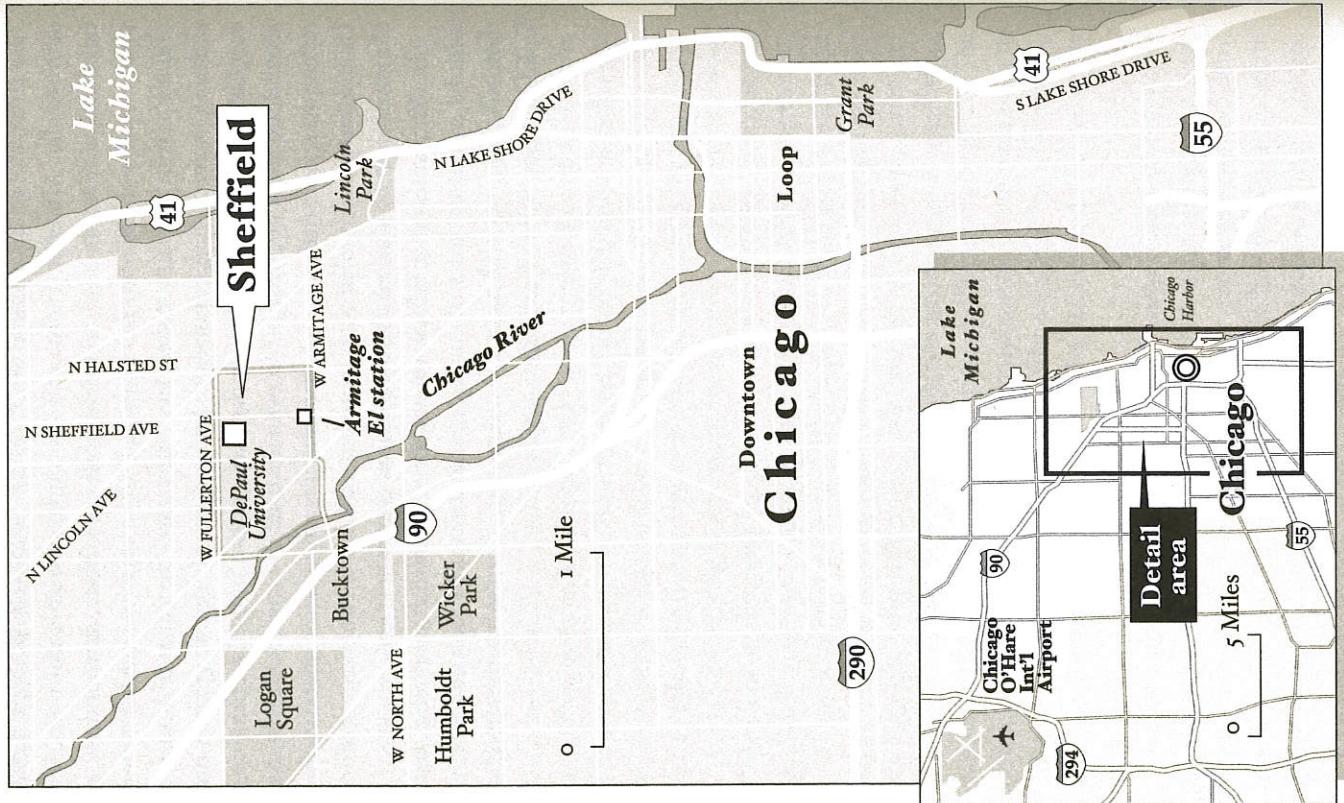


## A NEIGHBORHOOD IN CHICAGO



IT IS SIX THIRTY IN THE MORNING in Sheffield, a quiet neighborhood three miles north of downtown Chicago. I'm sitting by the window at a bagel-and-coffee shop just off the corner of Sheffield and Armitage, across the street from the Armitage elevated train station. Every few minutes a Brown Line train rumbles by directly overhead, its noise so consistent and regular that it feels like an icon of neighborhood life, not an annoyance of any sort.

Armitage Avenue is no Parisian boulevard; there are no boulevards in Sheffield, only business streets and residential streets. But the buildings are about the same age as those in central Paris; nearly all of them were built between 1880 and 1910. The Argo tea shop on the other side of the street reveals the date 1885 in large letters on the second-story wall. By city ordinance, none of the buildings can be more than thirty-four feet tall.

A parade of early risers marches down the street in front of me: joggers, men in suits on their way to the train, art students from nearby DePaul University carrying their supplies to the studio. It is not a picture of diversity as we have come to define it—there are very few blacks or Hispanics on the street—but it is the sort of diversity Jane Jacobs saw in Greenwich Village in the 1950s, a diversity of occupations, ages, and daily schedules. There are people on their way to nine-to-five jobs, others returning from night shifts, young singles who jog this route every morning, older people who cover the same route at a slower pace.

The businesses that line this block of Armitage are, for the most part, neither chic nor shabby. There is a Rugby Ralph Lauren bou-

thing about the place. It is rich. Actually, very rich. As of 2009, in tract 711, where comparatively modest old houses fill most of the residential blocks north of Armitage, the median family income was \$201,125. When mid-decade projections were released in 2007 by Esri, an independent demographic research company, the median home price had surpassed a million dollars. “Gentrification” is not a word that accurately describes Sheffield. It is a neighborhood of stable and substantial affluence where scarcely any of the people we normally consider gentrifiers can afford to live.

It is easier to demonstrate that Sheffield is rich than to explain why. “At first glance,” the *Chicago Tribune* wrote in 2006, “it’s hard to see why some of Chicago’s most wealthy people have chosen this formerly nondescript area as their new enclave. It doesn’t have a lake view. It isn’t even that close to the lake.” And the land is flat as a pancake.

In fact, Lake Michigan is a little more than a mile from the center of Sheffield, and one can walk there in half an hour at a leisurely pace. But few of the residents do that very often. There are other factors that clearly have something to do with what has happened—the fourteen-minute train ride to downtown, the presence of a university, the tree-lined streets and pleasingly eclectic stock of houses—but none of these quite suffice as explanations. It is more instructive simply to say that Sheffield is a small piece of a much larger demographic phenomenon that has enveloped much of Chicago over the past couple of decades. “The city is changing,” then-mayor Richard M. Daley proclaimed shortly after taking office in 1989. “You’re not going to see the factories back.”

But just what Chicago was to see in the ensuing years was not predicted by Daley or anyone else. When the mayor spoke those words, the city had suffered through nearly a generation of economic and demographic decline and social disorder, to which no clear end was in sight.

In fact, however, by 1989 many of Chicago’s problems were already beginning to ease up. The loss of factory jobs was indeed horrendous: four hundred thousand of them between 1969 and 1983 alone, or 32 percent of the city’s total manufacturing employment base. This was roughly comparable to what was happening in other Midwestern indus-



*Armitage Avenue, in Chicago’s Sheffield neighborhood, has managed to retain its workaday appearance while serving as a commercial center for one of the city’s most affluent communities.*

tique, but that is about the only hint of cosmopolitan sophistication. The others are nearly all local. There’s a sports bar that has huge Cubs and White Sox banners displayed with seeming impartiality in the window, also a chiropractor and a dry cleaner. Around the corner on Sheffield is a Caribbean restaurant. If you look down the next block of Armitage, you can see empty storefronts.

But the day-and-night street life is undeniably interesting. “There’s so much activity at Armitage and Sheffield,” one resident says, “it almost feels like a movie.” Another boasts that “in Sheffield, you wonder what you’re going to see next, maybe a famous pro athlete next to a Filipino immigrant.” A third is more grandiose: “This is like the Left Bank of Paris seventy years ago.”

THE ONE THING you won’t notice about Sheffield through the windows of the Chicago Bagel Authority may be the most important

trial cities, except in one respect: Virtually all the other cities—Detroit, Cleveland, St. Louis—were unable to come up with new kinds of jobs to replace them. Chicago did. In Chicago, the downtown Loop and lakefront corridor running north from it gradually became a magnet for service and professional work: banking, brokerage, insurance, architecture, and various forms of temporary office employment. In 1950, Chicago had three times as many jobs in manufacturing as in services; by 2001, services led by more than two to one. “Manufacturing was still more important in Chicago than in most other big urban areas,” journalist David Moberg wrote a few years later, “but smoky mills, clanging presses, and fast assembly—or disassembly—no longer defined the regional economy.” Between 1990 and 2006, if you exclude factory jobs—admittedly a large exclusion—Chicago was a net job gainer. It ceased to be one in the recession years that followed, but demographic inversion was well under way, and it has not receded in the years since.

The question of why Chicago escaped the fate of other industrial cities is a subject that has been much debated, but in the end the most satisfying answer may be the simple reality of size. One can argue plausibly that there was room for only one Midwestern city to compete in the new service- and technology-based global economy that was emerging, and Chicago, by far the largest among these cities, was the obvious candidate, even with its serious problems of poverty, weak schools, and scattered violent crime.

Chicago's civic leaders were startled and discouraged to learn in early 2011 that the previous year's census had reported a citywide population decline of 6.9 percent, leaving a population of 2,695,598, fewer people than have lived in Chicago at any time since the 1920s. These are difficult numbers to present optimistically; the media tend to equate raw population growth with urban success, and Chicago had boasted when the 2000 census showed it with a small population gain, in contrast to the losses of other Midwestern cities. But a closer look at Chicago's population changes in the past decade reveals more precisely what happened: In part because of the demolition of the high-rise housing projects, the black population declined by 177,401, accounting for more than three-quarters of the total decline. Many went to suburbs

surrounding the city on all sides, including suburbs many miles distant from the city limits. There was a small overall decline in the white population as white working-class families living just inside the city's borders decamped to the suburbs, while Hispanics moved in to replace them, their numbers growing by three percentage points, and constituting the only major population group whose numbers increased in the city in the past decade. The more affluent population of the central areas remained stable. The census did not tell Chicago what it wanted to hear, but when one examines the numbers in detail, one conclusion is inescapable: Between 2000 and 2010, Chicago became a whiter city with a larger affluent population.

LIKE NEW YORK, but unlike most large American cities, Chicago has long had a reasonably large affluent population within a short distance of its commercial center. For most of the twentieth century, though, this population was limited to a narrow strip along the shores of Lake Michigan, stretching north from the Loop. These urbanites lived in tall and elegant apartment buildings constructed during the boom years of the 1920s, when completion of Lake Shore Drive made downtown offices easy to reach by car.

Except for this lakefront strip, however, Chicago roughly resembled other industrial cities: Hardly anyone resided in the center, and the neighborhoods immediately beyond it, most of them abutting factories and warehouses, were not considered fashionable or attractive places to live. During World War II, only 1 percent of what is now called the “central area” was in residential use.

This did not change for a long time. It finally changed mostly because of a widely held civic illusion: that Chicago's population was about to grow substantially. The city's official projection in 1959 was that by 1980, the city would increase from 3.7 million to 4.2 million. The housing director declared that “all large centers of population must plan for accommodating an ever increasing number of people.” In fact, he and the other experts were massively mistaken. By 1980, the city's population hadn't increased at all.

But Mayor Richard J. Daley (Richard M.'s father), a fervent believer

in population growth, had spent the two decades of his mayoralty (1955–1976) doing everything he could to house the added residents he expected to see. A 1957 zoning code made it much easier for residential developers to build luxury high-rise housing virtually anywhere they chose. Within a decade after that, the developers responded, and in the 1950s and 1960s, 350 new high-rise towers went up. At first, they were still mostly a lakefront phenomenon, pushing just a little farther west of Lake Michigan, onto such streets as Marine Drive and Sheridan Road. But they attracted thousands of upper-class renters and owners who decided they wanted to live the lakefront life. The city was responding to a projected population growth that never took place, but in the process it made possible moves by thousands of affluent residents to close-in apartments they found appealing.

In the 1960s, the elder Daley and the developers discovered downtown itself. The turning point was the construction of Marina City, on the Chicago River just north of the Loop, one of America's oddest residential complexes, but also one of the most influential. A pair of sixty-five-story cylindrical towers that vaguely resembled corncobs, nine hundred apartments perched on the banks of the Chicago River with boat docks for the residents, Marina City was, at the time of its opening in 1964, the tallest apartment building in the world. It was derided by critics but proved to be a huge financial success. In the words of the urban historian Joseph Schwieterman, Marina City was “a watershed in Chicago planning history. . . . [I]t showcased the cosmopolitan lifestyle available to those living in the greater Loop.” Never before had Chicago seen residential development on this scale so close to the heart of the city.

Marina City was followed in 1968 by Lake Point Tower, a seventy-one-story curved glass International Style building on the Lake Michigan shore that replaced Marina City as the world’s tallest all-residential structure. Lake Point Tower was infinitely more pleasing to look at than Marina City, although it was equally controversial—it obstructed the view of Lake Michigan for passersby and some area residents. It turned out to be equally successful. It drove home the idea that even a city with a declining population, as long as it is large enough, can attract the upper middle class to downtown living.

By 1970, an increasing number of new residential towers were going up in the old commercial sector surrounding the Loop. They brought in enough year-round urban dwellers to support a raft of new businesses that catered to them: restaurants, nightclubs, boutiques, and more than one multistory shopping mall. The more people came to central Chicago to live, the more successful the businesses became; and the more diverse and interesting the businesses became, the more people wanted to live nearby. It was, for the city government and the developers, a truly virtuous circle.

And it was a circle that kept expanding its dimensions—north, south, and especially west, where older blue-collar neighborhoods were filled with compact nineteenth-century houses close to the downtown action and waiting patiently to be reclaimed. That is, in part, the story of how Shefield became rich.

NOBODY LIVING IN SHEFIELD in 1970 would have guessed that anything like a demographic inversion was about to take place. The neighborhood was indeed undergoing a transition, but it was a transition from modest working-class enclave to semislum.

The Latin Kings had their official headquarters on the second floor of the 1885-vintage Mueller Building, at the corner of Armitage and Shefield, and sold drugs next to the tracks of the Armitage El station. The Kings’ rival, the beret-wearing Young Lords, were all over the neighborhood, not only selling drugs but demanding protection payments from local businesses. Anyone who chose to refurbish a house—there were just a few at the time—would likely be asked to pay the Lords \$2 a month to guarantee that the windows would not be broken. In 1969, the Young Lords and their leader, Cha-Cha Jimenez, seized a building on the nearby DePaul University campus and demanded that the university donate money to the group’s “anti-poverty” program. Teenagers from the huge Cabrini-Green public housing project, less than a mile away, used to make quick trips into the neighborhood to steal bicycles and ride off. In the early 1970s, the minister of the Armitage Avenue Methodist Church was murdered on the sidewalk in front of the church’s entrance.

On the residential streets east and west of Sheffield Avenue, larger buildings had been cut up into small apartments and housed as many as eighty people each. In the words of Erich Teske, who was growing up in Sheffield at the time, "Virtually every garage was covered with graffiti. The garbage was strewn over the alleys." Residents who wanted to preserve a semblance of neatness used shovels to dump the trash into garbage cans. There were signs scattered throughout the neighborhood that read, in big black letters, RID YOUR BLOCK OF RATS. RATS EAT GARBAGE. CLEAN UP THE GARBAGE.

This was by no means a uniformly poor neighborhood. The median family income in census tract 710, on the blocks west of Sheffield, was \$9,375 in 1970, only slightly below the national family median of \$9,870. Thirteen percent of the people in tract 710 lived beneath the poverty line, a number that matched almost precisely the average for the nation as a whole. Tract 711, the neighborhood's eastern half, was doing a little better. Its median family income was \$11,392.

Many of the white ethnic families who had occupied Sheffield for generations continued to live there in 1970, but it was not the place they fondly remembered. Sheffield in 1970 was a dangerous place to be.

In a sense, the city actually did create Lake Michigan. For more than half a century of its existence, the lake absorbed massive amounts of industrial waste that flowed into it from the Chicago River. Year by year, the garbage dumped into the river turned the lake into more and more of an eyesore. Finally, at the beginning of the twentieth century, city engineers found a method of using canal locks to reverse the river's flow, depositing the industrial garbage west into a new Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, returning the lake to the more or less pristine condition it had been in when Potawatomi Indians lived along its banks in the eighteenth century.

The engineers who performed this feat mainly felt that they were dealing with a public health nuisance, but they were doing much more than that. They were creating miles of clean blue lakefront suitable for boating, swimming, and other pleasures of urban life. The boosters are correct when they say that no other major lakefront city did this. Nearly all the others concentrated industry along their major waterfronts and left them unusable for much else, essentially creating a wall between the water and the city. More than a century later, most of them are still struggling with this problem. One is not drawn to the splendors of Lake Erie in Cleveland or Buffalo, or Lake Huron in Detroit.

But Chicago, whether it fully intended to or not, made a lakefront that was an attraction rather than an eyesore. When Richard J. Daley decided in the late 1950s that the city needed a whole new collection of high-rise apartment buildings, he had the shores of Lake Michigan to place them on. Of the high-rise apartment buildings constructed in Chicago in the 1960s, 90 percent were within one mile of the lake.

By the end of that decade, most of the opportunities closest to Lake Michigan had been seized, and the process of urban revival began moving into the blocks a little farther west that were known as Lincoln Park. Despite its location, the Lincoln Park neighborhood was more than a little seedy in the 1960s, with many of its 1920s-era apartment buildings turned into multitenant rooming houses. But Lincoln Park was the next closest thing to Lake Shore Drive, and by the early 1970s, its renewal was on the verge of completion. The invasion of the professional class now stretched all the way to Halsted Street, ten blocks

THE SITUATION did not change overnight, or even in a couple of years. No single event or series of events made Sheffield into something new. The most accurate thing to say is that something important was happening around the center of America's third-largest city, and Sheffield gradually became part of it.

Certainly one can make a list of factors that contributed. Perhaps first among them, odd as it may seem, is Lake Michigan, a body of water that one can live indefinitely in Sheffield without even noticing. It is sometimes difficult to explain to non-Chicagoans the mystical significance that the lake possesses. Civic leaders have traditionally talked about it as a civic achievement, almost as if they had built it. "You ride the length of Chicago," the influential newspaper columnist Jack Mabley wrote in 1957, "and think that other cities, corruption or no, should have been able to produce something as beautiful."

from the lakefront park. There it stopped. Lakefront and Lincoln Park parents warned their children not to wander any farther west than Halsted Street. Halsted was the eastern boundary of the ominous residential enclave known as Sheffield.

If riding a bicycle west of Halsted Street was a scary enterprise, then renovating a house in Sheffield was a much riskier one. Nevertheless, people with the means to do that began doing it in the early 1970s. Sheffield was different from Lincoln Park in an important way: Rather than apartment buildings, its residential stock consisted largely of single-family homes—“workmen’s cottages,” in the local parlance. The neighborhood traditionally had housed German and Irish families whose breadwinners earned modest but stable livings serving as police officers or firefighters, or working for the local gas company, or holding down jobs at the nearby steel factory or the Deering Harvester plant in the industrial corridor just west of the neighborhood boundary.

Although no precise numbers exist, it’s estimated that workmen’s cottages comprised nearly two-thirds of all the housing in Sheffield at the start of the 1970s. They were modest in size, but they were solidly built and attractive—a quirky eclectic mixture of Italianate, Romanesque, and Queen Anne architectural styles, nearly all dating from the period between 1880 and 1910. Hundreds of them were available, because their previous working-class owners had begun moving to the suburbs. They were also affordable; in tract 711, the more expensive of the two main Sheffield census tracts, the median home value in 1970 was \$23,800. “Living west of Halsted was considered very risky,” says Diane Levin, a longtime resident. “But it was a beautiful, undeveloped neighborhood.”

It was also a neighborhood that was easy to get to. Trains on the Brown Line, then known simply as the Ravenswood El, rumbled by every few minutes. The Armitage Station, which opened in 1907, was rickety and underused in the early 1970s: It looked like a relic of a very different time. There were no wooden trains anymore—the Chicago Transit Authority had stopped using those in the 1950s—but the tracks and platforms and railings still conjured up the feeling of an old wooden city, and the tiny stations and creaking trains made the

Ravenswood El feel a bit like the Toonerville Trolley of urban mass transit.

The Ravenswood line was in financial trouble throughout the 1970s, and the CTA threatened seriously to close it down in the early 1980s, but suddenly its ridership began to grow again, its mere presence an attraction to the arriving professionals more than it had been to the locally rooted blue-collar workers in the neighborhoods it traversed. Between 1987 and 1998, as overall CTA rail traffic continued to plummet, traffic on the newly renamed Brown Line increased by nearly 30 percent. In 2000, weekend service was reinstated along the line, forty-eight years after it had been discontinued for lack of patronage. By that time, roughly half of Sheffield’s workforce was taking the Brown Line to jobs somewhere in the city, and the main problem was overcrowding. All its stations had to be retrofitted to accommodate the longer trains that were necessary to handle the traffic. In the first decade of the new century, the Brown Line corridor was the hot property of Chicago’s transportation network, and Sheffield sat right in the middle of it.

The stations along the line are spaced every few blocks, and Sheffield has two of them: one at the south border on Armitage and one at the northern end at Fullerton, in the middle of the DePaul University campus.

Founded in 1898 by the Vincentian Catholic order, DePaul has always been a presence in the neighborhood—many of the priests who taught there grew up in working-class families on the Sheffield streets. But for most of the school’s history, it was a modest presence: “the little school under the El,” as people liked to call it, overshadowed in local Catholic education by the more imposing Loyola University on the Far North Side. DePaul in 1970 was still almost entirely a commuter school, just as it had been in the 1920s and 1930s, when Richard J. Daley rode the train there four nights a week to get a law degree.

DePaul almost decided to abandon the Sheffield campus in 1967 for more enticing suburban pastures, but it made the opposite decision instead: It stayed and converted its grimy buildings dating from the 1920s into a modern and nationally known school whose twenty-four thousand students made it the largest Catholic college in the United

States. It's a stretch to call twenty-first-century Sheffield a college neighborhood, but the continued presence and growing reputation of the university was one more magnet enticing newcomers to buy the old workmen's cottages that surrounded it on every side.

One other feature of Sheffield attracted newcomers in the 1970s and 1980s: its music scene. Music and theater had come to Lincoln Park in the 1950s, with the arrival of the Second City comedy club and a thriving folk and blues cluster in Old Town, a mile or so south of Sheffield along North Avenue and Wells Street. The glory days of Chicago folk music were over by the 1970s, but the blues began creeping northward, into storefronts on Halsted near Sheffield's eastern border, close to DePaul. Some of them are still there: One of the clubs, B.I.U.E.S., is a reminder of the neighborhood's funkier days, with a tiny stage, wobbly bar stools, and vinyl seats held together by duct tape. Across the street from B.I.U.E.S. is Kingston Mines, which dates all the way back to the late 1960s, a cavernous open space with stages built to look like back porches. These days, you can buy a genuine Kingston Mines jacket for \$250. And there is one last conspicuous reminder of the folk scene: the Old Town School of Folk Music, located not in Old Town but along the Armitage shopping corridor between Halsted and Sheffield. It has been mainly a school and music store for several decades, holding on at the same address since 1968.

No one would confuse this with Montmartre in the 1890s, but it was an important part of Sheffield's revival, an amenity that helped to persuade young and relatively affluent home buyers that the neighborhood was worth the indignities that still lingered from the days of overstuffed rooming houses and gangs and drugs on the street. It was a deal that the newcomers were willing to accept; the squalid days are now no more than a distant memory for those Sheffield residents who remember them at all.

THESE DAYS, Sheffield is much more concerned about preservation than it is about attracting development. The commercial corridors of Armitage Avenue and part of Halsted Street have been designated by the city as a historic district, and are unlikely to change very much.

The blocks of storefronts that give the neighborhood the aura of the late nineteenth century seem poised to maintain it well into the twenty-first. On Webster Avenue, in the middle of Sheffield, you can find a jewelry store that calls itself the Left Bank and has done just about everything it can to create the aura of old-fashioned Parisian shopping. But with a few minor exceptions, the residential streets do not have historic protection. Plans to establish it have been debated for years, but have met a wall of resistance from home owners who don't want to lose the right to alter their property as they see fit. Walking down the residential blocks of Sheffield, you find a smattering of lawn signs that read SAY NO TO LANDMARK DISTRICTS.

And so it is legal to do almost anything to a house on a residential block in Sheffield—add on to it, change its architectural style—or, most ominously, tear it down. There are some residents who insist that the neighborhood hasn't changed much in the past few years, but others feel that it has been losing its identity to the teardowns of the last decade. "They're turning what was a vibrant urban neighborhood into



*Sheffield combines "workmen's cottages" from the nineteenth century and expensive new homes on narrow lots, built to replace older homes that have been torn down.*

a collection of bloated, physically isolated, suburban-style manses,” Tribune architecture critic Blair Kamin wrote a few years ago, referring specifically to the streets south of Armitage. “Most cities would kill to have billionaires and multi-millionaires putting down this kind of change instead of fleeing to the ‘burbs. . . . It’s just that they’re killing off the architectural style and urban substance that once made this area so attractive.”

To an outsider, it doesn’t look that way. The vertical McMansions built in the last few years stand mostly as conspicuous exceptions to the long rows of Victorian cottages. They are conspicuous mainly because there are still relatively few of them. But there is no denying that the biggest story in Sheffield, at least until the real estate bust of 2008, was the arrival of the superrich.

Some of them are famous. Kerry Wood, the onetime star pitcher for the Cubs, became a resident of the neighborhood. So did Penny Pritzker, the Hyatt heiress identified by *Forbes* magazine in 2009 as the 647th-richest person in America, who built a home of more than eight thousand square feet on Orchard Street, just south of Armitage, a street that some locals have taken to calling “Gazillionaire’s Row.”

The McMansions in and around Sheffield don’t look anything like their suburban counterparts. The limits on height and lot size guarantee that. A majority of them are simply tall, narrow glass boxes. Some manage to blend in rather well with the surrounding buildings. But their extravagance is undeniable, even if not all of it is visible to the passerby. Many of them have elaborate green-designed rooftop decks on the fourth floor, reachable by elevator. Some of these decks block the view from the surrounding older houses. Some of the new houses have huge wine cellars that run the entire width of the property. There are heating coils under the sidewalks in front. And there are massive curb cuts that critics say ruin the pedestrian flavor of the streets on which they are placed.

The owners of the smaller houses that still dominate the neighborhood can’t really be said to have suffered economically. They bought for next to nothing, in many cases have paid off the mortgages, and could sell them for a fortune. The one depressing fact of life for the

owner of a Sheffield cottage is taxes. Some home owners whose buildings fall far short of McMansion status find themselves looking at property tax bills that can run as high as \$11,000 a year.

The most common complaint that long-term Sheffield residents make about the newcomers, however, is that they don’t have much interest in broader community life. There’s been “a tremendous diminution in participation in civic affairs,” says Martin Oberman, who used to represent Sheffield on the Chicago City Council. “There’s a lot more isolation. As people build three- or four-million-dollar houses, they tend not to be community activists.”

One hears that all the time in Sheffield. “The young people here don’t have kids for my littlest boy to play with,” one resident told a writer for *Midwest Magazine*. “They lead their own lives and don’t make friends.” But it’s not a new complaint. That comment was made in 1972. In Sheffield, as in countless neighborhoods around the country, the glory days of civic activism always seem to have occurred a generation before.

If there is a true test of resident commitment to the community, it would seem to be in the schools. The elementary school that serves Sheffield is Oscar Mayer, at the northern end of the neighborhood, next to the DePaul campus. It goes from kindergarten to eighth-grade. For most of the past quarter century, the student body at Mayer was overwhelmingly black and Hispanic, with most of the pupils bused in from other parts of the city. There weren’t enough children from Sheffield families to keep it operating at capacity. In 2002, Mayer had a white student population of 12.5 percent.

In the past decade, that began to change. By 2007, the school was 27 percent white. It was in the process of conversion to magnet status, as a Montessori school in the lower grades and an International Baccalaureate program in the higher grades, with neighborhood residents guaranteed a place. This move generated criticism that the Chicago school system was mainly trying to make Mayer more attractive to affluent white families living around it, luring them away from private schools. That has been borne out only in a selective way. There are white majorities in kindergarten and first grade, and sizable numbers

of white pupils through the early primary school years. But as the children grow older, the percentages change. In eighth grade, Mayer remains a minority-dominated school.

The consensus nevertheless exists among some Sheffield residents that even though it is available to students of any race living anywhere in the city, Mayer in ten years will be a majority-white school primarily serving Sheffield and the neighborhoods around it. And whether we wish to believe it or not, school performance tracks demographics more than it tracks pedagogical approach. The more middle-class students populate a school, whatever their ethnic background happens to be, the higher the test scores rise. An increase in middle-class students is a magnet that draws more middle-class families to the neighborhood, changing the performance of the school further, in what amounts to a virtuous cycle.

IT'S EARLY EVENING now in Sheffield, the busiest time of day on Armitage Avenue. Sipping a glass of wine at the Twisted Lizard sidewalk cafe, around the corner from the train, you can track the changes in the street scene as the evening rush hour wears on. At five o'clock, the sidewalks transport a parade of babies in strollers, many of them just retrieved from the St. Vincent de Paul day-care center on Halsted Street, one of the largest such centers in the state, with nearly five hundred children in attendance. Judging from the profusion of strollers in the late afternoon, and the seemingly ubiquitous presence of children's clothing stores on Armitage and Halsted, you begin to suspect that census data on household size in Sheffield—a median of roughly two people per household in the two main census tracts—is somehow in error.

By five thirty most of the strollers and children are gone, and the scene has begun to change significantly. There are middle-aged men with white shirts and briefcases now, younger men carrying messenger bags, women lugging big round papasan wicker chairs from a neighboring furniture store, and quite a few people carrying clothes on hangers from the dry cleaner that sits next to the station.

The Starbucks on the corner of Armitage and Sheffield is busy at

this time of day, as it was early in the morning, but the scene is much more social. Few conversations took place in the store early in the morning; much of the inside crowd was composed of young women working silently on their laptops. At six in the evening, however, little knots of people congregate in front of the store to talk, almost as if each group had an assigned time: One group leaves the corner and another turns up to replace it.

One also gets more sense of Sheffield as a left-leaning urban enclave in the evening than in the morning. There are Greenpeace activists on two of the four corners; adults drift by on skateboards and Roller-blades. I begin to wonder whether this is more a neighborhood of aging hippies than I thought it was. Then I see a red Corvette convertible glide by, and I am reminded of a basic truth: It is still a place where it can cost more than a million dollars to buy a house.

ONE THING most of Chicago's planners felt sure of in the 1980s was that once the westward spread of central-city affluence reached the end of Sheffield, it would face an insuperable physical barrier. The western boundary of Sheffield, Clybourn Avenue, was a wide, ugly thoroughfare lined with strip malls. Just beyond it was an industrial zone called Goose Island, with factories where many of Sheffield's old blue-collar workers used to be employed. After Goose Island came the Chicago River, and a few blocks beyond that, the eight-lane Kennedy Expressway. Any two of those obstacles seemed sufficient to halt the residential boom. It looked like a safe bet that the upper-class march that had moved west from Lincoln Park in the 1970s could not be repeated beyond the river and the freeway.

But anyone who made that bet was wrong. In the two decades after Sheffield became rich, an equally dramatic—although different—transformation took place on the other side of the barrier, in Wicker Park and Bucktown. In retrospect, it isn't that hard to understand. This was a boom generated to a large extent by public transportation. And on the CTA's Blue Line, both Wicker Park and Bucktown were only a few minutes farther from the Loop than Sheffield was. When you are sitting on a train, a factory district, a dirty river, and an eight-lane

freeway don't loom so large as obstacles. Martin Oberman puts it succinctly: "In Chicago," he says, "gentrification follows the El." "Gentrification" is a word that fits Wicker Park and Bucktown, even if it's the wrong term for Sheffield. Both had reputations as havens for artists and bohemians well before World War II, in the years when the Chicago poet Nelson Algren entertained the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in a third-story apartment above a Wicker Park storefront.

The bohemian tradition never really died in these neighborhoods. Nevertheless, by 1970 they had deteriorated even further than Sheffield. Crime and poverty rates were higher; an even larger proportion of the white middle-class residents had moved away. North Avenue, the heart of the area, was shabby and unappealing. "I remember when that stretch of North Avenue was hubcap shops and liquor stores," state representative John Fritchey said a few years ago. "No one wanted to claim it then, and now everyone wants to claim it."

That's true. Some locals, like Fritchey, believe that North Avenue is the dividing line between Wicker Park on the south and Bucktown on the north. Others ferociously claim that the border lies two blocks farther north, at Bloomingdale Avenue. But it doesn't really matter. The two neighborhoods just seem to blend into each other.

And they have a frenetic quality that quiet Sheffield has never possessed. Armitage Avenue in Sheffield is a busy and attractive street; on a summer evening, Damen Avenue as it runs through Wicker Park and Bucktown is more of an open-air festival, the sidewalks jammed with so many young people that it feels a bit like SoHo or Greenwich Village in New York. Damen Avenue is lined with bookstores, boutiques, sidewalk cafés, and art galleries; there seem to be more art galleries in Wicker Park than there are business offices. If one wishes to make comparisons to the Left Bank of Paris seventy years ago, and to the twenty-four-hour public display that its streets presented, then Wicker Park and Bucktown are a closer fit than Sheffield.

Since the 1990s, though, these neighborhoods have faced some of the issues that Sheffield did earlier. A single-family house in Wicker Park can cost a million dollars now; some of the artists who settled there twenty years ago have been priced out and have moved to places

even farther west, such as Logan Square and Humboldt Park. It is not hard to find someone in the crowd on Damen Avenue who will lament that the glory days of bohemian life are over. But most of those who have lived here over the past couple of decades and remain today seem to accept the change.

**SHEFFIELD**, **WICKER PARK**, and **Bucktown** tell the story of Chicago's demographic inversion, and they tell it colorfully, but they are not the neighborhoods that produce the largest numbers. Sheffield had an estimated population of about eleven thousand in 2007; Bucktown was only a little larger, and even Wicker Park, the largest of the three, had twenty-three thousand. None of these is expected to grow much between now and 2020.

Sheffield is all but built out, and large-scale development in either Wicker Park or Bucktown would face significant community resistance. The big numbers lie elsewhere, along the very borders of Chicago's Loop, and in the Loop itself. This is where the high-rise growth of the central city took place on a massive scale prior to the 2008 recession. The Chicago Planning and Zoning Department estimated in 2009 that what it calls the Central Area—five miles running north and south with the Loop in the center, and a mile west from the lake in most places—had acquired a residential population of 165,000 by 2007. It had grown 48 percent in the years since the 2000 census was taken. The planning department predicted that the number will be up to 230,000 by 2020.

That may be wishful thinking on the city's part. But even the current estimate of 165,000 is difficult to grasp until you walk around the Central Area and gaze up at the multitude of residential buildings, some of them fifty and sixty stories tall, that did not exist in 2000 and are now filled with home owners or tenants. In the district surrounding the Loop, sociologist John Koval wrote in 2006, "High-rise villages and communities—interspersed with warehouse conversions—are literally popping up like so many mushrooms on a summer morning."

These new high-rise villages have some unexpected touches: trees and flowers in the middle of the wider streets, with wrought-iron fence-

ing around them; old-fashioned streetlights reminiscent of the ones Haussmann placed on the boulevards of Paris. Such amenities are no accident—they came by direct order of Mayor Richard M. Daley, who had, it seems legitimate to say, a bit of a Paris obsession. On his return from a visit to Europe in 1996, he decided that downtown Chicago's larger office buildings should be lit at night in a manner reminiscent of those on some of the boulevards of Paris. Later, he insisted that the new condo neighborhoods have at least one shade tree for every twenty-five feet of street frontage, a somewhat autocratic decree but one that Haussmann would have approved of. Nearly a thousand hanging baskets went up on downtown streets in a single year, many of them three feet tall and marked with the inscription, *urbis in horto*—“city in a garden,” which happens to have been Chicago’s city motto since 1837.

In 2008, the condo mushrooms basically stopped sprouting. Huge new residential projects—including architect Santiago Calatrava’s 150-story tower on Lake Shore Drive—were put on hold until the real estate market picked up. By mid-2009, there were more than ten thousand unsold condominiums in the Central Area. Most of the townhouses and midrise condominiums were maintaining their attractiveness rather well; it was the developers who overdid it, who chose to build fifty or sixty or seventy stories simply because they could get the money. Some real estate analysts speculated that by the spring of 2009 there was already a backlog of Central Area condos that could take as much as five years to clear. But even the pessimists did not dispute that in the year 2020, no matter how many condos are built or sold, downtown Chicago is likely to be a nest of center-city urban affluence unequalled in size—or even approached—by anyplace in America outside Manhattan. Sheffield is unique in its own way, but in other respects, it is a harbinger of things to come.

One lesson we should not attempt to draw from all this is that massive numbers of suburban families will return to the city, reversing the demographic changes of the past half century. Even if the city’s projections are accurate and Chicago’s Central Area is home to as many as 230,000 people in the year 2020, that will still be less than one-tenth of the population of the city as a whole. The rules of urban

population change that prevailed in the past century are not going to be erased that easily.

The city is likely to grow modestly in the coming decade, and the Central Area somewhat more than modestly. The Census Bureau reported early in 2009 that the percentage of residential permits issued within the city was 7 percent of the metro area total in the early 1990s, 23 percent in the early 2000s, and 40 percent in 2007. That process of change has paused; it has not concluded.

The suburbs of Chicago are not emptying out by any means, but they are no longer growing very fast, and some of them, the most distant, less appealing, and less convenient ones, are not currently growing at all. Some of this is undoubtedly due to a recession that has made it difficult for urban dwellers to sell their houses and move, but much of it is due to the enhanced appeal of the city’s close-in neighborhoods.

There are those urban critics who insist that this is a temporary phenomenon, that once national prosperity has fully returned, prosperous families will again be vacating the central city in large numbers to find exurbs where they can spread out. It is not possible to refute such predictions; what can safely be said is that virtually no one who has spent the past decade watching Chicago closely believes that it is going to happen. The consensus is that the abandonment of the central city and the rapid suburban growth that marked the second half of the twentieth century are slowly coming to an end. And so the urban areas of the next generation, not only Chicago and New York but others that have been much less fortunate so far, will be much different places than they were in 1990. In many ways, they will resemble the cities in which our grandparents felt comfortable, rather than the ones in which we ourselves grew up.

The real essence of demographic inversion is based not on numbers but on choice: Increasingly over the past decade, both before and during the recession, people with the resources to live wherever they wished began choosing to live near the urban center—just as Viennese, Parisians, and Londoners at the turn of the previous century elected to do. This will have significant social consequences, especially when it comes to daily communication and casual social life. Central-city dwellers who have the option of communicating with friends almost

entirely by electronic device will also have the option of socializing on the street or in neighborhood cafés in ways that suburbanites do not get the opportunity to do. Many of them will be drawn to the urban center by precisely that opportunity.

A hundred years ago, the legendary architect Charles McKim talked about the civilizing effect of wealth. One has to be careful tossing around phrases like that today. But if by civilizing effect McKim meant a richer cultural scene, a more comfortable mingling of races and ethnic groups, a more vibrant outdoor life, and a more diverse array of people using the streets at all hours of the day, it seems fair to predict that the next urban America will be a more civilized place than the current one.