

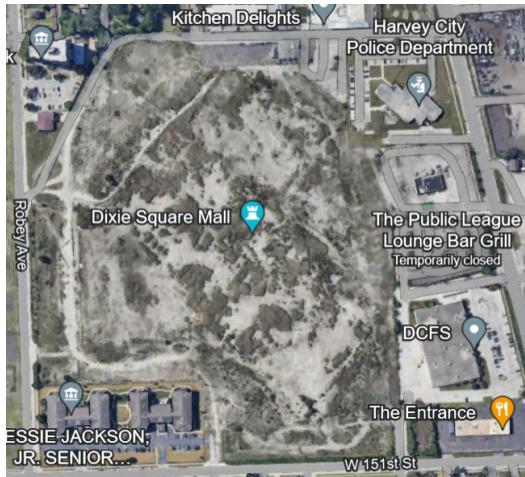
## Field Investigation 1 Reflection: Dixie Square Mall

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Oblique view of the site of the Dixie Square Mall

For my fieldwork, I went to the Chicago suburb of Harvey, IL, located approximately 20 miles south of the Loop. It is accessible via the Metra Electric line toward University Park, one that I have ridden numerous times toward Hyde Park, but never as far as Harvey. Harvey is a majority-Black city, although Latinos have rapidly grown as a percentage of the population in the past 20 years. Like many majority-Black neighborhoods and cities in Chicago, population has fallen significantly since the 1980s, from a peak population from over 35,000 to less than 20,000 now. The feature I became interested in before coming to Harvey was the site of the former Dixie Square Mall. Dixie Square Mall, notable for its location in the suburbs, was opened in 1966 and boasted “64 shops, including a Woolworth, a Walgreen’s, a Montgomery Ward, and a Jewel supermarket” (Ulrich). However, due to concerns about crime and general economic decline, many of these stores had left by the mid-70s, and by 1980, the mall was declared “dead”. Perhaps the site’s most famous moment, as the location for a car chase scene in the movie *The Blues Brothers*, caused significant damage to its buildings. In spite of efforts to redevelop or demolish the site, Harvey’s monetary struggles prevented it from doing either, and it lay abandoned, decaying, and overgrown, popular with urban explorers and gangs alike. A grant from the state in 2012 finally allowed for its demolition, and today a field stands in its place.



Nowadays, an investigation of this field on Google Earth suggests a starkly empty site, quite different from the parking-lot-laden buildings and tree-lined residential streets nearby. A bar, a police station, a public housing project, and a senior living center encircle the premises. The ground looks barren, with light brown dirt interrupted by darker brown splotches. 3D imagery reveals that those dark brown splotches are elevated, and perhaps look like mounds of dirt. It seems traversable, and it even has a number of unmarked paths, although there is no imagery along them. It might seem to be a construction site or even a quarry, but certainly not something natural, and also something quite massive. But for all this intrigue, the only hint I had to look further into it was its blue rook marker, which symbolizes a historic place on Google Maps. That marker, simple and gaudily teal as it may be, is very helpful in approaching a neighborhood and getting to the culturally important features.



The brown mounds visible on Google Earth 3D imagery



The street leading up to the field

When I visited it in person, the first thing I noticed was how green it looked in comparison to what I'd seen on Google Earth. Although there were many tan grasses when I was in the field, the imagery suggested nothing like abundant green leaves and shrubs on the ground. Overall, it was much more alive-feeling than I ever thought it might be. If not for the assorted litter on the ground, I might even mistake it for a prairie field out in the countryside. The second thing I noticed was that the mounds that were so prominent and protuberant on Google Earth were absent. I realized that Google's 3D-ification software had parsed the vast patches of tall grasses by aggregating them into solid brown polyhedra. Like I expected of the fictional mounds, those tall grasses did prevent mobility through the fields. But, unlike the mounds, they were shockingly beautiful. I stood for a while to stare at them and watch them sway with the strong breeze coming through (the video on this post). The disparity between the expected and actual terrain seems like less of a mapping error and more of a lack of granularity with the satellite data. If I were making this map, I might color it green for parks and natural lands, rather than the unshaded gray that currently occupies the region and makes it seem like an inhospitable lot. Physically moving around the space . When I took photos, I had to raise my hand up above the grasses, which obscured much of the landscape. I do feel like I did adhere to the standard view where the horizon bisects the frame, and the grasses go on into the distance. However, since Dixie Square Mall seems to get little visitation, especially after its demolition, there is no perspective affixed to the common perception. In walking around, I was able to decide what perspectives were most salient.



The wind-blown blades of tall grass in the field



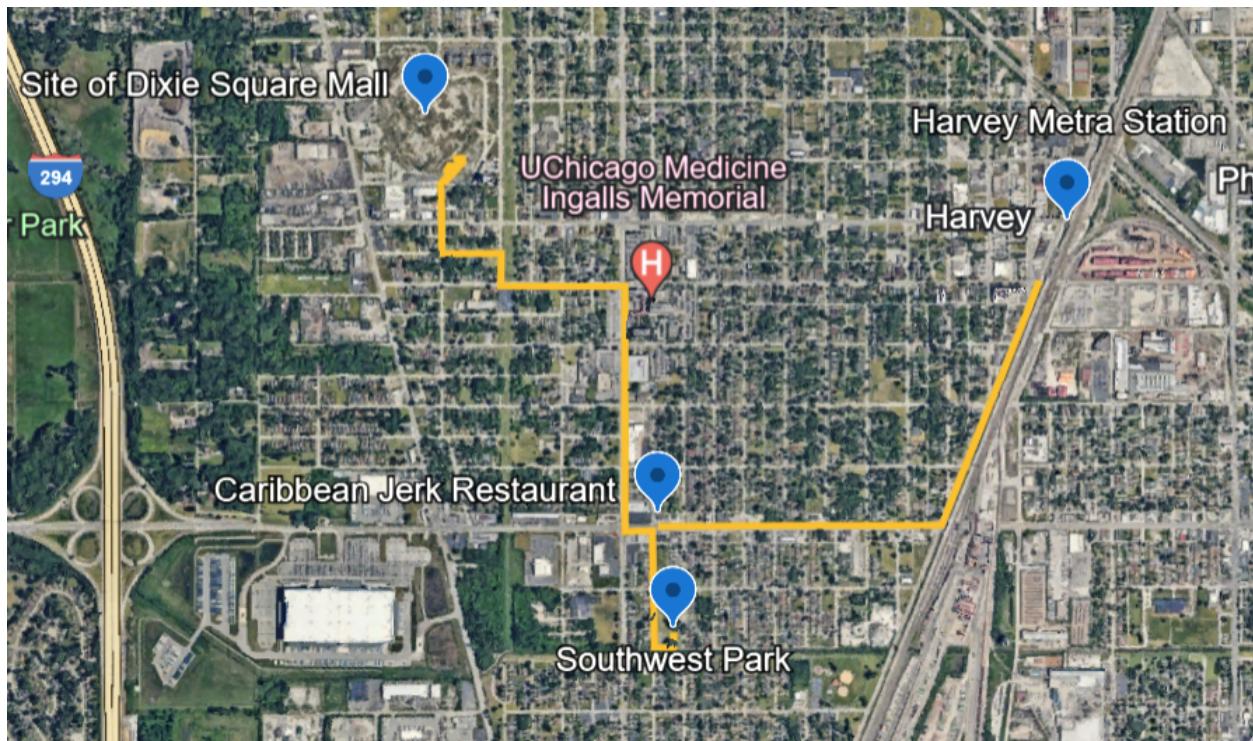
The green shrubs I noticed, with the public housing project in the background

Broadly, as I walked around Harvey, I saw some empty lots and seemingly-empty and abandoned units. The decline of Dixie Square Mall, exacerbated by its reckless destruction during the filming of *The Blues Brothers*, portended that trend, and exemplified the struggle of Black Americans to accrue generational wealth from property value when their neighborhoods are disrespected and disinvested from. The departure of amenities like the Dixie Square Mall makes it ever more inconvenient to live in the city, shifting the centers of cultural and economic life to the Loop. That being said, there were many lively elements of the city, including a delicious Jamaican restaurant I went to, neatly manicured tree lawns with delicate awnings, and a beautifully decorated community center. It is wrong to write a death certificate for a very-much-alive city. At first blush, at least, the map does not display any of these relations. One could claim that this is a failing, but I don't think that is the purpose of a reference map. There are too many stories to be able to tell all of them, and without the help of Google Earth in marking it as a historic site, I would not have been drawn to Dixie Square mall in the first place. Even without labels that elaborate social and environmental histories, the reference map can help researchers approach them if they know where to look. Not even a visit to the field itself could truly reveal that history, although perhaps an archaeological dig could unearth some '70s artifacts. Maps have the power to display a (distorted) reflection of the present ground-level condition of a place while alluding to what once lays there through their labeling.



View from Harvey northeast to Lake Michigan

Map of my movement in Harvey:



[https://earth.google.com/earth/d/1Pov6d664wqBdhVV4MOb4\\_mD8yX\\_j1s\\_r?usp=sharing](https://earth.google.com/earth/d/1Pov6d664wqBdhVV4MOb4_mD8yX_j1s_r?usp=sharing)

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