



*Paseo Boricua:*  
Claiming a Puerto Rican Space in Chicago

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**Abstract**

*"Paseo Boricua,"* a mile-long segment of Division Street in Chicago's Humboldt Park community, came as a response to the encroaching gentrification and displacement of Puerto Ricans in the communities of West Town and Humboldt Park. This essay examines the creation of an economic, political, and cultural space for Puerto Ricans in Chicago, and its effect on the community.

## Introduction

Division was an area that nobody wanted to visit. Everyone was afraid of it. If you weren't from this neighborhood, you wouldn't want to come to Division. Today, thousands of people come to Division, including Puerto Ricans who have moved away from this area.  
(José López, Director of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center)

*"La División"* is the name Puerto Ricans use to refer to the section of the larger Division Street in Chicago that passes through the "heart" of the Puerto Rican community. Its pronunciation blends in two languages; the Spanish *"La"* with the English name of the street, "Division." At one time, *"La División"* extended from Ashland Avenue to California Avenue on the Near Northwest Side's West Town and Humboldt Park communities, but today it has shrunk to the section beginning on Western Avenue and ending just past California Avenue in Humboldt Park (see map). When I first became familiar with *"La División"* in 1989, I was elated to find a place with familiar sounds and smells. Puerto Rican music, in all its forms, blared from loudspeakers outside Lily's Record Shop. *Pasteles*, *lechón*, *alcapurrias*, and other favorite dishes of the Puerto Rican cuisine could be ordered at La Bruquena Restaurant, or across the street at Latin American Restaurant. I was immediately transported to my childhood and adolescent days in Río Piedras. Similar sounds and smells surrounded me as a child. I immediately felt connected to *"La División,"* yet I remained cautious because *"La División"* had a bad reputation, especially among those of us who did not live in the community. Sidewalks were in bad shape and empty lots were unkept and strewn with trash. Drug activity was routine and one could see drug transactions in daylight, as well as find used needles littering sidewalks. I was told repeatedly not to attend the *Fiestas Patronales* (Puerto Rican Festivities) at the park because "there is always shooting." Like me, many middle-class Puerto Ricans complied, going to *"La División"* to eat or find the music that was not in the shelves of Tower Records, and getting out of there as soon as possible. After a two-year absence from Chicago, I returned in 1995, only to find that *"La División"* was now also called *"Paseo Boricua."* I was astounded to see the beautification of the area, and to find myself, as many other middle-class Puerto Ricans from the suburbs, attending festivals there. As a sociologist, I was fascinated as I witnessed a transformation that has created an undisputable economic, political, and cultural space for Puerto Ricans in Chicago. While *"La División"* was a marginal and out-of-the-map ethnic community, *Paseo Boricua* puts Puerto Ricans on the map.

In this article, I discuss the reasons for and the effects of the transformation of "*La Division*" into *Paseo Boricua*. While "*La Division*" has been the location of Puerto Rican economic, political, and cultural expression for the past thirty years, it has been an unorganized space with unmarked and ambiguous boundaries that made it difficult for outsiders to distinguish it as a Puerto Rican community. This left the neighborhood pray to urban development and gentrification. By contrast, *Paseo Boricua* is a planned and conscientious effort that transforms "*La Division*" into a recognizable economic, political, and cultural space for Puerto Ricans and clearly demarcates the boundaries of the community. "*La Division*" contains the spirit of the Puerto Rican community, but *Paseo Boricua* is the concrete reaffirmation of Puerto Rican collective identity in Chicago and their will to stay put. In this paper, I discuss these changes and show how this transformation is owed to the visibility and clout gained by Puerto Ricans, particularly among the second and third generations, in economic and political circles in the city. The data presented here include interviews, newspaper articles, and other published and unpublished written materials on *Paseo Boricua*. The article also draws heavily from my recollections and observations of *Paseo Boricua* acquired through my involvement and participation in community events since 1989.

### **Puerto Rican Displacement in Chicago**

Being familiar with the history of displacement of Puerto Ricans in Chicago, I worried about the impending gentrification of "*La Division*." Signs of redevelopment were evident before I left Chicago in 1993. Renovated houses and refurbished condos and lofts were propping up throughout the area at prices well beyond the reach of Puerto Rican and other long-time residents. I wondered if "*La Division*" would be engulfed by the forces of urban development that had transformed African American and Mexican neighborhoods into highly priced neighborhoods with trendy new names that erased any association with its previous dwellers. I wondered if once again Puerto Ricans would be priced out of their neighborhood.

Puerto Ricans began arriving in Chicago in significant numbers in the 1950s. Initially, they settled near their places of employment, in neighborhoods where people were willing to rent to them and where housing was cheap (Padilla 1987). While some of these early enclaves disappeared as Puerto Ricans moved to other areas because of sustained interracial conflict with their whites and African American neighbors, others were displaced during the urban renewal initiatives of the 1960s and 1970s (Padilla 1993).

The 1960s and 1970s' urban renewal projects, such as the Chicago 21 Plan, sought to transform the downtown area into a regional, national and global business district (Betancur et al. 1991; Perez 2000). "Buffer zones" were created to protect the downtown area from the low income communities that surrounded it, leading to the displacement of low-income Latino, African American, and white residents (Betancur et al. 1991; Perez 2000). Aponte-Pares (1999) describes similar processes in New York City's Lower East Side and East Harlem, which resulted in the displacement of Puerto Rican and African American communities. In Chicago, Puerto Ricans were forced to move out of the Near West Side neighborhood along Harrison Street to make way for the University of Illinois at Chicago campus (Suttles 1968). They were also displaced from the Lincoln Park neighborhood, a Near North Side lakefront community, when De Paul University, the McCormick Seminary, a number of large hospitals, and an influx of white professionals moved into the area during the 1960s (Aspira 1996; Padilla 1987).

As urban renewal took full force in Lincoln Park, Puerto Ricans fought against displacement. The most vocal group organizing to fight displacement was the Young

Lords, a street gang which turned into community activists that later expanded to New York and other East Coast cities (Padilla 1987). Besides staging protests, the Young Lords vandalized property to intimidate whites, occupied the McCormick Theological Seminary and the Armitage Avenue Methodist Church demanding funds for community projects, and disrupted meetings of the Lincoln Park Conservation Community Council demanding subsidized housing in new building developments (Padilla 1987). Despite these efforts to stall displacement, Puerto Ricans could not contain the larger economic and political forces driving urban renewal in Chicago. They left Lincoln Park and moved directly west into other Puerto Rican settlements in the West Town, Humboldt Park, and Logan Square communities. Although small clusters of Puerto Ricans can still be found in Lincoln Park, there is no "community" there. Today, Lincoln Park is one of the trendiest and most expensive neighborhoods in the city.

By the early 1960s, Division Street, running through West Town and Humboldt Park, was already the center of the Puerto Rican community. Institutions such as El Teatro San Juan and the YMCA were located on "*La División*," as well as the offices of Puerto Rican newspapers (Padilla 1987). The first Puerto Rican Parade took place on "*La División*" in 1966, the same year that saw Puerto Rican riots (Padilla 1987). In the early 1970s, Roberto Clemente High School was built on "*La División*", Jose De Diego Academy, the first bilingual school was, a block away (Padilla 1987). Another riot took place in 1977, starting at the Humboldt Park and spilling over to Division Street (Chicago Tribune 1977; Lowe and Blackley 1977a, 1977b).

In the late 1990s, a new wave of redevelopment hit the city prompted by Mayor Richard M. Daley's initiative to attract affluent whites back into the city. As in the 1960s, redevelopment concentrated in the neighborhoods near the city's core, such as the South Loop and the Near West Side just north of the University of Illinois at Chicago. Soon, it also hit the eastern fringes of West Town, in the area now known as Wicker Park. This area falls right on the el-line, the city's elevated railway system, providing fast access to the city's downtown business district. As a consequence, the boundaries of the Puerto Rican community moved west, and the threat of a new displacement resonated around the community at the beginning of the 1990s. Along with middle and upper class whites (e.g., yuppies), came other Latinos, particularly Mexicans, Dominicans, and Guatemalans. While the influx of other Latino groups may rob the neighborhood of its Puerto Rican character, whites are perceived as the real threat. Since the 1960s, Puerto Ricans have lived alongside other "ethnics" such as Poles and African Americans in West Town and Humboldt Park, so the influx of other Latinos just adds to the multiethnic character of the community. However, the arrival of middle-and upper-class whites worries community residents who remember how the rapid influx of affluent whites to Lincoln Park and Wicker Park preceded and precipitated the displacement of Puerto Ricans from these areas. As a community activist and director of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center states:

What I have noticed is that there has been displacement here...the African American presence in Humboldt Park has grown and for many reasons the Mexican community has also grown in this neighborhood. There is an increase, I wouldn't say significant, but important of Dominicans. But for me the main threat for West Town and the Puerto Rican community is the process of gentrification that displaces our community and does not allow it to survive in this neighborhood. (Jose Lopez, my translation)



In 1999 the *Chicago Tribune* published an article on the gentrification of the Humboldt Park community. Melita Garza quoted Rev. Tomas Sanabria as saying that white newcomers are hostile to the community:

None of the neighbors who've moved in in the last five years have ever knocked on the door and asked to help with the food pantry or the youth programs... What they've done is buy properties. Put up a fence. Put in an alarm system. Buy some dogs and then go to the [police beat] meeting and start talking about those boys, those kids, our kids, how we need to incarcerate them. (Garza 1999a)

Signs that gentrification was fast approaching "*La División*" became evident when the city began to clean up the area, particularly the park, also called Humboldt Park, in the 1990s. Community residents began to suspect that the dredging of the lagoon and beach, the restoration of the boat house and field house, and the fixing of the infrastructure of the park was connected to the influx of whites nearby. Humboldt Park is a beautiful park with 107 acres of lush lawns, but had suffered from neglect for years. Cars set on fire were often pushed into the lagoon (Lowe and Blackley 1977b). Stories abound about a head that was found in the lagoon years ago, and people believe that more than a head lies at the bottom of the lagoon. For instance, Mérida Rúa recalls being told that piranas and crocodiles lived in the lagoon. These urban legends were spiked by the unsanitary conditions that pervaded the neglected park and perhaps successfully discouraged many residents from swimming or fishing in the filthy water.

Although community residents welcome the improvements at the park, they wonder about its timing. Former Alderman Luis Gutiérrez, now a congressman, and his successor Alderman Billy Ocasio had worked diligently for improvements in the ward, which includes the park, but these renovations started only after white influx was under way. Many community residents doubt that this is a coincidence. In 1993, suspicions were confirmed for many when the Park District revoked a permit to place a statue of Pedro Albizu Campos, a Puerto Rican Nationalist leader, in the park (Drell 1993a, 1993b, and 1993c). The Park District had agreed to allow residents to place a statue of Albizu Campos on the park near the intersection of California Avenue and Division Street, the southwestern corner of the park that constitutes the western boundary of "*La División*." A controversy ensued when opponents alleged that a statue of Albizu Campos has no place in public space because he advocated violence as a means of obtaining the independence of Puerto Rico. Supporters argued that Albizu Campos is a Puerto Rican hero who went to prison because of his speeches and views for a free Puerto Rico, and equated him with Ghandi, Jefferson, Mandela, and Malcolm X (Drell 1993c, 1993d). Many community residents believe that the revocation of the permit had little to do with the controversy surrounding Albizu Campos but more with the reluctance to place a Puerto Rican marker in the park. The statue of Albizu Campos was temporarily placed in front of the Pedro Albizu Campos Museum on California Avenue directly across the park, and in 1997 was moved to *La Casita de Don Pedro on Paseo Boricua* in an event presided by Lolita Lebrón, one of the four Puerto Rican nationalist pardoned by President Jimmy Carter in 1979.

Confirmation of the fast approaching gentrification came when sections of the neighborhood began to be renamed. While sections of West Town had been renamed as "Wicker Park," "Bucktown," and "Ukrainian Village" in the 1980s, the renaming of sections of Humboldt Park began to appear in the late 1990s, mostly in rental and real

estate advertisements. "West Bucktown" is what redevelopers call the northeast section of Humboldt Park, an area that is undergoing a "home-building boom" (Buck 2001). As in Manhattan's Lower East Side's gentrification, the image of the "urban frontier" is alive and kicking in Chicago. Smith (1992:69) argues that "the social meaning of gentrification is increasingly constructed through the vocabulary of the frontier myth," where the agents of gentrification are extolled as "brave pioneers." In Chicago, the image of "West Bucktown" as a new urban frontier is reflected in a newspaper article in the *Chicago Tribune*:

Kevin Rocio calls himself "an urban pioneer." The mortgage banker moved from Lincoln Park to Bucktown when few other brave young professionals would venture west of the Chicago River to the Northwest Side neighborhood, which was short on cachet but big on inexpensive real estate. Now, he's moved on again and is getting settled in his newly constructed loft that's even farther west, on not-yet-trendy California Avenue. Rocio is doing what so many other successful urbanites have done. Developers in search of cheaper land, which often translated into lower home prices, have jumped over the broad roadway of Western Avenue and into new territory. They have brought the affluent home buyer, now priced out of a surging Bucktown to Humboldt Park. Or is it West Bucktown? Developers and many newcomers like to look at the area as an extension of the now trendy and expensive Bucktown. Other newcomers and current residents scoff at the fanciful name. It's plain to them: Bucktown stops at Western Avenue, where Humboldt Park begins. (Buck 2001:1)

Similarly to the process of gentrification in the Lower East Side (Smith 1992), gentrification in West Town was preceded by the arrival of artists into the area. Seeking larger, open, and cheaper spaces to convert into studios, young artists were initially attracted to West Town, only to be followed by developers who eventually "priced" them out of the area. As the cost of housing skyrocketed, these artists have ventured into Humboldt Park, with the developers right at their heels (Buck 2001).

Census data confirms the accelerated pace of gentrification in the Puerto Rican community in the 1990s. West Town experienced a loss of 24.7 percent of its Latino population while the white rate increased by 7 percent in the last decade. In 1990, there were 54,361 Latinos in West Town, constituting 62 percent of the residents. By 2000, their numbers decreased to 40,920 or 46.8 percent of the population. This constitutes a loss of 13,441 Latino residents in West Town. The number of white residents increased from 44,728 to 50,887 for a total gain of 6,159 white residents. Whites climbed up from being 51 percent of the population to 58.8 percent. The black population remain stable with a 0.1 percent decrease.

Accompanying these population changes are the noticeable disappearance of Puerto Rican markers in the section of "*La Division*" that falls in West Town. These markers have been replaced by trendy restaurants and condo developments. Puerto Rican markers now concentrate in the Humboldt Park section of "*La Division*," specifically in *Paseo Boricua*. Humboldt Park experienced a very small increase in Latino population (6.3 percent), probably in part absorbing those leaving West Town. However, it was the communities to the north and northwest of Humboldt Park that experienced drastic gains in the number of Latinos. The percentage of Latino residents

in Hermosa, Avondale, and Belmont Cragin increased by 41.6 percent, 99.6 percent, and 198.1 percent, respectively. While not all Latinos moving into this area are Puerto Rican, this trend supports community residents' assessment that Puerto Ricans are moving west.

### Community Responses Against Gentrification

The threat of gentrification propelled Puerto Rican leaders to launch a war to preserve the community's space similar to the wars waged at San Francisco's Tenderloin and New York's Lower East Side's (Robinson 1995; Smith 1992). While the Tenderloin's struggle centered on low-income housing, and the Lower East Side activists focused on access and control of Tompkins Square Park, the Puerto Rican war against gentrification in Chicago is being waged in several fronts including housing, business, and culture. Unlike past wars against the displacement of the Puerto Rican community, this one does not take place in the streets through protest and civil disobedience as in the Lower East Side's, but in city hall and involves thorough research and planning, much like the Tenderloin's activists. Lacking political representation in the past, Puerto Ricans had traditionally resorted to grass-roots actions, but in the mid-1990s they drew support from political representatives in Congress, the State Legislature, County Commission, and City Council. In addition, many educated Puerto Rican professionals headed not-for-profit organizations, funded through private, state and federal grants, that serviced the Puerto Rican community. The Humboldt Park Empowerment Partnership (HPEP), a coalition of over eighty community organization and business leaders, was formed out of concern for the impending displacement of the Puerto Rican community and previous attacks on service-oriented organizations (Lyndersen 2000). Instead of continuing to work independently, they united forces with political leaders and formulated a master-plan to counter and stop gentrification: the Humboldt Park Empowerment Zone Strategic Plan in 1996. This redevelopment plan seeks to stabilize and maintain the Puerto Rican identity of the community through various initiatives in the areas of business, housing, and culture.

The economic initiative seeks to develop various commercial strips around the community by attracting investors, particularly those from Puerto Rico who can provide products and services in high demand. An increase of affordable housing is another initiative of the redevelopment plan. A major victory was won when the city government designated future development of vacant lots in the area for affordable housing (Donato 2001; Finan 1999; Garza 1999b). The third initiative seeks to maintain the Puerto Rican flavor of the community through the development of cultural landmarks. The creation of the Institute for Puerto Rican Arts and Culture to be housed at the historically significant Humboldt Park Horse Stables is an example of the cultural development of the community. The rationale behind these initiatives is that in order to keep Puerto Ricans from selling their property to speculators and developers, and in order to encourage Puerto Rican professionals to move into the neighborhood and bring their capital with them, Puerto Ricans goods, services, and culture have to be provided there.

*Paseo Boricua* is one part of this redevelopment plan. Its champions are Alderman Billy Ocasio, Cook County Commissioner Roberto Maldonado, and the Division Street Business Development Association, who have converted a typical inner-city strip into a clean and safer community space. *Paseo Boricua* was born when Alderman Ocasio convened a group of city and county officials, community members and architects to come up with a plan that would not only mark the area as Puerto Rican but



help establish an economic base by attracting businesses, particularly Puerto Rican. The group decided on the creation of a "Little Puerto Rico," a concept that had worked for other Chicago ethnic groups. Chicago has well-known ethnic enclaves, such as Chinatown, Greektown, Little Italy, and *La Villita* (for Mexicans). The idea was to recreate Puerto Rico in Chicago through the use of easily recognizable cultural symbols. The Puerto Rican ethnic enclave is being forged by "creating a sense of place" through the use of architecture, everyday social interaction, and public events much in the way that "Little Saigon" has become for Vietnamese-Americans in Westminster, California (Mazumdar et al. 2000). Alderman Ocasio presented the idea of *Paseo Boricua* to Mayor Richard M. Daley and obtained his support and funding for the project. Commissioner Maldonado further developed the idea by pushing for the creation of a restaurant and entertainment district along *Paseo Boricua*, and baptizing the area as "Puerto Rico Town."

#### *De Bandera a Bandera:*

##### Cultural Symbols in the Recreation of the Homeland

*Paseo Boricua* consists of a mile-long stretch along Division Street between Western Avenue and Mozart Avenue that has been designated as the gate to the Puerto Rican community. The location of *Paseo Boricua* has pragmatic reasons. Not only did it made the project viable by concentrating efforts on a smaller strip, but more than half of the buildings (70 out of 120) were owned by Puerto Ricans and other Latinos. In addition, many of the businesses' names already have Puerto Rican connotations, for example, Luquillo Barber Shop (Luquillo is a town in Puerto Rico), Boriken Bakery (Boriken is the Arawak name for the Island), and the restaurant La Bruquena (a kind of crab).

Although other business corridors exist within the Puerto Rican community, only *Paseo Boricua* weds the economic, political, and cultural into one space. This section of Division Street was the most appropriate place to locate *Paseo Boricua* given its historical significance in the development of the community. The westbound movement of Puerto Ricans due to gentrification along the eastern fringes of the community has changed the imaginary boundaries of "*La Division*." Today, little distinctively Puerto Rican, or Latino, presence is found east of Western Avenue, the boundary separating West Town and Humboldt Park. When people talk about "*La Division*," they are referring to that segment of Division Street that lies in what is now known also as *Paseo Boricua*. Community leaders decided to concentrate in this smaller portion of Division Street because this is what now constitutes "*La Division*" or the heart of the Puerto Rican community.

The most distinctive characteristics of *Paseo Boricua* is that it has an entry and an exit demarcated by two huge steel Puerto Rican flags crossing Division Street. The flags serve as boundaries, or territorial markers, that claim this urban space as distinctively Puerto Rican. Ramos-Zayas (1997:329) views the Puerto Rican flags "as territorial markers, a grassroots effort to revitalize Humboldt Park, discourage Puerto Rican exodus to the suburbs, and deter further gentrification." As ethnic boundaries, the flags are located in important community places that have become "contested territories," or sites of cultural struggle and affirmation. The westernmost flag is located by the park. This is where Puerto Rican festivities take place, as well as the 1970s riots erupted, and this is also where the controversy over the Pedro Albizu Campos statue ensued. Near the place where the statue of Albizu Campos would have been place towers the Puerto Rican flag along Division Street, ironically providing a more obvious and highly visible sign of Puerto Rican cultural and nationalist affirmation.

The easternmost flag is placed near Roberto Clemente High School, located on

Western Avenue right in the border dividing West Town and Humboldt Park. The school has been a battleground for community struggle for participation in local institutions since the 1960s (Flores-Gonzalez 2000). These early battles included naming the school after a Puerto Rican as well as demands for the teaching of Puerto Rican history (Flores-Gonzalez 2000). School activists were labeled radicals who supported the independence of Puerto Rico and used the school to indoctrinate students into radical politics (Flores-Gonzalez 2000). More recently, school activists who had gained access to the educational process through the school reform of 1989, have been labeled terrorist sympathizers. An ongoing federal investigation is looking into their alleged misappropriation of school monies to fund the campaign for the release of the eleven Puerto Rican political prisoners with links to the F.A.L.N. So far no one has been charged or indicted, but these accusations have led to the dismantling of school reform at Clemente High School. Accompanying the dismantling, there has been a "cleansing" of the student population through "zero-tolerance" policies that have resulted in the expulsion of 40 percent of its students. Rumors circulate around the community about a movement among developers, gentrifiers, and conservative sectors (religious and pro-statehood) of the Puerto Rican community to change the name of the school. Some residents remember that as Puerto Ricans were being displaced from Lincoln Park, the name of the local high school was changed. Many community members believe that these attacks are aimed not only at the pro-independence sector but at the larger Puerto Rican community. They believe that the timing is not accidental because these attacks come at a time when West Town and Humboldt Park are undergoing rapid gentrification. According to Ramos Zayas (1997), attacks on Clemente High School are interpreted by many residents as part of the gentrification process that seeks to prepare the school for the not so distant arrival of a white student population.

The flags themselves are the most obvious symbol of Puerto Rican space. According to Alderman Ocasio, the flags were chosen among other designs because they are an undisputable symbol of pride for Puerto Ricans. José López, director of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, says that the Puerto Rican flag, which used to be equated with pro-independence ideals, now symbolizes the Puerto Rican nation, and this meaning is shared by supporters and opponents of independence for the Island. The flags, which are made out of welded pieces of pipeline weigh 45 tons and stand 59 feet tall, form a 56 foot arch from one side of the street to the other. The design of the flags is full of meaning. According to José López, "they are made out of steel to honor the first Puerto Rican migrants that arrived in Chicago and established themselves in the south of Chicago in the steel industry area. The second wave of Puerto Ricans came to work in what its called pipelines which are steel sections" (my translation). The flags render homage to the first large group of Puerto Ricans who ventured into Chicago (see Ramos-Zayas, forthcoming). The shape of the flag represents the history of the community and its future in Chicago.

On the one hand, the flag poles project themselves symbolically into the future, as if welcoming the new millennia and the Puerto Ricans' contributions to its growth; on the other hand, the three red strips swirl themselves and end up like a ballerina dancing itself into the ground, as if making a claim upon that space. (*Paseo Boricua* Directory: 17)

Initially, the flags ensued a controversy not only because they were standing alone (without the U.S. flag), but because the color of the triangle is sky blue rather than the

dark blue that had been customary of the Puerto Rico flag. The sky blue triangle of the flags in *Paseo Boricua* is true to the original color of the Puerto Rican flag adopted in New York City in 1895, and reclaimed by the Puerto Rican people in recent years.

Further historical significance was given to the flags when they were unveiled on January 6, 1995. That date is the *Día de Los Reyes Magos* (Three Kings Day), the traditional Christmas holiday in Puerto Rico (see Ramos-Zayas, forthcoming). Because the flags were a gift from the city of Chicago to the Puerto Rican community, this date was befitting. The unveiling also served to mark the centennial of the adoption of the Puerto Rican flag in New York on 1895 (*Paseo Boricua Directory*). The flags in *Paseo Boricua* are spectacular, and as such they have won seven awards, including the 1995 Building of the Year Award by the American Institute of Architecture (*Paseo Boricua Directory*:15).

As the pillars of the Puerto Rican space, the flags were just the highlights of a stronger statement. The flags contain an idealized typical Puerto Rican atmosphere which recreate the ambiance of the small towns left behind on the Island through the use of recognizable cultural symbols and icons. This space has become a gallery of Puerto Rican culture that extends "*de bandera a bandera*," a phrase made popular by Alderman Billy Ocasio. To accomplish this, fifty lightposts were painted black, fitted with 19th-century lighting and "adorned with laser etched wrought iron banners representing images of the three cultural experiences that define the Puerto Rican people (the Taino, Spanish and West African)" (*Paseo Boricua Directory*:15). Among the symbols of these three cultures featured in the banners are the Taino sun, the Three Kings, and the *vejigantes*. Musical instruments representative of each of these cultures are also depicted in the banners (*guiro*, guitar, and congas). In addition, 16 *placitas* were distributed along the *Paseo* where people can sit in wrought iron benches or play domino on the concrete tables and benches under the shade of a tree and next to large concrete flower pots.

In 1997, *La Casita de Don Pedro*, named after Pedro Albizu Campos, was inaugurated in what used to be a vacant lot in the middle of *Paseo Boricua*. *La Casita de Don Pedro* follows the *casita* or "little house" projects that began sprouting throughout New York City in the 1980s. These structures are made out of brightly painted wood, with corrugated metal roofs and verandas (Aponte-Pares 1997; Sciorra 1990). Some have windows, electricity and indoor plumbing, but many, such as *La Casita de Don Pedro*, have only electricity. *Casitas* respond to the needs for meaningful places that validate cultural identity among Puerto Rican residents in New York's impoverished neighborhoods (Aponte-Pares 1997; 1998). According to Aponte-Pares (1998:275), "building *casitas* is an act of reterritorialization that affirms the power of culture in space while offering resistance to further deterritorialization by appropriating place in the urban environment." He adds that "the practice of building *casitas* imparts identity to the urban landscape by rescuing images, *rescatando imagenes*, and by alluding to the power of other places everybody recognizes, feels good towards and can identify with" (1997 :56). The symbolic power of the *casita* lies in the nostalgic recollection of this icon of the Puerto Rican past. *Casitas* are also a symbol of resistance by residents who claim control of space and manipulate their urban landscape to bend it into a space used for cultural expression (Aponte-Pares 1997, 1998; Sciorra 1990).

New York *casitas* occupy contested territories and must contend with developers and housing authorities which seek to reappropriate their space (Flores 2000). While *casitas* represent a "fantasized paradise" (Aponte-Pares 1997) and serve as a location for cultural expression and celebration, they also have more practical uses for the

community. *Casitas* host a variety of community activities such as birthday parties, Puerto Rican dance lessons, political rallies, and voter registration drives (Aponte-Pares 1997; Sciorra 1990).

As occurs with New York *casitas*, *La Casita de Don Pedro* has symbolic and practical meaning for Chicago's Puerto Rican community. Yet different from New York *casitas* that seek to bring a "pedacito" of Puerto Rico into New York, *La Casita de Don Pedro* in *Paseo Boricua* is a bold statement in the face of gentrification. It is an act of resistance that defies the forces of redevelopment throughout the city. And unlike many New York *casitas*, which are erected in empty lots or public property, and must constantly fight eviction, *La Casita de Don Pedro* stands in a private lot. In a joint venture of the Pedro Albizu Campos High School and Architreasures, Inc., an empty lot was purchased, cleaned up, and a "typical" Puerto Rican country house was built in the back of a garden with flowers (*Paseo Boricua* Directory 2001). The controversial statue of Pedro Albizu Campos, which the park district refused to place, greets visitors from its perch in the middle of a star-shaped flower pot. The star represents the lone star of the Puerto Rican flag, and a mosaic of red and white stripes adorns the walkway from the street. The *Casita de Don Pedro* doubles as a garden-gallery and a cultural center where *plena* and *homba* workshops take place free of charge, anyone is welcome to join in the playing, singing or dancing Friday afternoons during the summer.

While *La Casita de Don Pedro* adds a Puerto Rican flavor to the architecture of *Paseo Boricua*, further plans to recreate Puerto Rico exist with the facade project. This project, proposed by the Division Street Business Development Association and sponsored by the city, calls for cosmetic changes on the facade of buildings within *Paseo Boricua* to resemble Old San Juan colonial buildings—from simulated wrought iron balconies to bright color painting of the structures. The city agreed to pay 50 percent of the cost for those building owners that signed up for the facade program. Although the program has not started yet, the Municipal Supermarket went ahead and altered its facade to pay tribute to El Morro, the Spanish fort that greets visitors at the mouth of San Juan's Bay. Along with these cosmetic changes, *Paseo Boricua* will be the site of a Puerto Rican "Walk of Stars," whereby the sidewalks between the flags will hold round plaques honoring Puerto Rican artists and performers.

The last stage of the *Paseo Boricua* project consists in the development of a business district. Alderman Ocasio, Commissioner Maldonado, and the Division Street Business Development Association are trying to attract Puerto Rican entrepreneurs, from both Chicago and Puerto Rico, to open up restaurants in *Paseo Boricua*. The intention is to create a Puerto Rican restaurant district similar to what Wentworth Street and 18th Street have become for Chinese and Mexicans in Chicago. According to Commissioner Maldonado, once these restaurants are established, supporting businesses such as Puerto Rican souvenir shops and bakeries will develop in response to the demand for these services from restaurant patrons. As Zona-i (2000) states, "*La Division*" is becoming "*Un Viejo San Juan con nieve*."

#### "*Aquí luchamos, aquí nos quedamos*"

A year after the flags were installed, *Paseo Boricua* unquestionably became the economic, cultural, and political space for Puerto Ricans in Chicago. In the first year alone, 16 new businesses opened diversifying the kinds of services available. At the end of 2000, *Paseo Boricua* supports more than ninety businesses and organizations: an art gallery, beeper shop, botanica, hardware store, craft shop, night club, driving school, newspaper, florist, currency exchange, moving company, jewelry store, social club, thrift shop,



and consultant; two attorney's offices, laundromats, opticians, auto mechanic shops, bakeries/delicatessen, taverns; three banks and lenders, bookstores; four music and video stores; five discount stores, restaurants; seven barber and beauty salons, churches, grocery stores; ten community service-governmental programs; and eleven health clinics and/or pharmacies.

*Paseo Boricua* has also become a cultural space for Puerto Ricans. The Isabel Rosado Gallery, which displays and sells the art work of former and continuing Puerto Rican political prisoners, carries out many cultural events and receptions. *La Casita de Don Pedro* teaches aspects of Puerto Rican culture with its *plena* and *bomba* workshops, expositions of photographs and Puerto Rican crafts, and serving as the setting for children to have their photo taken with the Three Kings on January 6th. The Pedro Albizu Campos Museum, which recently relocated to *Paseo Boricua*, holds exhibits from Puerto Rican artists as well as cultural activities. Three times a year, *Paseo Boricua* becomes the site of cultural festivities, which are *Día de los Reyes Magos* (Three Kings Day), *Desfile del Pueblo* (the People's Parade), and *Fiesta Boricua* (Puerto Rican Fest). All these events, described below, celebrate Puerto Rican culture. *Paseo Boricua* is also the site of impromptu and spontaneous cultural reaffirmation. When Tito Trinidad defeated Oscar De La Hoya, people spontaneously celebrated on *Paseo Boricua*.

In addition, *Paseo Boricua* has given a political space to Puerto Ricans. The offices of Cook County Commissioner Roberto Maldonado, a Puerto Rican, are in the middle of *Paseo Boricua* a few doors down from *La Casita de Don Pedro*. Soon, Congressman Luis Gutierrez and State Legislator Cynthia Soto, who is Mexican, will share office space with Commissioner Maldonado. Storefronts are rented by politicians seeking an aldermanic or legislative seat, as well as by those campaigning for the coveted presidency of the Puerto Rican Parade Committee. It is not unusual for contenders for the Parade presidency to set up campaign headquarters close to each other on *Paseo Boricua* and to campaign along the stretch. Congressman Luis Gutierrez often eats and holds parties at a local restaurant. Political rallies and demonstrations are frequently held on *Paseo Boricua*. Recent rallies demanding the ousting of the Navy from Vieques were attended by Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr., Jackie Jackson, and prominent elected, religious and civic leaders of the Puerto Rican and African American community.

These economic, cultural and political spaces intertwine in numerous events that take place in *Paseo Boricua*. Most notably, it is during the *Día de los Reyes Magos* (Three Kings Day), *Desfile del Pueblo* (People's Parade), and *Fiesta Boricua* (Puerto Rican Fest) that these three aspects come together. On January 6th, the celebration of the *Día de los Reyes Magos* takes place along *Paseo Boricua*, starting with photographing sessions with the Three Kings, followed by a parade along the Paseo, and culminating with the distribution of gifts for community children. The 2001 *Día de los Reyes Magos* celebration brought together local elected officials, the fire department, the city's transit authority, the police, the Latin American Motorcycle Association (three of its members dress as the Three Kings and others help organize the line of children), Miss Illinois who is of Puerto Rican-descent, the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, and the Park District. The distribution of toys took place at Roberto Clemente High School's gym. About 5,000 children received toys donated by Toys-for-Tots.

The first weekend in June, Humboldt Park holds the *Fiestas Patronales* (Patron Saint Festivities that no longer have any religious connotations). The *Fiestas Patronales* began as a celebration of the Day of St. John the Baptist in late June by the *Caballeros de San Juan*, a Catholic organization among Chicago Puerto Ricans in the 1950s. In 1966, the religious procession was replaced by a lay parade through the city's downtown on the



first weekend in June. The Parade is preceded by a week-long festivity at Humboldt Park, filled with music performances, vendors, games, and "*máquinas*" (mechanical rides). *Paseo Boricua* becomes vibrant with people—not all of them Puerto Rican—who come from all parts of the city and suburbs—even from Milwaukee—to attend the events. Well-known Puerto Rican musicians have performed at the *Fiestas*, including El Gran Combo.

The peak of the *Fiestas* takes place on Saturday, when the *Parada Puertorriqueña* takes place downtown, followed by the smaller but livelier *Desfile Del Pueblo* along *Paseo Boricua*. The latter is organized by the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and thus is aligned with the pro-independence sector. Although there are less floats parading down the street, *Paseo Boricua* gets packed with people coming to see and participate in the parade. Beginning the night before the festival, *Paseo Boricua* becomes noisy and it is impossible for residents to sleep because of a constant caravan of cars displaying huge Puerto Rican cars and beeping their horns. Around noon on Saturday, *Paseo Boricua* is filled with people who have come to see the *Desfile del Pueblo* and cars parading up and down the strip. Some years, cars parade along "official" floats, but other years, the police closes up *Paseo Boricua* and allow only "official" floats to parade. Sales boom at local businesses, particularly at food and music shops. While there is no lack of pinchos and alcapurrias in sidewalk food-stands, finding a seat at one of the two local restaurants is nearly impossible. Attending the *Desfile del Pueblo* can be nerve-wrecking for the noise, and crowd, but it is one of the most sincere and spontaneous expressions of Puerto Rican culture in Chicago.

The summer culminates with *Fiesta Boricua*, a one-day festival celebrated along *Paseo Boricua* on Labor Day Weekend, it is attended by more than 100,000 people.

This annual celebration showcases the diversity of Puerto Rican musical expression, from *plena* and *bomba* to *salsa* and *merengue*, from *rock en español* to *Latino rap*, from the *trova* to *mapeye*. *Fiesta Boricua* has featured legendary Puerto Rican musical figures, including Willie Colón, Pappo Lucca, Michael Stuart, Victor Manuelle, Jessica, Andy Montañez, El Topo, Andrés Jiménez, La Sonora Ponceña, Larry Harlow, Roberto Roena, Roy Brown and Yomo Toro, among others. But besides the rich musical experience, *Fiesta Boricua* provides a day of total immersion into Puerto Rican culture—from food to artisanry, from art exhibits to children's entertainment. (*Paseo Boricua Directory*:18)

*Paseo Boricua* is blocked to traffic during the *Fiesta Boricua*. Four stages (one under each flag, one in a side street in the middle of *Paseo* and a smaller stage for children's entertainment) showcase simultaneous performances by Puerto Rican musicians and dancers. Performances can be joyful, leading the audience to sing and dance, but they can also be emotional, as what happened during a 1998 performance by Roy Brown, when the audience waved hundreds of Puerto Rican flags in unison by his rendition of "*Boricua en la Luna*." While most performers are brought from Puerto Rico and New York, local talent abounds at the event.

The street is lined up with vendors, mostly selling food or crafts, and people walking between stages. It becomes so crowded that it is often difficult to walk amidst the vendors and their clients. As happens during the *Fiestas Patronales*, restaurants become too crowded and often close their doors for lack of capacity. *Fiesta Boricua* ends around 9 p.m. with an impressive display of fireworks. The coordination of *Fiesta Boricua*

brings together the 26th Ward Democratic Organization, the Division Street Business Development Association, the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, X-Tropical radio station, and promoter Henry Cardenas. It also brings out residents who, along with volunteers from the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, help clean up the street after everyone goes home. As stated in *Paseo Boricua* Directory, *Fiesta Boricua* "has become the largest one-day Latino festival in the entire Midwest" (19).

The success of the *Día de los Reyes Magos*, *Fiestas Patronales*, and *Fiesta Boricua* speaks to the changing image of Humboldt Park as a result of the development of *Paseo Boricua*. It has come a long way from 1977, when after the riots newspapers articles characterized Humboldt Park as a chaotic and dangerous community (see Perez 2000). That these festivities attract thousands of people, many of them middle-class Puerto Ricans who live in the suburbs, testify to these changing perceptions as well as to the class complexity of the larger Puerto Rican community. Yet, it may be that the changing image of *Paseo Boricua* is perhaps best exemplified in everyday day life rather than on special occasions. Sitting at Boriken Bakery one sees an assortment of people coming in to buy Puerto Rican pastries, *pan de manteca*, or a *sandwich de pernil*. Regular patrons include kids who live along *Paseo Boricua* as well as middle class Puerto Rican professionals stopping by on their lunch hour. Clients of the bakery include African American and Anglo residents. Having lunch at La Bruquena one is struck by how the make-up of the clientele has changed drastically. While it initially was a "hole in the wall" restaurant that serviced residents and a few Puerto Rican professionals who knew of its existence, La Bruquena has been remodeled twice and is now frequented by Puerto Ricans of various social classes.

In general, business sales have increased 30 percent in *Paseo Boricua* since the flags were unveiled. There is general enthusiasm among business owners on the impending development of a restaurant and entertainment district with a distinct Puerto Rican flavor. According to a recent article on the *Chicago Sun Times* (Mendieta 2001), Chicagoans are spending more money dining out, and they are demanding different types of restaurants that offer ethnic cuisine. Recently, a feasibility study conducted by the University of Illinois at Chicago lent support for the development of an ethnic restaurant district along *Paseo Boricua* (Torres et al. 2000). The study concluded that *Paseo Boricua* can become an important ethnic economic enclave if a combination of moderate to high-priced Puerto Rican restaurants are established. These restaurants will attract working class Puerto Rican who live in Humboldt Park as well as a larger segment of more affluent Chicagoans who enjoy eating at ethnic establishments. The plan calls for an initial opening of five upscale and moderately priced restaurants specializing in Puerto Rican cuisine (The Final Call 2001). The UIC study states that the development of *Paseo Boricua* as a restaurant and entertainment strip should go hand in hand with the development of cultural icons such as the facade project. Furthermore, the study predicts the success of such venture given the support of the city and many organizations for the redevelopment of Humboldt Park, of which the *Paseo Boricua* project is a part.

Anyone who visits *Paseo Boricua* leaves impressed not only by the flags but by the determination with which the community has appropriated a space in this city of ethnic neighborhoods. *Paseo Boricua* rises from the determination not to be displaced and is firmly rooted in a solid vision. The initial success that *Paseo Boricua* is enjoying is owed to community effort, particularly to the collective resistance and direct confrontation of gentrification using the same political and economic tools used by the redevelopers. Some community activists argue that by "playing the game," Puerto

Ricans are only "buying time," and that by stabilizing the economic base of the community they are making it easier for the redevelopers to gentrify the area. Community leaders are conscious of the dilemma, but they are convinced that there is no other way to stop gentrification and that more direct and confrontational tactics, such as those used in the 1960s, will result in the community's displacement. Far from being comfortable, community leaders are attentive to redevelopers' steps, trying to keep a few steps ahead. While it remains to be seen if Puerto Ricans remain in Humboldt Park, community leaders continue their proactive approach, briefly celebrating any small victory while getting ready for the next battle. While the war against gentrification is waged in different sectors of Humboldt Park, only *Paseo Boricua* brings together the economic, political, and cultural struggles into a single space, and it is in *Paseo Boricua* that the statement displayed in a bumper sticker "*Aquí luchamos, aquí nos quedamos*" takes full meaning.

