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The Context of Diversity: A Study of Six Chicago Neighbourhoods

Emily Talen

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Abstract

Depending on how diversity is defined, every city has at least some neighbourhoods that are diverse, despite the enduring reality that American cities tend to be highly segregated. This paper investigates six socially diverse neighbourhoods in Chicago from the perspective of the residents who live there. The specific focus is on the interaction between residents and physical form, spatial pattern, and the location and function of civic institutions. Six neighbourhoods in Cook County were selected that are simultaneously diverse along four dimensions: age, income, family type and race/ethnicity. From February to June 2006, tape-recorded interviews were conducted of 85 residents in the six neighbourhoods identified as being highly diverse on multiple dimensions. Residents were surveyed about their familiarity with, and opinions about, social diversity, in addition to questions designed to probe their feelings about the importance of place and neighbourhood context.

Introduction

The story of 20th-century urban America is a story of manifested social division. Industrialisation brought rising affluence, the growth of the middle class, cheap cars, cheap oil, highways and government subsidies, which, combined with racial and class intolerance, sparked widespread socio-spatial sorting. We developed whole systems that maximised profits through homogeneity. Global distribution, financial markets and lending institutions structured themselves around homogeneous clustering and centralised notions of cultural authority. Clustered social spaces began to dictate business decisions (Metzger, 2000; Weiss, 1988, 2000). Other explanations for spatial sorting include consumer choice, discrimination in institutions and governance, neighbourhood dynamics and macro-based explanations involving political economy and social change (van Kempen, 2002; Grigsby et al., 1987). Many view the ‘divided and polarised’ city as a product of state activities (Marcuse and van Kempen, 2002).

Already by the 1920s, the connection between social segregation and cities was pronounced.

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Harvey Warren Zorbaugh, in his classic 1929 study *The Gold Coast and the Slum*, wrote that there is no phenomenon more characteristic of city life, as contrasted with the life of the rural community or the village, than that of segregation (Zorbaugh, 1929, p. 232).

Louis Wirth reached a similar conclusion in ‘Urbanism as a way of life’, noting that urban populations were both highly differentiated and increasingly subordinated to mass culture (Wirth, 1938).

The physical characteristics of cities have always played a role in this social sorting. Where pre-20th-century urban form accommodated social mixing, urban form after the 1920s thwarted the ability of classes to mix, even if they had wanted to. Suburbs have now become more socially diverse, but, one could argue, they have done so in spite of their physical form, not because of it. Suburban neighbourhoods are still being built for one social class or another, whereby market segmentation strictly divides neighbourhoods into pods of distinct income categories.

There have been some excellent studies of how social, cultural and economic differences bear out in differentiating space and place (for example, Kefalas, 2003; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999). Studies of racial and ethnic diversity, like Juliet Saltman’s *A Fragile Movement* (1990) or Sanjek’s *The Future of Us All* (1998), showed the practical issues involved in trying to sustain multiethnic neighbourhoods. This study follows in these genres. My primary interest is in the places that have managed to sustain some level of diversity, despite homogenising trends, and how neighbourhood context is related to that diversity. I am specifically interested in the interaction between residents and physical form, spatial pattern and the location and function of civic institutions. What does the physical context of socially diverse neighbourhoods mean for the residents who live there? Do residents perceive that these places have been responsive to the needs of a diverse neighbourhood, in terms of their physical design—i.e. the location, form, use and pattern of buildings, institutions and facilities, streets and public spaces?

While there is no explicit definition of the ‘socially diverse neighbourhood’, people often consider the mixing of residents by race/ethnicity and by income level or wealth to be the most essential forms, although the mixing of age, family type and household type is also important (Sarkissian, 1976). A lot of scholarship has focused on defining, understanding and empirically documenting neighbourhood-level diversity (Ellen, 1998; Galster, 1998; Lee and Wood, 1990; Maly, 2000; Ottensmann, 1995). A diverse neighbourhood may have teenagers and elderly; married couples and singles; empty-nesters and large families; waiters and teachers as well as professionals; affluent people and people on fixed incomes; and people of varying racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In short, they are places that harbour a full range of human complexity.

We are fortunate that, despite the pressure to homogenise, some urban neighbourhoods have managed to attract and retain diversity—defined in this paper as the mixing of population in relatively close spatial proximity, as measured by variation in income, race/ethnicity, family type and age. After briefly reviewing some of the factors that contribute to diversity, I present the results of a survey of 85 residents living in six diverse places in Chicago. By focusing on those places, I hope to shed light on some of the ways in which neighbourhood context could be related to diversity.

**Why Are Neighbourhoods Diverse?**

There are historical, economic and political factors that contribute to neighbourhood-level diversity. Historical factors may be particularly important since places that are diverse seem to be those with a long tradition of diversity. Many diverse neighbourhoods
functioned historically as immigrant ports of entry and this openness may have translated into other forms of diversity, such as economic.

Because of the historical rootedness of diversity, diverse places tend to be older than non-diverse places (Talen, 2006). In addition, older places may be more likely to have experienced a housing filtering process, whereby some proportion of the housing stock, because of its age, became more affordable. At the same time, there may have been an infiltration of new housing stock, creating a mix of building ages conducive to diversity (Jacobs, 1961). Building age mix is also likely to result in a lower median housing age for the area overall, as compared with newer suburban locations. A mix of building ages helps to ensure a mix of rents and prices (for both owners and renters, and for both residential and non-residential users). Different types of use require different types, and costs, of buildings.

The dynamics of the local housing market are likely to play a strong role in the effectuation of diversity. It has been shown empirically that racial inclusiveness is related to four housing market conditions: new housing (populated by younger Whites with more tolerance for diversity), multifamily housing, rental housing and affordable rental housing (Pendall, 2000). These market conditions are also likely to affect income diversity. To the degree that housing unit type is a significant factor in social diversity, diversity is likely to be found where there is a mix of more than one housing type, including owner vs renter-occupied and single-family vs multifamily housing.

The location of industry is another relevant factor. Income-diverse areas in Chicago and other major cities tend to be primarily in ‘blue-collar’, ethnic neighbourhoods located in inner-ring suburbs (Orfield, 2002). Many of these diverse areas started as industrial suburbs adjacent to railroad lines. Studies have revealed that middle-income suburbs, many of which consist of housing tracts developed near industry, also have the widest range of income groups (Oliver, 2001). Accordingly, the diversity of the older suburb has been heralded as the lynchpin of urban regeneration (Orfield, 2002; Oliver, 2001; Hudnut, 2003).

Such areas may have suffered a certain degree of economic decline in recent decades, particularly due to the loss of industrial jobs (Leigh and Lee, 2004). They may be struggling to recover from the loss of an industrial base, but maintaining some stability either because of the rootedness of the population or because of the influx of new types of activities. Former industrial sites may now function as edges of diverse neighbourhoods, in some cases being replaced by luxury town homes, condominiums and shopping malls. Income diversity may also result wherever areas with stable land values lie adjacent to areas with decreased land values. This characterises land near industrial sites and highways, for example.

Diverse areas may be places where macro processes of economic growth did not translate into widespread spatial mobility. Instead, some residents may have been able to ‘improve in place’. Or there may have been disruptions in the gentrification process—it may have stalled because of larger economic trends. Although many view the process of middle-class relocation to inner-city neighbourhoods as mostly detrimental (Abu-Lughod, 1994), if gentrification did not result in complete displacement it may have been a significant factor in generating income mix. Some studies have shown this, arguing that gentrification promotes socioeconomic mixing and probably only adversely affects a small number of older residents (Vigdor, 2002; Freeman and Braconi, 2004).

These kinds of processes generate what Nyden et al. (1997) refer to as a ‘laissez-faire’ diverse community. Examples include areas where gentrification stalled because of housing market changes, ageing communities where residents were replaced with younger people, neighbourhoods adjacent to fully revitalised areas, places that function as immigrant
ports of entry, or the addition of affordable housing developments. Cohen (1998) documented the income diversity of a gentrifying Baltimore neighbourhood that resulted when two fractious community groups created an investment stand-off.

What of the physical/locational forms and patterns believed to be associated with social diversity? Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford had strong ideas about the physical factors conducive to diversity. Lewis Mumford (1968) believed that a healthy diversity required limits on size, density and area, while Jacobs (1961) stressed the importance of use. Offices, factories, dwellings and other types of primary use were essential for bringing people to a place and secondary uses were essential for serving the people that came. While many agree that mixed uses—including public and quasi-public facilities and neighbourhood-level commercial enterprises—are essential for sustaining socially mixed communities (Myerson, 2001), finding the appropriate mix to support income diversity can be problematic. As Goetz (2003, p. 8) cautioned, “the poor relate to [neighbourhood] amenities in ways fundamentally different from more affluent families”. For example, public transport and affordable daycare are likely to be much more important to poor families (see also Bayer, 2000).

Philip Nyden and colleagues (Nyden et al., 1997, 1998) found a variety of physical factors contributing to ‘stable diverse’ neighbourhoods. Significant factors included whether they had attractive physical characteristics, access to public transport and jobs, land use diversity (stores and restaurants), housing stock variety, proximity to downtown or the existence of ‘social seams’ in the form of schools, parks or a strip of neighbourhood stores. Others have stressed the importance of a neighbourhood’s ‘institutional base’, particularly religious institutions (Rose, 2000), as a way to promote “strong cross-status ties in mixed-income neighbourhoods” (Clampet-Lundquist, 2004, p. 443).

A variety of housing types in one location is an obvious way that physical form promotes social diversity. Mixing housing unit types can occur in two ways: new, mixed housing type developments, or the infilling of new types of development, either on vacant parcels or through the addition of larger homes or smaller units (over garages, over stores). In the latter case, forms associated with mixed housing include corner duplexes, walk-up apartments on back streets, smaller lots and duplexes designed as single-family homes. Putting larger or more expensive housing in lower-income areas through demolition and replacement (so-called ‘monster’ houses in bungalow neighbourhoods), or by restoring housing previously divided into smaller apartments, are development approaches that work in reverse: higher-income housing in lower-income neighbourhoods (Lang et al., 1997).

Methodology
Measuring Diversity
To investigate resident perceptions of neighbourhood diversity, I chose the City of Chicago and the surrounding suburbs and towns of Cook county (Figure 1). The county consists of 138 incorporated towns and 866 census tracts, and had a 2000 census population of 5.3 million (making it the second-largest county in the US). Within the City of Chicago, there are 77 ‘community areas’ and 172 officially designated neighbourhoods (Figure 2).

Diversity is defined here as the mix of different groups within one relatively small geographical area. I looked at four variables to characterise resident diversity: income, race/ethnicity, age and family type, as listed in Table 1. I used the census block group as the spatial unit of analysis, because it provides an adequate level of spatial variability without being too aggregated. Although the census tract is often used in studies of racial
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and class segregation, researchers have argued that smaller units may be more appropriate.\textsuperscript{3}

While there are many different ways to measure diversity, I selected two to analyse the diversity of Chicago neighbourhoods: the Simpson diversity index (Simpson, 1949) and the neighbourhood diversity index (Maly, 2000). The Simpson index, which has been around since the 1940s, can be used to evaluate how many categories (such as income levels, races, ethnicities, housing types) exist in a given area. The index is commonly used to measure biological diversity. Its formal expression is

\[ A = \frac{N(N-1)}{\sum n_i (n_i - 1)} \]

where, \( A \) is the diversity index; \( N \) is the total number of individuals (or housing units or households) for all categories; and \( n_i \) is the number of individuals (or other characteristic) in the \( i \)th category.

The neighbourhood diversity index measures diversity in a different way, by comparing the population distribution of an area with the overall city average. Its formal expression is

\[ ND = 1/2 \left( |C_a - T_a| + |C_b - T_b| + |C_c - T_c| + |C_d - T_d| \right) \]

where, \( C \) is the group percentage (categories \( a, b, c, d \), for example, using racial or income categories) for the whole city, and \( T \) is the group percentage for the area, such as a census tract.

An area reflecting the composition of the city will have a low ND, while an area consisting predominantly of one group will have a large ND. The data come from Census Summary Tape File 3, spatially adjusted to allow comparisons between geographical areas over time.\textsuperscript{4}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Figure 1.} The study area: Cook County, which includes the City of Chicago.
\end{center}
Narrowing Things Down: Six Highly Diverse Places

To select places for in-depth study, I used both measures in order to provide a degree of robustness. I mapped those census block groups that were the most diverse in 2000—scoring in the top quartile on both measures for all four variables (family type, income, age and race/ethnicity).

To make a final selection, I first selected block groups that were in the top quartile on income diversity for the Simpson index and the ND index in both 1990 and 2000. I wanted to focus first on income diversity because of its more direct connection to the built environment—i.e. physical features like housing type can have an effect on income diversity in a way that is more direct than the other diversity types. I excluded any block groups that had 0 families in either year, leaving a total of 4242 block groups. Out of those, 165 block groups were in the top quartile of diversity on both indexes in both years.

I then selected block groups that were diverse on income plus one other variable (age, family or race/ethnicity): 7 were income diverse and age diverse; 7 were income diverse and family diverse; and 21 were income diverse and race/ethnic diverse. I then looked for spatial clusters of these block groups. I found six areas that had clusters of three or more block groups within one community area or one municipality. These are shown in Figure 3.

These six areas—the incorporated towns of Berwyn and Blue Island, and the community areas of Bridgeport, Irving Park, Portage Park...
and West Ridge located in the City of Chicago were the selected locations for the resident interviews. Selected census characteristics are given in Table 2. Table 2 shows that, using this methodology, the neighbourhoods selected were much more ethnically diverse than racially diverse. Only one, Blue Island, had an African American population above 5 per cent. Hispanic population was strong, however, in all areas and four of the six communities had greater than one-third Hispanic population in 2000.

**The Interviews**

From February to June 2006, tape-recorded interviews were conducted with 85 residents in the six neighbourhoods identified as being highly diverse on multiple dimensions. Six students were hired to help conduct the interviews. Interviewers used a semi-structured format, starting with a list of questions (Table 3) that respondents were then encouraged to expand on. The following four issues were of primary interest:

1. Familiarity with, and opinions about, social diversity.
2. Social bonds and connections in the neighbourhood.
3. Place-identity—whether respondents identified with place and what features seemed to promote that identity (such as a special restaurant, the place they grew up in, a street, a favourite park).
4. Strengths and weaknesses of the neighbourhood/community.

We started with respondents we could easily connect to: local business owners, community centre representatives, chamber of commerce directors, school principals and aldermen. Following each interview, we asked for referrals. An effort was made to identify people from all walks of life, from the public, non-profit and private sectors, both officials and residents with no official role in the community, long-timers and recent arrivals, and people from varying age-groups and cultural and ethnic affiliations. Table 4 gives a few characteristics of the respondents. Because we often started with contacts associated with particular organisations rather than ‘man on the street’ interviews, the respondents tended to be people who were knowledgeable and involved in the community. It cannot be claimed that the selected interviewees are representative of the community; however, they do provide an informative depth and range of opinion regarding the neighbourhood context of diversity.

The summary that follows condenses the interviews into a series of specific, recurring themes. One note of clarification: the terms ‘community’, ‘neighbourhood’ and ‘town’ tended to be used interchangeably.

**Table 1. Description of Variable Categories, Used to Compute Diversity Indices**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diversity variable</th>
<th>Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td>White alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>5 and under</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income</td>
<td>Under $20000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family type</td>
<td>Married, with children under 18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: All variables are from the 2000 Census, by block group.*
in discussions with respondents. Technically, West Ridge, Bridgeport, Irving Park and Portage Park are ‘community areas’ and Berwyn and Blue Island are separate, incorporated municipalities. Historically, all were connected to rail lines, but their origins were different: Blue Island started as an agricultural centre, Bridgeport as an industrial town, and Berwyn, Portage Park and Irving Park were commuter rail suburbs (Keating, 2005). West Ridge was the westernmost part of Rogers Park, a commuter rail suburb, but its origins were also tied to agriculture. Within each area, there are distinct neighbourhoods, ranging from few to many. We did not attempt to ‘correct’ people in their use of the terms ‘community’, ‘neighbourhood’ or ‘town’, so the summations below tend to reflect a correspondingly descriptive rather than technical use of terminology.

**A Few Pertinent Facts**

Most of these communities have entire books written about them, especially their histories. The books written on Chicago and its people and neighbourhoods could fill a library. Sketched out here are just a few pieces of information of particular relevance to the study of each area’s social diversity.\(^5\)

**West Ridge**

West Ridge, or West Rogers Park, 8 miles north of downtown Chicago (‘the Loop’),
Table 2. Selected census statistics for the six survey areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Population per square mile</th>
<th>Percentage White</th>
<th>Percentage Hispanic 1990</th>
<th>Percentage Hispanic 2000</th>
<th>Percentage Black or African American</th>
<th>Percentage Asian</th>
<th>Percentage 15 or younger</th>
<th>Percentage 65 or older</th>
<th>Median household income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue Island</td>
<td>23463</td>
<td>5822</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>36 520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berwyn</td>
<td>54016</td>
<td>13 876</td>
<td>73.4</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>43 833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridgeport</td>
<td>33694</td>
<td>16 044</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>35 535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irving Park</td>
<td>58643</td>
<td>18 156</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>7.44</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>42 037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portage Park</td>
<td>65340</td>
<td>16 417</td>
<td>69.5</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>45 117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Ridge</td>
<td>73199</td>
<td>20 736</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>6.78</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>41 144</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 2000 data unless otherwise indicated.
Table 3. Interview questions

1. Please give your name and your affiliation (occupation or membership, if applicable).
2. How long have you lived in this area and how familiar are you with it? Are there particular locations that you are most familiar with? Are there special organisations, clubs, religious or community groups you are involved with?
3. How familiar are you with the social diversity of this community?
4. Do you think there is a healthy sense of community or civic life here? Do different types of people interact with each other in positive ways? Are all groups involved, or is there some disenfranchisement?
5. Are there ways in which an outsider would be able to tell, just by walking down the street, that this is a socially diverse place? (see if respondent can point out places on a map).
6. Have there been any tensions that have resulted from the diversity of people here? Does this area embrace all types of people, including African-Americans, Latinos, Asian-Americans, immigrants? Rich and poor? Young and old? People with different types of living arrangements (family and non-family)? Have tensions been expressed in public settings, like in schools?
7. Are there ways that people here have tried to establish barriers between groups, both physical and non-physical? (e.g. putting up fences and gates?)
8. Conversely, do you think the community sustains diversity in specific ways?
9. What are some of the important issues here in terms of planning/design? What kinds of changes have been occurring? (for example, are there problems with gentrification/displacement, or disinvestment)?
10. Can you think of ways that the physical structure of this community either sustains or detracts from social diversity? For example, do you see any of the following as problematic? (refer to map):
   - Mixtures of different types of housing (apartments near single-family residences, for example)
   - Mixtures of uses (too much or not enough, or not well designed)
   - Public facilities like parks, schools, community centres (is public space sufficient and well placed—accessible to everyone?)
   - Uses that are degrading to the community—like highways, vacant land, or noxious facilities?
   - Streets and intersections? Can people get around easily?
11. Can you think of specific types of policies, developments, or projects (private or public) that would specifically enhance or preserve social diversity?
12. Do you have any additional thoughts on the issue of social diversity, in Chicago or in the US more generally?
13. Finally, can you suggest other people who would be good to talk to about this topic?

was a farming community up until the 1920s, when developers started to buy up farm land and build bungalows and apartment buildings. After World War II, there was an enormous building boom in West Ridge. Businesses in West Ridge in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s were almost entirely Jewish owned and were clustered along the main commercial corridor, Devon Avenue. Sometime in the 1970s, “for whatever reason” as one business owner explained, ageing Jewish business owners started to move out (there were six kosher butchers on Devon Avenue at one time, now there is one) and Indian and Pakistani businesses moved in. The businesses along Devon Avenue are now predominantly Indian and Pakistani, and people come from all over the US to visit this distinct commercial area. The businesses are mutually reinforcing. People shop, find jobs, eat Indian food, plan a trip, buy wedding clothes—engage in anything related to Indian/Pakistani culture.

In recent years, West Ridge has become more diverse in religious, cultural and ethnic terms, and one respondent claimed that it now contains
over 60 different religious organisations. The population of West Ridge remains strongly Jewish, even if the business establishments have substantially decreased. Conversely, many Indian and Pakistani business owners do not live in West Ridge, and commute in from the suburbs to run the shops, as they did initially in the 1970s. Some respondents remarked that most residents were detached from the main commercial activity and in fact avoided it. As one put it: “If you live here, you avoid Devon ... the street is crazy”. The disconnect between the commercial hub and the residents of West Ridge is palpable. Cultural diversity along Devon Avenue is driving the commerce and tourist trade of the area, but it is not servicing local residents.

**Irving Park**

Irving Park, located 7 miles north-west of the Loop, is divided between Old Irving Park, a wealthier, mostly single-family area with large historical homes, and Irving Park proper, which is a highly diverse, although strongly working-class section of Chicago. Irving Park is populated by many people of eastern European descent. Old Irving Park has a strong neighbourhood association that has been successfully blocking development in recent years, especially new multifamily developments. Many sections of Old Irving Park were down-zoned to R-2 in the 1990s.

Irving Park began as a separate, affluent suburb in the 1880s but, according to the president of the Irving Park Historical Society, immigrants began building smaller homes in between the wealthy as long ago as the early 20th century. There may have been “some envy about the mansions”, but there were few overt tensions. Over the past two decades, Irving Park has grown more Hispanic (from 9 to 43 per cent Hispanic in 20 years) and has become less of an eastern European enclave. The population has also become much younger and housing values have soared.

**Portage Park**

Portage Park lies immediately to the west of Irving Park. Unlike Irving Park’s division into two distinct areas, Portage Park is thought of as one neighbourhood. It is not considered to be as strongly ethnic as other parts of Chicago (there are few officially organised ethnic associations), although there is a significant Polish and, increasingly, Hispanic population. Economically, many view it as a blue-collar neighbourhood that has recently been settled by professionals moving out of more expensive locations like Lincoln Park.

In addition to a large centrally located park for which the neighbourhood is named, Portage Park is especially proud of a once-thriving commercial area known as Six Corners. This intersection of three major streets was once the most important retail location outside the Loop. It still retains the original Sears store, which is a source of great community pride. However, the shopping area has been deteriorating over the past few years.
decades and many residents expressed sadness at the loss of its prominence as the community hub of Portage Park. Some blamed the deterioration of Six Corners on increased car dependency; others blamed it on mismanagement and the corruption of local leadership.

**Bridgeport**

Bridgeport, just south of the Loop, was the first neighbourhood in Chicago, established to house labourers building the canals. It is well known as the home of the Irish, the Daley family and the Chicago White Sox. It also has a large planned manufacturing district which was the first of its kind in the US, set up to retain an industrial employment base. There is continuous pressure from developers to turn the beautiful old factory buildings into loft space and condos, but the city is intent on retaining the buildings for industry.

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**Figure 4.** There is a large Orthodox Jewish community in West Ridge. Some Jewish businesses remain, but most of the commercial area is now Indian and Pakistani.
More than any of the other communities, Bridgeport has seen an explosion of condominium and high-end single-family development in the past few years. A large new complex of single-family residences called Bridgeport Village has been constructed just north of the planned manufacturing district. Long-time residents of Bridgeport seemed amused by the development because of its proximity to what locals call ‘bubbly creek’, an odorous section of the Chicago channel where they used to dump animal carcasses. One resident said:

Bridgeporters are laughing at them ... when you see people spending a million dollars to live next to a smelly creek, you think they’re crazy.

**Blue Island**

Blue Island is a small town (about 23,000 population) that lies just outside the Chicago city limits, on its southern border. There is a rail stop on the Metra—the regional railway serving six counties—that stops right along Blue Island’s historical main street. Both the main street and the rail stop are the target of revitalisation efforts and plans are underway to transform the area into a mixed-use, transit-oriented development. Appropriate to that goal, almost 50 per cent of Blue Island’s housing stock is in the form of multiple-family dwellings.

The population of Blue Island is almost evenly distributed between African American, Hispanic and White residents. One resident pointed out, however, that this is not the distribution in the schools, which have much higher numbers of Hispanic children. This reflects recent in-migration. During the 1990s, thousands of Whites moved out and a similar number of Blacks and Hispanics moved in.

Like Berwyn, the other incorporated municipality in this study, local politics were
Figure 6. The intersection known as Six Corners in Portage Park. This area used to be a major shopping destination for Chicago, as well as a source of great pride for local residents.

Figure 7. New condos are a common sight in Bridgeport. Residents complain that the new buildings do not integrate well with the surrounding neighbourhood.
characterised by many respondents as being White-male dominated, with rampant cronyism and little opportunity for grass-roots or minority impact. Blue Island has struggled with economic decline for decades (a librarian in Blue Island described it as having “low self-esteem”), but many are hopeful that times are changing due to the recent efforts to stimulate redevelopment around the regional rail line.

**Berwyn**

Berwyn borders Chicago on the west. It was originally known as a Czech and Bohemian neighbourhood, with many residents working in the nearby GE plant. Large, older parks with Czech names, like Proksa Park, testify to this ethnic heritage. During the past couple of decades, however, there has been a dramatic demographic shift, with a large influx of Hispanic residents. The population shifted from 7.8 per cent to 38 per cent Hispanic in the span of one decade (1990–2000). According to one school administrator, the school population of Berwyn is 75 per cent Hispanic.

Berwyn is well served by major transport routes (a point made by virtually every Berwyn respondent). It is traversed by the Eisenhower expressway, the Metra regional railway and the city of Chicago's rapid transit system (the ‘EL’). It is a major part of Chicago’s ‘bungalow belt’ and the rich architectural details of the bungalows are a source of community pride. It is also famous for its streets of apartment buildings—two-flats and three-flats—built, along with the bungalows, in the 1920s through the 1940s.

Business owners in Berwyn say that the “number one weakness” of the community is its inability to attract more business. The business community is still feeling the pinch from the loss of J. C. Pennys and Sears to an outlying
mall (North Riverside). Some remarked that the economic boom of the 1990s seemed to have skipped over Berwyn. There were often referrals to the political in-fighting of Berwyn, which seems to have thwarted any co-ordinated efforts to spur planning and economic development. A recent election in which a large number of the ‘old guard’ politicians were replaced by new leaders, some Latino, seemed to offer hope for change. The newly elected mayor called it a “revolution”.

Berwyn is somewhat divided geographically and socioeconomically along Cermak Avenue, the main commercial core once known as the ‘Bohemian Wall Street’. Park and school districts are divided into north and south, which many residents said was the main source of whatever division between north and south existed. The northern part of Berwyn is described as being more low income and working class, while the southern portion of Berwyn, closer to the train station, is considered more affluent.

Themes

The Value of Diversity

The vast majority of respondents claimed that diversity was something they valued, that they were very much aware of it, that diversity promoted tolerance and creativity, and that most people got along fine, despite their differences. Most people reported that getting along with people unlike themselves was simply a reality to be dealt with. A resident of Berwyn put it this way

It’s easy to be prejudiced and be critical if you don’t have to deal with ‘them’. But if they’re your neighbours and you see them at the ‘Y’
and you see them at the store and you see them at school, then you better accept it and try not to be prejudiced.

Long-time residents said that the areas they lived in were much more diverse now than when they were children and, although they recognised the challenges this entailed, they did not present it as something negative. There were even claims that the growth some areas were experiencing was in part a result of the lure of diversity—that people actively sought it out.

It should be reiterated that, with the exception of Blue Island, the diversity of these neighbourhoods was not racial. Given what we know about the significance of the Black–White racial divide and its effect on population sorting (see especially Massey and Denton, 1993; Kefalas, 2003), this leaves open the question of whether stronger Black presence would have caused respondents to view diversity differently. Since the neighbourhoods were mostly diverse in terms of factors other than race, respondent support of diversity may be analogous to research showing that multi-ethnic cities tend to exhibit higher tolerance for social integration (Frey and Farley, 1996).

The degree of tolerance and open-mindedness might have been exaggerated, especially given that many of the respondents were in positions of leadership or were representing community-based organisations, and thus would be strongly inclined to present a positive, inclusive point of view. Diversity was never an explicit organisational goal, but the desire to facilitate tolerance can nevertheless be viewed as implicit in public-sector institutions like schools. While many noted that Chicago has long been considered one of the most segregated cities in the US, respondents seemed almost philosophical about the diversity they were living in, saying things like “diversity is absolutely essential for healthy communities”. They believed that living together was a way to build tolerance. The Alderman of West Ridge, Bernard Stone, made the point that, following September 11 2001, there were riots all over the world, but not in the religiously diverse neighbourhood of West Ridge. “People working together find out that people are really more alike than they are different”, said Alderman Stone. This was a common theme amongst the majority of respondents.

Long-time residents noted that attitudes towards race and ethnicity had changed dramatically. This change was especially true for Blacks, some said, who had previously been shut out of places like West Ridge, Irving Park and Portage Park. Some places experienced race riots in the 1970s. A resident of Portage Park said that

People who grew up here were raised in the ‘old school’ way—Ukranians lived here and Swedes lived there ... If you were from Bridgeport then people said ‘oh, you must be Irish’.

In other words, awareness of the connection between where you lived and what nationality or race you were used to be much more pronounced.

Despite the generally positive views about diversity, respondents recognised the tensions produced. Residents of Berwyn expressed fear that the sudden rise in Hispanic population was “taxing the system”, as large families required services like schools and put additional stress on utilities and police and fire services. One resident said that there was a strong sense of community in Blue Island but it did not come automatically: “we work very hard at it”. Another noted that the difference in child-rearing practices between apartment-dwellers and single-family home-owners created a clash in parenting styles: “the apartment kids are given more leeway because there is less space inside the home”.

Notions of what was keeping these places diverse were based on ideas about the overlapping needs and objectives of community
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members. These ranged from shared cultural practices to the more practical, locational advantages of the neighbourhood that residents necessarily held in common. In the former case, Amie Zander of the West Ridge Chamber of Commerce pointed out that women from the Indian, Pakistani and Orthodox Jewish communities were united in that the women tend to stay at home rather than work outside the home.

More pragmatic views pointed to transport, housing and the needs of business. Transport was seen as a major factor, and all of the communities were identified by residents as having excellent access to the downtown. A resident of Blue Island made the point that city services were key to retaining the affluent end of the diversity spectrum, asking: “Who’s going to buy the more expensive homes we have here if the streets aren’t swept and the trash picked up?” Along these same lines, the head of one local bank saw the need for everyone getting along as essential because it was “best for business”. Others noted that small “mom & pop stores” that could be walked to were essential for retaining lower-income people. Where cultural preferences varied, the ability of the neighbourhood to meet a variety of needs within the same place could contribute to diversity. Thus a mix of housing ages helped racial diversity because “Whites like the older homes and Blacks like the newer housing”.

Another pragmatic reason identified as contributing to the maintenance of diversity was rental housing. Residents viewed the rapid conversion of apartments to condos as working against that. This point of view contrasted with political leaders who favoured ownership because it results in more tax revenue. However, residents associated with community-based institutions noted that rentals are particularly important for new immigrants. One respondent pointed out that if entry-level homeownership is later available to immigrants within the same neighbourhoods, it provides a degree of stability, because residents can become homeowners without having to move out of the neighbourhood.

Development Pressures

Housing cost was identified as a key barrier to sustaining diversity. Respondents cited new condominium development as a source of stress on the ability of neighbourhoods to stay diverse. However, none of the six diverse areas was experiencing the kind of rapid gentrification seen in other places in Chicago, like Wicker Park and Bucktown on the North Side. As one respondent put it, “taxes are going up, but it isn’t to the point of panic”. (Note that most of the diverse neighbourhoods studied here are protected by new tax rules that put a cap on property tax increases. This was not the case when Wicker Park and other neighbourhoods closer to the Loop were rapidly gentrifying.) Several respondents in Bridgeport argued that new condominiums were being bought by “old-timers” who wanted to cash in their equity on their single-family home and move into something smaller.

Concerns about affordability were contrasted with desires for economic growth and new investment. In Berwyn and Blue Island, a number of respondents were more concerned about stimulating economic expansion than maintaining affordability. A respondent in Berwyn, for example, said: “We need to raise the median income in Berwyn; we’re becoming a lopsided town, we’re becoming one class”. This sentiment was connected to a concern about ethnic immigration.

While residents believed that their neighbourhoods exhibited a certain robustness—that their communities could withstand change and new development because they “had seen it all before”. There was little conception of what government or the non-profit sector might be able to do to help support and sustain diversity. Instead, the existence of diversity was viewed as an historically derived, somewhat random occurrence. In addition,
rising costs tended to be associated with new condo development, not downzoning or other barriers to development put in place by residents. One resident of Old Irving Park, which had recently downzoned its neighbourhood, reasoned this way about the inability of non-affluent people to move into wealthier Old Irving Park: “it’s not about people’s attitudes, it’s just that housing cost is a barrier”.

There was an obvious awareness that diverse neighbourhoods could become the victims of their own success—i.e. that people moving to a place because of its diversity would ironically end up making the area less diverse. New condominium development and million-dollar homes on gated cul-de-sacs were seen as not being well integrated, putting stress on the long-term stability of diversity in the neighbourhood. Whether minorities were being pushed out as a result was only vaguely understood. One developer argued that, since new single-family development in these highly built-up neighbourhoods involved reclamation of industrial and underutilised commercial land, developers were making better use of land and not simply displacing existing families: “Nobody’s being pushed out. Nobody’s being priced out”, a developer in Bridgeport claimed.

Where it seemed clear that long-term residents were leaving, the reason was put squarely on the problem of affordability. Out-migration was not about crime, not about traffic or other aspects of urban living, but rather, it was about the high cost of living. Evidence to support this concerned the fact that residents who moved further out to gain affordability still retained a connection to the neighbourhood, coming back every Sunday, for example, to attend church. Ironically, this practice was putting a strain on the neighbourhood because of the need to retain large parking lots for people to drive in from the suburbs—parking lots that sat vacant most of the week.

These kinds of demographic change were connected to concerns about neighbourhood character. Residential change ranging from garage conversions to new ‘cinder block condos’ could be seen as destroying the character of the neighbourhood. With little planning or design review in place, changes were perceived as being mostly detrimental, where the correct and only response would be to block change. This sentiment prompted residents of Old Irving Park to fight density and successfully down-zone their neighbourhood. They pointed to neighbouring areas like Wicker Park, where “there’s architectural sameness ... they’re all starter condos, with a little balcony for the Webber grill”. Many residents valued the pedestrian orientation and walkability of traditional neighbourhood design and wanted to keep the basic structure—minimal setbacks, wide sidewalks, accessible storefronts—intact.

The neighbourhood change that residents were primarily reacting to constituted an increase in density, the support of which varied based on location. Specifically, there was willingness to support density increases along commercial corridors, but not in residential areas. One resident of Old Irving Park understood the advantage: “We want to get enough density to support a Starbucks”. A city planner assigned to Portage Park said that residents there were “fine with chains”—they just wanted their retail district to be strong. From the small-business owner’s point of view, however, high-end chains would have to co-exist with independently owned stores. One business owner said: “The ethnic stores don’t want an ‘American look’; they will lose business if they look too American”. In a similar vein, a business owner in Blue Island equated the sprucing up instigated by the Main Street programme as ‘harassment’, constituting “stupid, picky little rules that will push people out”. On the other hand, the idea of making a business area ‘attractive’ was seen as significantly less important than simply attracting a major retailer to the area: “A Walmart or a Kmart—that would help diversity”, said one Blue Island business owner.
Another dimension of the density issue was the degree to which it seemed to be occurring in haphazard ways. Converting single-family houses to multifamily residences was one source of resentment. As one respondent put it: “I don’t care what ethnicity they are, if they’re cramming into one house it causes problems.” Adding illegal apartments, motivated by the need for additional rent, was cited as a significant problem in Berwyn. Some pointed out that the poor design of apartment buildings could make multifamily housing more of a liability than it needed to be. There was some sense that lack of planning and design for development was putting a strain on things. “That’s one of the problems with this town”, a respondent said of Blue Island, “there isn’t really a design to it”.

Social Connectedness

Against a backdrop of increased tolerance for diversity and the ability to identify ‘common denominators’, the ability to channel diversity in positive ways was seen as limited by a lack of ‘better networking’. This came up in response to such practical issues as the ability of businesses to band together to address parking and litter problems. One business owner in Portage Park said that it was hard to get ethnic groups involved in business organisations because “they don’t think in terms of the neighbourhood as being their market, they think in terms of their group being their market”. Latinos in Berwyn were described by several residents as “insular”. The head of an historical society in Blue Island said that he had difficulty getting Hispanics involved in his organisation because of a lack of historical connection: “I have no photos, artefacts... nothing from the Hispanic community”. There was some sentiment that people in diverse places were having a difficult time forming a unified vision of what their neighbourhoods should be.

Whereas a reliance on walking was identified as helping ethnic groups to stay neighbourhood-focused, an increase in mobility among other groups was severing connections to the local community. Respondents pointed to the increased role of the automobile in this. A resident of Berwyn recalled when police and firefighters were required to live in the communities they served, so that they would have a stake in the local area. Some recalled a time when they knew where all of their teachers lived. Perceptions that there were fewer community-wide events bringing people together were fuelled by evidence that involvement in neighbourhood-based organisations and institutions had declined dramatically. A fireman in Blue Island told of how the Lions and VFW Hall were gone and that “a lot of fraternal organisations are going by the wayside”.

The consequence of fewer people being involved in community activities and a perception of retreat to private worlds was a belief that residents no longer knew how to function as neighbours in a neighbourhood. One long-term resident of Portage Park recalled: “Growing up, nobody had a tall fence. Now everyone has a six-foot-tall wood fence and everybody just drives into their little piece of the world”. Sometimes this was attributed to newcomers. In Bridgeport, one resident said that when new town homes get built

First thing that goes up is the outside security door, then a security fence that locks it. People in Bridgeport laugh at it because there’s no need for it—‘it’s not that bad, folks!’.

The implication of this was a loss of caring about how to be a good neighbour. One argued that

Some people don’t understand how a neighbourhood works, how to keep it on a social level; they just don’t understand what has to be done, like cutting the grass.

But there was also an interesting connection drawn between tight-knit, closely bonded communities and decreased mobility. In West Ridge, the tight bond of certain ethnic
and religious groups was believed to be tied to the ability to walk to communal facilities like synagogues. The Orthodox Jews of West Ridge are one example. Diverse communities were identified as providing access for new immigrants—to services and facilities as well as people who speak their own language. Some respondents said that ethnic immigrants created permanence in the community because they were so attached to their neighbourhoods. The strong bonds within different groups were also cited as a reason why gentrification pressures did not always amount to much. Although imposing some hardship, respondents believed that residents would find a way to stay in the community because of the cultural organisations and institutions they had come to depend on. The ability of West Ridge to resist gentrification and maintain social connectedness to a higher degree than Bridgeport might be due to locational factors—Bridgeport is closer to the Loop making gentrification pressures stronger—but it might also be due to the ability of West Ridge to maintain stronger ethnically and religiously based institutional support.

The Role of Public and Private Institutions

Most respondents believed that the role of public and private institutions in community life had changed significantly. While religious institutions were still thought to be the centre of social activity in some neighbourhoods like West Ridge, respondents in Bridgeport saw a significant decline in the role of church and school. Catholic parishes in particular had gone from being the centre of social and educational life to being of much more limited social significance. This was attributed to a broadening of resident interests and lessening of group affiliation. Some argued that new residents were not joining parishes and not sending their children to local schools: “the new people are not joiners; there isn’t a sense of community with these people”. That perception has been echoed in other studies of gentrification in Chicago (Nyden et al., 2006).

There is a certain paradox to having strong institutions in diverse neighbourhoods. Such institutions had historically tended to separate people by enforcing attendance at a particular parish and school, with little outside contact. Few facilities functioned specifically as inclusive community centres. Now, religious, ethnic and various private institutions are seen as being crucial for maintaining some degree of social connectedness. The Irish-American Heritage Center in Irving Park, for example, is run by a board that includes “lawyers and doctors in addition to blue-collar and people of little means”. Arts organisations like the Portage Park Arts Center were seen as drawing very diverse groups together: “Housewives doing quilting next to people doing eastern meditation exercises”. An artist in Bridgeport claimed that the arts district was “holding Bridgeport together”.

The need for more community facilities was discussed in terms of specific population sub-groups, especially children. A resident of Irving Park observed that communal play spaces were essential not just for keeping people connected, but for taking the children off the streets and giving them somewhere to go. This in turn, she argued, could lessen tensions among neighbours. In a neighbourhood with high density and insufficient public space, the provision of spaces for play may be essential for keeping neighbours neighbourly. Some observed that there was a need not only for more facilities, but also for better access to existing ones. Residents of both Blue Island and Berwyn said that children had poor access to public libraries and (in the case of Blue Island) many had to cross over railroad tracks to get there. At the other end of the age spectrum, it was claimed that the Blue Island community lacked sufficient “lifestyle options” for seniors.

The fragmentation and privatisation of communal places translated to a lack of social
footing. Places that would have functioned as community focal points in previous decades no longer existed. Residents perceived that there used to be a wider array of gathering places, including centralised commercial areas. In Portage Park, the Six Corners shopping district was said to be the central life of the community and its steady economic decline bothered Portage Park respondents significantly. The director of the West Ridge Chamber of Commerce said that there were few places for teenagers to go, a condition that might have been alleviated in previous eras by commercial venues.

Where institutional strength was cited as being important, respondents criticised funding levels and a lack of commitment. They noted that underfunding of libraries and even the lack of a local newspaper were making it more difficult to hold the diverse community together. They pointed out that it used to be that Chicago public schools played a formative role in community life, but that funding cuts had eliminated the ability to keep the schools open to the public after hours. Respondents noted that there was now a lack of commitment to public schools and that parents, particularly newer affluent ones, opted to send children outside the neighbourhood to private schools. In Irving Park, for example, the landmark Carl Schurz high school was populated by students being bussed in because “kids from the neighbourhood try to avoid going there”. Interviewees were aware of recent gang-related shootings at the school and attributed this to outsiders.

Discussion

Socially diverse neighbourhoods are distinguishable as places where residents are working out the day-to-day complexities that arise when different kinds of people occupy the same geographical space. These neighbourhoods are not gentrified—although they often have strong gentrification pressures—and they are not suffering from high crime and disinvestment. Yet neither are their business districts and schools thriving. These are neighbourhoods and communities that are sometimes viewed as stops along the way to the ultimate American dream, the more affluent suburban neighbourhood. As the mayor of Berwyn summarised:

We’ve always been a stepping-stone community, a launching field for the Napervilles ... Berwyn started out with the Czechs, then the Irish, then the Italians, now the Hispanics; they come from Chicago. Some stay here and some end up moving further out. It’s the next step in the economic ladder.

There is a constant tension arising from paradoxical change: development pressures fighting against neighbourhood preservation efforts, older public facilities that deteriorate despite new investment, small businesses that are pushed out by chain stores, local institutions with far-flung constituencies, declining schools in the midst of rising wealth, old-timers that are displaced by young professionals, and real and imagined fears that gradually escalate. Eventually, such neighbourhoods often veer in one direction or another and lose their diversity.

Bell and Hartmann’s study of the “cultural ambiguities” of discourse surrounding diversity revealed that, although most Americans are overwhelmingly positive about diversity in the abstract, further probing reveals deep tensions resulting from the problematic realities of difference as they are experienced in the concrete contexts of everyday social life (Bell and Hartmann, 2007, pp. 895 and 897).

Our respondents seemed to have a clear understanding of the tensions surrounding diversity and were able to put them in a concrete context. Not only were they very much aware of the diversity surrounding them, they were also aware that urban investment and revitalisation activities had an effect on diversity; that
investment can be good for social diversity in one context and work against it in another. Overall, the interviews revealed that the struggles between different groups were interwoven with—that is, expressed through and around—issues very pertinent and even central to their perceptions of neighbourhood context and the design of the built environment.

Yet all six communities lack basic planning and design support. Since development tends to be smaller in these already built-up neighbourhoods, neighbourhood plans and designs are the only mechanism for ensuring that development fits into a broader framework. Unfortunately, most neighbourhoods in Chicago do not have any kind of legal power to enforce a collectively derived vision. None of the six communities have an open, democratically driven neighbourhood planning process. The process is closed, mostly a matter of the personal interest of individual aldermen. As a developer from Bridgeport summarised it, “In Chicago, the aldermen control development because the aldermen control zoning”. Even for large projects, there is generally no neighbourhood involvement or community review of projects. When Alderman Stone was asked why a large park was being developed near his home at the suburban edge of West Ridge, he said, “Well, I like it ... I have a personal interest in parks”.

The lack of public involvement in diverse places is unfortunate, because in these places especially there is a need to foster public participation and collective input. That is because diverse areas are likely to be located in older, inner-ring suburbs that are mostly built out and prone to recurring issues over the appropriate use of space—space for parking, for new development, for single-family conversions, for public facilities, for schools. Our interviews confirmed that the ever-present contestations over issues endemic to older neighbourhoods had no process of resolution—no participatory approach that would ensure an open attempt to strike a compromise or a consensus.

The practical value of planning and design is that it exerts pressure on local aldermen to pursue a collective vision and not deviate according to their particular whims or, many respondents believed, their ability to line their own pockets. Aldermen respond to their constituencies but, many believed, only to those with the loudest voices. There was an example in Bridgeport of a developer who was trying to build town homes in a single-family area that would have included common open space, but the alderman insisted that only single-family housing could be built. Without consideration of housing mix, context, need, design and planning, the alderman was only using the blunt instrument of conformity to respond to the development proposal.

Lack of planning impedes the community’s ability to feel that it is moving forward and progressing on some level. Many respondents had the view that certain neighbourhood developments or improvements were essential to the neighbourhood’s long-term health and that, without them, the neighbourhood would decline. With so much riding on certain high-profile projects, much could be gained by concretising these developments as essential parts of community-generated plans. Relatedly, experience with structured resident input in Chicago’s community policing programme has had significant success, especially in integrated neighbourhoods (Skogan, 2006).

In the absence of a collective vision, residents in a diverse neighbourhood may be particularly prone to antagonism towards new development. Without clear plans and guidelines, change is often seen as threatening. There were many examples given by respondents of attempts to block new development—especially development that would increase density. To the degree that some new development is necessary to sustain diversity, neighbourhood planning and design could play a stronger role in ensuring compatibility of diverse types of development, thereby minimising attempts to block changes that would actually promote diversity.
Residents seemed to be most concerned with predictability and the ability to avoid bad quality design, not with blocking people out per se. Residents in Berwyn were upset about the loss of historical structures to make way for an Applebees and a parking garage proposed for Devon Avenue in West Ridge was widely criticised by neighbourhood residents and merchants because of its bad location and design. These types of stresses may have been dealt with in a less contentious way if there had been a different kind of decision-making environment.

The failure of process also tends to result in uncreative solutions to things. The city planner for Portage Park said that some residents believed that the way to battle crime was to promote higher housing prices. Perhaps if there had been a process in place for addressing issues like neighbourhood crime, solutions that seek a more holistic understanding of proposals, especially their negative consequences (like gentrification and residential displacement), would be a matter of course. Tensions over practical issues like traffic and parking should not be allowed to escalate and transfer into objections about particular groups of people. There is a need to empower residents with the tools and strategies they need to address such issues.

In highly diverse areas, there are special challenges to forming a unified vision of what the neighbourhood should be and how it should grow. This makes public participation even more essential, since the ability to take control of neighbourhood change may very well be the best strategy for sustaining diversity. Diverse neighbourhoods already have to work through social mix on a daily basis. It seems that planners could, at a minimum, ensure that there is a process in place for dealing with conflicts over issues having to do with the design and use of space.

**Conclusion**

The viability of stable, diverse neighbourhoods in 21st-century America sometimes seems perilous. Recently, two of America’s most prominent social scientists put the idea in question. Survey work by Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), found a surprising level of multicultural intolerance in his longitudinal survey of 26,000 people in 40 communities. He concluded that, although diversity is essential for productivity and social well-being, people in diverse places—even non-ethnic Whites—often become more socially isolated. Conservative commentators picked up on this to bolster arguments that multiculturalism is dead (Sailer, 2007). Meanwhile, the Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson published the results of an ethnographic study called *There Goes the Neighborhood: Racial, Ethnic, and Class Tensions in Four Chicago Neighborhoods and Their Meaning for America* (Wilson and Taub, 2006). In it were exposed the worst sorts of racial prejudices, constituting an alarming and bleak appraisal about the long-term prospects for neighbourhood-level diversity.

What these studies show is that neighbourhood-level diversity and the tolerance it requires is not and never was, an easy row to hoe. The survey results presented here confirm this, and also give some insight about the relevance of neighbourhood context in thinking about the issue. Overall, the survey showed that most residents thought positively about living in a diverse place—a viewpoint largely missing from the very negative appraisal of diversity in the book by Wilson and Taub (see Sugrue, 2006). They were able to identify some very practical reasons for sustaining diversity—to promote neighbourhood stability and economic development, for example. At the same time, respondents were aware of the problems of diverse places and seemed resigned to the fact that there would always be tensions between groups. Differences were visible in everyday conduct, from child-rearing practices to standards of neighbourhood appearance. Tensions between groups were
recognised as thwarting the ability of residents and small-business owners to work together to address common problems, but there was a matter-of-fact recognition that some effort would be required to make social diversity ‘work’—that stability in a diverse neighbourhood did not come automatically.

The responses brought out a number of recurrent themes concerning the relationship between diversity and neighbourhood context, which was the primary focus of the study. First, views about what was keeping places diverse—or causing them to lose diversity—were often tied to resident perceptions of physical and/or locational factors. For example, transport was seen as a primary factor contributing to the retention of diversity and all of the communities were identified by residents as having excellent access to the downtown. Neighbourhood institutions like churches and schools were viewed as playing a paradoxical role, as historical dividers but also, more recently, as neighbourhood centres that drew diverse groups together. Many saw the lack of community facilities and the loss of institutional strength as working against the ability to maintain diversity.

Neighbourhood change reflected in new types of development was mostly seen as a threat to diversity, rather than a way of promoting it. While the ability to attract more affluent residents was tied to neighbourhood appearance, there was also recognition of the need for rental housing. Fears about the loss of diversity resulting from condominium conversions and the loss of affordable housing were often cited, but these could be contrasted with the views of those who favoured economic growth and new investment. Density increases were not welcomed, unless they were restricted to commercial corridors where density would presumably result in an increase in services. Tensions between new residents and existing residents were manifested physically—with fences, security doors and the enclaving of new housing units. While it may have been recognised that planning and design might have helped to ease the problems associated with new development, residents expressed little inclination that such controls were a realistic option.

The lack of association between proactive control of the built environment and the maintenance of social diversity reflects a wider issue in the urban planning field. While the form, pattern and design of the built environment is believed to have played a strong role in fostering the patterns of segregation that characterise American cities, their reform is not often looked to as a way to reverse the situation. In discussions about how to address the antithesis of place diversity—segregation—American city planning, in its capacity as a profession that plans and designs cities, has been relatively withdrawn. Peter Hall (2002) observed that the problems of inner-city disinvestment, White flight and segregation—the most potent manifestations of non-diversity—are problems that, “almost unbelievably”, city planning has not been called upon to answer. Unlike in other countries, “Americans are capable of separating problems of social pathology from any discussion of design solutions”, focusing instead on “a bundle of policies” (Hall, 2002, p. 461)—often only weakly related to neighbourhood context. And yet, the quest for diversity has always been part of the planning profession, from garden cities to British new towns to new urbanism (Talen, 2005). Perhaps more studies highlighting resident perceptions of the connections between neighbourhood context, built environment and social diversity will help to refocus our attention on this potentially important strategy.

Notes

1. These ideas are more completely developed in Design for Diversity: Exploring Socially Mixed Neighbourhoods.
2. Diversity is defined differently than integration and desegregation, which involve
deliberate strategies for racial and ethnic mixing (see Maly, 2005).

3. Quinn and Pawasarat (2003), for example, noted that racial integration that relies on aggregate measures like census tracts may be misleading, advocating instead for block-level measurement.

4. ‘Spatially adjusted’ means that the boundaries between census geographical units, which change over time, have been spatially rectified so that time-periods can be meaningfully compared. This is done by spatial interpolation, whereby data are apportioned to new spatial units. The disadvantage of using Summary Tape File 3 is that, since the data are based on a sample rather than a full count, they are subject to sampling error. For this study, I felt that the problem of sampling error was outweighed by the need for a small enough geographical unit for gauging diversity (block group) and the need to look at change over time.

5. Much of this material was drawn from the interviewees themselves, with cross-referencing from The Encyclopedia of Chicago (Grossman et al., 2004).

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