

## **Re-imagining Nature: The Julia C. Lathrop Homes and the Chicago River**

### **Abstract:**

This project will use the case study of riverfront redevelopment and Chicago's Julia C. Lathrop Homes to explain the changing meaning of nature in neoliberal cities. The Lathrop Homes, public housing projects surrounded by new high-income housing developments along the north branch of the Chicago River, are scheduled to be completely demolished and replaced with a mixed-income housing development by the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA). The new desirability of riverfront living has made the Lathrop property particularly valuable and reflects a change in public perceptions of the river.

### **Introduction:**

The Julia C. Lathrop Homes are a public housing project located on the North Branch of the Chicago River slated for demolition in 2009. They are the one of the first three public housing developments in Chicago (the Jane Addams and Trumbull Park projects are the other two) and were completed in 1938. The homes were constructed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) under the New Deal to house white workers and their families. Designed by Chicago's most prominent architects of the time (including Hubert Burnham, Daniel Burnham's son), the development consists of 925 units in mid-rise (3 to 4 story) apartment buildings and row homes amid ample green space. The architects were heavily influenced by Ebenezer Howard's Garden City tradition.<sup>1</sup> The Homes were the last public housing project in the city to be fully integrated and were highly controversial amid the race riots of the 1960's.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps because of this, the Lathrop Homes remained one of the most racially diverse public housing projects in Chicago. Lathrop also largely managed to escape the gang warfare,

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<sup>1</sup> Preservation Chicago "Julia C. Lathrop Homes" Chicago's Seven Most Threatened Buildings. 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Hirsch, Arnold. *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998)

brutal violence, and social disintegration that plagued other projects beginning in the 1960's.



**Figure 1.** An aerial view of the Lathrop Homes in 1938<sup>3</sup>

The descent into violence and the notoriety of high-rise public housing projects like the Robert Taylor Homes and Cabrini Green forced federal lawmakers to come up with a new model for public housing. In 1992 Congress authorized a new program called Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) developed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The plan provided funding for cities to eliminate high-rise buildings and revitalize the most distressed housing projects. The program seeks to reduce the isolation and concentration of very low-income families and

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<sup>3</sup> New Deal Network Photo Gallery, available at:  
[http://newdeal.feri.org/search\\_details.cfm?link=http://newdeal.feri.org/library/m56.htm](http://newdeal.feri.org/search_details.cfm?link=http://newdeal.feri.org/library/m56.htm)

improve surrounding neighborhoods by replacing traditional public housing with mixed-income development.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 2.** The Lathrop Homes today

The Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) plans to use HOPE VI funds to demolish the Lathrop Homes build a mixed income residential development where one-third of the units are reserved for public housing.<sup>5</sup> There is considerable resistance to this plan from a coalition of Lathrop residents, affordable housing advocates and local preservation groups. These groups claim that the HOPE VI program was designed to address problems of social isolation, gang violence, and concentrated poverty that Lathrop itself did not experience. The extent to which the Lathrop Homes can be characterized as ‘distressed’ is also questionable. Under the CHA’s initial Plan of Transformation in 2000 the Lathrop

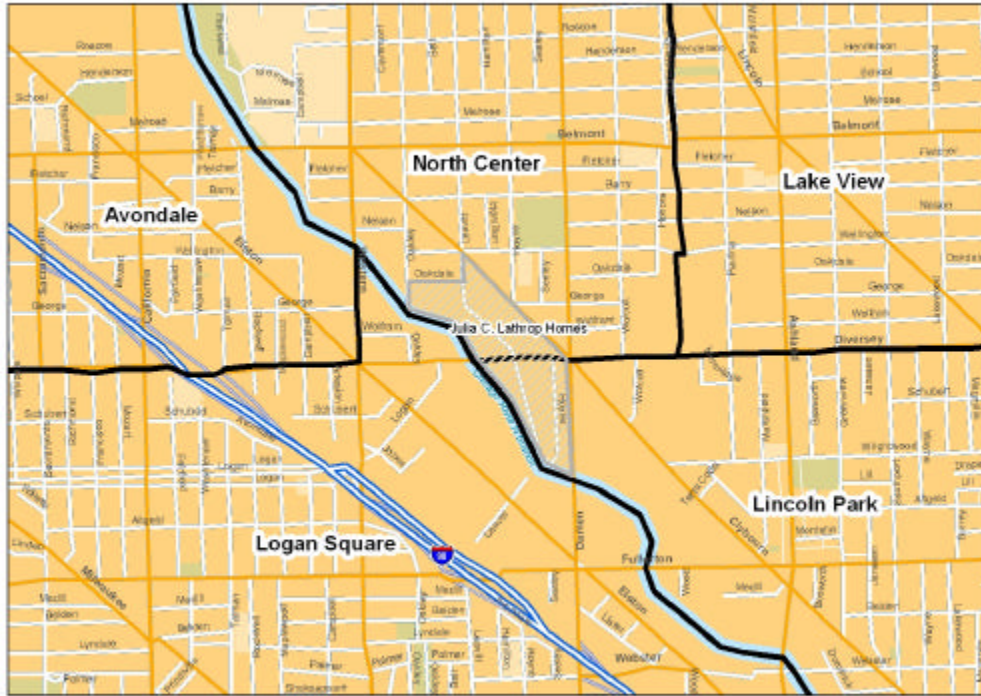
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<sup>4</sup> Marquis, Gerald P. and Ghosh, Soumen. “Housing Oppotunities for People Everywhere (HOPE VI): Who Gets Back In?” *The Social Science Journal* 45: 401-418 (2008).

<sup>5</sup> Chicago Housing Authority “FY2009 Moving to Work: Annual Plan for Transformation Year 10” Available at theCHA.org (2008).



homes were not considered a distressed property. In following years the CHA revised its plans, and eventually called for the demolition of the homes in the 2007 plan.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 3.** Location of Lathrop Homes

The situation for Lathrop is unique because unlike other housing projects (with the exception of Cabrini Green), the surrounding neighborhood is relatively diverse both economically and ethnically, although this is changing. The five community areas surrounding the Lathrop homes are experiencing increased gentrification (Avondale, Logan Square and North Center) or are already highly gentrified (Lakeview and Lincoln Park). The increased value of properties in this area make the CHA's decision to pursue mixed-income development highly contentious; affordable housing advocates expect that such plans will exacerbate an already substantial dearth of affordable housing in the area.

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<sup>6</sup> Chicago Rehab Network "Chicago Rehab Network Comments on FY2008 Annual Plan" (2007).

Median home values in Avondale, Logan Square and North Center increased by 20% or more from 2002 to 2007 when adjusted for inflation. Some view the CHA's plans to demolish Lathrop as an attempt to further gentrify the surrounding neighborhoods at the expense of public housing residents.<sup>7</sup>

The intense gentrification of Lathrop's surrounding neighborhoods coupled with its newly valued location along the river make its future as an entirely affordable public housing project precarious at best. Lathrop presents an excellent case for criticism of the HOPE VI program and the general shift towards the privatization of urban space. It also demonstrates the impact of discourses of nature and the city on gentrification and the changing perceptions of nature in neoliberal urban environments.



**Figure 4.** The river walk at the Lathrop Homes

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

This paper focuses on the role of the river in deciding Lathrop's fate. It argues that the post-Fordist mode of production has re-framed narratives of the Chicago River, emphasizing its value as a 'natural' resource with primarily aesthetic and recreational functions. This new conception of the river has made riverfront living desirable for the first time since the early years of the city's history. As such, Lathrop's riverfront location has made it particularly vulnerable to the privatization drive of city officials.

### **Literature Review:**

Today's globalized economy is predicated on the free, uninhibited movement of capital on a global scale. Cities are vulnerable to this seemingly boundless nature of capital and are forced to compete with one another to fix it in place, often through investment in the built environment.<sup>8</sup> City governments do this by providing attractive environments for businesses and property developers through tax incentives and loosening regulations. Healthy property markets generate revenue for the city; replacing blighted landscapes with new luxury residential developments promote the continued inflow of wealthy residents and their tax dollars into the city. Gentrification in this context is a strategy for cities to remain competitive in a global market by fixing capital investment in the built environment.<sup>9</sup>

Gentrification is also a product of deindustrialization, which left large swathes of land near the city-center under populated, neglected, and undervalued. The so-called 'rent-gap' between the actual value of a property and its potential value given locational advantages eventually leads to reinvestment and redevelopment. Ultimately the actual

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<sup>8</sup> Harvey, David. *The Limits to Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> Mitchell, Don. "The Annihilation of Space by Law: the Roots and Implications of the Anti-homeless Laws in the United States" *Antipode* 29 (3): 303-335. (1997).

value equals the potential value and the process of gentrification is complete.<sup>10</sup> The gentrification in the areas surrounding the Lathrop Homes has made formerly industrial land along the river newly desirable. With deindustrialization, many of the manufacturing facilities located on the riverfront moved elsewhere, leaving behind an impressive stock of buildings for condo or loft conversions.

Deindustrialization has also perpetuated a new perception of the river. Instead of being viewed as an avenue for commerce and industry, it is now viewed as an asset that increases the 'liveability' of an area because it promotes interaction with 'nature'. Similar shifts in perception have accompanied waterfront redevelopment projects in Baltimore, New York City and Portland. Gentrification along the riverfront suggests a revalorization of 'nature' in urban areas that is promoted by city governments and developers under the discourse of 'liveability'; this discourse is meant to attract further investment in property markets.<sup>11</sup>

The relationship between nature and the city has been addressed by geographers and others in recent years. Keil and Graham argue that nature and urbanization are hardly antithetical, rather "nature and the city [are] continuously remade in and through the other."<sup>12</sup> The history of the city of Chicago is an excellent example of the dialectical relationship between urbanity and nature; nature shapes the city and the city shapes nature.<sup>13</sup> Changes in the role of nature in urban areas are related to new modes of

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, Neil. *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Hagerman, Chris. "Shaping Neighborhoods and Nature: Urban Political Ecologies of Urban Waterfront Transformations in Portland, Oregon" *Cities*, 24 (4): 285-297 (2007).

<sup>12</sup> Keil, Roger and Graham, John. "Reasserting Nature: Constructing Urban Environments After Fordism" in Braun, B. and Castree, N. eds. *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millenium*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 102

<sup>13</sup> Cronon, William. *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (W.W. Norton and Company: New York and London, 1991)

production, thus the new vision of nature in the twenty-first century is a product of economic processes in the post-Fordist regime of accumulation.<sup>14</sup> Keil and Graham contend that nature is being ‘reinserted’ into the urbanization process in post-Fordist cities; discourses of nature, the environment, and sustainability are becoming major players in the production and management of urban space.<sup>15</sup>

Particularly relevant to this paper is research that addresses the meaning of nature. As the work of political ecology has shown, discourses of nature are never neutral and can never be entirely separated from their cultural, historical and institutional contexts.<sup>16</sup> Thus, it is argued that it is more appropriate to view nature as a social construction.<sup>17</sup> Sharp divisions between the realm of society and the realm of nature are misguided because they discount the ways that society impacts and is impacted by nature, and vice-versa. Neil Smith argued that capitalism affects humanity’s relationship with nature, such that nature is ‘produced’ by society for profit.<sup>18</sup>

### **Methodology:**

The paper uses historical analysis from primary and secondary sources to explore different narratives of nature relating to the Chicago River. The analysis focuses specifically on the north branch of the river, covering the period just before the Lathrop Homes were built up through the present day. The intent is not to provide a comprehensive history of the Chicago River; rather the goal is to gauge public

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<sup>14</sup> Keil, Roger and Graham, John. “Reasserting Nature: Constructing Urban Environments After Fordism” in Braun, B. and Castree, N. eds. *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millenium*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory, Derek “(Post)Colonialism and the Production of Nature” in Castree, Noel and Braun, Bruce eds. *Social Nature: Theory, Practice, and Politics* (Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2001)

<sup>17</sup> Cronon, William. *Uncommon Ground* (W.W. Norton: New York and London, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Smith, Neil *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (Routledge: London, 1984).



perceptions of the river's value at different stages of urban development. What follows is a brief but focused look into how the meaning of Lathrop's riverfront location has changed since its completion in 1938.

### **Narratives of the Chicago River**

The Chicago River's reputation as a noxious open sewer was well deserved for much of the city's history. Since European settlement, the river has been contaminated by barges and boat traffic, refuse from Chicago's famous stockyards, various industrial wastes and raw sewage. The city's massive pollution problems prompted a human-induced reshaping of the river system to alleviate disease problems and suit the needs of rapidly growing industries. The most dramatic engineering feat was the reversal of the river's flow towards the Mississippi River basin in 1900.

At the time the Lathrop Homes were constructed the north branch of the river was still plagued by pollution. The river corridor was an important industrial zone with significant barge traffic. In 1925 plans were put forward to pave over the north branch and use it as a road for automobile traffic. Despite the engineering difficulties in implementing such a plan, the Chicago Tribune remarked that "one advantage to be gained by boulevarding the river would be the hiding of an unsightly sewer ... its waters are polluted until the mere sight of them disgusts."<sup>19</sup> While the plan was rejected due to pressure from riverfront industries that depended on river traffic, the audacity of the idea points to how dire the pollution problem was at this time period. The plan also demonstrates that although the river was seen as a nuisance by some, its value was still derived from its commercial function. The paved-over river was to serve as an automobile highway to provide easy access to downtown. The pollution problem

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<sup>19</sup> "Paving the River" *Chicago Daily Tribune* 6 July 1925.

persisted through the 1930's, with forest commissioners and north branch residents complaining about the dumping of sewage and other refuse from communities upriver. A letter to the editor of the Tribune referred to the "open sewer, dignified by the name of the north branch of the Chicago river" and declared that it "looks and smells as though there are plenty of dysentery and typhoid germs in it."<sup>20</sup> The industries along this stretch of the river were influential enough to pressure the city council to dredge the river when a drought dropped the water level and affected barge traffic. Manufacturers with warehouses on the river from Belmont to North avenue formed the North Branch Industrial association to lobby the city government.<sup>21</sup>

The Lathrop Homes were constructed on the former industrial site of the Deering works plant, which was a major manufacturer of farm implements.<sup>22</sup> The plant was abandoned in 1933 and the land was acquired by the city in 1935.<sup>23</sup> The location of the proposed housing project along the polluted and foul-smelling north branch was probably intentional. In addition to the repulsive nature of the river, the site was also located in the middle of a major manufacturing corridor characterized by industrial noise and air pollution. When the first residents moved into the Lathrop Homes in 1937 they occupied a site that was far from desirable.

The value of the river continued to be primarily commercial through the first half of the twentieth century. In 1935, the Chicago Tribune commented on the value of industry along the river:

Geographical beauties of the region as seen through commercial and industrial eyes are that it is the spot where raw materials can be assembled at low cost and

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<sup>20</sup> "The Sewage Works Should Help" *Chicago Daily Tribune* 26 December 1933.

<sup>21</sup> "Aldermen Vote to Dredge North Branch of River" *Chicago Daily Tribune* 19 January 1935.

<sup>22</sup> "Abandon Huge Deering Plant on North Side" *Chicago Daily Tribune* 23 March 1933.

<sup>23</sup> "PWA Takes Over North Side Site for 565 Homes" *Chicago Daily Tribune* 14 August 1935.

the finished products can be distributed right on the doorstep of the greatest buying power valley in America.<sup>24</sup>

By mid-century, however, the high levels of pollution in the river were again raising concerns. In 1945 a subcommittee headed by Alderman Merryman from the 45<sup>th</sup> ward (at the time this was the ward that contained the Lathrop Homes) was formed and charged with investigating river pollution.

The subcommittee's preliminary report, which branded the north and south forks of the river "an open sewer and a detriment to public health and welfare," likely to cause an epidemic."... Merryman said that on a trip along the river to gather material for the report he observed at one place accumulated sludge so thick that it fouled the propeller of the motor launch in which he was riding and stalled the boat's engine. Sewer gas rising from the bottom of one of the slips, he said, was so heavy that he was afraid to light a cigaret (sic).<sup>25</sup>

In 1956 a summer drought caused unusually low water levels on the north branch of the river, concentrating the foul odor and emitting hydrogen sulfide gas. North side residents demanded immediate action from the mayor, reporting that "the gas was polluting the air, attacking the paint on houses and tarnishing silverware in homes."<sup>26</sup> Mayor Daley eventually ordered the Fire Department to pump water from fire hydrants back into the river to alleviate the smell.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the increased public awareness of pollution hazards, industrial development along the river was still encouraged. Many neighborhoods sought urban renewal funds to eliminate blighted areas and replace them with new industrial corridors. In 1958, the Lakeview neighborhood sought funds to remove slums along the river between Belmont and Diversey, noting that "future planning should look toward potential

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<sup>24</sup> "City's Trump in Trade Outlook" *Chicago Daily Tribune* 1 March 1935.

<sup>25</sup> "Plan to Clean River and Gain More Diversion" *Chicago Daily Tribune* 12 January 1945.

<sup>26</sup> "North Side Residents Complain of Pollution" *Chicago Daily Tribune* 18 October 1956.

<sup>27</sup> "Firemen Flush Channel to Remove Gas" *Chicago Daily Tribune* 19 October 1956.

industrial development.”<sup>28</sup> The area surrounding Lathrop remained primarily industrial through the 1960’s and most residential areas near the river were blighted.<sup>29</sup>

Concern about the state of the river continued to grow especially in the 1970’s as the new environmental movement became mainstream. Roughly coinciding with this period of increased environmental consciousness was the beginning of a period of deindustrialization in Chicago. Industrial and manufacturing firms abandoned the city in droves, seeking cheaper operating costs in the suburbs, Sunbelt cities, or overseas. The number of industrial plants and riverfront property values declined dramatically beginning in the late 1960’s.<sup>30</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising that Friends of the Chicago River, an influential group dedicated to restoring and protecting nature along the river was founded during this period in 1979. Efforts by the city government to transform the riverfront into a recreational space began in 1973 with the Central Area Plan, but this plan focused only on the downtown and immediately adjacent areas. The plan did not address the immediate problem of pollution in the river, however, and much of its riverfront plans were never realized.<sup>31</sup>

In 1980 the city commissioned a year-long study of the river, with the goal of “introducing more recreation, while protecting industrial activities already on the river banks.”<sup>32</sup> The city’s drive to promote the recreational use of the river while simultaneously protecting polluting industries was largely unattainable. Despite increased awareness and public concern, water quality in the river had not improved substantially since the 1960’s. The Chicago Tribune addressed this problem in 1981:

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<sup>28</sup> “Lake View Awaits Word on How to Stop Blight” *Chicago Daily Tribune* 27 February 1958.

<sup>29</sup> Solzman, David M. “The Value of Inland Waterfront Industrial Sites” *Land Economics* 45(4) 1969.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> City of Chicago Office of the Mayor. Chicago 21:Plan for Central Area Communities. 1973.

<sup>32</sup> “Chicago River Fishing Vision ‘Is Still Alive’” *Chicago Daily Tribune* 18 December 1980.

Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago was called a man who could work miracles, but even he could not transform the Chicago River into a noontime fishing spot. The late mayor also dreamed of gondolas on the river, operated by experts from Venice. Twenty-five years have passed since Daley first mentioned his dream of youngsters fishing in a river that is associated with dirty water, barges and cargo ships. They're still just dreams.<sup>33</sup>

The same article ends on a more optimistic note, quoting Robert Cassidy, chairman of the Friends of the Chicago River:

We've found that the riverbanks are really a big concern now. People want them cleaned up. They want to see a cleaner river. They want to see a better use of open space along the river. They want a pleasant and more useful resource, instead of the stinking hole that it has been since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>34</sup>

The first comprehensive initiative to improve the quality of the riverfront came in 1998 when the city approved the Chicago River Corridor Development Plan. The goal was to “to reclaim the river as an aesthetic and recreational resource to improve the quality of life for all Chicagoans” and to “encourage economic development compatible with the river as an environmental and recreational amenity.”<sup>35</sup> The plan’s focus on river walks, parks and recreational uses (including canoe docks, fishing and hiking trails) reflects the new role of the river in post-Fordist Chicago. The plan’s language also implies a separation of ‘natural’ and ‘urban’ spaces, describing the river as “a peaceful, natural contrast to the urban environment”.<sup>36</sup> Given the river’s history a label like ‘natural’ might seem odd, but it is indicative of a dominant narrative that views nature as a system that is entirely separate from human influence. According to this discourse, nature is pure and pristine (‘untrammelled by man’), and as such it is valuable in and of itself.

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<sup>33</sup> “New Era Emerging for Chicago’s River” *Chicago Daily Tribune* 3 August 1981.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Department of Planning and Development “Chicago River Corridor Design Guidelines and Standards” (April 2005), 1

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 1



Similar discourses of nature can be found in advertisements promoting riverfront condo developments near the Lathrop homes. There are two major developments near Lathrop, River Park and the Homes of River's Edge; both are along the west bank of the River along Diversey Avenue. An online advertisement for a 2 bedroom townhome in River Park boasts a "deck and huge windows overlooking the river" and features images of the river in the summer.<sup>37</sup> Other ads feature pictures of the river showing wildlife (mostly birds and geese), kayakers and other small boats to show the recreational value of the riverfront property. Another River Park condo features "spacious landscaped patio overlooking picturesque stretch of river, perfect for pets, entertaining or just watching the geese and wildlife."<sup>38</sup> The River's Edge development highlights similar qualities of the river in its advertisements. The developer's weblog promotes the riverfront path that runs behind the homes, suggesting "for those just looking to go for a nice walk with your child in a stroller, I can recommend the river walk just behind Rivers Edge. This nicely shaded and paved sidewalk stretches to Western Avenue."<sup>39</sup> This marketing not only indicates the apparent desirability of living along the river, but also that the expected buyers of the riverfront condos are young couples and families with small children. The images of a picturesque river, complete with green spaces, birds and kayakers, reinforce a new image of the Chicago river as an aesthetic, recreational, and 'natural' amenity, and reposition riverfront living as desirable.

The relationship between the Lathrop Homes and surrounding luxury housing developments is tenuous at best. The demolition of Lathrop would likely boost property

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<sup>37</sup> Best Chicago Condos "2208 W. Diversey Ave", <http://www.bestchicagocondos.com/luxury-condos/2208-w-diversey-ave.html#info>

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> The Homes of Rivers Edge Weblog "Time to Exercise", <http://riversedgechicago.wordpress.com/2008/01/19/time-to-exercise/>

values by allowing new development in the area and by removing the stigma of public housing. The developers of the Rivers Edge community have made their views clear, posting the following message on their weblog:

After nearly 70 years in operation, the Chicago Housing Authority's Julia C. Lathrop Homes public housing complex, located across the river from Rivers Edge, is slated for demolition and redevelopment as part of the agency's \$1.6 billion "Plan for Transformation." This CHA housing project located at Damen and Diversey will be significantly changed in the near future and will help the resale value of properties at The Homes of Rivers Edge.<sup>40</sup>

### **Conclusions:**

The meaning of the Chicago River today is quite different than when the Lathrop Homes were built in the 1930's. Lathrop was built on the river when it was viewed as an avenue for commerce, an industrial corridor and an open sewer. Today, Lathrop residents find themselves occupying a prime piece of real estate along a 'pristine' stretch of the river, complete with wildlife, river walks, and kayakers.

To speak of a 're-valorization' of the Chicago River is not necessarily correct; it would be more accurate to argue that the river was always valued, but that it has been valued for different reasons throughout history. Even during its most polluted, malodorous years the river was still a valuable amenity, a natural resource that facilitated commerce, industry, and (to varying degrees) sanitation. Today the river's amenities are defined somewhat differently, as an aesthetically pleasing landscape, recreational area and green space, but it continues to exercise an important influence on the city. Thus, it is less that nature is being 'reinserted' into the urbanization process, but rather that the way nature is conceptualized has changed over time.

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<sup>40</sup> The Homes of Rivers Edge Weblog "Redevelopment Planned for Community Surrounding Rivers Edge", <http://riversedgechicago.wordpress.com/2008/02/19/redevelopment-planned-for-community-surrounding-rivers-edge/>

The case of the Lathrop Homes represents a confluence of several larger processes. First, it is indicative of a larger trend towards privatization of public services beginning in the 1980's. The devolution of public housing to the private market is also related to the rise of neoliberal urban governance structures which promote the large-scale gentrification processes closing in on the Lathrop Homes from all directions. The reassertion of particular views of nature in the urbanization process is also a product of the demise of Fordism and the rise of a new global economic system. New emphasis on the 'greening' of natural features like the Chicago River is a product not only of increased environmental consciousness, but also of awareness among urban planners and private developers that pristine natural environments are an excellent way to attract capital. Nature has become a form of place-marketing; it is an asset that attracts businesses and promotes the gentrification of previously unattractive areas of the city. The fate of the Lathrop Homes illustrates how new narratives of nature in post-Fordist cities are intimately related to, and possibly even the products of, neoliberal restructuring processes transforming today's cities.