

CHAPTER 4

The Walkable Immigrant Neighborhood: Chicago's "Little Village"

City neighborhoods often take on new identities as one population moves out and another moves in. Little Village, on the Southwest Side of Chicago, has gone through changes of name and population more than once.

If you had boarded a train in downtown around 1880 and ridden it 5 miles southwest, you would have arrived not in a place called Little Village but in a subdivision called Lawndale. The founders of Lawndale, real estate developers Alden C. Millard and Edwin J. Decker, started converting farmland on the city's outskirts into lots for houses, stores, churches, and meeting places shortly before the great Chicago fire of 1871.¹ Their expectation was that Lawndale, an orderly new community just a 20-minute ride from downtown, would appeal to businesspeople, professionals, and other middle-class Chicagoans.

In fact, affluent families, including meatpacker E. G. Orvis, did come and erect a number of stately houses, some of them architect-designed. By the 1890s, however, manufacturing and other industry

also descended on the Southwest Side, bringing with them tens of thousands of blue-collar workers, many of them immigrants. The Anglo-Saxon upper middle class shifted to less ethnic pastures.

Lawndale and an adjacent area known as Crawford became home to thousands of Bohemians, immigrants or children of immigrants who had roots in what is now the Czech Republic. They found Lawndale agreeable in that it was tidier and less crowded than Pilsen, the neighborhood immediately to the east, where many Czechs had endured the difficulties of tenement life. In Lawndale, they established a host of Czech-oriented institutions, including, in 1904, Blessed Agnes of Bohemia Roman Catholic Church (now St. Agnes of Bohemia), the neighborhood's largest Catholic parish. By World War I, so many Bohemians had settled in Lawndale that they began calling it Czech California.

As time went by, the southern portion of Lawndale became known as South Lawndale, distinguishing it from its near twin, North Lawndale, a Czech stronghold that changed composition during the 1920s and emerged as Chicago's most populous Jewish settlement. South Lawndale remained a stable working- and middle-class community into the 1950s. It was an area where Czechs owned most of the stores and where smaller contingents of Poles, Germans, Hungarians, and other Europeans lived side by side with the Czechs.

Then came a period of rapid racial change, reflecting the migration of hundreds of thousands of southern blacks to Chicago in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. African Americans, long confined to what was referred to as the Black Belt on the city's South Side, surged into neighborhoods that had previously used deed restrictions and other means to keep them out. North Lawndale underwent the most abrupt racial turnover in the entire city; at the start of the 1950s, it was 87 percent white, and at the end of that decade, it was 91 percent black. Many African Americans could not buy houses except at inflated prices, through exploitative contracts rather than standard mortgages. North

Lawndale started to fall apart. In 1964, business leaders in South Lawndale responded by rechristening South Lawndale “Little Village,” a name meant to clearly distinguish the white ethnic community from its collapsing black neighbor.

As conceived by Czech American real estate salesman Richard Dolejs, the name Little Village was supposed to suggest a picturesque European village—there were plans, not widely implemented, to decorate the storefronts in a quaint, Central European style—but the 1960s held a further surprise. A huge wave of immigrants was ready to move west from Pilsen, and that group was Mexican—not European—in origin. By 1980, the majority of Little Villagers were Mexicans or descendants of Mexicans. Some held US citizenship. Many did not.

At that point, the neighborhood might have tumbled into despair given that the Mexicans who had moved there generally had low incomes and not much schooling; many were not fluent in English. To make matters worse, in the mid-1960s, Latino gangs began operating in Little Village. (They remain active to this day.) The neighborhood persevered nonetheless. Mexican migrants diligently sought work at whatever level they could find. They squeezed their families into small apartments, often sharing the homes of relatives at the start. Their numbers grew phenomenally. From 1960 to 2000, Little Village’s population soared 50 percent, from slightly less than 61,000 to slightly more than 91,000. Now, there were more customers than ever for the neighborhood stores, more people to stroll the sidewalks, and more participants (at least potentially) for efforts aimed at improving the neighborhood and boosting the prospects of its people. If South Lawndale had been “Czech California” from the 1920s to the 1950s, Little Village proudly presented itself as the “Capital of the Mexican Midwest” from the 1970s onward. It became the principal port of entry for people migrating from south of the Rio Grande to the north-central United States.



Mural on a garage. Much of the public painting in Little Village echoes Mexican motifs. (Photo by Philip Langdon)

Coping with Calamities

I first learned of Little Village from Eric Klinenberg's book *Heat Wave*. Klinenberg, a sociologist, investigated the effects of a catastrophic heat wave that struck Chicago in July 1995. The heat index, a combined measure of temperature and humidity, soared to more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit and stayed there for an entire week. On two straight days, it exceeded 115 degrees.² The extreme conditions caused the deaths of 739 people across the city. Most victims were elderly and lived alone, expiring in isolation in their sweltering apartments. A death toll of this magnitude had never been seen before in a heat wave in the United States.

In probing the disaster, Klinenberg discovered interesting patterns. The death rate, he noticed, varied greatly from one neighborhood to another. One of the starkest contrasts was between North Lawndale

and Little Village. North Lawndale suffered a horrific death rate—40 fatalities per 100,000 residents—whereas Little Village had fewer than 4 deaths per 100,000. North Lawndale and Little Village had similar microclimates and had “almost identical numbers and proportions of seniors living alone and seniors living in poverty,” according to Klinenberg, yet from the standpoint of public health, Little Village was a different world, ten times safer than its neighbor.³

Why was there this disparity? Some believed that Little Village came through the heat wave better than North Lawndale because Latinos maintain strong family ties across the generations—ties that are crucial during a crisis—and Latino family connections saved the neighborhood’s elderly. Klinenberg cast doubt on that explanation. For one thing, nearly half the elderly in Little Village at the time were not Latino; they were white non-Hispanics (most likely Czech Americans or Polish Americans) who had stayed behind when their compatriots had moved to suburbs like Cicero and Berwyn.

Instead, Klinenberg hypothesized that something in Little Village’s social environment enabled vulnerable people to survive a period of intense physical stress. The keys, he deduced, were the neighborhood’s “busy streets, heavy commercial activity, residential concentration, and relatively low crime.”⁴ Those factors, he observed, “promote social contact, collective life, and public engagement in general and provide particular benefits for the elderly, who are more likely to leave home when they are drawn out by nearby amenities.” In Klinenberg’s view, it is critically important that vulnerable people, such as elderly individuals who live alone, have access to “comfortable and secure streets and sidewalks” and to places that “draw people out of their homes and into the public.” When those are readily available, people establish relationships; they learn where to turn during an emergency.

North Lawndale, a largely African American neighborhood, contained few stores and gathering places within walking distance of homes,

and crime shadowed the streets. In Little Village, the opposite was true. Elaborating on ideas from Jane Jacobs, Klinenberg asserted that “a substantial quantity of stores and other public places sprinkled along the sidewalks of a district is the basic requisite for establishing public safety through informal social control. Commercial institutions draw residents and passersby out into the sidewalks and streets, inviting foot traffic and promoting social interaction among consumers, merchants, and people who simply enjoy participating in or observing public life.”⁵

Twenty-Sixth Street

“Bienvenidos a Little Village,” says the greeting on a decorative arch that stretches across Twenty-Sixth Street near the corner of Albany Avenue. This ceremonial spot, a short distance west of the massive, grim Cook County Jail, is where costumed dancers, riders on horseback, motorcyclists wearing oversized sombreros, and young women clutching red, white, and green flags assemble in mid-September each year for the Midwest’s largest Latino parade. Two hundred thousand people—some of them residents of Little Village, others from as far away as Iowa and Michigan—line the street for twenty-five blocks, celebrating Mexico’s Independence Day.

Twenty-Sixth Street, the chief commercial corridor in Little Village for more than a century, is a good route for the parade. It is a corridor amply endowed with Mexican-oriented products, stores, and ambitions. During the noisy 2-mile procession, the parade’s participants pass street vendors peddling *aguas frescas*, a sweet drink of fruits, cereals, flowers, or seeds blended with sugar and water. They pass *panaderias*, bakeries selling *pan dulce* (sweet bread), *bolillos* (variants on the French baguette), *cuernos* (horn-shaped pastries), and other Mexican treats. Eight of these aromatic establishments operate within Little Village’s 4.4 square miles.

They pass eighty restaurants, including Mexican ones like Nuevo Leon, where customers order northern Mexican dishes such as *machaca*,



View toward the arch on West Twenty-Sixth Street. One of the men in the sketch points to where Little Village is situated in the city of Chicago. (Drawing by Dhiru A. Thadani)

rehydrated dried meat pounded into tenderness and served with large flour tortillas. They pass shops selling bridal gowns and *quinceañera* dresses, frilly, floor-length outfits that Mexican American girls wear to their fifteenth-birthday parties. There are thirty-eight *quinceañera* dress shops on Twenty-Sixth Street.

In all, more than a thousand businesses line the 2-mile-long commercial corridor. Toward the end of the Czech period, Little Village had seen an increase in the number of vacant stores. The 26th Street Community Council and the Twenty-sixth Street Chamber of Commerce (now the Little Village Chamber of Commerce) set about recruiting businesses to fill them. Owners of neglected buildings were prodded to fix them up. Within a few years, the empty storefronts were occupied and active again. Today, besides shops with a Mexican flavor, there are hundreds of



A vendor selling snacks from a food cart on West Twenty-Sixth Street in Little Village. The bags hanging from the cart's ceiling contain imitation chicharrones, a Latino treat. Real chicharrones are deep-fried pork skins; imitations are made from flour and water. (Photo by Philip Langdon)

mainstream enterprises: banks, discount stores, dry cleaners, insurance agencies, grocery stores, doctors' offices, beauty salons, check-cashing and money-transfer outlets, shoe stores, and dollar stores. Listen to local people and you will repeatedly hear that Twenty-Sixth Street in Little Village has a greater sales volume than any other business district in Chicago except posh North Michigan Avenue. Its robust performance is a point of pride.

Stores within Walking Distance

The standard Chicago grid of streets and alleys is a structure that helps make neighborhood businesses accessible. From any side street in Little



Las Isabeles, a corner grocery at South Central Park Avenue and West Twenty-Seventh Street, where a vendor displays fruits and vegetables for sale. The mural offers a religious message: “As I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (Photo by Philip Langdon)

Village, residents can walk directly to Twenty-Sixth Street. There are no dead ends or cul-de-sacs to interfere with access. Twenty-Sixth Street, 48 feet wide from curb to curb, provides two lanes down its center for the 14,000 vehicles that travel it each day, plus two lanes providing on-street parking. There are 10-foot-wide sidewalks between the street and the storefronts, a width not overly generous but sufficient. The sidewalks get heavy pedestrian use, especially on weekends.

Commerce is also concentrated along a few other streets, and sprinkled throughout the neighborhood are corner stores. When the Czech owners moved out, many of the corner stores they had operated were bought or leased by Mexican residents, who have now run them for two

or three generations. Neighbors close by, especially last-minute shoppers, stop in them frequently for milk, juice, and popular Mexican items such as *menudo* (tripe soup) and *carnitas* (deep-fried pork). “There’s a corner store on just about every block,” said Simone Alexander, a community organizer with Enlace Chicago, a dynamic community development organization serving Little Village. “People walk to the bank and they walk to the grocery store. A lot of women walk their kids to doctors’ appointments.”

Since 2000, Little Village’s population has slipped to 79,000, largely because Mexico-US migration has gone into reverse since the world economic crisis of 2008. The Chicago area still has the second-largest population of Mexican-born immigrants in the United States, but Illinois has lost hundreds of thousands of construction, manufacturing, and other industrial jobs in recent years, work that used to lure Mexicans northward.⁶

Little Village nevertheless remains densely populated, at nearly 18,000 persons per square mile, with higher concentrations in some areas. Although the median household income in Little Village is \$34,000 a year—far below the national average of \$52,000 and the metro Chicago average of \$71,000—the volume of households per square mile generates enough spending to keep plenty of businesses afloat.

How many households might be within a 1- to 4-minute walk of a corner store? The standard house lot in Little Village is 25 feet by 125 feet, and a block generally contains about fifty lots. So, a single block could hold 50 bungalows, or 100 apartments if it is developed with two-family units, or 150 apartments if it is filled with three-family units. In an area uniformly developed with three-family units—which are common in the eastern portion of Little Village—there could be more than nine hundred households within a 4-minute walk of the store. Many buildings in Little Village have been reconfigured to add more apartments than zoning allows, so the customer base of some



Mural of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the side of La Chiquita Supermercado on South Pulaski Road. The brightly colored center of the mural, one of the older ones in Little Village, is based on a painting in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. (Photo by Philip Langdon)

corner stores may be even greater than these calculations indicate. (The median household in Little Village contains 3.8 occupants, nearly triple the density of Chicago as a whole.)

Corner stores are only the beginning. A variety of other small businesses operate in houses, garages, and backyards. Many jobs filled by Mexicans do not pay well, so a man with mechanical skills may set up an auto repair shop part-time in his garage to bring in extra income. “We’ve got loads of alley mechanics,” said Andrea O’Malley Muñoz, a Little Village resident since the 1970s. The mechanics live close to their customers, charge reasonable prices, and speak Spanish, all of which builds a following, Muñoz said. “Some of them do quite well,” she

noted. Those who prosper may eventually move their operation to a larger garage, on a street with more visibility.

Sprinkled through the neighborhood are fabricators of the metal fences that enclose most of Little Village's front yards. Also scattered through the neighborhood are tire shops. "You drive through, and you're back out on a main street," Muñoz said. "It's faster than the AAA."

People who live in Little Village tend to spend money in Little Village. Although car-owning residents shop some of the time at big-box stores in nearby Cicero, loyalty to community businesses is pronounced. "Little Village functions because people sort of stay in the community," Matt Cole of Chicago Neighborhood Housing Services observed. "They say, 'This is my community, this is where I shop.'" For residents who need products and services, "there's not a lot of reason to leave," said community organizer Alexander. "You can get what you want in Little Village—unless you're in your twenties or thirties and looking for craft beers."

Peddling for a Living

There are many ways in which a dense, gridded neighborhood like Little Village helps some of the new residents to earn a living. It might not be a generous living, but enough to get by on. The most conspicuous example is street vending. With a minimal outlay, a new person from Mexico can rent or buy a pushcart, stock it with a few simple foods, and start peddling. Vendors find good locations on major streets, street corners, and even side streets. Their presence makes the streets safer and more sociable. "It adds to the vibrancy of the streets," said Ricardo Muñoz, who has represented Little Village on the Board of Aldermen since 1993. "It's another set of eyes and ears."

Andrea Muñoz (unrelated to the alderman) described the daily rhythm of the peddlers: "In the morning there are three or four different groups of vendors. The earliest are those selling tamales and warm drinks. They are out from 6 to 10 a.m., catching people on the way

to work, serving a mobile breakfast.” Tamales are accompanied in cold weather by *atole*, a flavored, corn-based drink similar to hot chocolate.

Other peddlers arrive to sell *churros*, crunchy fried-dough pastries, sometimes sprinkled with sugar, that serve as a quick breakfast or snack. They are good for dipping in *champurrado* (chocolate-based atole) or *café con leche* (strong coffee mixed with scalded milk).

Around 10 o'clock, the tamale vendors depart, and another group of peddlers—the *eleteros*—appears. This group sells fruit (watermelon, cantaloupe, honeydew melon), corn, cucumber spears, bags of artificial pigskin, and *raspas* (flavored ice shavings). The fruit is cut or chopped and sprinkled with lime juice, often with a dash of red pepper for kick. Corn (*elote*) is this group's biggest seller, which is why these peddlers are called *eloteros*. The corn is served on a stick or as kernels in a cup. A healthy lunch or snack from an *eletero* costs the customer a dollar or two. The fruit and vegetable vendors remain on the streets until perhaps 4 or 5 in the afternoon.

As soon as the first warm day arrives, possibly in April, *paleteros* appear, starting around noon, selling *paletas* (fruit ice bars), a treat available in all sorts of flavors. *Paleteros* show up near schools around lunchtime and return there at the end of the school day, when another stream of customers rushes out the doors. In the summer, *paleteros* walk the side streets and head for parks. As many as seven or eight of them may compete for business near a park.

For years, food vending on public ways was prohibited by city ordinance, so officials, including Alderman Muñoz, arrived at an informal agreement: as long as the carts were clean and the vendors did not obstruct the public way, police assigned to Little Village were to leave them alone. In 2015, however, the City of Chicago enacted an ordinance legalizing food peddlers but requiring them to buy a license, periodically have their carts inspected, and comply with food-preparation procedures, at a significant expense.



A parent picking up a child at Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez Elementary School, where a vendor peddles cotton candy at the end of the school day. Many children in Little Village walk home with their parent or guardian. (Photo by Philip Langdon)

“It just codified the ability of a more authoritarian alderman to shut folks down,” said a skeptical Alderman Muñoz. Peddlers who wanted licenses obtained them, he said, but others who could not afford them asked him for leniency, and he agreed. Thus, the original Little Village understanding—that police are to let vendors operate unless they are causing trouble—remains in force in Little Village.

How much economic reward does a vendor reap? “I think people are forced to do that [operate a pushcart] when it’s the last option,” said Jaime di Paulo, executive director of the Little Village Chamber of Commerce. “For the vast majority, it’s basically their last hope in terms of pursuing the American dream.” Nearly a third of Little Village residents are poor, and peddling is a way of coping; it lets them earn some money despite a lack of formal education or understanding of English. Some people peddle year after year, into old age.

Maria Garcia, who arrived in Chicago in the late 1990s from Cuernavaca, south of Mexico City, illustrates how a determined person can use peddling as a stepping-stone. She made Mexican-style ice cream in her home, and for seven years, often with her sons Angel and Victor, she pushed an ice-cream cart through Little Village. “We would go all over the neighborhood,” Victor Garcia told an interviewer.⁷

One of Maria Garcia’s favorite spots was the sidewalk outside St. Agnes of Bohemia. The historically Czech parish turned predominantly Mexican American in the 1970s and today conducts nine Masses—two in English, the other seven in Spanish—each Sunday. On a typical Sunday, approximately four thousand people troupe in and out of St. Agnes. The church has no parking lot, so many parishioners walk to and from worship. Many of them stopped at her cart.

“Maria was a real hit. She had flavors you wouldn’t find in stores—mango with chilies; pina colada; *elote* [corn],” Andrea Muñoz said. Elote-flavored ice cream became a best seller. The Garcias prided themselves on using high-quality natural ingredients and on using brown sugar

rather than white sugar. People loved their concoction's light, refreshing quality that was closer to sorbet than to conventional ice cream.

Maria Garcia suffered a setback when someone reported her to the board of health, which does not allow people to make ice cream at home and sell it to the public, and her operation was shut down. The Garcias regrouped, however. They found a small retail building on Twenty-Seventh Street, fixed it up, and converted it into a coffee and ice-cream shop called Azucar, the Spanish word for sugar.

Word of mouth led customers to the shop, a cheerful little establishment that the Garcias outfitted with comfortable seating and clean, contemporary decor. Praise posted on sites like Yelp further boosted customer traffic. The key attraction was the shop's exceptional product, which the Garcias sold at very reasonable prices. By 2012, the



Maria Garcia and her son Victor serving customers at Azucar, their Mexican ice-cream shop on West Twenty-Seventh Street in Little Village. After several years of peddling ice cream on the streets, Mrs. Garcia opened the store, which enjoys a large following. (Photo by Philip Langdon)

Garcias—Maria still spoke only Spanish, but her sons had mastered both Spanish and English—were dispensing more than thirty flavors of ice cream. On weekends, people lined up out the door.

So, it is not unheard of for someone to advance from *ambulante* (cart pusher) to operator of a brick-and-mortar establishment. “People become entrepreneurs,” said the chamber of commerce’s di Paulo. “If they do well, many of them want to expand, he said. “They feel they’d like to open a store.”

Getting to Work

For much of the twentieth century, the Little Village neighborhood had factories close by. To the southeast lay a huge International Harvester plant. To the west, in Cicero, stood the 150-acre Hawthorne Works, which made telephone equipment for Western Electric. Many of the large employers are now gone. People seeking work have increasingly had to shift to public sector and service occupations in restaurants, hotels, landscaping, and other fields, many of which pay substantially less than factory work. Even so, many residents continue to work in manufacturing, mostly in smaller enterprises, and many of them some distance away.

A fourth of the workers who live in Little Village carpool to their jobs; the carpooling rate in this neighborhood is one of the highest in the city. Several day-labor offices operate in Little Village, and vans whisk the temporary workers off to small suburban factories. Some workers drive their own vehicles, although undocumented immigrants shy away from that for fear of being pulled over by police. Many ride buses. “Six bus lines crisscross the neighborhood, three going north–south, three east–west,” Alderman Muñoz said. “The Cermak Road bus goes all the way to McCormick Place,” North America’s largest convention center, a major employer, he pointed out. “The Twenty-Sixth Street bus goes to Michigan and Randolph, the epicenter of downtown.”

Little Village Organizers

Two individuals who have had a profound effect on the civic culture of Little Village are Marcos Muñoz and his wife, Andrea Muñoz. Marcos was born in Ciudad Acuna, Coahuila, a border town across the Rio Grande from Del Rio, Texas. In 1954, at age thirteen, Marcos left his hometown to find work in the United States and help feed his family.

As Andrea recounted, “He was hired to work on a farm in Texas, feeding animals, cleaning up behind them, collecting the eggs, et cetera. He slept in the barn with the animals. After six months he asked for his money so he could go back home—hoping he would have enough to buy a cart that he could use to sell fruits to help support his family.

“The rancher told him he could give it to him the next morning, and his wife would take him to the bus station in town to go back home. At 4:30 the next morning, he was wakened by immigration officials putting handcuffs on him. He asked to knock on the door of the rancher to get his money. There was no answer. He was deported back to Mexico.”

He never did get paid. Marcos Muñoz nonetheless returned to the southwestern United States as a migrant worker, and in 1965, he met Cesar Chavez, who was organizing laborers in the vineyards of California. In 1967, Chavez sent Marcos to Boston to orchestrate the New England segment of a national boycott of table grapes, and there he met Andrea O’Malley, a teacher who had grown up in Brockton, Massachusetts, a shoe-manufacturing city south of Boston. Andrea quit her job to work on the boycott, the two wed, and after several years, the United Farm Workers transferred them to Chicago. That is how they came to live in Little Village in 1975.

Marcos, whose schooling had ended on the second day of second grade, got a job in a factory that made punch presses. Andrea became an immigration consultant for Catholic Charities and later rose through the Cook County Hospital system, directing the Dr. Jorge Prieto Family Health Center, among other responsibilities.

One day when Marcos was unemployed, he started sweeping the alley behind their house and managed to get neighbors to join him. The cleanup launched the Muñozes into years of organizing in Little Village. They established block clubs, some forty-five of them. Many residents were relatively new to the neighborhood, and some were new to the United States. They fared better when they learned from, and made common cause with, one another.

The Muñozes also became active in local politics, helping spark the

careers of individuals such as Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, who in 1986 became Chicago’s first Mexican American alderman. It was Garcia who forced Rahm Emanuel into a closely fought runoff election for mayor in 2015.

Of Chavez’s legacy, Marcos said, “Cesar showed the importance of community.”^a Of Little Village residents, he said, “They’re big contributors.”



Andrea O’Malley Muñoz outside the house where she and her husband, Marcos—both former organizers for farmworker union leader Cesar Chavez—live in Little Village. The Muñozes have been involved in community causes since the 1970s. (Photo by Philip Langdon)

^a Jason Pace, “The Legacy of Cesar Chavez and Marcos Munoz,” *Uniting America* blog, Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, Mar. 27, 2013, <http://icirr.org/content/legacy-cesar-chavez-and-marcos-munoz>.

About one worker in six commutes via public transit, and another 7 percent—a respectable figure, said Scott Bernstein of the Chicago-based Center for Neighborhood Technology—walk to work. If you add those who work at home to those who walk to work, the combined group amounts to nearly 10 percent of the neighborhood’s employed population. “This,” Bernstein said, “reflects not only the obvious service jobs along the main shopping streets but also the service jobs at public facilities such as the schools and a still vibrant manufacturing sector—a shadow of its former self, but not all that far from the Stockyards Industrial District and the Central Manufacturing District.”

The only rail service in Little Village is the Chicago Transit Authority’s elevated Pink Line along the neighborhood’s northern edge. It is a long trip, but some use it to head first toward downtown and then switch to a train to Chicago O’Hare International Airport, which is a huge job source. In addition, bicycling is growing, helped by the grid of streets and by bike routes and bike lanes established in recent years.

Pursuing Community Causes

Like the Czechs before them, Mexican residents in Little Village have established dozens of community organizations. Some are permanent, and others are targeted toward shorter-term goals. Schools, and school overcrowding, have ranked high among the residents’ concerns.

“When I graduated from eighth grade in 1979, my math class was in a hallway,” said Alderman Muñoz. “In 1993, it was *still* in a hallway. I made it my mission to argue for more schools. It was a community concern that I put on steroids.” As a result, four new elementary schools and one middle school opened in the next five years. Those schools still look good today. Partly because they are embedded in a walkable neighborhood, many parents can be seen accompanying their children on foot to and from school each day. A further boost to education was the opening of the new Little Village Lawndale High School in 2005.

A key element in the neighborhood's progress has been the Little Village Community Development Corporation, now called Enlace Chicago. In 1999, when Jesus "Chuy" Garcia was hired as its first executive director, it was a small organization focused on creating a community-driven process for redevelopment of an abandoned industrial park at the western end of the Twenty-Sixth Street commercial district. Under Garcia, who had been the city's first Mexican American alderman and then Illinois's first Mexican American state senator, the organization expanded in size and scope. By the time Garcia stepped down in 2008, Enlace had 27 full-time employees and 120-part time staff members; it was pursuing a range of economic development initiatives and was countering gang violence, helping improve student achievement and graduation rates, and advocating for new parks and recreational spaces. As Little Village's largest community organization, Enlace led in-depth initiatives like the ones that produced a Little Village Quality of Life Plan in 2005 and a follow-up plan in 2013.

Gardens, Parks, Air, and Transit

Enlace Chicago, the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO), and other groups have converted parcels of disused land into community gardens. One basic purpose of the gardens is beautification. "This was a very ugly zone," said Maria Herrera, sitting in a garden near Twenty-Sixth Street, one of four gardens supported by Enlace. Herrera, who worked as a nurse in Mexico, spends much of the summer in that garden, helping people learn to grow vegetables, including plants native to Mexico. The gardeners learn about soils and fertilization and also become more knowledgeable about nutrition and health, including how to avoid becoming diabetic, an important matter for Latinos in the United States, who are about twice as likely as non-Hispanic whites to be afflicted with diabetes. Children play in the garden's small pool.



Maria Herrera, facilitator of community gardens for Enlace Chicago, in one of Enlace's gardens. She was a nurse in Mexico and helps Little Villagers learn about nutrition. (Photo by Philip Langdon)

“It’s food access, it’s household income generation, it’s reviving from-scratch cooking,” community organizer Alexander said about the gardens’ varied value to the neighborhood. In a community where obesity is a problem that frequently leads to diabetes, the gardens are places that people can walk to, thus encouraging physical activity. Women sit crocheting, sometimes while getting low-key, no-cost help with domestic or psychological problems. “We try to respond to mental health needs through informal social gathering spaces because it’s really taboo to see a therapist,” Alexander explained. “There’s a lot of stigma around those kinds of needs. But,” she noted, “a person can go to a garden” without being labeled a psychological client.

When the economy worsens, “the first thing to go from people’s

budgets is fruit and vegetables,” said Kim Wasserman of LVEJO, showing off a garden her group created next to an industrial zone. For a yearly fee, participants have a place to tend raised beds, grow their own food, and have outdoor meals. “Every Wednesday,” Wasserman said, “we eat what we grow.”

“What does a healthy community look like?” Wasserman asks. “It has a mix of green space and industry and residential—not just one thing.”

LVEJO and other groups fought for years to shut down the two old Fisk and Crawford coal-burning power plants, which had aggravated health problems such as asthma afflicting residents of Little Village and Pilsen. Protesters wore gas masks during Day of the Dead marches. A “Coalympics” got attention during Chicago’s bid for an Olympics.⁸ Finally, in 2012, both plants shut down, ending Chicago’s dubious distinction of being the only major US city with two coal-fired plants operating within its borders.⁹

Little Village has had the smallest volume of open space per resident of any community in the city. At one point, it was a paltry 0.32 acre per inhabitant. Today it is 0.59 acre per resident—which is still a low figure, but it represents progress—and the community continues to push for more. One notable achievement was the 2014 opening of a new park, called La Villita, on twenty-two acres that had been polluted for decades by an asphalt roofing plant. Mayor Rahm Emanuel described the cleanup, carried out through the federal Superfund program, as “the largest brownfield conversion in America.”¹⁰ The site now boasts athletic fields, community gardens, basketball courts, a skate park, a children’s playground, a picnic pavilion, and a multiuse trail with fitness stations, among other features.¹¹

Wasserman noted that after the Little Village Lawndale High School was built on Thirty-First Street, the community relaunched a campaign to get the Chicago Transit Authority to establish a bus route on that thoroughfare.¹² Little Village Lawndale was the only high school in



The creation of twenty-two-acre La Villita Park on formerly contaminated industrial land was a victory for the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization and for the community, which historically had a shortage of public green space. La Villita, on South Sacramento Avenue in the southeast section of Little Village, opened in December 2014. (Leslie Schwartz Photography)

Chicago that did not have a bus line within two blocks. At first, the requests for buses on Thirty-First Street went nowhere. So, the youth started working with local college students and LVEJO interns to craft a bus proposal that articulated the need from a planning perspective—encompassing infrastructure, walkability, ridership, and revenue. They studied the business background of Chicago Transit Authority board members and learned to speak their language.

A bus line, LVEJO noted, would reduce carbon dioxide emissions. It would also help overcome a racial problem: African American students were being attacked while walking from the high school to a distant spot where they boarded a bus that would take them home to North Lawndale. Based on the group's report, the CTA agreed to a

one-hundred-eighty-day trial of half the proposed route. “That proved so successful that in 2012 the CTA made it permanent,” Wasserman said. “In 2016 the second half of the route was approved.”

The route attracts plenty of riders. “In the summer, the bus goes all the way to the lakefront,” Wasserman pointed out. “Now you can get to the lake in 30 minutes instead of two hours.” She draws inspiration from social protest movements in Mexico and said of her organization, “We see a long-term commitment to fight for what is right. We come from a country where organizing is part of our life.”

Gang Violence

In *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect*, Harvard professor Robert J. Sampson leads readers through one of the most meticulous sociological examinations ever made of Chicago’s neighborhoods. Research by Sampson and colleagues concludes that the city’s Latino neighborhoods and immigrant neighborhoods generally function well. Latinos are blessed with a large array of organizations that help them deal with the challenges of urban life. Latinos, and immigrants as a whole, engage in less violence than do Chicagoans overall. As Sampson wrote, “Cities of concentrated immigration are some of the safest places around.”¹³

That generalization is undercut by a rash of gang shootings and killings that has disturbed Chicago in recent years, some of them committed by young Latinos. In Little Village, the biggest threats are posed by the Latin Kings, who claim the east side of the neighborhood as their turf, and the Two Six Nation (named for Twenty-Sixth Street), who claim the west.¹⁴ When the two gangs battle each other, sometimes bystanders are inadvertently killed.

Street gangs in Chicago can be traced as far back as violent white immigrant groups prior to the Civil War.¹⁵ It was harassment of Latinos by non-Hispanic whites, some say, that led Latinos to form their own

gangs.¹⁶ Once Latino organizations began attacking one another, a cycle of violence and retribution was set in motion.

Territory is central to gang life. South Ridgeway Avenue, a largely residential street that runs north–south through the center of Little Village, has at times functioned as the dividing line between the Latin Kings and the Two Sixes, although when strongly challenged, the boundary can shift. In 2013, according to Chicago police, the border was South Hamlin Avenue, a block west of Ridgeway.¹⁷ Members repeatedly tag buildings on the border with gang initials and insignia and with insults aimed at rivals. A three- or five-pointed crown announces that the area is claimed by Latin Kings, and a bunny with a bent ear asserts that it is the domain of the Two Six Nation.

Gangs can operate in many different settings, from suburban cul-de-sacs to public housing towers. In Chicago, gangs have a geographical and hierarchical structure and are organized down to the street and block level. When members tag a site, they may mark it with the name of the street that is home to their subgroup. To control a territory, members may be ordered to walk their street for a set time—from, say, 9 in the evening until 1 in the morning—said the Reverend Tom Boharic, a young priest at St. Agnes of Bohemia who has made it his mission to provide boys with alternatives to gang life. Gang members threaten individuals who, purposely or inadvertently, are found wearing colors of an opposing gang: black and gold for the Latin Kings, and black and beige for the Two Sixes.

Electronic communication has introduced subtle changes in how gang turf is defended. A young woman interviewed about territorial conflicts in Little Village explained: “A decade ago, to gangbang was to literally stand on your block, wearing your flag. Today, with more access to technology and other outlets, physical confrontation at the border is less frequent. Much of the border mentality is taken to the Internet.” The Internet, however, ultimately leads back to confrontations in

physical places. The young woman pointed out that “when both sides meet in person, the clash is immediate and aided by guns.”¹⁸

Violence is not random; rather, it is directed at specific individuals or groups, especially members of rival gangs. In her years of living and working in Little Village, Enlace Chicago’s Alexander has never been attacked. “Mostly,” she said, “being a white woman gives me a free pass.” What matters most is whether a person fits into one of the ethnic or racial categories that a gang is intent on controlling. “My husband, who is Cuban, will not walk anywhere,” Alexander said. “It’s much more difficult to be a Latino male. You can’t cross certain boundaries.” Still, anyone can accidentally become a casualty if a gang fight erupts nearby. “People in general understand that they could catch a stray bullet,” Alexander said.

Boundaries begin to constrain a Latino boy’s movement when he is in fifth or sixth grade; that is the age at which boys start to be recruited by gangs. Little Village Lawndale High School was built with the intention of cutting across racial lines; the school encourages blacks and Latinos to avoid stereotyping and to instead become comfortable with each other. Although some progress has been made, blacks do not hang out much in Little Village after school and on weekends. Latino gangs make them feel unwelcome. In early 2009, young blacks were hurt in a series of violent incidents. Along the northern edge of Piotrowski Park, east of the school, Latino adults attacked African American students after they had left the school grounds. Some were injured badly enough to be hospitalized. Chicago Tenth District Police Commander Roberto Zavalo said some people in the neighborhood around the school assumed that the African American students were gang members, whether that was true or not. Whenever students display gang emblems in school, on that day “we’re going to have a problem on 31st Street,” Zavalo said.¹⁹

Why do boys in Little Village join gangs? Rarely is drug-selling the reason. The crucial thing about a gang is its ability to answer a teenage boy’s desire for pride and reassurance; the gang affirms his identity and

provides an outlet for demonstrating masculinity. Boys join a gang to feel valued and important. “They look for community, and that’s where they find it,” said Chicago historian Dominic Pacyga. “If a kid doesn’t do well in school or do sports, some of them look to the streets,” said Matt DeMateo, pastor of New Life Community Church. Part of the appeal of gangs has to do with “just a lack of options,” DeMateo said.

Pressure to join a gang seems particularly intense for those struggling to balance two contending cultures: the largely traditional Mexican culture of parents and grandparents and the fluid, impersonal, and sometimes hard-edged American culture that the rising generation ultimately has to adapt to. The tragedy is that gangs impart destructive lessons and promote behavior that is fundamentally hostile and hollow. Alexander described it this way: “Violence has to do with maintaining territory through peacocking, through strutting.”

Establishing Order

If the neighborhood grid can be useful to gangs, the grid also functions in the reverse direction: the street, block, and building network helps residents resist gang incursions. A pattern of streets, sidewalks, and small front yards and of buildings punctuated by windows and doors that overlook the public realm makes it easy for people to notice troubling behavior and take action. Civility is reinforced by the large number of people walking to local destinations; by the influence of the corner stores; by the numerous street vendors; by the sprinkling of home businesses, alley mechanics, and other small enterprises throughout; and by institutions embedded in the neighborhood.

Through block clubs, Little Villagers exert collective responsibility for the safety and attractiveness of their surroundings. In many front yards there are simple globe lamps, installed by block club members years ago to illuminate the area and make the block safer stand. On some blocks, residents have painted the trunks of trees, a custom imported

from Mexico; the whitened trunks reflect light from the globe lamps and from streetlights. Illumination was not the only reason for painting the tree trunks. Another aim, said Andrea Muñoz, was “to show others that the block was organized and united.” The street grid, when it is intelligently cared for, sends messages, and these messages result in a more secure place to live.

After a group of neighbors has completed a block improvement, whether it is cleaning an alley, installing lighting, or painting the tree trunks, they often celebrate by having a block party. Jesus Garcia, born in the Mexican state of Durango and brought up mainly in Chicago, said, “Mexicans are a party culture—we have parties for everything. With children, there’s always birthdays. There’s loud music playing. There are smells from cooking. Guys being festive is normal—normal to us.” Block clubs and the layout of the neighborhood allow these gregarious instincts to be channeled into community building.

Neighbors who see gang members hanging out down the block are encouraged to go out, act in a friendly manner, and ask “How are you doing?” said Andrea Muñoz. Neighbors get on their phones and prod other neighbors to come out, too. The aim is to start a conversation. The gang members may then decide to move to another location—sometimes that is the most that can be hoped for—but there is always the chance that a better long-term relationship will develop.

Multiple organizations fight back against gang graffiti defacing buildings in the neighborhood. Municipal crews often spray brown paint over gang tags. That solution is better than letting graffiti accumulate, but it is not ideal. Who wants to see the bottom 6 feet of apartment buildings covered in drab brown paint? The Reverend Tom Boharic of St. Agnes of Bohemia sees the city paint jobs as a “ghetto blaster” approach that overcomes the problem only temporarily.

Some community groups instead replace graffiti with paintings that will have a more lasting and positive effect than the city’s solution.



Little Village abounds with tall street trees. Some of them have had their trunks painted white, a custom from Mexico that was adopted by some of Little Village's block clubs, in part to herald that the neighbors are organized. (Photo by Philip Langdon)



The Reverend Tom Boharic of St. Agnes of Bohemia Catholic Church in front of a mural that students under his instruction painted at South Avers Avenue and West Twenty-Seventh Street, not far from the border between the Latin Kings and the Two Six gang. (Photo by Philip Langdon)

Father Tom runs Imago Dei, a program that brings together boys in the fifth through eighth grades (and sometimes higher grades) and authorizes them to paint murals over the gang tags. The boys' creations range from traditional Mexican-style murals to contemporary art. "We put up a Unity mural representing the unity of cultures," Father Tom said as he walked the blocks near his church, touring the boys' artwork. Murals with religious themes stand a good chance of remaining undisturbed. "Even the gangs are religious," he said. "They'll tag on any building but never on a church." Father Tom noted that the community likes the murals created by youths he supervises. "People will congratulate them on the work," he said.

In a few instances, the community has taken sites notorious for violence and turned them into neighborhood assets. That happened to a



A walk home from school includes passing one of the many religious murals painted on garage doors and other surfaces in Little Village. The inscription translates to, “Rise up, my son, and go in peace.” (Photo by Philip Langdon)

parking lot at South Lawndale Avenue and West Thirty-First Street, next to Ortiz de Dominguez Elementary School and close to a gang border. Where teachers used to park their cars, a soccer field now echoes with the sounds of kids at play. Rob Castañeda cofounded a youth organization, Beyond the Ball, to reach out to young boys through sports. He did so despite great risk to himself and his family. In 1999 and 2000, gang members, sometimes carrying rifles, tried to force him out of the neighborhood. “They were breaking our windows,” Castañeda said. “They set our house on fire.” Yet Castañeda and his family stayed and made a growing impact. “By 2006,” he said, “we were working with about 250 guys from the neighborhood. We saw the amazing culture we were building. The guys who attacked our house went to prison. Their kids are in our program.”

One of the challenges in Little Village is that many parents work long

hours or at more than one job, and many are not around when their children get out of school. Castañeda's program uses organized play to help fill that gap. "When people play," he observed, "it makes them more resistant to trauma."

Lessons of Little Village

Little Village has a fundamentally walkable character, perhaps not to the same degree as the intimately scaled rowhouse neighborhoods in Center City Philadelphia, but Little Villagers can accomplish a great deal on foot. The community's density and pedestrian-oriented uses benefit residents in multiple ways: by lessening their need for automobiles, reducing their transportation expenses, making the neighborhood more self-sufficient, and helping people form bonds with their neighbors.

Stores and services of nearly every kind, including health clinics, professional offices, and food banks, are within walking distance. Businesses specializing in Mexican products, from cooking ingredients to *quinceañera* dresses, have become regional attractions, generating jobs and income and reinforcing local pride.

Despite its strengths, the Twenty-Sixth Street corridor cries out for physical improvement. Outdated or harsh facades need to be upgraded, as Jaime Di Paulo of the Little Village Chamber of Commerce is quick to acknowledge. Visual appeal may not be the first thing that newly arrived immigrants worry about, but in the long run, the look of a place does matter. Americans' standards for the built environment have risen tremendously in recent years. People are drawn to urban business districts that have a lively or uplifting spirit and are disappointed when that spirit is missing. A thoroughfare like Twenty-Sixth Street will fare better if it compares favorably to other neighborhood business districts in Chicago and the suburbs. Little Village merchants should take a lesson from the success of Maria Garcia's little Azucar ice-cream shop on Twenty-Seventh Street, where not

A High School Born of a Hunger Strike

When Chicago school officials put plans for a promised Little Village high school on hold, claiming financial difficulties, the neighborhood did what it often does: it turned to collective action. Block club leaders who had been trained in community organizing began a series of events that culminated in a highly effective protest. On May 13, 2001, Mother's Day, fifteen Mexican American mothers and grandmothers pitched tents on the school site on Little Village's southwestern industrial edge, named their settlement "Camp Cesar Chavez," and began a hunger strike.

"Every night, different churches would take the lead, marching to support them," said Andrea Muñoz. The protesters were upset that the board of education had recently opened two selective-enrollment high schools in more affluent white areas of the city yet had postponed constructing a high school in Little Village. After nineteen days of subsisting on broth, water, and Gatorade, the protesters achieved their goal and brought the strike to an end on June 1. Mayor Richard M. Daley replaced two of the top leaders of the board of education and on June 26 appointed Arne Duncan the new chief executive officer of Chicago Public Schools.^a Duncan, later secretary of education in the Obama administration, gave the community a crucial financial commitment, and in the fall of 2005, the Little Village Lawndale High School opened on South Kostner Avenue at West Thirty-First Street.

The protesters "not only insisted on being a significant part of the planning process, but also came to guide it," Joanie Friedman wrote in a history of the controversy.^b Urban high schools tend to be large, impersonal institutions, but Duncan "said kids function better in a small school, where teachers know the kids," Muñoz recalled. Thus, it was decided that the new high school, designed for approximately 1,600 students, would consist of four small, autonomous academies in one building. The four discrete parts are connected by a central atrium. Each academy has its own principal and teaching staff, but some facilities, including the library, swimming pool, auditorium, and health center, are shared.

Advocates of the new school were allowed to work with architects to

^a Ana Beatriz Cholo, "Little Village Getting School It Hungered For," *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 27, 2015, <http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2005-02-27/news/0502270311-1-hunger-strike-chicago-public-schools-chief-arne-duncan>.

^b Joanie Friedman, "Contested Space," *AREA Chicago*, <http://areachicago.org/contested-space/>; first published as "Contested Space: The Struggle for the Little Village Lawndale High School," in *Critical Planning Journal* 14 (Summer 2007): 143–56.

ensure that the culture of the community and the memory of the strike were reflected in the building and grounds. Public charrettes (intensive design sessions) were convened to learn what was important to the community. The architects distributed cameras to residents and asked them to capture images that defined the neighborhood. Participants returned with images of local murals, monuments, and mosaics, which the architects then incorporated into the building design.

“The school was a symbolic victory for the neighborhood,” Muñoz said. Testifying to that, one of the academies is the School for Social Justice, which keeps people aware of the struggle and the ideals of the strikers. Enrollment boundaries for the \$63 million complex were set so that the student body would be integrated, with approximately 70 percent Latino students (largely from Little Village) and approximately 30 percent African American students (overwhelmingly from North Lawndale).



Mural in a corridor of Social Justice High School, one of the four autonomous schools that make up the Little Village Lawndale High School Campus on South Kostner Avenue. The inscription says: “Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and then watching the evidence change.” (Photo by Philip Langdon)

only is the product appealing and reasonably priced; the atmosphere is artful and inviting.

Public transit in Little Village is decent and well-used. It would be even more valuable if the buses ran more frequently and to more destinations.

More parks, community gardens, and green spaces are needed. Alderman Muñoz is correct when he describes the scarcity of parks as a problem inherited from decades ago. The businesspeople who developed industry, commerce, and housing in South Lawndale a century or more ago did not reserve enough land for public enjoyment. The community is making progress—inserting gardens and play areas into vacant spaces, converting disused industrial land into parks when opportunities arise, and preparing for the Paseo, a 4-mile biking and walking path that when completed will provide an enjoyable off-road connection between Little Village and Pilsen.²⁰ The more these kinds of projects are carried out, the healthier and steadier the neighborhood will be.

Vigorous organizations that focus on neighborhood well-being are one of Little Village's strengths. The energy displayed by these organizations and their members has been impressive.

Gang violence is probably the biggest single threat to Little Village's long-term stability. Wholesale migration from Mexico to the United States appears to be over for the immediate future, and to be sustainable, Little Village will have to hold on to a large proportion of its existing residents, not lose them to suburbs or other sections of the city. That will be difficult unless gang violence is reduced. To their credit, community organizers realize that gangs pose a serious challenge. The gang problem leads back to families and schools. If some families cannot steer their boys clear of gangs, schools and outside organizations will have to work extra hard to see that boys follow a productive path. The rate of high school graduation, worryingly low, must somehow be substantially raised.

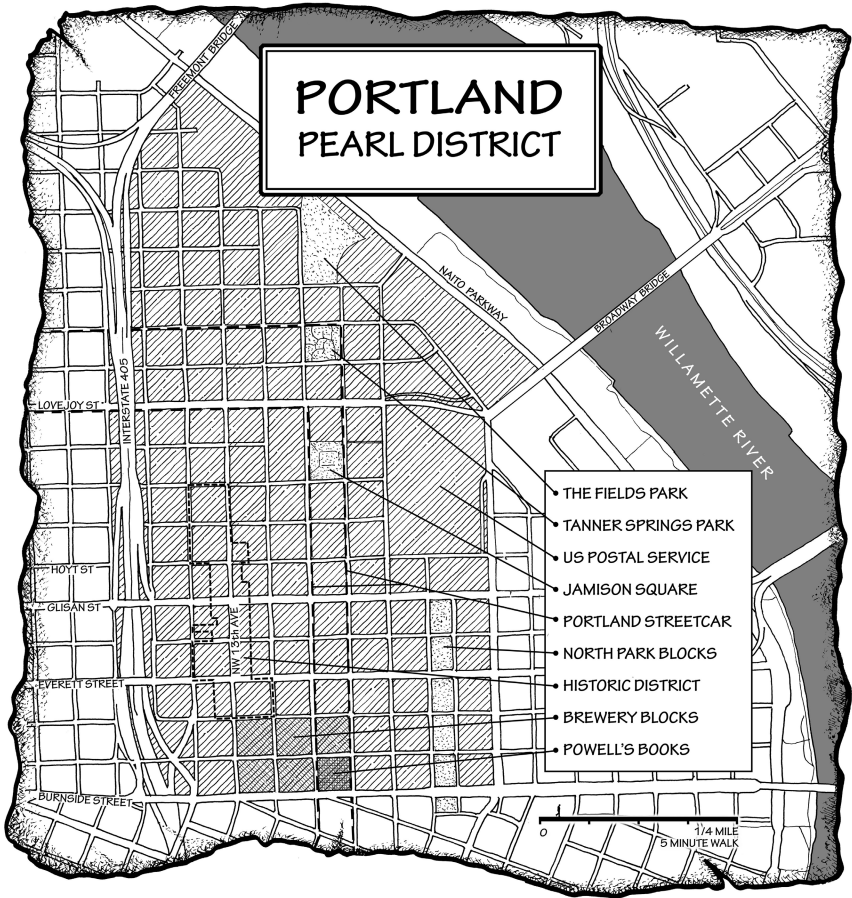
On the whole, it is heartening to see how well Little Village is doing.



Residents building composting bins in a community park organized by the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization. Community gardens grow food, aid nutrition, and bring Little Village residents together. (Photo courtesy of Little Village Environmental Justice Organization)

Says Michael Rodriguez, a former leader of Enlace Chicago, “For Mexican Americans, this is where you get your foothold.”

“Foothold” is an apt word choice, because Little Village is a place where people put their feet to good use. They walk. The walkability of this section of Chicago, home to immigrants and the children of immigrants for much of its history, reinforces the community’s cohesiveness and serves its residents well.



Map of the Pearl District, showing the network of 200-by-200-foot blocks that was extended northward across the former rail yards. A thirteen-acre tract west of NW Broadway is a US Postal Service Center that is expected to be redeveloped with commercial and residential buildings, including an estimated six hundred affordable apartments. (Drawing by Dhuru A. Thadani)