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Accumulation through Abandonment:

Demolition and the Uneven Production of Vacant Lots in Chicago Neighborhoods

by

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Abstract

Demolition is a common fact of contemporary urban life, particularly in areas with aging building stock, rapid population change, or sudden transformations in land-use. Far from a natural or inevitable process, however, demolitions and their aftermath are intimately tied to the uneven production, destruction, and distribution of value in social and geographic space. This article argues that there are two main social categories that demolitions fall into: “rent gap” demolitions and “spatial fix” demolitions, each representing distinct but related moments in urban processes of capital accumulation and corresponding with either rapid redevelopment of land or sustained periods of land vacancy, respectively. The socioeconomic factors of community areas in Chicago have a great deal of influence on the patterns of demolition and redevelopment that occur, affecting what kinds of demolition occur where. In the context of cascading social and ecological crises, the forms of value that are legible to actors influencing the built environment, as well as accompanying practices of care and repair (or lack of it), call for urgent critical examination and reconsideration of demolition-neutral urban policy.

Introduction

In October 2019, a four-story building was demolished in Chicago's Gold Coast neighborhood. The structure was built in the 1880s as a single-family home and had functioned as a restaurant before being demolished to make way for a 330-foot high-rise with luxury condos and commercial space (Koziarz 2019a). That same month, the University of Chicago demolished the American Taxi Service Building, a 1928 structure across the street from Jackson Park in the Hyde Park neighborhood. In this case, there was no 330-foot high-rise following in its stead, only a vacant lot (Koziarz 2019b). In October 2019, there were twenty-two demolition permits issued in the West Englewood community area, just a few miles from Hyde Park. Few, if any, of these buildings made the historic preservation watchdog list or received media coverage. These three cases illustrate different levels of attention and care paid to buildings based on socially constructed notions of cultural significance, as well as how the different political-economic forces behind a particular demolition are reflected in the demolition's aftermath.

If demolition is thought about at all, it is often in contexts like the American Taxi Service Building or the 19th century Gold Coast Greystone. Some buildings—as the story goes—reflect a particular strand of cultural heritage that gives them a reason to be insulated from development pressure, be it for their architectural style or social significance. Demolition as a social practice, however, plays a critical role in the unfolding of urban restructuring and value extraction across spatial and temporal scales. Understanding the social and geographic structure of demolitions within a city, and what proportion of such demolitions result in either a vacant lot or redevelopment, can illuminate patterns of capital that serve to (re)produce uneven development in the built environment along stratified racial and class lines. The social geography of this

uneven development, *where* this model of slash-and-burn urban development occurs and *who* is primarily affected by it, is of critical importance for scholars interested in equity.

Theoretical Framework

RACE AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF URBAN REDEVELOPMENT

Much of the literature on the political economy of urban redevelopment in the past several decades has drawn on rent-gap theory (Smith 1979). Rent-gap theory was developed as an alternative to consumer sovereignty hypothesis that saw gentrification as the result of changing consumer preferences, especially among young, mobile professionals, away from large houses in the suburbs and towards urban modes of life. It instead stressed that gentrification is an expected product of market systems for land and housing distribution. The theory suggests that redevelopment of a particular parcel of land will generally occur when the capitalized ground rent appropriated by landowners plus the cost of redevelopment is less than the potential ground rent that could be achieved if the land were to be put to its “highest and best use” from the perspective of rent extraction. As capital embodied in the built environment undergoes depreciation over time, areas with devalued land and structures but high potential ground rent (due to proximity to the city center, a concentration of jobs, other amenities, etc.) come to have high potential for redevelopment and gentrification.

While rent-gap theory has provided substantial insight on urban restructuring processes, particularly gentrification, further theorization is needed to relate rent-gaps to the central role that race plays in structuring the urban built environment, particularly in Chicago. Recent critical literature has focused on race as a primary factor in attempting to theoretically analyze extreme

land abandonment in the American Rust Belt, as opposed to conventional explanations that emphasize deindustrialization, housing lifecycle processes, and municipal fiscal challenges (Hackworth 2018). Further still, other authors have theorized gentrification and redevelopment as intrinsic processes of racial capitalism, where racialization and class stratification are fundamentally intertwined (Rucks-Ahidiana 2021). The extent to which transformations in the built environment are influenced by various social categories, particularly race and class, should be studied further, but for now a synthetic approach that treats them as closely related but not necessarily codetermined should be sufficient for this paper's analysis.

THE ROLE OF VALUE

The production, distribution, and eventual decay of various forms of value is central to many analyses of capitalist urbanization, not only those inspired by rent-gap theory. David Harvey describes the built environment under capitalism as both a set of use-values for the accumulation of capital, either directly via physically structuring labor in space or indirectly by enabling the ongoing social reproduction of capitalist class relations, as well as functioning as a commodity itself in the form of real estate (Harvey 1985). Harvey suggests that the dynamics of capital produce waves of investment in the built environment that inevitably result in devaluation. Importantly, however, these sites of devalued capital retain some level of functional use-value that leaves the door open for future waves of investment and accumulation. Urban land retains a minimum value, even absent capital improvements to that land, due to its speculative potential.

Harvey also argues that capitalist urbanization is facilitated by “accumulation by dispossession,” the “mirror-image of capital absorption through urban redevelopment” (Harvey 2008, 34). The value captured in urban space is not always newly produced, it often comes at the cost of the devaluation and appropriation of existing value, often held by low-income and socially marginalized populations. This is a key driver of conflict over claims to land between communities who have roots in a particular place and capitalists who wish to intensify value extraction. A focus on dispossession also centers the differential social effects that urban redevelopment produces. If capital accumulation happens everywhere, but in some communities that accumulation is enabled through dispossession rather than investment, it suggests we must take a close, critical look at the processes (and their analyzable, spatialized effects) that enable such a formation.

BEYOND “HISTORIC” PRESERVATION

One way that market-led transformations in the built environment are resisted is through historic preservation. Historic preservationists have long argued that certain aspects of the built environment contain intangible cultural value that should be insulated from market pressures towards demolition and redevelopment. This idea, institutionalized in the United States through the National Register of Historic Places as well as a network of nonprofits and activist organizations, is a terrain of social and political contestation that often reproduces racial inequities seen across society (Cep 2020). What is considered “historical” is mediated through cultural and aesthetic priorities, themselves often informed by broader social forces. A narrowly aesthetic or cultural approach to protecting our inherited built environment is therefore insufficient to properly recognize and protect other forms of value embedded within it.

Some preservation scholars have suggested that the distinction between historical and non-historical structures is artificial, and that the built environment should be understood primarily as “environmental artifacts” (Merlino 2020). Under this view, all buildings have some degree of inherent value due to their being repositories of a massive amount of embodied energy, materials, and labor that was deployed in their construction. This view is concordant with methodological approaches such as Life Cycle Analysis (LCA), which seek to understand the embodied environmental effects of all stages of an object’s production, use, maintenance, and disposal, as well as more radical ecological perspectives. The lack of recognition of the ecological value form points to the inability of contemporary urban policy and economic structures to adequately maintain stores of value that do not lead to further accumulation.

DEMOLITION AS URBAN ACCUMULATION STRATEGY

Demolition occupies a key location in the unfolding of urban value production processes. As a physical event, it marks the transformation of a building into rubble and empty land. As a moment in a social-ecological process of accumulation, it transforms an embodiment of cultural, ecological, and use-values into a devalued *Terra Nullius* ripe for redevelopment and further accumulation. Rachel Weber argues that, while buildings in urban areas of concentrated poverty may be marginalized by capital due to the short-term rent gap being too small, so long as the “value of the structure declines faster than the ground rents increase... demolition—a potent spatial fix—prepares the land for gentrification and building upgrading.” (Weber 2002, 5.) This uneven development provides capital with new potential sites of value extraction out of formerly devalued spaces. Additionally, the vacant lot is a neatly abstracted urban form, conducive to

speculation free from the particularities of place or building conditions, making it more legible—and thus desirable—to market actors.

This devalorization process is also investigated by William Conroy, who examines urban land through the lens of a “biopolitical commons” (Conroy 2019). He argues that urban planners and real estate capital actively produce vacant land via “ontological devaluation” of racialized spaces and communities in order to allow for future enclosure. One effect of municipal policy such as Chicago’s Large Lots program is to devalue the present built and social conditions of stigmatized territory and widen the rent-gap, leading to more profitable investment in the future. This supplements our theoretical focus on markets and introduces the state as an active agent, turning demolition from a spatially and temporally localized event into a moment of an accumulation strategy that plays out across a variety of scales.

Common justifications for the state’s role in demolition and the offloading of vacant lots to developers focus primarily on perceived criminal activity, the cost of municipal services, decreased property values and tax revenues associated with vacancy, and “the spiral of blight,” where a few vacant properties lead to degenerating conditions for the community as a whole (National Vacant Properties Campaign 2005). Such justifications recall the legacy of “urban renewal” projects, which often resulted in the destruction of “obsolete” buildings and the displacement of community residents (Chaichian 2017). Some empirical studies have provided evidence indicating that vacant lots likely have some impact on crime (Stern 2021) and property values (Rahman 2020). The existence of these effects, however, does not contradict the role of the state in facilitating accumulation through vacant lots. City government officials may have multiple motivations for a particular policy, and the state is often a contested terrain of political conflict rather than a monolithic vehicle for capital.

In another piece by Jason Hackworth, he describes the effects of demolition as the de facto urban policy in areas with extreme-housing loss in the American rust belt. Drawing on organic metaphors, such as describing blight as “cancer,” the Detroit Blight Removal Task Force was tasked with eliminating blight from the city under the assumption that a blighted physical appearance of the built environment has substantial negative social and economic effects (Hackworth 2019). The cancer metaphor also serves to attach fear of urban decay to those not immediately effected by it, crafting political constituencies who are interested in combating blight in other areas by any means necessary in order to prevent the potential spread into their communities. It is worth bringing up the racialized origins of blight as a concept and its connection to exclusionary urban policy in the early 20th century. As Rachel Weber describes the history of blight:

“Many of the blight indicators involved some sort of mixing or blurring of boundaries: a mixture of land uses or of the race and ethnicity of residents. As Swartzbaugh notes in her historical study of race in Chicago, even though buildings on the black South Side were not as old as those on the north and west sides of the city, they were more frequently categorized as unfit or substandard. Blight was disproportionately found in nonwhite areas; one checklist even included ‘percentage of Negroes’ (Chicago Plan Commission 1942) as one of three indications of blight.” (Weber 2002, 8).

This quote also reminds us that perceptions of the value and fitness of the built environment in a particular area often have more to do with the observable social characteristics of their context, rather than endogenous features of the buildings themselves. While contemporary definitions of blight may not explain the concept in explicitly racial terms, the policies built on such an understanding continue to produce racially uneven effects.

PRIOR WAVES OF RESTRUCTURING IN CHICAGO

While this study focuses on the most recent wave of demolition and redevelopment occurring in Chicago, the particular locations where broad restructuring of the built environment can and does occur is both enabled and restricted by prior rounds of restructuring. Many areas of Chicago with formerly high rent gaps have already had that rent gap become capitalized and gentrification, along with associated social and demographic transformations, has already occurred. While “super-gentrification” of already gentrified areas may occur given the right circumstances, this is overall a small subset of all neighborhoods (Lees 2003). In this sense, the areas with potential for gentrification and redevelopment are path-dependent, and time-based analyses will inevitably capture only the current restructuring logics rather than producing fully generalizable theory. For example, Chicago lost 46% of its manufacturing jobs in the period between 1967 and 1982 (Abu-Lughod 323). While this clearly still has an effect, the most dramatic expressions of post-industrial restructuring in the built environment have likely already occurred and would not be reflected as strongly in a more contemporary analysis.

As early as the 1920s the Chicago North Side neighborhoods of Old Town and Lincoln Park were undergoing gentrification and following the now familiar pattern of formerly stigmatized neighborhoods becoming more tolerable for investors and eventually undergoing dramatic shifts in neighborhood composition (Hertz 2018). Research at the University of Illinois-Chicago’s Voorhees Center suggests a rough timeline for gentrifying neighborhoods that marks Lincoln Park, North Center, West Town, and Near South Side as gentrifying prior to 2000. Between 2000 and 2010, seven more community areas underwent gentrification: Near West Side, Near South Side again, Logan Square, West Town, Bridgeport, Uptown, and Douglas (Natalie P. Voorhees Center for Neighborhood and Community Improvement 2014). Many

community areas not captured by the Voorhees Center study are also commonly considered to currently be undergoing gentrification and redevelopment, particularly the Lower West Side (including Pilsen and Heart of Chicago) and Woodlawn. In the same time span, many other neighborhoods also underwent changes associated with decline, including population decrease and lowering median incomes, suggesting that there is substantial intra-city variation in how these restructuring processes unfold. In order to make sense of the most recent manifestations of such processes in the built environment, we should take a look at the data.

Data

This project used a combination of various data sources to compile information on different social and geographical aspects of demolition patterns in Chicago. Data on the number of demolitions was taken from the “Building Permits” dataset published by the City of Chicago Data Portal. Because this dataset includes every kind of construction permit, the data was filtered for the “Wrecking/Demolition” category of the PERMIT_TYPE column. Analysis was restricted to 2008-2021 because the dataset only has an attribute for community areas beginning in 2008, and this study is focused on the most recent wave of demolitions and redevelopment.

Determining community areas for older permits based on address or latitude/longitude would be labor-intensive and impractical for a study of this scale, considering the massive size of the dataset. Each instance of demolition was weighted equally, with the relevant information here being the number of demolitions in a community area within the established time frame.

Population data (including 2010 population, 2020 population, vacancy percentage, median rent, median income, median housing value, and racial composition) was pulled from the

Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning “Community Data Snapshots by Community Area.”

These data snapshots are compiled from a number of sources, “including the U.S. Census Bureau, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, the Illinois Department of Employment Security, the Illinois Department of Revenue, and CMAP.” (cmap.illinois.gov). This data was preferred over census data because census data is less up to date and does not always include the necessary relevant variables. While not as granular as census data, community areas (here used interchangeably with “neighborhoods”) are used by city planners and for the purposes of this project correspond better to the cultural, demographic, and political fabric of Chicago.

Data on vacant lots was taken from the City of Chicago Data Portal’s “City-Owned Land Inventory” dataset. This data is compiled to facilitate the sale of lots whose ownership has been transferred to the city through abandonment, tax liens, and demolition. It does not include city-owned lots that are used for municipal purposes such as police stations (ex: The Loop has 0 vacant lots under this definition, despite containing many municipal government buildings). It also does not include privately-owned vacant lots, as that information is not publicly available. Data was restricted to “Date of Acquisition” in the same 2008-2021 time frame for better comparison with demolition data. This is certainly not a perfect proxy for all vacant lots—especially considering that “vacant” lots are a fraught category, often being used by community organizations for various activities and should not be treated as absolutely devoid of activity or value—but it is the best I could come up with given publicly available data sources. Despite these limitations, the data is sufficient for a preliminary study that could be supplemented by future analyses with a more rigorous approach.

Methods

For the preliminary analysis, I divided the number of demolitions and vacant lots by the population of each community area. There are a few issues with this approach, especially the fact that population change may be causally linked to the variables of interests, so weighting by population could distort the outcome variables, but this approach was still preferred in order to keep more populated community areas from having an outsized impact on the results. Using raw demolition counts per community area would likely skew the results towards more highly populated areas with more buildings. Another potential issue comes from the fact that community areas with low population and a lot of building stock, such as industrial zones, may be overrepresented in the data. These issues should be kept in mind when interpreting the analysis, but this was still the most reliable method for normalizing demolitions across community areas given the scope of the project.

I then ran simple R^2 calculations in Excel for the correlation between my outcome (number of demolitions/2020 population, number of city-owned lots/2020 population) and predictor (change in population 2010-2020, vacancy percentage, median rent, median income, median housing cost, and racial composition variables). Outlier neighborhoods were identified using standard deviations based on the population-weighted demolition/vacant lots in each community area.

Constructing a redevelopment index, defined as:

$$1 - \frac{\# \text{ of city - owned vacant lots}}{\# \text{ of demolitions per capita}}$$

and representing the proportion of demolitions within a community area in a given time frame that do not result in a vacant lot, allows us to group community areas and perform more advanced analysis. In order to compare averages of social characteristics across neighborhoods with similar redevelopment levels, each community area was divided into one of four categories based on the aforementioned index: low redevelopment (0.9 or less), medium redevelopment (less than 0.95, more than 0.9), high redevelopment (less than 0.99, more than 0.95), and negligible vacant lots (higher than 0.99). Averages were then taken of various relevant socio-demographic and physical indicators to determine where substantial differences lie.

Results

Table 1 shows that there is a strong linear relationship between groups of community areas within a particular range of redevelopment indices and their average attributes across a number of categories including: percent change in population from 2010-2020, vacancy ratio, median income, median rent, percent Black, and percent White. The delineation of racial categories as Black, White, and other comes from Hackworth 2018, who theorizes the relationship between Blackness and Whiteness specifically as a determinant of urban restructuring via an analysis of group threat theory, but more granular analysis of this category would be useful in further studies.

The results show that community areas with lower redevelopment indexes have, on average, more residential vacancies, lower median incomes, lower median rents, higher proportions of Black populations, lower proportions of White populations, and lower, often negative, rates of population growth from 2010-2020. Among neighborhoods with

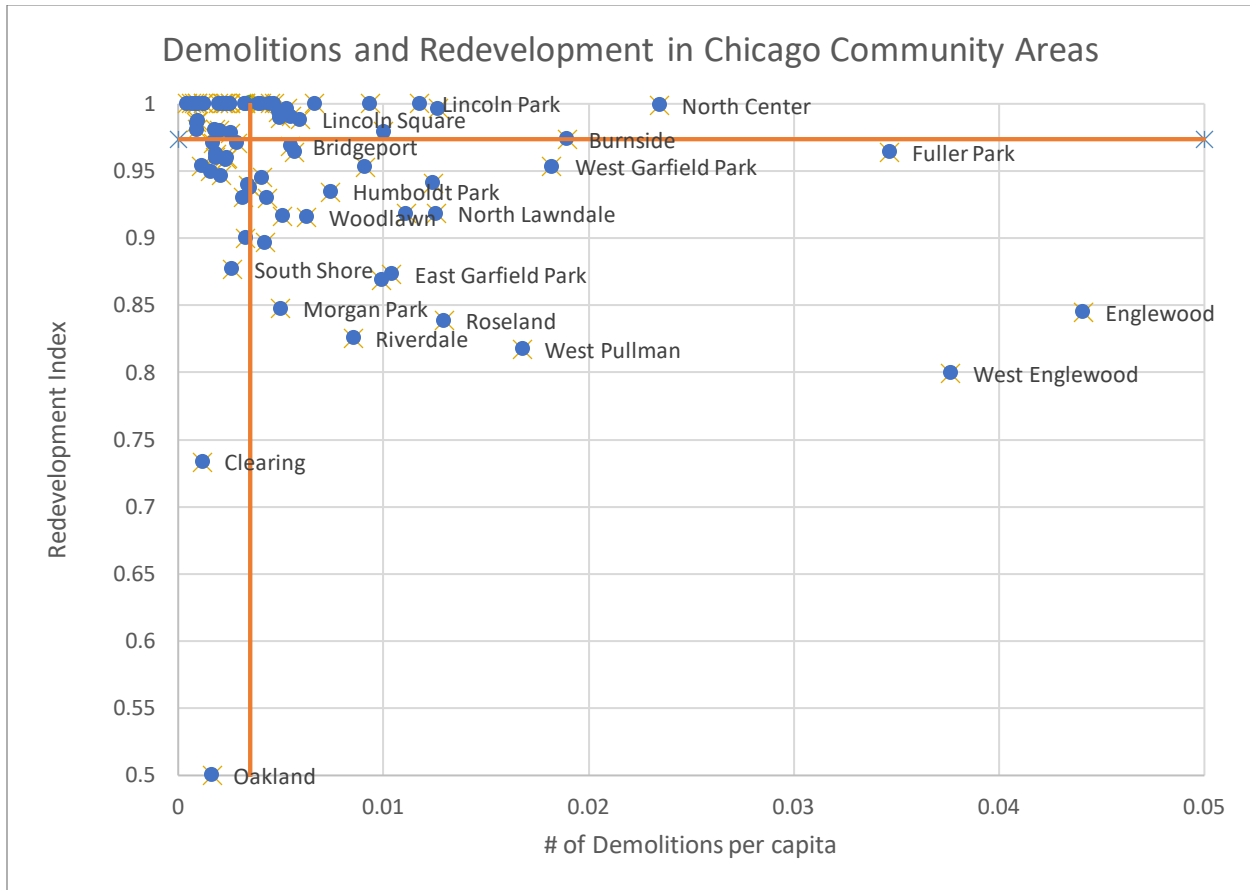
redevelopment indexes below 0.9, the median income was \$36,276, the population decreased by 5.1% between 2010 and 2020, and was 78.9% Black and 8.7% White. This can be contrasted to neighborhoods with redevelopment index above 0.99, which had a median income of \$73,548, 2.9% population growth over the same time period, and were on average 13.3% Black and 44.9% White. There was no significant variation in the median age of housing stock, suggesting that the age of structures and related physical features of the built environment within a community area are less significant determinants of redevelopment rates than social and economic features.

Table 1: Community Area Redevelopment Index by Population Characteristics

Redevelopment Index	% change in population (2010-2020)	Vacancy Ratio	Median Income	Median Rent	% Black (2020)	% White (2020)	% Other Race (2020)	Median age of housing stock
Low ($X < 0.9$)	-5.10	0.11	36276	895	78.91	8.70	12.39	70.62
Medium ($0.9 < X < 0.95$)	-4.43	0.08	38614	922	60.74	9.77	29.49	73.00
High ($0.95 < X < 0.99$)	-1.97	0.04	55497	1048	31.41	27.78	40.81	73.55
Negligible Vacant Lots ($X > 0.99$)	2.93	0.02	73548	1210	13.31	44.86	41.83	72.45

The redevelopment index was also used to create a 2-axis chart (Figure 1). This chart has the number of demolitions per capita on the x-axis and the redevelopment index on the y-axis. This allows us to differentiate between neighborhoods where high demolition rates occur in tandem with redevelopment and where they do not. For the sake of visual clarity, labels for community areas clustered near the top left were removed. The orange vertical and horizontal lines within the chart represent the median value for each axis.

Figure 1: Demolitions and Redevelopment in Chicago Community Areas



Based on this chart, there are a number of notable observations. The majority of Chicago neighborhoods actually had a relatively high redevelopment index, suggesting that most demolitions that occur in the city result in redevelopment shortly after. Englewood and West Englewood are two community areas that are significant outliers, with the two highest demolitions per capita as well as low redevelopment indexes. Oakland, Clearing, and South Shore had relatively low demolitions per capita, but among demolitions that occurred, a high proportion of them resulted in vacant lots. Among these neighborhoods, Clearing is the only one that is not predominantly black and has a median income higher than that of the Chicago average. The rest ranged from 87% to 94% Black and had a median income ranging from

\$22,127 to \$32,844. North Center, West Town, and Lincoln Square had relatively high demolitions per capita, but also high redevelopment indexes, suggesting demolitions occur as a result of demand for increased building rents on the same land. These three neighborhoods all have higher incomes than the Chicago average and are predominantly white, ranging from 2% to 7% Black, and had median incomes from \$81,149 to \$125,033. Because so many neighborhoods had zero city-owned lots, there is a large cluster at the top of the graph. Among neighborhoods with zero city-owned lots, most also had a relatively low number of demolitions, with two exceptions: Lake View and Lincoln Park, both of which are predominantly white and have above-median incomes. This trend is also visible in the following choropleth maps.

Figure 2: Demolitions per Capita Choropleth Map

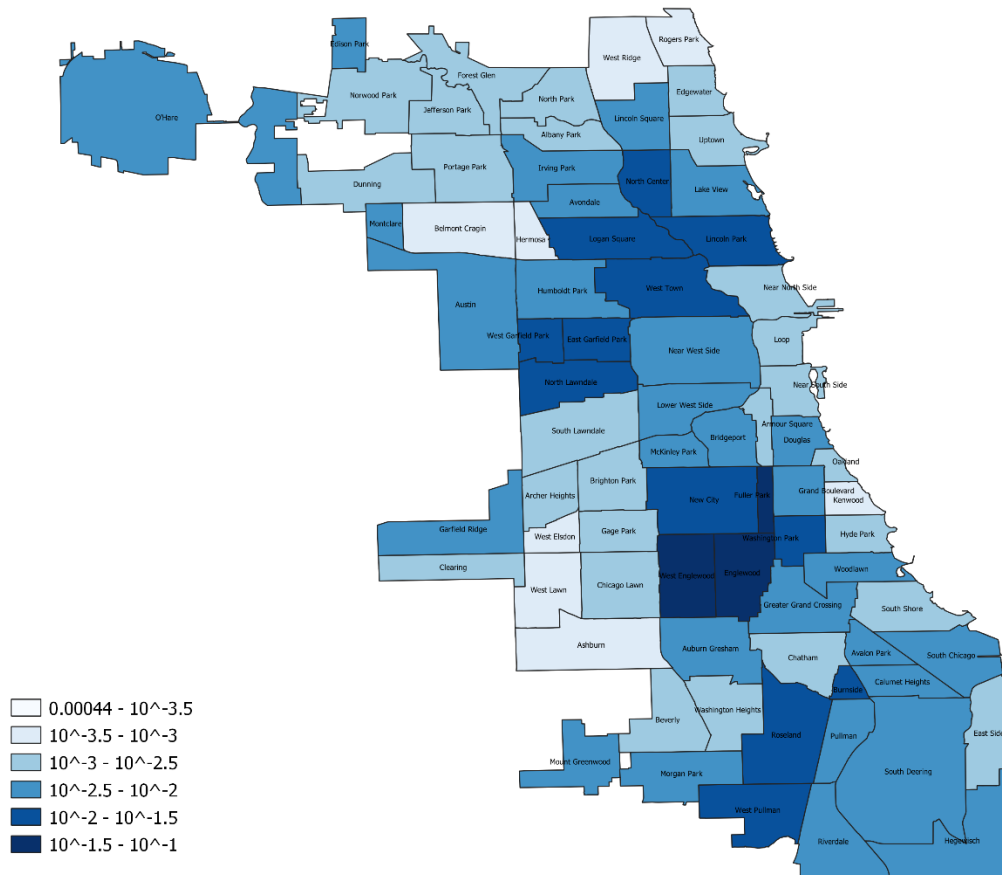


Figure 2 shows the number of demolitions per capita across Chicago's neighborhoods. A logarithmic scale was used to classify the data. While the absolute number of demolitions per capita can be considered low across all neighborhoods, there is substantial variation between neighborhoods. It is interesting to note that many of the neighborhoods with the highest demolitions per capita were of a similar distance from the city center and were not neighborhoods directly adjacent to the loop but instead a few neighborhoods away. No rigorous geographic analysis of this observation was performed for this project, but further work may investigate the spatial path-dependency of demolition waves.

Figure 3: Vacant Lots per Capita Choropleth Map

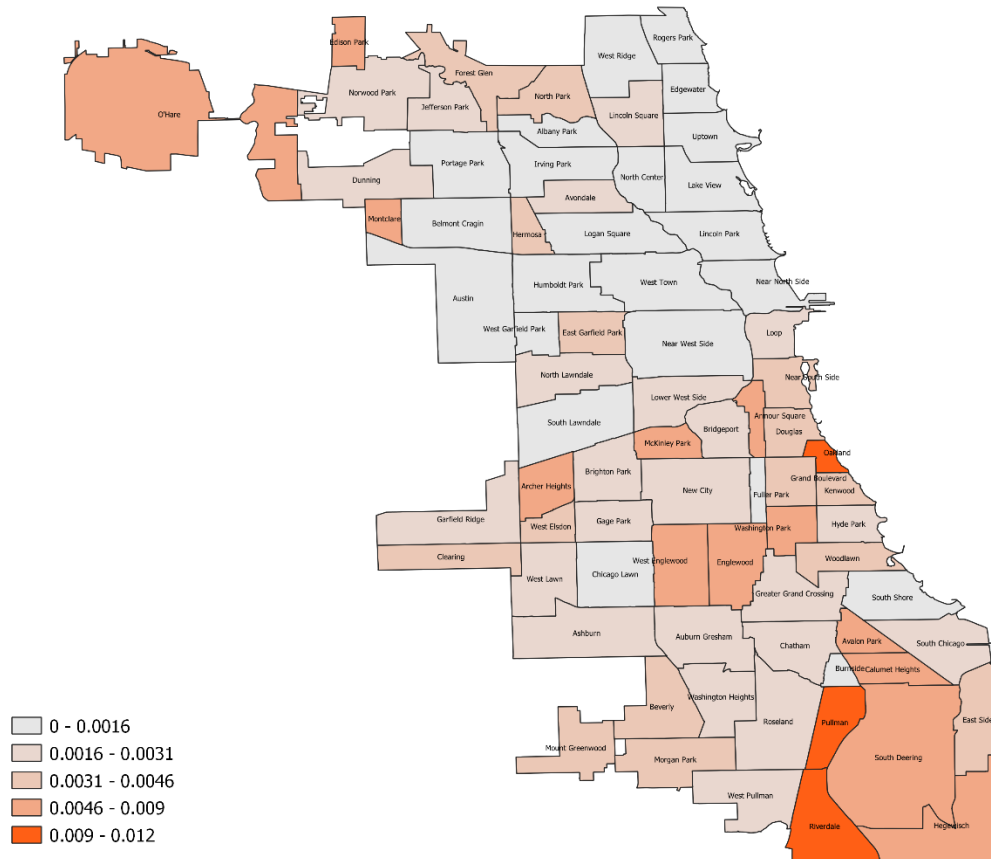


Figure 3 depicts vacant lots per capita in each neighborhood. Data was classified according to the “natural breaks” setting on QGIS. There is less overall variance here than in the demolitions per capita map, but there is a similarly large gap between neighborhoods with the lowest and highest numbers of vacant lots per capita. All three upper outlier neighborhoods were on the South Side of Chicago: Oakland, Pullman, and Riverdale. Most other neighborhoods with higher vacant lots were on the South Side as well, while most North Side neighborhoods had a relatively low number of vacant lots per capita.

Figure 4: Redevelopment Index Choropleth Map

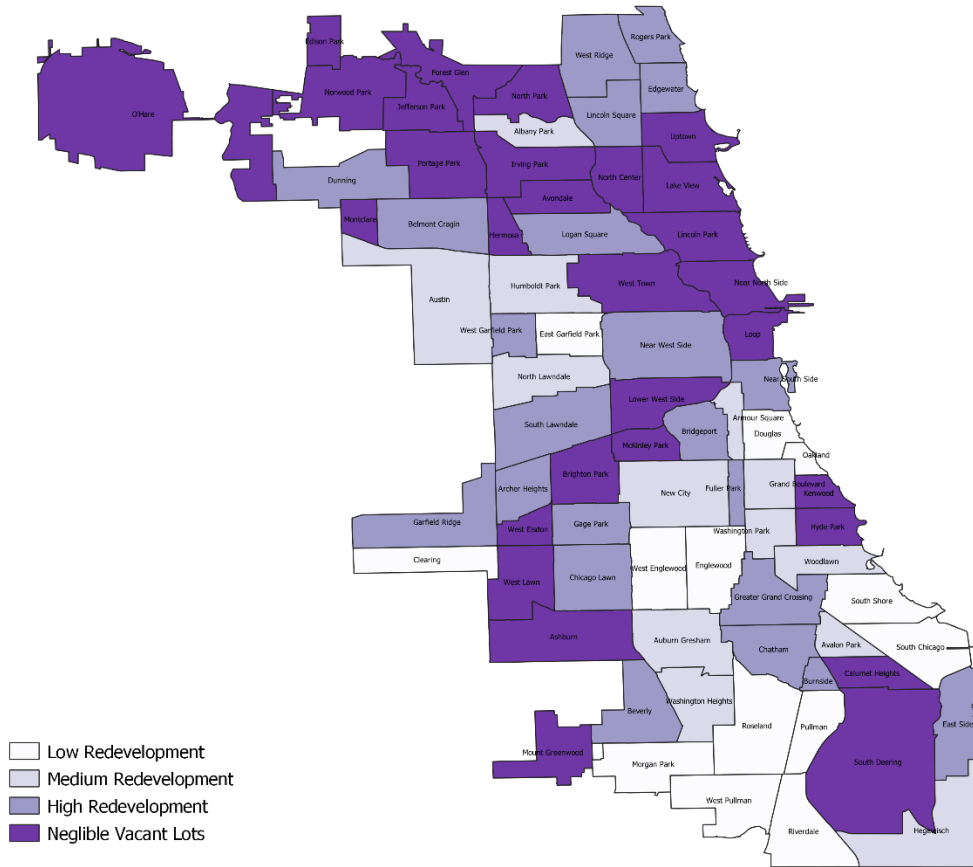
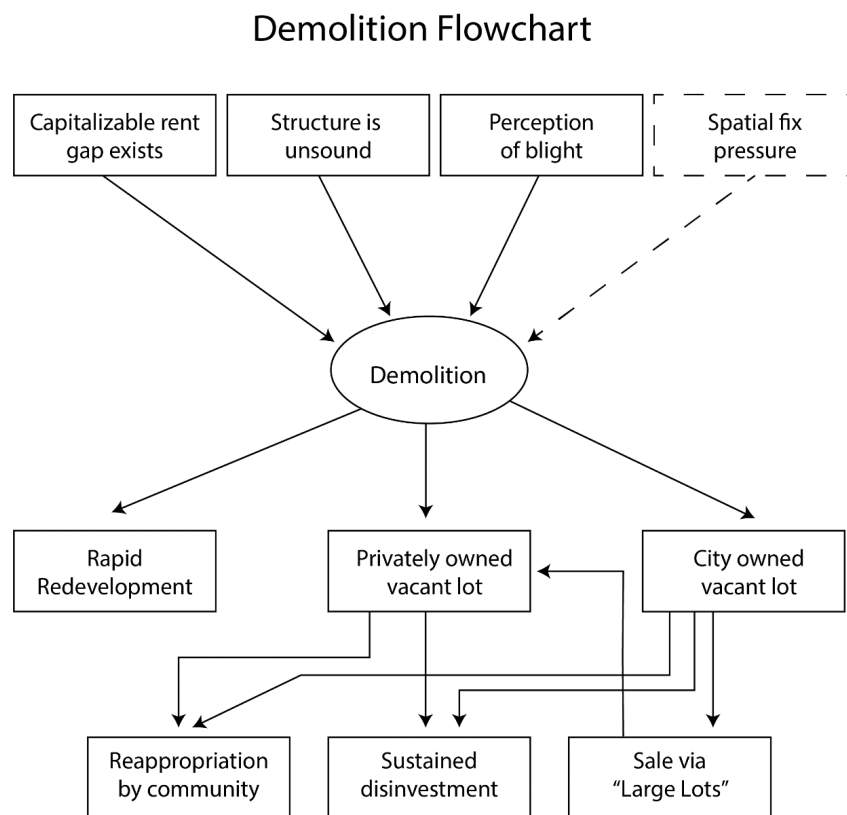


Figure 4 depicts the redevelopment indexes of Chicago neighborhoods. The data was classified according to the same scheme as Table 1: low redevelopment ($X < 0.9$), medium redevelopment ($0.9 < X < 0.95$), high redevelopment ($0.95 < X < 0.99$), and negligible vacant lots ($X > 0.99$). With few exceptions, neighborhoods on the North Side were overwhelmingly classified as high redevelopment or negligible vacant lots. The West Side was mixed, including neighborhoods from across the redevelopment spectrum. The South Side contained nearly all neighborhoods with low redevelopment indexes as well as a substantial portion of medium redevelopment neighborhoods with a few exceptions such as Hyde Park, Kenwood, Mount Greenwood, and McKinley Park.

Discussion

What can this analysis of demolition and redevelopment patterns tell us about how value is produced, destroyed, and distributed throughout the built environment? Putting aside ad hoc demolitions (here defined as demolitions whose immediate cause has to do with physical characteristics of a building rather than the potential for value extraction from a piece of land), two main motivations for demolitions come into view, each represented by the branches of this demolition flowchart (Figure 5).

Figure 5:



Demolitions that result in rapid redevelopment can be termed “rent-gap demolitions:” the prospect of intensified value extraction from a plot of land is enough to lead to redevelopment plans and at no point in the brief period of land vacancy between demolition and new

construction does the land become municipally owned. These types of demolitions are more common in areas with greater capital investment and represent many of the demolitions in community areas with both high demolition rates and high redevelopment indexes, such as Lincoln Park and North Center. Such neighborhoods may or may not be actively undergoing demographic transitions associated with gentrification, something that should be investigated in further research.

The second category of demolitions is more difficult to parse, though their role in the urban value production process is no less important. In order to be brought into the accumulation nexus, certain plots of land must be made legible and desirable to market actors. For many of these, that means demolition, sustained vacancy, and reincorporation into the land market at rock bottom prices, all facilitated at various stages by municipal programs such as Large Lots. These can be termed “spatial fix” demolitions. While determining the direct intent behind this type of demolition is beyond the scope of this study, one potential explanation concerns their justification via appeals to blight or other perceived negative effects of abandoned property, while simultaneously acting to standardize and devalue urban land. This paves the way for future rounds of appropriation and capital accumulation by taking advantage of common preconceptions about the relationship between safety or social stability and the form of the built environment.

We should be careful not to overextend the results of this analysis, however. One problem with weighing demolitions per community area by population is that communities with very small populations or a low total number of demolitions can produce more extreme statistical observations. Oakland, for example is one of the smallest community areas in Chicago with a 2020 population of 7227. Between 2008 and 2021, there were 12 demolition permits issued and

6 vacant lots acquired by the city, leading to a redevelopment index of 0.5—by far the lowest in Chicago. The second lowest index (0.73) came from Clearing, a moderately populated neighborhood with 24976 people in 2020, but 30 demolitions and 8 city-owned lots.

The high number of vacant lots in small community areas is surprising in itself, but the redevelopment index is not capturing rates of demolitions, only the proportion of demolitions that result in rapid redevelopment. Likewise, community areas with 0 vacant lots necessarily have a redevelopment index of 1, but there is substantial variation in both total number of demolitions and demolitions per capita. Both Kenwood and Lake View have a redevelopment index of 1, but Kenwood had 12 demolitions total (0.00067 demolitions per capita), while Lake View had 948 demolitions (0.0093). This is about a 14 times difference in per capita demolitions and a 79 times difference in total demolitions, but both end up with the same redevelopment index. Again, the redevelopment index fails to capture some important aspects of the built environment and should not be taken as a standalone index, instead it should be examined in tandem with other indicators.

While demolition permits are generally a good proxy for actual demolitions and city-owned vacant lots are a decent proxy for all vacant lots, the publicly available data for both are limited in their timeframe. The City of Chicago building permits data set only began associating permits with a community area in 2008. Because the demolition process, not to mention demographic transformations, can take years to fully play out, it may be that the 2008-2021 timeframe misaligns with actual causal factors. This limited timeframe also necessarily ignores transformations in the built environment that occurred prior to 2008. Additionally, all data points were taken after the Global Financial Crisis that began in 2007 and was strongly tied to a housing bubble in the United States. The demolition and urban development patterns of post-

2008 Chicago may be substantially different than before the recession, making generalizability to other timeframes more challenging.

Urban processes produce observable effects in different spaces at different times, and this study only analyzes one slice of such processes. Waves of accumulation ripple through the fabric of the built environment, and this study looks only at the most recent crest of that wave. Because of this and other potential confounding factors, this study should not be used to create a predictive model of demolitions that can be applied to particular cases. It merely demonstrates differential rates of demolition and vacant lot production across communities and points towards paths of theorization that may illuminate underexplored forces that shape the built environment.

Footnote

It is important that urban sociology be reflexive and consider the context of its creation, particular at institutions that are actively involved in transforming their object of study, such as the University of Chicago. Knowledge production, particularly about the urban, does not occur in a vacuum and should reckon with its history and effects. In 1958, UChicago began an “urban renewal” campaign that resulted in the demolition of 638 buildings and the displacement of 4000 predominantly Black families in Hyde Park and “South Campus,” the university’s term for the areas of the Woodlawn community area between 60th and 61st street (Bradley 2021). Across the city, nearly 23000 families were displaced, more than 2% of the city’s population (Moser 2018). This campaign was and still is resisted by various community organizations and political groups. Despite such resistance, displacement and gentrification is ongoing and has been accelerated, particularly in Woodlawn, with the construction of the new Woodlawn dorm and other UChicago facilities. Critical scholarship, while important for interrogating the operations of power, is often materially supported through the very institutions it deconstructs, and this should at least be acknowledged by academics working on these topics.

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