Humboldt Park Looks to the Past to Fight Gentrification

Harvey Henao
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Lincoln Park has not always been the upper-scale neighborhood that it is today. Indeed, the highest price ever paid for real estate in the city of Chicago was located in the neighborhood, to the tune of $7,000,000. But in the 1960s, Lincoln Park was nothing like today. It was a community of working class whites, blacks and a large Puerto Rican community living and working in its historic turn of the century buildings. There was a strong sense of security, with families watching out for other families' children. Residents needed only to walk to the corner store on Halsted Street and Armitage Avenue to purchase all they needed for that evening's meal.

But beginning in the late 1960s, things began to change. Developers, aided by the city's Department of Urban Renewal, began buying up property with the intention of either rebuilding or rehabbing them into luxury housing. Residents began to be forced out of their homes because of rising rents and property taxes. But instead of sitting back and letting this all happen, some residents decided that they had to fight back.

José “Cha-Cha” Jiménez was one resident that recognized if something was not done, they would all end up kicked out of their community. In the 1960s, Jiménez was a member of the Young Lords, a local youth gang. In 1968, he assumed leadership of the Young Lords and decided to reinvent the gang into a community activist group to combat this growing problem.

“We only wanted what was fair,” Jiménez said. “We were not anti-yuppie or anything...we just wanted what was right.”

Being forced out of their community because of gentrification was unfortunately not something new for the Puerto Rican community. In the 1950s, the community was focused largely in the Old Town neighborhood. Jiménez recalls growing up in a hotel-turned-apartment building on Lasalle and Superior Streets, along with many other Puerto Rican families.

“It was great...I remember everyone used to share what they had,” Jimenez said. “Even though we were all poor, we always managed to get food because people helped each other out.” But that changed in 1962, when the Carl Sandburg Village was built near Lasalle Street and North Avenue. The development was the first of its kind for the city of Chicago. It was a collection of luxury condominium apartments along with retail commercial space built in the neighborhood, even though few of the first-generation immigrants could even dream of being able to afford living there. From there, most Puerto Rican residents moved further west, mainly to Lincoln Park and Humboldt Park.

But today, there is no trace of Puerto Ricans left in Lincoln Park, leaving Humboldt Park as the sole Puerto Rican stronghold in the city. However, Humboldt Park is today going through what Lincoln Park endured in the early 1970s. Condos and new construction are being built that is priced out of the reach of most residents. The cycle begins anew.

Jiménez's first experience in community activism was a violent one. In 1968, he got some of the neighborhood residents together to attend a Lincoln Park Conservation Association meeting to voice their opinion on proposed development. However, what they did succeed in doing was disrupting the meeting.

“We went in there shouting and tearing shit off the walls,” Jimenez said. “We told them that this meeting was over until there was a poor white, a black and a Latino sitting on the committee.”

Miraculously, Jiménez and the rest of the Young Lords managed to escape arrest that night. But the greater community took notice of their organization.

“It was a success,” Jimenez said. “We made our point and we didn’t go to jail.” But looking back on the incident, however, Jimenez does wish he had done some things differently.

“Knowing what I know now, I wouldn’t have done that,” Jimenez says with a chuckle. “[But] considering the level we were at, we did the right thing...we were 18 and 19-year-old kids, and we were angry.”
Jiménez adds that such violence also contributed to many neighborhood and city residents not taking them seriously, an image problem they worked hard to overcome. In addition, they drew the ire of Chicago Police, who at the time were notoriously oppressive, according to Jiménez. But he is quick to point out that the Young Lords decided to do things “correctly” from that point forward.

The Young Lords did not ultimately succeed in their goals of diversity in Lincoln Park. But simply because they did not have a say in the community’s development does not mean the organization failed, according to Jiménez. Considering the successes the organization had, he feels the Young Lords were a positive impact on the community. Thanks to an agreement with the Methodist Church, the group was headquartered at the Armitage Methodist Church on Armitage Avenue and Dayton Street, or as they nicknamed it, the “People’s Church.” The Young Lords offered community services using the church.

“We had a daycare center for residents to use free of charge,” Jiménez said. “We also maintained a park and a free clinic.” He also notes that the mere action of converting a street gang into a community organization constitutes a success in their eyes.

Although it might seem the Young Lords lost their battle in Lincoln Park, they have not given up on the war, according to Omar López, former member of the Young Lords and currently director of Calor, a community based organization for HIV-infected Latinos.

“There were lots of lessons learned in Lincoln Park,” López said. “We learned that to really have a chance, you have to be involved early.”

López added that by the time the Young Lords and other neighborhood organizations like the LPCA signed on to fight gentrification in their neighborhoods, it was already too late. When the Young Lords were most active, in 1968-1970, the city of Chicago was already 15 years into an Urban Renewal plan it had set forth in 1956. +

“The developers were way ahead of us,” López said. “No way was the city going to go back on the deals they had already made.”

Indeed, city planners quickly shot down a proposal by the Young Lords that incorporated mixed-income housing. In 1973, architect Howard Alan, of Howard Alan Architects in Lincoln Park, designed a development for an empty lot near Larrabee Street and Armitage Avenue that called for 18 two-story townhomes that would incorporate affordable housing. Rental units, along with condominiums for sale, would be available along with commercial retail space. Both the Young Lords and the Lincoln Park Conservation Association endorsed the development. Even the local Department of Urban Renewal office approved. But when the plan came to a vote in City Council, it was quickly voted down, Alan said.

“There were about 200 people in [City Council chambers at City Hall] that were there to speak in favor of our development,” Alan said. “But before anyone knew what was happening, it was voted down.”

According to Alan, the development he designed promoted community living, with decks overlooking a central outdoor plaza. Alan still does not know why the proposal failed.

“I designed it based on what I understood the community to be about – shared help,” Alan said. “Everyone supported it at the local level...even members of the CCC [Community Conservation Council] supported it.”

The CCC was a Mayor-appointed council of neighborhood residents that were supposed to recommend to the city what was best for their community.

“What’s there now is a much different development than what we had,” Alan said. “It doesn’t promote community much.”

According to Alan, part of the problem was that the city as a whole had a negative perception of the area. Because of this, he surmises the city rushed in development.
"I never thought it was as bad as people said it was," Alan said, who has lived in Lincoln Park since the mid 1960s. "People were just fearful of what they didn't understand."

Alan said he took on the Young Lords' cause because he believed in the community's right to have a say in its future and because he appreciated the grassroots effort of the group.

"I didn't realize how fearful and unacceptable that was in our society," Alan said of the Puerto Ricans' efforts to preserve their community. "It must have been very depressing for the first generation Americans that were here." Another part of the problem according to Alan is that nobody was politically astute enough to understand the intricacies of Chicago politics.

"When we tried to do things the right way," Alan said, "we got nowhere."

Today, the Young Lords have turned their attention to Humboldt Park, the next neighborhood they believe is likely to be gentrified in the city. The neighborhood remains the last Puerto Rican stronghold in the city. The city of Chicago even recognizes the area with large Puerto Rican flag sculptures spanning Fullerton Avenue at Humboldt Park Boulevard. But once again, this is all being threatened as gentrification begins to move west. Already, property values have skyrocketed. A two-flat house now sells for $300,000, according to the Chicago Tribune real estate section. In 1996, the same home might have sold for as little as $55,000, according to archived records. Rents hover around $1000 for a two-bedroom apartment.

However, organizing in Humboldt Park will not be easier than their experience in Lincoln Park. But, the community is better equipped for the fight ahead.

"The community didn't have the resources or the foresight to stay organized," Lopez says of the Lincoln Park battle against gentrification. "We need to get coalitions of neighborhood organizations together...it has to be a community process."

López reiterates the importance of organizing the community early on to fight gentrification.

"We learned our lesson in Lincoln Park," López said, "and we still missed the bus on Wicker Park and West Town." López is referring to two near northwest side Latino communities that were quickly gentrified.

Lopez said the Young Lords are currently involved in seeking out community groups in the Humboldt Park area to educate them on their experiences and begin to help them organize. However, he notes that the community is far from being able to stop developers and the city from letting gentrification establish a foothold.

"We are not in a position to organize," Lopez said. "We have to be able to share information with [other] organizations...experiences need to be shared."

Some community groups that Lopez hopes to band together in their fight against gentrification are the Hispanic Housing Alliance, the Hispanic Development Organization, and the Near Northwest Neighbors Network.

"We are focusing on education people on what the ramifications of gentrification are," said Eliuć Medina, executive director for the Near Northwest Neighbors Network. "As a community we'd like to declare a community for our own."

According to Medina, who has lived in Humboldt Park since 1968, part of the problem in Lincoln Park was, despite the Young Lords' efforts, people didn't understand what was happening. Because of this, his organization is making it a point to educate the community and tell them the importance of staying where they are.

"In Lincoln Park, we were too quick to get up and go," Medina said. "Now we understand that we have to stay put and not sell."

Medina said Lincoln Park had the distinct advantage over the current situation in Humboldt Park because more residents were homeowners and most homeowners lived in their properties.

"Now, there's nothing left there."

Today, the NNNN has been one of the most involved in organizing the community, assisting residents with buying homes, establishing businesses and offering job training to residents.

Although López feels that these organizations have to work together to be more successful, he notes that their mere existence is a step in the right direction.

"Today is different, not easier," López said. "We have more knowledge than we ever have before...we now have elected officials and people that will advocate our cause. We didn't have that back then."

Harvey Henao is currently a graduate student of journalism at Columbia College in Chicago. He also holds a Bachelor's degree in Sociology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In addition to working toward his Masters degree, he is a freelance journalist for a variety of area newspapers, including the Pioneer Press and Lerner Newspapers. He plans to continue a career in journalism after his graduation in July of 2004. Contact him at hhenao78@hotmail.com.