

“Carl Sandburg Village: Urban Renewal’s Impact on Queer Chicago”

Carl Sandburg Village is an urban renewal project on the Near North Side of Chicago. A joint project between the Chicago Plan Commission, the Department of Urban Renewal and real estate tycoon Arthur Rubloff, the development was devised to transform the area from a den of vice into a haven for white middle-class prosperity. Sandburg Village was dreamt of as the project that could keep white families in the city. Walled off from the Near North Side’s existing Black, Brown, and queer communities, Sandburg Village shifted the trajectory of the neighborhood and solidified who and what was welcome in Daley’s Chicago.

From the 1930s through the 1960s, the Near North Side was the location of one of Chicago’s two lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities (the other being the Near South Side).¹ By the 1940s, it was considered a “vice district” due to the prevalence of both prostitution and queer and transgender nightlife.² The area was home to a variety of queer bars: Big Lou’s, the Front Page Lounge, Sam’s, the Lake Shore Lounge, and the nation’s first leather bar, The Gold Coast.³ These clubs were regularly raided by the Chicago Police Department, who harassed and arrested patrons for physically touching, dancing, propositioning undercover agents, and “cross-dressing.” Local newspapers ran front-page stories on the raids, printing the

¹ Justin Spring, *Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 56-64.

² “Vice Districts,” Encyclopedia of Chicago, accessed November 13, 2019, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1304.html>

³ Timothy Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout: Chicago and the Rise of Gay Politics*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 18-24

names, occupations, and neighborhoods of arrested patrons. LGBTQ Chicagoans faced alienation, estrangement from family, and termination from jobs due to media coverage, in addition to legal consequences. The 1950s were a time of increased harassment as Cold War panic spread about communists, spies, and soon “degenerates,” “perverts,” and “deviates.”⁴ In 1953, President Eisenhower expelled gays and lesbians from federal employment through an executive order based on security risks, and police departments around the country expanded the criminalization of queer and transgender people. In this context, Chicago intensified its policing of queer life, forming the Chicago Crime Commission and seeking advice from other cities’ law enforcement on how to fight vice. Soon, the Chicago Police Department would not be alone in their quest to rid the Near North Side of its LGBTQ community.

Richard J. Daley campaigned as a family man when he ran for Mayor of Chicago in 1955; campaign posters pictured his large Irish Catholic family as a picturesque vision of 1950s values. He promised to crack down on crime and make “our neighborhood streets safe for women and children.”⁵ Thus, when three teenage boys were found brutally murdered on the Northwest Side, the newly elected Mayor was determined to find the killer. With no solid leads, police rounded up every “sex degenerate” they could, interrogating over 300 gay men. Local newspapers covered every detail, further linking homosexuality to “a predatory threat to unsuspecting youth.”⁶

⁴ Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout*, 16.

⁵ Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout*, 29.

⁶ Spring, *Secret Historian*, 231.

The Near North Side's reputation as "the place to live if you were gay,"⁷ put it square in Daley's sights.

The 1950s were also a time of white flight from the city as middle class white families moved en masse to the suburbs. Mayor Daley saw neighborhoods changing and sought a way to keep white families in Chicago. Nationwide, cities were adjusting to the baby boom and suburbanization by embarking on major urban renewal projects: clearing slums and tenement-style housing to build highways, skyscrapers, and housing developments. In 1941, the city attempted to insulate the prosperous Gold Coast neighborhood from the encroaching "ghetto" by knocking down 700 apartments to build the Frances Cabrini homes. This had not stopped the "North Side blight: The Gold Coast was still threatened, the shopowners[sic] on North Michigan Avenue were nervous, and the city planners were worried."⁸

In 1953, executive director Ted Aschman and director John Cordwell of the Chicago Plan Commission determined that they finally had the right strategy for the Near North Side. Said Cordwell:

"You don't drop a parachute into an area completely surrounded by the enemy. You can't survive in a wagon completely surrounded by angry Indians. And you can't build an urban renewal project in an area completely surrounded by blight. You have to have easy access to the area, be able to get in and out of it. You have to do 'missionary' work in the community you're renewing, and you have to have a strategy for the whole area, not just the project you're building."⁹

The planning for Sandburg Village had begun.

⁷ Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout*, 14.

⁸ Denise DeClue, "The Siege of Sandburg Village," *Chicago Reader*, January 20, 1978, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/the-siege-of-sandburg-village/Content?oid=3295234>

⁹ DeClue, "Siege."

The Planning Process

While Cordwell and Ashman were strategizing military theory, real estate tycoon Arthur Rubloff was also planning. He created a plan to revitalize Michigan Avenue retail as “the Magnificent Mile” in 1948, but he was also concerned about the future of the Near North Side. Between 1940 and 1950, the neighborhood’s Black population had increased by 245%, which concerned Rubloff and the North Michigan Avenue Association, as well as the Chicago Plan Commission.¹⁰ In 1956, Cordwell and Ashman pushed the Chicago Land Clearance Commission to study the Near North Side vice district. Rubloff and the North Michigan Avenue Association brought their concerns to Mayor Daley, and he called on CLCC director Ira Bach to move it along. While the CLCC investigation was happening, Rubloff visited Bach and encouraged him to visit the site. After driving through the Near North Side district together, Bach agreed that it was blighted and recommended in his report that the area between North Avenue and Division Street, Clark Street and LaSalle Street be cleared. The only noted opposition to the land clearance came from the ward’s alderman, Paddy Bauler. After Bach and Housing and Redevelopment Coordinator James Downs visited Alderman Bauler during “office hours” at his local tavern and bought several rounds of drinks for his constituents, he was no longer opposed to the slum clearance and redevelopment.¹¹ Once the City Council and Illinois State Housing Board had approved it, the land was purchased,

¹⁰ DeClue, “Siege.”

¹¹ DeClue, “Siege.”

residents relocated, and the homes demolished. The process cost over \$10 million and thanks to the Housing Act of 1958, the Federal Government paid 75% of the total.

Arthur Rubloff had been pushing for a massive redevelopment of the areas around the Loop initially called “Project X” and later the “Fort Dearborn Project.” He imagined luxury apartments buttressing the Loop, Gold Coast, and North Michigan Avenue, preventing the integration of Black Chicagoans into these areas.¹² According to political scientist Edward Banfield, Daley opposed the project because “the residential part of the Project would have to be mainly high-rise ‘economy’ apartments for elderly people and childless couples.”¹³ White Chicagoans were not sufficient for Daley; he specifically sought white cisgender heterosexual families.

The Near Northside Redevelopment Project was soon the most desired project in the city. Dozens of firms bid for the project, but Arthur Rubloff secured the deal with \$6.4 million, nearly twice what other firms had bid. In a nod to the modernist ethos of urban renewal, Rubloff proposed four 27-story high-rise buildings, three 24-story buildings, and ninety-four town houses. Solomon Cordwell Buenz would be the architecture firm. The Corbusier-influenced design would leave 73% of Sandburg’s 16 acres open for use as ornate walking paths and lawns, though walled off from the neighborhood. The proposal called for the development’s own public elementary school, a theater, elevated walkways, and an underground parking garage. Sandburg

¹² Adam Cohen and Elizabeth Taylor, *American Pharaoh: Mayor Richard J. Daley - His Battle for Chicago and the Nation*. (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2001), 397.

¹³ Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout*, 57-58.

Village would not be of the Near North Side; it was an insular fortress from the Near North Side.

The ground-breaking on the site began in 1962, complete with the blessing of its namesake Chicago poet Carl Sandburg. The towers in the complex were named for writers and poets (Alcott, Cummings, Dickinson, etc), a hint of the white, educated class of tenants Rubloff sought to attract. Much of the construction took place in the first year.

¹⁴ Costs ballooned and building continued until 1972, with the Department of Urban Renewal awarding more land to Rubloff for an additional two high rises. More ambitious plans like the theater, moats, and elementary school were abandoned. The first tenants moved into Sandburg in 1963; a 2007 *Chicago Tribune* article said “It required Chicagoans of fearless spirit to become pioneer tenants at Sandburg Village” as it was “built amid a Near North Side area of blight, brothels and banditry.”¹⁵

Sandburg Village accomplished what the city and developers hoped it would: it kept white families on the Near North Side and infused upper middle-class interest into the area. Old Town, the area around Sandburg, developed as a scene of urban bohemia and by the late 1970s, vintage two-flats in the area were real estate’s hottest commodity. Ironically, this was the type of housing the CLCC tore down in order to build Sandburg Village.¹⁶ The former residents of the area were pushed elsewhere in the city. Black families moved into the newly-built Cabrini-Green high rises just west of

¹⁴ J. Linn Allen, “Chicago’s Sandburg Village,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 19, 2007, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/nation-world/chi-chicagodays-sandburgvillage-story-story.htm>

¹⁵ Allen, “Chicago’s Sandburg Village.”

¹⁶ Allen, “Chicago’s Sandburg Village.”

Sandburg. The Puerto Rican community moved North to Lincoln Park and west to Humboldt Park. Some queer clubs remained on the Near North Side throughout the sixties, though police harassment and intimidation reached an all-time high.¹⁷ Throughout the 1970s, each of these groups would build political power to challenge and work within the Daley political machine.

Arthur Rubloff and Chicago's Department of Urban Renewal were praised for the success of Sandburg Village, and it seemed to renew belief that cities themselves could succeed. Rubloff welcomed the praise, stating "The whole area would have gone down the drain," if not for his development. John Cordell agreed, reflecting in 1986: "Urban renewal only failed because people approached it in a timid fashion, taking a factory on a quarter block and demolishing it and putting up a high-rise." He added, "So Sandburg Village was like a military operation. We had to have the sufficient size and numbers to go in there and push the enemy back. Coldly. Like D-Day."¹⁸

Analysis

Sandburg Village represents one of the most extreme examples of Urban Renewal. The City of Chicago paid millions of dollars to destroy residents' homes in order to spur a private housing development outside the reach of most former residents.

¹⁹ The planning process was a lesson in Chicago politics and the Daley Machine: the greasing of palms, calling in favors from powerful friends, the exclusivity of Daley's "whiz

¹⁷ Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout*, 71-94.

¹⁸ Steve Kirch, "Sandburg Village: Winning a Battle in Urban Renewal," *Chicago Tribune*, September 14, 1986.

¹⁹ DeClue, "Siege."

kids.”²⁰ The only stakeholders involved were government and real estate professionals -- rich white cisgender heterosexual men. The Near North Side community was not engaged in the project in any way; the community itself was seen as the problem planners sought to solve. The Sandburg Village project was an overt attempt to control the spatial movements of Black and Puerto Rican Chicagoans and rid the city of queer sexuality. The definitions of vice and blight used to condemn the area was based on the people themselves: poor people lived there; Black and Puerto Rican people moved there; Queer and trans people touched, danced, and drank there. The solution, per Urban Renewal, was to knock down the homes and build new ones constructed for affluent people, pushing the former residents elsewhere.

In her article, “Gender, Urban Space, and the Right to the City,” Yasminah Beebeejaun interprets the work of Henri Lefebvre through a gendered lens, which provides an understanding of the harassment of the Near North Side’s queer and transgender community before and after Sandburg Village. Despite extreme criminalization, the presence of queer nightlife and community represents the community’s claim to their “right to the city.” Beebeejaun argues that these “rights are not experienced in the abstract but have a spatial and material dimension. . . The valuing of some social groups over others is maintained through our interactions and access to differentiated spaces of the city.”²¹ The policing of LGBTQ Chicagoans on the

²⁰ Cohen and Taylor, *American Pharaoh*, 505.

²¹ Yasminah Beebeejaun, “Gender, urban space, and the right to everyday life,” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 39, no. 3, 1.

Near North Side speaks to this battle of access and inclusion. In a negotiation of power, the Chicago Police Department criminalized the presence of queer people. Pushing back, queer and trans people continued to go to these queer clubs despite threats and very real consequences, reiterating their right to the city. The result was increased harassment and the Chicago Plan Commission condemning the entire neighborhood. The right to “everyday life” speaks to the mere act of occupying space in the city, the right to exist. Within 1950s and ‘60s Chicago, this right did not exist for queer people. The “crimes” they committed were not actions but indications of their identity; Vice was not the prevalence of any particular crime. It was the presence of queer people existing in a spatial dimension.

This act of state power regulating and controlling the lives of its citizens is the execution of Authoritarian High Modernism. James C. Scott wrote, “The troubling features of high modernism derive, for the most part, from its claim to speak about the improvement of the human condition with the authority of scientific knowledge and its tendency to disallow other competing sources of judgment.”²² Urban Renewal represents this attempt to better society through the daring actions of a benevolent government; to achieve true progress, the city must be destroyed and built again - an urban utopia crafted by the most knowledgeable of all planners, to achieve humankind’s true potential. The needs of marginalized residents of the Near North Side pale in comparison to the impact this housing development could have: It is necessary to clear

²² James C. Scott, “Authoritarian High Modernism,” In *Readings in Planning Theory*, edited by Susan S. Fainstein and James Defilippis, (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 81.

the land in order to build the village that will save the Near North Side, save the Gold Coast, and save downtown Chicago from vice and blight.

The lack of any community involvement is a natural feature of Authoritarian High Modernism and its “unrestrained use of state power as an instrument to achieve its designs.”²³ With a Plan Commission hand-picked by Daley as the best and the brightest, it likely seemed ridiculous to involve the poor people who lived in the Near North Side in the redevelopment project. Again, the goal of the land clearance was to displace them. The experts and professionals conceived of Sandburg Village as an attack on the area’s increasing Black population. They viewed this migration as an infectious disease and Sandburg as a last chance at intervention before downtown was compromised and the city was lost forever.

This planning process took place a decade before the Cleveland Plan and Norman Krumholz brought the concept of equity into the planning lexicon. In her 1969 article for the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,”²⁴ Sherry Arnstein gave planners a symbol for the gradations of community participation and pushed for an aspect of redistribution of power in the planning process. The Sandburg Village plan represents the lowest rungs on Arnstein’s ladder, signifying non-participation. It’s unclear what, if anything, residents were told

²³ Scott, “Authoritarian High Modernism,” 81.

²⁴ Sherry R. Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35, No. 4 (July 1969): 216-224.

prior to the land clearance; it's likely that manipulation and informing are the most accurate descriptions of their experience.

The Sandburg Village project was not created with the Near North Side or even for the Near North Side. It was planned and built to bring a new demographic to the neighborhood and curb "white flight" from the city. Mayor Daley saw it as a development where white professionals could settle down and reproduce as he had, contributing to his racist goal of keeping Chicago as white as possible.

Sandburg Village is considered one of the most successful Urban Renewal projects in America. It is credited with stabilizing the North Side and triggering the gentrification of Old Town. Rubloff, Ashman, and Cordwell had careers of acclaim with Sandburg Village as their crowning achievement. Critiques of the development have centered on the racial and class dimensions, which is why it's important to document that queer and trans communities have always been a part of the city. Even when their histories have been written only in whispers, nods, and arrest records; when government criminalizes and brutalizes them or when million dollar developments have been erected to protect the city from their vice, queer and trans people have always been there.

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