

Understanding Paseo Boricua: Why the Preservation of Chicago's Puerto Rican Enclave Matters

by

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Abstract

Paseo Boricua, which loosely translates to “Puerto Rican Promenade,” is the center of Puerto Rican culture, business, and politics in Chicago. Since 2000, the rate of gentrification on Chicago’s northwest side, where Paseo Boricua is located, has increased significantly. Community leaders and residents have worked fervently for decades to maintain Paseo Boricua and the surrounding area as a Puerto Rican space by protecting and expanding affordable housing, investing in arts and culture, and supporting Puerto Rican-owned businesses. In the context of a place at risk of losing its population and character, this thesis asks: Why does the preservation of Paseo Boricua as a Puerto Rican cultural enclave matter? Through interviews with twenty-one community leaders and residents, historical research, and a review of public media, I present three themes that illuminate the significance of Paseo Boricua. First, the district represents Puerto Rican self-determination—a reality that is not possible on the island due to its continued colonial status. Second, the place honors and teaches Puerto Rican identity, history, and culture. As Puerto Ricans have faced centuries of colonization, exploitation, and oppression, Paseo Boricua provides space for Puerto Rican people to celebrate their resiliency and joy. Third, the distinctive food, music, art, culture, and leadership of Paseo Boricua contribute uniquely to the vibrancy and diversity of Chicago. I conclude by arguing that the city of Chicago must preserve Paseo Boricua—the only officially designated Puerto Rican cultural district in the United States—through concerted policy and planning efforts in partnership with local community leaders. This thesis seeks to contribute to the ongoing conversation and strategy regarding how to preserve Puerto Rican culture on Paseo Boricua and why it matters.

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Part I: Introduction

“Division Street, Paseo Boricua, must be the most beautifully decorated street in America. And since you have the prettiest street in America, it’s possible that you may just be at the forefront of this [displacement] struggle for the whole United States, and then maybe for the whole world. As you lift up your voices, you teach all of us what we are supposed to do to make progress.”

-Dr. Mindy Thompson Fullilove at the 2018 Puerto Rican Agenda Housing Summit



Figure 1: *Sea of Flags*. 2004. Gamaliel Ramirez, Star Padilla, Moncho, Melissa Clintron, and Luis Ortiz. The mural depicts Paseo Boricua during Fiesta Boricua, a festival that attracts tens of thousands every year. Lolita Lebrón, a Puerto Rican Nationalist, is the mural’s central image. Located at 2500 W Division Street. Photo by John P. Walsh.

Paseo Boricua is the center of Puerto Rican culture, business, and politics in Chicago. The vibrant six-block corridor is located on the northwest side of the city within the West Town community. The larger area is more commonly referred to, however, as “Humboldt Park,” since it is directly adjacent to the 207-acre public park of the same name. Additionally, the community area called Humboldt Park is directly adjacent to West Town (see Figures 2 and 3). The corridor runs along Division Street and is bound by Mozart Street to the west and Western Avenue to east. Two Puerto Rican flags made of steel, weighing forty-five tons each and measuring fifty-nine feet tall, soar above the two entry points and serve as gateways to the

district. The corridor is lined with Puerto Rican restaurants, cultural institutions, social service agencies, Puerto Rican-owned businesses, and over sixty colorful murals.

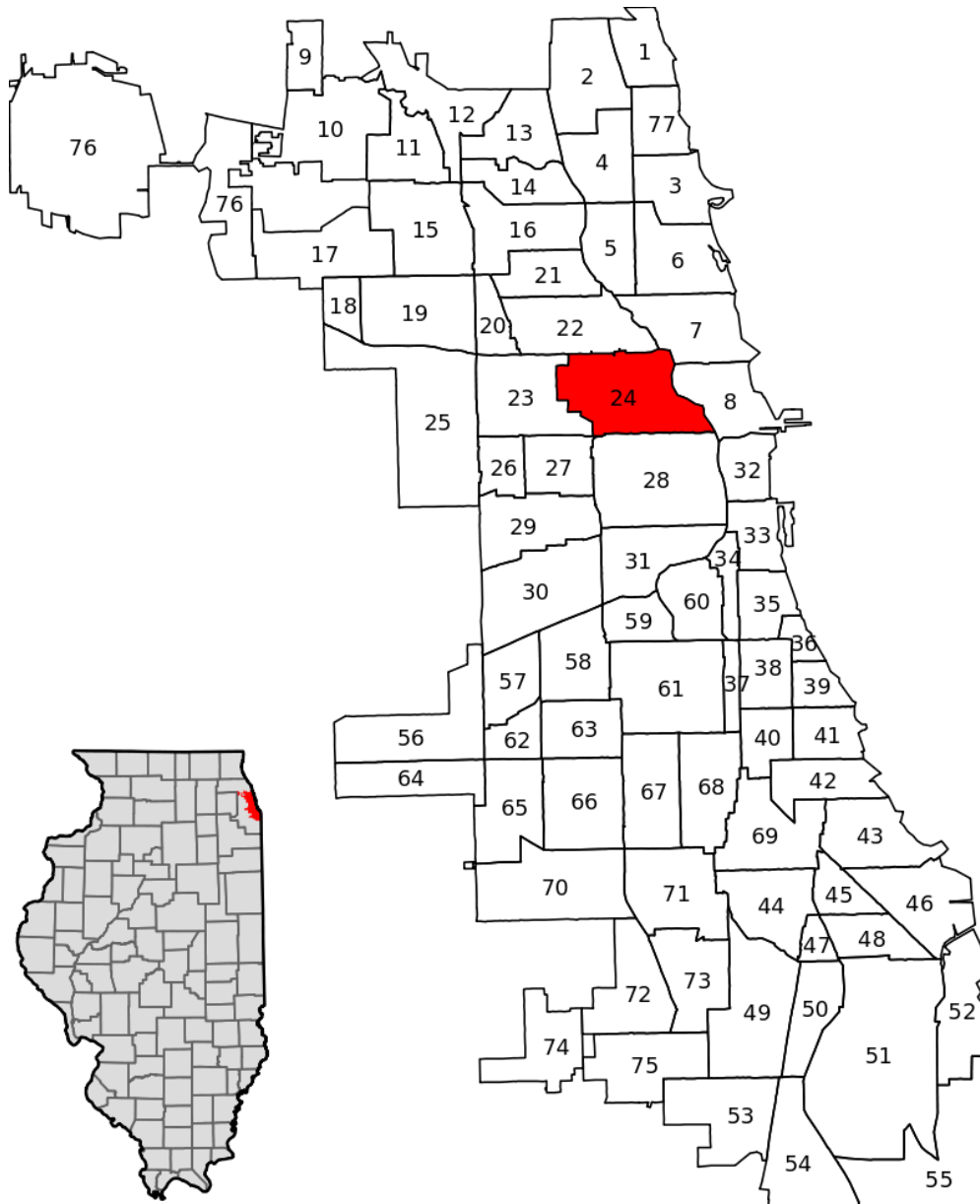


Figure 2: Chicago Neighborhood Map. Community area 24 is West Town where Paseo Boricua is located. Other community areas of note are Lincoln Park (8), Logan Square (22), Humboldt Park (23), Near West Side (31), and Near North Side (32). Source: The Map Collection, University of Chicago Library.

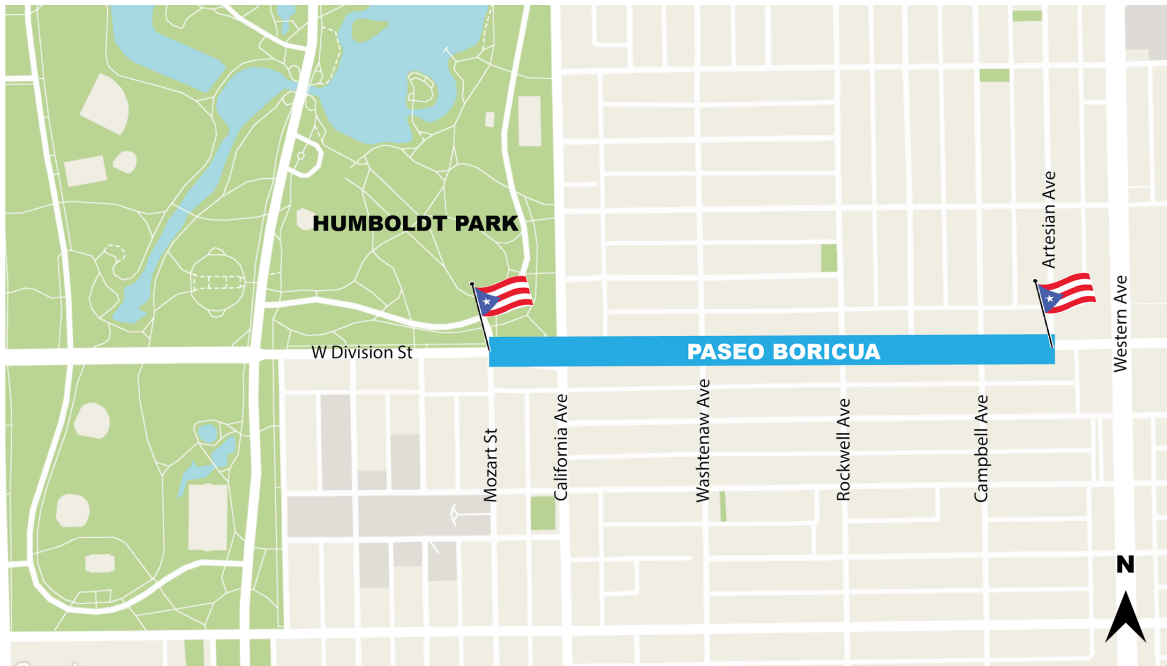


Figure 3: Paseo Boricua is a half-mile long stretch along West Division Street on Chicago’s northwest side, bound by Mozart Street to the West and Artesian Ave to the East. Base map by Snazzy Maps.

West Town and the surrounding communities are home to nearly 50,000 Puerto Ricans, which constitutes about half of Chicago’s total Puerto Rican population (American Community Survey 2018, 5-Year Estimates). After being displaced from neighborhoods they had originally settled in during the mid-twentieth century, Puerto Rican community leaders and organizers sought to stake their claim in West Town in the 1960s. Their efforts included founding organizations that built affordable housing, encouraging homeownership among Puerto Rican residents, creating new schools and churches to serve the community, painting murals, and organizing cultural events. The first Puerto Rican People’s Parade was held in June of 1966 and has attracted thousands of people to Division Street every year since.

In recent decades, West Town and surrounding communities, including Logan Square, have gentrified significantly. In these neighborhoods, the Latino, Black, and working-class populations have decreased while the white and higher-income populations have increased (Biasco, 2016; Zamudio, 2018; Ramos, “Traditional Hispanic enclaves lose residents”, 2019). Multi-story condos have been built, home prices have increased, expensive restaurants and stores have opened, and Latino-owned businesses have shuttered (Fishman, 2014; Biasco,

2016; Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University, 2020). The economic forces that pushed Puerto Ricans to West Town and Humboldt Park in the 1960s are now pushing these families out once again. Between 2000 and 2018, the proportion of Latinos in West Town decreased by 24 percent while the total population remained stable (see Figure 8, p. 29).

Despite these demographic changes, Paseo Boricua remains a decisively Puerto Rican space. As you walk down the corridor, you will hear *plena*, *bomba*, and *reggaeton* music playing from radios, smell *jibaritos* (sandwiches made with fried plantains) wafting through air, and hear Spanish spoken on every corner. Businesses are named after Puerto Rican towns, including Jayuya Barbershop, Luquillo Barbershop, and Yauco Food & Liquors. Look up and you will see wrought-iron light posts with banners that portray images of the three ancestries that make up the Puerto Rican identity: Taíno, Spanish, and West African. Look down and you will see fifteen bronze medallions along the corridor that honor Puerto Rican artists and leaders inspired by Hollywood's Walk of Fame. The murals are not only vibrant and colorful, but tell the stories of Puerto Rican history, culture, and politics.

What has made this staying power possible in the face of powerful economic forces is a unique combination of community organizing, political control, and cultural placemaking. The Puerto Rican Agenda, a coalition of over thirty local organizations that have a stake in improving quality of life for Puerto Ricans, meets monthly to organize around key issues which include preserving the community's affordability, maintaining the community's Puerto Rican identity, and preventing the displacement of low- and moderate-income residents in the area. While Puerto Ricans on the island do not have the right to vote in American elections, Puerto Ricans on the mainland do. Since the 1980s, the 26th Ward, where Paseo Boricua is located, has been represented by progressive, pro-independence Puerto Rican aldermen. All three aldermen have used their power to implement policy that prevents gentrification, including inclusionary zoning and blocking specific developments that would contribute to neighborhood change.

That said, the Latino, Black, and working-class populations in West Town and the surrounding communities are decreasing as the white and higher-income populations increase (U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey 2018, 5-Year Estimates). Young Puerto Ricans who would like to rent or buy in West Town are priced out (Cintrón et al, 2012; interviews). As one community leader asked in an interview, “If none of us are left, who will we [social service agencies] be serving?” While many share the attitude that gentrification is inevitable or inescapable, there are steps that community leaders and elected officials can continue to take to mitigate displacement. In the context of a place at risk of losing its population and character, this thesis asks: **Why does the preservation of Paseo Boricua as a Puerto Rican cultural enclave matter?**

In this thesis, I present three key themes that illuminate the significance of Paseo Boricua. First, the district represents Puerto Rican self-determination—a reality that is not possible on the island due to its continued colonial status. The confluence of the anti-colonial political struggle of Puerto Ricans on the island and the local struggle of the community within Chicago is key to understanding Paseo Boricua’s significance. Second, the place honors and teaches Puerto Rican identity, history, and culture. As Puerto Ricans have faced centuries of colonization, exploitation, and oppression, Paseo Boricua provides a space for Puerto Rican people to celebrate their resiliency and joy. Third, the distinctive food, music, art, culture, and leadership of Paseo Boricua contribute uniquely to the vibrancy and diversity of the city of Chicago.

As the only officially designated Puerto Rican cultural district in the United States, the city of Chicago must preserve Paseo Boricua through concerted policy and planning efforts in partnership with local community leaders. These efforts include coordinated community organizing, affordable housing development, inclusionary zoning, targeted small business support, continued investment in arts and culture, and sustained elections of progressive Puerto Rican and Latino leaders. This thesis seeks to contribute to the ongoing conversation and strategy regarding how to preserve Puerto Rican culture on Paseo Boricua and why it matters.

Organization

In **Part I**, I present my research question, methodology, and personal positionality. I also offer land acknowledgements for the West Town community and the Island of Puerto Rico. The land acknowledgements are particularly relevant as this thesis centers on themes of colonialism, oppression, and displacement. I also introduce my argument for how Paseo Boricua can be preserved and why it matters.

The next two sections provide a backdrop for understanding the significance of Paseo Boricua as a place where Puerto Rican self-determination is realized and identity is celebrated. **Part II** examines the history of the United States' colonization of Puerto Rico and how it led to mass migration to the U.S. in the mid-twentieth century. **Part III** focuses on the displacement and discrimination Puerto Rican migrants faced upon their arrival to Chicago, how Puerto Ricans fought to put down roots in West Town, and how the rich and vibrant cultural district of Paseo Boricua emerged.

In **Part IV**, I describe the increasing rate of gentrification on Chicago's northwest side and the strategies the community has used to mitigate it. I argue that the key preservation strategies Paseo Boricua have used to date are coordinated community and political organizing, affordable housing development, and investment in arts and culture.

In **Part V**, I conclude my argument for why the preservation of Paseo Boricua matters.

Methodology

Primary research for this thesis consisted of semi-structured interviews with twenty-one individuals representing community leaders, elected officials, artists, residents, and journalists living and working in the West Town and Humboldt Park communities. The interviews were conducted by phone and ranged from thirty to sixty minutes. They took place from May to November 2020. I participated in two meetings of the Puerto Rican Agenda, a coalition of non-profit organizations that develop and execute a community-driven vision for the Humboldt Park area and Puerto Rican community. Secondary research included an academic literature review, historical research, a review of public media and publicly available reports, and demographics published by the U.S. Census Bureau. Particularly influential in my research were two books, *Puerto Rican Chicago* by Felix Padilla and *War Against All Puerto Ricans: Revolution and Terror in America's Colony* by Nelson Denis. I also heavily relied on several papers by Professor Ivis García Zambrana, and the Paseo Podcast, a project led by Joshua Smyser-DeLeon and sponsored by the Puerto Rican Cultural Center. While much has been written about the history of Puerto Ricans in Chicago as well as gentrification on Chicago's northwest side, this thesis seeks to contribute new perspectives and data to the ongoing conversation and strategy around preserving Paseo Boricua and Puerto Rican culture in Chicago.

Personal Positionality

I was introduced to Paseo Boricua through a service-learning program in which I participated during college. The program introduced students to the city of Chicago through conversations with community leaders, neighborhood walking tours, and community service projects. As a founding student leader, I helped design the program and guided students through the week's experiences and discussions. In the visits to Humboldt Park, we toured the six-block corridor with community leader and poet Eduardo Arocho; we discussed the community's history with community activist and Executive Director of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center José López; and we learned about the movement for Puerto Rican Independence from Ricardo Jiménez, an activist who was imprisoned for eighteen years, pardoned in 1999, and who today serves director of *VIDA/SIDA*, an HIV/AIDS prevention program located on Paseo Boricua.

Upon arriving to Paseo Boricua, I took in the enormous Puerto Rican flags that serve as the gateways to the district, the extensive Puerto Rican Nationalist imagery, and the plethora of Puerto Rican restaurants, institutions, and businesses that line the corridor. In the time I spent there, I viewed exhibits at the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture, planted vegetable seeds at Albizu Campos High School's community garden, and visited UrbanTheater Company, a local performance arts space. The experience, while brief, was immersive, transformative, and unforgettable. It unleashed a curiosity within me about how this place came to be, how its character will be maintained, and how it will evolve in the years to come.

The more recent connection I have to Paseo Boricua is my experience working with Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation, a community development corporation based in Humboldt Park just a few blocks north of Division Street. Bickerdike was founded in 1967 by local residents and organizers, including former political prisoner Oscar López Rivera, who joined forces to fight housing neglect, abandonment, and arson on Chicago's northwest side. A founding member of the Puerto Rican Agenda, Bickerdike advocates for, develops, and maintains affordable housing in Humboldt Park and the surrounding communities. One of their developments, *La Estancia*, is a fifty-seven unit affordable housing development that anchors the west entrance of Paseo

Boricua. As the organization’s Resource Development Manager, I attended events, built relationships with local partners, and learned more about the community’s history, plans, and priorities. Stating this connection to community members during the interview process helped me establish myself as a credible researcher. It prevented me from facing the dreaded “we don't want nobody that nobody sent” Chicago response.

While I am not Puerto Rican and have never been a resident of Humboldt Park, my relationship to the community has helped shape and inform my interests in housing and economic development. The community’s fervent commitment to maintaining its Puertoricanness and improving quality of life for existing residents has inspired me to pursue the research questions in this thesis. In my interview with José López, the Executive Director of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, I asked “What is the community’s most pressing challenge?” He immediately stated “gentrification” and said that I was “in the right place and the right time” to pursue the topic. That confirmation of the importance of this topic from one of the community’s most prolific leaders gave me confidence to pursue this thesis.



Figure 4: Author (right) participating in a tour of Paseo Boricua led by Eduardo Arocho (left), local community leader, tour guide, and poet. 2012. Photo provided by author.

Land Acknowledgements

This thesis centers on themes of colonialism, gentrification, contested land, and contested identity. The parallels between colonialism and gentrification are key to understanding the importance and significance of Paseo Boricua, a space that Puerto Ricans in Chicago have worked diligently to build, protect, and expand. Similar to colonialism, gentrification involves the displacement of an established, less powerful group by a new, more powerful group (Wharton, 2008). Both colonialism and gentrification can be defined as the practice of acquiring control over a space by occupying it and exploiting it economically. Both practices are heavily racialized and typically involve a white group occupying and exploiting a non-white space. The non-white, marginalized group is displaced and harmed while the white, dominant group benefits and profits from its newly occupied land and amenities.

“Economic development has always been a tool of explaining colonialism, or justifying it. You declare a place undeveloped that needs to be developed. You see indigenous land, you settle it, you develop it, you drive them out. This is what gentrification has done and what it continues to do today.” -Community leader

The land acknowledgments for West Town and Puerto Rico recognize and respect the Indigenous peoples and the enduring relationships they have with these lands. They introduce the history that is often suppressed and forgotten regarding how people indigenous to Chicago and Puerto Rico were violently colonized, murdered, and displaced by white settlers—the former in the 1800s and the latter in the 1500s. The acknowledgements ask us to consider how Indigenous people and the story of their colonization have shaped these places and influenced their trajectories. They also ask us to be accountable to our past and caution us against repeating or paralleling the past atrocities. Finally, they provide an understanding of who the original stewards of the land were and how they helped shape the identity and culture of the people who live there now.

West Town, Chicago

The land that West Town occupies today was originally inhabited by the Kickapoo people, an Algonquian-speaking tribe that originated in the region south of the Great Lakes (Kenjockey, n.d.). In the early 1800s, the United States government forced the Kickapoo people, along with the Potawatomi, Odawa, Chippewa, Ojibwe, and other nations living in the Chicago area, to sign a series of coercive treaties that forced them to cede their lands (Tanner, n.d.; Dukes, 2017). While some members of the Potawatomi tribe managed to negotiate their right to stay by leveraging their conversion to Catholicism, thousands were forced to leave (Dukes, 2017). The 1833 Treaty of Chicago promised cash payments and land tracts west of the Mississippi—a promise that the United States government never fulfilled (Dukes, 2017). After the removal of Native Americans from the region, there was no Native American presence in Chicago for over a century (Kenjockey, n.d.). Not until the Indian Relocation Act of 1956—a law that defunded reservations and encouraged Native Americans to relocate to urban areas—did Chicago gain back a Native American population (Hautzinger, 2018). According to the American Community Survey, there were approximately 23,000 Native Americans in the Chicago area in 2018, making it the third-largest urban Indian population in the United States (Hautzinger, 2018).

Puerto Rico

The Island of Puerto Rico was originally inhabited by the Taíno, an Arawakan-speaking people that inhabited the islands of the Caribbean (Estevez, 2019). The Taíno called the island “Boriken”—the basis of the words “boricua” and “borinqueño” that Puerto Ricans now use to call themselves and embrace their indigenous identity (Brown, 2002). The naming of Paseo Boricua follows in that tradition. The Taíno were the first Indigenous people that Christopher Columbus encountered when he made landfall on the Bahamas in 1492 (Brockell, 2019). After expecting to find gold and spices, the disappointed Spanish kidnapped and sold thousands of Taínos into slavery as a consolation prize (Estevez, 2019). They kidnapped, enslaved, raped, tortured, and killed millions of Taínos within the first few decades of landing on their shores (Brockell, 2019). Additionally, the Taíno were killed by infectious diseases that the Spanish brought to the Caribbean, among them, smallpox. For centuries historians and ethnographers

have written that the Taíno people were extinct by the mid-1500s (Poole, 2011; Brockell, 2019). However, census records from 1514 show that about 40 percent of Spanish men on the island of Hispaniola (present-day Dominican Republic and Haiti) had Taíno wives (Poole, 2011).

The narrative that the Taínos were exterminated is a centuries-old myth. In 2002, a DNA study revealed that 61 percent of the 800 Puerto Rican study participants had mitochondrial DNA that confirmed Taíno ancestry (Mejías, 2019). In the 2010 U.S. Census, 20,000 Puerto Ricans identified as “American Indian or Alaskan Native,” a substantial increase from 13,336 in 2000 (Poole, 2011). Taíno culture lives on today through not only their living descendants but through the continued use of their symbols, traditions, language, and foods. Words that come from Taíno include *canoa* (canoe), *hamaca* (hammock), *barbacoa* (barbecue), *tobacco* (tobacco), and *huracán* (hurricane) (Poole, 2011). Though the majority of today’s Puerto Rican population has Taíno ancestry, the Puerto Rican government does not officially recognize the Taíno as an Indigenous people (Mejías, 2019). Several groups in Puerto Rico, including the Jíbaro-Boricua Indigenous Movement, continue to advocate for the Puerto Rican government to acknowledge the history of Indigenous people on the island after the fifteenth century and to recognize the Taíno as a living Indigenous tribe (Mejías, 2019). Several murals on Paseo Boricua pay homage to the Taíno roots of Puerto Rican people. *The 79th* mural painted by artist John Vegara is one example (Figure 5).



Figure 5: *The 79th*. 2009. John Vergara. There are 78 municipalities in Puerto Rico that each have their own coat of arms. Paseo Boricua is recognized as the 79th. Three Taíno people are portrayed at the foreground, honoring Puerto Rico's indigenous ethnic group. In the background, the steel flag, Chicago skyline, and the Humboldt Park boathouse represent Paseo Boricua. Photo by author.

Part II: Historical Context

“We are born in a land that belongs to but is not part of the United States. In other words, our homeland is a piece of property where we do not have the right to decide over its destiny. Our struggle is for our right for self-determination, to have a place in the space where we can recreate our culture, organize as a nation, and affirm our identity as Puerto Ricans, on the island, as well as in the diaspora.” - Cristian Roldán, muralist and program director at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center

Self-Determination

Puerto Rico has been an occupied territory for over five-hundred years, since the island’s colonization by Spain in the late fifteenth century. In 1898, Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the United States at the end of the Spanish-American War. To this day, Puerto Rico remains an unincorporated territory of the U.S., making it the oldest colony in the world (Monge, 1999; Hernández, 2019). As a colonized people, Puerto Ricans on both the island and in the diaspora remain oppressed. Puerto Ricans continue to have limited political and economic power by design. The contractual relationship between the U.S. government and the island limits the authority of the Puerto Rican government and their fiscal relationship has made the island economically dependent on the States. The attitudes formed during the early colonial period continue to affect the racist way Puerto Ricans are perceived in the United States: as inferior and subordinate (Padilla, 1987, p. 55). Puerto Ricans are “othered” and not perceived as American, despite the fact that all Puerto Ricans are natural-born American citizens. Only upon arrival to the U.S. do Puerto Ricans gain power through their ability to vote and participate in an economy not oppressed by ongoing colonial exploitation.

Paseo Boricua is thus a unique space where Puerto Rican self-determination and autonomy are realized. Through directed community-building and organizing over the past five decades, Puerto Ricans have gained the power to elect representatives that share their values, to run businesses and organizations on their own terms, and to tell their stories through art and education. Providing the historical context of Puerto Rico’s colonization and exploitation is essential to understanding the meaning and value of Paseo Boricua as a space of self-determination.

The American Colonization of Puerto Rico

The United States' objective of acquiring Puerto Rico in the Spanish-American War was to gain a competitive advantage against European countries by gaining access to a new supply of land, materials, and labor. When the U.S. took control of Puerto Rico in 1898, the island had an agriculture-based economy with 85 percent of its one million people living in rural areas (Padilla, 1987, p. 28). Immediately upon colonization, the U.S. began to take over and transform the local economy. American corporations purchased land from small farmers, developed large plantations, and began to centralize production and manufacturing into urban areas (Padilla, 1987, p. 28). Subsequently, sugar production skyrocketed and profits were driven to American business owners and investors (Cabán, 2018). This overhaul of the island's economy within a mere three decades led to Puerto Rico's "total economic dependence on the United States" (Padilla, 1987, p. 32).

In 1917, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Jones–Shafroth Act, which created a more autonomous government for Puerto Rico while maintaining its status as an unincorporated territory (Akiboh, 2018). The Act created a bill of rights for the territory, instituted a three-branch government system, and declared English as Puerto Rico's official language (Garrett, 2011; "Jones Act", 2011). Most notably, the Act granted American citizenship to all Puerto Ricans born on or after April 11, 1898 ("Jones Act", 2011). In an address to Congress, President Wilson maintained that providing citizenship to Puerto Ricans as opposed to independence was enough to "satisfy the obligations of generous justice towards the people of Porto Rico [sic] by giving them the ample and familiar rights and privileges accorded our own citizens in our own territories" (Wilson & Scott, 1921). Providing American citizenship made it possible for the U.S. to draft tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans into World War I, which the U.S. entered one month after the Jones–Shafroth Act was signed (Franqui-Rivera, 2017; "Puerto Ricans become U.S. citizens, are recruited for war effort", 2019).

While all Puerto Ricans are American citizens, Puerto Ricans on the island still cannot vote in U.S. presidential elections and are not represented by voting members in Congress. Today,

Puerto Ricans on the island elect a governor and their legislators, but the U.S. continues to maintain the power to veto any law passed and stop any action taken by the legislature (“Jones Act”, 2011). All U.S. federal law applies in Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Congress reserves the right to revoke American citizenship by vote (Garrett, 2011; “Puerto Ricans become U.S. citizens, are recruited for war effort”, 2019). In the words of Gordon K. Lewis, a leading scholar of Puerto Rican politics, “the government of Puerto Rico, in effect, governs practically nothing” (Lewis, 1974, p. 14).

As the U.S. continued to centralize the production of sugar, coffee, and tobacco on the island throughout the early twentieth century, the number of agricultural jobs decreased leading to a surplus in labor (Cabán, 2018). Meanwhile, the U.S. economy was booming in the years leading up to the stock market crash, which saw unemployment at a record-low of 3.2 percent (“The Labor Market During the Great Depression and the Current Recession”, 2009). By contrast, in 1929, before the stock market crash, unemployment in Puerto Rico had reached a staggering 36 percent (Cabán, 2018). During the Great Depression, American sugar plantation owners cut wages, prompting thousands of sugar cane workers on the island to go on a series of strikes (Denis, 2015, p. 116). In 1934, leaders of the island-wide workers’ union signed a labor agreement without consulting union members, a move that did little to change wages or improve workers’ rights (Denis, 2015, p. 116).

In the 1930s and 40s, tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans seeking better job opportunities left the island for the United States—migrating primarily to New York City (Cabán, 2018). As American citizens, Puerto Ricans were free to move to the U.S. without the need of a passport or other immigration paperwork. Despite this substantial migration, unemployment rates on the island persisted. The economy developed by the U.S. government and private sector could never sustain an acceptable rate of employment for Puerto Rico’s population (Padilla, 1987, p. 46). In general, Puerto Ricans did not choose to migrate to the U.S. because they wanted to, but because they were forced to by circumstance.

After World War II, the U.S. government pursued two strategies to alleviate unemployment and poverty on the island: industrialization of the Puerto Rican economy and incentivization of mass migration (Padilla, 1987, p. 46-53). The U.S. government worked with the U.S.-appointed Puerto Rican governor and legislature on efforts to transition the distressed agriculture-based economy to one that was industry-based (Cabán, 2018). The series of projects came to be known as *Operación Manos a la Obra* or “Operation Bootstrap.” A key tenet of the strategy was to provide tax exemptions to American corporations who began operating in Puerto Rico (Toro, n.d.). In addition to attracting business to the island with federal tax exemption on profits, the U.S. government also advertised the lower labor costs (Padilla, 1986, p. 46; Toro, n.d.). As a result of these incentives, Operation Bootstrap encouraged a substantial number of American manufacturing businesses to relocate to the island (Toro, n.d.). In 1949, the U.S. Department of Commerce valued manufacturing in Puerto Rico at \$93 million (Ayala & Bernabe, 2009, p. 70). By 1967, the estimated value had increased to \$621 million (Ayala & Bernabe, 2009, p. 70).

In addition to incentivizing American corporations to do business on the island, Operation Bootstrap incentivized the extraction of surplus workers for mainland-based labor. The Puerto Rican Department of Labor advertised mainland-based job opportunities, while the Federal Aviation Administration subsidized flights to American cities. (Padilla, 1987, p. 53). Between 1946 and 1964, nearly half a million Puerto Ricans immigrated to the U.S., primarily to New York City, Philadelphia, and Chicago (Cabán, 2018). According to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, “Puerto Rican migration to the United States was considered one of the greatest peacetime population movements recorded in contemporary history” (Cabán, 2018). The vast out-migration from the island to American cities was and continues to be intentionally architected by the U.S. government.

Puerto Rican Migration to Chicago

The first wave of Puerto Ricans migrated to Chicago in the late 1940s (Padilla, 1987; Betancur and Smith, 2016). The Chicago-based employment firm Castle, Barton, and Associates began recruiting Puerto Rican men to work in non-unionized steel foundries, as well as Puerto Rican

women to serve as domestic workers (Betancur and Smith, 2016, p. 124; Rúa, 2012). The firm recruited employees for companies including the Chicago Hardware Foundry Company and the Inland Steel Company, both of which were experiencing labor shortages (Padilla, 1987, p. 104; Rúa, 2012). The City was also experiencing a shortage of maids, and recruiting firms saw this as an opportunity to take advantage of the Island's cheap labor pool, reducing domestic worker wages to an all-time low (Rúa, 2012). Puerto Rican migration to Chicago coincided with the Second Great Migration of Black Americans from the South, as well as the migration of large numbers of Mexican immigrants from the Southwest (Padilla, 1987, p. 58). All three groups were relegated to the bottom of the labor market to jobs that were low-paying, unsafe, and undesirable to the existing labor force, which was largely made up of European immigrants. Though they expected to save money and ultimately return home to Puerto Rico, these migrants became "trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty, marginal employment, and welfare" that was difficult to escape (Padilla, 1987, p. 68).



Figure 6: Young women recruited as housemaids by employment firm Castle, Barton, and Associates, late 1940s. Photo provided by DePaul University Department of Geography.

Nearly 80,000 Puerto Ricans migrated to Chicago between 1950 and 1970 (U.S. Census Bureau; Paral et al, 2004, p. 23). On top of viewing these migrants as welfare-dependent, Chicagoans associated them with the activities of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party (PNPR). In other words, Puerto Ricans migrants were seen as freeloaders at best and violent terrorists at worst (Rúa, 2012). After the 1954 attack on the U.S. Capitol by PNPR members, in which five members of Congress were wounded, the FBI and the Chicago Police rounded up, questioned, and arrested Puerto Ricans across the city (Rúa, 2012). The perception of Puerto Ricans as racially inferior, resource-draining terrorists laid the foundation for decades of discrimination, harassment, and violence that continues to this day. Part III tells the story of how Puerto Rican Chicagoans have fought this racial discrimination and mistreatment by building a community focused on self-determination, resiliency, and joy.

Part III: The Making of Paseo Boricua

“We needed a place to educate our children because the public education system was failing them. We needed a place to protect our homeless youth. We needed a place to protect our LGBTQ community. The city of Chicago and the state of Illinois failed us miserably in that community, so we fostered health, education, art, entrepreneurship, and pride.” - Former elected official, November 2020 interview

Discrimination and Displacement

While thousands of Puerto Ricans were migrating to Chicago, legislative plans for urban renewal and slum clearance were beginning to take shape. Puerto Rican migrants originally settled into housing near their workplaces, which had been made available and affordable by white flight (Betancur & Smith, 2016, p. 133). These neighborhoods were near the urban core and included Lincoln Park, the Near North Side, and the Near West Side (Padilla, 1987, p. 79-84; Betancur & Smith, 2016, p. 124). For example, the Chicago Hardware Foundry Company, one of the main steel foundries that Puerto Ricans were recruited to, was located just north of downtown (Padilla, 1987, p. 104; Rúa, 2012). Within a decade of their arrival, in the late 1950s, thousands of Puerto Ricans were forced to relocate from two of the areas they had settled in—the Near North and Near West sides—marking the first major displacement of the Puerto Rican community (Padilla, 1987, p. 84). Through family and community networks, most of these Puerto Ricans relocated to Lincoln Park, four miles north of downtown (see Figure 2, p. 7).

By the time they arrived to Lincoln Park, urban renewal was well underway there as well. By the late 1950s, there was an established Puerto Rican enclave located around the intersection of Armitage Avenue and Halsted Street (Padilla, 1987, p. 119; McClelland, 2018). In 1965, the Lincoln Park Conservation Association (LPCA), a powerful neighborhood group, unveiled a General Neighborhood Renewal Plan that detailed demolitions scheduled to take place over the next fifteen years (Padilla, 1987, p. 120). Even though Puerto Ricans only made up seven percent of the community’s residents at the time, the Renewal Plan would demolish 35 percent of the Puerto Rican-occupied homes (Padilla, 1987, p. 120). The areas planned for clearance affected lower-income Lincoln Parkers including not only Puerto Ricans but also Black and Appalachian migrants (Hertz, 2018, p. 88).

This planned removal of Puerto Ricans did not come as a surprise, as the group had been experiencing racist discrimination in Lincoln Park since their arrival. For example, in 1958, the LPCA reported that most landlords listing their properties through the association were requesting “no pets, children, southerners or Puerto Ricans” (Hertz, 2018, p. 76). Landlords had evicted Puerto Rican tenants for not living “within health and safety standards,” and LPCA members had complained that Puerto Rican youth were a “threat to public safety” and “make too much noise at night” (Hertz, 2018, p. 76-79). What distinguishes the Lincoln Park story is that this time, Puerto Ricans fought back.

The Will to Stay Put

The fight to resist displacement in Lincoln Park was led by the Young Lords. Originally a street gang organized to protect Puerto Ricans from the area’s Italian, Polish, and Appalachian gangs, the group transitioned into a civil and human rights organization in 1968 (Hertz, 2018, p. 126; Mortice, 2020). The transition was led by the twenty-year-old activist José “Cha Cha” Jiménez who was inspired to change the group’s mission after learning about the Black Panther Party’s approach to fighting for radical social and political change (Hertz, 2018, p. 126-127; Serrato, 2019). In the face of urban renewal threatening to destroy large swathes of Puerto Rican housing, the Young Lords reprioritized their mission to oppose these plans and to advocate for affordable housing development. As Jiménez grew closer to Fred Hampton, the Chairman of the Illinois Black Panthers, the two organizations formed the original Rainbow Coalition or Poor People’s Army. In a 2019 interview, Jiménez reflected on their alliance: “We were already fighting for our rights in our neighborhoods, and we needed to form a united front. Our mission was self-determination for our barrios and all oppressed nations” (Serrato, 2019).

While there had been some opposition to the urban renewal plans beforehand, the Young Lords Organization (YLO) put up an aggressive fight that the Lincoln Park community had not yet seen. In 1969, the members began attending meetings of the Department of Urban Renewal where they saw for the first time redevelopment plans that included the demolition of their own homes. They responded violently, throwing chairs out of the building’s windows and

one member flipping the table containing a building model (Hertz, 2018, p. 129). In 1969, YLO members interrupted Lincoln Park Conservation Community Council (LPCCC) meetings, led an occupation of the McCormick Theological Seminary demanding the funding of affordable housing, and staged a sit-in at the 18th District Police Station protesting the harassment of the Young Lords (Hertz, 2018, p. 132-139, Serrato, 2019).

Over the course of 1969, the Young Lords were increasingly targeted and harassed by urban renewal officials and the Chicago Police (Hertz, 2018, p. 131; Betancur, 2002, p. 796). For example, after several LPCCC meetings were interrupted, urban renewal officials reasserted their power by hiring one-hundred uniformed police officers to suppress the Young Lords' tactics (Hertz, 2018, p. 139). Throughout 1969, aldermen's offices were bombed, several Young Lord members were killed, and the pastor of the church who was an ally to the YLO was brutally murdered along with his wife (McClelland, 2018). The Chicago police did little to investigate these horrific incidents insisting they had no leads (Hertz, 2018, p. 131, 141).

After years of organizing, protesting, and advocating, the Young Lords amassed some temporary wins, but ultimately lost the battle against urban renewal in Lincoln Park. As a result of their occupation of the McCormick Theological Seminary, Seminary leadership met the YLO's demands by committing \$280,000 (about \$4.2 million in today's dollars) to an affordable housing development project (Hertz, 2018, p. 132; Mortice, 2020). However, the project never came to fruition. As a result of protesting the LPCCC, the Council agreed to put a moratorium on demolitions until previously displaced residents were rehoused (Hertz, 2018, p. 134). However, the moratorium was reversed a few months later and the urban renewal plan continued as it had originally been conceived.

All told, 38,000 people, predominantly Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and poor whites, were displaced from Lincoln Park as a result of urban renewal in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Mortice, 2020). By the early 1970s, the YLO's leader, José "Cha Cha" Jiménez, temporarily fled Chicago and the YLO shifted their priority from housing to health care (Hertz, 2018, p. 150).

With their leadership disbanded, the Young Lords' power and influence quickly subsided. Today, upscale restaurants, cafes, and a juice bar are located at Armitage Avenue and Halsted Street—what used to be the heart of the Puerto Rican community in Lincoln Park. While the young Puerto Rican activists could not stop the gentrification of Lincoln Park, their aggressive tactics and community building efforts laid a foundation for Puerto Rican Chicagoans' solidarity and activism in the decades to come.



Figure 7: Members of the Young Lords with their fists in the air on November 2, 1969. Source: Chicago Tribune Archives.

Staking Ground in West Town

Throughout the 1960s, Puerto Ricans also settled in pockets of West Town, a large neighborhood directly west of Lincoln Park, where housing had been made available by recent white flight. For the first half of the century, Poles, Italians, Russian Jews, and Germans had been the community's dominant ethnic groups and in 1930, West Town's population peaked at 187,000 (U.S. Census Bureau; Schmidt, 2012). Between 1930 and 1960, the community lost nearly 50,000 residents (See Figure 8). In 1960, the community was 98 percent white and by

1990, the white population had shrunk to 51 percent and the Hispanic/Latino population had grown to 62 percent. As a note, the U.S. Census did not include a racial category for Hispanic/Latino until 1970 (Brown, 2020). However, according to the 1984 Chicago Fact Book Consortium, there were 7,948 Puerto Ricans in West Town or about 5.7 percent of the total population by 1960 (Betancur, 2002, p. 810). About 54,000 Hispanics, predominantly of Puerto Ricans descent, migrated to the neighborhood between 1960 and 1990.

| Year | Population | Race/Ethnicity | | | |
|---------------|------------|----------------|---------------------------------|----------|------------|
| | | White alone | Black or African American alone | Hispanic | Other Race |
| 1930 | 187,292 | 99.5% | 0.4% | 0.0% | 0.1% |
| 1960 | 139,657 | 97.7% | 1.7% | 0.0% | 0.6% |
| 1990 | 87,703 | 50.8% | 10.5% | 62.0% | 38.2% |
| 2000 | 87,435 | 58.2% | 9.9% | 46.9% | 31.8% |
| 2010 | 79,284 | 56.7% | 9.1% | 29.2% | 5.0% |
| 2018 Estimate | 84,255 | 62.7% | 7.0% | 22.7% | 7.6% |

Figure 8: West Town Community Area Demographics, 1930-2018. Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey 2018, 5-Year Estimates

In those decades, Puerto Ricans faced the same racism, intimidation, and violence that they had in the communities they had been displaced from before. White residents, community leaders, and elected officials were terrified that the demographic change would lead to decreased property values, increased crime, and the destruction of their voting base (Betancur, 2002, 800-801). Churches, hospitals, and community organizations worried about losing their real estate and patrons (Betancur, 2002, p. 801). The presence of Puerto Ricans was equated to deterioration, disinvestment, and the dissolution of their white community. In theory, Puerto Ricans could have been perceived as a blessing for property owners and local institutions who worried about not being able to replace their tenants and patrons, but widespread racism and classism made this impossible (Betancur, 2002, p. 801). Existing neighborhood associations did

everything they could to encourage white families to stay and prevent Puerto Rican families from moving in. Throughout the 1960s and 70s “there were countless instances of intimidation, harassment, and surveillance directed at the Puerto Rican groups and individuals who were viewed as presenting a fundamental challenge to existing power relationships” in West Town (Padilla, 1987, p. 168). While white residents and real estate developers focused on attracting white families and maintaining property values, Puerto Rican residents focused on building their community up and staking their claim in West Town.

As local churches, businesses, and social services agencies were not welcoming of their new neighbors, Puerto Ricans were forced to create their own set of institutions and organizations to serve the community (Padilla, 1987, p. 162; Betancur, 2002, p. 796-797). In the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, the Puerto Rican community founded several organizations focused on affordable housing development, homeownership education, youth education, and culture. These organizations included Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation, Spanish Coalition for Housing, Hispanic Housing Development Corporation, Latinos United Community Housing Association, the National Boricua Human Rights Network, Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos Puerto Rican High School, and the Puerto Rican Cultural Center. All of these organizations exist today and continue to be committed to their original missions.

As the Puerto Rican population grew, the community became a formidable voting bloc. Despite redistricting that split West Town into four wards, intentionally weakening the voice of Puerto Ricans and other minority groups, Puerto Ricans began running and electing their own representatives in the 1970s and 80s (Betancur, 2002, p. 803; Betancur & Smith, 2016, p. 126). In 1985, Luis Gutiérrez, a close friend and colleague of Chicago’s first Black mayor Harold Washington, was elected alderman of the 26th Ward, where Paseo Boricua would come to be located. Throughout his tenure, Gutiérrez worked closely with his colleagues in City Council, local organizations, and residents to build affordable housing, make infrastructure improvements, rehabilitate first floor retail on Division Street, and expand cultural events in the ward (former elected official interview). In 1992, Gutiérrez became the first Hispanic elected to

the U.S. House of Representatives, representing Illinois District 4, one of the most gerrymandered districts in the country (former elected official interview; “How to rig an election”, 2002). Billy Ocasio, another second-generation Puerto Rican, was appointed to the vacant City Council seat by Mayor Richard M. Daley and took office in 1993.

How the Flags Came to Be

One of the first events Alderman Billy Ocasio held was an all-day community summit to develop a comprehensive quality of life plan for the 26th Ward, which includes parts of both West Town and Humboldt Park. The meeting was held in partnership with the newly formed Puerto Rican Agenda, a coalition of leaders who work together to support and advocate for the Puerto Rican community in Humboldt Park and West Town (former elected official interview). Nearly one thousand people, including community leaders, residents, Mayor Richard M. Daley, and several members of his cabinet participated (former elected official interview; Betancur & Smith, 2016, p. 126). One of the key takeaways from the meeting was the desire to create a physical landmark that would anchor the Puerto Rican community to West Town. After being displaced from the Near West and Near North Sides by urban renewal and gentrification in the 1950s, from Lincoln Park in the 1960s, and feeling displacement pressures once again in West Town, the community wanted to establish some form of permanency.

The idea of a cultural marker also came out of a desire to unify the community. At the time, there was growing political division among community members regarding Puerto Rican independence versus statehood (former elected official interview; local artist interview). Throughout the 1980s, several community members were arrested and charged for their association with the *Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional Puertorriqueña (FALN)* or Armed Forces of National Liberation, a paramilitary organization that, through direct action, advocated for Puerto Rican independence (Rinaldo, 2002, p. 141). These arrests included Oscar López Rivera, the founder of Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation, Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School, and the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, and brother of José López. Community members did not see eye-to-eye regarding the narrative around Oscar López Rivera and the actions of the

FALN (former elected official interview; local artist interview). While not all Puerto Ricans agreed on the complex politics of the island, and still do not, they could be unified by the pride they share for their Puerto Rican identity.

When it came to getting funding and buy-in from the city for the gateway project, community leaders and elected officials in West Town had two things on their side. First, the city had identified cultural placemaking as a strategic priority for economic growth. In 1986, Mayor Harold Washington's administration released the city's first cultural plan. Central to the plan was the idea that culture is vital to the city's economy as it helps attract new businesses, revitalize neighborhoods, and draw tourists to both downtown and the city's neighborhoods. The plan's recommendations included "create a task force to encourage and promote cultural tourism" and "assist and train cultural organizations to develop promotions to targeted tourism markets" ("Chicago Cultural Plan, 1986, p. 12). In 1990, the Puerto Rican population in West Town was at its peak, making the community a prime target for cultural placemaking. Additionally, about 80 of the 120 buildings on Division Street between California Avenue and Western Avenue were owned or occupied by Puerto Rican residents and businesses (former elected official interview; Betancur & Smith, 2016, p. 126). The community was ripe for promoting the city's new vision for cultural tourism.

Second, was that due to a recent incident, the city had betrayed the community's trust and the relatively newly-elected Mayor Richard M. Daley was looking to get it back (former elected official interview). In the early 1990s, then-Alderman Luis Gutiérrez and the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, led by José López, raised funds to erect a statue of Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos in Humboldt Park, a 207-acre park adjacent to what is now Paseo Boricua.

A Note on Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos

Albizu Campos was president of the PNP in the 1930s and had "dedicated his life to the establishment of a free and sovereign Puerto Rico" (Delgado, 1993). Throughout his life of advocacy and activism for Puerto Rican independence, he was arrested and

imprisoned three times: once in 1936 on charges of seditious conspiracy and twice in the 1950s for violating Public Law 53, otherwise known as the Gag Law, which made it a crime to sing, speak, or write about anything regarding Puerto Rican Independence (Ocasio, 1993; Monge, 1999). It was also a crime to own or display the Puerto Rican flag even in one's own home (Denis, 2015, p. 307). The law was enforced for nine years, from 1948 until it was deemed unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1957 (Agrelo, 2020, "The Puerto Rican Flag's Evolving Colors"). Despite the law's demise in 1957, Albizu Campos remained in federal prison until 1964 (Denis, 2015, p. 247-251). He died shortly after he was pardoned at the age of seventy-three and is recognized as a martyr for the Puerto Rican Nationalist Movement.

According to former Aldermen Luis Gutiérrez and Billy Ocasio, the Chicago Park District had given them permission to move forward with the Albizu Campos statue. They even recast the bust to meet Park District requirements (former elected official interview; local artist interview). However, when the statue was ultimately ready, the Park District rescinded their decision, citing that Albizu Campos was too controversial of a figure to be honored in a public park. The issue turned into a city-wide debate and the Puerto Rican Cultural Center led weeks of protests in Humboldt Park and at the Chicago Park District headquarters. People opposed to the statue did not think it was appropriate for the park to honor a person who "inspired violence" and conspired to "overthrow the U.S. government" ("Reject This Humboldt's Gift", 1993). Proponents of the statue argued that the community's selection of Albizu Campos should be honored and that Chicago has a long history of allowing European ethnic groups to honor their heroes within the parks (Delgado, 1993).

At the end of the day, the community leaders and elected officials, still livid, resigned to putting the statue in a different location. The Puerto Rican Cultural Center purchased a vacant lot on Division Street and, with the support of city funds and the expertise of Architresures, a local arts non-profit, transformed the lot into a landscaped garden with a 1940s-style Puerto Rican home, benches, and a space for performances (Rinaldo, 2002, p. 149). The space was named *La*

Casita de Don Pedro y Doña Lolita (Mr. Pedro's and Ms. Lolita's Little House) and opened in 1998 with the six-foot, seven-inch 600-pound bronze statue of Albizu Campos standing at the center (Rinaldo, 2002, p. 149). *La Casita* also honors Puerto Rican Nationalist Lolita Lebrón, who was imprisoned for leading the insurrection against the U.S. Capitol in 1954 that sought to draw attention to the cause for Puerto Rican Independence. Today, *La Casita* hosts many events and activities that teach and celebrate Puerto Rican art, music, and history.



Figure 9: *La Casita de Don Pedro y Doña Lolita* (The Little of House of the Honorable Pedro and Lolita). 1997. The bronze statue honors Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos. The murals on the little house honor Oscar López Rivera. Located at 2625 W. Division Street. Photo by Anna Munzesheimer.

Twenty-seven years after the city refused to put the statue in Humboldt Park, the anger over the issue is still palpable.

“He [Mayor Richard M. Daley] offered me everything but the statue—money for the election, jobs, but he wouldn’t give me the statue.” -Former elected official interview

*“When the city wouldn’t let us put the statue of Campos in the park, we bought the f***ing lot and put it there.”* -Former elected official interview

When the idea for creating two Puerto Rican flags as gateways to the community arose, the mayor put his full support behind it, eager to rebuild trust with the Puerto Rican community (former elected official interview; local artist interview). In 1994, Mayor Richard M. Daley agreed to foot the \$450,000 bill for the flags as part of a \$1.2 million investment in the Division Street corridor. Alderman Billy Ocasio leveraged his position to get the project done quickly and by January 6, 1995, Three Kings Day, the flags were installed. The location of the flags was determined by the high density of Puerto Rican businesses, organizations, and residents on Division Street. The western flag is located at Mozart Street (2834 West Division Street) and the eastern flag is at Artesian Avenue (2428 West Division Street). In exchange for the flags, Alderman Ocasio committed to rallying the community to vote for Mayor Daley in the 1995 election (Betancur & Smith, 2016, 2002). Mayor Daley won his third election that year in a landslide victory and went on to serve for a total of twenty-two years, from 1989 to 2011, the longest tenure in Chicago's mayoral history.



Figure 10: The 59-foot steel flag located at Division Street and Artesian Avenue is installed, marking Paseo Boricua. January 6, 1995. Photo by the Puerto Rican Cultural Center.

“I think that was the real result of those flags—the fact that young people at Clemente [High School] were now looking into their identity and celebrating who they were and not being ashamed of their identity or where they came from. Humboldt Park wasn’t considered a great place. And it still has problems but it brought a sense of ownership and responsibility and pride to our people.” - Former Elected Official

The flags are striking in their size and height—they weigh nearly fifty tons each, are fifty-six feet across, fifty-nine feet tall, and are anchored thirty feet into the ground. They soar above Division Street and are the largest flag sculptures in the world (García, 2018, “Building a Self-Determination Gateway”). Since their installation, they have won seven architectural awards including “Building of the Year” by the American Institute of Architecture (García, 2018, “Building a Self-Determination Gateway”). While the steelwork of the flag looks delicate, lead designer Edward Windhorst stated that they are “built solidly enough to last for five-hundred years” (Newman, 1995). Using a computer program, they were designed to be safe, stable, and strong enough to withstand the whipping Chicago winds. The use of steel as the flags’ main material pays homage to the Puerto Ricans who migrated to Chicago to work in the steel foundries in the 1940s and 1950s. As Eduardo Arocho, the former Executive Director of the Division Street Business Development Association stated in an interview: “Those flags are permanent monuments that belong to the city of Chicago. The unique history is specific to Puerto Ricans in the Chicago area, not New York. The flags are made to last five-hundred years, perhaps longer than Chicago itself, and most definitely longer than any of us will be around” (García, 2018, p. 132).

The flags are steeped with meaning for the Puerto Rican community. After decades of being displaced from surrounding neighborhoods, the flags represent a permanent anchor for Puerto Ricans in West Town. The flag is also a symbol of resistance. In 1948, Public Law 53 made it illegal for Puerto Ricans to display the flag, even within their own homes (Denis, 2015 p. 307; Agrelo, 2020). As author Nelson Denis writes, “the suppression of a basic human symbol—the flag of one’s own homeland—has created a special affection for the Puerto Rican flag” (Denis, 2015, p. 307). When Mayor Daley arrived at the scene on January 6, 1995, he got out of his car

and said to Alderman Billy Ocasio: “You told me you wanted to create flags, but you never told me how big of flags they would be” (elected official interview).

“On my block, you know where the Puerto Ricans are because everybody has their flag outside. It’s just such a unique thing to our culture.” - Joshua Smyser-DeLeon, Paseo Podcast host

In addition to the two flags, the \$1.2 million redevelopment included painting fifty light posts black, fitting them with nineteenth-century style lighting, and adding laser-etched wrought iron banners that portray Taino, Spanish, and West African imagery (Hagedorn, 2014, p. 245). Sixteen *plazitas*, or little plazas, were added to the streetscape that include wrought-iron benches, concrete tables, and attractive landscaping (Flores-Gonzalez, 2001, p. 16). The city installed a “Walk of Fame” that consists of fifteen bronze medallions along the corridor that pay tribute to Puerto Rican artists and leaders. The funding also went to facade improvements in order to make buildings resemble Old San Juan colonial buildings with their wrought iron fences and bright colored paint.

Once the flags were installed, organizations including the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and the Division Street Business Development Association (DSBDA) joined forces to encourage Puerto Rican restaurants, businesses, and nonprofits to locate along the strip. In 2000, the DSBDA partnered with the University of Illinois Chicago Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy to conduct a feasibility study for the creation of a Puerto Rican restaurant and entertainment district (community leader interview). “We interviewed about one hundred people, mainly white people, asked if they would be interested in this, and they said yes” (community leader interview). Today, the corridor has eight Puerto Rican restaurants and seven cultural institutions including UrbanTheater Chicago, the AfriCaribe Cultural Center, and the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture.

Paseo Boricua is unique from a typical commercial corridor due to the density of nonprofits and social service agencies, many of which were founded in the 1970s during the community’s early

efforts to stake their ground in West Town. The Puerto Rican Cultural Center alone operates out of at least six spaces along the corridor including *VIDA/SIDA*, a clinic that provides HIV prevention services, *El Rescate*, a shelter for homeless LGBTQ youth, and the Diabetes Empowerment Center which provides exercise classes and nutritional counseling. As of 2018, about one-third of the commercial space on Paseo Boricua was occupied by nonprofit organizations and is therefore non-commodified space (García, 2019, p. 130). Sustaining social service agencies that cater to the Puerto Rican community's needs continues to be a strategy for preservation.

Part IV: Preserving Paseo Boricua

“We bought a house in Belmont Cragin. As much as I wanted to invest in and live in Humboldt Park, we couldn’t afford it.” -Community leader, November 2020 interview

Neighborhood Change

Chicago’s northwest side has undergone significant gentrification and demographic change in the past two decades. Between 2000 and 2018, West Town lost nearly 22,000 Latino residents, the majority of whom were Puerto Rican (U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey 2018, 5-Year Estimates). Between 2000 and 2018, Logan Square, the community that borders West Town to the north, lost 16,000 Latino residents (U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey 2018, 5-Year Estimates; Cintrón et al, 2012, p. 29; Ramos, “Traditional Hispanic enclaves lose residents”, 2019). During the same time period, West Town gained 2,000 white residents and Logan Square gained 13,000 white residents (U.S. Census; American Community Survey 2018, 5-Year Estimates). In a 2002 journal article, sociologist Rachel Rinaldo described the change taking place on Division Street on the blocks directly west of Paseo Boricua:

“Once a lonely stretch with just a few bars and bodegas, populated by a mixture of Eastern Europeans, Puerto Ricans, students, and artists, the strip of Division between Ashland and Western is now home to white students and professionals. On the leafy side streets, teardowns are supplanting older houses with cheaply built, multi-story condos. Expensive restaurants and stores have sprung up—they draw mostly white crowds—while smaller, usually Latino-owned businesses have closed. Division Street’s transformation became complete when Chicago Magazine, the arbiter of middle-class taste in the city, anointed it the next hot restaurant row” (Rinaldo, 2002, p. 46).

Along with rising rents, home prices, and luxury amenities, the northwest side has become a “zone of affluence” due in part to its proximity to public transit, the Kennedy Expressway, and downtown (Ramos, “Traditional Hispanic enclaves lose residents”, 2019). According to Rob Paral, a demographic and public policy consultant, “Hispanics have essentially been getting priced out of the zone of affluence. The pressure of housing costs is what is driving the displacement, and the story is they are now moving more southwest and further northwest”

(Ramos, “Traditional Hispanic enclaves lose residents”, 2019). Communities that have gained substantial numbers of Latino residents include Belmont Cragin and Portage Park, two communities northwest of Paseo Boricua and West Town (Cintrón et al, 2012, p. 29). These communities have more affordable housing but lower quality schools, higher crime rates, and worse access to public transit in comparison to West Town and Logan Square (Ramos, “Traditional Hispanic enclaves lose residents”, 2019).

One example of a development that has led to significant neighborhood change is the Bloomingdale Trail, a vacant railroad that was converted to an elevated trail in 2015, located less than one mile north of Paseo Boricua. The project development, also known as “the 606” has dramatically increased housing costs, increased the rate of new construction condos in the area, and increased the risk of displacement for lower-income residents within one half-mile of the trail (“Displacement Pressures in Context”, 2020). According to analysis conducted by the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University, the median price for a one to four-unit residential building rose from \$97,000 in 2012 to \$462,000 in 2018. By comparison, the city’s median price for these residential buildings rose from \$136,000 in 2012 to 222,000 in 2018 (“Displacement Pressure in Context: Examining Recent Housing Market Changes Near The 606”, 2020).

In January 2020, Aldermen Roberto Maldonado (26th Ward) and Carlos Ramirez-Rosa (35th Ward) proposed a fourteen-month moratorium on building permits, demolition permits, and zoning changes in the effort to take time to understand how to slow the displacement of lower-income residents who are predominantly African American and Latino (Ori, 2020). City commissioners approved a six-month ban on demolition permits along the western portion of the trail that was effective from February 1 to August 1, 2020 (Bloom, Cerone & Alani, 2020). While this action provided an opportunity to examine the issue, the challenge of rising housing costs remains.

Preservation Strategies

Today, West Town and the adjacent communities are home to 50,000 Puerto Ricans. As of 2018, the eight census tracts that immediately surround Paseo Boricua are 35 percent Hispanic and 18 percent Puerto Rican (American Community Survey 2018, 5-Year Estimates). By comparison, the city of Chicago is 30 percent Hispanic and 4 percent Puerto Rican. For decades, community leaders have worked to maintain the Puerto Rican population of West Town through community organizing, affordable housing development, and investments in arts and culture. While many of the people I interviewed share the attitude that gentrification is “unstoppable”, they acknowledged that steps can be taken to slow down or mitigate displacement. Several reflected on how the concentration of efforts *bandera a bandera* (flag to flag) makes the task seem more tangible and manageable. In an interview, one former elected official reflected: “The economic forces are inevitable. But here are the two flags and we are going to do everything we can to own everything between them.” This section examines these efforts and discusses the ways in which they must evolve in order to continue to preserve the area’s Puerto Rican population and cultural vibrancy.

Community Organizing

From an outsider's perspective, Paseo Boricua has been remarkably well organized since its inception. The Puerto Rican Agenda (PRA), founded in 1991, is a coalition of over thirty nonprofit organizations committed to the self-determination of Puerto Ricans in Chicago, throughout the diaspora, and in Puerto Rico through policy and advocacy. The meetings are open to the public and about fifty people attend each month. For decades, José López has been the coalition’s most prominent leader and activist. In my interviews, people referred to López as the “principal architect of Paseo Boricua,” a “driving force for everything that has happened here,” and most commonly, “my mentor.” At the age of seventy-one, he is the Executive Director of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and remains extremely active. While he has been criticized for not fostering the next generation of leaders (Fishman, 2014), data collected from my twenty-one interviews proves otherwise. He has served as an advisor to all three aldermen of the 26th Ward, mentored countless activists, and has raised funds to support artists,

business owners, and schools in the community. The proof is also in the current leadership of the PRA. Two young individuals co-chair the PRA, Cristina Pacione-Zayas, Associate Vice President of Policy at the Erikson Institute and Jessie L. Fuentes, Dean of Student Affairs at Albizu Campos High School. Both are lifelong residents of Chicago, longtime community organizers, and mentees of José López (Smyser-DeLeon, 2019, 2020, “Episode 4”, “Episode 19”).



Figure 11: From left: Cristina Pacione-Zayas, Co-Chair of the Puerto Rican Agenda; José López, Executive Director of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center; Jesús "Chuy" García, U.S. Representative for the Illinois 4th Congressional District; Jessie Fuentes, Co-Chair of the Puerto Rican Agenda. Photo by Jesús "Chuy" García.

The PRA’s approach to community development and preservation is comprehensive. They organize and advance their work plans through five committees: Arts and Culture, Education, Health and Wellness, Policy and Public Affairs, and Housing. The coalition often commissions studies to inform their decision making. For example, in 2012, the PRA developed a report in partnership with local universities and nonprofits called “60 Years of Migration: Puerto Ricans in Chicagoland” (Cintrón et al, 2012). The report was funded by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation and the Chicago Community Trust and includes significant quantitative research around issues including housing, health, youth development, and economic development. For

example, the economic development section includes an analysis of Puerto Rican labor force participation and a market analysis that quantifies the spending power of residents. At the time, they identified an unmet need for several retail categories including clothes, footwear, and entertainment. In addition to this analysis, the study recommended developing relationships with local financial institutions “rooted in a commitment to using creative methods for evaluating loans to borrowers with unconventional credit histories” (Cintrón et al, 2012, p 36). This is just one of many examples of how the PRA uses research to advance its mission.

Another important facet of community organizing on Paseo Boricua is the role of local politics. Since 1985, the 26th Ward, where Paseo Boricua is located, has been represented by progressive, pro-independence Puerto Rican aldermen. All three aldermen—Luis Gutiérrez, Billy Ocasio, and Roberto Maldonado—have used their power to further the mission of Puerto Rican self-determination and have implemented strategies to mitigate gentrification. Luis Gutiérrez, a community activist and advisor to Chicago’s first Black mayor Harold Washington, was first elected to the position in 1985. As alderman, he focused his efforts on local economic development, the construction of affordable housing, and “cleaning up the ward” (former elected official interview). In City Council, he led the Latino Caucus and was described as a “council workhorse” (Fremon, 1988). When Gutiérrez was elected to U.S. Congress in 1993, Mayor Richard M. Daley appointed Billy Ocasio, a life-long resident of Humboldt Park, to replace him as alderman.

Born and raised in Humboldt Park, Billy Ocasio was an active community leader who worked with organizations including Puerto Ricans Organized for Chicago, ASPIRA Inc., and Latin United Community Housing Association (LUCHA) before becoming alderman in 1993 (Rice, 2014; interview). As described in Part III, Ocasio was instrumental in the creation of Paseo Boricua. After the flags were installed in 1995, Ocasio focused his efforts on providing tax incentives, forgivable loans, and facade improvement grants to small businesses between the two flags (former elected official interview). He oversaw the use of the \$1.2 million investment in the

Division Street corridor which included the installation of the bronze medallions honoring famous Puerto Ricans, the banners on light poles, decorative garbage cans, and even vintage payphones brought in from Puerto Rico (former elected official interview). He advocated for the construction of a new library, vocational center, the renovation of the Humboldt Park Boathouse, and used his authority as alderman to downzone several parcels to prevent the development of luxury condos (Hinz, 1999; Eng, 2004; Rice, 2014; former elected official interview). In the early 2000s, he raised funds to rehabilitate and convert the nineteenth-century Humboldt Park stables into what is today the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture (NMPRAC) (Almada, 2006). Today, NMPRAC is the only self-standing museum devoted to showcasing Puerto Rican arts and culture in the U.S. Billy Ocasio serves as President and Chief Executive Officer.

In 2009, Alderman Ocasio was tapped to become a senior advisor to Illinois Governor Pat Quinn and Roberto Maldonado was appointed to his seat. Maldonado had served as the Cook County Commissioner for fifteen years and was a close ally of former alderman Luis Gutiérrez (Joravsky, 2009). As alderman, Maldonado's primary focus has been the development and preservation of affordable housing (Morell, 2019; elected official interview). Since becoming alderman, 221 units of affordable housing have been built in the ward and 515 units are currently in the pre-development process (Bloom, 2019, "Maldonado Touts Affordable Housing Wins At Forum"; elected official interview). In 2018, Maldonado introduced a plan to incentivize low- and moderate-income homeowners to stay in the community by offering forgivable home improvement loans ("Gentrification pushback", 2018). The \$1 million pilot was approved and ran for two years, from 2018 to 2020, and provided loans of up to \$25,000 that are forgivable as long as homeowners stay in their residences for another five years ("Gentrification pushback", 2018). Additionally, Maldonado is known for his aggressive rejection of zoning change requests that do not include affordable housing units ("Alderman wants to downzone properties", 2019; elected official interview). Maldonado is an outspoken member of City Council, often butting heads with Mayor Lori Lightfoot on issues such as zoning, crime, and

budgeting. In 2019, he was elected chairman of the Latino Caucus, marking a progressive shift in the thirteen-member group (Morell, 2019).



Figure 12: A celebration of Oscar López Rivera’s (center) return to Humboldt Park after serving thirty-six years in federal prison. He was joined by former 26th Ward Alderman and U.S. Representative Luis Gutiérrez (far left), his brother José López (left), and current 26th Ward Roberto Maldonado (right) for a parade down Division Street in May 2017. Photo by Ashlee Rezin/Sun-Times.

In addition to these three aldermen, Puerto Rican Chicagoans have been elected to several other local, state, and federal positions. For example, Iris Martinez and Omar Aquino currently serve in the Illinois State Senate, Delia Ramirez serves in the Illinois State House, and Luis Arroyo Jr. serves on the Cook County Board of Commissioners. In 2018, Jesús "Chuy" García was elected to the U.S. House, replacing Representative Luis Gutiérrez after his retirement and representing Illinois’ 4th Congressional District, where Paseo Boricua is located. Nicknamed “ earmuffs” due to the way the map was drawn, the district includes both of Chicago's Hispanic enclaves—the predominantly Puerto Rican enclave on the northwest side as well as the predominantly Mexican enclave on the southwest side (former elected official interview; “How to rig an election”, 2002). García is Mexican-American and has been a leader of progressive politics in Chicago for decades, working closely with Puerto Rican and Hispanic coalitions since

his days in City Council in the 1980s. The representation of Puerto Ricans in positions of power has been instrumental in the creation and preservation of Paseo Boricua.

In 2018, City Council adopted a resolution sponsored by Alderman Maldonado that called for Paseo Boricua to be extended and renamed “Puerto Rico Town” (Ramos, 2019, “Efforts for ‘special purpose’ designation”). The resolution proposes that the district be extended from California Avenue to Grand Avenue, doubling the length of the corridor from .7 to 1.6 miles (Ramos, 2019, “Efforts for ‘special purpose’ designation”). While the resolution on the city level is purely symbolic, it calls for a state mandate that would officially designate the corridor as a “Special Purpose District” that would establish a “Cultural Sanctuary” (“City Council Adopts Ald. Maldonado’s Resolution”, 2018). According to the resolution, the Special Purpose District would “allow for a process to involve the community in the prioritization and allocation of investments in existing and new businesses, art and culture that both preserves the community’s unique identity and creates jobs and a strong economy” (“Call for honorary designation of Chicago's Paseo Boricua”, 2018). While the state mandate has not passed, it is a chief priority of the Puerto Rican Agenda and the Puerto Rican representatives in the State Assembly (Smyser-DeLeon, 2020, “Episode 18”).

Affordable Housing Development

West Town has an impressive and storied affordable housing development history. Three organizations, Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation, Hispanic Housing Development Corporation, and LUCHA are all dedicated to developing affordable housing for the Latino community on the northwest side. All three are members of the Puerto Rican Agenda and often support each other on their projects. Together, they develop and manage thousands of units on and near Paseo Boricua.

Bickerdike was founded in 1967 as a direct response to the displacement and violence that Puerto Ricans were facing and got their start building ninety single-family homes to stabilize the community (García et al, 2019, p. 9; community leader interview). In the 1980s, Bickerdike

transitioned to redeveloping and constructing affordable rental housing and today manages 1,094 rental units, the majority of which are located in Humboldt Park and West Town. In 2007, Bickerdike completed the construction of *La Estancia*, which translates to “The Stay”, an affordable development with fifty-seven units that anchors the west entrance of Paseo Boricua. The development’s name is a nod to the community’s decades-long fight to stay put in West Town. In the late 1990s, a private developer had purchased the vacant lot and Bickerdike worked with Alderman Billy Ocasio to prevent the planned development and negotiate a sale (Finkel, 2005; former elected official interview; community leader interview). The \$17 million project was financed through Low Income Housing Tax Credits and Tax Increment Financing. *La Estancia* was Bickerdike’s first mixed-use development project and includes 12,000 square feet of retail and community space on the first floor. Today, that first-floor space is occupied not by a for-profit business, but rather by the Diabetes Empowerment Center and Pedro Albizu Campos High School offices.



Figure 13: Bickerdike’s *La Estancia* Apartments featuring an Old San Juan colonial-style turret and arches on the first floor. Construction was completed in 2007. Photo by LISEC Architects.

One of the affordable housing developments in the works on Paseo Boricua is the Nancy Franco Maldonado Paseo Boricua Arts Building. Named for Alderman Roberto Maldonado’s late wife, the mixed-use building will provide twenty-four affordable units with commercial space and a

theater on the ground floor. The development will replace four buildings that have been vacant since 2005 and become the new home of the UrbanTheater Company, a multicultural theater company currently located in a small space on Paseo Boricua. The live/work housing will be targeted to artists and their families who earn 30 to 60 percent of the area median income (“Humboldt Park Commercial TIF”, 2018). In June 2019, City Council approved \$4.2 million in Tax Increment Financing, a \$4.2 million multi-family loan, and \$261,000 in low income housing tax credits to support the project (Koziarz, 2019). In November 2020, Mayor Lori Lightfoot issued an ordinance allocating an additional \$6 million in tax-exempt housing bonds to the project (Bloom, 2020). The architectural design of the building includes arches on the first floor, a white facade, and balconies—all nods to Old San Juan colonial-style buildings.



Figure 14: Rendering of the proposed Nancy Franco Maldonado Paseo Boricua Arts Building. Image by UrbanWorks Architects.

In June 2018, members of the Puerto Rican Agenda came together for a day-long event to align on key strategies for strengthening the Puerto Rican and Latino presence in Chicago. In a report prepared by Professor Ivis García and students from the University of Utah, the PRA identified key policies and outlined strategies for working towards them. The policy recommendations included increasing inclusionary zoning requirements, creating communal forms of ownership through worker coops or a Community Land Trust, improving distribution of Chicago Housing Authority resources, and continuing to target special populations such as seniors, youth,

veterans, and artists for housing development projects. While a constant challenge in the face of gentrification pressures, community leaders and elected officials are well-positioned to work together towards these housing-related goals.

Cultural Placemaking

A hallmark of Paseo Boricua are the many murals, symbols, and cultural markers that line the corridor. For decades, community residents and leaders have used cultural placemaking to not only celebrate Puerto Rican identity but also as a strategy to stake their claim in West Town. Events celebrating Puerto Rican culture take place throughout the year, including *Día de los Reyes Magos* (Three Kings Day) festival in January, the Puerto Rican People's Parade in June, and *Fiesta Boricua* in August. Even in the midst of a global pandemic, Paseo Boricua is dedicated to celebrating its traditional annual events and holidays. For example, the 42nd Annual Puerto Rican People's Day Parade was celebrated virtually in June and the annual Three Kings Day events were held in a socially distanced manner. Through the community's ongoing commitment to cultural placemaking, Paseo Boricua is clearly defined as a Puerto Rican space.



Figure 15: From left: Victor Garcia, Raymond Souchet, and Javier Carrasquillo dressed as *Los Reyes Magos* (The Three Kings) distribute one thousand gifts to children on January 6, 2021. Photo by John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune.

Cultural placemaking is defined by creating and expanding arts and cultural infrastructure in a place to keep the place from disappearing culturally (Feng & Owen, 2019). By drawing on the cultural and social identities that define a place, placemaking strengthens connections between people and the places they share (Silberberg et al, 2013; “What Is Placemaking?”, 2007). Cultural placemaking celebrates the identity and history of the people who live in a place, often highlighting themes of diversity, democracy, and the struggle for social justice (Redaelli & Flood, 2016). Highlighting a community’s culture both visually and experientially helps build community identity, collective power, and trust through increased social interaction (Silberberg et al, 2013). As cultural placemaking is context-specific, the efforts can prevent the homogenous aesthetic of modern-day housing and commercial development (Bedoya, 2014). When cultural placemaking is community-led, the public art, events, and other efforts define a community’s identity on their own terms. Permanent projects and developments, such as the creation of plazas or large art installations, help communities stake their ground in a place. The two steel flags are the ultimate symbol of cultural permanency.

Through cultural placemaking, residents are invited to share their ideas regarding how a place could improve their quality of life. The hallmarks of placemaking are that it is people-centered, community-driven, and context-specific (“What Is Placemaking?”, 2007). In order for a placemaking effort to succeed at bringing people together and improving quality of life, it must be led and informed by the people who live and spend time near the place. For this reason, cultural placemaking is distinct from the branding efforts that private developers and corporations implement to make a place attractive. At its core, placemaking is about returning public space to people (Silberberg et al, 2013). On Paseo Boricua, several cultural institutions as well as the PRA facilitate collective cultural planning and placemaking.

A Note on Word Choice

There has been a long-standing debate around the nomenclature and concept of placemaking. Some argue that the word implies that a place is not “made” and that it is in need of transformation (Vey & Love, 2019; Redaelli & Flood, 2016). The conception of

placemaking in and of itself degrades the value of an existing place. Others say that a place is never “made” and that placemaking is about community residents activating and maintaining their spaces in the way they fit (Silberberg et al, 2013). Some prefer the term “placekeeping” to emphasize the importance of pairing displacement prevention efforts with public space activation (Feng & Owen, 2019). I prefer the term “placemaking” because, from my perspective, the making of a place is never finished. Communities are constantly changing, evolving, growing, or shrinking. For that same reason, “placekeeping” is not fully possible. There are powerful social, political, and economic forces that individual communities cannot overcome. For this reason, I argue that places can be “made” but cannot be “kept.” It is crucial for communities engaging in cultural placemaking to be acutely aware of the external forces that impact their space and to develop a comprehensive strategy to prevent the potential negative impacts of their efforts.

On Paseo Boricua, the placemaking is visibly and vehemently political. As prominent muralist Cristian Roldán described: “Art’s capacity to encode a whole narrative in a visual image serves as an accessible platform for marginalized communities to use their own voice to speak about the issues that matter to them at the same time that they politicize the public space” (personal correspondence). There are prominent murals of Puerto Rican activists including Oscar López Rivera, Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos, and Lolita Lebrón, among others. These political figures are not just activists, but a symbol of the struggle against American colonialism and imperialism. Of the over sixty murals on the corridor, many invoke the history of Puerto Rico’s colonization, genocide, and exploitation as well as the discrimination, violence, and oppression that Puerto Ricans in Chicago continue to face today. The figures below provide a few examples.

One of the community’s earliest murals, *La Crucifixión de Don Pedro Albizu Campos* depicts Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos crucified in the center alongside Puerto Rican Nationalists Lolita Lebrón and Rafael Cancel Miranda. Across the top are six independence leaders from the nineteenth century including Ramón E. Betances, the father of the Puerto Rican Independence Movement and instigator of *El Grito de Lares* (The Cry of Lares). *El Grito de Lares* took place in the town of Lares, Puerto Rico in 1868 and was the first major revolt against Spanish rule on the island. The background of the mural is the Revolutionary Flag of Lares, the original Puerto Rican independence flag (Agrelo, 2020, “The Puerto Rican Flag’s Evolving Colors”). In 2003, the mural was almost lost when a developer planned to build a condominium on the adjacent lot. After eight years of advocacy and fundraising, the mural was saved and restored by Humboldt Park artist John Vergara in 2011 (Mitchell, 2011). The story of this mural and its restoration represents the confluence between the anti-colonial struggle for independence on the island and the anti-gentrification struggle for community preservation in Chicago.



Figure 16: *La Crucifixión de Don Pedro Albizu Campos* (The Crucifixion of Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos). 1971. Mario Galan, José Bermudez, and Hector Rosario. Located at 2425 West North Ave. Photo by Max Herman.

In 2016, the Puerto Rican Cultural Center commissioned Cristian Roldán to paint a mural commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the 1966 Division Street Riot. *Repression, Resistance, and Resilience* is divided into five sections that tell the story of Puerto Rican's history, beginning with the colonization of the indigenous Taíno people and ending with the 1966 riot that was sparked by a police officer shooting a young Puerto Rican man named Arcelis Cruz (Padilla, 1987, p. 145; Ramos, "Humboldt Park's murals help Puerto Ricans", 2019). The mural was informed by online research as well as interviews with community elders and leaders (Roldán, personal correspondence). Artist Cristian Roldán wanted the piece to "acknowledge that the history of colonial repression of the Puerto Rico people is an issue not only limited to a place (the diaspora or the mainland), but as a socio-political problem that foment intergenerational trauma." The mural was funded with support from the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and its design and execution was a collective community effort (Roldán, personal correspondence).



Figure 17: One section of *Repression, Resistance, and Resilience*. 2016. Cristian Roldán and community volunteers. Located at 2700 West Division Street. Photo by Manny Ramos/Sun-Times.

In 2017, artist Sam Kirk spearheaded a project called *Las Puertas del Paseo Boricua* (The Doors of Paseo Boricua) that brought sixteen new murals to the corridor. The project was funded by the Chicago Cultural Center’s Year of Public Art (2017), the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, the Puerto Rican Culture Center, the Division Street Business Development Association, and 26th Ward Alderman Roberto Maldonado (Kirk, 2017). The thirteen artists, representing Puerto Rico, Mexico, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Ecuador, created sixteen murals that “celebrate our cultures, reflect on obstacles we’ve overcome, current political challenges, and the unity and integration that we want to see more often and in our future” (Kirk, 2017). Kirk intentionally selected doors on buildings with long-time owners who are committed to staying in the neighborhood indefinitely to make sure the works of art are preserved (local artist interview). Kirk was extremely intentional about the selection of the artists, making sure there was diversity in gender, age, and background (Kirk, 2017; local artist interview). Alderman Maldonado provided financial support that “tripled the original ask” making it possible for the artists to be compensated fairly (Kirk, 2017). This project represents one example of the community’s commitment to investing in cultural placemaking between the two flags.



Figure 18: Four of the sixteen doors that make up *Las Puertas del Paseo Boricua* (The Doors of Paseo Boricua). From left: Artwork by Cristian Roldán, Sam Kirk, Reynaldo GuAracibo Rodriguez, and Cristian Roldán. Photos by Sam Kirk.

This mural, entitled *Oscar, somos la marejada de la liberación*, was painted to commemorate Oscar López Rivera's release from federal prison in 2017. Throughout the 1970s, Oscar López Rivera was a prominent leader and activist in Chicago, founding several organizations alongside his brother, José López. In 1981, López Rivera was convicted of seditious conspiracy due to his affiliation with the paramilitary group *Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional* (Armed Forces of National Liberation) and was sentenced to fifty-five years in federal prison. In 2017, his sentence was commuted by President Barack Obama and he returned to live with his family in Puerto Rico. Having served thirty-six years, he is one of the world's longest-held political prisoners and is one of the most depicted political figures on Paseo Boricua (Kendall, 2017). The mural depicts López Rivera writing a letter to his granddaughter from prison. The sea represents the need for a tidal wave of activism to abolish prisons (Vázquez, 2018). Paseo Boricua provides a space for Puerto Ricans to honor the commitment and sacrifice that López Rivera and many others have made to the anti-colonial struggle.



Figure 19: *Oscar, somos la marejada de la liberación* (*Oscar, we are the groundswell of liberation*). 2018. Designed by Osvaldo Budet Melendez, illustrated by José “Primo” Hernández, painted by Osvaldo Budet, José “Primo” Hernández, Estefania Rivera, and Xavier Arzola. Photo by Manny Ramos/Sun-Times.

Paseo Boricua has one of the largest concentrations of public art in the city of Chicago. The assertive expression of Puerto Rican identity and history politicizes the space in a way that declares ownership. As one walks down the corridor, the Puertoricanness of the space is undeniable—the outcome of decades of intentional and collective cultural placemaking. Manny Ramos, a Puerto Rican journalist with the Chicago Sun-Times, reflected on this topic on the Paseo Podcast, a project of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center: “Humboldt Park’s murals are unique in the way they are politically driven. Not just what’s happening locally, but what’s happening on the island. They provide a commentary on everything from the diaspora to everything that’s happening here and abroad. We’re talking about our freedom fighters and what it’s like to be colonial status, one hundred plus years later” (Smyser-DeLeon, 2019, “Episode 9”). Paseo Boricua provides an example of how communities can use cultural placemaking to support the effort of staying put in every-changing cities.

Part V: Conclusion

“When languages become extinct, when animals become extinct, when ecosystems become extinct, what do we lose? We lose a great deal of our interconnected humanity and even part of our nature. The erasure of cultures and identity through the process of gentrification does the same thing to the city. It guarantees a homogenized metropolis in which rich diversity is completely lost.” - Cristian Roldán, artist and program director at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center

Why the Preservation of Paseo Boricua Matters

While Chicago’s Puerto Rican population is smaller than that of four other American cities (New York, Miami, Philadelphia, and Orlando), Paseo Boricua is the only officially designated Puerto Rican cultural district in the United States. Through decades of community organizing and development efforts, Paseo Boricua has become a rich, vibrant, and tight-knit enclave that is now at risk of losing its character and population due to persistent gentrification pressures. In this conclusion, I argue that the preservation of Paseo Boricua matters for three reasons: 1) the place is an expression of Puerto Rican self-determination; 2) it honors and teaches Puerto Rican identity, history, and culture; and 3) it contributes to the unique diversity and vibrancy of Chicago. For these reasons, the city of Chicago and state of Illinois must continue to take action to preserve Paseo Boricua in perpetuity.

Self-Determination

Paseo Boricua is a space where Puerto Rican self-determination and autonomy is realized. The 50,000 Puerto Ricans that live in and near the district have the authority to build a community on their own accord, elect their own representatives, and celebrate their culture freely. After over five-hundred years of colonization and oppression that continues to this day, Puerto Rico continues to lack sovereignty, making it impossible for Puerto Ricans on the island to have authority over their own political, economic, and cultural affairs. The oppression and exploitation that people on the island continue to face is evident in the sheer size of the Puerto Rican diaspora. Today, there are significantly more Puerto Ricans living in the United States (5.4 million) than on the island (3.5 million) (U.S. Census Bureau). The economic dependence that

the U.S. intentionally created throughout the twentieth century continues to wreak havoc on the island.

Local Puerto Rican organizers and politicians constantly invoke the importance of self-determination and self-actualization in their missions. For example, Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School's mission is "based on the philosophical foundation of self-determination, a methodology of self-actualization and an ethics of self-reliance" ("Mission & Vision", 2020). Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation's mission includes the commitment to "network with other organizations and stakeholders who share the vision of the community's collective struggle to control its own destiny" ("Who We Are", 2021). Another housing organization, originally founded as Latin United Community Housing Association now simply goes by LUCHA, the Spanish word for "struggle." The successive elections of Puerto Rican aldermen have helped support the community's vision of self-determination. As one local elected official reflected in an interview: "It is very, very important, one-hundred percent, for my successor to also be Puerto Rican—a Puerto Rican with a clear understanding of self-determination ideology and Puerto Rican identity." This ideology is at the heart of Paseo Boricua's existence—past, current, and future.

Identity, History, and Culture

Puerto Ricans have a distinct and complex cultural, ethnic, and political identity. All Puerto Ricans are natural-born American citizens and have been since the 1917 Jones–Shafroth Act. Puerto Ricans use the U.S. dollar, serve in the U.S. military, and are eligible for all U.S. government programs (Latham, 2012). However, Puerto Ricans do not vote in U.S. elections, are not represented in the U.S. Congress, and do not pay federal taxes. Both English and Spanish are the island's official languages and the American and Puerto Rican flags fly side-by-side above government buildings (Latham, 2012). The result of this perplexing political relationship has led to many Puerto Ricans feeling torn between the two places and between two identities. Nowhere is this identity crisis more apparent than in the outcomes of the Puerto Rican status referenda, which for decades have been inclusive, leaving the island stuck in limbo

between statehood, independence, and maintaining its commonwealth status. This quote from visual artist Carlos Rolón shared on the Paseo Podcast provides insight into the experience of the Puerto Rican identity crisis:

“I remember having a discussion with my science teacher in fifth grade. And she was telling me that I’m American. And I was like, ‘No, I’m Puerto Rican. My mother’s Puerto Rican, my father’s Puerto Rican.’ And she was like, ‘Yeah, but where were you born?’ And I was like, ‘I was born in Chicago.’ And she was like “so then you’re American.” And I remember going home and crying because she was telling me that I wasn’t Puerto Rican. So immediately, it kicked off this identity crisis. So that is the body of my work.” (Smyser-DeLeon, 2020, “Episode 31”).

A similar reflection came from one of my interviews:

“I learned zero about Puerto Rican history and culture in school. It is not covered in the Chicago Public School curriculum—neither is Latin American history. As I got older, I became interested in trying to find myself. Who am I? Where do I come from? Who is Albizu Campos?” -Local journalist

What does it mean to be Puerto Rican? While many struggle to answer this question, Paseo Boricua helps provide an answer by celebrating, honoring, and teaching Puerto Rico’s distinct history, culture, and way of life. This legacy dates back to the late 1960s when Puerto Rican community leaders began founding their own organization, churches, and schools when white Chicagoans turned them away. Today, Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos alternative high school continues to offer a curriculum that includes Puerto Rican history and culture. The National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture puts on exhibits featuring art from the island and the diaspora. The AfriCaribe Cultural Center and Puerto Rican Cultural Center hold tours and events that teach Puerto Rican history, music, and dance to locals and visitors. The UrbanTheater Company puts on shows that tell stories written and performed by Puerto Rican and Latino artists. Murals shine a light on the horrors of colonization, violence, and political imprisonment as well as the joys of liberation, pride, and resilience. The public art educates passersby who

may not be familiar with the history and current conditions of Puerto Rico. One of the people I interviewed, who did not grow up in the area, shared the following reflection:

“I saw the mural that says over 50 percent of Puerto Rican debt is interest. And I was like, wow, this is colonization. They have to repay us for all the stuff we did to them. I hadn’t realized how much colonialism had happened in Puerto Rico. We basically did the same thing to Puerto Ricans that we did to Native Americans. Before moving here I didn’t know any of that.” -Local artist

The proud display of countless Puerto Rican flags stands in sharp contrast to the nine years (1948 to 1957) during which it was illegal to not only fly the flag, but to be in possession of one in one’s own home (Ocasio, 1993; Agrelo, 2020, “The Puerto Rican Flag’s Evolving Colors”). The many annual events from *Día de los Reyes Magos* to *Fiesta Boricua* bring joy and nostalgia to thousands. City Bureau journalist Justin Agrelo reflected on his experience participating in the June 2020 Puerto Rican People’s Parade, which took place in the wake of George Floyd’s murder and the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic:

“We celebrate a collective understanding that the forces of white supremacy and colonialism that uprooted our families from the island to this cold city in the middle of the empire have not erased us and therefore have not won. That the underfunded schools, overpoliced neighborhoods, racial segregation, gentrification, and the state violence that we were met with here have not won either. That we will not exist passively, but instead as loud and as proud as we can.” (Agrelo, 2020, Puerto Rican flags fly high in June).

In a world where Puerto Ricans are constantly fighting to preserve and express their identity, Paseo Boricua is an oasis in the diaspora. The city of Chicago must not let this *pedacito de patria* (a small piece of motherland) slip away.



Figure 20: Mariam Santiago watches the Puerto Rican People's Parade on Division Street with the cheering crowd on Saturday, June 16, 2018. Photo by Chris Sweda/Chicago Tribune

Vibrancy and Diversity

What makes Chicago special is its patchwork of ethnically and economically diverse communities. That said, cultural enclaves only exist because of the city's legacy of racist segregation. As one of the artists I interviewed remarked: "If we didn't live in such a segregated space, would this [gentrification] even be a topic?" If Puerto Ricans had not faced discrimination, harassment, and violence and been displaced from the communities they originally migrated to in the late 1940s, Paseo Boricua would not exist. But because of that history, Puerto Ricans chose to stake their claim in West Town. With the installation of the two steel flags, "Puerto Ricans literally cemented themselves in the ground" (local artist interview).

There are few places in the United States where one can experience Puerto Rican food, music, dancing, theater, art, architecture, and cultural events like one can on Paseo Boruca. From the *plazitas* to the architecture, one can almost feel as if one is walking through the streets of Old San Juan, though perhaps not in the dead of Chicago winter. Paseo Boricua makes the city more interesting, unique, and vibrant. Two interviewees reflect on this theme:

“As a Northwest Side resident, I want the neighborhood to thrive as a Puerto Rican enclave. What I love about Chicago is it's a city of neighborhoods, each with its own distinctive flavor. I want to be able to walk up to the neighborhood's namesake park and grab a jibarito from one of the many food trucks in the area, and to see Puerto Rican flags everywhere. The celebration of Puerto Rican culture in Humboldt Park is a beautiful thing and it makes our city more vibrant.” -Local journalist

“It gives you a window to a whole other country. Usually, you have to travel to get that kind of experience.” -Local artist

In his introduction to the Chicago Cultural Plan of 1986, Mayor Harold Washington wrote:

“Culture is a precious resource that requires careful attention. It is an integral part of Chicago’s spirit and an underpinning of Chicago’s well-being” (“Chicago Cultural Plan”, p. 3, 1986). On Paseo Boricua, community leaders have taken that sentiment to heart—the careful attention to and investment in cultural placemaking have made it possible for the Puerto Rican enclave to stay in place. In addition to the cultural placemaking efforts, the combination of community organizing, political control, and affordable housing have been and will continue to be essential to preserving Paseo Boricua. The proposed extension of Paseo Boricua to “Puerto Rico Town” represents a promising future for the preservation and expansion of the cultural enclave. In the spirit of Mayor Harold Washington, the city of Chicago and state of Illinois must take action to preserve this precious place in the decades and centuries to come.



Figure 21: One of the two flag sculptures that serve as the gateways to Paseo Boricua located on Division Street and Artesian Avenue. Photo by Carolyn Variano/Chicago Tribune.

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Appendix

Study contacts

Community Leaders

1. Eduardo Arocho: Poet, tour guide, and former Director of the Division Street Business Development Association
2. Joy Aruguete: Chief Executive Officer of Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation
3. Michael Burton: Asset Management Director at Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation
4. Ivis Obreno García: Assistant Professor of City and Metropolitan Planning at the University of Utah; former co-chair of the Puerto Rican Agenda
5. Nadya Henriquez: Economic Development Administrator at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center
6. Ricardo Jiménez: Director of Vida/SIDA, a program of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center
7. Manwah Lee: Executive Director of Architresures
8. José López: Co-founder and Executive Director of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center
9. Iván Vega: Co-Founder and Executive Director of the UrbanTheater Company
10. Alex Wilson: Founder and Executive Director of West Town Bikes

Elected Officials

11. Luis Gutiérrez: Former 26th Ward Alderman; Former U.S. Congressman - IL 4th District
12. Daniel La Spata: Alderman for Chicago's 1st Ward
13. Roberto Maldonado: Alderman for Chicago's 26th Ward
14. Billy Ocasio: President and Chief Executive Officer of the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts & Culture; Former 26th Ward Alderman

Artists

15. Joyce Fernandes: Artist, writer, and former Executive Director of Architresures
16. Lauren Herrmann: Photographer
17. Sam Kirk: Visual artist
18. Cristian Roldán: Visual artist and Program Director at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center
19. Carlos Rolón: Visual artist

Journalists

20. Mina Bloom: Journalist at Block Club Chicago
21. Manny Ramos: Journalist at the Chicago Sun Times

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