



Settled by Eastern Europeans, Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood is now home to a large Latinx community. Photo: Elizabeth Blasius/Bloomberg CityLab

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How a Plan to Save Buildings Fell Apart

Fears of gentrification doomed a long-planned effort to landmark Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood. For historic preservation advocates, that failure may be an instructive lesson.

Elizabeth Blasius and Zach Mortice

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In 2018, Chicago's Department of Planning and Development felt that they had a progressive plan to preserve one of the city's most rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods. Pilsen, on the city's southwest side, was home to Eastern European immigrants in the 19th century; in the 20th century, it drew newcomers from Mexico. The overlapping waves of arrivals left enduring marks on the neighborhood's architectural fabric, where ornate "Bohemian Baroque" buildings carry brilliant murals painted to express the area's Latinx heritage. But residents of Pilsen were facing growing affordability pressures: According to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, median home prices went from \$76,000 to \$198,000 from 1990 to 2015, and the median sale price in 2019 was \$430,000, per *Chicago Magazine*.

To protect more than 850 buildings in Pilsen, the city proposed establishing a historic district, primarily focused on simple, vernacular building types. In a first for the city, the plan called for the neighborhood's murals to be preserved, a feature that moved preservation beyond bricks and mortar to more ephemeral signifiers of culture. Perhaps most importantly, the historic district was just one part of a larger preservation strategy that included housing supports, economic development measures, park space, and more. The hope was that these measures would relieve pressure on over-burdened neighbors struggling to stay in their homes, easing the path forward for landmarking.

In May 2019, the city's landmarks commission unanimously recommended the district move forward and its regulations were tentatively in effect until the district was brought up to a vote before the City Council Committee on Zoning, Landmarks and Building Standards. Alderman Byron Sigcho-Lopez, who represents much of Pilsen, successfully lobbied to delay the vote for a year to give the community time to consider the effects of landmarking. The planning department itself tacked on an extra six months to try to sell neighbors on the plan and respond to community concerns, holding three community meetings in English and Spanish.

"You have to tailor the district to the specific community," says Maurice Cox, DPD commissioner, who joined the department in 2019, after the landmark plan was assembled. "[This isn't] a one-size-fits all. We acknowledged that there was a fairly unique community and that there would have to be guidelines that we tailored to where they are – their income range, the circumstance of ownership."

During negotiations, the city proposed shrinking the size of the district significantly, and offered an expansion of funds available through the Adopt-a-Landmark Program. But by December 2020, it had become clear that DPD's effort didn't work: The public remained "almost unanimous" in opposition, says Cox. After hearing neighbor after neighbor inveigh against the historic district, Cox pulled his support, and each of the 18 members of the Zoning Committee voted the district down.

The opposition came from a grassroots coalition of neighbors and neighborhood organizations, deploying some of the same tactics often used by preservationists to relay their causes. Voices from within the working-class Latinx community made it clear that they were unconvinced that landmarking would provide relief from displacement and gentrification.

And no wonder: Those are problems that historic districts – and preservation at large – were not developed to address.

The failure of the Pilsen plan illustrates a central contradiction in historic preservation. Preservationists present their work as a boon to culture, community and continuity; saving

buildings helps to maintain the collective memories of place. But read to the end of most historic preservation assessments, and the final directive on what should happen to any place is defined by material commodities: why and where certain segments of certain buildings should be preserved. That kind of landmarking leaves culture and community unprotected.

This wasn't the first time that Pilsen had been the focus of ambitious urban planning. The arrival of Mexican immigrants in the mid-20th century was itself the product of grand plans emanating from City Hall: Parts of the near West Side neighborhood, where many Mexican families lived in that era, were razed in the mid-1960s to build the University of Illinois at Chicago. In 1963, eminent domain was used to acquire and demolish blocks of buildings on Pilsen's east side for the construction of the Dan Ryan Expressway. City services suffered: Into the late 1960s, the area had no public high school, so students were required to travel to Harrison High School in Lawndale, where, like most Chicago public schools of the era, non-English speaking students would be grouped in classrooms alongside students with learning disabilities and behavioral problems.

In 1973, Mayor Richard J. Daley championed Plan 21, an urban renewal project developed without community input that aimed to draw middle-class residents and shoppers back to Chicago. While the plan touted rehabilitation, its intention was to create a controlled buffer zone around the central business district, which would have led to the displacement of Pilsen residents.

While longtime residents remained concerned about municipal disinvestment, lack of services, and public safety, in the late 1980s, the neighborhood's culture and architecture began attracting private-sector interest – along with members of the creative class. By 1990, efforts to redevelop the long-neglected (but landmarked) 1902 Schoenhofen Brewing Co. into residential lofts and commercial space were rejected by neighbors who demanded that the city protect the area for industrial use to provide jobs.

“Back in the 1990s, you had the city fining people for broken windows in Pilsen,” says Veronica Reyes, vice president of community ownership at the Resurrection Project, a nonprofit based in Pilsen that helps families gain access to affordable housing (and that did not support the historic districting effort). “There have been a lot of improvements, and since then it's become a very desirable neighborhood. Who doesn't want to have a landmark designation? But there are a lot of people we don't think about when we think about preservation.”

When first presented in 2018, the local historic district was one component of a larger effort called the Pilsen and Little Village Preservation Strategy. The plan included a five-year Affordable Requirements Ordinance (ARO) pilot aimed at increasing the affordability of large residential projects within Pilsen and the adjoining Little Village neighborhood, housing resources to help residents avoid displacement, and an industrial modernization strategy to boost access to quality jobs. Open space improvements were also part of the plan, including the purchase and

transformation of an abandoned rail line into a linear park called the Paseo, similar to the 606 trail on the northwest side. The ARO pilot was implemented, but most of the other elements of the strategy stalled at the planning stage – except the historic district, which was implemented, almost in isolation.

Cox says that neighbors would have been more likely to be supportive if all these measures had moved along with the landmark district, and local preservationists agree.

“We wanted the historic district,” says Lisa DiChiera, director of advocacy at Landmarks Illinois, “but at the same time we recognized these other issues that were happening in the neighborhood and we wanted to make sure that everything was getting addressed. They just didn’t do it.” As a result, “the historic district became the fall guy.”



A mural by Brenda López Macias and Manuel Macias on the side of El Popocatepetl Tortilleria in Pilsen. The city’s landmark designation would have also protected the neighborhood’s distinctive of colorful murals. *Photographer: Raymond Boyd/Michael Ochs Archives via Getty Images*

Furthermore, residents had to guess at what additional cost burdens a historic district might bring,

because design guidelines delineating how historic building elements had to be maintained to conform to the district's standards were never completed. Guidelines for historic districts provide recommendations on a multitude of building components from masonry repair and windows to signage, but don't provide any cost comparison as far as the price of these repairs versus the price of a repair outside of a historic district. Despite the city's reassurance that costs would not be a burden, as well as the delivery of example renovations, the community wasn't assuaged. "There was a message of misinformation" says Eddie Torrez, architect and principal at Bauer Latoza Studio, the firm that worked on the nomination.

"There was talk of incentives, but the city did not give a clear picture of available funds for repairs," says Reyes. "Many of the families affected by the district are on fixed incomes and are either concerned about rising rents or burdened by rising property taxes."

Pilsen residents were asking questions that there were few definitive answers to, because there's not much data on whether landmarking and historic districts slow or accelerate gentrification. A study of landmark districts in the *Journal of the American Planning Association* showed that in New York City, hardly a typical real estate market, landmark districts don't change racial composition in neighborhoods but are tied to decreases in the poverty rate, more home ownership, and more educated residents.

Another element of the district's dissolution can be tied to the changing political climate in Pilsen and across Chicago. The initiative was initially pushed by former Mayor Rahm Emmanuel and supported by Alderman Danny Solis. Mired in the ongoing fallout after the police murder of Laquan McDonald, Emmanuel declined to seek re-election in 2019. Solis also declined to run, after federal investigators confronted him with a report detailing how he had received gifts in exchange for working deals through the city council. Solis' successor, Sigcho-Lopez, came to city government as an activist. A member of the city council's Democratic Socialists of America caucus, he was the former director of Pilsen Alliance, a local nonprofit that's continued to push against the landmarking effort.

"The historic district could only protect the buildings, not the people," says Sigcho-Lopez. "That's why the community didn't want the district."

Former activists like Sigcho-Lopez have spent a lot of time on picket lines and at protests. And in decades past, that would have put him squarely in the preservationist camp. Historic preservation began as a movement to prevent private interests and governments from destroying buildings that helped narrate community history through its built environment. Preservationists of the 1960s took to the streets by way of grassroots organizing to voice their objections to building demolitions and government-sanctioned urban renewal. As this ethos gained popular support and local, state and

federal governments leaned into notions of history and environmentalism, preservation became a function of government, protected by law.

As preservation became a component within planning, a portion of the field splintered, leaving the part of the field nurtured in communities disconnected from the municipal process, whether it was the de facto preservation of communities by people of color or poor people, or other efforts to stave off threats coming directly from residents. Once preservation had been institutionalized into governance, it took on the characteristics of its wider civic charter and ran the risk of becoming as hierarchical and top-down as any imperious mayor or zealous department head. That's what happened in Pilsen, says DiChiera.

“To me, landmarking has to be a block-by-block thing. It really has to be a grassroots, bottom-up effort,” she says. “In Pilsen, it was a very top-down effort.”



Pilsen residents remained wary of promises that landmarking their neighborhood could also protect them from displacement. *Photo: Elizabeth Blasius/Bloomberg CityLab*

And Pilsen already has a rich history of preservation – just not the kind that shows up in a city

council agenda or mayoral press conference. “While the Bohemians were the builders of Pilsen, the Mexicans were its Preservationists,” reads a line in the nomination for the Pilsen Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) in 2007. Unlike local landmarking, listing on the NRHP does not have the legal means to prevent a building from being demolished or altered, unless that action is performed by a governmental agency or with public money.

Listing on the NRHP offers tax incentives that encourage renovation. If an owner spends 20% of the structure’s value on qualified expenditures, they can receive a tax credit for that work. Owners of buildings listed on the NRHP or designated as a City of Chicago Landmark are able to take advantage of a Property Tax Assessment Freeze, where a property’s assessed valuation is frozen for eight years after the initial year in which the rehabilitation of the property began.

While the tax freeze is available for homeowners, the Federal Historic Tax Credit is only available to those that own income-producing properties, which makes it a particularly poor fit for a place like Pilsen. Neither of these incentives are applied automatically, and each requires an application process. The incentives are structured in a way that requires building owners to have the capital to perform the work first, and then receive reimbursement once the work is reviewed. This formula is easy for wealthy building owners to follow, but harder for an owner whose capital is the building they own. There is no funding to bridge this gap and few supplementary grant or loan resources. It’s system of incentives that disproportionally favors white, wealthy property owners, and leaves renters out. Only one building in Pilsen has received federal tax credit support: Thalia Hall, an ornate Bohemian community center and theater modeled on an opera house in Prague, was converted into a concert venue, bar, and restaurant in 2013.

“The values and principles are to protect the structure,” says Paola Aguirre, a member of the city’s Landmarks Commission whose work as an architect and designer is centered on the intersection of equity and preservation. Aguirre joined the commission in October 2019 after it had already passed along its recommendations for Pilsen. “The Landmarks Ordinance doesn’t consider economics. It doesn’t consider equity guidelines whatsoever,” she says. “Do we have the right rules and regulations in play that are responsive to the pressures that our communities are facing? The answer to me is no.”

Developing such regulations and matching preservationists’ actions with their rhetoric, advocates of more equity-focused preservation say, means moving beyond saving bricks and mortar. “When you’ve preserved buildings, you can feel like you’ve accomplished the preservation of place without having actually tackled how to keep people in place, who helped to constitute that place and give it character,” says Japonica Brown-Saracino, a sociologist at Boston University who studies neighborhood change and gentrification. Progressive efforts often revolve around preserving the

“symbols of a social group” instead of the group itself, she says, as in the city’s proposal to save Pilsen’s murals.

And to take it even further, assuming a community isn’t displaced by neighborhood change, there’s value in preserving *their specific way of life* as well. “If you preserve people but don’t preserve the institutions that they’ve relied on to support their community, it’s not clear to me what you’re preserving,” says Brown-Saracino.

That means dealing in public policy and breaking down disciplinary borders. Preservation often operates in a reactive mode, jumping into unfamiliar communities only after a crisis arises. In Philadelphia, for example, the city’s failure to landmark “Doctor’s Row” – a block of homes once owned by Black professionals in South Philly – opened to door for developers looking to tear down and redevelop properties in the now-gentrified neighborhood. “Preservation needs to partner with more community development organizations, more social justice organizations, housing developers, planners,” says Di Gao, senior director of research and development at the National Trust for Historic Preservation. “We need to – together – come up with project strategies to achieve the results that we want from a more holistic point of view.”

Widening the sphere of preservation to include social justice has been a focus of the National Trust of late, with significant campaigns to address women’s overlooked roles in American history and launching the African-American Cultural Heritage Action Fund in 2017, to “Tell the Full American Story.” But branded campaigns are just the first step toward making these practices and procedures a typical part of the discipline’s baseline approach. “If people are calling for historic preservation, that should automatically trigger some sort of collaborative review of the state of the neighborhood that’s thinking about historic preservation, social preservation, landscape preservation, simultaneously,” says Brown-Saracino.

A new consensus is forming around this sort of historic preservation multilateralism, and DiChiera doesn’t see any reason to cling to traditional borders between her field and any other. “Some people may say, ‘That’s not historic preservation, that’s community development.’ It doesn’t matter what label you give any of these things because in the end it’s all about trying to help a community remain viable. It’s a two-fold problem. It’s a problem that you can’t expect the historic preservation movement to solve those problems alone; it has to be a multi-pronged effort. But at the same time, the historic preservation movement has to recognize that the longtime cultural heritage of a barbershop in a historic building is probably going to be viewed as just as significant by the

community as the building itself.”

The fact that preservationists have to actively make this case is testament to the same specter of racial and class bias that infects every corner of American life. “Historic preservation has an enormous responsibility to be a force for social justice in communities,” says Gao. “There is a lot of legacy within the field where it seems like preservation was created to primarily preserve grand legacies of elite, white men,” she says.

If you ask preservationists and civic officials how and if historic landmark ordinances can help marginalized communities retain their history and culture, the constant refrain is that landmarking is “just one tool” in an arsenal of cultural preservation. But it’s not the only one.

One of the most established is San Francisco’s Legacy Business Registry, which began in 2016. The first such program in the nation, it gives grants to businesses that have been in a neighborhood for 30 years or longer if they maintain their historical name, essential business operations, physical features, and the craft and traditions of their business. A report on preservation equity in African-American neighborhoods assembled as part of the National Trust’s African-American Cultural Heritage Action Fund effort details more ways that preservationists can work with allied groups to keep communities in place and their historic buildings intact. This includes more inclusive criteria that prioritizes intangible heritage and social values over strict definitions of historic architectural integrity.

In the Treme neighborhood of New Orleans, preservationists worked to subsidized repair and maintenance costs for low-income homeowners in a historic district with “Revival Grants.” In Chicago, the Neighborhood Opportunity Fund leverages fees paid by developers who want additional rights to build downtown to support revitalizations on the South and West sides. And in Atlanta, philanthropists are working with nonprofits to provide property tax relief in neighborhoods under gentrification pressure.



Pilsen's original landmarking plan would have protected more than 850 buildings in the district. *Photo: Elizabeth Blasius/Bloomberg CityLab*

Those kinds of programs could have been useful in Pilsen. “Residents love the Czech influence of the architecture,” says Reyes, “but there was an insistence that [landmarking] had to be done to protect it, and was presented at a time where people were already struggling to stay in the neighborhood. It comes to a point where you feel like you are being choked.”

That struggle was complicated by the Covid-19 pandemic: In 2020, Pilsen struggled with inadequate medical care and testing access, as job losses and business closures forced families to make economic choices that deferred maintenance and renovation projects in favor of basic needs.

Preservation would have more willing partners if Black, Brown, and low-income people weren’t already under so much pressure and had the free time and energy to engage with preservation in the same way affluent, white people do. Public-sector austerity has become the enemy of historic preservation: Brown-Saracino says there needs to be “a much more robust and routine way of keeping spaces affordable for people, not just in new-built construction and not just in public housing, but through a variety of different means.”

Just in terms of housing, Chicago is short 120,000 affordable units overall, but these shortages aren't spread evenly across the city. A DePaul University Institute of Housing Studies report revealed that some of Chicago's most intensely gentrifying neighborhoods are losing affordable units most rapidly, and that while there's been a drop in demand for affordable units, the number of available units has dropped faster than this rate in the last several years.

"I would hate that, in the end, we choose not to preserve working-class communities because there are so many other issues on their minds," says DPD commissioner Cox. "In that case, preservation truly ends up being a luxury."

Going forward, Cox says the city's Department of Housing will take the lead in Pilsen because long-term affordability is its biggest concern, and in January 2021, the city council approved a new ordinance that will make it harder for developers to turn more affordable apartment buildings into single-family homes in Pilsen as well as along the 606 trail. In March, that same group of alderman created a demolition surcharge ordinance pilot program that would require property owners to pay a fee for razing buildings in the same areas, with the fees going into the Chicago Community Land Trust, a nonprofit program that works to make homeownership achievable for low- and moderate-income people.

And that's progress, say neighborhood advocates – evidence that the city is listening to Pilsen on their own terms. For Aguirre, that's the only way forward. "It doesn't matter how good your intentions are. If that's not a priority for the community, who are we to create priorities for them?"

Elizabeth Blasius is an architectural historian and writer based in Chicago.

CityLab contributing writer Zach Mortice is an architectural journalist based in Chicago