The Rich History behind Little Village

Just a little less than 8 miles Southwest of The Loop (central business district), lies Little Village, a neighborhood of Chicago known for its rich Hispanic and Latino heritage. Little Village, or as locals call it La Villita, was a settlement of the South Lawndale area and was initially filled with migrants from Pilsen, another Hispanic and Latino neighborhood, by World War II. Then, by the 1990s, Little Village was known as a primary entry point for newly arriving Hispanic and Latino Immigrants to Chicago according to The City of Neighborhoods. Currently the education demographics of
Little Village, according to the Statistical Atlas, are about 49% of people aged 25 do not have a high school diploma, whereas 39% have a high school diploma, and 11% have a higher degree. Making this community filled with blue-collar workers and entrepreneurs.

**What Little Village Brings to the Table**

Busy 26th street serves great economic profits to Little Village and proves important to the city of Chicago in general. In fact, Little Village serves as the cities second-highest-grossing shopping strip after the famous Magnificent Mile in The Loop of Chicago. This is huge, proving that Little Village is vital to the city of Chicago because of the grossing profits it brings in. This is just one of the reasons why this neighborhood is so special.
“Little Village has the energy and density of a major city, but with a close-knit community of independent businesses and non-profits that make it one of the most dynamic neighborhoods in Chicago.” -The City of Neighborhoods

Today, Little Village is known for its bright murals, authentic Mexican cuisine, and tight-knit community. As one who has visited Little Village, I truly felt like I was transported out of Chicago. The community of Little Village is beautiful because of the number of small businesses and talent that is seen by art, food, and culture preservation. With a community as delightful as Little Village, it is important that it is protected from potential harm that could take down this neighborhood as well as celebrated.

Environmental Injustices

While there many environmental injustices in Little Village there are three to focus on:

1. Fisk and Crawford Power Plant
2. La Villita Park
3. Smokestack Demolition

The Key Players involved in Little Villages Environmental Injustices
**Player #1: The City of Chicago**

Current Leadership is Mayor Lori Lightfoot and her administration team. Lightfoot has been mayor of Chicago since 2019 and has brought some promising insight to changes she and her team hope to make.

> According to Crain's Chicago Business, Lightfoot plans to "...actively disrupt systems of traditional exclusionary decision-making, prioritizes land-use decisions that mitigate legacy environmental injustices and creates opportunity for green economic development through strategic partnerships between the city, nonprofit partners, community leaders, academia and the private sector."

Lori Lightfoot. Source: Twitter
Lightfoot brings hope to nonprofit partners in wanting to work together to have a partnership rather than a dictatorship. This is positive for minority communities, who often experience environmental racism because they will be able to experience more communication with policymakers.

Lightfoot also has an overall goal to make a Green Economy which aims to maintain economic development and advancement while protecting the value of the environment. A Green Economy uses natural resources more efficiently. Karen Chapple, Urban Planning Professor at the University of California Berkeley sees the Green Economy as having four parts as follows:

1. Renewable Energy  
2. Green Building and Energy Efficient Technology  
3. Energy Efficient Infrastructure  
4. Waste Management

Lightfoot has some similar, but different ideas to a Green Economy rather than Chapple. According to Crain's Chicago Business Lightfoot wants to focus on three parts:

1. Develop a citywide environmental justice strategy for communities disproportionately suffering from water, soil, and pollutated air.  
2. Encourage sustainable redevelopment in all Chicago neighborhoods.  
3. Create a working group to monitor air quality

While Lightfoot's Green Economy may be slightly different than expert Chapple's Green Economy, they have similar principles and values. With this in mind, Lightfoot seems to provide a promising outlook for environmental justice and growth in Chicago.
Player #2: Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO)

The LVEJO was founded in 1994 by public school parents who saw an environmental hazard at their children's school. What once was a small organization has blossomed into a successful non-profit organization.

![Some LVEJO members. Source: Flickr](https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/7019d9d0527044d29bef5aaa707353c6/print)

Many of the staff at LVEJO have PhDs or doctorates in the following:

- Urban and Regional Planning
- Policy Studies
- Environmental Studies
- Finance
- Law
- Social Sciences

Important people also part of LVEJO also include:

- Volunteers
- Managers
- Community Organizers
- People with a passion to help Little Village
LVEJO brings the piece of community involvement and public participation which is very crucial to creating healthy cities and neighborhoods.

LVEJO has done incredible things for Little Village. To read more about the organization as well as their success stories click the button below.

LVEJO Website

Player #3: Urban Planners

Urban planners play a major role in helping with cities develop to accommodate the populations needs whether that be through transportation, environmentally, or socially.

When it comes to minority communities, there are some new organization in place for planners to be apart in Chicago to help plan properly in minority communities.

According to South Side Weekly, an all Latinx urban planning group was started by José Miguel Acosta-Córdova, a UIC grad student, in January 2016. This group is called the Latino Planning Organization for Development, Education, and Regeneration (LPODER) but is pronounced as "el poder" meaning "the power". LPODER was also formed around the same time the Society of Black Urban Planners (SBUP) was formed. Both organizations aim to educated other people, as well as planners, on how minorities need to be more of a focus when it comes to Urban Planning because the field is dominated by 81% white individuals.
Moreover, when it comes to Little Village and planners who are not part of the LPODER, many do want to help support these communities, but may not always have the personal experience like members of the LPODER and SBUP. One example of this is that according to Crain's Chicago Business, planners in Chicago note the injustices with the Chicago River in particular and want to make sure it is more equitable for all communities.

“As urban planners, we must recognize the work being done by community groups like Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, who received a grant to explore health implications of industrial sites along the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal. Following the lead of local voices like theirs will help ensure that development serves residents.” - Crain's Chicago Business

An introduction into Environmental Injustices...
Fisk & Crawford

This Power plant was one of Chicago's biggest industrial sources of CO2 emissions according to the Chicago Tribune. This plant was opened in 1903 and was running up until it got shut down in 2012.
La Villita Park

Another example of environmental injustice in Little Village is La Villita Park, which sits on toxic waste. This is also known as a park being built on a Superfund Site.

Today La Villita Park contains three grass fields, a skate park, two basketball courts, two astroturf fields, a fitness area, a small picnic pavilion, and a playground. However, achieving this park, which opened in 2014, was a constant, long, and strenuous battle for the LVEJO.

An important aspect of the La Villita Park is that it is adjacent to the Cook County Jail.
Smokestack Demolition

Perhaps the most relevant environmental injustice in Little Village recently occurred on April 12th, 2020. According to the Chicago Sun-Times, a 95-year-old smokestack of the once Crawford power plant was being demolished by the Hilco Redevelopment Partners.
Map of Little Village

To the right showcases the different areas where these acts of environmental injustice took place as well as the LVEJO's office.

Unpacking the Environmental Racism behind these injustices

But first, what is Environmental Racism?

Environmental racism is institutional rules, policies, and regulations made by the government that deliberately target minority communities whether that be in a race group or socioeconomic status. It can also be when these minority communities have to live in or near areas that have poor environmental conditions like toxic waste, urban decay, pollution, etc.

Environmental Racism Present in Fisk & Crawford

The shut down of the plant in 2012 was a huge step for Chicago moving towards cleaner air but an even bigger step for the residents of Little Village. However, shutting down this coal plant was no easy task despite the amount of
Environmental Racism in Little Village

health harm it brought to the residents of Little Village. In fact, it took decades of activist groups in Little Village to get this particular plant to be shut down.

"...Crawford coal plant was responsible for 26 deaths, 1,800 asthma attacks, and 350 emergency room visits every year." (Pacific Standard).

With the fact that something as deadly as this coal plant stayed up and running inside a brown neighborhood of Chicago speaks to the level of environmental racism still present. While this is completely unacceptable, the LVEJO can not help every environmental problem alone. This will require a corporation from the Chicago government.

Environmental Racism in La Villita Park

La Villita Park shows the environmental racism that Superfund Sites bring to the city of Chicago and other areas. The Chicago Reporter sums up the environmental racism of superfund sites perfectly:

"The concentration of toxic risk suggests that Chicago continues to fail to live up to a fundamental principle of environmental justice: a person’s race or income level should not increase their likelihood of living near hazardous waste. With more than half of the city’s Superfund sites on the South Side and more than a third on the West Side, maybe this injustice can be best addressed if we call it by its true name: environmental racism."
Behind the La Villita Park field sits the Cook County Jail. Source: Climatesofinequality.org

The issue here is that this park is a Superfund site, meaning that while the site of the park may be cleaned up, for now, it does not mean it will be cleaned up forever. It is like putting a bandaid in a bloody wound. At first, the problem is fixed, but later the blood, or toxic waste, will seep to the surface again. This is troubling to think about considering that this contaminated soil can lead to health effects like cancer. After just a quick Google search, anyone can see that superfund sites are incredibly dangerous. This again proves the environmental racism present in Little Village and brings attention to the fact that these minority communities are getting discriminated against in more ways than most people could even imagine.

In addition to the park being unhealthy in the fact that it on a toxic superfund site, it also is mentally unhealthy in the fact that the Cook County Jail is right across the street from a park where young children play at as well as young adults. Having a Jail across from a park showcases how these minority communities can be thought of as an afterthought.
A picture of a general superfund site. Source: Union of Concerned Scientist

To read more about superfund sites and how the LVEJO has fought for the La Villita Park in many ways, click below.

Click Here

**Environmental Racism with the Smokestack Demolition**

Activist Furious About Implosion That Sent Dust Into Little Village
A large plume of
dust completely intoxicated
the neighborhood of Little Village
making it a potential public health
crisis. The main issue here, besides the
health of the citizens of Little Village, is
how the city of Chicago
and Chicago mayor, Lori Lightfoot,
handled the crisis. To put it simply,
they didn’t handle it. The
executive director of LVEJO, Kim
Wasserman, and the rest of the
organization demanded that City Hall
forces Hilco Redevelopment
Partners to leave Little Village and to revoke the $19.7
million city subsidy of a massive warehouse on sight (Chicago
Sun-Times). Lightfoot did not grant the LVEJO requested but
was quick to point fingers at the Hilco company and
is claiming that this was “incredibly unacceptable”.

However, what is incredibly unacceptable here is
the unwillingness to make a change in Little Village by the City
of Chicago. While the apologies are appreciated, they are not
enough. Wasserman and others want new permits in place
and the ability for “right to refusal” for communities impacted
by environmental racism to have the right to veto permits
based on public health impact. This would have been very
necessary given that the entire world is in the COVID-19
pandemic. With a "right to refusal," this would have never
occurred.

Wasserman also states, “Permitting decisions by
any Chicago department and zoning, planning or
tax incentive approvals by City Council must
factor in a company’s track record and that of their
The environmental racism in this recent crisis is the lack of prevention into the project. Before The smokestack was taken down, the LVEJO had been in contact with the city of Chicago to not move forward with the project due to the current COVID-19 pandemic (Chicago Sun-Times). However, that request was ignored. This smokestack crisis that occurred brings a couple of questions to ponder:

- Would this have ever occurred in white or wealthy neighborhood or a suburbs?
- Would the news be spread differently if this took place in a wealthy or white neighborhoods or suburbs?
- Whose responsibility is it to make sure this does not happen again?
- How does this get prevented for future demolition?

What does this mean for Little Village?

From the Fisk and Crawford Power Plant, La Villita Park, and the smokestack demolition it is apparent that the environmental racism has affected the community drastically in terms of health conditions. Moreover, this can be mentally tiring on the community as well. The fear of breathing in unsafe air or having chemicals seep into your skin from playing at the local park is something that the members of Little Village have to live with.

The Bad

Despite all of the current work that is being done by planners, LVEJO, and the City of Chicago there is no way to go back in time change the injustices that have already happened.
The Good

Little Village is Moving Towards Sustainability. While changing the past is impossible, moving on and making changes is possible.

With the dedication from the LVEJO I feel that Little Village has a bright future from the list of accomplishments they have already achieved. Below is a short list of the accomplishments the LVEJO but visit their website to read more.

1. Coal Plant Shut Down
2. Transit Victory
3. Community Garden
4. Reclaiming Green Space

The community garden in Little Village. Source: LVEJO

The City of Chicago, specifically Lightfoot, expresses that she is intolerant to the environmental racism in Little Village and elsewhere. After the smoke stack demolition incident, Lightfoot was quick to point fingers, however, she did express a lot of remorse and sorrow. In an ideal world, the demolition would never have happened. However, I feel hopeful to have a Chicago Mayor that seems interest in helping minority communities. Hopefully, this means that Lightfoot and the City
of Chicago will put more of a priority on Little Village and other minority communities in the future.

Planners also have a positive effect on minority communities. Thanks to organizations like LPODER and SBUP there has been more education to planners and others about planning in minority communities and the urban planning field in general. This is a huge step because it is starting the conversation about discussing injustice issues like environmental racism. In addition, planners recognize groups like the LVEJO and are willing to work with them to plan a better Little Village for everyone.

Wrap-Up

The beauty in this community is worth saving

As mentioned earlier, Little Village is a tight knit-community that embodies the Hispanic and Latinx culture. The video below captures all Little Village has to offer.
Despite all the unique heritage in the neighborhood, the devastating truth is that if these environmental racism acts such as the Fisk and Crawford plant, La Villita Park, and the smokestack demolition continue to occur, Little Village will no longer exist due to the health hazards. Therefore, moving forward it is important to show support to LPODER and LVEJO because they are the main change agents to making Little Village healthier, with the help of the City of Chicago and Mayor Lightfoot. To help support these planners and organizations the first step is to get and educated and educate others. Below are the links to LPODER and LVEJO.

LPODER Facebook

LVEJO Donations

Creating less environmental racism is Little Village is an overwhelming task but is one that could be completed one
step at a time.

Works Cited


