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# A Puerto Rican Business District as a Community Strategy for Resisting Gentrification in Chicago

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## Abstract

This article outlines the strategies for economic and community development in a neighborhood in Chicago, mainly composed of Puerto Rican migrants, that has been experiencing gentrification since the 1990s. This paper argues that the Puerto Rican leadership has attempted, with some degree of success, to promote economic development in the form of businesses and institutions that reproduce the Puerto Rican culture in a commercial district known as Paseo Boricua without resulting in the displacement of the pre-existing community. This has been made possible by a community plan, which balances projects aimed at creating jobs with social interests. In particular, this research explores the elements of that plan, along with other strategies, which have contributed to the prosperity of Paseo Boricua, as well as some of the challenges the district confronts. This research is based on 4 and a half years of ethnographic work with an organization of community leaders named the Puerto Rican Agenda. Besides ethnographic methodology, the study is based on interviews, focus groups and surveys. [Keywords: *Business District, Puerto Rican, Gentrification, Community Development, Economic Development*].

## Introduction

Gentrification refers to a process of neighborhood change where people with more purchasing power move into a working-class neighborhood resulting in rent, housing and tax increases ultimately displacing original residents (Smith and Williams, 1996). Long-term residents often contest the forces of gentrification by organizing a number of grassroots campaigns and directly protesting the building of condominiums and the creation of businesses that they are not able to afford (Levy, Comey and Padilla, 2006). In particular, ethnic groups are known for embedding flags and other cultural symbols that clearly denote the neighborhood's identity in the landscape (Naegler, 2012).

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In Puerto Rico, for instance, activists in Vieques have used a number of strategies to confront real estate interests and speculation—from flags, to not-for-sale campaigns, to a moratorium on sales of untitled property. Meanwhile, a community land trust was established in Caño Martín Peña to protect land from private interests. In the case of Puerto Rican migrants, East Harlem (or *El Barrio*) stands out as a space of cultural resistance. Puerto Rican activists from *El Barrio* have used a number of cultural initiatives—such as museums, murals and restaurants—to contest gentrification and claim a stronghold both physically and symbolically (Lao-Montes and Davila, 2001). In the context of Humboldt Park, this article explores how *Paseo Boricua* (a Puerto Rican commercial district) was envisioned as the primary community strategy to halt urban gentrification.

### **Puerto Ricans in Chicago**

Puerto Rican migrants started to move to the United States in mass numbers as part of the Operation Bootstrap, which began in 1947 primarily to resolve the shortage of workers in productive and domestic labor (Padilla, 1947). In 1960, there were 32,371 Puerto Ricans living in Chicago and by 2000 the population more than tripled to 113,055 (Census, 1960 & 2000). Since then, like in other industrial cities, the Puerto Rican population has slightly declined to 103,105 according to the last American Community Survey of 2013 (ACS, 3-year estimates 2013).

In the 1950s, Puerto Ricans settled in the West Side of Chicago but it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that this trend accelerated as a result of the urban renewal project Chicago 21 Plan, which displaced Puerto Rican families living in the North Side to the West Side (Betancur, 2002). In 1995, the Puerto Rican Agenda (Agenda, for short), a collective of Puerto Rican leaders and community organizations serving the West Side, came up with the idea of installing two monumental flags (one of them illustrated below) to halt the gentrification that was coming from the North and East sides. They called the space that was demarcated by the flags, *Paseo Boricua* (abbreviated as *Paseo*), which functioned as a community gateway.

Because of the influence of the Agenda in conceiving, developing and maintaining *Paseo*, the majority of my ethnographic work was carried out for a duration of 4 and a half years focused on participating in the activities of this group. In addition, this particular article is based on interviews, surveys and focus groups conducted with business owners in *Paseo*. The concept of *Paseo* was first articulated in the Humboldt Park Redevelopment Area Plan, and then instituted

by the Division Street Development Association. Therefore, the first section of this paper introduces these two key institutions to provide the necessary context to understand Paseo's formation, mission and politics.



Figure 1 —Flag of steel marking Paseo Boricua. Source: Author

## Two key institutions in the development of Paseo

### *Humboldt Park Redevelopment Area*

Paseo Boricua is part of a Humboldt Park Redevelopment Area (HPRA), which “is an innovative and landmark effort within the city of Chicago to promote housing and economic development along with giving the community power to acquire and assemble land for purposes outlined in the Redevelopment Plan” (“HP Redevelopment Area,” 2014). The HPRA was a concept created in 1994 by the Humboldt Park Empowerment Partnership (HPEP), a collective of more than 80 community organizations. The Near Northwest Neighborhood Network (N4N), a non-profit organization, also a member of the Agenda, was the main entity involved with these organizations and established the HPRA.

The plan, approved in 1994 by the city of Chicago Planning Commission, was broader than Paseo. It also entailed the development of affordable housing projects, cultural projects, manufacturing and the provision of educational and social services. The planning process to create the redevelopment area involved over 1,000 residents and 100 organizations (DSBDA, 2008). NNNN at that time had more than 30 staff organizers and they were able to find enough support to leverage this proposal and make it a reality.

The recruitment of new businesses in Paseo was also part of this plan and in the first few years, the commercial strip went from 70 percent vacant, to 95 percent occupied (Ocasio, 2013). When the flags were installed in 1993, Paseo Boricua was born and by around 1995, according to key informants, more Puerto Ricans—many with the assistance of the Division Street Development Association—started to invest in the area, rehabilitating the façades of buildings, making renovations to their interior and even designing and constructing expansions.

#### *Background of the Division Street Business Development Association*

Founded in 1989, the history of the Division Street Business Development Association (DSBDA) on Paseo and particularly the promotion of a Puerto Rican space is closely tied to the threat of further gentrification. After being themselves displaced by gentrifying forces, they moved their offices to Paseo and since the development of the flags of steel in 1995, the organization “has actively sought to raise the visibility of the local community and business market, establishing a brand presence for the Paseo Boricua cultural enclave” (DSBDA, 2014).

With strong Puerto Rican and more loosely Latino roots, the mission of DSBDA, “has been to facilitate the organization of individuals that seek to enhance their participation in the burgeoning economic structure of Humboldt Park [the Puerto Rican neighborhood], while at the same time remaining dedicated to the cultural development and empowerment of its Puerto Rican/Latino community” (Northern Illinois University, 2010).

In terms of their target audience, DSBDA serves “the business community on Division Street generally composed of small micro-enterprises with informal structures and infrastructure. Many are family run, or individuals that are under-capitalized and under-informed by standard business practices/financial responsibilities” (DSBDA: Overview, 2014). DSBDA is also trying to encourage “development without displacement.” In line with this, they have promoted various affordable housing projects in Paseo (ibid).

The following section discusses the policies that have allowed Paseo to succeed, as discussed with key informants in interviews and focus.

## **Key elements of the district**

### *1. A Business Development Association*

The existence of DSBDA has been a key factor in the development of the business and the community interests embedded in Paseo. For example, one of the first initiatives of DSBDA was to hire someone at minimum wage to clean up the streets of the business stretch, as the government was not assuming that responsibility. In contrast, the businesses districts in West Town and Bucktown (gentrified communities where Puerto Ricans used to live) are designated Special Service Areas—which means that businesses and homeowners in that area pay extra for street cleanup.

DSBDA carries out a wide variety of activities. They sponsor networking events and provide technical assistance to businesses primarily through workshops and special seminars. Some of the classes include “how to start and manage a business,” “how to create a business plan,” among other kinds of training. Unfortunately, not many business owners take advantage of these workshops. The association is more successful accomplishing other tasks. For instance, they hosts a business incubator and links businesses to finance sources. It also assists businesses that are in need acquiring a building permit, or a business/liquor license. In order to attract new customers to the area, they host various festivals such as the Haunted Humboldt Park, Puerto Rican Day Parade, *Fiesta Boricua*, Three Kings Winter Festival & Parade and the Paseo Boricua Classic Car & Bike Show. These festivals have proved extremely successful to market Paseo.

In addition, they provide food crawls and walking tours as a way to expose others to the history, culture and the businesses that exist in the area and that are unknown to most Chicagoans. The organization also engages in marketing assistance, by hosting a website with a local business directory that has about 300 visitors each month. Staff distributes marketing and/or special activities materials at community events on an ongoing basis. DSBDA also engages in lobbying activities and uses its connections with public and elected officials to advocate for more resources for Paseo. Research has been a major component for what the organization performs. About a half dozen reports and feasibility studies have been produced by or for DSBDA.

## *2. Businesses own their building*

According to community leaders, the majority of the buildings are owned, not rented, by the Puerto Rican business owners. In 2003, community leaders with the help of Banco Popular, started to lead a campaign in order to encourage the businesses in Paseo to buy their properties, instead of renting them (*Chicago Tribune*, 2003). The idea behind this was that owning reduced the chance of rent increases that could ultimately displace business owners from the area. The following quote from the business focus group on Paseo illustrates the importance of ownership and not having to pay rent or, even better, a mortgage:

I think that businesses that engage in retail are not necessarily successful. We've had a few clothing, retail clothing stores and music stores that haven't been successful. Primarily because they don't own their own property which I think that is really helpful.

According to key informants, the fact that many buildings are owned by Puerto Ricans has helped the businesses avoid gentrification to some extent.

## *3. Providing spaces to not only shop but also hang-out*

The DSBDA (2008) study *Path to New Strategies* showed that although more than half of the people (57 percent) used the space for shopping, a large number (46 percent) of individuals who frequent Paseo use it as a space to socialize. One of the notable cultural differences of Paseo is that it usually has people just hanging out, sitting and chatting, playing dominoes, standing on the corners. In Paseo, there is not a clear distinction between the sphere of private enterprise (or economic activity) and the public sphere (which engages in the creation of a socio-cultural space).

This was intentionally planned. The creation of Paseo was not about *making* a Puerto Rican Business District, but more about *enhancing* what already existed in the strip for generations: community interaction. Since the 1960s, Paseo has had many Puerto Rican establishments, including a theater, record stores, small groceries, barbershops, florists, restaurants, clothing and jewelry stores, bakeries, and bodegas, among other establishments that primarily served the community internally and that serve as “third places” (places that are not home or work according to Oldenburg book published in 2000).

In a survey I conducted with people using the space, I found out what Paseo Boricua has become for them: “a place for Puerto Ricans to meet,” “a fun place to go,” “a place to learn about culture and history.”

Such comments demonstrate that Paseo is a space mostly dominated by community ties. These connections extend to other spheres of life. For instance, according to the same survey, it is through “word of mouth” that the majority of the people find out about events (69 percent) or housing opportunities (59 percent) (DSBDA, 2008).

#### 4. *Allowing but limiting big national chains*

The 2001 IRRPP report mentions that there is a “need to get people on board with a common vision, especially concerning product selection” (DSBDA, 2001, 28). From the very start, community leaders have shied away from recruiting large retail chains such as Walgreens or CVS from outside the community. There is only one exception that comes to mind: Roberto Maldonado (the current Alderman) directly supported the establishment of Family Dollar (a discount store) on the basis that people in Paseo didn’t have a store to buy the affordable goods they needed for the everyday life. In other words, Paseo Boricua’s vision has been to encourage entrepreneurialism from within the community first, but at the same time acknowledging that some flexibility must be taken into account to satisfy the needs of the community as a whole.

#### 5. *Supporting businesses and non-profits*

There is a large number of non-profit organizations in Paseo including DSBDA, *Vida Sida*, the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, *Batey Urbano*, *Puerto Ricans Unidos en Acción* and Pedro Albizu Campos High School, among others. In fact, about one-third of the commercial space on Paseo is occupied by non-profit organizations (DSBDA, 2014). The high density of non-profit organizations, including social service organizations, not only has the side effect of lowering rents in the area, which is a concern in a gentrifying community, but it also has the effect of solidifying the community around institutions that are rooted in that space.

#### What type of business do you own?

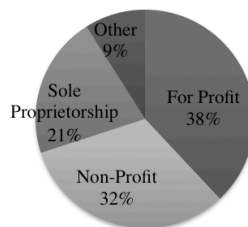


Figure 2 — **Business types in Paseo Boricua.** Source: 2012 DSBDA survey.

6. A combination of retail, but with a strong Puerto Rican identity

As Figure 3 below displays, businesses are comprised of a combination of retail (including discount, clothing, record and book stores, at 20 percent), restaurants (17 percent), and grocery/liquor stores (12 percent), among others. Many of the non-profit organizations are focused on Puerto Rican culture and fall under the categories of art, education and “other.” About 10 percent of businesses fall into the “Professional Services” category which consists of, among other things, consultants, architects, medical and marketing offices.

According to the designers of Paseo an important feature is that most businesses support “Puerto Rican-ness”. They very proudly display Puerto Rican flags in shop fronts, showing very clearly the kind of identity politics that they supports. The Puerto Rican identity, according to internal sources, is a way of halting gentrification. This is mainly because they do not attract that many outsiders. Attached to the politics of Puerto Rican-ness, the flags of Paseo Boricua serve as a means to declare ownership over the space through the act of “plantar bandera” (planting the flag), like Tommy Olivencia’s famous song declared.

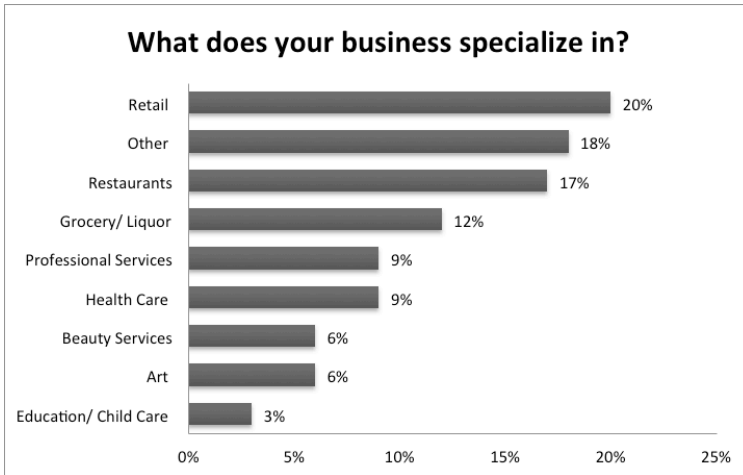


Figure 3. **What does your business specialize in?** Source: 2012 DSBDA Survey

7. Appealing to a range of incomes, a local and extra-local decisively Latino and Puerto Rican clientele

According to the researchers at University of Illinois-Chicago’s (UIC) Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy (IRRPP), Paseo Boricua restaurants were hoping to attract “upscale North Side



residents and local Latinos” (DSBDA, 2001). Among Latinos, there is a market segmentation between those who are high-income or low-income and those who were residents or not. The study’s interviews found that community leaders were not in agreement exactly about who the Latino target audience for Paseo was—Latinos who lived in the area or beyond, with low or high incomes.

The study showed that the market strategy, including the ambiance of the restaurants, the shops and the pricing, might vary depending on just for whom Paseo was meant. As the study states, “if the primary market is the outside community, then issues like safety become more important, some respondents argue and issues of maintaining affordable housing near Paseo becomes less important” (*ibid*, 26). This research study was reported in 2001, so today we can see from the vantage point of what Paseo Boricua has become and perhaps can conclude that Paseo has adopted a sort of mixed strategy: from high-end to low-end restaurants, condos to affordable housing developments and so on.

Nonetheless, a local and community-driven market has dominated. For example, in a video (*Paseo Boricua Food Crawl Tour by DSBDA, 2009*) where DSBDA promotes their Paseo Boricua’s food crawl, various business owners stated, without explicitly being asked, that the primary market has been Puerto Rican families of all incomes. For example, Roberto Tañón from *La Bruquena*, explains how their customers thank him for the food saying, “thank you, I feel like my grandmother cooked for me.” Epifanio Vélez talking in Spanish added to the cinematographic vignette, “I wanted to make a pretty restaurant for the Puerto Rican community, something that represents us well, so that all Puerto Ricans have a place to bring our families and make them feel proud of their culture.” The Latin American restaurant owner concludes that, they have a “familiar environment ... that everybody can afford.”

On Chicago’s West Side, where Latinos are densely concentrated, there are a large number of wealthy Latinos. The following map shows a rate that compares each geographic area to other areas where Latinos are concentrated and creates a summary of the household income for Latinos that are above the average. The average is represented by a rate of 100. As the map shows, most of the census blocks adjacent to Paseo have a significantly above average rate of 175-200. Specifically, a lot of Latinos that are better off live within walking distance of Milwaukee Ave. We could assume that many of these Latinos are young professionals.

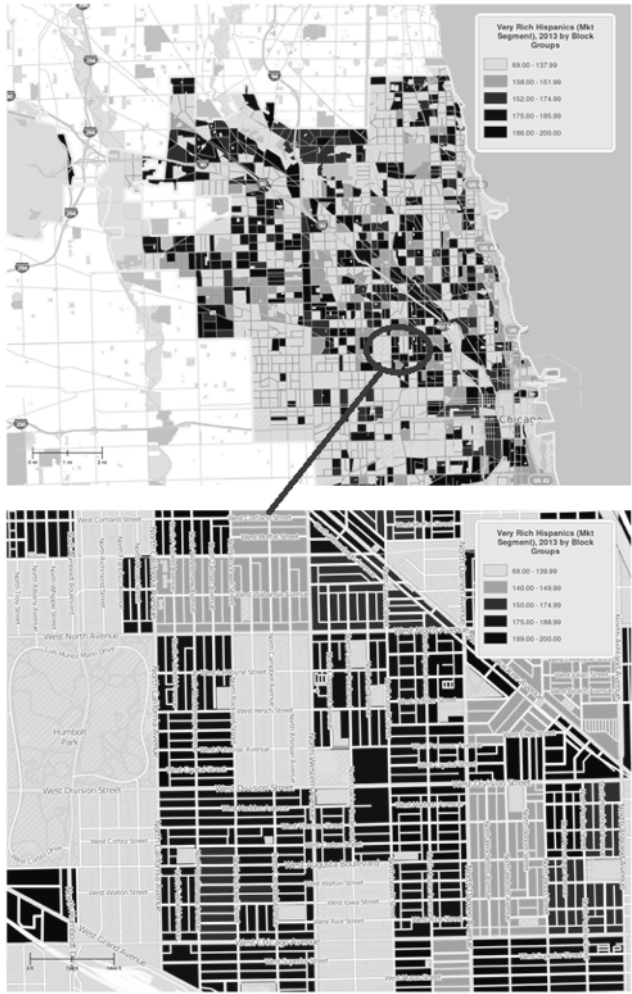


Figure 4 — “Very Rich” Hispanics. Source: Map created by author using Simply Map

Meanwhile, some key informants have noted that suburban Puerto Ricans come to Paseo to purchase certain items that are not sold in the suburbs (e.g., Puerto Rican *sofrito* [a cooking base], Puerto Rican-specific groceries, and musical instruments). Some Puerto Ricans may sponsor Puerto Rican businesses based both in the uniqueness of the products that they sell and “bounded solidarity” (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). What is clear is that many suburban Puerto Ricans will travel considerable distances to go to Paseo, at least once every couple of months.

Nonetheless, some business owners, and especially community

leaders, believe that the fate of Puerto Rican businesses really depends on the non-suburban Puerto Rican population as well as tourism. The next section explores this and some of the other challenges that Paseo experiences.

### **Key challenges**

#### *1. We need support from “our own”*

Puerto Rican businesses require a critical mass of the local Puerto Rican population in order to survive. And many business owners believe that currently their local Puerto Rican base is not supporting them. A business owner explained,

Well, I would say that for me the biggest challenge is to get our own people to patronize our own establishments. I would like to know where the support is in our own communities, if you go to our businesses you don't see the majority of the people that live in the community in our businesses. We have to go outside our community in order to get the clients to come into our business, that's what I find the most challenging. I find it a little bit hypocritical actually, because we talk about all this support for the community interest, but when we have the business, when we have sweated, when we have had to endure inspections, when we had to endure floods, when we had to endure bad economy, when we had to endure all these different things and we discuss it as a community group we're really not there for each other. Does that make sense? And I think that to me that's the most challenging.

There is a structural issue within Puerto Rican businesses. In part, it needs the support of Puerto Ricans and in part it needs the support of others. Some restaurants cater almost exclusively to Puerto Ricans and it is difficult to determine exactly why this is the case. I might speculate that much of it has to do with aesthetics. Some restaurants like *La Bruquena* are able to attract tourists, but at the same time, they are very successful with Puerto Rican patrons. They hold “Bike Night” for mostly Puerto Rican and Latino motorcycle riders on a regular basis, which has allowed them to create a space for the community to socialize.

Some restaurant owners have mentioned that Puerto Ricans are less likely than other groups to frequent a Puerto Rican Restaurant. Mexicans, according to this narrative, are much more likely to visit a Mexican Restaurant, when eating out. Puerto Ricans are more likely to say, according to informants, “why would I eat there [in Paseo], when I can cook here [home]?”

## 2. The misfortune of not appealing to “others”

In some respects, non-Puerto Ricans are also a targeted audience of Paseo Boricua—those who live in the area and those who do not. But there are challenges when trying to attract non-Puerto Ricans to Paseo. For instance, there is a low awareness of Puerto Rican food (DSBDA, 2001). In personal interviews, when outsiders (non-Hispanic black and white) were asked why they did not frequent Paseo Boricua restaurants, even when they lived in the neighborhood, many mentioned they were unfamiliar with the food being served.

One of the most popular restaurants among outsiders is Papa’s Cache Sabroso; it has more reviews on Yelp<sup>1</sup> than any other Puerto Rican restaurant in the city. The restaurant sells primarily *pollo-chon*, which is chicken marinated with traditional pork seasoning. Along with others in the community, I have speculated as to why this restaurant is so popular. We have concluded it is simply because it mainly sells a product that everyone is familiar with: Chicken!

The other traditional foods such as *tostones* (fried plantains), *yucca* (casaba) and *arroz con gandules* (pigeon pea rice) come on the side. The *jibarito* (a sandwich that uses plantain instead of bread) is one of Papa’s signature dishes as well. It is also important to note, this restaurant is closer to Western Avenue (closer to Wicker Park, a gentrified area), which may explain why some on the other side may be willing to venture to Paseo.

Additionally, as far as customer base goes, it is often said in the community “white people attract more white people”. For example, While Papa’s restaurant clientele is very diverse, as the owner states “people from all nationalities come here, not only Puerto Ricans, but Mexicans, whites, African Americans and even Chinese.” He adds, “everyone that I see walking in here I see them as green [the color of money]”. The owner explains that “word of mouth” is what has helped him the most to build his clientele. Papa’s restaurant then achieved a measure of independence from the Puerto Rican clientele as it’s more about the product on offer and therefore, it depends less on a regular Puerto Rican clientele base.

In addition to being unfamiliar with the food, some non-Puerto Ricans assume that staff doesn’t speak enough English, which is not true, based on my field experience. Many outsiders have complained about the service—that the waiters are not attentive, or that the food order takes

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<sup>1</sup> Yelp is a San Francisco based company hosted in Yelp.com. Users can rate and review businesses.

too long to get from the kitchen to the table. According to some, this highlights one of the cultural differences of the slow-pace that islanders are accustomed to compare with the American way of life.

### 3. *Access to finance*

The 2012 DSBDA survey estimated that 27 percent of business owners got business loans in order to buy their building or fund their business activities. Anecdotal data, collected from interviews, showed that Banco Popular was a major player in helping businesses to acquire financing in the past. As a result, in 2005, DSBDA awarded Banco Popular, the Paseo Boricua Corporate Partner of the Year (La Voz Del Paseo Boricua, 2005). Nonetheless, according to the DSBDA 2012 survey, the majority (72.7 percent) of business owners used their own savings for the aforementioned purposes.

In a focus group for the Puerto Rican Agenda, I learned that many business owners refinanced their own homes in order to obtain the financing needed to maintain their businesses. When Puerto Rican business owners in the focus group were asked about their challenges, the most important roadblock they cited was the “lack of capital,” or obtaining the necessary funding for their start-up or business improvements, especially from a bank or from government sponsored programs. In addition, the Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy 2001 report states, “it is a long and difficult process for many in the community to improve their lot and thus be more active patrons of the businesses in Paseo.”

Banks have specific requirements that business owners of color may find difficult to fulfill. For instance, some may require a history of formal education, a business plan and/or previous business experience. Moreover, the DSBDA survey showed that most start-ups in Paseo (70 percent) did not have any sort of previous business experience. The kind of money that some of these business owners reported as being necessary was not in the six-figures. It was more around the \$20,000 mark and other small loan amounts.

Whether or not bank discrimination exists, some business owners said that they had to rely on people they knew in order to afford their start-up costs. For example, business owners Zuleika and Ricardo were able to initially get a loan through the help of a friend,

We’ve had our business for 25 years. When we bought the business, the owner financed to us through a lawyer, the business because we couldn’t find one, 25 years ago. And then we had a partner; when we wanted to buy him out, we

couldn't find a bank neither. A major league baseball player, a friend of ours came and said "You need what, \$200,000 dollars? Here's the money, you got it" and he lent us the money to buy out the business. Yeah and in two years we paid him out, in two years we paid him out! And we couldn't find a bank that would say "Okay, we believe in you, we're going to do it. We're suffering because the economy is going up and down. But still we are solid and we're trying to get a loan now and it's like, you know? Every door that we knock is, you know? [sic].

Many Puerto Rican businesses, like Zuleika's and Ricardo's, have been bought out from other Puerto Ricans and on some occasions financed by friends and family, as it was difficult to get financial backing from banks. This means that Puerto Rican businesses may be more likely to fail than those of non-Latino whites. Many community leaders have raised the point that some Puerto Rican businesses fail because they do not seek the assistance of the established networks. Members of the Puerto Rican Agenda have expressed how they will be willing to pull some strings in order to save Puerto Rican businesses in Paseo. Instead of reaching out to DSBDA, PRCC and other members of the Puerto Rican Agenda, business owners remain silent of their financial problems until it's too late.

As migrants get accustomed to formalized forms of finance for example, applying for a loan at a bank, they become less likely to seek out the financial help of their social networks (that is, borrowing from family and friends) for financing their enterprises (Portes, 1998). For example, Portes (1998) emphasizes how important it is for migrants to seek ethnic solidarity to finance start-ups, or financial assistance. Members of the Puerto Rican Agenda have mentioned the idea of using a rotating credit model similar to that being used by Latinos in both the U.S. and Latin America (Vélez-Ibáñez, 1986), as well as other ethnic groups such as Koreans and Chinese.

#### *4. Building the capacity of DSBDA*

Of the 34 businesses that completed the survey, only about four reported receiving technical assistance from DSBDA. In the interviews with the business owners, it was clear that although most businesses knew about the existence of DSBDA—mostly by the name of the executive director and their board, not necessarily by the name of the organization—they seemed to be generally unaware of the services that the association provided. For example, they knew that the organization conducted tours of the neighborhood and conducted meetings,

but outside of that they knew very little about specific programs or resources that they had available. My interview data suggests that many perceived their operations to be small-scale and therefore not meeting their needs. According to “traditional wisdom,” most business development organizations at the scale of DSBDA have “been weak and ineffectual developmental actors” (McCormick, Hawley and Meléndez, 2008).

##### *5. Actually stopping gentrification in the neighborhood*

Although informants have come to the conclusion that gentrification would be more advanced if the flags in Paseo Boricua would not have been installed, the fact is that the process of gentrification has been moving forward for 20 years. Many Puerto Ricans on the eastern end of the Humboldt Park community have left due to encroaching gentrification. The map below shows: 1) how gentrification—characterized here by higher incomes (Ley, 1992), percent decline in those of Hispanic heritage (Hammel and Wyly, 1996) and an increase in homeowners (DeGiovanni and Paulson, 1984)—is moving west towards Humboldt Park; 2) a few block groups that exemplify changes in median incomes and percentages for non-Hispanics and homeowners between 2000 and 2005-2009. For example, in the year 2000 block group A’s non-Hispanic population was only 22%, with a median income of \$31,528. The ACS 5-year estimates for 2005-2009 show that the same block group increased in percent of non-Hispanic population to 56% and the median income increased by 143% (or to \$76,688). Many other block groups on the western side of the community, unfortunately, tell us a similar story. Nonetheless, although figure 5 clearly shows signs of a first wave of gentrification in Humboldt Park, research participants agree with the statement that gentrification although still a threat, has not advanced at the pace of nearby areas.



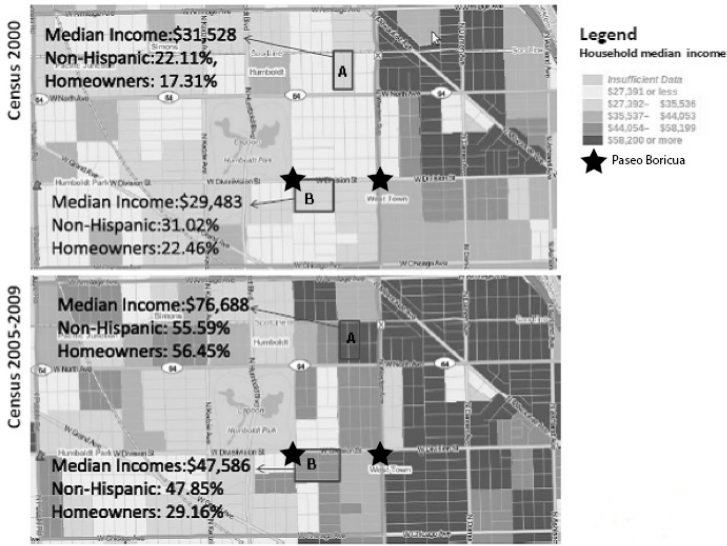


Figure 5. Is Paseo a hindrance to gentrification?

### Conclusion

Successful business districts at the neighborhood level provide spaces for different kinds of people to interact. On a DSBDA pamphlet, Ocasio describes exactly “who” is part of the community in Paseo Boricua,

Young entrepreneurs and seasoned businesspeople, youth and seniors, bankers and workers, community-based organizations and mainstream institutions; in other words, a whole host of people coming with different interests and perspectives to weave together our community’s cartography in a beautiful tapestry (DSBDA, 2007).

This kind of cultural, age and class diversity often requires a mix of uses—a variety of retail establishments and housing types, corner stores and (at times) big chains. This variety is what fosters the great mosaic of what makes a vibrant neighborhood.

Likewise, the establishment of a formal redevelopment area (the Humboldt Park Redevelopment Area, in this case) and the institution of a planning body that executes the plan (DSBDA and other member organizations of the Puerto Rican Agenda) have been absolutely key in encouraging this kind of mix. These organizations and activists have used their expertise, while taking into consideration what the community has articulated as their vision, to give continuity and



stability to a plan that otherwise would sit idle. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the efforts of these organizations are part of broader community organizing goals to halt gentrification and from erasing the historic memory of Puerto Ricans in the Humboldt Park area. Thus, having institutions with a clear Puerto Rican identity has allowed the district to remain predominately Puerto Rican, and within Puerto Rican-ness, relatively diverse.

This research has also demonstrated that although symbolic ownership, as represented by establishing the flags of steel in Paseo Boricua, is relevant to the very issue of self-determination in this community, it is also important for business owners to own the buildings they occupy as part of their strategy to combat rising rents. Additionally, non-profit organizations, as well as medical services, educational services and churches act as a detractor of rising rents because these are services that do not attract consumers into the area, but are of service to local residents. Jeremy Nowak (1999) speaks of the ambiguity of community developers engaging in economic development activities:

In most of America's low-income urban neighborhoods, even the best community-based development efforts function as managers of decline as much as catalysts of significant renewal.... The neighborhood development model, organized around place and community, has tended to consider neighborhoods in terms of constituent service rather than in economic terms (150).

Nowak urges those involved on neighborhood initiatives to recognize the tensions that exist between the goals of economic development and the goals of community development. Any redevelopment in an urban neighborhood represents both an opportunity (much necessary investment) and a threat (possible gentrification). It's a very delicate balancing act. That being said, decision makers and activists, in particular, have to pay attention to the kinds of development they promote. Further, activists need to carefully scrutinize all redevelopment projects from the perspective of intended (and even unintended) consequences.

Although, Paseo does attract a number of tourists and higher income crowds, Paseo is not about supporting economic development for economic development's sake—it is mostly about creating a space for the community that already exist. In other words, Paseo is not about supporting Puerto Rican restaurants so they can profit, it's about supporting the restaurants' claim to have a stake in the space,

to feel proud about being the only community in the United States with so many Puerto Ricans in one single strip. As it is frequently mentioned, New York City, which is home to more Puerto Ricans than Chicago, doesn't have the same density of Puerto Rican restaurants in one single space. This a testimony to how the community organizing efforts of Puerto Ricans in Chicago have successfully resulted in the establishment of the Paseo Boricua space and concept.

As this paper shows, there are a number of challenges that Paseo experiences (including the threat of gentrification) and this is why, as many activists often declare, "la lucha continúa" (the struggle continues). Nonetheless, to many in the community the mere existence of Paseo is a symbol of hope. This business district very loudly says to the Puerto Rican community that they should stay in place.

It is my aspiration that from this article practitioners can draw lessons that might be employed to create thriving business districts for Puerto Ricans in the diaspora as well as those in the Island. The failures outlined here, hopefully, can be seen as opportunities to help Humboldt Park activists and other planners to focus on new and fresh strategies that concomitantly achieve the goals of community and economic development.

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