Redefining Gentrification in Chicago's West Loop: How Commercialization Transformed a Desolate Meatpacking District into the City's Trendiest Consumption Destination

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PRESENTATION OVERVIEW

Background
Neighborhood Overview
Data & Methods
Key Findings
Policy Recommendations
Future Research

KEY TOPICS

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR PRIVATE CAPITAL TO SATURATE A SPACE THAT WAS NEVER INTENDED FOR RESIDENTIAL FUNCTION?

HOW DOES THIS CASE BUILD UPON, OR DISRUPT, ACADEMIC GENTRIFICATION LITERATURE?
BACKGROUND

PRE-1970S
Great Depression leads to abandoned buildings and warehouses
Time Magazine calls it "land of the living dead" in 1949

1970S-1990S
Near West Side predominantly occupied by meatpackers and commercial storage warehouses
Sidewalks occupied with alcoholics, prostitutes, blood pools from meatpacking activity

1990S - PRESENT
Influx of global capital, private investments (McD's HQ, Google, Twitter)
Transition from "Near West Side" identity to "West Loop"
Neighborhood Overview
1990: HARPO STUDIO OPENS
Put West Loop on the map as an up-and-coming corridor ready for revitalization

1996: DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION
Held at the United Center, fueled planners and developers to invest in revitalizing Near West Side

1999: TIF PLAN FOR DEVELOPMENT
City-backed plan to convert empty warehouses and storage to retail and office space
TURNING POINTS

2010: GIRL AND THE GOAT OPENS
Put Randolph on the map for forthcoming slew of high-end restaurants

2012: MORGAN GREEN LINE STATION
Made West Loop more transit-oriented and pedestrian friendly

2015: GOOGLE OPENS MIDWEST HQ IN WEST LOOP
Significant indicator of growing economic engine
DATA
1. Interviews with stakeholders ranging from community organizers, small business owners, private developers
2. Community meetings that center around development proposals
3. West Loop community Facebook groups

METHODS
Transcriptions and visual spreadsheet
Key Findings

1. TENSION OVER GENTRIFICATION
- I find there are two camps of people who disagree on the extent that gentrification defines West Loop's Chicago
- First group do not believe WL gentrified because there was nothing and no one to displace
- Second group believe WL has and continues to gentrify because there are people later displaced by sky-rocketing property values and taxes

2. PROCESUAL COMMERCIALIZATION
- Intention to commercialize drove WL's development
- No singular turning point was the impetus for change, each key moment produced its own ripple effect of consequences
3. PREDICTABILITY ≠ PREPARATION
- Sudden and massive influx of private investments did not leave enough room for public investments
- Commercial amenities such as restaurants, bars, salons are abundant but public spaces, parks, and public schools aren't
- Grappling with obsolete infrastructure that was intended for warehouses, not residents

4. CONSUMPTION DESTINATION
- Abundant transience, few people establishing "roots" in WL
- Lack of capacity for community building efforts
- Urban gatekeeping due to high cost of living
West Loop’s concerning lack of open space for public uses
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. COLLABORATE WITH PRIVATE DEVELOPERS TO ENHANCE PUBLIC SPACES
Suggest private developments to have ample green space and mixed use functions for street level plans

2. HOLD COMMUNITY MEETINGS THAT DISCUSS MORE THAN PRIVATE DEVELOPMENTS
Provide opportunities for neighborhood stakeholders to voice their visions and opinions on community building

3. ENFORCE MEASURED GROWTH
Alleviate frustrations that West Loop development boom is untethered
CONCLUSION

In a space that was never intended for residential functions, the West Loop is a case of processual commercialization instead of gentrification. It increasingly resembles a consumption destination and community building capacity is noticeably absent.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Investigating placemaking in a newly established neighborhood. Can placemaking forces come from dominantly private investments and global capital?