MOVING TOWARD WHITENESS. URBAN CHANGE, SOCIAL HOUSING AND ETHNIC RELATIONSHIPS IN CHICAGO AFTER WWII

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ABSTRACT

"All the riots that I unearthed in the immediate post-war period had a common impulse: each result from the shifting of racial residential boundaries" (Hirsch 1983, xii). The history of Chicago after WWII was characterized by two main issues: a series of new urban plans and vigorous internal mobility. Immigrants from Europe and African Americans from the rural South needed 'spaces' to inhabit. Thus, many agencies, like the Chicago Housing Authority, designed a series of interventions that, in addition to changing the pattern of the city, deeply influenced the relations between ethnic communities. Moreover, the heavy industrialization of the city, with the consequent need of low-cost housing, transformed the urban landscape. This paper aims to reconstruct how the gradual changes in the urban environment have had a direct impact on relationships between ethnic groups. Thus, fuel was thrown onto the fire of social struggles and reactions such as "white flight" took hold.
Keywords: Immigrants; African Americans; Ethnic Minorities; Urban History; Chicago.

You asked me earlier, how did they [the Americans] treat you?

[Interviewer]: Yeah.

Well, the way they treat the blacks several years back was the way they treated the Italians. If you were Italian, you were the scum, you know. Why, because you came in and you worked the lowliest job, you did the ditch digging and toilet cleaning and so on and so forth, where the group before that, by this time, became a little more educated and made a little bit more money, was able to afford a little better houses and you would move into where they moved out of, just like the blacks moved in where the whites moved out of for a while ...

(CMS. 114, BOX 6 PAN-98, 27-28)

*M*oved in where the whites moved out. But the Italians were white, weren't they? So what do the words of Angelo Pane, an Italian immigrant from Chicago,

interviewed by a researcher from Dominic Candeloro's crew in 1980 mean?[1] The aim of this paper is to investigate the relationships between Chicago's immigrant communities and the urban renewal plans effected by the city in the 1940s and 1960s, highlighting the role played by the processes of urban expansion in creating an increasingly wider and irreparable fracture between some ethnic communities—namely the Northern and Central European immigrants—and others, such as Latino and African American. In order to do so, the two key issues underlying this study need to be analyzed. The first one is the urban development that Chicago has been dealing with since the end of the 1800s, through a series of interventions in the city layout that had as goals, on the one hand, the expansion of the city's boundaries and, on the other, an improvement in the quality of life. The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 was intended to go precisely in this direction, proving that Chicago could become the capital of the Midwest. This was also the objective of the Plan of Chicago, a renovation project through which the architects Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett in 1909 wanted to transform the city from an industrial outpost into a model for the new modern middle class. Partially failing in the mission, Chicago was instead overturned by new infrastructures for the mobility of workers and goods, infrastructures that were real barriers of social separation. Alongside this, and perhaps partly as a consequence, a strongly accelerated expansion of public housing projects occurred: in effect, a large number of workers corresponds to a considerable need for housing. This issue constitutes the second and most important aspect which will be analyzed in this paper.

The public housing projects that began to characterize Chicago in the transitional years of the 19th and 20th centuries were intended for an economically fragile social class. Moreover, among the many objectives that were set, one of these was to favor the coexistence of different communities. Since the ethnic structure of Chicago

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[1] The *Italians in Chicago Oral History Project* was a study about Italian Immigrants in Chicago in the twentieth century. Brought on by professor Dominic Candeloro at the Department of History at the University of Illinois with funds from The National Endowment for the Humanities, the aim was to document the Italian American experience in Chicago. The outcome was 114 interviews, recorded in the years 1979-1981 and then transcribed and analyzed by the researchers themselves. The interviews cited in this paper are from the archive of the Center for Migration Studies of New York. The catalogue code of all the interviews is CMS.114 BOX, following item nr.

was already in those years strongly characterized by European immigrants and, after the 1920s, by an increasing number of African Americans, the first consequence was that public housing and social settlement ended up becoming a 'laboratory' for interethnic coexistence. From here, we can then begin to reason about the central object of the article. Can it be argued that Chicago's urban renewal and expansion projects influenced community relations? If so, was there or was there not an intentionality in public and private agencies to foster rather than hinder these relationships? Or could the opposite have occurred? Friction between ethnic groups certainly has the power to alter *social* boundaries. But can this influence the modification of *residential* boundaries? The racial covenants that will be discussed below were one example. Theser, strongly supported by associations of property owners and local politicians, being legitimized by legislation that was still segregationist, demonstrated that where the law did not arrive, direct relationships between communities could do the rest. The words of Angelo Pane that open this article are an example of this.

Finally, why Chicago? The theme of gentrification, the 'white flight' phenomenon—the flight to the suburbs of the white middle class in the second half of the twentieth century—as well as the relationship between ghettoization and ethnic minorities, are issues present in other US cities throughout the twentieth century.[2] Newark, Boston, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles have had a similar history, but specifically Chicago was the most important destination of a strategic emigration of African Americans from the rural South, and it is behind these strategies that we can find Chicago's paradigmatic role in studying the relationships between social mobility, segregation, and conflict within public housing programs.[3]

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[2] About this question in other US cities, see Carnevale 2014, Nicolaides 2019, and Stanger-Ross 2009.
[3] For further studies see Grossman 1991; St. Clare Drake and Cayton Horace 1945.

FROM SETTLEMENT TO PUBLIC HOUSING

In the late 1700s, Baptiste Point du Sable decided to establish his own business near the mouth of the Chicago River. DeSaible was a free man of Dominican origin, a "handsome negro, well educated" (Andreas 1884, 71), of African ancestry through his mother. We can therefore say that the history of Chicago as a paradigmatic city of the Midwest began with an immigrant, one, moreover, belonging to a minority.
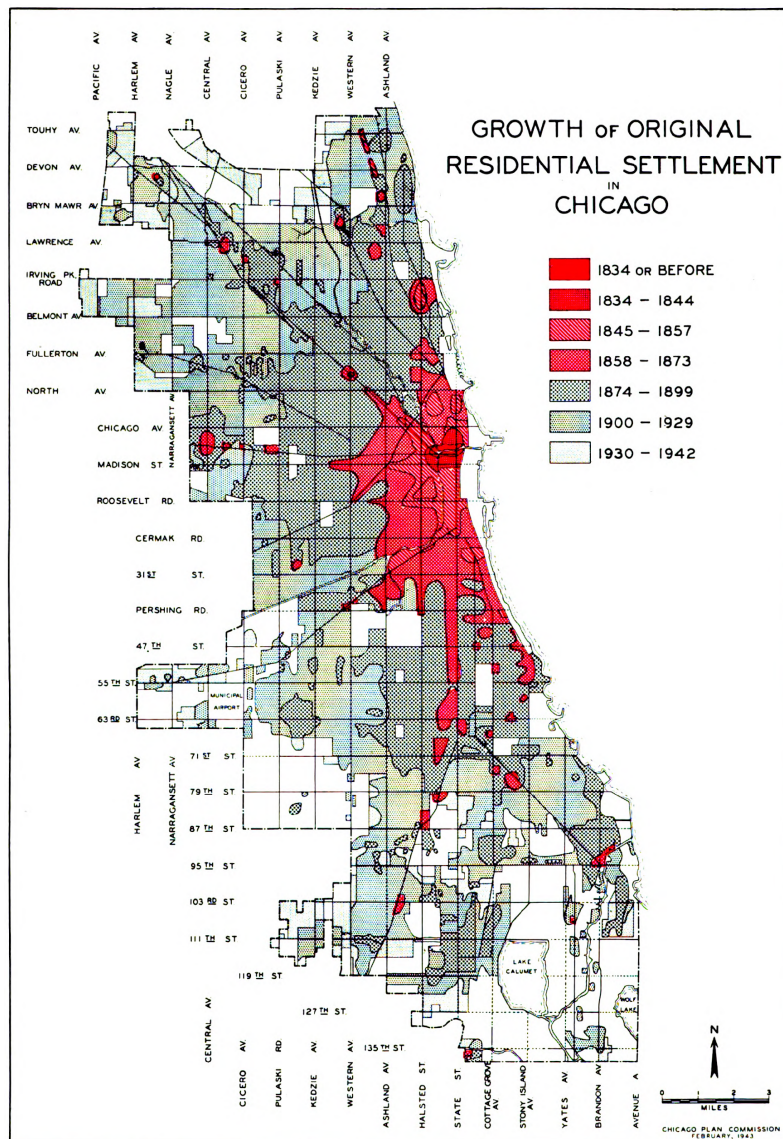

Figure 1. Growth of Original Residential Settlement in Chicago. (Chicago Plan Commission 1943, 22)

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Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the urban structure underwent significant expansion, which increased exponentially between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Plan of Chicago, for example, fell squarely within this ideal of improving the quality of life by modernizing the urban structure. This development had two main directions. The first was linked to the private market, for many decades the main agent of expansion of the city boundaries. The second, with greater social impact, was instead the beginning of a long process of public building, which radically changed various social relationships. In particular, this second aspect was part of a larger project in which many American cities were involved, starting in 1918, when 16,000 housing units were built for war workers across the country. In 1932, the government passed the Emergency Relief and Construction Act as a response to the Great Depression, and the following year the National Industrial Recovery Act initiated major urban redevelopment projects. Specifically, this was implemented through a policy of slum clearance, ultimately established in 1937 with the National Housing Act (Meyerson and Banfield 1969, 17-18). The idea that the elimination of low-cost housing, replaced by new housing and infrastructure, could lead to an improvement in the quality of life and, above all, to an improvement in civic values, was for several decades one of the most frequent debates. Through a process of urban renewal, the goal was to cleanse the community of harmful elements, thereby reducing crime, violence, and degradation.

Since its foundation in the mid-1930s, the Federal Housing Authority has emphasized the correlation—first presumed and then gradually taken for granted—between minorities mixing and social risk. After WWII, the guidance FHA evaluators received before designing new typology of construction was, in fact, intended to prevent racial coexistence:

> By underwriting mortgages issued by lending institutions, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) made it possible for a larger share of working and middle-class individuals to own homes, but arguably exacerbated racial disparities: the property-owning majority that was created in the period after World War II was white. There is general agreement that FHA underwriting criteria played an important part in this story. (Tillotson 2014, 25)

If we look at Chicago's urban redesign under the lens of what Tillotson suggests about the FHA, we can observe the emergence of what Hirsch masterfully defined as *racial geography*: "The peculiar characteristics of Chicago's racial geography—the Black Belt's concrete northern end, the white thorn in its flank, and its newly occupied southern and western provinces—were all, in some measure, acquired through government action after World War II" (Hirsch 1983, 10). There is, however, a next step, a sort of "evolution" of urban redevelopment involving Chicago and other US cities. If, in fact, it was necessary to rethink the urban model, from housing to infrastructure, due to the large flows of internal and external immigration that had considerably increased the population in almost all the industrial cities of the Midwest, it was equally important that housing be affordable. The demolition and subsequent reconstruction of entire neighborhoods was one of the most frequently followed paths, despite having a direct impact on community equilibrium. In fact, the areas considered most difficult were almost always inhabited by immigrants and, especially after the 1930s, by African Americans. This meant that redrawing the boundaries between blocks equated to redrawing the ethnic boundaries of Chicago:

> The ground plan of most American cities, for example, is a checkerboard. The unit of distance is the block. This geometrical form suggests that the city is a purely artificial construction which might conceivably be taken apart and put together again, like a house of blocks. The fact is, however, that the city is rooted in the habits and customs of the people who inhabit it. The consequence is that the city possesses a moral as well as a physical organization, and these two mutually interact in characteristic ways to mold and modify one another. (Park, Bourgess and McKenzie 1925, 4)

Hence, when the FHA decided that this checkerboard needed to be changed, the first consequence was a crisis in Chicago's very racial geography. This was due to a shift in the delicate balance that had developed over decades of overlapping and alternating ethnic communities:

> The city's streets can be read as can the geological record in the rock. The old stone fronts of the houses on the side streets; old residences along lower Rush and State, crowded between new business blocks, or with shops built along the street in front of them; ... "Deutsche Apotheke" on the window of a store in a

> neighborhood long since Italian. These are signs that record the changes brought about by the passing decades, changes still taking place today. (Zorbaugh 1929, 4)

The development and planning of boundaries pre-eminently of ethnic significance, capable of defining which areas could be considered high or low risk, highlighted another element. In the years when Chicago was taking the form of a mosaic, each tile represented a neighborhood and, more importantly, its predominant ethnicity. Deciding where to live could mean social mobility or being relegated to constant ghettoization: people, by choosing their place in the city, could define themselves, their personal and collective identity. Positioning oneself beyond an urban geographical boundary—for example between the Gold Coast and the slums of Little Sicily—was a clear affirmation of belonging. The main problem, however, was whether immigrants, and even more so African Americans, could make such a choice. Were they then free to decide? And if they were, could all immigrants do so?

In 1939, the Chicago Plan Commission explained that compared to 603,000 native-white homeowners, there were 264,000 foreign-born white and only 71,000 African Americans (Hirsch 1983, 190). In addition, imbalances between white and black Americans were also evident in details such as the interest rate charged by banks, the term length of loans—very short for African Americans—and, more broadly, the ability to purchase a home (Tillotson 2014, 29-32). It should be clear, therefore, that it was in this setting that Chicago's long process of building renovation took shape. In this sense, two important events occurred in 1937. The first was the passage of the National Housing Act, which aimed to "encourage the creation by communities of independent, special purpose authorities chartered by the states and empowered to receive Federal grants and to build and manage housing" (Mayerson and Banfield 1969, 18). In connection with this, the Chicago Housing Authority was created in the same year, with the role of promoting public housing as envisioned by the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration of 1933, to "(1) provide decent, safe, and sanitary housing to poor families and individuals who live in substandard dwellings and cannot get adequate housing in the private housing market, and (2) to remove slums and blighted areas" (Deveraux 2012, 17). In this political and social climate, Chicago became a

significant theater for the development and growth of subsidized housing and settlements in the early 20th century.

The "settlement culture" had actually originated in Britain, where welfare policies were already active in the late 19th century. In both Europe and the United States, however, it was with the First World War that, due to housing projects for war veterans and their families, construction volumes became significant. In the United States specifically, it was not until the beginning of the 20th century that public housing gained a prominent place within urban redevelopment projects. But even in this case there was a peculiarity, since the emergency shifted from veterans to immigrants: if in Europe the cities and countryside were emptying, on the other side of the Atlantic they were filling up. In Chicago, this alternation between the war emergency and the migration emergency had a significant weight precisely because of the large number of foreign citizens coming in particular from Europe. The settlements thus became a laboratory of coexistence, where friction and conflict alternated with positive relations; moreover, the urban expansion of the city began along two different tracks. The first involved the construction from scratch of public housing and, to a lesser extent, residential. At the same time, on another track, a wide-ranging slum clearance operation was carried out, through which several neighborhoods were demolished to reconfigure them as places of settlement. The only link that reform policies took into account in both cases was the intention to pursue the FHA's idea of security improvement through slum clearance. In truth, the opposite result occurred: "All the riots that I unearthed in the immediate postwar period had a common impulse: each resulted from the shifting of racial residential boundaries in modem Chicago" (Hirsch 1983, xvi). The first 'battlefields' were, as I have said, the more than thirty settlements that sprang up between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in a city in continuous growth. Among these, the most relevant were certainly the Jane Addams Hull House Project, born from the will of Addams, a leading woman of the American bourgeoisie and a convinced social reformer. Her idea was to create a place of sharing that would provide, in addition to housing, spaces for culture and integration such as a library, an art gallery, youth centers and schools. The settlement, born in 1889 in the Near West

Side—a neighborhood with economic and social difficulties—in about fifteen years acquired the extension of more than 10 buildings, becoming a point of reference for the whole country. Naturally, since the Near West Side was an area densely populated by European immigrants, the experience that resulted was significant.
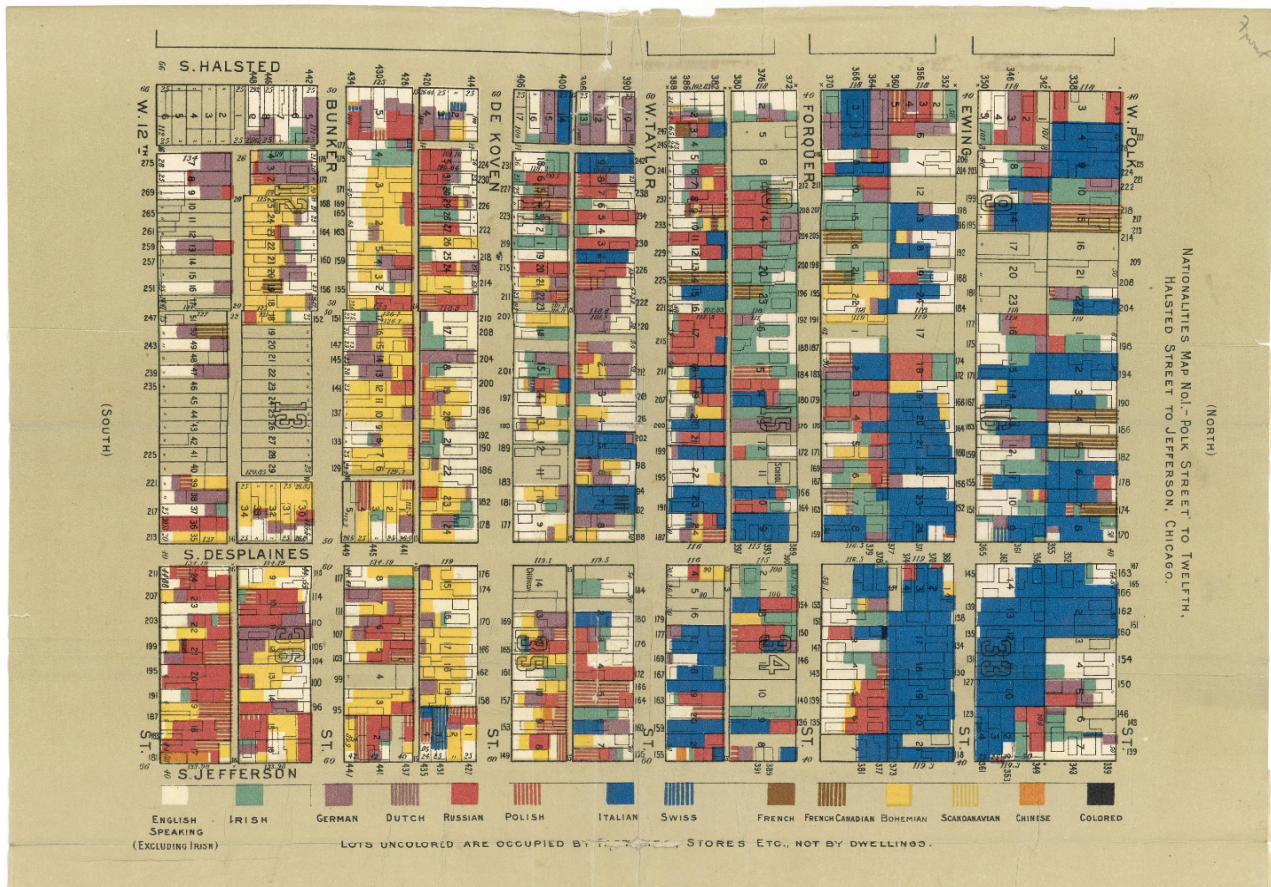

Figure 2. Nationality Map n°1. (Addams 1895)

In the late nineteenth century, shortly after the project began, a volume was produced by residents that collected some reflections on Hull House. This, in addition to being a work "on the wages and conditions of the working poor in the nineteenth ward" (Schultz 2007, 1), provided some maps of the racial geography of this settlement. In the first four, there was an example of how, replicating what was happening outside the settlement, communities lived together but divided. The year was 1895. For many immigrants, therefore, the experience of settlement represented their first opportunity to relate to cultures different from their own but, at the same time, distant from the American one, which was the paradigm of reference to which they had to adapt.

The difficulty of emancipation lay in the fact that the US social structure was based not so much on class differences as on race/ethnicity differences, in which skin color played a key role. More clearly, class hierarchy was directly influenced by race, and individuals based their dynamics of affiliation to social groups also considering this categorization. The arrival of many European immigrants, however, brought turbulence to the system, as the entry of 'hybrid' individuals had further complicated the issue of *whiteness.*[4] Roediger and Barrett had identified them as 'in-between people' (402-406), thus suggesting that the entry of outsiders into a subdivision that was incomprehensible to them had implied a rethinking of the hierarchies themselves. Thus, a short circuit was triggered when the new immigrants could no longer be identified as a homogeneous alien group. *Whiteness* was/is not an objectively established element, but rather a status, which can be achieved. In fact, as James Baldwin suggests "No one was white before he/she came to America" (1998, 178). The breakdown of the system occurred especially when, contrary to expectations, the situation took an unexpected turn. One of the most relevant examples is what we can call the 'involuntary' boycott at the expense of white supremacists, due to the presence of Italian immigrants in Louisiana in the late nineteenth century. The supremacists, by sponsoring the massive arrival of new whites, wanted to swell the ranks of their followers. What happened instead was the arrival of a mass of "almost black" people, unsuited to intolerance and therefore difficult to co-opt as allies.[5] Maybe due to this, in the first half of the 20th century we had what Jacobson called a "dramatic decline in the perceived differences among these white others" and this because "Immigration restriction, along with black migration, altered the nation's racial alchemy and redrew the dominant racial configuration along the strict, binary line of black and white, creating Caucasian where before had been so many Celts, Hebrews, Teutons, Mediterraneans, and Slavs" (Jacobson 1999, 14).

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[4] See Jacobson 1999.
[5] For further reading, see Scarpaci 2006 and Scarpaci 1975.

As for the windy city, it is fair to say that the Chicago Commons, from the founding of the first settlements, was the ideal 'battlefield.' Hull Houses, Graham Taylor's Commons, and above all what was Little Sicily and only after became Cabrini-Green saw on the one hand, as I previously mentioned, the first experiences of ethnic coexistence between immigrants of different nationalities; on the other hand, they were also the scene of the first encounter between immigrants and the American lower working class, represented by African Americans. This allowed aspiring US citizens to understand how the social structure was hierarchical and, above all, revealed to them the racial geography that characterized the relationships between communities. The settlements thus provided a first opportunity to understand how housing choices could result in a facilitation of social integration or, on the contrary, into the risk of remaining in a situation of exclusion and ghettoization, both residential and social. The other truth that immigrants had to face was that that hierarchy was not always stable from birth. Such a position in this sense could/must be conquered, so "to become 'Caucasian' in the 1920s and after then, was not simply to be 'white'. ... it was to be *conclusively, certifiably, scientifically white*." (Jacobson 1999, 75). And further, Jacobson suggested that in doing so, immigrants had to understand that "Southern Europeans were so dark ... that they can be termed 'white' not in the ordinary sense, but only in contrast with the African negro." The collision with these unwritten rules often occurred at the time of understanding the practices through which admission to the settlements took place. In the case of the Jane Addams Project's, for example, almost only European immigrants and lower-class whites participated. The HHM&P maps show this clearly, and settlers' recollections underscore this issue:

> Black people didn't go in that neighborhood. They didn't walk around Taylor Street They were on Roosevelt Road, lived there on the other side of project. ... We had them right next door to us and then they were having these parties every week and we started getting bugs and mice and rats. So we finally moved out. The first black man that moved in, they busted his windows and rioted everything else. He was a nice man, finally he wound up managing a basketball team with the white guys and you look back at it and it was well move to get the blacks in. Very sneaky you might say, not sneaky, but that's the only word I can think of now. To get one nice black person in and accept him and then sneak the rest in. Well, they snuck in so much that the white moved out, because of the

culture and different living style were too different and the whites that were in the project loved it. We used to have as I said, the project would take care of everything very good ... (CMS.114, BOX 4 FUM-69, 30-31)

It was a kind of informal 'segregation.' Here, too, the settlements were not an exception, but a reconfirmation of what was happening outside. There, due to the *racial covenants* that remained in force in Chicago until 1948 when the Supreme Court ruled these restrictions unconstitutional, there have been significant inequalities between communities. Moreover, these inequalities also had a direct influence on the city's renewal projects, including those for public housing, so much that "if the law could not be invoked to enforce discriminatory covenants against Negroes, what justification was there for discrimination by public agencies?" (Meyerson and Banfield 1955, 23) Following this mined path, immigrants and other ethnic groups gradually chose to leave the settlements, thus bringing new relationships and especially struggles to the streets of Chicago. The architectural landscape of urban Chicago from the late 19th century to the 1960s grew exponentially due to an increase in urban population and the growth of industry and the commercial market in the Midwest area. The city's structural layout changed from a few single-family homes in the mid-1800s to row houses and apartments at the turn of the century.

The emergence and expansion of manufacturing districts brought large numbers of workers and their families to Chicago: the rise of the working class meant a growing need for affordable housing. But because those social groups included white European immigrants, poor white Americans, and African Americans moving in from the rural South, racial confrontation was inevitable. Immigrants learned not only to become white, but also to coexist in the name of whiteness. One of the few settlements to which Americans of African descent had access was the Ida B. Wells Homes project. The Wells Homes' construction began in 1939 on the South Side of Chicago, in the area between South Parkway and Cottage Grove. This side of the city was called the Black Belt, and the idea behind the Ida B. Wells project was a cynical strategy to "keep the city safe," keeping the African American community out of Chicago's middle class areas; in doing this, public agencies aimed to preserve the ghetto. What in the reformers' intentions initially represented a housing opportunity for the vulnerable, promoting their

inclusion and encouraging positive community relations, eventually became a context of friction and intolerance in Chicago's history. Thomas Guglielmo, referring to the Francis Cabrini Homes, a settlement with a large Italian Catholic community, writes:

> Father Luigi Giambastiani, long-time pastor of the nearby St. Philip Benizi Church, had grown increasingly bitter about the project in these months. In a letter to the Chicago Housing Authority, he explained why: "The cohabitation or quasi-cohabitation of Negro and White hurts the feelings and traditions of the White people of this community." (Guglielmo 2003, 146-157)

And further:

> By this cohabitation, the Negroes might be uplifted but the Whites, by the very laws of environment feel that they will be lowered. ... separation of the two groups ["whites" and "negroes"] ... is the only practical road to community brotherhood. Negroes have the Ida B. Wells project. Why do they want to come into this project where they are not wanted? (Guglielmo 2003, 146-157)

Italians were also part of a new and growing white consciousness that involved all immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. So, it becomes essential, as Fred Gardaphé suggested about Italian Americans, to understand why those who had long been discriminated against, became discriminators within the span of just a few years. Above all, it is important to understand why they never advanced alternative hypotheses of bonding with the African American communities (Gardaphé 2010, 2).

BATTLEGROUND CHICAGO

On July 27, 1919, a white mob attacked a group of young African Americans who had mistakenly entered a beach for the exclusive use of whites. One of them, Eugene Williams, died. The consequences were a long series of clashes with 38 dead and more than 530 injured, in what is known as the "Chicago Race Riot." This well-known fact reminds us that while the history of Chicago in the 19th century is the story of a city that grew rapidly as well as the story of an important place of arrival for immigrants, it is also the story of deep and divisive struggles. As I mentioned earlier, conflicts often occurred, to the extreme, in wanting to prove that one could or could not 'become

white.' To move from in-between people to the American ethnic middle class, a migrant had to prove that he/she was not part of a minority. Hence, the choice of the right school, the right youth club and, most importantly, the right neighborhood in which to live, became an essential aspect of this ethnic transition. However, assuming that the main problem was the choice of the neighborhood may be simplistic and misleading: in fact, the actual issue was the possibility of gaining access to such choice. This was also the reason that, even after World War II, lay behind a series of clashes generated by the assignments of public housing even after World War II: when a family was assigned an apartment in an area with a fragile community equilibrium, the consequences could be tragic. The main issue thus remained the substantial segregation between whites and African American communities: such an urban configuration, the whites argued, would help prevent the escalation of conflicts. To achieve this, it was necessary for those who felt part of the 'white ethnic majority' to be fully aware of their great privilege, in order to unite and mobilize the members of their own community to their advantage.

Early on, opposition to the admission of African American families into white neighborhoods—both in the case of settlements and public housing—took the stage violently, with direct attacks on properties. Arson was an everyday occurrence. This had a twofold purpose: the first was, obviously, to scare away potential African American tenants, while at the same time preventing the mob from falling into criminal acts such as murder. The second purpose was to reduce the attractiveness of the buildings themselves. Inherently, this violence had a significant weight on the decision of the assignee families to accept the house and, above all, influenced another type of struggle, this time of an economic nature. Racial covenanting was not enough to cope with the reception of African Americans: an important role was played by citizens' and developers' associations, such as the Southtown Planning Association (SPA), "created in 1939 to manufacture ingenious ways of preventing Negroes from moving into the area." The SPA, and others such as the Southtown Land and Building Corporation and the Oakland-Kenwood Property Owners' Association, pursued the common goal of maintaining the white predominance in the neighborhoods they dealt with, opposing any real uplift for the black community (Hirsch 1983, 37-38). These associations acted

astutely, purchasing areas which were soon to be demolished or collapsing in their economic value, and tore them down. In doing so, they could deprive African Americans of housing opportunities by reducing the number of available housing units; in addition, by building new but higher-value housing, these associations invalidated the possibility of housing access at its outset, acting at the economic level. This practice excluded the less well-off families which could not compete for housing, forcing these families to move into the only neighborhoods which allowed the admission of blacks and that consequently became inhabited exclusively by the latter. European immigrants, now aware of their socially acquired white status, stood up together to defend their borders.
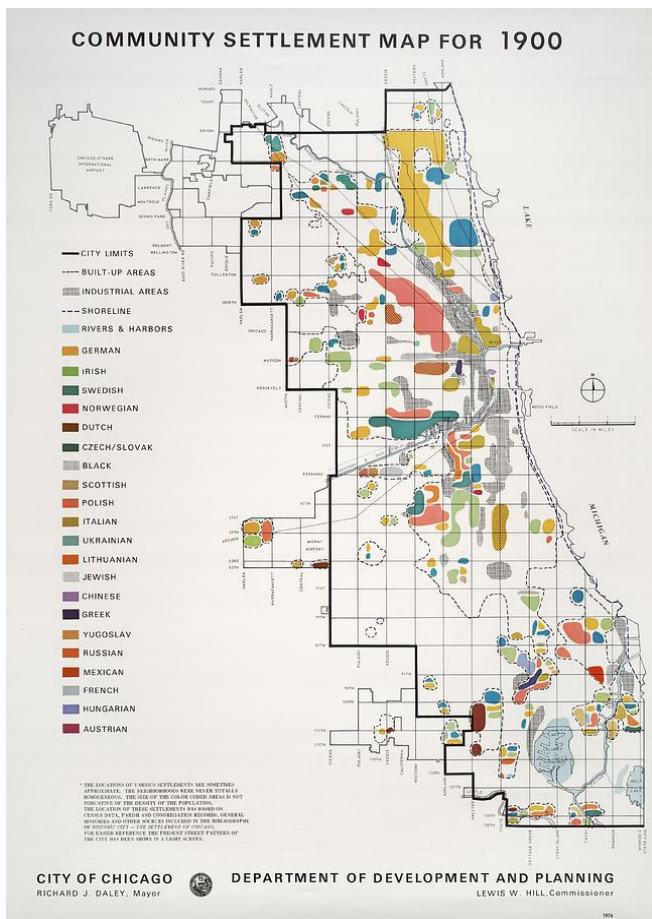

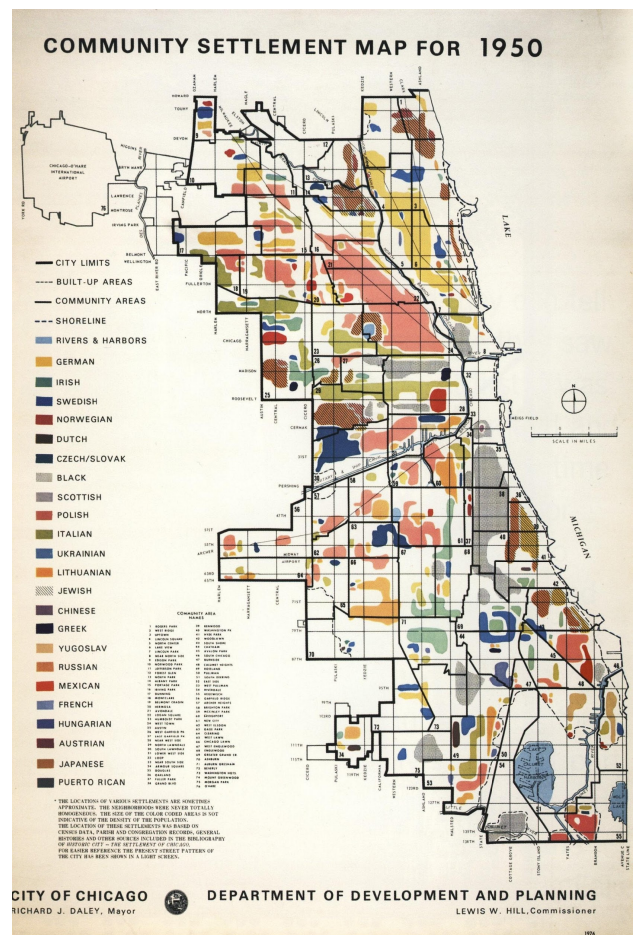*Figure 4. Chicago Community Settlement Map for 1900*

Figure 3. Chicago Community Settlement Map for 1950 (Chicago Department of Development and Planning 1976)

Public housing redevelopment plans were heavily involved in this phase of the struggles, and Chicago's racial geography was once again redrawn, as evidenced by maps published in 1976 by the *Department of Development and Planning* show. However, the housing problem, while remaining the central issue in triggering ethnic conflicts, was only the tip of the iceberg: the different conditions in which Italians, Irish, Swedish and other immigrants interacted with African Americans opened up much more complex scenarios of this struggle. By the end of the 1920s, the same reasons that made the configuration of Chicago resemble the multi-faceted structure of a mosaic, in relation to its ethnic communities, affected the presence of youth gangs in competition for territorial dominance across the city, shaping its appearance into that of a collage. Most of the members of these formations were in fact second-generation immigrants; moreover, there were 369 gangs with a mono-national structure. Italians made up 11.3%, Poles 16.8%, Irish 8.5%, and African Americans 7.2% (Trasher 1927, 130-131). What had happened in the settlements, which became the scene of both conflict and dialogue, reappeared with dance halls, brothels, and everything involved in the entertainment industry. A distorted condition could be witnessed in which there was both a facilitation as well as an impediment to ethnic relations, so much so that Diamond suggests that: "This centering of youth culture is indeed a useful analytical move to understanding American political culture from the 1940s to through the 1960s" (Diamond 2009, 130). Hence, the ongoing numerical growth of the African American community played a major role both in the issue of public housing and, at the same time, in the definition of white immigrants through these "immoral" leisure activities:

> Such evidence suggests that even in the midst of widespread resistance to racial integration, an ambiguous fascination with black bodies and a desire for racial mixing prevailed among many white young men. Although this was not a phenomenon restricted to the terrain of youth subculture, the world of youth leisure offered unparalleled possibilities for the production and indulgence of such forms of fascination and desire. (Diamond 2009, 132)

Considering this, there can be identified three changes in ethnic and social relationships. The first was the increase in the proportion of prostitution managed by the African Americans; the second, directly related to the latter, occurred with the

transformation of sex districts into 'interracial' districts; as a consequence, the third and last change was a substantial increase in the presence of whites in black neighborhoods. In this way, nightclubs fostered a new awareness. Immigrants, having to deal with a range of environments in which African Americans were "dealers" of illegal and dirty pleasures, could observe first-hand the praxes that had to be avoided in order to become respectable citizens:

> The presence of racial others in and around clubs, bars, theaters, and dance halls marked them as what Turner refers to as "liminoid spaces"—domains set apart from the productive and normative worlds of work, school, family and ethnic community. ... Such rituals thus transformed taxi-dance halls into forums where young, mainly second-generation ethnics and immigrants could, via "detours to others," develop a vision of themselves as white ethnics not vulnerable to the same forms of degradation suffered by nonwhite groups. (Diamond 2009, 79-80)

However, there was a substantial difference between conflicts for the control of the fleshpots of the city and those for the right to housing. While in the first case the level of struggle remained very much linked to crime and illegal trade, in the second half of the 20th century there was a shift towards the question of the right of access to public housing. To that very end, African Americans gradually shifted this struggle into the broader field of civil rights. This does not mean that the fighting slackened, but rather that its ultimate goal changed: for the black community, the latter became the affirmation of different demands enriched with political meanings. The clashes between different ethnic communities in Chicago must be read in this perspective: on one side of the barricade were the European immigrants, on the other the African Americans. In the first trench, immigrants fought because, from their point of view, the control of the territory—first and foremost through control in the allocation of public housing—represented the affirmation of white supremacy. On the other hand, the same objectives were pursued in a broader project of recognition of the civil rights of blacks and other minorities. Apparently, different goals shared the same approach.

HOUSES, SCHOOLS, AND GARDENS. FROM RACIAL GEOGRAPHY TO A
GEOGRAPHY OF STRUGGLES

> ... in the years to come, Chicago's parks, beaches, and schools would become the
> principal arenas of racial conflict. If youths had taken the lead in patrolling
> neighborhood boundaries and spearheading campaigns against integration in
> the past, they would be even more at the forefront of efforts to bar African
> Americans from such leisure spaces in the late 1905s and early 1960s. (Diamond
> 2009, 223)

Between 1945 and 1965 the clashes thus entered the sphere of public space, taking the
struggle to a higher level. In this way, there was a reiteration of racial geography that,
however, developed in an increasingly political way. In 1945, a series of strikes aimed at
preventing an increase of admissions of African Americans in schools, testified to the
widening of the conflict to the youth; thus, struggles could no longer be identified as
specifically "national," as they had been among gangs in the early 20th century.
European immigrants, who were occasionally joined by Mexicans from the mid-20th
century, became a 'social subject,' which aimed to shift the question of conflicts on the
black/white antinomy. What is interesting to note is that, until the early years of the
20th century, this ideological clash was almost exclusively the prerogative of the old
Anglo-Saxon white immigrants: Irish, Germans, Scandinavians. The politicization of the
conflicts, a greater involvement of youth and students, and the opening of the conflict
to a more 'social' dimension, were further exacerbated by what was happening at the
national level.

A key example is *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 US 483 (1954), in
which the Supreme Court definitively established the unconstitutionality of school
segregation. In June 1962, a series of attacks were launched against African American
students at Crane High Schools on the Near West Side. The attacks, made mostly by
Italian Americans and Mexican Americans, raised fears of a new escalation of violence,
but the new political sensibility channeled by the Civil Rights Movement was at that
point pervasive in the African American community, absorbing its attention. The
reaction was part of a stream of strikes that in those years had involved many cities,
including Chicago. In the wake of this new course of inter-ethnic conflict, attacks on

African Americans took shape in various recreational areas of the city between 1957 and 1961. These were no longer just gang-related clashes or attacks on youth and students: for instance, the episode occurring in Calumet Park in 1957 represents just one of the conflicts aimed at removing blacks from all those areas considered zones of white privilege. Here, a group of picnickers was brutally attacked by a crowd of whites. Since this was not an isolated event but occurred after others with similar content, its social and political significance was considered so important that the British Consulate in Chicago wrote a confidential note, also emphasizing the indifference of the press:

> On Saturday, July 28, another negro group numbering about 100 had a picnic in Calumet Park. As in the previous week, they were attacked by about 100 white people who threw stones, bottles, etc. and also physically attacked the men, women and children. The police sent for reinforcements. According to the report of the police sergeant who was in charge of the detachment, the white mob finally increased to about 5,000 or 6,000. As squad cars entered the Park they were stoned by the white group. ... according to the sergeant's report, at least 23 negroes were taken to hospital and five white men were arrested. ... As far as I know, not a line about any of this trouble has appeared in any of the Chicago newspapers (BCG of Chicago, BE.2/50101).[6]

The clashes that involved the schools, as well as those that occurred in public areas, however, remain linked to the processes of development and modification of Chicago's urban structure. In redrawing the structure of the city's racial geography—which was clearly the ultimate goal of public housing agencies such as the CHA—all circumstances for peaceful interaction among communities were taken into account. In doing so, preserving separation was encouraged—intentionally or unintentionally—instead of facilitating dialogue. Beginning with settlement planning, which somehow renewed boundaries between old neighborhoods, the evolution of public housing also perpetrated this ghettoizing model, thus completely failing in its initial mandate. Moreover, instead of fostering alliances between different ethnic groups, friction was

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[6] Available at URL https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/leaders-and-controversies/g6/cs1/g6cs1s5.htm. Last accessed 12 December 2020.

fomented. Of course, it is not possible to find official proof of the CHA policies' intentionality in igniting the conflict, just as it would be hazardous to identify the presence of racist instances in the planning itself. But what was put into practice had, unfortunately, precisely these devastating effects.

Precisely because of this, one of the consequences that occurred in the period straddling WWII was the replacement of ethnic communities in neighborhoods due to the arrival of African American families. The arrival of lower class minorities—blacks, Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, and others—had led to an increase in the demand for public housing. Moreover, the same neighborhoods that had hosted European immigrants in the early 20th century were home to gradually increasing numbers of these new immigrants. What is called "white flight" was a direct result of these changes. The new American middle class, largely characterized by European immigrants, had no intention of living alongside blacks. As it turned out, for example, in the Cabrini-Green projects, coexistence was not considered positive and was therefore unacceptable:

> [I] ... why did you leave Monroe and Cicero?

> Because the Blacks moved in. And we were the last two families on the block to move. My husband tried setting up block clubs, and opened up a youth center on the corner of Monroe and Cicero. And he got Mayor Daley to sponsor it. And we tried getting the churches involved in accepting the Black people. And it didn't work out. It got so that you'd walk down the street ... and I had my purse taken away from me twice. I didn't mind if they'd just take the purse away, but they'd knock me on the floor. That I didn't like. So after the second one I said to my husband...That's it. Do gooder or not. No more. And he consented to it. And then we moved out to Downers Grove. Now we're living in a condominium. (CMS.114 BOX 4 DEF-60, 33)

The post-war period saw an implementation of housing construction in Chicago's suburbs:

> In 1947, only 5,968 new homes and apartment units were constructed in Chicago, whereas 24,744 units were built in the metropolitan area outside the city. By 1956, the Chicago total had risen to only 13,625, but the suburbs built 48,632 units that year. The postwar construction in Chicago's suburban areas did much to alleviate the housing shortage of the middle class but not of the poor, ... It also signaled

> the loss of a great deal of the middle-class population of the city. (Deveraux 2012, 49)

However, many white dwellers must have thought that a peaceful relocation could not be the solution. At the same time, the growth of housing built by the CHA was not enough. This was the background to what happened in Trumbull Park in 1953, a clear sign of how the new middle class was exclusively white and without any intention of inclusive social interaction. A couple of years earlier, in 1951, a violent attack on the Clark family had already occurred in Cicero: the presence of a significant Italian American community in what had been Alfred 'Al' Capone's home had undoubtedly played a fundamental role. The defense of a laboriously acquired whiteness could not be disregarded, so much so that the Clarks were not allowed to move into a white neighborhood that wanted to keep its separation from the suburbs (Bernstein 1999, 13-27). Trumbull Park, however, represented something even more troubling. The Howard family had received approval for housing in this public housing project: the reasons for this were both that Mr. Howard was a veteran, and more importantly that his wife, Betty, was apparently light-skinned. Although the CHA no longer had discriminatory policies for access to housing, there was still hesitation to let African American families move into Trumbull and other areas 'run' by a white majority. If the agencies did not impose a ban, citizens did it, so much so that "as Betty Howard had 'not the slightest physical characteristics of a Negro,' the neighbors did not immediately ascertain the racial identity of the family. By August 5, they did. The result was nearly a decade of sporadic violence" (Hirsch 1995, 523).

Nonetheless, the Howards were not a problem per se. Rather, the issue was perceived as an attempt to systematize the inclusion of African Americans into white neighborhoods. Since that area of Chicago already had a significant presence of African Americans—as they were among the largest workers in the various industrial districts in the area—the CHA probably considered it logical to include other African American families. This attempt took place both in the few weeks the Howards spent in Trumbull Park and in the months that followed. Grievances, almost always violent, were directed at both black citizens and to those whites who hid their hostility towards CHA's new

policies. After Betty and Donald Howard's family was evicted for 'alleged violations' to the rules on access to housing, the conflict did not subside, precisely because Trumbull was only its trigger. For a long time, violent attacks, fires, and bomb explosions followed one another, with the general aim of boycotting every attempt to favor the integration of African American citizens. And even when, afterwards, things seemed to calm down, this was merely superficial (Hirsch 1995, 329-531):

> By mid-1960, liberals applauded the fact that the area had been 'generally quiet' for the 'better part of two years.' But there was little else to cheer. One close observer of the neighborhood noted that the expression of anti-Black attitudes was merely 'less overt and violent than in the past.' The *South Deering Bulletin* illustrated the soft articulation of the hard line on race when it changed its slogan from '*White People Must Control Their Own Communities*' to '*Boost Your Community, Preserve Your Community*' in the early 1960s. The simple fact was that violence had already triumphed. The CHA's determination to maintain a token Black presence in the project meant that local residents could not restore the area's racial homogeneity. But by the 1960s, they maintained the neighborhood as a 'white' community. (Hirsch 1995, 548-549)

CONCLUSIONS. WHETHER POSSIBLE

> When writing ethnic history scholars have all too often focused solely on relations between WASPs, who represent the dominant group in the United States, and one or more of the nation's many minority groups. Ethnic relations, however, are pluralistic rather than monolithic; that is, just as WASPs interact with various ethnic groups, so too do ethnic groups interact with each other. This has been particularly true in the case of blacks and Italians. Curiously, historians have given this subject only minimal attention. (Shankman 1978, 30)

What Shankman wrote is broadly applicable to other immigrant groups, not just to Italians. The path taken by many of them, especially those from Eastern and Southern Europe, but also from Asia and South America, was similar. In many cases it was not only a process towards social integration, which involved learning a language, laws, and cultural practices. In fact, with this article I have tried to show how issues such as skin color and whiteness—in the sense proposed by Jacobson—were fundamental. But if it is clear how essential it is to be considered "white," beyond the color of one's skin, the process to acquire this status has not always been clear, and Chicago represents a telling

paradigm in this regard. The complexity of its social structure throughout the 20th century was epitomized by its racial geography, whose mosaic overlapped with the urban landscape: as one element changed, so did the other element in the equation. The possibility of self-determination as a dweller of a settlement or, more generally, of a neighborhood, was the discriminating factor in achieving full citizenship rights. By being able to choose where to live, a dweller could choose whether to be part of the blessed majority or of the unprivileged minority. The key point is: did everyone really have a choice? The long history of Chicago's urban evolution, with the dual presence of social settlements and public housing projects, proved to be the ideal context to show how urban mobility went hand in hand with social mobility: in this context the opportunity to choose meant having the chance at civic equality. The role played by some actors external to the communities, such as the Chicago Housing Authority since the early 1930s, showed that both the abolition and the construction of ethnic boundaries cannot have been a responsibility left solely to citizens. These balances were played out on a more complex proscenium, in which the various actors on stage were not able to put an end to conflicts and iterations of intolerance for almost a century, highlighting an issue which is still delicate and relevant in 2021.

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