Change, Community Groups, and Neighborhood Reputation* (Center for Urban Policy, Loyola University of Chicago, 1982), 44.

³³ Ellen Berrey, *The Enigma of Diversity: The Language of Race and the Limits of Racial Justice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

³⁴ Welter, *The Rogers Park Community*, 7.

the area north of Birchwood Avenue and east of the “L” tracks in order to include the properties along the southern edge of Howard.)

Some Rogers Park residents are concerned about the higher concentration of subsidized housing units north of Howard relative to the rest of the neighborhood.³⁵ This view was strongly represented throughout the CDI, with concerns about Howard area residents’ perceived lower socioeconomic status—and their potential impact on the rest of Rogers Park—couched in appreciation for the neighborhood’s racial and ethnic diversity. This point of view isn’t new; some participants at public forums on development in Rogers Park in the late 1980s “drew upon the notion of the neighborhood as racially and economically mixed to justify their opposition to subsidized low-income housing.”³⁶

In part because residents viewed the Howard area as less desirable, starting in the 1980s the 49th Ward concentrated redevelopment efforts on the commercial corridors it saw as safer bets for investment. Dorothy Gregory, a white Rogers Park resident who spearheaded redevelopment efforts at the time, put it plainly: “Clark Street was iffy. Howard Street was iffy, Morse Avenue was a disaster. Let’s do Sheridan Road because it’s safe and it’s also a gateway.”³⁷ Thus development and new housing construction concentrated along Sheridan in the southern part of Rogers Park, near Loyola and Lake Michigan, a lakefront axis that was whiter, wealthier, and already more accessible to through-traffic between downtown Chicago and Evanston.

This geographic conflict points toward a larger disagreement about the need for additional housing in Rogers Park, where that housing should be built, and what kind of

³⁵ Berrey, 134.

³⁶ Berrey, 145.

³⁷ Berrey, 149.

housing—subsidized or market-rate, studio or family-sized units, or a combination of multiple types—it should be. In particular, some residents, both from within the Howard area and without, express concern about further concentrating subsidized units north of Howard. Some (not all) of this opposition manifests as a kind of not-in-my-backyardism, which is often the kind sandwiched between disclaimers about the speaker’s love for Rogers Park’s diversity. Other residents think that due to its high density of both subsidized and non-subsidized units, the Howard area bears more than its fair share of residential density compared to the rest of the neighborhood. Others still think that the existing subsidized housing hasn’t been well managed, and they are concerned that an additional development would add to that burden.

But many people do want additional housing in Rogers Park. Some of them advocate specifically for housing that is affordable to the neighborhood’s lowest-income residents—households making less than 15% of the area median income (AMI). Rogers Park and the adjacent neighborhood of West Ridge are the primary destinations for refugees arriving to Chicago, and some residents think a new development should prioritize their specific housing needs. Others favor additional subsidized housing, but as a component of a mixed-income development that also includes market-rate units. Others still think the neighborhood could use more housing, but want a market-rate development with no additional subsidized units beyond the minimum number required by the City.³⁸

There are also many people who sympathize with several viewpoints, or who aren’t sure what they think. All of these divides are deeply embedded in the Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative, but the opinions of many community members on even one issue like

³⁸ Lori E. Lightfoot, “Amendment of Municipal Code Titles 2 and 17 by Modifying Chapters 2-44, 17-3 and 17-4 Regarding Affordable Housing (2015 and 2021 Affordable Requirements Ordinances and Near North/Near West and Milwaukee Corridor Pilot Areas),” Pub. L. No. O2021-1226 (2021).

housing aren't fixed or even known. That ambiguity and uncertainty of opinion is evident throughout the CDI, just as much as more legible disagreements.

The Howard/Ashland Site

The recent history of the Howard/Ashland lot begins with Lerner Newspapers, a chain of Chicago-area weeklies that housed printing operations on the site for several decades in the mid-twentieth century. According to the Cook County Recorder of Deeds,³⁹ in 1985, Lerner Newspapers was sold to St. Louis-based Pulitzer Publishing Co. and the lot was acquired by Chicago Title & Trust Company, which transferred ownership of the land to Pulitzer in 1990. In 1996, the Burrell Restaurant Corp., a partner in the development group that built the Gateway Plaza shopping mall a few blocks west of the site on the other side of the “L” tracks, purchased the lot. Due to Burrell’s financial problems, the lot bounced between it, Standard Bank and Trust Company, and Parkway Bank and Trust Company between 1998 and 2012. The City purchased the lot from Standard Bank and Trust Company, which held it at the time, in December of 2012 for \$900,000. As part of the sale, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency undertook a minor remediation of the then-vacant site and declared it free of environmental hazards. The City of Chicago Department of Planning and Development (DPD) issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the site in May of 2014, seeking ideas for a mixed-use development project that would integrate well into the existing Howard streetscape.⁴⁰

RFPs are the means by which the City selects contractors for publicly funded projects. A Department of the City—in this case, Planning and Development—writes and issues an RFP for

³⁹ Karen A. Yarbrough - Cook County Clerk, “Parcel Page For Street Address: 7519 N ASHLAND AVE” (Cook County Recorder of Deeds, December 15, 2019), https://www.ccrecorder.org/parcels/show/parcel_title/1629702/.

⁴⁰ City of Chicago Department of Planning and Development, “7519-33 N. Ashland Ave. Request For Proposals (RFP),” May 27, 2014, https://www.chicago.gov/content/city/en/depts/dcd/supp_info/7519-33-n--ashland-ave-.html.

a project. The RFP is usually a multi-page document that includes an outline of the direction the City wants the project to take, as well as some criteria by which the resulting bids will be measured. City employees then evaluate the responding proposals and select a winner to take on the project.

No serious proposals were put forth in response to the 2014 RFP for Howard and Ashland. To activate the space while it searched for a permanent use, the City leased the site to Peterson Garden Project,⁴¹ a Chicago nonprofit that manages community gardens on city-owned lots. When the lease was announced, some residents expressed concern that a garden would become a “gentrification bullet” for the area and serve primarily white residents from other parts of the neighborhood instead of Howard area residents, who are mostly African American.⁴² Others disagreed and viewed the garden as an opportunity to bring community members together in a long-vacant space. Whatever the concerns, Peterson began the Hello Howard Community Garden on the southern two-thirds of the site in 2014, with the contractual stipulation that Hello Howard, like all of the gardens the organization manages, would be temporary, authorized only until the City found a permanent use for the land or a developer successfully undertook a project on the site.⁴³

Peterson Garden Project has continued to operate Hello Howard on the southern two-thirds of the site in the years since, with the northern third remaining mostly vacant. According to Dr. Molly Doane, a Rogers Park resident and anthropologist specializing in urban community gardens, in the summer of 2020, a group of refugees from Rogers Park began planting in the soil

⁴¹ “Home - Peterson Garden Project,” accessed August 30, 2021, <https://www.petersongarden.org/>.

⁴² Benjamin Woodard, “Peterson Garden Project a ‘Gentrification Bullet’ for Howard St.: Critics,” *DNAinfo Chicago*, October 23, 2013, <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20131023/rogers-park/peterson-garden-project-gentrification-bullet-for-howard-st-critics>.

⁴³ Benjamin Woodard, “Peterson Garden Project Turning Abandoned Howard Lot Into Community Gardens,” *DNAinfo Chicago*, October 17, 2013, <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20131017/rogers-park/peterson-garden-project-turning-abandoned-howard-lot-into-community-gardens>.

on that vacant northern third, creating a spontaneous guerilla farm that became an important site for connection in the neighborhood at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴⁴ In the winter of 2020, however, the Howard Street Special Service Area (SSA)—the entity, composed primarily of Rogers Park residents and business owners appointed by the City, charged with promoting business activities along Howard Street—learned of the planting when some of the farmers began to dig underneath the clean mulch and plastic layer that covered the lot, and into the unremediated soil below. The SSA tested the soil and found it contaminated with lead, so it replaced the lock on the northern portion of the lot and removed the remnants of the summer garden.

While there had not been a *successful* development proposal for the Howard/Ashland lot between 2014 and the beginning of the CDI in 2020, there had still been a number of proposals for the site in that time. The plan that advanced the farthest became public in the fall of 2019, when the Alden Foundation, a healthcare and senior living provider, partnered with Artspace, a nonprofit developer specializing in housing for artists, to propose a mixed-income housing complex that included 65 units of LGBTQ-friendly housing for seniors and 15 units designated for artists.⁴⁵ A development targeted at a such a specific population is somewhat unusual in the realm of developer-proposed projects, though it isn't unheard of.

The 49th Ward Office rejected the project due to the Alden Foundation's reputation for poor maintenance of their existing senior living facilities, as well as their lack of experience with the LGBTQ population and their seeming disregard for community input or approval, since they applied for tax credits from the City for the development before alerting Alderwoman Hadden or

⁴⁴ Metropolitan Planning Council, *Rogers Park Corridor Development: Community Kick Off*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TyPr8LpyM1o>, 01:17:20-01:18:19.

⁴⁵ Chicago's 49th Ward, "Howard & Ashland Proposal," Chicago's 49th Ward, accessed March 9, 2022, <https://www.49thward.org/howard-ashland-proposal>.

holding any community meetings. That the Alden Foundation intended the project for a specific population threw their lack of engagement with the community—particularly the one for which they proposed the development—into even starker relief. What this failed proposal illustrated, Alderwoman Hadden wrote in her response, was the “need [for] a community-centered process to proactively vision what would be the best use of this space for residents in 49 and the city.”⁴⁶

Not all proposals for the site have been as serious. As an April Fools’ Day joke in 2019, outgoing Alderman Joe Moore sent an official email to residents inviting them to attend a meeting on the “Howard Yards” development, a play on the controversial Lincoln Yards development, that would bring a high-rise luxury residential tower to the corner of Howard and Ashland, along with an indoor roller derby rink and music venue.⁴⁷ The development, Moore wrote, would be a partnership between Russian developer “Boris Badenov” and tech billionaire Elon Musk. This spoof project was immediately criticized as insensitive and tone-deaf, given community concerns about gentrification in the neighborhood, and illustrative of the lack of touch with residents that cost Moore his aldermanic seat.⁴⁸

While Moore framed his comparison of the two sites as a joke, their connection is instructive. Like the Lincoln Yards development area, the Howard/Ashland lot is a former industrial parcel surrounded by a neighborhood that is more affordable than adjacent areas. That relationship isn’t a coincidence. In the case of both the Howard/Ashland site and the Lincoln Yards development, the surrounding areas have maintained their affordability in part due to their

⁴⁶ Maria Hadden, “The Alden Foundation’s Howard Ashland Proposal: Aldermanic and Community Feedback,” Google Docs, accessed March 9, 2022,

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dE2FdM0k44aIzWLqZeaB1vXzeQX3Rqhh/view?usp=drive_open&usp=embed_facebook.

⁴⁷ Joe Moore, “Residents Invited to Review Proposed ‘Howard Yards’ Development at Howard and Ashland,” April 1, 2019, <https://ward49.cmail20.com/t/ViewEmail/y/10274146B9C4DADF/97F37331D39233E81C65CA3F48968C2E>.

⁴⁸ Jay Koziarz, “Ousted Alderman Pitches ‘Howard Yards’ Development in April Fools’ Email,” Curbed Chicago, April 1, 2019, <https://chicago.curbed.com/2019/4/1/18290618/alderman-moore-howard-yards-development-april-fools-joke>.

proximity to industry. Now that the industry has left, the sites have become prime candidates for gentrifying redevelopment.

A large luxury complex like “Howard Yards” could raise the cost of nearby housing and threaten that affordability, which is a primary concern of many neighbors. Moore’s reference to Lincoln Yards illustrates, in a small and incidental way, how all plans for the Howard/Ashland lot take place in the broader context of development in the City of Chicago and in a historical moment when working- and middle-class communities in major cities are rapidly gentrifying. To understand and evaluate the Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative as a design process—one that explicitly aimed to distinguish itself from others in the City that have prioritized profit above genuine community involvement—we need to understand the political landscape of development it has taken place within. When Hadden said she wanted a new kind of development process that would have “developers and companies reacting and responding to [residents], rather than the other way around,” what was she positioning herself against, and what exactly did she have in mind?

INVEST South/West

Late in the CDI process, Paul Reise, an urban planner for DPD and former Project Manager for the Rogers Park Business Alliance, told residents that the City was going to model the RFP for the Howard/Ashland lot on the RFP framework from INVEST South/West,⁴⁹ a DPD initiative focused on revitalizing commercial corridors in under-resourced neighborhoods on Chicago’s South and West Sides.⁵⁰ The City presents the INVEST South/West process as more

⁴⁹ Metropolitan Planning Council, *Howard/Ashland Corridor Development Initiative - Report Presentation*, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/Alderwoman49/videos/168791845058478>, 00:57:16.

⁵⁰ Chicago Department of Planning and Development, “INVEST South/West.”

rigorous and specific than previous models for RFPs. Rather than simply outlining a general desired use for a piece of land with a few conceptual requirements, as the City did in the 2014 RFP for the Howard/Ashland lot—and as was standard in RFPs for mid-size development projects prior to INVEST South/West—the INVEST South/West RFP form attempts to codify neighborhood priorities as development requirements. DPD held community roundtables prior to the issue of the RFPs, and each document includes priorities for each neighborhood aggregated from resident input at those events. For example, the RFP for the parcel of land in the Auburn Gresham neighborhood on the South Side of the city lists mixed-use residential and retail buildings, sit-down restaurants, entertainment venues, new grocery stores and other shops, community festivals, public arts, and activities for young people as top community priorities.⁵¹ Reize emphasized that he intended to incorporate resident feedback from the CDI into the written RFP for Howard and Ashland.⁵²

The three criteria DPD lists for the evaluation of the INVEST South/West proposals are the promotion of short- and long-term community wealth building, professional and technical competence, and economic feasibility.⁵³ As a component of the community wealth building criterion, development teams are expected to partner with Black- or Latino-owned or -run businesses or organizations from the relevant neighborhood with a track record of promoting racial justice.⁵⁴ This emphasis on formal community partnership represents a departure from past RFPs.

Another change in INVEST South/West is the high level of design priming—specific suggestions of what a successful bid could look like—relative to past RFPs. For example, the

⁵¹ City of Chicago Department of Planning and Development, 32.

⁵² Metropolitan Planning Council, *Howard/Ashland Corridor Development Initiative - Report Presentation*, 00:56:30.

⁵³ City of Chicago Department of Planning and Development, “Request for Proposals: 838-58 West 79th Street,” 2020, https://www.ccac.org/_files/ugd/c62b69_29677acadb0f4d0388787533dc4a633f.pdf, 50-53.

⁵⁴ City of Chicago Department of Planning and Development, 51.

RFP for Auburn Gresham includes detailed renderings like the one below, created by renowned Chicago architecture firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), to illustrate the building type and streetscape DPD wanted to see in the resulting proposals.⁵⁵



While some kind of illustration in an RFP is normal, the high level of detail and specificity of this rendering is a departure from past RFPs. Rather than a rough sketch that illustrates the general size and shape of the desired building, the SOM rendering resembles the kind of image that could be included in an actual proposal. To be clear, the above building isn't a specific response to the requirements and priorities of the Auburn Gresham RFP. But it also isn't just a stand-in for a five-story residential building with ground-floor commercial space; it includes specific choices about materials, form, balcony placement, and pedestrian spaces. We can compare this rendering to the image below the Metropolitan Planning Council included in its

⁵⁵ City of Chicago Department of Planning and Development, 10.

report on the CDI to illustrate one of the potential development scenarios for the Howard/Ashland site they distilled from community feedback.⁵⁶



The MPC image, while not yet a component of an RFP, is similar to the kind of illustration one might expect to see in an RFP. The differences between it and the SOM rendering are more than stylistic. The SOM image is flashier, but the real difference is that the architectural choices in the MPC image, like the precise choice of brick vs. wood vs. metal cladding for wall material, are less clear, aside from the glass used for the windows, and they aren't supposed to be clear. The MPC sketch alludes to use—the top three floors are residential,

⁵⁶ Metropolitan Planning Council, "Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative," March 2021, 20, <https://www.metroplanning.org/uploads/cms/documents/20210402-rogersparkcdi-finalreport.pdf>.

and the fuzzy “community” label on the ground floor and the people behind the windows let us know that this is some kind of public space—but it leaves the specifics to be hammered out by the developer and architect. This kind of generic image is indicative of other elements of the CDI process, which I’ll discuss in detail in the next section. However, as a potential component of an RFP, MPC’s sketch gives respondents more freedom in their design than SOM’s rendering. The INVEST South/West RFP doesn’t demand that respondents propose a building to match the SOM rendering down to the window. Yet the material and architectural specificity do imply a desire for a building that doesn’t just fulfill the same function, but shares a similar design attitude to SOM’s.

That level of control over proposal design is similarly reflected in the list of thirty-two design services firms that are pre-qualified to contribute to INVEST South/West proposals.⁵⁷ This list is also a departure from past RFPs, and it explicitly narrows the organizations DPD recommends contribute to a competitive proposal. To be clear, an RFP bid has always been a massive undertaking that requires multiple contributors, including developers, architecture firms, and sometimes community organizations to work together on different components of a proposal. INVEST South/West further codifies that level of professionalization, and to the extent that the process creates opportunities for community members to contribute more than in previous rounds of RFPs, those opportunities are created primarily *within* bids led and structured by increasingly large cohorts of developers, architecture firms, and other professionals.

This structure is reflected in the proposal evaluation process. According to the Auburn Gresham RFP, the City of Chicago reviews INVEST South/West submissions according to the required criteria: community wealth building, professional and technical competence, and

⁵⁷ “INVEST South/West Pre-Qualified List of Design Services Firms,” n.d., https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/dcd/general/invest_sw/pre-qualified-design-list.pdf.

economic feasibility. DPD holds additional roundtable discussions to gauge community input on shortlisted proposals, and then the City selects the winner based on the evaluation criteria and community feedback.⁵⁸

While this additional opportunity for the public to give their input on proposals sounds nice, it isn't clear how the City incorporates the feedback they receive into their final decision. In the case of the Auburn Gresham RFP, only one development team—Evergreen Real Estate and Imagine Group—submitted a proposal. Residents spoke out at the subsequent roundtable discussion about how they thought the proposal, which was for a large affordable housing complex, didn't align with the priorities they outlined in the RFP. In particular, the project did not include a grocery store or other large retailer, which residents repeatedly emphasized was a crucial community need.⁵⁹ Evergreen and Imagine revised the proposal to spread the housing units out over two large lots instead of one to decrease the density, which was a concern of some residents, but the project is still a large housing complex without an anchoring business.⁶⁰ With no alternative proposals, it appears that the project will move forward as revised.

INVEST South/West looks like a process with more community input than past rounds of RFPs, but developers don't actually have to engage with a broad set of community interests, either as they are outlined in the RFP or in the subsequent roundtables, and a development that faces a lot of public pushback is still allowed to move forward. The distillation of community priorities from the roundtables into broad categories like mixed-use residential and retail buildings, sit-down restaurants, and entertainment venues, as is the case of the Auburn Gresham RFP, means that the community input developers are encouraged to engage with isn't that

⁵⁸ City of Chicago Department of Planning and Development, "Request for Proposals: 838-58 West 79th Street," 53.

⁵⁹ Jonathan Dale, "The Community Engagement Challenge of Invest South/West," *South Side Weekly*, July 22, 2021, <https://southsideweekly.com/the-community-engagement-challenge-of-invest-south-west/>.

⁶⁰ Ian Achong, "Updated Plans For Auburn Gresham Invest South/West Revealed," *Chicago YIMBY* (blog), November 27, 2021, <https://chicagoyimby.com/2021/11/updated-plans-for-auburn-gresham-invest-south-west-revealed.html>.

specific in the first place. The Evergreen/Imagine proposal is a mixed-use residential building, but the category is so broad that their eventual design contradicted many community members' explicit wishes. What, then, is the purpose of community input in a development process, if it doesn't substantially inform the final project?

INVEST South/West is a large, public-facing effort to direct new funding to the neighborhoods that the City's current leadership argues could use it the most. It incentivizes private developers, through \$750 million in public funding, to design for and invest in sites they might not have considered previously. However, while the INVEST South/West RFPs are more detailed and nominally expand the opportunities for community members to give input compared to previous rounds of RFPs for lots of their size, the underlying development process—how community members, respondents, and City officials engage with the project, give their input, and evaluate proposals—is fundamentally unchanged.

This is the ecosystem from which the Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative emerged.

The Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative

On October 1, 2020, the 49th Ward Office and the Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC) convened a community meeting over Zoom to kick off the Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative (CDI). The 49th Ward and MPC advertised the meeting through the Ward Office mailing list and with a large sign on the chain link fence at the northwest corner of the Howard/Ashland lot. More than 100 participants were in attendance. At the start of the meeting, Alderwoman Hadden introduced the CDI as an engagement process designed to center community opinions on the Howard/Ashland site and preempt a developer from bypassing residents and approaching the city with a plan that wouldn't take community needs into account:

I want to make sure that we're not caught off guard or left just reacting to someone else's proposal. Even in my short time in office, we've received three proposals [for buildings on this site] that developers or community organizations have wanted to submit to my office or submitted to the City...So, going through this community development process, through the Corridor Development Initiative, we're really going to be putting first: what do Rogers Park residents want to see? What do Howard Area residents want to see in this space? What's the best use we can make of it? And how do we want to present ourselves so that we've got developers and companies reacting and responding to us, rather than the other way around?⁶¹

Paul Reise, the DPD planner liaising with the 49th Ward on the development of the Howard/Ashland lot, gave a brief overview of the site's history and the RFP process:

To be honest, the City hasn't always been great at this process...The RFPs that were put out for this site in particular, they were four or five pages, just kind of the basics of demographics and zoning and kind of a basic map, and that was really it. There was just kind of this wishful thinking of what kinds of developments you would get. There was no real planning, no real process for it. That's something that we're being real intentional about moving forward.⁶²

⁶¹ Metropolitan Planning Council, 00:10:37-00:11:27.

⁶² Metropolitan Planning Council, 00:42:38-00:43:11.

Reise explained that the new RFP model that DPD was developing, in part through the INVEST South/West initiative, would be more principled than previous versions of RFPs and emphasize community input. At this stage, Reise implied that the CDI would likely culminate in an RFP process, although he did not provide any further details on what it might look like, when it might occur, or how it might interact with the CDI. Notably, the above quote represents his entire explanation of what an RFP process is. He did not explain what a proposal is or what one entails, what kind of entity usually submits a proposal, or how community and stakeholder input might be incorporated into the RFP in ways that they had not been previously.

Representatives of MPC and Alderwoman Hadden then took questions from participants. Residents were curious about the extent to which their input would be included in a potential future development. The first two questions, which were submitted through the meeting chat and then read aloud— “Why wouldn’t we want 100% affordable housing on this site, as Logan Square just broke ground on?” and “I’m curious as to the possibility of a mixed-use and mixed-income development solution for this site. I believe that healthy neighborhoods should have a blend of both market rate and affordable units. What does the Council propose to make sure that there is some balance, and not a concentration of one extreme or the other?” —prompted similar responses from Alderwoman Hadden and MPC. A representative from MPC told residents:

We’re not interested in proposing what should be on that site. This process is to engage the community in talking about the balance of what should be on that site, and when we get into the next session where we actually get to talk about scenarios, we’re going to dig a little bit deeper into unit mixes...So we are not coming in with our own agenda to say ‘this should be 100% affordable housing,’ [or] whatever. We’re really here to help steward the process and to listen to community, and to help you look at the data and look at the conditions and to come up with scenarios that you think are best for your community.⁶³

⁶³ Metropolitan Planning Council, 00:58:23-00:58:58.

MPC brought some participants off mute and asked them to expand on their ideas. Dr. Doane—the Rogers Park resident, community gardener, and researcher—advocated on behalf of the Hello Howard Community Garden, the refugee farm that occupied the northern third of the lot at the time, and their intangible benefits to the community:

I have been involved in the Peterson Garden and the sort of spontaneously emerging refugee garden north of that which is—if you walk by there, it’s just beautiful, and also in the Howard Area Community Garden, partly as a researcher and partly as a gardener. And I just see these spaces as being so important in the community for bringing people together that do not normally associate that much and for providing fresh food, outdoor space—during Covid, it’s been really important—and just promoting stress relief, mental health, and these benefits [that] are hard to count in terms of economics. But I think that we have to think about how much those are really worth.⁶⁶

MPC also polled residents on their impressions of the neighborhood surrounding the site.⁶⁷ Residents split over safety and walkability along Howard Street, with around half of residents feeling safe and comfortable walking through the area, and the other half expressing concern.

How do you feel about your experience of the area – Howard & Ashland? (Safety, easy to navigate, good place to meet people)

| | | |
|---|---|---------------------------------------|
| I drive by there quickly. Or, avoid walking over there. I live on the west side of the Howard tracks. | walkable | garden is a great place |
| Dangerous | I avoid it as much as possible. Speeding drivers. Street harassment | Safe |
| easy to get around walkable | Walkable | Need to focus more on safety |
| | | I feel safe. The way that the streets |

Press ENTER to pause scroll

⁶⁶ Metropolitan Planning Council, 01:17:20-01:18:19.

⁶⁷ Metropolitan Planning Council, 01:23:50.

One community member voiced his concerns about safety in terms of the neighborhood as a whole:

I feel that there are certain times that you are just not able to travel in all parts of Rogers Park. That is one of my big concerns. I live off of Sheridan Avenue. I love the community. So excited that it's a heavily mixed area, but I do worry sometimes that it is very segregated in certain parts of the city, and [in] certain parts of the neighborhood.⁶⁸

The meeting then concluded with two more open-ended poll questions— “What would you do to improve this area?” and “What do you think needs to happen to ensure that Rogers Park continues to grow and thrive while supporting its existing residents?” While responses rolled in, one MPC facilitator gave an overview of the opportunities for participants to give more input, including at four in-person design workshops on October 10 and two online design workshops on October 8 and 14 facilitated by All Together, a design and consulting firm that specializes in public design workshops.⁶⁹ Residents could also pick up take-home design kits to model the uses they envisioned for the site with color-coded foam blocks and post their designs to social media.

On November 12, 2020, MPC and the 49th Ward Office hosted a second community meeting⁷⁰ over Zoom to share the input they received at the design workshops. Alderwoman Hadden introduced the project again, this time opening with a specific reference to the Hello Howard Community Garden:

Right now, if you're familiar with the space, if you've walked down Howard Street past this intersection, for many years it's been a vibrant community space, a great green space. [It] produces a lot of food and produce for people, and has been put to really good use in bringing folks together. But it is city-owned land, and even in my short time in office, we've already had a couple of developers interested and putting forth proposals. So, we're fortunate to have this process and

⁶⁸ Metropolitan Planning Council, 01:24:27-01:25:00.

⁶⁹ Metropolitan Planning Council, 01:31:23.

⁷⁰ Metropolitan Planning Council, *Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative - Community Review Workshop*, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/alltogetherdesignstudio/videos/816441972250518>.

have our partners work with us because it was important for me to make sure we as a community got to have a say in what we want this site to be and what we need.⁷¹

Her remarks illuminate the direct contrast between the existing garden's recognized value to the community—" [It] produces a lot of food and produce for people, and has been put to really good use in bringing folks together"—and its status as a City-owned lot.

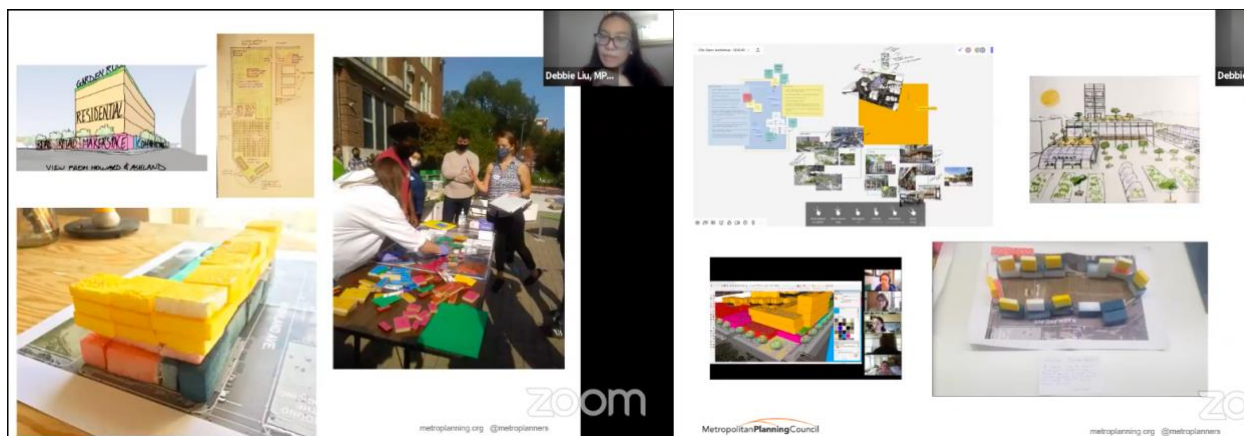
Counterintuitively, the lot being publicly owned renders its current use as public space vulnerable, due to its potential to generate new revenue for the City. The MPC representatives who led this meeting invoke that potential here, and introduce for the first time the so-called "opportunity cost" of different development options. Under this banner, they frame the ensuing overview of community input from the surveys and design workshops chiefly in terms of economic feasibility, a constraint they had not substantively introduced in their discussion of the development until this point in the public meeting series, although they could have framed it this way during the design workshops.

Debbie Liu, the MPC Community Engagement Associate who led this meeting, said the following about the community design ideas from the workshops alongside the two slides below, starting with the slide on the left and then transitioning to the one on the right:

Here are some examples of what people have said. Residential, garden, roof, multistory, mixed-use. So it ran the gamut. And here [*switches slide*] are some other examples of things that were a little bit less pragmatic and more creative. Including on the bottom [right] with a Gale Elementary student who decided the best use for this site is a water park.⁷²

⁷¹ Metropolitan Planning Council, 00:04:52-00:05:38.

⁷² Metropolitan Planning Council, 00:12:23-00:12:55.



That was the entire discussion of community design ideas at this meeting. What followed was an overview of the four “development scenarios” MPC distilled from the input at the workshops and in the surveys.⁷³ These scenarios were not intended to represent specific community ideas, but as amalgams of community ideas that point towards different paths a development on the site might take.

The first scenario is the closest to what currently exists: a garden or green space on the lot. Because Peterson Garden Project only manages temporary gardens on vacant spaces it leases from the city, this scenario would require an organization like NeighborSpace, a Chicago nonprofit urban land trust, to acquire the Howard/Ashland lot and take over the operation of the community garden.⁷⁴ Jordan Bailly, the MPC Associate who led this portion of the meeting, emphasized that this scenario would have a high opportunity cost. Should a group like NeighborSpace be able to acquire the land, even at a discounted rate, and choose to maintain a garden on the lot, they—and the City—would forgo the opportunity to put a profit-generating development on the site. There would be no financial return on the investment and no new taxes generated from that use.

⁷³ Metropolitan Planning Council, “Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative,” 18–21.

⁷⁴ NeighborSpace, “NeighborSpace: Community-Managed Open Space,” accessed April 10, 2022, <http://neighbor-space.org/>.

The second, third, and fourth scenarios are various combinations of green space and mixed commercial, residential, and retail uses.⁷⁵ According to MPC, these scenarios have “medium” opportunity costs because they would add profit-generating uses to the site but reserve up to 50% of the land for garden or green space. Notably, none of these four scenarios would guarantee the preservation of any part of the Hello Howard Community Garden. Any amount of construction would likely occupy the whole site and require the complete removal of the garden as it exists now and replacing it, likely at least a year later, with either a new garden, landscaped space, or other “green” use.

Either way, Bailly explained, all four scenarios would have to change dramatically in order to be economically feasible. First, the cost of the land would have to be offset with revenue generated from the development; no organization or group that could spend the projected \$1.5 million⁷⁶ to acquire the lot, even at a discounted rate, would do so only to keep it a garden (certainty Bailly’s, not mine). The current residential square footage in scenarios two, three, and four would have to increase to cover the costs of the garden and the other uses, as retail and commercial rents are less reliable. It could be difficult to attract retail and commercial tenants to these scenarios in the first place because the lack of on-site parking and the nearby stretches of vacant retail along Howard Street might dissuade customers. And ultimately, Bailly added, “whatever portion of the site that can remain for a community garden is dependent on the economic feasibility of any future development.”⁷⁷

While the November 12 meeting was supposed to be the final one of the CDI, on March 16, 2021—more than four months later, and with little public communication on the project

⁷⁵ Metropolitan Planning Council, 19-21.

⁷⁶ Metropolitan Planning Council, 17.

⁷⁷ Metropolitan Planning Council, *Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative - Community Review Workshop*, 00:37:39-00:37:47.

during that time—MPC and the 49th Ward Office held an additional public Zoom meeting.⁷⁸ The MPC team gave another overview of their four development scenarios with nearly identical language on economic feasibility and opportunity cost to the November 12 meeting. Then Alderwoman Hadden and representatives from MPC fielded questions from residents. Notably, this was the first meeting of the three where residents could see each other and type openly in the chat. The October 1 and November 12 meetings had been webinar-style, where only the speakers could see the list of attendees and their questions. The March meeting thus featured more lively discussion among attendees, particularly in the chat, and Alderwoman Hadden routinely elevated written questions and comments into the group conversation. Given that this meeting was predominantly a summary of the CDI and a discussion of next steps in the Howard/Ashland development process, it also featured the least discussion of what Rogers Park and the North of Howard area are and have been like historically. Instead, discussion became more speculative as residents considered what they wanted their neighborhood to become.

Community members raised similar issues at this meeting as at the prior two, including the desire to maintain and improve the Hello Howard Community Garden and the extent to which affordable housing should be prioritized in the proposal. Eva McCann, Howard area resident, commented in the chat⁷⁹ that “[w]e already have unused storefronts on Howard Street. We also do not need anymore [*sic*] affordable housing. Mixed income perhaps but NOH⁸⁰ is already overwhelmed with what is called affordable Housing [*sic*] that is not managed very well.” David Zoltan, a resident and vocal advocate for low-income housing, disagreed, writing that “[t]he greatest need we have is for affordable housing, both in Rogers Park and throughout

⁷⁸ Metropolitan Planning Council, *Howard/Ashland Corridor Development Initiative - Report Presentation*.

⁷⁹ “Howard/Ashland Corridor Development Initiative - Report Presentation Zoom Chat,” March 16, 2021.

⁸⁰ North of Howard

the city. We have a deficiency of 180,000 affordable units in Chicago. I agree with my neighbors that we can use less retail, but this project must include affordable, accessible housing, especially so close to the Red Line.”

In response to concerns about the already high density of housing around and north of Howard Street, Alderwoman Hadden asked residents to focus less on the density of Rogers Park relative to other neighborhoods:

As folks think about how a city thrives, and especially how a neighborhood like ours thrives, we want people to live here. I know it might feel dense. We certainly are one of the most compact and one of the most dense neighborhoods. But the whole city’s been experiencing population loss. And when we think about the kind of thriving communities that we want, whether it’s supporting our wonderful, small, locally owned businesses, benefitting our community spaces, our neighborhood organizations—we need people to live here.⁸¹

This claim about Rogers Park’s residential density, and the use of density to make arguments throughout the CDI for and against more housing, prompted me to investigate the residential density of the northern part of the neighborhood. I was not able to find a density analysis of Rogers Park based on the 2020 census, so I performed my own analysis of residential density within the four census tracts that surround the Howard/Ashland site. I layered the residential building footprints over a people-per-square-mile analysis of the tracts to illustrate how density in the area is unevenly distributed and in part depends on clusters of high-density courtyard apartment buildings, which are more common in the west of the neighborhood, relative to single-family homes, which are more common in the east of the neighborhood near the lake.

The Howard area north and east of the site—illustrated in detail in the second map below—is particularly dense. With the exception of the stretch of Rogers Avenue immediately east of the Site and the block of Juneway Terrace between Ashland and Sheridan in the

⁸¹ Metropolitan Planning Council, *Howard/Ashland Corridor Development Initiative - Report Presentation*, 1:01:04-1:01:40.

northernmost part of the neighborhood, the residential landscape of the Howard area is comprised primarily of six-flats and courtyard apartments with at least twenty-two units. It is indeed a dense area, with 4,905 residents in just over 0.123 square miles, which equals a density of just over 39,878 people per square mile. That area includes the western part of the tract that contains the Howard “L” station, so the actual density of the portion of the tract where people live is even higher. Nonetheless, the area is not entirely built up; there is some available space, including on the Howard/Ashland site and the vacant lot immediately to its east. Neither MPC nor Alderwoman Hadden mentioned that lot or its potential to be a part of a design for a development, despite the fact that, unlike the Howard/Ashland site, it has no current use. For more information on my methodology for generating these maps, see the Appendix.



At the October 1 meeting, Paul Reise and Alderwoman Hadden had implied the likelihood of the City issuing an RFP for the site, but the specifics of that process, as well as how community input from the CDI would factor into the text of the RFP, had not been substantively developed between that meeting and March 16. At this meeting, after Reise explained that he was going to write the RFP in the model of the INVEST South/West, he emphasized his intention to continue community involvement in the process as it moves forward:

Once the RFP goes out and we get a handful of responses back, we can even bring those responses—the actual proposals and developers or whomever—back to this committee to present those proposals. The committee can say what they like, what they don't like, what pieces work, what doesn't, and then we can kind of incorporate that into the evaluation process as well. And the last thing I'll say is that once the final team is selected, there's still a year-plus of negotiating the final product, so we're gonna have to negotiate all the zoning. Depending on what they bring to us, there's still a lot of work that's involved, and we—the Department—definitely require a community process for that whole scenario, too. So even once we get the final proposal in, that's kind of still just half way through the process and the community will absolutely be involved in that as well.⁸²

The community committee Reise mentions would be a group of neighbors, small business owners, and nonprofit leaders from the area selected to give feedback on the proposals from the RFP. Alderwoman Hadden invited participants interested in sitting on the committee to email the 49th Ward.

As this meeting neared its end, Alderwoman Hadden took more questions from participants, most of whom indicated a deep dissatisfaction with either the CDI as a process or the position residents were then left in relation to the City and the future of the site. Em Pratt, a neighbor who participated actively in the meeting's chat thread, asked "What's the likelihood that the City will take any of this into account in the end?" Hadden assured them that "It's a *really* high likelihood."⁸³ Luke Joyner, another participant then asked, "Wouldn't it make sense

⁸² Metropolitan Planning Council, 00:57:41-00:58:45.

⁸³ Metropolitan Planning Council, 00:51:40-00:51:45.

to aim for something truly community-driven and different, not pre-skewed toward developer's feasibility?"⁸⁴ To which Alderwoman Hadden responded:

I think that's what we're doing here. So, we're not drawing a map to something and saying "Hey developers, build this." But we're open to ideas, right? There's not a foregone conclusion here. And so, I think at every step of the way as we're building this, we're trying to make this as community-driven as possible. And that's going to come down to that RFP process as well. I don't know exactly what it's going to look like for us, but I know I'm committed to making sure that we can do that. And what that could look like too is maybe, from the community, us asking and looking for people who have done projects that are more like what we want to see and trying to even recruit some of those people to be interested in our site. So those are some other ideas that we can think about. Is there something else in this city, or in the near area, that looks like or could be like what we want to see? Let's find out who did it, and let's see if it's something that could work with us.⁸⁵

Fails on its Own Terms

The CDI failed on its own terms. Chiefly, the retroactive application of economic feasibility to MPC's design scenarios at the November 12 meeting undercut the premise of the CDI as Alderwoman Hadden presented it to community members on October 1—namely, that the CDI would prioritize community needs over those of companies and developers. That isn't to say that a good community development process shouldn't consider the economic realities of a development. Indeed, it would be naïve and irresponsible to ignore the constraints of a site or a neighborhood or a project, if those are indeed the constraints with which you are dealing. An honest recognition of those limitations can provide a clearer space for generating ideas than one in which anything and everything is possible. However, MPC's blanket application of the standard of economic feasibility revealed not an awareness of economic constraints, but an internal bent towards profit-driven development, despite their acknowledgement that "green

⁸⁴ Joyner is now my advisor for this paper, but he was not at the time of this meeting.

⁸⁵ Metropolitan Planning Council, 00:53:50-00:54:54.

space” and improving the Hello Howard Community Garden were residents’ top priorities.⁸⁶ This move illuminates an essential fact about the nature of community input; the space for people’s ideas to matter is only real if they can share their ideas with a good-faith understanding of constraints and possibilities as the foundation for the conversation.⁸⁷

Bailly’s comment that “whatever portion of the site that can remain for a community garden is dependent on the economic feasibility of any future development” is particularly revealing.⁸⁸ Economic feasibility as MPC defines it is the ability of a development to generate revenue to offset the costs of land acquisition and construction.⁸⁹ This value is inherent to the CDI process, which MPC defined on October 1 as a “series of interactive, public workshops designed to plan proactively *in the context of market realities*” (emphasis mine) and goes unquestioned as one of its premises. That is odd, considering that Alderwoman Hadden’s stated goal at that same meeting was to get “developers and companies reacting and responding to us, rather than the other way around.”⁹⁰ On the one hand, MPC and the 49th Ward intended the CDI to be a new method for community engagement that prioritized community needs over those of developers. On the other, the chief metric by which they evaluated potential development scenarios was economic profitability to those same developers, or to the City. In one breath, MPC and the 49th Ward claimed to want to get out in front of development companies and set their own terms of engagement; in the next, they ceded enormous power to developers by designing scenarios that both prioritized profit-generating uses and blurred community input into enough ambiguity that developers could work to maximize their profits within those uses. Rather

⁸⁶ Metropolitan Planning Council, “Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative,” 13–14.

⁸⁷ Derickson and Routledge, “Resourcing Scholar-Activism.”

⁸⁸ Metropolitan Planning Council, *Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative - Community Review Workshop*, 00:37:39-00:37:47.

⁸⁹ Metropolitan Planning Council, 00:36:47.

⁹⁰ Metropolitan Planning Council, *Rogers Park Corridor Development*, 00:10:37-00:11:27.

than prioritizing community participation and creative agency, MPC and the 49th Ward were thinking and acting like developers, which undercut that participation and limited the scope of the possible input.

It would be more understandable if MPC used economic feasibility as a criterion to assess specific proposals. However, they did not apply this standard to actual community ideas—or to specific proposals from any group—but to one community garden scenario (notably not a continuation of the existing Hello Howard Community Garden, but just *a* garden) and three blurred scenarios they created which represent no single person or group’s vision except for their own. It is those scenarios they then measured in terms of economic feasibility and found lacking. Then they used their own judgments of “medium” and “high” opportunity costs to propose lowering the amount of the lot available for green space and raising the residential square footage requirement to bring in more income for the developer. And those three amalgam scenarios represent not compromises between community proposals, but the arbitrary application of input produced by a leading process that pushed participants to frame their ideas for the site as various combinations of commercial, residential, retail, and green space uses.

One charitable explanation for this kind of process could be that MPC didn’t think any single community idea could represent the breadth of community desires for the site, so a compromise solution might ultimately please more people, or be more realistic. They might also have wanted to make scenarios that, in addition to being more plausible per their economic feasibility standard, would be easier for community members to digest as potential trajectories for the site than a more specific idea. However, these categories are so broad that to color-code foam blocks and ask residents to build a development on an aerial print-out of the site with their preferred permutation of uses is functionally useless, particularly given that those visions were

then translated by MPC into percentage use breakdowns for the space, not specific design ideas. This method cedes nearly all responsibility for imagining and proposing a specific vision for the site to the developer. A small business incubator and a private office are both commercial spaces. A luxury twelve-story condominium building is residential, as is a six-story mixed-income studio apartment complex, as is a three-story courtyard building with large units exclusively set aside for single-parent families making less than 30% AMI. The particulars of these projects— architecturally, socially, the degree to which they are open to or built for a specific public— matter.



This image from MPC’s report on the CDI that I contrasted with the SOM rendering from the Auburn Gresham INVEST South/West RFP illustrates this ambiguity. The sketchiness of the

building *design* in the MPC image makes more sense as a component of an RFP because it leaves the *architectural* decisions up to the developer. However, because the image is not also accompanied by specific *use* requirements and design ideation allied with that use, it leaves too much up to the developer in terms of what the development actually *is*. The vague “community” scrawl on the first floor could mean whatever the developer decides it means. The INVEST South/West RFP has this same problem; while the architectural choices in the SOM rendering cast a specific design and material mood, what’s actually going on in the ground floor of that building is purposefully ambiguous. It could represent several of the broad categories of community priorities from the Auburn Gresham RFP—it could be an entertainment venue, a restaurant, or a place for youth activities—and each of those categories represent a wide range of potential outcomes. It could also represent none of those priorities; there’s no requirement for it to do so. And indeed, the winning development proposal in the Auburn Gresham RFP prioritized subsidized affordable housing over the large anchor businesses residents requested, likely because, as Jordan Bailly explained in his overview of the CDI design scenarios, finding stable retail tenants can be difficult, and residential square footage is more reliably profitable.

In the eventual version of the Howard/Ashland development process as described by Paul Reise on March 16, a couple members of the community committee would be able to rank the proposals put forth by developers using a rubric. If the framework for the development put forth in the RFP is generic, as is the case in design scenarios two, three, and four, developers will almost certainly take the opportunity to propose plans that maximize their ability to make money. Those plans may or may not align with a plan for a childcare center, for example, or housing that caters to residents with the lowest incomes, or any other of the more specific uses individual community members proposed throughout the process that got flattened into

“commercial” or “residential” use categories. It is important here to distinguish the different meanings of the word “use.” On the one hand, there is “use” in the macro urban planning sense that MPC employs—residential, green space, retail, commercial. But there is also how a space is *used*—as a childcare center for refugee families making less than 15% AMI, for example. Both of those categories say something about the “use” of a space, but in the CDI, MPC only engages with “use” on the larger scale.

Rather than “plan[ning] proactively” or getting out in front of a future developer, the CDI created the illusion of collecting public input to limit developers’ power, without actually curtailing their ability to propose the most profitable use they can within the envelope of zoning allowances. Under this system, community members could easily be left at a late stage in the process with just a few options, none of which represent the values they hoped to put forth.

Investigating those Terms

Just because appealing to for-profit developers is how buildings usually get built in Chicago doesn’t mean that is the only way a site *can* be developed, period. Again, that is not to say that economic constraints don’t exist or should be ignored. But there was at least a nominal desire on the part of the 49th Ward Office to make this process one that really worked for Rogers Parkers and gave them more power over developers than community members have had in prior City development processes. The terms of the CDI as they were outlined, however, even had they been executed perfectly, would not have fulfilled that goal. The 49th Ward Office and MPC sacrificed too many choices to the abstract desires of a for-profit entity yet to be determined, leaving too much to chance and crowding out any potential for an alternative, community-driven proposal to emerge and develop with any specificity.

Alderwoman Hadden and MPC were very clear at the first meeting that they wanted to value community opinions over the needs of developers, but it isn't clear exactly what they thought they meant by that. Did they mean that valuing resident input would *necessarily* mean opposing profit maximization, and they were going to consciously choose the former over the latter? That's what Hadden's statement that "we want to present ourselves so that we've got developers and companies reacting and responding to us, rather than the other way around," seems to imply. However, they might also have wanted to value resident input and acknowledge that it *might* come at the expense of a developer's profit, and that would be fine *if* that's the case. They might also have wanted to value resident input, and thought that respecting it more *could* coincide with developers' needs as well. MPC's discussion of the opportunity cost and economic feasibility of their development scenarios in the second meeting seems to imply the third of these possibilities.

Alderwoman Hadden's strong language at the first meeting suggests—if we assume good faith—that she really did want the first option. MPC's definition of the CDI as a process taking place "in the context of market realities" seems more tempered, along the lines of the second or third definition, though representatives' insistence at the first meeting that they were there "to help steward the process and to listen to community" without dictating an outcome implied that they agreed with Hadden, or at least intended the process to be more open-ended and undetermined. However, the CDI was also a political process. It's difficult to elucidate the intent behind Alderwoman Hadden's statements in particular because she alters the strength of her opinions and her real or acted naivete regarding City processes when it is convenient for her to do so. She bills herself as a progressive alderperson who opposes many Mayor Lightfoot's policies, and ran on a platform of being more in touch with community members than former

Alderman Joe Moore (who authored the spoof “Howard Yards” project after he lost reelection). She presents herself as a proponent of the people when it is convenient for political purposes, but then hedges about what might or might not be possible within existing DPD structures. Despite the fact that maintaining the Hello Howard Community Garden was one of residents’ top priorities, it is in her political interest to build a development on the site she can take ownership of. Hadden is a Rogers Park resident and was before she was a politician, but now that she is a politician, she has her own priorities that may or may not always align with residents over developer interests.

It is important to point out that there were people who participated in the CDI who genuinely believe in the power of the free market to generate the best proposal for Howard/Ashland. They looked at the string of failed bids for the site over the past decade and concluded that appealing to developer interests would be the surest way to attract multiple companies to compete for the City contract, and that competition would be the most efficient way to yield a strong proposal. That belief in the (gently regulated) free market is ultimately the premise of INVEST South/West, and RFPs more generally. Proponents worry that if the City doesn’t incentivize developers to compete by providing them leeway with which to maximize profits, fewer developers will submit proposals, which could reduce the overall quality of a community’s choices for a site. The Alden Foundation’s failed proposal for housing for artists and seniors is a prime example. Alden felt empowered to try to proceed with their plans because there weren’t any other bids on the table, and the 49th Ward might not be able to prevent a similar proposal from moving forward in the future. Believers in the free market think that a process that caters to developers might be the neighborhood’s best bet.

However, the belief in the power of the market to yield the strongest proposal wasn't the goal of the CDI as Alderwoman Hadden and MPC presented it, and, ultimately, as of April 2022, the CDI has not yet yielded an RFP, let alone any serious proposals. The southern two-thirds of the Howard/Ashland lot remains the Hello Howard Community Garden, and the northern third remains vacant, not because that was the chosen outcome of the CDI, but because the SSA locked the gate surrounding the north of the lot, and no alternative use has emerged.

I do not propose a complete alternative process that solves all the problems with which the CDI grappled. These processes are difficult, and context-dependent, and any solution proposing a one-size-fits-all approach will necessarily be incomplete. However, there are examples, however few and far between, that illuminate alternative processes, which I address in the "A Better Process" section below. There were also crucial moments throughout the CDI that hinted at what a process that valued the specific visions of individuals and community groups, rather than the logics of developer-driven economics, might have looked like.

First, it was only in the second half of the March 16 meeting—the third and final online meeting, but the first in which participants could see each other and interact directly—that the moderated discussion veered away from the use breakdown of the site and towards competing visions of what Rogers Park as a neighborhood ought to be and how it ought to allocate its resources. There were hints of this discussion at prior meetings, when individual participants were allowed to unmute and comment on the value of the garden to the neighborhood or the safety of the area along Howard Street. However, beyond reducing the potential for chaos or too many people talking at once in the online setting, the webinar format limited the ability of participants to voice their support for or opposition to a neighbor's proposal, or to interrogate the claims made by officials or another participant.

For example, the community member who, at the October 1 meeting, voiced concerns about segregation in Rogers Park and safety along Howard Street, was echoing the historic pattern of claims among predominantly white, wealthier Rogers Parkers that the Howard area, with its less wealthy, predominantly non-white population, was less safe, and that any development there should attempt to disrupt the concentration of poverty. Such claims could easily have been made verbatim at community meetings twenty or thirty years ago, as investors and housing developers became increasingly interested in Rogers Park. At the 2002 State of Rogers Park address, for example, tenant activists pushed for protections for low-income renters in the North of Howard area, while residents and community leaders from other parts of the community expressed concern that “the neighborhood is being terrorized by seven-year-olds” snatching purses and adults drinking and “[pitching] pennies.”⁹¹ The activists then pushed back against that reductive characterization of the neighborhood. However, in the webinar format, the resident’s claim went uninterrogated, in a way that, given the liveliness with which participants spoke and wrote to each other in the March 16 meeting, it likely would not have in a more open setting.

One unavoidable fact of this process is that it took place during the Covid-19 pandemic and during a period of the pandemic in which vaccines were not available, or were not yet widely available. The move to a predominantly online process was therefore necessary, and any online version was almost certain to feature less active conversation between community members than an in-person process, particularly given that the online setting created an additional barrier to attendance for people who did not have a computer or internet access. However, Alderwoman Hadden and representatives of MPC repeatedly cited the pandemic as the reason for the CDI not

⁹¹ Berrey, *The Enigma of Diversity*, 155.

being better, including in ways that had nothing to do with the pandemic. The demographics of the October 1 meeting participants, for example, skewed disproportionately whiter and older than the Rogers Park average, and Howard area residents were particularly underrepresented, which MPC acknowledged when they surveyed participants at the start of the meeting.⁹² To their credit, MPC did subcontract with All Together to facilitate in-person design workshops in an attempt to reach residents who were unable to access the online meetings or simply wanted an opportunity to connect to their neighbors in person. However, the specific participant ideas that *did* emerge from the workshops were summarily dismissed during the November 12 meeting. To the extent that participants were encouraged to develop their own ideas, it was only to inform MPC's amalgam design scenarios.

The energy in the discussion during the second half of the March 16 meeting provides an example of what a process that consistently foster open community conversation might have looked like. Perhaps, instead of asking residents what the greatest local needs were through polls at the October 1 meeting and in the subsequent survey, MPC could have allotted more time for residents to share more open-ended thoughts with the group and respond to others, while also providing avenues for people to submit written comments separate from the polls and survey categories.

Any process that takes community input as its substance will have to develop strategies to promote collective conversations that don't bend too soon towards an artificial consensus nor allow vocal minorities to hijack the discussion, as Rai emphasizes in her analysis of community discussions about development in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood.⁹³ Such a process will likely be less efficient than one like the CDI, which relied on pre-determined values and survey

⁹² Metropolitan Planning Council, (00:28:18).

⁹³ Rai, *Democracy's Lot*, 67.

categories. But it might yield input and proposals that don't fit neatly into the categories anyone might expect. It also might yield *process*. If a facilitator asks a complicated, open-ended question like "What kinds of services could this community use more of?" and funnels responses into a set of pre-determined categories, then engages with those responses at the level of the categories and not at the level of the ideas, they've flattened all variation between ideas within categories, and made everything about the category rather than the idea or the process. Parks, yards, community gardens, and green roofs are all green spaces, for example, but they serve different purposes,⁹⁴ and people access and interact with them differently. "Parks," as Jacobs tells us, are not cure-alls for what ails the city, "are not automatically anything."⁹⁵

The facilitator has also eliminated their capacity to be surprised by an idea that proposes a use, or a combination of them, that fails to fit into their boxes. Community ideas—prior to their being assimilated into the MPC design scenarios—received a total thirty seconds of consideration at the November 12 meeting. The only idea discussed in any level of specificity was the Gale Elementary student's proposal to turn the site into a water park, which was played for comedy and promptly dismissed as one of the "less pragmatic" designs. This attitude illustrates MPC's larger disrespect towards community design ideas, which they treated only as inputs to be rearranged into their own scenarios, not as coherent or worthy ideas to be supported and developed in their own right.

Most people are not design professionals, and it would be a mistake to imply that there isn't valuable expertise that an architect, urban planner, contractor, or other professional could bring to a process like the CDI that most community members might not have. But if a process purports to value community input, yet consistently undermines that input by appealing to

⁹⁴ Hou, "Bottom-up Placemaking."

⁹⁵ Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 92.

professional know-how or an immutable status quo, it does not actually value that input, but rather the *appearance* of community involvement. A truly participatory planning process must value residents for the expertise they do have, which is, at a minimum, in living in a particular place alongside their neighbors. If you're not going to facilitate a design process that draws out and encourages thinking about a place based on that expertise, and then incorporate that thinking into the ultimate design in a concrete way that actually informs and changes it—why hold a participatory process at all?

A Better Process

In order to illustrate the details of what a development process that prioritizes community input might look like, I've chosen two case studies to explore in some depth. The first is a recent example from Chicago, and the second occurred in Berlin, Germany, in the late 1980s. There are many, many examples of innovative urban design projects, including several that are occurring right now, such as the Soil Lab and other projects commissioned for the 2021 Chicago Architecture Biennial on *The Available City*. I chose these particular examples to illustrate what an alternative development process can look like in *this* time and *this* place, and in another time and another place. Both examples elucidate what a generous design process might look like, but they take different approaches and are conditioned by different constraints.

Ethical Redevelopment on Dorchester

Theaster Gates is an artist with backgrounds in ceramics, urban planning, and theology. He intervenes in the built environment, primarily on Chicago's South Side, to activate spaces traditional developers and government entities have long neglected. These interventions often adapt existing structures into community spaces for gathering and performance, and Gates takes a particular interest in spaces significant to the history of Chicago's African American community. In his preface to the 2018 book on his redevelopment practices *Land-Art: Theaster Gates Art and Space Initiatives*, Gates considers what happens when people approach the creation and adaptation of urban places as artists rather than traditional developers, when "there is no immediate, apparent return [on the investment of money or other resources] and, sometimes, there is none projected or expected in the future."⁹⁶

⁹⁶ University of Chicago's Place Lab, Rebuild Foundation, and Space Fund, *Land-Art: Theaster Gates Art and Space Initiatives* (Theaster Gates, 2018), 3.

He calls the resulting process, which emerged out of a series of collaborative sessions with community leaders, ethical redevelopment, defined as “a philosophy aiming to shift the value system from conventional profit-driven development practices to conscientious interventions in urban contexts through art and spaces.”⁹⁷ It has nine principles.

The first principle is “Repurpose + Re-propose.”⁹⁸ Actors should recognize local assets and plan to activate the existing people and places before bringing in outside labor and resources.

The second is “Engaged Participation.”⁹⁹ More and more government planning agencies and development corporations engage with the public in some way, but too often those engagement strategies focus on informing members of the public about a project, not collaborating with them to build it. Ethical redevelopment holds that engagement should center “the willing investment of participants’ time, talents, and resources in a given place, [in a way that] redefines the architectural, cultural, social, and economic landscape... The value of the relationship is in the intimacy, not the duration. Engage for as long as it makes sense to engage. This intimacy sparks commitment to a vision.”¹⁰⁰

The third principle is “Pedagogical Moments.”¹⁰¹ A development process presents opportunities to teach people new skills, discover latent talents, and share accumulated wisdom. These moments can happen as part of a formal or informal brainstorming session, but can also be built into a project’s function through artist residency and community skills development programs. What are the opportunities to spur knowledge generation? How heavily can a project invest in those opportunities to prioritize knowledge sharing at every stage?

⁹⁷ University of Chicago’s Place Lab, Rebuild Foundation, and Space Fund, 37.

⁹⁸ University of Chicago’s Place Lab, Rebuild Foundation, and Space Fund, 42.

⁹⁹ University of Chicago’s Place Lab, Rebuild Foundation, and Space Fund, 50.

¹⁰⁰ University of Chicago’s Place Lab, Rebuild Foundation, and Space Fund, 51.

¹⁰¹ University of Chicago’s Place Lab, Rebuild Foundation, and Space Fund, 58.

The fourth is “The Indeterminate.” Project facilitators should “embrace uncertainty. Accept ambiguity. Allow the work to offer solutions; ask questions in response to ‘problems’ facing a neighborhood or a city. Resource inequity can be reduced with imagination.”¹⁰² How can a project commit to a specific vision, but remain flexible about its method of achieving that vision?

The fifth is “Design.” Everyone deserves beauty.¹⁰³

The sixth is “Place Over Time.” “Place-based activity is about the aggregation of years of activity and organic development of relationships. When it works, people visit and return in response to offerings that are authentic to the spirit of the place. Intentionality resonates. Visitors can shift from users to participants” in a cycle of creation and co-creation.¹⁰⁴ The making of a space doesn’t end when the final brick is laid. At that point, community members take over and make meaning in the place together.

The seventh is “Stack, Leverage, + Access.”¹⁰⁵ Amplify small successes to attract the attention of funders and the resources for larger projects.

The eighth is “Constellations.”¹⁰⁶ Charismatic leaders are ineffective over the long term without a network of invested team members and the support of local institutions like governments, banks, and businesses. A diverse group of stakeholders creates new possibilities for development processes; it need not necessarily lead to watered-down compromise.

¹⁰² University of Chicago’s Place Lab, Rebuild Foundation, and Space Fund, 67.

¹⁰³ University of Chicago’s Place Lab, Rebuild Foundation, and Space Fund, 74.

¹⁰⁴ University of Chicago’s Place Lab, Rebuild Foundation, and Space Fund, 83.

¹⁰⁵ University of Chicago’s Place Lab, Rebuild Foundation, and Space Fund, 90.

¹⁰⁶ University of Chicago’s Place Lab, Rebuild Foundation, and Space Fund, 98.

The ninth is “Platforms.”¹⁰⁷ A platform provides a larger structure for cultivation, greater than any one project or building, so that people who might not otherwise interact can consistently get together to work, think, and play.

In her essay within the *Land-Art* volume, scholar Romi Crawford concludes that “Gates’ places are, in fact, complex aesthetic, social, and physical situations. They evolve from his attention to micro-events, what he sees embedded in the urbanscape, and into something that challenges what we like to think of as art. They are barometers of what might be on the horizon for art making and for cities.”¹⁰⁸ Gates and his collaborators have distilled the principles of ethical redevelopment through their body of work, and the principles propose one method for how genuine community involvement can be meaningfully integrated into an actual development.

Much of the scholarship surrounding Gates’ work, given that it is a body of *artistic* work and not just a collection of development projects, emphasizes his particular vision and role as charismatic leader. This focus makes sense, but it reflects some scholars’ concerns about the long-term sustainability of his work or the reproducibility of his model.¹⁰⁹ To a certain extent, its inability to be reproduced is half the point. Gates doesn’t intend his work to be copied identically in different contexts, nor does he think of it as a silver bullet for revitalization; his projects represent his (informed) view of the best use for a piece of local infrastructure in one community at a particular moment in time. However, the principles of ethical redevelopment outlined in *Land-Art* could guide development in any place. Principle eight—Constellations—emphasizes that Gates’ work (and ethical redevelopment generally) is only possible through a network of

¹⁰⁷ University of Chicago’s Place Lab, Rebuild Foundation, and Space Fund, 106.

¹⁰⁸ Romi Crawford, “Elements of the Gatesian Method: Contract Aesthetics, Black Bricks, and Extreme Collaboration,” in *Land-Art: Theaster Gates Art and Space Initiatives* (Theaster Gates, 2018), 253.

¹⁰⁹ Shannon Jackson, “Utopian Operating Systems: Theaster’s Way of Working,” in *Entry Points* (New York, NY: Vera List Center for Art and Politics, The New School, 2015), 215.

collaborators, and any alternative development practice must extend beyond a single leader. Therefore, while much of my analysis stems from Gates' writings and writings about Gates, it is important to keep in mind that his adaptive reuse projects represent the work of an array of architects, engineers, artists, musicians, urban designers, and others.

The Dorchester Projects were Gates' first large-scale interventions in the built environment. They are a cluster of adaptive reuse projects along South Dorchester Avenue between 69th and 70nd Streets in the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood of Chicago. The Projects began in 2006 when Gates, who lives on the block, began to purchase abandoned properties adjacent to his home and reimagine their use. He acquired the empty house next to his own, then a former neighborhood candy store, and then another house across the street, which he transformed into the Archive House mini library, the Listening House—an archive for historic South Side institution collections, including Dr. Wax Records—and the Black Cinema House—a space for viewing and celebrating Black filmmakers—respectively.¹¹⁰ In 2013, after gaining favor with then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Gates purchased the nearby Stony Island State Savings Bank, which was slated for demolition, from the City for \$1.¹¹¹ The building was rehabilitated into the Stony Island Arts Bank and is now a community archive and exhibition space.¹¹² He funded the initial construction of these projects using sales of his own art, a strategy he refers to as a “hustle,” a Robinhood way of beating the art world—with its high-rolling collectors willing to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for scrap materials salvaged from his rehabs—at its own game.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Jackson, 216.

¹¹¹ John Colapinto, “The Real-Estate Artist,” *The New Yorker*, January 12, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist>.

¹¹² Rebuild Foundation, “Stony Island Arts Bank - Project Items - Theaster Gates,” 2019, <https://www.theastergates.com/project-items/stony-island-arts-bank>.

¹¹³ Colapinto, “The Real-Estate Artist.”



He also acquired the nearby Dante Harper Townhomes, a public housing project built in the 1970s by the Chicago Housing Authority that had stood vacant for years. In collaboration with the Chicago-based firm Landon Bone Baker Architects and Brinshore Development, a national development company, Gates rehabbed the dilapidated complex into the Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative. The rehab was a direct attempt to convert a symbol of the City's failure to provide suitable homes for Black families into a prosperous housing complex and cultural center.¹¹⁴ The project renovated thirty-two low-rise brick townhomes into two- and three-bedroom rental units for mixed-income artists. Twelve units are reserved for public housing, eleven are "affordable" rentals, and nine rent at market rate. A central block of four townhomes was converted into a community art center and porch.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Mabel O. Wilson, "Collecting Publics: The Spatial Politics of Dorchester Projects," in *Entry Points* (New York, NY: Vera List Center for Art and Politics, The New School, 2015), 239.

¹¹⁵ Landon Bone Baker Architects, "Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative, Chicago, IL," accessed May 2, 2022, <https://www.landonbonebaker.com/work/dorchester-arthousing-collaborative/>.



LBBA collaborated with Site Design Group, a Chicago architecture and urban design firm, to landscape the project.¹¹⁶ The townhomes face out to the street, and the original design included twenty feet of concrete between the front doors and the curb with only a thin strip of grass in between. The original backyards, which opened directly onto an alley, were covered in grass. LBBA and Site Design flipped this arrangement, replacing some of the front concrete with grassy lawns and the backyards with a shared rock garden punctuated by garden beds and trees to form a privacy screen between the back doors and the alley.¹¹⁷ While the exterior form of the townhomes remains mostly unchanged, upgrades to the details—mustard yellow doors, a dark red band along the top of each building, windows that swing out to let in fresh air and sound from the street—reflect a care and a generosity that makes the formerly institutional-looking

¹¹⁶ site design group, “Chicago Artful Landscape | Dorchester Artist Housing Collaborative,” accessed May 3, 2022, <https://www.site-design.com/projects/dorchester-artists-lofts/>.

¹¹⁷ Justin Manley, “The Death and Life of Dante-Harper Townhomes,” December 27, 2015, <https://justinmanley.work/posts/dorchester-art-housing-collaborative/>.

buildings playful and inviting.¹¹⁸ The redesigned spaces are private but not insular and encourage residents to gather while also providing each household their own space.

In an interview, Gates elaborated on the specific dynamic that made the collaboration with LBBA and Brinshore successful:

If we think not only about these artist housing units but also start to think about other types of spaces that might grow up over the next couple of years to support artists who live in a larger community, and that larger community that wants culture to be part of it, then not only are we making a good housing project but we are building and transforming a community. So initially my model or approach to things was a little different, but [Brinshore and LBBA] were generous in the way they listened and the strategies we ended up using to finance this big idea. They're developers and architects who were willing to think differently about the thing that they do every day so well. They were willing to say, "Maybe more could be done."¹¹⁹

Gates' interventions in the built environment illustrate a development process that depends on collaboration between groups of design professionals but simultaneously questions the established modes of doing things. The resulting projects are not dull compromises, but carefully considered spaces that invite members of a specific public to live in and complete them.

The fact that they are adaptive reuse projects, rather than new buildings, no doubt helps. The existing buildings provide a clear set of constraints from which to work, even if a structure's interior, exterior, or both evolve dramatically over the course of the design. Because the money for the projects comes primarily through art sales and funding to the Rebuild Foundation—the nonprofit Gates established to manage his projects—he has an unambiguous decision-making power within a collaboration that, in a more traditional scenario, would go to the development corporation funding the project. In the case of DA+HC, Brinshore acts more as a management

¹¹⁸ Landon Bone Baker Architects, "Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative, Chicago, IL."

¹¹⁹ Maura Guyote, "Theaster Gates' Dorchester Art+Housing Collaborative Offers Affordable Housing & Art Space in Chicago," *Creative Capital*, August 29, 2014, <https://creative-capital.org/2014/08/29/theaster-gates-dorchester-arthousing-collaborative-offers-affordable-housing-community-space-chicago/>.

company and advisor than a traditional developer, which enables Gates to hold onto creative control and ensure that the needs of artist-residents are prioritized over sheer profitability. And as his reputation grows, he is able to cling to this rare leverage with traditional developers and expand it, and to convene increasing numbers of collaborators and resources. Gates operates like a kind of benevolent dictator; while he is flexible in his process (principle four), he has an unshakeable vision. His collaborators are able to contribute to that vision, but they are ultimately asked to execute it.

The Ökohaus

The Ökohaus (German for Eco House) is an experimental collaborative housing development initiated by renowned architect and design engineer Frei Otto as part of the 1987 International Building Exhibition in Berlin, Germany. Completed in 1992, the Ökohaus is really three houses, each a grouping of 120 and 144-square-meter wood-frame units nested within a terraced concrete structure, situated on the former site of the Vatican embassy in Berlin's Tiergarten park. While Otto, along with architects from his studio, designed the three "plateau" structures into which participants would embed their particular "nests," they left the design—and, notably, the construction—of the individual units up to the participants, who were called eco-builders.

The eco-builders had to work alongside and collaborate with their neighbors to design and build their own homes. Christine Kanstinger, Otto's daughter and an architect in his studio, explained that "of course, we defined the plots on the land [for the three plateaus] beforehand to see what was possible, because you cannot say that everything is free, you have to consider something. It was very difficult to represent that in a drawing, because one had to draw

something, which should not mean a fixation, because we also did not want to influence [the eco-builders],” in their final designs.¹²⁰ They chose the positions for the three buildings based on the distribution of the trees, which had grown wild on the site since it became vacant and which they wanted to preserve.

It took two years and 1,300 consultations with prospective families to select the final eighteen eco-builder households and for each household to select its spot in one of the three plateaus.¹²¹ Even after the design process for individual units began in earnest, some families dropped out of the project as the timeline for completion stretched into the future and the anticipated costs of the units increased. The entire process was, predictably, at odds with the normal habits of construction. There were eighteen sets of clients, each of whom had an equal ownership stake in the development, distributed throughout three buildings on one lot. Some households chose to hire their own architects, some families included an architect who could devote time to the project, and others without formal design training chose to design and construct their units themselves, with some input from Otto. As expected, the design of the units dragged on as neighbors argued over access to space and light. Hermann Kendel, an architect and partner in Otto’s studio who managed the eco-builders’ process, recalled that at a certain point, “someone called for the ‘strong man.’ ‘But this is the task of the architect to coordinate this!’ I said no, no, you’re adults, you can agree and this will be a real solution, not one dictated by some dictator.”¹²² The process was not always harmonious. While eco-builders did eventually agree on designs that were compatible enough to start construction on the units, lawsuits between neighbors over property disputes persisted for years after the buildings’ completion.

¹²⁰ Beate Lendt, *Dreaming of a Treehouse*, 2011, <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/dreamingtreehouse>, 00:10:10-00:10:30.

¹²¹ Lendt, 00:18:07.

¹²² Lendt, 00:20:53-00:21:08.



The only strict recommendations Otto (pictured above¹²³ at a collaborative design session, seated on the right) and his partners made to the eco-builders were to use south-facing windows and solar panels to passively heat the units and generate electricity, and to add several square meters of plants onto the exterior of each unit to absorb carbon dioxide. The Ökohaus was an experiment in collaborative design and coordination between (mostly) laypeople without formal design training. Through it, Otto also investigated what might be possible if architects prioritized more ephemeral materials in their designs. What does a building that prioritizes the needs of plants look like? “What does a city look like,” he asks, “that is not prevented from being reasonable by its material and/or its planning?”¹²⁴

¹²³ Gerhard, “‘Ökohaus’ Berlin-Mitte (Tiergarten) | Corneliusstraße 11-12,” *Solidar Architekten* (blog), March 13, 2019, <https://www.solidar-architekten.de/oekohaus-berlin-mitte-tiergarten-corneliusstrasse-11-12/>.

¹²⁴ Lendt, 00:13:25.

Otto watched bombs decimate the German cities of Augsburg, Munich, and Stuttgart during World War II, and the experience profoundly shifted his view of what architects should prioritize. If centuries-old stone buildings could be leveled in moments—by *people*, no less—then why should architects limit themselves to sturdier materials built to last? Why build monuments at all? Why not emphasize the relationship people (or plants, or trees) have with a building over its form? In describing his approach to the Ökohaus project, Otto said that the builder “who never experienced a shower of bombs and seen the destruction of a city, has missed a semester of urban planning.”¹²⁵ The experience isn’t one he would wish on anyone, but it confers a crucial lesson. If an entire city could disappear overnight, then why not try to build the *most ideal* city, not one hemmed in by pre-conceived notions of what’s possible?

Otto expanded on his method in reference to his full body of work:

...one discovers things that have not been studied extensively yet, and then the gaps can be filled; I call this the “systematic method of invention,” but it’s only a method. The process through which one thing is combined with another can be done very systematically, and I have developed an entire series of inventions that have their origin in this combinatorial analysis. But the truly important things did not arise from that method, but largely from fortuitous or casual observations made during experiments, some of which were planned in a completely systematic style. I have always combined systematic experimentation with the fortuitous or casual, where chance plays a role; if something is accidentally discovered, it would be stupid to reject it simply because it doesn’t fit within the systematization. I am convinced that one can’t invent anything by working only systematically.¹²⁶

In the design of the Ökohaus, Otto relinquished an enormous amount of control to the future residents of the project. The process was contentious, but ultimately went well. Eighteen families, nine architects, and more than twenty contractors coordinated to complete the

¹²⁵ Lendt, 00:37:31.

¹²⁶ Juan María Songel, *A Conversation with Frei Otto*, Conversations: A Princeton Architectural Press Series (Princeton Architectural Press, 2010), 32.

residences, and the resulting buildings—one of which is pictured below—are cohesive but not cookie cutter.¹²⁷



Frei Otto and Theaster Gates are both designers with visions who convene large numbers of people through alternative design processes to develop new spaces on vacant or under-utilized pieces of their respective cities. However, their approaches to each of these projects were different. They are both deeply concerned with how community members will use the resulting spaces, but where Otto used his expertise to organize a structure within which residents and outside architects exercised a large degree of autonomy over the end development, Gates leveraged his skills and resources to convene a wide range of community members and professionals to participate in, but ultimately execute, his specific vision. These cases are not diametrically opposed, but rather two points along an axis, with one end representing a

¹²⁷ Gerhard, “‘Ökohaus’ Berlin-Mitte (Tiergarten) | Corneliusstraße 11-12.”

completely dictatorial model in which the designer makes all the decisions, and the other an entirely community-driven model in which professionals' sole job is to execute community choices (or, as was the case for some families in the Ökohaus, in which community members execute their choices themselves). Gates' projects lie closer to the benevolent dictator end of the axis, while the Ökohaus lies close to the community-driven end.

The Rogers Park Corridor Development Initiative doesn't fall into either of these categories, which indicates that there is at least one other focal point for development: a corporation- or profit-driven model. The Ökohaus and the Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative both dealt with development costs and the realities of property management as a component of their processes, but both projects throw into stark relief the degree to which the CDI prioritized profit over actual community involvement, despite Alderwoman Hadden's claims.

Implications for the CDI

MPC and the 49th Ward were either unaware of, or were not honest with participants about, the economic and policy constraints within which they were building the CDI. At the first meeting on October 1, residents who were more familiar with City processes—and those who were just skeptical about the extent to which the City would meaningfully adopt public input—specifically asked what kinds of development ideas they should consider and how officials would use their input as the process moved forward. Alderwoman Hadden and the MPC representatives assured these residents that they shouldn't worry about constraints because truly anything was possible. Their process would hinge so completely on what community members wanted that even they, the facilitators, didn't know what direction it would take.

This framing was either the result of a lack of due diligence on the part of the 49th Ward on City development processes—what kinds of development outcomes were likely or possible within the Department of Planning and Development—or it was a lie. That ignorance or dishonesty became clear in the subsequent meeting on November 12 when residents learned that there actually was a quite binding constraint around a possible development at Howard and Ashland: “economic feasibility.” That constraint not only existed, but apparently rendered the input participants had contributed up to that point unrealistic. Or at least the design scenarios that MPC had distilled from their input—thereby flattening any complexity or distinction between individual ideas—were deemed unrealistic. In order to become more feasible, the scenarios would have to evolve to become more profitable, both for the City and, primarily in MPC’s explanation, for the future developer of the property. The priorities of that abstract entity were the most important criterion in the evaluation of the already flawed design scenarios, in direct contrast to how Alderwoman Hadden framed the purpose of and rationale for the CDI on October 1.

To set aside malice for a moment and assume ignorance: the 49th Ward Office did not understand the existing landscape of City development initiatives and how different kinds of participation processes might or might not fit within those structures. They thus could not decide how they might frame a new community engagement process to work strategically within those existing structures, or to choose at what points they would fight to break out of them. They then could not communicate to participants how the CDI or any one portion of it might fit into the larger story of the Howard/Ashland site’s development, which only further limited community members’ ability to contribute meaningfully to the process and have their ideas engaged with in good faith.

These issues with the CDI illuminate a fundamental lack of good communication and transparency on the part of MPC and the 49th Ward, particularly in their explanation of the terms of the CDI, the potential for an RFP, and what City development processes in general might entail. It is instructive to imagine what an alternative, more transparent process with clarified and expanded terms might have looked like. So to conclude, I'll re-examine the history of the Howard/Ashland site, this time with an eye for the points at which community members might intersect with its historical evolution, a process of which the CDI and other formal initiatives are only a small part.

Opportunities for Expanded Terms

Lerner Newspapers issued a Rogers Park community weekly for years before the company was acquired by Pulitzer Publishing Co., the paper was shuttered, and the building was torn down. According to Paul Bick, a Rogers Park resident, landlord, and business owner who worked for Lerner in the 1980s, that newspaper and others like it were important points of connection; they featured neighborhood want ads, event announcements, photos of children at play. The loss of the building became a reminder of that prior means of connection from an era before the internet, before much of neighborhood communication moved online.

In the aftermath of the demolition, as the property moved between the Burrell Restaurant Group and an array of banks, it remained vacant. Neighbors and passerby might not have known about the transfers of property going on behind the scenes or, as the years went by, even remembered the Lerner Newspapers plant, but it would be natural for them to be curious about this oddly shaped, vacant piece of real estate along the Howard Street commercial corridor,

where it was flanked on both sides by businesses. “*When are they going to build something there?*”, they might have wondered. “*What will it become?*”

Then, after two decades of the site sitting vacant, the City acquired the land and leased the lot to the Peterson Garden Project, which invited residents to apply for a raised bed. Some people were excited about the opportunity; others were skeptical and concerned that the garden could become an instrument of gentrification. But now the site was changing, and the Peterson lease would only be renewed until the City found a permanent use for the lot, which begged the question: what might the site become next?

As the years passed and proposals for the site were introduced and abandoned, the Hello Howard garden community expanded and solidified. More raised beds were built, and nonprofit organizations like A Just Harvest ran programs to bring refugees from Rogers Park into the space so they could use the garden as a source of fresh food. When the locks on the fence surrounding the northern portion of the lot went missing in 2020, the planting rapidly expanded into that part of the site, which is notably right along the highly trafficked sidewalk of Howard Street. The garden thus became increasingly visible to casual observers as a source of food for many community members, as well as a place of respite and gathering during the pandemic. It was at this moment in the history of the Howard/Ashland lot that the 49th Ward Office and MPC announced the CDI. Here, finally, was a formal opportunity for neighbors to give input on the future of the site before a developer came knocking with a proposal.

The CDI happened, with all of the moments and missed opportunities for community input that I outlined in the prior section. Alderwoman Hadden then privately convened the community committee she and Paul Reise mentioned at the end of the March 16 meeting. However, as of May 2022, there has not been any further public communication about the site,

and no RFP has been issued. Extrapolating forward, assuming that there will be an RFP that follows the contours of the process Reise laid out, the RFP will in some way include community input from the CDI and likely some additional input from the community committee. When (or if) developers submit proposals, two members of that committee will rank proposals using rubrics; the exact criteria for the evaluation of proposals are not yet determined. The City will then somehow incorporate those community rankings into their final selection. And after a winner is chosen, there could be an additional process, led by DPD and the developer, to solicit feedback on the proposal.

This outline assumes that the opportunities for community input Reise suggested at the March 16 meeting actually happen. However, these opportunities, as well as the ones offered in the CDI, represent only a portion of the ways people have engaged with and shaped the evolution of the site at different stages. The CDI and the future process that Reise outlined ignore, for example, the existing community of gardeners who have been thinking long and collectively about how to build a welcoming community space on the site. Although MPC acknowledged the importance of the garden to participants at various points throughout the CDI, they did not consider the possibility of bringing together a group of people—most obviously, the Hello Howard community gardeners—who already had a deep engagement with and specific ideas for the site and helping them develop their thinking with more resources.

A more expanded process than the CDI might have entailed Alderwoman Hadden or another facilitator outlining the history of the site as I have done, or even more thoroughly through collective memory, both looking back at how the site has evolved and projecting into the future about the potential avenues for development the site might take. Then they could take an honest look at DPD processes, exemplified by INVEST South/West, and ask residents to

consider what elements or assumptions of the longer process—for example, the survey/design charrette methods for collecting participant input, the RFP as a default mechanism for identifying a developer and architect, the official criteria for the evaluation of proposals of any kind, City officials being the ones to ultimately choose the winner—they might want to push against. All of which would create more opportunities for individual participants to impact the final development than the terms of the retail vs. commercial vs. residential vs. green space uses residents were encouraged to consider.

When people in positions of authority—in this case, representatives of MPC—frame their questions in terms of the site’s use, most people are going to frame their answers in terms of use and simply disagree with each other on those terms, then be forced to “compromise.” For example, when residents were asked whether or not they wanted housing on the site, people who already had strong opinions about whether or not Rogers Park or the Howard Area needed more housing explained what they thought should happen with the site in those terms: we should put more housing on the site, or no we should not. MPC was then able to frame participant input on the terms they set—this many people want housing, this many people do not. Rather than attempting to engage with the complexity of people’s viewpoints and foster a conversation between community members, MPC simply recreated the existing ideological divides participants brought into the meeting. This power dynamic is an example of why the concept of planner as researcher is important, and how the principals of community geography can be instructive.

Viewing the community engagement process as a knowledge *formation* process, rather than a knowledge *extraction* process, could help prevent the process from becoming a verbal survey that collects people’s existing opinions. This idea ties back to the essential premise of

community geography from Shannon et al. that there is no “pre-existing public awaiting engagement.”¹²⁸ There is a group of people who might be already interested in the site—and that interest likely exists at a variety of levels, from the casually curious to those with clear convictions on what they think the site should become—but that group isn’t as ideologically or even necessarily geographically coherent as we might assume. And even if they are, that doesn’t mean that they’re able to communicate a coherent idea for a development, or architecture, or why spatial choices and details matter, without any preparation. There is also a group of people who might not have any kind of conscious opinion on the site, but who might want to engage in a process, if they are made aware of it and if their opinions are valued just as much as those of the people who know exactly what they want. Any successful community engagement process should recognize this diversity of potential stakeholders and value the people who might not know what they think just as much as those who do, or who think they do.

Here, the three-point spectrum of development—developer-driven, architect-driven, and community-driven—I elucidated in the “Better Process” section is particularly instructive. Any development is going to involve more than one of the poles; the Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative (an architect-driven process) involved a development group, and Frei Otto designed the internal structure of the Ökohaus (a community-driven process). However, Brinshore Development and Otto executed the visions of Gates in DA+HC and the eco-builders of the Ökohaus, respectively, rather than compromise them. It might seem counterintuitive to advocate against compromise in a community development process, but it is important to recognize where the agency lies in the context of a development. Developer-driven projects that include architects are far more common than architect-driven projects, which are both more

¹²⁸ Shannon et al, 1149.

common than truly community-driven projects. Our current landscape of development in Chicago is built around the needs and desires of developers. In the CDI, MPC and Alderwoman Hadden attempted to compromise between two impulses—the opinions of community members and profitability for developers—which produced a more middling process than if either model had gotten its way more fully. That isn't to say that an unabashedly developer-driven process would have produced a better outcome, but it could have been more aware and honest about where the power to make decisions about the project ultimately lied.

This is not an example of a successful professional-community placemaking partnership as described by Schneekloth and Shibley but what Bickford calls “legislating desires.”¹²⁹ That is, the CDI did not just provide institutional support for residents to share their dreams for the site, but actively used its institutional framework to affect those desires. One might argue that the mixed-use scenarios MPC put forth more closely align with the density and diversity of uses for which Jacobs advocates. Bickford argues for a similar pattern of use, referencing Jacobs directly when she argues that “[r]ather than possessing a singular distinct identity, then, urban and suburban spaces should be fuzzy and multilayered.”¹³⁰ But does such an argument extend to a mixed-use development on every block? At the level of the street or the neighborhood, the rote implementation of a six-story, retail-on-the-ground-floor, residential-on-top building designed in a predictable, craftless way—the kind of development MPC envisions in scenarios two, three, and four—risks precisely the homogeneity at scale that Jacobs explicitly denigrates.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that the aim of education should not be to teach students how to navigate an oppressive world, but to help them develop the skills they need to overthrow oppressive systems and create new ones. A great participatory design process could

¹²⁹ Bickford, “Constructing Inequality,” 370.

¹³⁰ Bickford, 369.

be one such form of education, one that doesn't require opportunities for community involvement to exist within pre-defined City structures, but that recognizes and cultivates the organic relationships and attention to place and significant bodies of personal experience and insight that Rogers Parkers have and already contribute to their neighborhood. Rogers Parkers identify strongly with their neighborhood. Throughout the CDI, when participants were able to speak and comment openly, they rarely limited their feedback to what they thought should happen to the Howard/Ashland site or even what kinds of services the neighborhood needed more of. The residents who attended the CDI clearly and consistently steered the conversation toward what they thought Rogers Park's values as a neighborhood should be and how the decision of what to do with the Howard/Ashland lot could illustrate those values, particularly in the face of profound issues like the availability of quality housing and climate change. What those values are exactly was an object of debate, and participants resisted being characterized by stereotypes and told what they should want by MPC. In short, they resisted a process that limited their development options to those within the existing system. A process that recognized and valued Rogers Parkers' impulse to experiment, to value the existing character of their place but also appreciate its ability to grow and adapt, could actually allow participants to learn from each other and dream up something transcendent within a new system.

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Appendix

This discussion of residential density as an aspect, not only of Rogers Park as it exists today, but as a critical component of what Rogers Park should become, prompted me to investigate claims like Alderwoman Hadden’s statement that “we certainly are one of the most compact and one of the most dense neighborhoods.” I performed a similar calculation of tract-level density using the updated 2020 Census numbers for the four tracts immediately surrounding the Howard/Ashland site in the north of Rogers Park. The raw density numbers alone, however, were insufficient to understand the lived experience of density of the area, so I added in residential building footprints from the Chicago Data Portal and categorized them by number of units to gain a better picture of the residential landscape. Only residential buildings in the file contain a value for “number of units”—non-residential buildings contain a value of 0—so through this visualization we can see where residential buildings are, where non-residential buildings are, and how residential buildings with different numbers of units are distributed. In sorting the building types into bins, I sought to preserve important Chicago housing types including the two-flat, three-flat, and six-flat. For buildings with more than eight units, I used the Fibonacci sequence to group them into increasingly large bins.

“Residential Density by Census Tract in North Rogers Park, 2020” contains only the data included in the Chicago Data Portal building footprint file. Most of the residential buildings contain information about their number of units, but when I started my analysis I realized that there were many residential buildings, particularly in the Howard area, that did not have that information. In order to illustrate the most complete picture possible of density in the area, I went into the field to find the buildings without unit data and estimate from their exteriors how

many units they contained. I included my estimates in the “Residential Density in the Howard Area, 2020” map on page 45.