

Spring 2018

## Gentrification and Chicago

Jordan Marks  
*College of DuPage*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.cod.edu/essai>

---

### Recommended Citation

Marks, Jordan (2018) "Gentrification and Chicago," *ESSAI*: Vol. 16 , Article 23.  
Available at: <https://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol16/iss1/23>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in *ESSAI* by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact [orenick@cod.edu](mailto:orenick@cod.edu).

## Gentrification and Chicago

by Jordan Marks

(English 1102)

Imagine residing in one place your whole life, in an affordable apartment, living a simple yet comfortable life. Then one day a new library opens in your neighborhood. At first it seems like a good thing. Seemingly overnight tourism starts to increase, which brings money into the neighborhood. Then you start to notice an influx of new people moving in. This seems benign in the beginning, but as the months pass you notice as your rent and utilities begin slowly increasing in price. You come to a point where you can no longer afford to live in the place where you had spent so many years, and are suddenly forced to find cheaper housing in a neighborhood you had previously deemed undesirable and unsafe. This “forced migration” is the unfortunate reality for many longtime Chicago residents facing the gentrification of their lower income and ethnic communities. For many years the city of Chicago spent a lot of money and manpower implementing projects aimed at increasing public influx into lower income neighborhoods, ostensibly to build up and improve the neighborhoods for the residents. However, contrary to popular belief, these neighborhood upgrades have created more harm than good. Gentrification is playing a huge role in the destruction of the cultural and creative integrity of the city of Chicago and counteracting it could result in the preservation of important ethnic centers and cultural hubs. This essay will focus on the harm caused by gentrification, the negative long term effects, and the benefits of counteracting gentrification in Chicago neighborhoods.

Gentrification is not a new concept. Defined as: “the buying and renovation of houses and stores in deteriorated urban neighborhoods by upper- or middle-income families or individuals, raising property values but often displacing low-income families and small businesses” (“gentrification”), gentrification is a process that has been reshaping neighborhoods all over the country for decades under the guise of “progress.” In Chicago, many refer to an urban renewal project in the Lincoln Park neighborhood in the mid 1950’s as the beginning of what was to become a long string of neighborhoods lost to gentrification. As a part of this initial project, many older housing projects in the area were demolished to make room for newer, more expensive housing. That soon led to wealthier people moving into the area, who demanded more upscale restaurants and stores to complement their expensive apartments and condos. As developers rushed in to meet the need, prices on homes and rents on small, family-run business that had anchored the neighborhoods went up, and soon the original residents could no longer afford to live in the community that they had built (Bennett 1). Another example was the trend in Old Town in the 1970’s of the purchasing and refurbishing of antique homes by affluent benefactors. As the homes were upgraded, developers wanted to get the maximum return on their investment, so they began charging higher rents. This drew affluent purchasers who were drawn to the “charm” of living in a quaint, old-fashioned neighborhood. But they also demanded a more upscale type of quaint, so once again developers began purchasing real estate and driving old tenants out by raising rents. They got rid of the small, family run businesses and rented the buildings to business that could support the lifestyle of the new inhabitants. This “turn-over” of Old Town is often referred to as the first case of actual gentrification to take place in the city (Bennett 1). Throughout the seventies, major housing projects and renovations led to the gentrification of areas such as Wicker Park, Logan Square, and many other areas within the Northwest side, the West side, and the south loop, driving out the original and often immigrant populations and replacing them with upgraded urban vignettes that were more pleasing to

wealthier buyers. Even now, projects are in the works for the south side and lower west side, a few of the rare remaining holdovers of small, lower-class ethnically diverse neighborhoods. Byron Sigcho, a member of the Pilsen Alliance, a group determined to halt the gentrification of their lower west side city, says: “If we continue to displace more and more low income residents, we will lose what makes Pilsen so special, so unique. That welcoming, that diversity it’ll be gone if we don’t have that diversity” (Schutz 1). What Sigcho means by this is that if these big construction companies want to come into their neighborhoods and build expensive housing, they will no doubt drive lower income residents out and subsequently destroy the cultural integrity and diversity that is the very thing that makes Pilsen so unique.

Pilsen is a strong example of a community trying to hold on to the foundation on which it was built, but is struggling against the tide of middle-class demand. A traditionally lower income, Hispanic neighborhood, Pilsen has unfortunately seen first hand what gentrification can do to a community. In the last 20 years alone, nearly 11,000 Hispanics have been displaced from their Pilsen homes, relinquished to a recent white influx to the area, a 2013 UIC study found (Lulay 1). Fortunately, Chicago leaders have found a possible solution to this, one that could invigorate the community, bring in more tourism, but also protect Pilsen’s long time residents. For a long time, the residents of Pilsen have wished for a trail connecting their community to the nearby Little Village community for two reasons: to remove the derelict train lines that have been an eyesore for the the past several decades, and to create an easy, accessible footpath to their city that could result in a spike in both tourism and revenue without degrading the integrity of their community. In a fortuitous turn of luck, the city of Chicago had actually been in the process of creating a network of elevated walkways and trails from the remnants of old BNSF railroad lines (Wisniewski 1). The residents appreciate the idea and are hopeful that their close-knit community will benefit from this project, but they also worry that this will have a similar outcome to that of the construction of the 606, a similar rails-to-trails project in the gentrified upper west side of Chicago. Many residents believe that like the 606, instead of helping to keep the integrity of their original neighborhood, the new trail system will draw in more middle-class buyers who want to enjoy the trails as part of their middle-class lifestyles, and housing prices and rent prices will skyrocket in the area surrounding the new trail system. Their fears are not unwarranted, and Chicago officials have acknowledged the concerns about losing established communities by proposing both a potential property tax freeze and strict zoning regulations on property lining the trails-to-be to try and thwart the creep of gentrification (Wisniewski 2).

On the contrary, on the Northwest side of Chicago, Wicker Park and Bucktown, gentrification has been the norm since the early 1970’s and residents have had no choice but to adapt. In the early days, Wicker Park and Bucktown were home to well-to-do groups of German and Scandinavian immigrants who worked in nearby industrial complexes. After the immigrants who initially settled the area moved on, the area became renowned as a haven for artists and musicians, who sought affordable housing in a close-knit community. Because of its popularity amongst writers, musicians, and artists, many trendy clubs and bars began to appear, including notable venues such as The Artful Dodger and the Rainbo Club. Places like these solidified artistic presence in the area, which caught the eye of wealthy investors who were thirsty for real estate in upbeat, popular urban centers (Lucido 1). During the late 70’s, realtors saw opportunity with the rows of Victorian style mansions and multi-level lofts. Throughout the 80’s, investors slowly chipped away at the integrity of the area, buying out smaller loft spaces and art studios, but critics say that the first major upscale turnover in the area was the mid 90’s conversion of the Manchester Lofts, a former artists’ space, to a series of high rent condominiums. Within 15 years, rising rents and utilities caused the beloved Artful Dodger to close and just in the past few years legendary music venue Double Door was forced to close due to rent (Little 1). As one can see, greedy investors took charge of a unique, quirky haven for artists and musicians and turned it into a vanilla middle-class anytown, just to make a few bucks.

They were not concerned about the culture, or the art, or the heritage; all they wanted to do was open the same few boutique chains as well as provide extremely limited space for upscale standalone businesses so that they could profit.

Most people are often led to believe that gentrification only takes place in disheveled outer neighborhoods that are facing imminent decline, but gentrification can affect downtown neighborhoods in large cities as well. The Medinah Temple is a great example of this. Originally built in 1912 by the Shriners, an appendant body to the Freemason cause, the building was an architectural testament to the classical Middle Eastern aesthetic that they cherished. In this beautifully designed building, the Shriners held large meetings within their elegant concert hall and preached their message of fellowship and philanthropy (“History” 1). Things changed in the late 1990’s, when the Shriners decided to sell the block that included both the temple and one of Chicago’s oldest artists’ houses, Tree Studio. Investors quickly jumped to purchase, but when prominent developer Steven Fifield proposed a \$21 million plan to tear down the temple and surrounding buildings in order to build a parking garage and expensive high rise condos, public outcry angered the Shriners and it took Mayor Daley himself to halt the plan in order to protect the historic buildings (Zhang 199). Daley formed a deal with developer Albert Friedman to completely renovate both Tree Studio and the old temple. As renovations began, much to their chagrin the tenants of surrounding buildings, who had advocated to save the temple for its historical beauty, saw their rents increase from around \$400 to nearly \$1,200 a month, rendering their once-affordable apartments now financially unreachable. In the early 2000’s a large Bloomingdale was opened inside the renovated temple, putting the metaphorical nail in the coffin for preserving the historic interior and function of the building. The Tree Studio renovation was finished in 2004, yet never drew an artist population because of inflated rent prices. At the end of the day, the only people who were to be found in either of the buildings were affluent shoppers or pricy lawyers. In lieu of preservation, the area saw the departure of almost all independently owned businesses; small restaurants, brick and mortar shops all paid the price of gentrification in the loop (Zhang 203). One may ask, what does this all mean? The example with the Medinah Temple demonstrates that gentrification can take place even in the heart of the biggest cities, shaping them by crushing their unique pockets of character in an effort to pander to the upper classes. The tragedy of the degradation and misuse of historic buildings, or the irony of hyper-inflating rent prices in an artist’s studio, making it too expensive for any artists to rent, is lost on developers who only care about their bottom lines.

Whenever there is one side to an argument, there is always, naturally, a second. Although opposition to gentrification is widespread and well voiced, the support for it unfortunately comes from the select few who have the money to make it happen at the snap of their fingers. One of those people is Cubs owner and self-proclaimed “savior” of Wrigleyville, Tom Ricketts. During his tenure, Ricketts has been doing all he can to gentrify the neighborhood, whether it be opening upscale restaurants, inciting massive renovation projects or just erecting giant advertisements. Ricketts definitely does not want his neighborhood to come off as a bad one in any way at all (Thompson 1). During a question-and-answer meeting, Ricketts gloated about the “positive reaction” the Wrigleyville renovations were receiving, then mockingly recalled a time where he referred derisively to Wrigleyville tenants as “resistant to change” when they strongly opposed the prospect of installing a 38-foot Toyota advertisement right above the left field bleachers, which for some people was right outside their window (Thompson 1). Just the mere idea of Ricketts referring to those people as “resistant to change” highlights his arrogance, insensitivity, and cluelessness. Ricketts wants his neighborhood to pump out as much money as possible, even if it means the obstruction of a view that someone paid for, or the removal of “troublesome” lower income tenants in the area.

In conclusion, gentrification is a phenomenon that exists on a much larger scale than just in Chicago. Every city sees gentrification in one way or another and it can affect almost anyone.

Nothing demonstrates this idea more clearly than Sherman Alexie's short story "Gentrification". In this story, a lone white man moves into a black neighborhood. He immediately notices a dingy mattress that had been sitting for a few days, and he understands that there will be a surcharge for not scheduling a trash pickup, so he goes out of his way to drop it off at the city dump himself. When he returns from the dump he finds the owners of the mattress are very unhappy with him and his actions. He is confused as to why they are unhappy with him, and he soon comes to the realization that he will most likely be shunned by the neighborhood (Alexie 615). What he doesn't understand though, is that the people that were already living in that neighborhood see this singular white man as the first step on the slippery slope of gentrification and the inevitable loss of their community. He doesn't see it, but to the residents, he is the first of many new additions to the neighborhood that will ultimately lead to loss of their homes and their livelihoods. And the residents are doing anything they can to stop it. Gentrification may seem like an unstoppable force, but there is almost nothing that public outcry can't fix. It looks like it is going to work in Pilsen with their trail, and it has worked in Wicker Park and Bucktown as well. Gentrification is built on a thin foundation of community improvement, but it really is the death of the communities that give America its unique and diverse culture. At the end of the day, stopping gentrification in Chicago is no simple task, but unless we want to live in a sterilized homogenous city, it is paramount to preserve the diversity that defines and celebrates our history.

---

#### Works Cited

- Abcarian, Richard, et al., editors. *Literature: The Human Experience*, 12<sup>th</sup> ed., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016.
- Bennett, Larry. *Fragments of Cities: the New American Downtowns and Neighborhoods*. Ohio State University Press, 1990.
- "Gentrification." *Dictionary.com*, Dictionary.com, [www.dictionary.com/browse/gentrification](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/gentrification).
- "History." *Beginnings - History - Shriners International*, [www.shrinersinternational.org/Shriners/History/Beginnings](http://www.shrinersinternational.org/Shriners/History/Beginnings).
- Little, Rebecca. "How Bucktown Got Boutiqued." *Chicago Magazine*, [www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/March-2007/Chic-Chicago/How-Bucktown-Got-Boutiqued/](http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/March-2007/Chic-Chicago/How-Bucktown-Got-Boutiqued/).
- Lucido, Gary. "Fighting Gentrification In Chicago Is Like Fighting Gravity." *ChicagoNow Is Full of Win*, 5 June 2017, [www.chicagonow.com/getting-real/2017/06/fighting-gentrification-in-chicago-is-like-fighting-gravity/](http://www.chicagonow.com/getting-real/2017/06/fighting-gentrification-in-chicago-is-like-fighting-gravity/).
- Lulay, Stephanie. "Pilsen Gets Whiter As 10,000 Hispanics, Families Move Out, Study Finds." *DNAinfo New York*, DNAinfo New York, 13 Apr. 2016, [www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20160413/pilsen/pilsen-gets-whiter-as-10000-hispanics-families-move-out-study-finds/](http://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20160413/pilsen/pilsen-gets-whiter-as-10000-hispanics-families-move-out-study-finds/).
- Schutz, Paris. "Logan Square, Pilsen at Crux of Gentrification Debate." *Chicago Tonight*, WTTW 21, March 2017, <https://chicagotonight.wttw.com/2017/03/21/logan-square-pilsen-crux-gentrification-debate>.
- Thompson, Phil. "Ricketts Wants Legacy to Be about More than Baseball." *Chicago Tribune*, 2 May 2018, pp. 1–1.
- Wisniewski, Mary. "Pilsen, Little Village Still Await Trail: Land Acquisition and EPA Cleanup Delay Conversion of Old Rails ." *Chicago Tribune*, 30 Apr. 2018.
- Zhang, Yue. "Historic Preservation in a Neoliberal Context ." *Neoliberal Chicago*, University of Illinois Press, 2016, pp. 193–205.