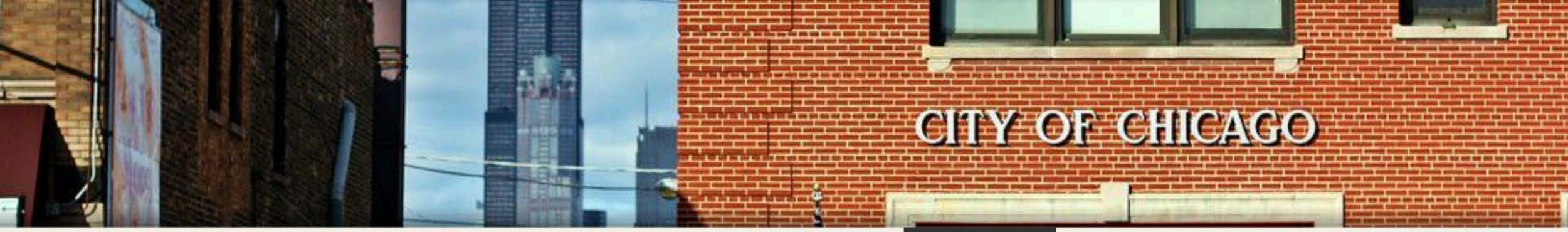


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# Postcards from the ruins

Legends of Chicago's South Side

by Amanda Wasielewski

*"The sky is a stain: the air is streaked with runnings of grease and smoke. Blanketing the prairie, this fall of filth, like black snow—a storm that does not stop...."*
– Waldo Frank, 1919

*"It's hard to imagine now, I was once told by someone who could remember the turning sails in his childhood, that the white flecks of the windmills lit up the landscape just as a tiny highlight brings life to a painted eye. And when those bright little points faded away, the whole region, so to speak, faded with them."*
– W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*

Driving along Lakeshore Drive on the South Side of Chicago, the city abruptly ends and you reach a vast, vacant grassland stretching out as far as the eye can see. There is little left here of the area's industrial past, aside from the crumbling walls of the old North Slip at E. 85th Street and a series of raw, industrial bridges over the Calumet River surrounded by grasslands or wastelands. Despite their marked absence, the legendary tracts of factories and steel mills that used to send heaping clouds of black soot and chemical flames spewing into the sky somehow still haunt the landscape, an erasure still felt by the city around it.

The land itself lies in wait. There have been multiple proposals for the redevelopment of the site since the South Works steel mill closed in 1992

and was subsequently demolished, including an ambitious master plan for the 430-acre site that was recently abandoned in favor of parceling the land in four parts and selling it off to developers. Further south of the North Slip and South Works site, along the old canals and waterways, additional unplanned grasslands extend throughout the former industrial heart of Chicago's South Side. Because the mills closed when I was a young child, after a steady decline from the 1970s, they have, for me, always been mythical places, living on in stories told to me by my parents and grandparents, a fantastic industrial hellscape of fire and rust. In the meantime, the land has been reclaimed by the marshlands upon which the city was constructed, a return to the pastoral after over a century of industry.

My father grew up on the South Side. His family eventually moved to the tiny southern suburb of Burnham, wedged between industry next to the Indiana border. Although Burnham was not, as is widely assumed, named after the famous architect and city planner Daniel Burnham, he nevertheless looms large in the history of the South Side. His masterpiece was the hugely influential but ultimately unrealized 1909 Plan of Chicago, a project that defined the *City Beautiful* movement and

was filled with radiant boulevards and plentiful lakefront parkland. Prior to the Plan of Chicago, Burnham tested out his ideas in the beaux-arts plan for the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which included a number of temporary and permanent neoclassical structures. Although the buildings looked impressive, many of them were in fact wooden structures covered with plaster, a cheap imitation of classical monumentality. In 1894, what remained of the fairground, apart from a couple brick and plaster buildings, was burned to the ground.

One of the buildings that remained was the Palace of Fine Arts, which is now the Museum of Science and Industry, always a favorite of my father's. When my parents and I drove along Lakeshore Drive one afternoon, we passed the former site of the fair, once in the shadow of the massive mill a half hour down the road. We were on a long-overdue pilgrimage back to the South Side, visiting the places where my father grew up and the Polish-Catholic cemetery where his parents and grandparents were buried. One of the relatives buried at Holy Cross Catholic cemetery is my great-grandfather, a Polish immigrant who worked as a blaster in the Bessemer department at a steel mill and was killed on the job in 1942. His death certificate reads, "The principle cause of death: Burns — 100% of body. Other causes: Shock."

On the way to Holy Cross, we passed what I imagined were other, unofficial cemeteries. According to popular rumor, the vast swath of grassland on the ex-industrial lands now provides a convenient, unattended burial ground for the murder victims of Chicago's organized crime. While the nature and composition of criminal syndicates have changed over the years, they have remained a constant presence in the city. And there's always been a fine line between organized crime and Boss politics in a city that was dominated by the autocratic Daley family throughout much of the 20th Century — mayors "Richard the First" and "Richard the Second," in my father's words.

As family legend goes, the son of that Bessemer blaster — my grandfather — was a paperboy outside a diner called Tony's on the south side, which catered to truckers passing through the industrial area. Tony, a man who apparently had no children of his own, took my grandfather under his wing and eventually left the diner to him when he retired. My grandfather seemed to have an in-depth knowledge of Boss politics in Chicago. If you weren't a member of the Democratic party, he used to say, good luck getting your street plowed in winter.

He successfully escaped life in the steel mills for small business ownership and my father went to university at the nearby University of Chicago, earned a doctorate and became a professor. My mother was also the first in her family to go to college. Social mobility for my Polish immigrant family happened quickly in Chicago. Very soon, the South Side was just a fading memory to them, some vacant land, an apartment building on a rundown block, a few headstones in a Polish-Catholic cemetery.

*"It was the sheer presence of the first ghetto and the white reaction to it, though, that did the most to produce the second. In creating it, white Chicago conceived a 'Frankenstein's monster,' which threatened to 'run amok' after World War II."*
– Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*

The Woodlawn neighborhood of Chicago sits partially on the site of the 1893 Columbian Exposition to the south of the University of Chicago. The neighborhood has long struggled against gentrification and 'redevelopment.' The key antagonist throughout much of this history has been the university, beginning in the 1940s. Up until that time,

Woodlawn was mostly populated by white, working and middle class families. Situated between 60th and 67th Streets, north to south, and Jackson Park and King Drive, east to west, Woodlawn and its neighbor to the north, Hyde Park, were demographically indistinguishable from each other for a long time. Woodlawn rapidly developed after the exposition: businesses of all sorts sprang up to cater to the influx of visitors. The latest in modern transportation — the Jackson Park elevated train line along 63rd Street — was built to transport visitors between the exposition grounds and downtown; it became the primary mode of transportation for the growing community of Woodlawn in the early 20th century. By mid-century, Woodlawn was a mostly black neighborhood, and became a staging ground for the civil rights movement in Chicago.

About 100 years after it was built, the Jackson Park/63rd Street "L" line and the neighborhood around it was falling into decay. In 1994, the residents of Woodlawn, influenced by powerful and corrupt community leaders, campaigned to tear down their own transportation lifeline. Their motivation for doing so was that they believed the elevated tracks attracted crime and blight. Their political representatives, on the other

During what Arnold R. Hirsch called the "first ghetto" in his book *Making the Second Ghetto*, middle-class African-American families began moving to Chicago's South Side in an area known as the Black Belt, originally only a narrow corridor between 21st and 33rd St, which was one of the few places in Chicago where black families were allowed to purchase homes and rent apartments. In the 1920s, E. 63rd street, over which the elevated tracks ran, was a booming commercial street and the center of Jazz Age entertainment.

The "second ghetto," which formed in the post-World War II era, expanded the boundaries of the Black Belt only slightly and faced significant opposition from white working class residents, particularly around the area of the steel mill. The most poignant symbol of this new era was the infamous Robert Taylor Homes housing project, constructed from 1960-1962. Hirsch writes, "Perhaps the most striking feature of the citywide accommodation after World War II was the extent to which it adhered to the restrictions laid down a generation before... It proposed 'building up,' expanding, and improving the ghetto, not abolishing it... the Taylor project has cast the shadow of the original Black Belt in concrete." By the 1990s, like the demonized Jackson Park/63rd Street

elevated train tracks that had been torn down in Woodlawn, the Robert Taylor homes were labeled dangerous architecture and demolished. The communities involved and the city of Chicago hoped to cure the social ills of both areas through destruction, as if that erasure could undo the years of damage that racist housing policies and disinvestment in black neighborhoods had done.

A new development on the site of the Taylor homes is called Legends South, the haunting of that space apparently already a foregone conclusion. It's a surreal site: the towers have been totally erased, and the development even includes a farm. Hulking over it is the Dan Ryan Expressway, which once all but guaranteed limited mobility for a segregated population. Now, a new urban pastoral sits in its shadow.

*"And yet if the boundary between city and country had no meaning here, that did not imply that this was a world without borders. Far from it. The city's history may have begun in the human dreams that prophesied its rise, but those dreams laid their foundations on solid earth, tracing their destiny onto the land's own patterns."*
– William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*

blacks." Targeting Chicago and the epidemic of murder the city is currently facing, Trump has vowed to "send in the feds" to "fix" Chicago. He has repeatedly assumed that all African-Americans live in "inner cities" and face unending poverty and crime. Since the 1990s, however, poverty has increasingly been driven out of major city centers to the peripheries while gentrification and urban renewal have dominated in the formerly poor "inner city." Meanwhile, it's clear that disastrous policies of segregation and discrimination in Chicago among the black community in the 20th century has not lead to the same levels of social mobility enjoyed by their white (former) South Side neighbors, even though both white working class Rust Belt communities and black communities across the country have lost homes, jobs, and infrastructure as deindustrialization and the waning of the modern project has spread since the 1970s.

In 1950, Hannah Arendt reflected on the aftermath of Nazism in Germany. She wondered at what seemed like a refusal to deal with the horrors of the war, writing, "A lack of response is evident everywhere, and it is difficult to say whether this signifies a half-conscious refusal to yield to grief or a genuine inability to feel. Amid the ruins, Germans mail each other postcards still showing the cathedrals and market places, the

The ghosts of the South Side live within these erasures, where the city has seemingly defied the logic of modernist progress upon which it was built. Standing at the top of the Willis Tower at night, which was once the tallest building in the world, the perfect grid of the city, arranged in lights, extends as far as the eye can see. From this vantage point, one would be forgiven for thinking that the landscape's natural form has been lost forever. William Cronon argues, however, that although Chicago may have seemed artificial and 'alien' in the glory days of its industrial past, it was built out of the landscape  as an extension of nature. Many of the modernist institutions of the city are either gone or in ruins — industry, public housing projects, mass transit — receding back into the landscape. But how the city's destiny may be remade again remains to be seen, this time traced onto the modern industrial city's old patterns.

In the aftermath of the 2016 US election, a mountain of tweets and think pieces have been written, fretting over the fate of the white working class in former industrial centers along the Rust Belt and their role in electing Donald Trump. Black voters, on the other hand, overwhelmingly saw through Trump's racist rhetoric, despite his half-hearted overtures to the black community and assertion that he has, "a great relationship with the blacks." Targeting Chicago and the epidemic of murder the city is

public buildings and bridges that no longer exist. And the indifference with which they walk through the rubble has its exact counterpart in the absence of mourning for the dead, or in the apathy with which they react, or rather fail to react, to the fate of the refugees in their midst." These postcards of things that no longer exist are a form of denial and, to Arendt, a failure of the German people to deal with the consequences of the Nazi period, which systematically tore their own society apart through genocide and war. While the context, in this case, is different than it was at the end of the Second World War in Germany, the postcards of former glory are an apt metaphor for how we deal with the destruction of the industrial shape of the city of Chicago. Amid the ruins of American modernism, we as Americans are similarly sending each other "postcards" — keeping the image of American cities alive, the legend of our great cities like Chicago.

As a child, I was proud to live in the city with the tallest building in the world. When the Petronas Towers of Kuala Lumpur surpassed the Sears (now Willis) Tower in 1998, it felt like the end of Chicago's reign in more ways than just the one. The 1990s were a period of destruction in Chicago — from public housing to public transport to industry. As the

Willis Tower has been outgrown by global competitors and all plans to build an even taller tower have stalled, cities in Asia and the Middle East have taken up the mantel of progress that Chicago once wore. Now we're left with our legends, our ghosts, and postcards of what we used to be.

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