



YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Austin was founded in 1895 as a residential community and quickly filled with Euro-American immigrant families looking to own homes and work their way up the social ladder. Middle class aspirations continued among the large numbers of African American residents who started making Austin their home in the 1960s and 70s.

Austin's industrial peak extended from the 1930s to the 1960s, when Zenith, Western Electric, Sears, International Harvester, and Brach's hired many Westsiders. Commerce traveled along the transit lines, concentrating retail businesses along Chicago Avenue, Lake Street, and Madison Street. This is where the retail sector is still found today.

Austin has a long-standing and active civic sector made up of community organizations, block clubs, non-profit service providers, churches with locally active ministries, and an often struggling, but innovative, business community. Working both individually and in collaboration, these groups apply their talents and resources to provide leadership, services, and amenities

that improve the quality of life in Austin. Many of this stems back to the 1970s and 80s, when concerned residents and leaders began to address one or more pressing issues in the community such as developing affordable housing, reducing the impact of gangs and street crime, and keeping adequate medical services and facilities in Austin.

Foreclosure and economic development are two of the top concerns in Austin at this time in the community's history. The foreclosure crisis and the economic downturn are the most immediate threats to the well being of the community and its residents. Foreclosures result in individuals losing wealth, independence, and, at times, shelter. Vacant properties are more susceptible to vandalism and criminal activity. Austin is working hard in the face of these challenges. *Sweet Homes Chicago; The Neighborhood Preservation Design Challenge* is one effort to highlight creative ideas to address foreclosure and economic development in Austin, and to help keep the neighborhood of Austin healthy and strong.

WHAT MAKES A NEIGHBORHOOD?



The word “neighborhood” can mean a lot of things. The technical definition is of a neighborhood is the area or region around or near some place or thing, a district or locality. In reality, a neighborhood means a lot more than that. A neighborhood is really made up of people working together to make a place beautiful, welcoming, safe, productive, and dynamic. Neighborhoods are often about sharing goals and visions for the future, while appreciating the past.

Today, in the many parts of the United States, urban neighborhoods like Austin are being dramatically impacted by the foreclosure crisis, a diminished job market, challenged educational bodies, and increasingly unjust environmental, social, and economic conditions. Austin is up for the challenge.

When it comes to neighborhood strength and resilience, Austin has it all: engaged residents and homeowners; green-space activists, active and impactful community based organizations; small businesses; great public transportation, and a sense of history and identity; faith and commitment that runs deep. Despite challenges of the past, present, and future, Austin is a model for neighborhood preservation and community pride.

FAITH & WORSHIP

Churches like Friendship Baptist Church are often the first stop for residents who need some assistance. The churches then refer their patrons to resources in the community. This type of approach exemplifies the value of meeting people where they live. Additionally, the highly local, block-by-block approach is another well-respected strategy for bringing about positive change that is scalable. Another example of a program is the “100 Blocks & 100 Churches” campaign, organized largely by the Westside Ministers Coalition, which brings prayer to street corners in Austin to communicate participants’ willingness to stand-up to crime.



ACTIVISM AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

There are a number of community-based organizations in Austin (including but not limited to SACCC, Bethel New Life, Westside Health Authority, and Austin Coming Together) that can trace their origins to community organizing efforts that aimed to retain or gain resources for area residents. Some of these organizations, whether from the outset or over time,

developed the capacity to deliver resources and services even as they continue to organize residents to speak up for outside support and social change.

The popularity and impact of community organizing should not be underestimated in Austin and a great deal of organizing has been political. Political organizing efforts bring various groups and residents together to have a louder voice and the collective power to address economic, educational, safety, and health concerns.

Organizations (including some of those who do political organizing) build and maintain relationships with block clubs, congregations, schools, and individual residents in order to maximize the reach of their services.

Block clubs are the most prevalent smaller community organizations in Austin. Some of their key activities are beautification (sometimes extending to recycling efforts), safety, and communications.



ARTS AND CULTURE

Austin community leaders draw on African American residents' meaningful connections to the past and place (e.g. Africa, the American South, or Austin/ Chicago itself) to promote practices and events that benefit individuals and the neighborhood. Perhaps most striking, the West African concept of Sankofa – learning from the past in order to move forward – is invoked by multiple local organizations as a model for self and community improvement.

The local organization called Sankofa celebrates wisdom from the past—such as the creative use of natural resources in both Africa and Austin—and transmits heritage through classes like African drumming.

More broadly, in recent years the Westside Historical Society has organized a Juneteenth Festival in Garfield Park. It both commemorates the day slaves in Texas found out they'd been freed, and celebrates African and African American heritage through rituals, performances, and the sale of African goods.



Austin is home to many large murals that depict community identity in terms of African, African American, and/or rural heritage. These themes reflect the desired purpose of leaders to instill ethnic pride and historically understanding as a route to individual and community improvement.

One mural, on the wall of the Westside Health Authority is one of the many in highly visible locations in Austin. Themes include the iconic Chicago skyline, the African Village, migration, and the African American and South African civil rights struggles.



TRANSPORTATION



Austin has ample public transportation resources; with access to both the Green and Blue train Lines and buses running north to south and east to west along the major roads. One point of interest along the Green Line is Bethel New Life Transit Village Project which is located in the adjoining West Garfield Park. This facility is LEED certified and used more than 25 percent recycled materials and incorporated green technology including photovoltaic cells, a rooftop garden, automatic light dimmers, high efficiency HVAC system, and innovative Heat Recovery Units (HRU) to reduce energy usage. Inside the building are retail spaces along with offices and classrooms for job training and financial education. The Green Line offers easy access from Oak Park to Downtown Chicago, which could mean the potential for a strong Austin-based commercial or business corridor along the Green Line.

EDUCATION

In the face of high unemployment, limited opportunities for young adults, and underperforming schools, Austin's civic sector is focusing on educational improvement as a cornerstone for improving community life. Many stakeholders feel that strengthening schools and youth opportunities will not only help kids stay on a safe and productive life path, but will also minimize the "brain drain" of young people leaving Austin to attend private and charter schools and attract new families to the area.



One notable approach to education is Austin Coming Together's coordination of its members in focusing on weak rungs in the local education to career ladder. As part of this ladder approach, ACT works to strengthen preschool networks and consequently area children's kindergarten readiness, helps convene stakeholders to voice local concerns and expectations to Chicago Public School leadership, and makes available a forum for area organizations to try and reach consensus on what sort of career campus to work towards for Westside residents. (In its general outlines such a campus would bring high school students, college classes, and manufacturers together. Local stakeholders have not been able to agree on specifics of such a campus, which has possibly hampered past development opportunities.) Other innovative educational approaches on the Westside include Al Raby School for Community and Environment and a partnership between Douglas Academy High School students and the nearby Harambee Garden.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Although entrepreneurialism is valued and supported by community organizations and public officials, the small business sector is limited in Austin. Successful businesses include restaurants and childcare providers, who have formed at least two networks of childcare businesses in the area. One strong effort is the Austin Child Care Providers Network who is working to build a connected educational ladder in Austin, in addition to offering networking and mentoring opportunities for its members.



GREENING AND GROWING

Beautification is one of the primary strategies of Austin organizations and residents concerned with enhancing the community's image and building solidarity among community residents of all ages. Beautification activities include episodic clean-ups of open space, the painting of murals, and community gardening.

Contemporary community gardening efforts started in Austin in the late 1980's when a group of residents decided to help one another clean up vacant lots and plant and maintain gardens on them. The Austin Green Team was born and is still going strong today, with seven gardens in the area and relationships to a number of others. They showcase Austin's residential and community gardens to their neighbors, friends, and other interested parties by hosting a Green Team Tour each year. The overarching motivation of the Green Team has always been community improvement, variously understood by them as taking control of spaces

that are otherwise too easily available for criminal activity, creating a desirable appearance for the community to attract more homeowners and businesses, and making spaces that create peace of mind.

In the last five years community gardening has been growing in popularity again in Austin, paralleling city and national trends towards fostering local food systems and realizing the individual benefits that come about through gardening and participation in outdoor activity.

Founded in 2010, Harambee Garden is possibly the latest incarnation of a community garden initiative started by individuals. The garden's mission is rooted in community building based on strengthening relationships among gardeners, local residents, and students, faculty, and staff from the adjacent Douglass Academy High School.

ARCHITECTURE AND PARKS

Austin houses are a combination of a large number of single family homes intermixed with walk-ups. Larger multiunit structures are scattered throughout the community and serve seniors and renters. Large homes, in various states of upkeep, cluster heavily along the northern and western boundaries of the research area.

Austin is also home to many historic buildings and parks. Austin Town Hall Park and Cultural Center is Georgian Revival in style and is a designated Chicago Landmark. It houses a recording studio, an indoor swimming pool, 2 kitchens, a gymnasium, performance theater/auditorium and fitness Center. Town Hall is also home to many youth, adult, and senior programming. There are often theatre productions, community meetings, and other events taking place there. La Follette Park Field House, designed in 1927 in Italian Renaissance

Revival, is another majestic building that is also a center of community events and programming in Austin. The park is over 17 acres large and this field house also includes an indoor pool, a gym, fitness center, & auditorium. Outside, the park is basketball courts, baseball fields, tennis courts, athletic field, pavilion, 2 playgrounds. Columbus Park, designed by the famous landscape architect Jens Jensen, is on the National Register of Historic Places and was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2003. Its expansive grounds include a small golf course and a lagoon.

