Beyond Convenience

Public Space, Urban Transformation, and Narratives of Bronzeville's Neighborhood Retail Spaces from the mid-20th Century to the Present.

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Sign outside Michigan Food Mart on the corner of East 47th Street and South Michigan Avenue.

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ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates the typological characteristics of corner stores in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood, from the mid-20th century to the present. Corner stores are defined as small, locally owned commercial spaces, typically open late, offering a wide range of merchandise, following a recognizable typology, and interspersed throughout neighborhoods, collectively forming an adaptable and resilient social infrastructure. I argue that Bronzeville's corner stores from the mid-century and the present share physical, geographic, social, and programmatic typologies that arise out of the peculiarities of the neighborhood's commercial environment and broader infrastructural trends. This study will trace the role of these typologies in defining a neighborhood's commercial culture and transformations in these typologies alongside larger-scale developments in the neighborhood's built environment. This analysis allows us to understand their form in the contemporary city and their changing relationship with the neighborhoods where they operate.

Incorporating evidence from Timuel Black's collection of oral histories, *Bridges of Memory,* and observations collected from site visits, this study demonstrates how Bronzeville's corner stores were priced and placed out of dense, residential sections of Bronzeville to existing commercial strips, which often contained single-use, low-density buildings. Despite this marginalization, this study shows how Bronzeville's historic corner store typologies—which were crucial in fostering neighborhood intimacy, racial solidarity, and pathways for social mobility—have been translated into the forms of the contemporary city. Ultimately, this analysis emphasizes the importance of corner stores for maintaining vibrant, culturally rich urban neighborhoods and calls attention to the consequences of their loss.

INTRODUCTION:

In the summer of 2024, I lived on the border between Manhattan's East Harlem and Upper East Side neighborhoods. Below my building, there was a bodega—a small space: messy, odd smells lingering in the corners, and food packed from floor to ceiling. Within the store, there was a deli counter, usually with the same familiar faces behind it preparing sandwiches, and two aisles packed with snacks, cooking materials, ingredients, and a wall lined with coolers holding sodas, sports drinks, and other cold beverages. In a little nook at the front of the store, there's the cash register, behind which there were racks of medicines, charging cables, cigarettes, t-shirts, and any odd object you'd never know you'd need until suddenly you realize you do. Working the cash register there'd be another set of familiar faces, pouring coffee, handing out sandwiches, taking payments, and greeting guests as they enter. The first time I ever patronized this business was for a breakfast sandwich—bacon-egg-and-cheese on a roll—to take with me on my way to the Q station at 96th Street, and eventually my office in SoHo. As the summer passed, I continued patronizing this deli nearly every morning, sometimes visiting it two or three times in a single day. It turns out, that when you see someone every day, you learn a lot about them. The man working behind the counter at the deli lived a few blocks down, and he worked the morning shift at the deli most days, from around 8am to 6pm. To maintain his anonymity I'll refer to him as Hector. He was a Puerto Rican man, likely no more than 30 years old, and one of the most popular figures in the neighborhood. Almost everyone called him by his first name and always had something personal to catch up with him about. I learned a great deal about the space by observing the interactions happening before me every morning waiting for my sandwiches. Many people, like me, relied on Hector for their morning coffee and breakfast sandwiches, and he seemed to have the orders of hundreds of people memorized.

Some people relied on Hector's deli, which accepted EBT, as their source of groceries, piling items from all corners of his store into canvas bags. Others relied on Hector as a creditor, walking out with a coffee and a sandwich, promising him that they'd return to the store with payment in just a few days, cemented by a swift handshake.

What I am trying to convey through these experiences in this deli is the complex social network that existed within a rather mundane space. Delis nearly identical to Hector's exist across New York City, from SoHo to the far reaches of the outer boroughs. Despite the colorful array of people and interactions within it, there was nothing particularly special about Hector's Deli, yet it still serves as a catalyst for building a strong, interconnected community within this neighborhood. Not just through selling egg sandwiches and one-dollar cigarettes, but by connecting the daily errands and routines of neighbors, with a friendly, familiar face. One that you'd be equally likely to see walking down your block as you would behind the counter of the nearby corner store.

Every city has a list of peculiarities that make it unique. It can be a specific style of architecture, the shape of its stop signs, a peculiar form of public transit, an atypical climate, or a jarring ecology. Cities build identities through their peculiarities. One common element of cities that is often parodied is the corner store, a practical installment of any city and a place that sells small, basic things; items people typically find themselves needing or wanting; places where they can go at any time of day, and that exist on every block of the city, no matter the neighborhood. In New York City there's the *bodega*, Detroit has *party stores*, Montreal has the *depanneur*, in Berlin, there's the *spätis*, and in Istanbul, there's the *tekel*. Each city has a version of the corner store that responds to the peculiarities of the social and built environment. New York City is famous for its small, narrow bodegas with shelves reaching for the ceiling, deli counters, and its mascot: the bodega cat. Each of

these characteristics reflects an intersection of the city's built and social environments—the term "bodega" originates from small shops popularized by Puerto Rican immigrants in the 19th century, the vertical structure of these stores emerges from the city's extreme density, and the cats symbolize an ongoing battle between the city and its pests. These typologies respond to the constraints and possibilities of the environment around them, translating the architecture and aesthetics of the street in the public realm of the city into a format that fits a secluded indoor space. This project is built on the idea of a corner store typology. A certain style of store in terms of its architecture, its offerings, its clientele, its owners, and a variety of other defining characteristics unique to each.

Returning to Chicago in the autumn of 2024, I found myself missing my visits to Hector's deli. Searching for a quick breakfast spot, particularly in Hyde Park, is surprisingly difficult. When it comes to grocery stores, Hyde Park's options are mostly limited to large chains like Trader Joe's, Whole Foods, and Target. Yet one neighborhood store distinctly sets itself apart: Open Produce. Even smaller than Hector's, Open Produce stays open late into the night, its green and yellow walls lined with rugged, homemade shelves stocked with fresh vegetables and a floor-to-ceiling assortment of specialty foods. While speaking with Steven Lucy, the owner of Open Produce, he cited New York City's bodegas as one of his biggest inspirations in the arrangement of the store. He loved the bodega's efficiency of space—the narrow aisles with food stacked from floor to ceiling allowed these stores to host a variety of offerings despite their small space. Most of all, he loved the extra-local nature of the bodega. Because of their presence all throughout the city, a single bodega only has to cater to the people living a block or two away from the store, sometimes offering items requested by one specific person. Open Produce was made to specifically cater to the community of East Hyde Park, a small niche within Hyde Park composed primarily of high-rise apartment buildings situated

between Lake Michigan and the Metra Electric tracks—an area that, despite its density, had limited access to fresh grocery options until Open Produce opened. Lucy felt Open Produce could be unique by combining the style of two typical American corner stores—as a sort of hybrid between the bodega and another type of corner store popularized in San Francisco that typically offered fresh produce. The combination of a typical bodega format with the added benefit of fresh produce proved practical for East Hyde Park, and now, after 17 years of operation, Open Produce has clearly succeeded in cultivating a crowd of dedicated, loyal customers.

I spoke with Lucy about the challenges of owning and operating a small store and he illustrated how the last 17 years of Open Produce hadn't been entirely without difficulty. For years after its opening, the store wasn't able to turn a profit, and Lucy had to work freelance as a programmer to make ends meet. Hyde Park has a list of peculiarities that make it an especially hard neighborhood to operate within—the transient student population, the preference for corporate grocers, increased legislative sensitivity towards alcohol sale, and limited commercial retail spaces. On top of this, small businesses in Hyde Park and all around Chicago are constantly faced with the city's peculiar commercial policies. There are odd, extraneous fees for features like front awnings; the privatization of commercial garbage collection has created an extractive, corrupt system; and strict zoning codes segregate commercial and residential spaces. These physical, legal, and social features of Chicago have generated a list of constraints that business owners like Steve Lucy need to address in order to create a popular, successful, and profitable operation. The way business owners navigate and design around these constraints defines a city's unique corner store typology—a form that is at once material, geographic, and social, offering a lens through which to examine a place's broader social and economic character, both past and present. The shape, the location, the hours, the size, the

employees, and even just the name of a corner store have the potential to provide insight into a neighborhood's character, and by tracing these characteristics through time, this project seeks to grasp how corner stores can resist and adapt to broader patterns of neighborhood change, specifically in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood.

The first part of this paper will discuss the theoretical framework of this project, explaining how oral history evidence can help develop a typology of Bronzeville's corner stores and how comparing historic typologies to those of the present can enrich our knowledge of the neighborhood's built and social environments and their relationship to urban change. Next, I will discuss theories of neighborhood commerce and spatial citizenship, focusing on how these theories involve corner stores in broader conversations about urban belonging and the politics of everyday space. Then I will discuss some of the ways that corner stores have been written about—in a less theoretical register—in the context of Chicago's history and in existing scholarly conversations to identify how this project both builds upon and strays away from traditional discourse. Next, I'll outline my methods for data collection and analysis, showing how my framework for analyzing primary source material can be used to make broader claims about Bronzeville's social and economic environments. I'll then conclude by addressing the limitations of my methods and framework and suggest avenues for this project to be expanded further.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Defining the Corner Store

For the purposes of this project, I am defining corner stores as small, locally owned commercial spaces, typically open late, offering a wide range of merchandise, following a recognizable typology, and interspersed throughout neighborhoods, collectively forming an adaptable

and resilient social infrastructure. For simplicity's sake, I will also refer to these types of stores consistently as *corner stores*, despite the wide-ranging lexicon of words that have historically been used to describe them, which I will describe in a later section. I argue that corner stores, in the specificities of their geography, design, and ownership structure, serve as informal ways of making space in a neighborhood that can adapt to and resist urban transformation. This project will use the neighborhood of Bronzeville, situated on the South Side of Chicago, as a case study for these stores, analyzing how the neighborhood's corner store typologies have both transformed and persisted in the past half-century. It will also heavily rely on material from oral histories collected by Timuel Black in his two-volume study of Bronzeville *Bridges of Memory* for historical evidence of corner stores and the ways they were used and understood by neighborhood residents. This material from *Bridges of Memory* will be paired with firsthand observations of these corner store spaces in the present neighborhood, allowing for a comparison of both historical and contemporary typologies. Through analyzing this transformation, this project seeks to trace how particular street-level commercial spaces have transformed alongside broader changes to the neighborhood's built environment.

Typological Analysis

This project is intensely focused on the concept of typologies, but it is important to establish what a typological study means in the context of corner stores and what they can provide to a place. A typology, in the context of urban commercial spaces, can correspond to a wide variety of physical, programmatic, geographic, and social characteristics. Physically, a typology can be constituted by the material the building is constructed with, the presence of street-facing windows, the placement of the front door, the arrangement of aisles, shelves, and the point-of-service, or any other material characteristics of the store. The programmatic typology refers to the way that the store is run, for

example, its hours, the number of employees, the availability of freshly made food, and the broader role of employees. Geographically, the typology of a store corresponds to its place within a larger neighborhood: its placement along specific blocks, its location in the building it occupies, and whether it is on the ground floor or elsewhere. The geographic typology is also dependent on the store's location relative to the distribution of population, the placement of public transit, or its vicinity to other important infrastructural landmarks. The social typology of a store corresponds to the people that use the space, including employees and customers, their relationship to the store and each other, their relationship to the neighborhood, their race and socioeconomic class, and the ways that they use the store. It is important to recognize that the typology of a store is not a fixed characteristic nor is it discrete—rather it is an evolving set of characteristics, each of which supplements the other. This project will inevitably generalize certain characteristics of Bronzeville's corner stores; however, by focusing on the most significant and contextually impactful features of each store, it aims to preserve nuance and avoid flattening these spaces into overly simplistic categories—opening space for richer discourse and comparison. This approach offers a more grounded understanding of how urban retail spaces respond to shifting economic pressures, demographic change, and evolving regulatory landscapes—highlighting the everyday adaptability and resilience of neighborhood commercial life.

Studying the Mid-20th Century

This project looks specifically to the mid-20th century as a primary reference point for the birth of the modern corner store—a time when technologies of food storage, distribution, and containment had evolved into forms that closely resemble those used in stores today. The mid-century also represents a crucial moment in the social and economic history of Bronzeville, marked

by rapid demographic shifts and an influx of large-scale urban redevelopment projects.[1] The Great Migration brought a significant influx of Black Southerners to Bronzeville from the American South, transforming the neighborhood into a distinctly Black cultural space.[2] Migrants were cornered into this neighborhood due to racist policies such as redlining and racialized covenants, which prevented them from living in neighborhoods outside of the region that would become known as the "Black Belt," or Bronzeville. During the mid-century, Bronzeville faced systemic disinvestment through practices such as land speculation, predatory lending, and federally funded urban renewal projects that prioritized the destruction of older neighborhoods, and the construction of large-scale developments.[3] These historical events dramatically reshaped Bronzeville's built and social environments during the mid-century and through an analysis of the typologies of mid-century corner stores, this project seeks to effectively trace the impact of the neighborhood-scale changes on the minutiae of neighborhood life. Understanding the past allows us to contextualize contemporary retail structures and assess whether modern corner stores retain elements of their historical counterparts or have lost them through fundamental transformation.

Corner Stores and Space Making

Using the idea that small commercial spaces serve as a means for making space, a typology is a reflection of how spaces are crafted through neighborhood change.[4] Tracing the transformation of corner stores from the mid-century to the present provides tangible evidence for how, alongside massive changes to the built environment during urban renewal, locally specific commercial spaces

[1] St Clair Drake and Horace Roscoe Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, Revised and enlarged ed (Chicago (Ill.): University of Chicago press, 1993). 150.
[2] Drake and Cayton. 559.
[3] Drake and Cayton. 42.
[4] Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, 1. MIT Press paperback ed (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997). 9.

have the capability to persist and adapt.[5] This project compares first-hand accounts of corner stores from the mid-century and observations of their contemporary form to assess the continuities of urban retail formats across a period of immense change. Have contemporary corner stores maintained their role as community anchors, or have they shifted toward more commercialized, efficiency-driven models? Has their format been subsumed by the forces of urban renewal, or has its localized, intimate character endured? How have Bronzeville's corner stores maintained a collective sense of neighborhood identity and culture through periods of immense redevelopment? By answering these questions, we can better grasp the social and economic realities of Bronzeville—both in the past and present—and the ways that neighborhood-level commercial life has evolved in the past half-century.

The typology of a corner store represents more than just retail format—it is the physical embodiment of the infrastructure that defines urban social and economic life.[6] In Chicago and cities across the United States, these small commercial enterprises have historically served as vital spaces for economic and social mobility, as well as spaces entrenched in community identity and collective memory, functioning as far more than simple retail outlets. Throughout the 20th century, Bronzeville's economy was shaped by forces of racial segregation and economic disinvestment that systematically dismantled local, community-owned businesses. The mid-20th century saw significant shifts in the demographics of the city and the built environment, as practices such as redlining, urban renewal projects, and gentrification resulted in an efflux of white residents from the urban core and the displacement of Black and Latino residents. These transformations were deeply spatial,

[5] Hayden. 9.
[6] Hayden. 9.

fundamentally reshaping how urban communities access food, goods, and social interactions. These processes altered neighborhood economic ecosystems, replacing small, locally owned stores with corporate chain retailers that prioritized efficiency and profit over community connection.[7] This study of the physical space of corner stores is at its core a typological study that aims to trace a retail format, but simultaneously, a complex social infrastructure that adapts, resists, and reflects broader urban economic and social dynamics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The corner store has long been a critical yet understudied element of urban infrastructure in Chicago's built environment. Scholarly conversations about these small, locally owned commercial spaces have emerged alongside broader discussions of urban transformation, infrastructural change, and neighborhood dynamics throughout the 20th century. As cities underwent significant demographic, economic, and architectural shifts, corner stores represented more than mere retail spaces—they were vital nodes of community interaction, economic opportunity, and neighborhood identity. Historians, urban planners, and sociologists have increasingly recognized these establishments as microcosms of broader urban transitions, as well as potential spaces for intervention in the built environment. However, comprehensive studies tracing their specific typological characteristics, especially in the context of Chicago, remain limited. While existing scholarship has explored corner stores through various lenses—from economic sustainability to public health—few have systematically examined how their specific physical, programmatic, and

[7] Andrew Deener, *The Problem With Feeding Cities: The Social Transformation of Infrastructure, Abundance, and Inequality in America* (Chicago (Ill.): The University of Chicago Press, 2020). 12.

social characteristics have both persisted and evolved in response to broader changes in urban infrastructures. This thesis seeks to address this gap in academic research, not only recognizing the social functions of a corner store but also recognizing how these places, in the specificities of their format, serve as informal ways of making space in a city that can adapt and resist change. First, this literature review will discuss studies of neighborhood commerce focused on walkability, mixed-use development, and traditional town planning based on the writing of New Urbanists, while the second will orient the study of corner stores based on Lefebvrian theories of socio-spatial citizenship focused on the production of space, everyday life, and the right to the city as it relates to these studies of neighborhood commerce. The third section will examine sociological and historical studies of urban food and commercial infrastructure and their transformations from the mid to late 20th century, and the final section will highlight contemporary literature about the complex role of corner stores in the city today and imaginations of their future.

New Urbanism and the Study of the Neighborhood in the Context of the Modern City:

Scholarly conversations about this topic first gained significant traction during the 1950s. During the post-war period as cities around the nation were being transformed through rapid suburbanization, massive highway and transportation projects, and urban renewal efforts, a group of scholars known contemporarily as the New Urbanists sprung up in opposition to these transformations. Generally, the school was concerned with highlighting the benefits of urban living, many of which had been taken for granted and were at risk of being spoiled by suburbanization and urban decay. As modernist architects, urban planners, and policymakers used increased federal power and funding to streamline processes of urban transformation, the New Urbanists toiled to create

compelling arguments to motivate citizens against these trends. In conveying these arguments, many of these New Urbanists relied on the past as a rich source of evidence, pointing to ways that traditional urban environments were conducive to strong communities, rich cultural environments, and prosperous commerce. The corner store, an emblem of the sorts of neighborhoods New Urbanists hoped to advocate for, appeared in many of these scholars' writings.

Among the most popular of the New Urbanists is Jane Jacobs, a writer, journalist, and activist based in New York City famous for her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. In it, Jacobs provides a variety of anecdotal stories detailing the subtle yet powerful inner workings of her neighborhood—New York's West Village—that make it such a livable place. Among the most memorable of her stories pertains to the delicatessen across the street from her. She tells how her family leaves their keys with the shopkeeper, Joe Cornacchia, who "usually has a dozen or so keys at a time for handing out like this."[8] She notes a certain "trust" that she and many of her neighbors have in Joe, not only for him to be a "responsible custodian," but also for him to "consider it no concern of his whom [she] can choose to permit in [her] place and why."[9] Joe assumes a dual role of a friendly neighbor and simply familiar individual, which Jacobs believes to be the basis of interpersonal relationships among neighbors. Jacobs even alludes to the risk of formalizing these sorts of relationships writing "the all-essential line between public service and privacy would be transgressed by institutionalization."[10] These analyses are grounded in Jacobs' writings on sidewalks and the irreplaceable energy that public life—embedded in spaces like corner stores, delis, groceries, and other forms of everyday commerce—brings to a community.

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[8] Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 60.
[9] Jacobs, 60.
[10] Jacobs, 60.

This idea is further developed in Leon Krier's theories of the concept of a "polycentric city"—one that subverts the typical monocentric city built during the industrial era by promoting the formation of strong neighborhoods.[11] Leon Krier, a New Urbanist of a slightly later generation than Jacobs, advocates for a similar commercial environment of small, locally owned establishments. Described by Krier as "urban quarters," these nuclei of the polycentric city are envisioned as "self-sufficient" from both public and private infrastructure, and as the "built expression of a community of collective and self-interests"—a vision that closely mirrors Jacobs' conception of the neighborhood.[12] Central to this idea is the belief that daily needs should be met within the quarter itself, reinforcing a sense of autonomy and community through local services and resources. Krier advocates specifically for decentralized, local food stores in these idealized polycentric cities, writing, "an urban quarter is autonomous with respect to kindergartens and primary schools, daily grocery shopping and markets."[13] Both Krier and Jacobs propose city planning schemes that stand in contrast to the dominant trends of urban planning and (re)development in the 1950s—models that centralized commerce in select zones, particularly the downtown business district, and pushed for a strict separation between residential and commercial areas, especially in the newly built suburbs far from the urban core.

Lewis Mumford's study *The City in History* further expands these discussions against the corporate commercialization of neighborhoods arguing that they do not only weaken the energy and coherence of public life, but also supports an architectural form that incentivizes abstraction,

[11] Léon Krier, Dhiru A. Thadani, and Peter J. Hetzel, *The Architecture of Community* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2009), 135.
[12] Krier, Thadani, and Hetzel, 135.
[13] Krier, Thadani, and Hetzel, 135.

convertibility, and replicability. The commercial city dictated by abstracted corporate interests is not based around the social interactions Jacobs observes and writes about, nor the autonomous, polycentric ideal that Krier posits, rather "the chief architectural forms produced by the commercial city were based on abstract units of space: the front foot and the cubic foot."[14] Neighborhoods that are dictated by the whims of corporate commercialism—driven by the motivations of profit and speculation—reflect these motivations in their built and social environments.[15] Mumford writes with the same lens about forces beyond just corporate commercialism, speaking to how urban renewal programs during the mid-century formulated by federal administrators, urban experts, and city planners were marketed as methods of improving neighborhoods, but in actuality, were "designed to satisfy the needs of the real estate operator, the building contractor, the municipal administrator, the governmental bureaucracy but without any respect for the traditions, the desires, or the hopes of the displaced slum dwellers."[16] When neighborhood space is dictated by motivations beyond those of its residents, whether that be commercial interests, or even those of the planner, the space becomes abstracted from their lives, filtered through unfamiliar scripts of development and change. These scripts, altruistic or not, impose new relationships between residents and the neighborhood they live in, complicating the way people use and perceive space.

Theories of Socio-spatial Citizenship and the Power of Place

Henri Lefebvre, a French sociologist, philosopher, and urban theorist, offers a crucial framework for understanding the interplay between social life and the production of space. Writing in the 1970s, Lefebvre saw the spread of "urban society" as a force dismantling the traditional spatial

[14] Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961), https://catalog.lib.uchicago.edu/vufind/Record/1511433?sid=73792947. 438.
[15] Mumford. 438.
[16] Lewis Mumford, *The Urban Prospect*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968). 243.

and cultural boundaries of centralized urbanism—the very model of urban space that the New Urbanists were working within. As cities spread themselves across their hinterlands with wide roads, housing developments, and suburban sprawl, the lines between the urban and nonurban were beginning to blur—an "implosion" that Lefebvre saw as part of a continuous process of capitalist urban expansion.[17] With the rapid commodification of land and space, new relationships between socioeconomics, politics, and culture were becoming embedded in the processes of urban development, particularly the urban land market. In Lefebvre's *The Urban Revolution* and *The Production of Space*, he asserts that space is not merely a physical backdrop for human activity, but rather, it is an entity that is socially constructed.[18] Space—much like liberal ideas of citizenship, human rights, and the rule of law—ought to be treated as an important realm of civil society, thus making the right to autonomy over space a new obligation of liberal society.[19] This perspective challenges earlier notions of space as a neutral container of social life; instead, it underscores how the organization of a city both reflects and reinforces broader social structures.[20]

Lefebvre's primary critiques target the dominance of modern capitalism in shaping urban space, estranging spaces from the people that inhabit them. He argues that the seemingly mundane routines of everyday life—the commute to work, the location of grocery stores, the design of public housing—are deeply embedded in capitalist logics of profit-making and control.[21] Through these critiques, Lefebvre introduces a vision of what he calls "the right to the city," whereby residents have more than a merely transactional relationship with their surroundings; instead, the "right to the city"

[17] Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
[18] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2013).
[19] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.
[20] Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*.
[21] Lefebvre.

encourages urban dwellers to fully enjoy city life with all its services and advantages—habitation—as well as take direct part in the management and shaping of these cities—participation.[22] David Harvey expands on this idea in his essay "The Right to the City" speaking to the dispossession of urban spaces into the hands of governments and quasi-government corporate interests in cities across the globe. In this essay, he provides a critique of the neoliberal imaginations of space, including those of the New Urbanists, some of whom I discussed above. He believes that the landscapes of New Urbanism, which "touts the sale of community and boutique lifestyles to fulfill urban dreams" have led to widespread pacification, not only in the formation of space, but more generally as urban citizens.[23] As "shopping malls, multiplexes and box stores" proliferate across space, so too does the "neoliberal ethic of intense possessive individualism," as well as "political withdrawal from collective forms of action."[24] Therefore, the future of cities—and of urban society as a whole—lies in its vernacular spaces, those places that are intimately crafted by the democratic motivations of urban citizens themselves. The everyday, in his view, is both the site where capitalist forces embed themselves most efficiently and the arena where individuals can collectively resist alienation, monotony, and top-down prescriptions of how to live.

Dolores Hayden's work extends and enriches this line of thought by highlighting how architecture and public space—and the specificities of their design and function, no matter how vernacular—can be used to study the social and economic histories of a place and their relationship with change.[25] In *The Power of Place*, Hayden argues that the social histories of marginalized groups

[22] Henri Lefebvre, Eleonore Kofman, and Elizabeth Lebas, *Writings on Cities* (Blackwell Publishing, 1996).
[23] David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review*, no. 53 (October 1, 2008): 23–40.
[24] Harvey.
[25] Hayden, *The Power of Place*. 9.

are too often erased from mainstream narratives about architecture and urban design. Like Lefebvre, she insists on the centrality of everyday life and the agency of ordinary people in shaping space, a crucial element of city making she calls "cultural citizenship."[26] By demonstrating how entire neighborhoods emerge from the cumulative impact of people's lived experiences, Hayden's scholarship underscores that reclaiming the right to the city requires acknowledging, commemorating, and preserving the places in cities that have been systematically undervalued and transformed. She specifically references the brutal effect of urban renewal on collective memory: "decades of 'urban renewal' and 'redevelopment' of a savage kind have taught many communities that when the urban landscape is battered, important collective memories are obliterated. Yet even totally bulldozed places can be marked to restore some shared public meaning, a recognition of the experience of spatial conflict or bitterness, or despair."[27] Through the process of understanding place, we can better understand the history of a space, a field that Hayden feels has been critically understudied: "the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens' public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory—remains untapped for most working people's neighborhoods in most American cities."[28] Her focus on underrepresented histories dovetails with Lefebvre's emphasis on the production of space as an ongoing dialogue between top-down forces and grassroots, community-driven actions.[29]

Viewed through these lenses, corner stores become vivid case studies of socio-spatial citizenship. As modest, community-based enterprises, they exemplify how localized commerce can

[26] Hayden. 8.
[27] Hayden. 9.
[28] Hayden. 9
[29] Hayden. 12.

facilitate forms of engagement that go beyond merely buying and selling goods. Corner stores materialize Lefebvre's lived space—shaped by the everyday, interpersonal relationships of neighbors—while also highlighting Hayden's emphasis on centering the experience of places that have historically been overlooked in dominant urban narratives. Rather than existing as abstract units of exchange driven by corporate logic, these establishments thrive on personal ties and local identity: a trusted neighbor working behind the counter, familial lines of credit extended in times of need, or communal ties that make even a cramped storefront feel like a shared cultural space. The specificities of these spaces' typologies are what have made them crucial cultural spaces.

Each of these authors illuminate why corner stores are such a crucial form of social infrastructure: they represent people's agency to actively shape their environment despite broader forces of urban renewal, gentrification, or neglect. In this sense, corner stores serve as modest but crucial nodes of spatial ownership, where residents negotiate relationships, build collective networks, and assert their right to define and preserve the character of their neighborhood. Their continued presence—whether in a rapidly gentrifying district or in a historically underinvested section of the city—underscores the possibility of sustaining a more resilient urban fabric, one that is co-produced by residents rather than dictated by distant economic or political agendas. The following section of this literature review explores how theories of spatial citizenship have informed infrastructural studies of food and grocery and their impact on neighborhoods, in turn using Bronzeville-specific examples that reveal the intersections of the right to the city with commercial retail space.

The Industrialization, Suburbanization, and Centralization of Food Consumption in the Modern City

Andrew Deener's 2020 book *The Problem with Feeding Cities: The Social Transformation of Infrastructure, Abundance, and Inequality in America* is a groundbreaking study of the transformation of America's urban food infrastructure throughout the 20th century and into our current era. The basis for Deener's book lies in the idea of the food desert, a concept of recent scholarly research concerning the inequalities of urban food systems across urban centers in the United States. His study is particularly interested in how food exists in such abundance in many parts of the nation and within neighborhoods just a few miles away from areas deemed as food deserts.[30] Deener's focus on food deserts sets his study apart from this one; however, his analysis of food infrastructure through the lens of historical transformation offers a useful blueprint for how this project will approach questions of infrastructural and neighborhood change. An earlier study of Deener's based on the same research argues that by understanding the food desert not solely as a product of urban demise, but rather the product of several years of shifting networks of infrastructure we can draw new relations between grocery stores and the built environment.[31] Deener explains how food networks in cities are intimately tied to the social, political, economic, and geographic changes brought to urban societies during the mid-century.[32]

Paul Ellickson's study on the rise of chain stores, from A&P—one of the earliest examples of a chain store—to its contemporary equivalent, Walmart, further interrogates this infrastructural shift, noting the emergence of grocery chains that managed their own logistical networks. Chain

[30] Deener, *The Problem with Feeding Cities*.
[31] Andrew Deener, "The Origins of the Food Desert: Urban Inequality as Infrastructural Exclusion," *Social Forces* 95, no. 3 (March 3, 2017): 1285–1309, https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sox001.
[32] Deener, *The Problem with Feeding Cities*.

stores like A&P, in contrast to their predecessors, practically operated as logistics companies with their own networks of delivery trucks and warehouses. Ellickson tells how these companies went as far as to "conduct careful traffic studies to aid in site selection, studied efficient store design, and constantly streamlined their logistical operations,"[33] demonstrating what Deener explains as a growing separation between food purveyors, their products, and the markets where they are sold. Food, once simply a natural resource innate to human life, became entangled in broader processes of industrial transformation, crystallizing at certain points throughout the century into a system rooted not in the natural world, but in economic value and vital infrastructure.[34] As urban centers expanded throughout the mid-century, Deener builds on the ideas of spatial citizenship discussed above to show how the history of grocery stores reveals a broader process of global urbanization—one in which everything was being absorbed into a transnational infrastructural network, as landscapes became saturated with "abundance and convenience."[35]

Sociologists studying the processes of suburbanization build on these ideas, also providing historical perspectives on the changing role of commerce in the city amidst suburbanization during the mid-century and the effect of the changing networks of food on built environment and the public sphere. Lizabeth Cohen notes how suburbanization challenged spaces of connection in the city, and how landscapes of mass consumption "created a metropolitan society in which people were no longer brought together in central marketplaces and the parks, streets, and public buildings that surrounded them but, rather, were separated by class, gender, and race in differentiated commercial

[33] Paul B. Ellickson, "The Evolution of the Supermarket Industry: From A&P to Wal-Mart" (Rochester, NY, April 1, 2011), https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1814166.
[34] Deener, *The Problem with Feeding Cities*.
[35] Deener.

sub-centers."[36] Richard Longstreth similarly argues that changes in architecture and the formats of retail during the mid-century resulted in the decentralization of the city and the expansion of the suburbs—commercial spaces like industrial-scale, corporate grocery stores were catalysts for suburban sprawl, not merely a product of it.[37]

These studies provide historical analysis that shows how our systems of transporting, selling, buying, and eventually eating food became entrenched in the systems dictated by larger changes to urban infrastructure. With food being a critical element of everyday life in urban spaces, larger scale infrastructural changes show direct effects on the street-level with food and retail culture becoming increasingly institutionalized, which, much like Jacobs worried in her book discussed earlier, threatened the relationship of commerce to the physical space of the city. Before grocery stores as we know them constituted the largest share of our food system, they existed alongside specialized stores: "butchers, delicatessens, variety stores, department stores," and other specialized vendors.[38] Philadelphia, which Deener uses as a case study throughout this book, had 9,500 separate locations where food was sold.[39] Because of their sheer quantity, these stores were an integral part of each neighborhood's environs.[40] Deener shows how the rise of chain grocery stores uprooted this relationship. At the heart of chain grocery stores was the philosophy of consumer convenience and

[36] Lizabeth Cohen, "From Town Center to Shopping Center: The Reconfiguration of Community Marketplaces in Postwar America," *The American Historical Review* 101, no. 4 (October 1996): 1050, https://doi.org/10.2307/2169634. 1079.
[37] Richard W. Longstreth, ed., *City Center to Regional Mall: Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing in Los Angeles, 1920 - 1950* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998).
[38] Deener, *The Problem with Feeding Cities*.
[39] Cohen, "From Town Center to Shopping Center."
[40] Deener, *The Problem with Feeding Cities*.

economic efficiency, values that began to separate food distributors from the neighborhood around them.[41]

The centralization and institutionalization of urban food networks also had important implications for the forces of cultural creation and social reproduction, especially in the context of Chicago. Lizabeth Cohen's book *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* tells how chain stores initially emerged in urban markets in the 1920s in the form of department stores such as Goldblatt's and Marshall Fields, but that food retailers largely remained locally owned.[42] In the 1920s, food retailers served as an avenue for newly arrived immigrants to involve themselves in a neighborhood's economy and for that reason, Chicago's working-class communities would "buy their food from independent merchants in the neighborhood and shop as they wished elsewhere…mass consumption did not challenge ethnic or working-class identity."[43] However, due to the centralization of food infrastructure during this period of suburbanization, these food retailers became economically unsound business models, especially given harsh competition from chain retailers. Cohen quotes a member of the American Federation of Labor saying "There is a Fruit store (independently owned) in our block of stores which must go broke at any cost.... The Great A&P will last longer than those people."[44] The centralization of food retail into chain stores centralized power—simultaneously on the level of the city and the level of the neighborhood—into the owners of these chain stores. By the 1970s, the majority of the South Side's population was Black, yet the chain stores that operated in the neighborhood—owned primarily by white CEOs—hired a

[41] Deener.
[42] Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*(Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
[43] Cohen.
[44] Cohen.

disproportionate amount of Black people, which was the impetus for Operation Breadbasket, an operation led by Martin Luther King Jr. and Jesse Jackson to ensure a workforce that reflected the racial composition of the neighborhood where it operated.[45] The loss of locally based and locally owned commerce was one of the many factors that contributed to the inequalities that plagued Chicago, specifically on the South Side, and that stressed race relations during the 1970s.

This tension of racial relations following the Great Migration and the ways it manifested in the economic environment of a neighborhood is examined firsthand in St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton's study of Bronzeville *Black Metropolis: A Study of Life in a Northern City.* Cayton and Drakes study, whose research largely took place starting in 1938 up until the first edition was published in 1945, contains invaluable data collected from the field that details the nature of economic activity on the South Side of Chicago. This data is especially illustrative of the ways that Black-owned businesses needed to compete for space within the boundaries of Bronzeville, especially during the mid-century when the rise of chain businesses overwhelmed the neighborhood's commercial environment. As white-owned chain grocery and retail stores began occupying the central thoroughfares of the neighborhood, Black businesses were pushed to its peripheries, on the neighborhood's "side streets" and "less desirable communities."[46] Drake and Cayton's study provides empirical data for this distribution, citing that "fewer than half the Negro businesses were in the main shopping district, while over three-fourths of the white businesses were on the chief thoroughfare. Of all the Negro businesses on the main thoroughfare, half were second-floor

[45] Martin L. Deppe, *Operation Breadbasket: An Untold Story of Civil Rights in Chicago, 1966-1971* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2017).
[46] Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*. 438.

locations."[47] It is also shown how important these businesses were Black migrants living in Bronzeville, however small and peripheral they were: "Many migrants who had been shopkeepers in the South, or who brought ambition or savings with them, opened small retail enterprises."[48] Especially during the time of the Great Depression, opening a small grocery store or a delicatessen was a typical method to ensure a steady income. On top of this, local shopkeepers often motivated neighborhood residents to shop at their stores as a form of racial pride, and as a way of investing their money in the neighborhood, rather than the white-owned chain retailers that were disconnected from the space of Bronzeville.[49] Drake and Cayton argue that shopping at local stores was a way of investing in the community and supporting other Black residents living in Chicago: "to the Negro community, a business is more than a mere enterprise to make profit for the owner. From the standpoints of both the customer and the owner it becomes a symbol of racial progress."[50] The industrialization and commercialization of neighborhood retail in Bronzeville during the mid-century had both a spatial and racial dimension, marginalizing Black-owned businesses to the periphery of the neighborhood and into small, informal spaces. This retail format—small, locally owned stores—became increasingly popular in Bronzeville, especially as the neighborhood's racial dynamics shifted. In contrast to the overwhelmingly white-owned chain stores, these businesses developed into a distinct typology among locally owned establishments in Bronzeville. The large-scale transformation of the neighborhood's food and commerce networks had large implications for the neighborhood's retail formats, as well as the racial composition of store owners.

[47] Drake and Cayton. 449.
[48] Drake and Cayton. 437.
[49] Drake and Cayton. 431.
[50] Drake and Cayton. 432.

Contemporary Theories of Corner Stores and their Role in Underinvested Neighborhoods

In more contemporary scholarship, advocacy for imbuing neighborhoods with small, vibrant establishments remains pertinent, with scholars from the fields of economics, anthropology, architectural studies, and public health conducting studies adopting new methods for understanding corner stores and their role in a community. Vikas Mehta's behavioral study of a commercial street in Boston showed the tendency of pedestrians to enjoy spending time around small businesses. These sorts of establishments were preferred "not only for the quality and variety of goods and services and the presence of friendly staff but also for their uniqueness, overall appearance, ambiance, and function as a community place."[51] Furthermore, Mehta noticed that these pedestrians tended to congregate and interact around areas "associated with eating and/or drinking," the category of social activities that comprise 40 percent of Mehta's observations.[52] However, due to its methods, Mehta's analysis strays away from a certain level of intricate social analysis and is far more focused on abstract social organizations, important methods that this study is hoping to build upon.

The dimensions of these specific social relationships are analyzed in Alan Puchalski's study of credit at Detroit corner stores—colloquially deemed party stores. The basis of his information comes from interviews with consumers and store owners along 8 Mile Road, a thoroughfare based in a low-income white neighborhood in the north of Detroit. Those interviewed by Puchalski tended to report troubles with typical means for attaining credit, but admitted to accepting credit informally

[51] Vikas Mehta, "Small Businesses and the Vitality of Main Street," *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 28, no. 4 (2011): 271–91, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43030948, 283.
[52] Mehta, 279.

from Party Store owners.[53] Puchalski explains how "party store owners/employees offered two types of short-term, interest-free informal credit to customers" who went on to "use these forms of credit to procure goods from stores and obtain cash advances, which helped them respond to economic shocks, combat food insufficiency, and survive economic destitution."[54] This study further examined the correlative strength of "building trust" through "personalized interactions," particularly in low-income and vulnerable areas.[55] It begins by telling why this area's residents were so prone to informal credit, and how this line of income became crucially important for the survival of the community. It then uses interviews to develop how these risky enterprises were able to develop, tracing themes of trust and kinship that arise out of these stores. It concludes by using this study as a model for understanding corner stores and their capabilities for community solidarity. It also warns about the threats of "bureaucratic integration" on relationships like these, much like Jacobs did in her study of New York City half of a century earlier.[56] While this analysis contains themes that are applicable across different urban environments, it still relies heavily on the specific social context of the north of Detroit to reach its conclusions. The dimensions of social relations in spaces akin to party stores in Chicago have yet to be studied in depth, and though this paper will engage less with the specific social interactions occurring in these stores, it hopes to engage with similar frameworks and analyses by identifying more thematic social uses of spaces, both in the contemporary context, and historically.

[53] Vance Alan Puchalski, "Credit at the Corner Store: An Analysis of Resource Exchange among Detroit-Area Urban Poor," *Sociological Forum* 31, no. 4 (2016): 1040–62, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24878806, 1048.
[54] Puchalski, 1049.
[55] Puchalski, 1060.
[56] Puchalski, 1060.

Corner stores, while small and unassuming, have a strong potential for connecting communities, providing food, and enlivening neighborhoods. These possibilities have been well studied in current scholarship; however, this study seeks to add onto existing scholarship by investigating the features of these stores—materially, geographically, programmatically, and socially—to show how their current format can be constructive on the scale of a neighborhood. Rachael Dombrowski and her colleagues studied the social potential of corner stores using a different metric than Puchalski: public health and food access. Dombrowski et al. conducted a study through the Cook County Department of Health and the Health Institute of Metropolitan Chicago to pair with corner store owners in several South Chicago suburbs to observe how adding healthy food options to corner store's offerings can improve a neighborhood's general health.[57] The study took interviews from store owners, consumers, and community-based organizations to build a theory of what makes a corner store successful in the promotion of health activities. The results showed that much of the success of these stores depended on shared racial or ethnic ties with the store owner, "trustworthy relationships" with consumers, the "prioritization of health over profit," the collaboration with county-funded projects.[58] Like many of the studies discussed before, "trust" and personal connection were crucial components for these store's success. Given these factors, the authors concluded that corner stores, and small businesses in general, were an "essential, yet underappreciated, component of community-based public health."[59]

[57] Rachael D. Dombrowski and Michele A. Kelley, "Corner Store Owners as Health Promotion Agents in Low-Income Communities," *Health Education & Behavior* 46, no. 6 (2019): 905–15, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48625382, 906.
[58] Dombrowski and Kelley, 911.
[59] Dombrowski and Kelley, 913.

With research based in East Los Angeles, Mienah Sharif and her colleagues studied corner stores in a similar vein, this time focusing more attention on the steps for community engagement that follow what Dombrowski et al studied. More than just studying the potential for corner stores to act as vehicles for community health, Sharif et al. studied how the design of these stores could incentivize their use and the promotion of healthy foods. The study surveyed youth in low-income Latino neighborhoods to gauge their perceptions of the area's food environment.[60] Several interviewees pointed out how socioeconomic conditions in a neighborhood greatly influenced its food options: access to fast food and alcohol was easy in less affluent neighborhoods, whereas other, more affluent neighborhoods had more "health-promoting" commercial environments with "high-quality, affordable produce" more readily available.[61] The interviewees also recognized how the lack of good marketing and design limited the amount of traffic that patronized corner stores that did sell healthy, high-quality produce.[62] At the end of the study, the authors had interviewees embark on a process to intervene in the design of old corner stores and convert them into new spaces.[63] The material offerings alongside the physical design of a corner store results in a certain social organization that can be considered part of the store's typology. Sharif's study recognizes a specific method for changing a neighborhood's relationship with health and high-quality produce through an intervention into other elements of a store's typology. By improving the design of these stores and centering their marketing language around improving access to healthy foods, these converted stores were able to generate a new culture of awareness about the scarcity of healthy foods within their

[60] Mienah Z. Sharif et al., "Mobilizing Young People in Community Efforts to Improve the Food Environment: Corner Store Conversions in East Los Angeles," *Public Health Reports (1974-)* 130, no. 4 (2015): 406–15, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43775514.
[61] Sharif et al, 408.
[62] Sharif et al, 411.
[63] Sharif et al, 407.

given community.[64] Each of these studies address the ways that corner stores—in the peculiarities of their format and design—can be catalysts for improving a neighborhood's vivacity, health, political awareness, and social tenacity.

Existing scholarship on corner stores reveals a complex narrative of urban transformation, infrastructure, and community dynamics. From Jane Jacobs' work on neighborhood vitality to contemporary studies examining food access and community health, researchers have consistently identified these small commercial spaces as critical sites of social, economic, and cultural strength. The literature demonstrates how corner stores are not merely passive commercial entities but active participants in neighborhood ecosystems, reflecting, and occasionally resisting broader urban infrastructural shifts on a citywide scale. By tracing the typological characteristics of Bronzeville's corner stores through archival and ethnographic evidence, this study builds upon these scholarly conversations while introducing a nuanced framework for understanding how urban commercial spaces both shape and are shaped by their local contexts. The methodological approach—combining historical documentation, spatial analysis, and attention to infrastructural networks—is an examination of how corner stores have historically functioned as critical nodes of community interaction, economic opportunity, and neighborhood identity throughout the 20th century, and analyzes how they stand in the present.

[64] Sharif et al.

METHODS

Introduction

This project uses evidence from oral histories to construct a framework for understanding the mid-century typologies of Bronzeville's corner stores and questions how their form—materially, geographically, programmatically, and socially—has evolved into its contemporary iteration. Comparing typologies of the past to first-hand observations of these stores in the present provides us with a means for understanding how corner stores— small, locally owned commercial spaces, typically open late, offering a wide range of merchandise, following a recognizable typology, and interspersed throughout neighborhoods—both resist and adapt to neighborhood-level change. This research advocates for corner stores as a crucial social infrastructure for protecting the identity of a place amidst inevitable urban change, both physical and social.

My research uses the neighborhood of Bronzeville as a case study, to focus my data collection and analyses, given that a holistic study of Chicago's corner stores would be out of the scope of this project. For the purposes of this project, the boundaries of Bronzeville will be defined, roughly, as the area East of South State Street, West of South Drexel Boulevard, South of East 31st Street, and North of East 51st Street. These dimensions are accepted boundaries of the neighborhood by several government agencies, historians, sociologists, and members of the general public.[65] This choice is motivated by a variety of factors, first, because of the amount, and superior quality, of oral history

[65] There is some minor controversy about the actual boundaries of Bronzeville. The designated Bronzeville area described in this study consists of what are considered the Douglas and Grand Boulevard districts, which is a smaller area than what was proposed in Drake and Cayton's *Black Metropolis*. Most contemporary scholarship about Bronzeville refers to these boundaries, as well as markers on the street such as banners and street-signs. While I am using this smaller area for my study of Bronzeville, some consider sections of Washington Park, Kenwood, Oakland, and Hyde Park as part of a broader Bronzeville community.

data available for this section of the city, especially those found in Timuel Black's anthologies. The first volume of Timuel Black's study concerns the first wave of Black migration to Chicago, the migrants from which largely settled in the above boundaries.

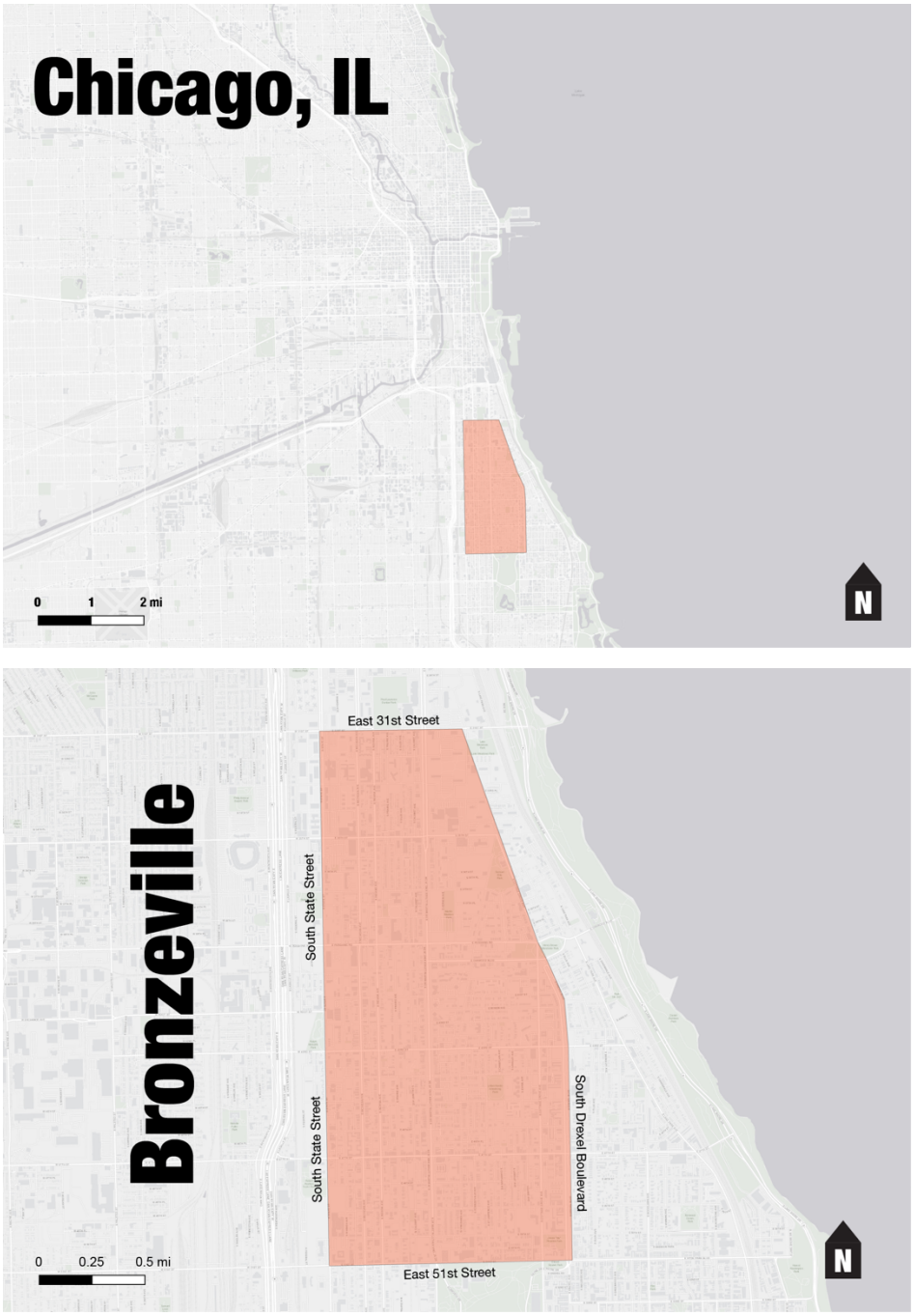

Figure 1: This Study's Chosen Dimensions of Bronzeville's Theoretical Neighborhood Boundaries

Second, in the early to mid-20th century, this area of Chicago was home to an exceptionally vibrant commercial environment—though one that was housed in some of the city's most deteriorated and dispossessed housing stock—and was subsequently the focus of numerous city-led and federally-funded urban renewal projects.[66] This former glory, demise, and eventual transformation makes the study of neighborhood change especially rich and pertinent in the context of Bronzeville. Third, Bronzeville is a neighborhood that—relative to other areas of the city with a similar residental density—lacks the same sort of density and extent in its commercial environment. The neighborhood is far from devoid of commercial activity, rather the commercial spaces in the neighborhood are situated in highly isolated locations within the neighborhood's boundaries and in small numbers. Each of these characteristics make Bronzeville an important case study for this project, and one that can effectively trace the ways in which corner stores have reacted to urban change.

Oral Histories from *Bridges of Memory*

This study will utilize a variety of methods to approach these questions, both historical and observational. With regard to historical research, the methods of investigation will concern several categories of primary sources, though this project will point the most amount of its attention towards oral histories collected by Timuel Black in his two volume study *Bridges of Memory*. These oral histories provide the most vivid picture of local neighborhood retail and are concerned almost exclusively with memories from the city during the mid-century. The sort of detail provided about vernacular spaces are scarcely found elsewhere, especially outside of available primary source material.

[66] Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*; Robert J. Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect*, Paperback edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

This work serves as a vast collection of personal anecdotes about daily life on the South Side of Chicago, specifically in and around Bronzeville. Timuel Black was a resident and active participant in the life of Bronzeville, as well as an avid historian of the neighborhood, an expertise that led him to author *Bridges of Memory.* In the introduction to the first volume of *Bridges of Memory*, Black describes the book as "not really about the economic, social, or cultural history of Black Chicago" but as a "collection of the oral memories of some of the people who participated in helping to make and shape those institutions as the result of their opportunities or lack thereof."[67] Black was motivated to collect these memories in response to a general lack of cultural knowledge passed down to younger generations, especially cultural knowledge regarding the first and second generations of Black Chicagoans who migrated during the Great Migration—those of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s—and the cultural institutions they built in Bronzeville. With much of the built environment in Bronzeville having been destroyed during urban renewal projects in the 1950s, much of the neighborhood's history was limited to the personal memories of its inhabitants, many of which were reaching the ends of their lives when Black published this book. Black's framework for curating both volumes of *Bridges of Memory* makes them an excellent resource for understanding the nuances of social life in Bronzeville during the mid-century and an irreplaceable source for understanding the vernacular spaces found around the neighborhood.

Oral histories are a crucially important form of evidence for this project given the informal and colloquial nature of commerce at corner stores. Black wrote that his intentions for this study was to "create a full and representative range of subjective information that all of us can review, examine,

[67] Timuel D. Black, *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's First Wave of Black Migration*, vol. 1st pbk. print (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2003). xiii.

criticize, modify, or even reject. This process of personal evaluation may serve to help the present and future generations to understand the distinctive qualities of the individual lives as well as the collective life of black folk in Chicago, whether it be organized, unorganized, or even disorganized."[68] Corner stores are an element of this "subjective life" of a neighborhood, prominent spaces within the built environment—for commerce, connection, and cultural life—yet simultaneously momentary and fleeting—spaces that are constantly in the midst of being closed, moved, reopened, and transformed. This makes Timuel Black's study of cultural memory an important piece of evidence to "review, examine, criticize" and "modify," as the memory of corner stores is often too transitory to find a place in canonical history, remaining solely within the memory of their users.

Timuel Black's interviews are not focused specifically on corner stores, however while speaking with interviewees about their experience living in the city and their favorite places around Chicago during their upbringings, interviewees often discuss corner stores and similar commercial enterprises. Most of the time, these are small anecdotes, just a few remarks in the midst of a larger story, but the ways that these interviewees reference these places is an important piece of analysis. This reflects the role that corner stores played in Bronzeville—their ubiquity made them landmarks for describing buildings and neighborhood space or references when remembering the life of a specific person or family. These stores were not merely destinations, but markers embedded in the social life of Bronzeville. Black's *Bridges of Memory* also includes interviews from a diverse range of Chicagoans, from famous musicians, religious leaders, and notable community organizers to Black's childhood friends, classmates, and former colleagues. The first volume of *Bridges of Memory* focuses on the first wave of the Great Migration—those who migrated from the American South during the

[68] Black. xiii.

late 1920s and 1930s—and the second volume focuses on subsequent generations of migration, including those who migrated between the 1940s and 1970s.

Site Visits

This project also involves site visits to corner stores currently operating in Bronzeville, to understand how they are situated in the neighborhood, the spaces they are inhabiting, and the spaces they are creating, both social and material. The site visits build on the use of first-hand observational evidence from *Bridges of Memory* that is used to understand the historic typologies of corner store. These site visits engage in the same sort of passive observational data collection, used to analyze the form of corner stores using a humanistic approach—one embedded in the embodied experience of the space—reflecting the observational data available in oral histories. Striving to understand corner stores less through observational analysis and more oriented towards interpreting how they are experienced by those who use them, this project emphasizes the affective, spatial, and relational dimensions of these commercial spaces. In doing so, it seeks to trace how contemporary corner stores continue, diverge from, or reimagine the social functions that these stores historically performed—particularly as informal gathering places, sites of informal economic exchange, and nodes of community identity.

To locate corner stores in Bronzeville, I first used the internet to see what places have been documented on Google Maps under keywords like *convenience, corner store, candy store, and grocery*. Next, I conducted several visits to the neighborhood, and during my visits, I was able to locate several stores that did not originally appear on my internet searches, largely because they fit a different criteria than what I had searched, despite constituting what this study considers to be a corner store. This was primarily stores listed online as liquor stores (for example, 200 Cut Rate

Liquors on East 47th Street and South Indiana Avenue) despite offering extensive grocery lines and merchandise comparable to other stores in the neighborhood marketed as grocery or convenience stores. Instead of using identifiable markers of corner stores in their name, some businesses were marketed as ethnic markets (For example, Adom African Market on East 47th Street between South Michigan Avenue and South Indiana Avenue), but in reality, had the same offerings as a typical corner store with select specialty items and produce.

Figure 2: 200 Cut Rate Liquors (East 47th Street and South Indiana Avenue)

The observations I recorded at these stores were not conducted according to any systematic methodology but rather took the form of a free-flowing interaction with the space. The intention of this form of observation was decided upon to simulate the lived experience of the corner store—one that is unpredictable, unsystematic, and spontaneous—rather than adopting a strict method that abstracts and convolutes the experience of the space. These observations include reviews of the store's interior, its popularity, its offerings, its opening and closing hours, and the relationship of the store with the streets it faces, among other things. Together, these site visits have helped me bridge the wealth of historical information about the commercial character of Bronzeville's stores throughout the last century with the realities of these stores in the present.

Referencing/Naming the Corner Store

This study uses the term corner store to reference a wide variety concepts that all fit under a general definition. For the purposes of this research, I am defining corner stores as small, locally owned commercial spaces, typically open late, offering a wide range of merchandise, following a recognizable typology, and interspersed throughout neighborhoods, collectively forming an adaptable and resilient social infrastructure. However, to begin the analysis of anecdotes published in *Bridges of Memory*, it is important to understand the many names that were used to describe corner stores throughout the study. The term corner store does not appear often in the lexicon of interviewees, despite its popularity in both the vernacular and academic vocabularies of the present. Throughout the majority of the interviews, the term grocery or grocery store was used to distinctly describe small corner stores in the neighborhood, oftentimes in comparison to the larger stores which interviewees would call grocery chains or chains. This distinction is clear in Black's conversation with Al Boutte, a

local store owner and prominent businessman in Bronzeville in the midst of a conversation about the loss of local retail in Bronzeville.

> ***Al Boutte:*** *There are still opportunities. Let's take grocery stores. Thirty years ago, do you know the largest grocery store chain in Chicago was A&P? A&P was the first large discount grocery chain, but, even so, you still had an enormous number of small groceries. Every community had at least five or ten grocery stores.*
> ***Timuel Black:*** *"Ma and pa" groceries.*
> ***AB:*** *But now you have five major chains, and the need for a "ma and pa" grocery store no longer exists in today's market.*[69]

Similar to several interviewees throughout Black's study, Al makes a clear distinction between places like A&P, which was a national chain, and what he and Black refer to as "ma and pa" style stores. This semantic typology is also reflected in Deener's study of urban food markets through history, noting the dual existence of "the corner grocery store," a store format developed in the early 20th century, and "chain grocery store," which proliferated in American cities the 1930s.[70] For this reason, when encountering anecdotes about grocery stores in Black's oral histories, I understand them as part of my definition of corner stores.

Other typical store names are the "Mom-and-Pop" store, referenced in the above quote and across oral histories, that refers to a variety of store types, but importantly referencing the local ownership of these stores. There are also several references to delicatessens, stores that are considered in the same regard as corner grocery stores and often used interchangeably. Andrew Deener, in his history study of urban food networks, describes that they were considered as the same enterprise as

[69] Black. 276.
[70] Deener, *The Problem with Feeding Cities*. 77.

local grocery stores, which is similarly reflected in *Black Metropolis*, which groups groceries and delicatessens into the same category while indexing commercial establishments.[71]

Drugstores, another term used throughout Black's oral histories, is also a ubiquitous term used to describe a variety of different establishments, though the distinctions between the drugstore as a place to buy prescription drugs and the drugstores as places with a business model more akin to the corner store, are harder to draw. Due to the limited scholarship on this discrepancy, determining whether the use of the term "drugstore" refers to a store fitting this study's definition of a corner store ultimately hinges on the context of the conversation. For example, in another conversation with Al Boutte, he mentions "the first line of credit I ever got to sell liquor in some of my drugstores," likely referring to a store similar to the corner stores this study concerns, especially because of the sale of liquor. [72] On the contrary, in a conversation with John Levy, the jazz musician says: "I worked, you know, in the drugstore-Sissie's Drugstore—on Fiftieth Place and Cottage Grove, and I delivered prescriptions," with the reference to prescriptions pointing towards this drugstore as something more closely related to a pharmacy.[73] Drugstores were sometimes referred to as distinctly separate entities from grocery stores, for example in this conversation with Juanita Tucker: "There were all kinds of businesses: jewelry stores, grocery stores, drugstores, shoe stores," but they were almost always referred to as locally owned entities, operated by specific people who lived in the neighborhood.[74] The one exception to this is when one interviewee mentions Walgreens, which was, and still is, a nationally owned chain drugstore.

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[71] Black, *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's First Wave of Black Migration.* 435; Deener, *The Problem with Feeding Cities*. 80.
[72] Black, *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's First Wave of Black Migration*. 272.
[73] Black. 196.
[74] Black. 226.

One of the most consistent naming conventions for corner stores is the use of the owner's (or owners') name to reference the store. This naming convention requires further context clues to decipher what sort of items the store is selling and what sort of role it plays in the neighborhood—which is often available—but the use of specific names shows a level of familiarity with the owner of the stores and subsequently reveals its local character.

DATA & RESULTS

Introduction

Corner stores serve as an informal way of making spaces that can persist and adapt amidst larger forces of urban change, maintaining the strong, local character of neighborhoods like Bronzeville amidst decades of immense physical and social transformation. Oral histories from Timuel Black's studies show how these stores were created through a variety of different means and motivations, each of which supported and guided, in some way or another, the typology of the store. These stores, due to the simplicity of their business model and their ubiquity across diverse spaces, were built with simple intentions to serve their community. It was through this simplicity that the spaces of these stores were crafted both alongside—and as a product of—the changes being undertaken in the built and social environments. Their typologies reflect not only the communal spirit that spurred their creation but also the adaptive nature of small-scale enterprises in rapidly changing urban landscapes. The persistence of these typologies shows the adaptive nature of small-scale enterprises despite decades of transforming urban landscapes. By examining these everyday spaces, we see how local commerce anchors a neighborhood's identity, even as larger economic and social forces continue to transform the city. My research identifies three specific means and motivations behind the creation of corner stores—social mobility, race, and neighborhood intimacy

and informality. These forces are reflected in corner store typologies, each shaping the physical, programmatic, geographic, and social forms that define small business spaces. The following section will detail each of these categories, using specific moments in the text that illustrate how these factors shaped the development and persistence of corner stores in Bronzeville.

Social Mobility in the Corner Store

As migrants arrived in Chicago from the American South, many found work in the city's growing industrial sector—but those shut out of jobs in the steel mills or stockyards had to seek out other ways to make a living.[75] Interviews from *Bridges of Memory* reveal how many of these migrants turned to commerce and small business, a common path to social mobility within Chicago's economic landscape. An interview conducted by Timuel Black illustrates how small convenience stores were often a low-stakes and flexible way for residents of Bronzeville to enter the city's commercial environment. In this interview, Black is speaking with Wayman Hancock, the father of legendary musician Herbie Hancock. While working as a marine at the O'Hare Field, now O'Hare International Airport, Wayman simultaneously ran a grocery store at East 45th Street and South Parkway (now Martin Luther King Jr. Drive) with his wife.

> ***Wayman Hancock:*** *See, I also had a grocery store at the time*
> ***Timuel Black:*** *You had a grocery store at the same time you were working in defense?*
> ***WH:*** *I was working there at night.*
> ***TB:*** *And running the grocery store in the daytime?*
> ***WH:*** *Yeah, my wife was actually running the grocery store.*
> ***TB:*** *Where was the grocery store?*
> ***WH:*** *At Forty-fifth and South Park on the west side of the street.*
> ***TB:*** *So, when you were drafted, you just closed the store?*
> ***WH:*** *Yes, and I sold my refrigerator cases to one of the Jones brothers.*[76]

[75] Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*.
[76] Black, *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's First Wave of Black Migration*.152.

The store on East 45th Street and South Parkway was a way for Hancock and his family to increase their income throughout the day, an income which, as Wayman shares later in his conversation Black, was used largely for his children's education. The store was a family enterprise, run by Wayman and his wife at different times throughout the day, and even at the event of the store's closing, some of the major assets of the space—the refrigerators—were kept within the neighborhood, just passed down to another family. Both the nature of the family-run business and the use—and reuse—of certain appliances necessary to run the store, shows the intimate, personal nature of running a corner store. A quick examination of the 1926 and 1950 Sanborn Maps show that the West side of East 45th Street and South Parkway, in both years, was a residential block, meaning that the grocery store was likely squeezed into one of these apartment buildings on the ground floor.[77] Being a small space, and one that is located in the heart of a residential block, this grocery store was a relatively simple means for Wayman Hancock to increase his family's wealth and invest in the neighborhoods commercial environment. And by passing down appliances upon the store's closing, Wayman and his family allowed for other families to engage in the neighborhood's economy with relatively low investment.

In a conversation Black conducted with a local business owner, Al Boutte, this idea is explored further, but this time focusing on how the deterioration of locally owned businesses in the later part of the 20th century affected employment on the South Side. Boutte, whose own story is far too vast to portray wholistically in this study, played an incredibly influential role in supporting Black-owned business ventures based out of Chicago, helping to finance drugstores, restaurants,

[77] Sanborn Map Company, *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Chicago*, 1920, Volume 13, 1920, https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn01790_013/; Sanborn Map Company, *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Chicago*, 1950, Volume 13, 1950, https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn01790_013/.

groceries, magazines, and even hair products, among other things, through Independence Bank.[78] In their conversation, Boutte and Black talk about the state of the built environment along Grand Boulevard (today's Martin Luther King Jr. Drive) and the transformation from its former grandeur as one of the South Side's most prominent commercial thoroughfares, into something more sparse, disparate, and empty, due in part to the relocation of buildings farther south into the Woodlawn and South Shore neighborhoods.[79] Boutte sees this landscape as a product of losing small businesses in the community, which not only injected a life into the space, but also served to employ the neighborhood's youth. He elaborates on the importance of small business in this portion of the interview:

> ***Timuel Black:*** *Al, you were discussing the fact that lots of young black people and some older ones as well now do business from downtown, but we still have small businesses in places like Eighty-seventh Street, Seventy-ninth Street, even Seventy-fifth Street, although Seventy-fifth Street is in deterioration to some extent, and those small businesses are the greatest employer of people.*
> ***Al Boutte:*** *Yes, by far!*
> *. . .*
> *Times have changed and so, therefore, business has also changed. One of our biggest problems is that we are very reluctant to change as a people and to recognize the need for that change. That's why the entry into Woodlawn of Cole Taylor and First National would not bother me. Business is still there. There are still opportunities. Let's take grocery stores. Thirty years ago, do you know the largest grocery store chain in Chicago was A&P? A&P was the first large discount grocery chain, but, even so, you still had an enormous number of small groceries. Every community had at least five or ten grocery stores.*
> ***TB:*** *"Ma and pa" groceries.*
> ***AB:*** *But now you have five major chains, and the need for a "ma and pa" grocery store no longer exists in today's market. Same thing happened in the business that I was in, and that is why I got out of it. At one time in the city of Chicago, we had seventy-eight black-owned drugstores. Now you have only about fifteen or so.*
> ***TB:*** *I don't even know where they are! But I know where yours were, and I still remember where Doxie's were![80]*

[78] Deppe, *Operation Breadbasket*. 116.
[79] Black, *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's First Wave of Black Migration*. 276.
[80] Black. 276–277.

This conversation suggests how the local, decentralized character of corner stores, referred to in this conversation as "small groceries," "ma and pa groceries," and "drugstores" allowed for residents of the neighborhood to easily integrate themselves into its commercial landscape. Instead of having to find a job at one of the businesses downtown—employment that would require a significant commute out of the neighborhood, and one that would dislocate residents from their home community—the store's programmatic typology made finding employment a more manageable endeavor. Not only were these stores located in the places where people lived, but as Boutte notes, these stores were numerous, with at least "five or ten grocery stores" in each community compared to the "five major chains" available to find employment in the retail landscape Boutte is speaking from. Furthermore, the corner stores were owned and operated by people like Boutte, a familiar neighbor who owned eight drugstores across Bronzeville, and not to mention an outspoken advocate for Black-owned small businesses during Operation Breadbasket and the larger Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.[81] This ownership structure facilitates employment among a community and boosts levels of social mobility, to support a healthy, vibrant neighborhood. Elements of these stores' typologies, from the programmatic structure to the social organization, made these businesses spaces for social mobility.

Social mobility is one specific motivation that helped craft the typology of corner stores in Bronzeville, however, social mobility was an aspiration that was intimately tied to race during the mid-century, a time period of especially tense race relations across Chicago. Centered in on the South Side and in Bronzeville, movements like Operation Breadbasket arose as a means of organizing Black entrepreneurs and consumers around the consolidation of wealth within the Black community.

[81] Deppe, *Operation Breadbasket*. 16.

With this in mind, I will now move on to discuss the role of race in crafting the typology of corner stores.

Race and the Corner Store:

The "Doctrine of the Double-Duty Dollar," as Drake and Cayton describe in *Black Metropolis*, is the idea that for residents of Bronzeville to spend money in local, Black-owned businesses is not only to purchase a commodity, but to invest in the advancement of the Black race.[82] The doctrine became popular during the mid-century and urged for a divestment from the many white-owned stores spread across Bronzeville and the rest of Black Chicago, many of which were chains. Drake and Cayton quoted the minister Dr. Gordon B. Hancock saying: "Tomorrow I want all of you people to go to these stores. Have your shoes repaired at a Negro shop, buy your groceries from a Negro grocer. . . and for God's sake, buy your meats, pork chops, and yes, even your chitterlings, from a Negro butcher." Hancock's motivation was to prompt residents of Black neighborhoods like Bronzeville "to patronize [their] own, for that is the only way [they] as a race will ever get anywhere."[83]

In their data collection conducted in 1938, Drake and Cayton found that there were 2,600 Black-owned and operated businesses in Bronzeville; and while there were 2,800 white-owned businesses, the Black-owned businesses "received less than a tenth of all the money spent by Negroes within these areas."[84] In this same study, it was also found that the second most common Black-owned business in Bronzeville (behind the barber shop) was the grocery.[85] Businessmen, advocacy

[82] Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*. 431.
[83] Drake and Cayton. 431.
[84] Drake and Cayton. 438
[85] Drake and Cayton. 438.

groups, religious leaders, and residents of the neighborhood saw the increased support of Black businesses as their way of making space in the neighborhood that distinctly reflected its people—particularly in their race. To have ownership over the neighborhood was to engage with and have ownership over its stores, which at the time were primarily barbershops, groceries, and drugstores. Even as white-owned businesses took up the best locations in the neighborhood, Black-owned businesses assumed a typology that conformed to the spaces open on side streets and on the second floors, creating a distinct style of store that supported the making of Black spaces in Bronzeville. As a store owner is quoted in *Black Metropolis*: "if we could get better locations our businesses would be better. The location I have is only fair—it is too far from the corner; but two white merchants keep the best places leased in order to prevent any Negro business from getting them."[86]

This dynamic comes to life in Timuel Black's oral histories, where people recount how the Black community was forced to adapt their retail practices around the white-owned businesses that shaped the neighborhood's commercial landscape. Bob Colin, who was born in 1904 and spent most of his youth in Bronzeville recalls:

> *"Back then, most of the businesses were either barbershops or beauty parlors, you know? In the twenties, there was one black who had three drugstores in the black community. He had out on Forty-fifth and State, and another one down at Thirty-fifth Street, but I think he had three. This was in the twenties, and the problem that blacks had was that whites owned all the business property, and a lot of times they wouldn't rent to blacks. I mean, we also had a few grocery stores or delicatessens, but at that time blacks had more businesses down in the South than they had up here in the North because segregation was so complete in the South."*[87]

Colin's anecdote tells how commercial spaces were dominated by white landlords, though certain businesses were able to break through this segregation—namely store formats akin to the typical

[86] Drake and Cayton. 448.
[87] Black, *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's First Wave of Black Migration*. 70.

corner store such as drugstores, grocery stores, and delis. In an era of racial transformation on the South Side of the city, the racial dimensions of building ownership played a large role in determining the types of businesses that existed in a Black neighborhood. By their nature, corner stores are small, specialized to the community around them, and require relatively low investment in space and materials, especially in comparison to larger enterprises such as hotels, restaurants, and auto-shops. Thus the small size, neighborhood specificity, and informal structure of these stores made them an important force in making Black spaces around the neighborhood.

The neighborhood's commercial boulevards along streets such as East 31st Street, East 35th Street, and even East 39th Street remained dominated by white-owned businesses for the majority of the 20th century. However, likely due to the immense amount of cultural activity centralized around East 47th Street and South Parkway—now Martin Luther King Jr. Drive—a critical density of Black-owned businesses began to form along East 47th Street, a designated commercial thoroughfare that sections the neighborhood. The density of Black-owned businesses along East 47th Street contributed to the perception of the street as a distinctly Black space, both culturally and commercially. In a conversation with Jack Isbell, an old classmate of Black's who worked as an insurance broker, Isbell alludes to his pride for East 47th Street due to the fact of its Blackness:

> ***Timuel Black:*** *To start with, when you came to work here on Forty-seventh Street, describe the way this community looked to you back then.*
> ***Jack Isbell:*** *Well, it was black. Forty-seventh Street was entirely black, and all this area was nice. By that I mean I could go down Forty-seventh Street and feel proud about all the stores and things that we had on that street, and those places were available to us because they were black organizations created by black entrepreneurs, and, as I have said to you before, I have always continued to work in this area. Now, Tim, I'm sure you know, for my own personal financial sake, I could have left Jackson, I could have left Mammoth, I could even have left Chicago Metropolitan and gone over to some of those other companies that were white owned, but I just did not want to lose my identity. I wanted to be black. That's what I always was, and I intended to stay that way.*
> ***TB:*** *And part of that is pride, isn't it?*

> ***JI:*** *Oh yeah, very definitely it was a matter of pride. Everything that I have ever done, every dime that I have ever made was made through working directly with black people just like myself, and I'm proud of that. Very proud, as a matter of fact!*[88]

To have businesses that were distinctly Black businesses, not just for the fact of their Blackness, but as a symbol of their specificity to the residents of the neighborhood is something that made residents of Bronzeville proud of their neighborhood, of their identity. These small businesses that are locally owned also give Isbell a sense of ownership over the neighborhood, noting his pride for "all the stores and things that we had on the street, and those places that were available to us."[89] In Isbell's case, it incentivized him to not only work in Chicago, but to work locally in the neighborhood, for a Black insurance broker. The corner store is a manifestation of this small, locally owned business, a means through which to make place and to sustain a sense of community. Corner stores serve not only as a site of economic exchange but also as a social anchor, reinforcing local identity and fostering relationships among neighbors. For Isbell and others, these stores were more than just places to purchase necessities—they were gathering spaces, markers of self-sufficiency, and reminders of a thriving, Black-owned commercial landscape in Bronzeville.

It is also important to note the ways that corner stores were often understood by neighborhood residents in racial terms—the race or ethnicity of a store owner often determined the way people spoke about a store or referenced it in conversations. Interviewees reference stores in such ways as, "the Arabs got a grocery store right there where it was at Fifty-fifth," or "on the street level there was a grocery store run by German people," and "he could go anywhere in any of those white-owned stores if he wanted to make a purchase."[90] Race is a defining feature of the corner store in

[88] Black. 300.
[89] Black. 300.
[90] Black. 70, 194, 19.

Black's interviews, which is surely a sign of his interviewee's age and experience growing up in the mid-century when concern towards race was much more prevalent than it is today. However, it is still fascinating to see how these stores were such an intimate part of the neighborhood—regardless of race—so much so that the people who lived around them could categorize them in this sense. This idea leads me to the next means through which corner store typologies were created: through a sense of neighborhood intimacy and organizational informality.

Intimacy and Informality in the Corner Store

The physical and geographic typology of corner stores in Bronzeville was shaped by the marginalization of Black-owned businesses to less-desirable parts of the neighborhood. Socially, these stores functioned as distinct environments structured around the race and social class of their customers, owners, and employees. Together with their programmatic features, these spatial and social characteristics made corner stores intimate, personal spaces: settings in which informality, defined here as the flexible, relational, and often improvised practices that emerge in response to structural exclusion, were not only possible but necessary. Corner stores were spaces where customers and employees were treated in a personal, often familial manner—settings closely tied to the domestic lives of their owners. They also operated informally: often located in areas not explicitly zoned for commercial use, staffed by part-time employees working irregular hours, and defined by a kind of commerce that unfolded more as a series of social exchanges than formal transactions. In the way that people reference corner stores, they were truly family businesses—both run by families and like a family. In a conversation with Eddie Casey, an old friend of Timuel Black's, Casey speaks about his Uncle's business, which served as a means of income for the family that had recently migrated from the South.

> ***Timuel Black:*** *So, when your grandparents and your mother and your brother and sister came to Chicago, you were all more or less under the supervision of your uncle.*
> ***Eddie Casey:*** *Right, and we all lived together on the second floor, above my uncle's store. Because she could read and write and my grandfather couldn't, my grandmother worked in the store while my mother did all the housework and cooking and stuff like that*
> ***TB:*** *Where was that store located?*
> ***EC:*** *It was in a four-story red brick building at Forty-eighth and State. We lived there for a while, and then my mother got married again, and we moved away, but in 1930 my stepfather got killed in an automobile accident. So after that happened, we moved back here to Chicago.*
> ***TB:*** *You knew that whenever there was a crisis like that, you could always come back here to Chicago.*
> ***EC:*** *Yes, that was because my uncle was such an exceptional man, and we all looked up to him as a father. When my mother couldn't provide, he was the one who bought shoes and clothes for us. He did everything for us just as if we were his own children. After we came back—this is in '32 or '33—my uncle bought a two-flat frame building across the street at 4841 State, and we moved ourselves and his business over there. That's where we were living when I graduated from Coleman School.*[91]

The contents of this story form a particularly moving narrative—one that offers an intimate portrait of Casey and his family's life in mid-century Chicago, shaped by hardship, migration, and care. Woven into this broader account is the quiet but significant presence of a corner store: not just as a site of economic activity, but as a stabilizing force in a time of crisis, a space bound up with persistence, interdependence, and survival. The prime location of the store, on the ground floor of the family's four-story apartment building made it so that it could be operated informally and by the family, with the tasks of the home and tasks of the store becoming intertwined into the singular tasks of the family, each playing to their own strengths and capabilities. The small, residentially focused typology of the store made this sort of informality possible. The store itself is a flexible enterprise, able to respond to the family's changing needs in the face of crisis, such as when Casey's stepfather was killed. When this happened, the family moved themselves and their uncle's business to a completely new space just down the street, this time in a two-flat frame building. This style of building is not typically used for the mixed-use format, especially because of the lack of distinct

[91] Timuel D. Black, *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's Second Generation of Black Migration* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2007). 23.

separation between the street-facing portion of the building and the more private portion. Despite this, the form of the building supported the intimate and informal programmatic typology of the family's business.

This intimacy and informality also exists outside the family structure, with close relationships being built among neighborhood residents in Bronzeville through the corner store and the attached living arrangements. Earlier on in his conversation with Wayman Hancock, Black is speaking to Hancock about the jobs he worked while he a kid in the early 1930s.

> ***Wayman Hancock:*** *Before that, I had been working all the time I was going to school in a grocery store for a fellow by the name of Newman.*
> ***Timuel Black:*** *Where was that?*
> ***WH:*** *First store he had was on Thirty-fifth and Federal Street for years. I was raised up right there. In fact, at one time, my family was living in the same apartment building because this apartment was divided up into two parts-a rear part and a front part-and a Jewish family lived in the front part, and we Jived in the back, and they had an entrance from the side. I worked downstairs in the grocery.*
> ***TB:*** *The people who lived in front of you, were they the owners of the store?*
> ***WH:*** *Yes, they were the owners of the store.*
> ***TB:*** *That was a sort of a "mom and pop" grocery store.*
> ***WH:*** *Yes.*
> ***TB:*** *But they had help. Boys who carried the groceries and bagged the stuff up, and-*
> ***WH:*** *Yeah, that's right ...*[92]

Not only could Wayman reference the owner of the store by name, but he also lived in the same building as Norman and his family—the very building that housed the grocery store where Norman and Wayman both worked. Wayman's relationship to the store and its owners was indistinct from his relationship to his neighbors. The locally focused, small, "mom and pop" style corner store made this sort of intimacy and informality possible in the way that a larger, corporate-owned chain store would not be able to. It is precisely this deeply interwoven personal dynamic that defines corner stores, revealing how a small, community-based business can anchor a network of trust that extends far

[92] Black, *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's First Wave of Black Migration*. 147.

beyond a mere commercial exchange. The role of corner stores as sites of social mobility, racial solidarity, and everyday intimacy reflects the underlying motivations that shaped their typologies. How these stores operated—physically, geographically, socially, and programmatically—was deeply informed by these forces. This analysis now turns to the present, tracing how these typologies have transformed in response to broader neighborhood-scale changes across the 20th century.

Broad Neighborhood Transformations in the 21st Century

At the surface level, Bronzeville's contemporary corner stores appear far different from similar stores in the neighborhood from the mid- to late-20th century. However, before I begin to analyze the differences between contemporary typologies and historic typologies, I'd like to lay out some of the ways that the built environment of Bronzeville as a whole changed drastically in the second half of the 20th century. This background is by no means exhaustive, rather, it serves to put the smaller-scale changes in corner store typologies into perspective. Between 1970 and 2020, the population of Bronzeville dropped nearly 70 percent, from around 120,000 residents in 1970 to a meager 30,000 by 2020.[93] The whole city of Chicago suffered a huge loss of population in the second half of the 20th century, however, the citywide population only decreased by about 20 percent. As residents flooded out of Bronzeville for neighborhoods farther south and the distant suburbs, the aging building stock crumbled, leaving lots across the neighborhood vacant and reinforcing Bronzeville's decline into what sociologists and politicians began calling a slum. In 1961, on the western side of the neighborhood, the Dan Ryan Expressway cut through Bronzeville, bringing with it the ideals of modern living and the threat of urban renewal. The Robert Taylor Homes, one of the city's most

[93] U.S. Census Bureau, "1970 Census of Population and Housing" (Washington, DC, n.d.); U.S. Census Bureau, "2020 American Community Survey (5-Year Estimates)" (Washington, DC, n.d.).

infamous public housing projects sprawled across the Dan Ryan corridor arranged in a line of 28 16-story concrete high-rises shadowing over the expressway's traffic. By the late 20th century, Drake and Cayton's Black Metropolis had become "one of the most dangerous and dispossessed in the country."[94] These sweeping transformations, from dramatic depopulation to infrastructural upheaval, reshaped Bronzeville's spatial and social identity. This project examines those changes through the evolving role of the corner store within the neighborhood.

Bronzeville's Corner Stores at the Neighborhood Level

This broad transformation of the neighborhood's built environment in the second half of the 20th century had sizeable implications for the typology of Bronzeville's corner stores, largely focused on the distribution of stores around the neighborhood. Whereas conversations in *Bridges of Memory* and data collected for *Black Metropolis* show how corner stores were once spread throughout the neighborhood, on side streets and main thoroughfares alike, today, Bronzeville's corner stores are primarily concentrated along East 47th Street around the CTA Green Line. East 47th Street, both historically and contemporarily, is one of Bronzeville's most commercially active streets, with the segment between South Michigan Avenue and South Cottage Grove Avenue containing almost exclusively commercial spaces. In total, six of the neighborhood's thirteen corner stores are situated along East 47th Street, and five of those six stores are within just five east-west blocks of the Green Line. More than a third of all the neighborhood's corner stores are within just five blocks of each other, and exactly half are along the same commercial street, notably, the busiest commercial street in the neighborhood. This stands in contrast to the typology of mid-century corner stores, which were

[94] Sampson, *Great American City*. 9.

not only spread out through the neighborhood, but were also subjugated to the smaller, less-desirable streets of the neighborhood, unable to find available space along streets like East 47th Street.

In conjunction with changes in the general geography of the stores, the spaces that corner stores inhabit in the contemporary neighborhood are more homogenous than oral histories describe them. This is largely because of the centralization of stores around the same thoroughfare—East 47th Street—which primarily houses older, one story, single-use retail spaces. All but three of the corner stores in Bronzeville inhabit one story commercial spaces—only one of these multi-story buildings with a corner store on the ground floor is situated along East 47th Street. These stores inhabit similarly sized spaces, with the majority occupying an estimated 1,500–2,000 square feet in area. All but two of the corner stores in Bronzeville occupy buildings that were originally constructed in the years between 1915 and 1925—Tony's Stop & Save on East 44th Street and South Cottage Grove Avenue occupies a building constructed between 1973 and 1983, and King Supermarket on East 41st Street and South Martin Luther King Jr. Drive was built in 1976.[95] I speculate that every one of these stores saw major renovations to their interiors at least within the last 20 years, with the majority of the spaces clearly having been renovated in at least the last five years. For the corner stores that are not situated along East 47th Street, each is situated on a commercially zoned street, which includes most of South Cottage Grove Avenue, East 51st Street, East 35th Street, and portions of East 43rd Street and South Martin Luther King Jr. Drive.[96] As Bronzeville's business activity became increasingly centralized along East 47th Street, stores along other thoroughfares—once busy

[95] City of Chicago, "Buildings" (Chicago Data Portal, April 10, 2024), https://data.cityofchicago.org/Buildings/buildings/syp8-uezg/about_data; Historic Aerials, *1973, 1983* (Nationwide Environmental Title Research, LLC (NETR), n.d.), https://historicaerials.com.
[96] Department of Planning and Development, *Zoning and Land Use Map* (City of Chicago, n.d.), https://gisapps.chicago.gov/ZoningMapWeb/.

and well-positioned—have grown more secluded and localized. Often isolated from other commercial hubs and awkwardly positioned near low-density housing or empty lots, these spaces are not only physically removed from the neighborhood's commercial core but also feel socially disconnected from the life of the community. Despite this, these stores serve as a continuation of the neighborhood's historic typologies—particularly in their geography—which was once far more distributed and localized than it is today.

Inside Bronzeville's Corner Stores

It is more difficult to trace the similarities of interior typologies between corner stores from the mid-century and their contemporary equivalents. Oral histories provide small hints about what sorts of items are being sold in a store, where it is in the neighborhood, and what sort of building it is situated within, but there is a bleak record—both written and unwritten—of the layout and design of historical interior spaces. Site visits to Bronzeville's corner stores and observations of their interiors offer insight into both the programmatic and physical typologies of these spaces, as well as the social life that unfolds within them. The layout of a store—what it sells, how it's arranged, and the presence of certain services—can reveal broader social uses and meanings. Understanding these interior features through this lens allows contemporary stores to be meaningfully compared with their mid-century counterparts. Also important to keep in mind when examining how corner store interiors have changed are the broader shifts in retail more generally. Andrew Deener's study of grocery stores speaks to the immense changes brought to the industry of food distribution just through the introduction of new refrigeration techniques, new supply chain partnerships, faster transportation methods, and even the technology of product codes, notably barcodes.[97] These developments in the

[97] Deener, *The Problem with Feeding Cities*. 14.

infrastructure of food distribution have changed the way food and merchandise is bought and sold along with the very food and merchandise that is being sold. However, looking past these material details, this study of corner store interiors will focus instead on the broad study of format rather than the peculiarities of their offerings or commercial technologies and capabilities.

Figure 3: Bronzeville Convenience (East 43rd Street and South Vincennes Avenue)

Full Grocery Lines

Bronzeville Convenience occupies a low-profile, pre-war brick building situated at East 43rd Street and South Vincennes Avenue, opposite of an empty field of grass, neighboring a Christian preschool to the west and another empty lot to the east, and just three blocks away from the elevated CTA Green Line 43rd Street station. The store has a bright yellow awning with bolded letter reading *BRONZEVILLE CONVENIENCE MART* and listing some of the store's offerings: *We Accept Link*

Card, Full Line of Groceries, Drinks, Snacks, Coffee, Cold/Sub, Nachos, Tacos, Fried Chicken, T-Shirts, Cleaning Supplies. The windows are lined with LED strip lights, barred from the inside, and plastered with large, colorful posters with pictures of chips, soda, candy, tacos, and sandwiches. A pair of flags with the word "OPEN" wave in the wind just outside the front door. Upon entering, customers are met with aisles filled with a wide-ranging selection of merchandise and what appears to be a home kitchen behind a row of display coolers.

Despite the store's colorful, brand-saturated exterior, one might be surprised to find a surprisingly robust selection of fresh food and groceries inside Bronzeville Convenience—a feature common to many of the neighborhood's contemporary corner stores. In the large display coolers, Bronzeville Convenience carries a wide selection of specialty meats and chesses sold by the pound such as catfish, chicken, sausage links, pork ribs, and more. They also offered a fairly limited selection of fresh food such as onions, potatoes, corn, tomatoes, broccoli, spinach, and greens, among other items. Other grocery items included bread, rice, pasta, canned foods, eggs, and dairy products. Beyond the full line of grocery items, the store carried the typical offerings of a convenience store, including soft-drinks, coffee, chips, candy, household items, tobacco products, and more. For this store to have a full line of grocery items, especially with an exceptionally robust selection of perishable foods, shows that this store is a well-frequented establishment by members of the neighborhood. The store also had two employees, one working behind the deli counter preparing made-to-order items and serving grocery items stored in the cold storage, and another running the point-of service for the rest of the store. Most stores in Bronzeville follow this format to varying degrees—some offering more grocery items than others—but nearly all carry at least a basic selection of perishable goods. In the oral histories from the mid-century, the distinction between corner stores

and grocery stores is very slim, not only because they offered similar services, but also because they were described using the same terminology. Despite differences in food storage and distribution technology, the grocery offerings of contemporary corner stores reflect the sort of typologies present in the testimonials from the mid-century. Corner stores today are more than just retail spaces—their wide range of offerings makes them places that customers return to regularly, whether they're picking up ingredients for a meal or for something as mundane as laundry detergent or a t-shirt. Bronzeville Convenience's location amid several blocks of empty lots suggests that, even as much of the neighborhood's built environment—especially the spaces around Bronzeville Convenience—has either been destroyed or dispossessed, spaces for commerce continue to play a vital role in shaping the social fabric of the area. This corner store, along with the building it occupies and its programmatic structure, serves as evidence of how small retail can persist through the forces of urban renewal and transformation, carrying with it the historical memory and identity of a place.

Figure 4: NYFC Restaurant & Fresh Market (East 47th Street and CTA Green Line)

Deli Counters

Another notable typological characteristic of Bronzeville's corner stores is the deli counter, which serves fresh, made-to-order food to customers. This installation is typical to most Bronzeville corner stores, but as an example, I'll be referencing NYFC Restaurant and Fresh market. This corner

store is situated just beneath the Elevated CTA Green Line 47th Street station, and it branded with a large, red sign reading NYFC directly adjacent to a small graphic of the Statue of Liberty. Outdated branding shows that this store, likely just a few years prior was actually called *New York Deli*, but evidently changed its name to NYFC, an acronym whose meaning I was not able to decipher. The windows are surrounded by LED light strips and are completely covered by colorful signs filled with faded pictures of food and merchandise: everything from pictures of salads, wraps, pizza, and sandwiches to the store's assorted grocery items and so-called *House of Tobacco* and cigars. Running along the posters is a faded red arrow pointing towards the deli's entrance under the CTA tracks that reads *New York Deli Enterance [sic].* One portion of the window—with evidence of a failed attempt of erasure—reads *OPEN 24 HR ATM 20/10 ACCEPT LINK CARD*, despite the store's hours actually being just 8am–9:30pm. Beneath the glow of a neon *OPEN* sign, a bright red poster with the store's logo reads: *YOU BUY WE STEAM OR FRY.*

Inside, the store is busy, and the deli counter is a very robust operation, serving the typical hamburgers, sandwiches, hot dogs, and chicken wings, but also specialty items such as steamed crab, lobster, shrimp, mussels, and southern-style seafood boil. Their menu spans several pages of a pamphlet they leave on the deli counter for customers to order with items ranging in price from around five dollars for a hamburger, all the way to a seafood boil for upwards of 75 dollars. This deli counter is just a part of the store's operations, as it also offers a full grocery selection, the typical items of any convenience store, household items, and tobacco products. This style of deli counter is not unique to just NYFC Restaurant and Market. Red Apple Food and Liquor Inc. is a large, window-less brick building that is similarly situated just beneath the elevated CTA Green Line 51st Street station. Right next to a red and white awning reading *Red Apple Food & Liquor,* is another sign

affixed to the store's brick façade reading: *Louisiana Famous Fried Chicken Since 1976*. Inside the store, customers find more than just the usual convenience store staples—they also encounter what could be considered a full-service restaurant operating within the same space. Louisiana Famous Fried Chicken, a Chicago-founded fast-food chain, licenses its stores and, in this case, operates in tandem with the corner store within the same space. In doing so, this corner store becomes a space of layered functionality—where fast food, grocery staples, and informal social interaction coexist under one roof. The fusion of these services reflects an adaptive typology shaped by both economic necessity and community demand, blurring the boundaries between convenience retail, prepared food service, and neighborhood gathering space.

Figure 5: Michigan Food Mart (East 47th Street and South Michigan Avenue)

Figure 6: Last Chance Food Mart (East 47th Street and South Calumet Avenue)

Some deli counters have more rudimentary options, like Michigan Food Mart, which occupies a two store pre-war building on the corner of East 47th Street and Michigan Avenue. Despite having a wide ranging selection of items for sale, including groceries, drinks, snacks, detergent, phone accessories, and clothing, the store's only made-to-order offerings are Italian beef sandwiches and nachos. Some corner stores don't have any deli counter at all, such as S-A Mini Mart, a small space on East 47th Street and South Calumet Avenue, and Last Chance Food Mart, a similar-

sized space just across the block. There are even some corner store spaces in the neighborhood where you would not expect a deli counter to be operating—for example, 200 Cut Rate Liquors on East 47th Street and South Indiana Avenue—that still manage to have a robust set of made-to-order options. The deli counter symbolizes the further importance of the corner store in Bronzeville: they do not only serve as grocery stores, or convenience stores, but also as fast-food counters, and in some cases, even restaurants. The evolving layout of these corner stores highlights not only a continuity with mid-century typological principles but also a dynamic adaptation to contemporary consumer needs. In essence, the interior typologies reveal a persistent commitment to community engagement. Bronzeville's corner stores are ubiquitous fixtures in the neighborhood's commercial landscape, serving as essential hubs for social interaction, everyday economic exchange, and cultural continuity.

Typologies, Place-Making, and Persistence through Change

Taken together, these stories from Timuel Black's oral history project and the site visits I conducted to contemporary spaces, reveal how corner stores function as powerful spaces of resilience and continuity, despite the neighborhood undergoing major social and physical changes. These stores—both in their historical and contemporary forms—occupy a distinctive typology, in their material, geographic, programmatic, and social characteristics. They are small, locally owned, and culturally specific spaces that nestle into the fabric of the neighborhood to meet the needs of residents effectively. From the improvised family-run operations of the mid-century, operating out of the ground floor of an apartment building in the mid-century, to the contemporary stores equipped with sophisticated deli counters and grocery lines, corner stores maintain a certain typology of intimacy and spatial specificity, illustrating their enduring capacity to adapt to change while still maintaining their core purpose as community anchors. Corner stores extend their reach far beyond

mere commerce, becoming spaces where families and friends pooled their resources, spaces where a range of entrepreneurial experiments could flourish, and spaces where a sense of communal belonging could exist. Corner stores are an element of social infrastructure in Bronzeville—employing local residents, reflecting the neighborhood's cultural identity, and responding to shifting consumer demands—giving neighborhood residents a sense of ownership and familiarity that withstands broader forces of urban change. Together, they stand as proof that local commerce, deeply grounded in communal relationships, can simultaneously preserve a shared past and propel a thriving future for neighborhoods like Bronzeville.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this project, the notion of corner stores as flexible, community-rooted spaces has revealed the broader social and physical evolution of Bronzeville. By spotlighting the small-scale, everyday transactions that happen on these corners—both literal and figurative—we see how urban life is constantly reimagined and reshaped, even under powerful external pressures such as economic downturns, suburban flight, and large-scale redevelopment. The capacity of corner stores to maintain their familiar character while also adapting to current consumer preferences underscores their ongoing value as conduits of neighborhood identity and resilience. Just as mid-century corner stores created intangible bonds through family-owned operations and personal credit lines, today's iterations continue to foster connection by offering quick meals, groceries, and a welcoming environment in which neighbors gather.

Limitations

Several constraints shaped this study. First, it relied heavily on oral histories—particularly Timuel Black's *Bridges of Memory*—to reconstruct a portrait of mid-century corner stores. While

these accounts are rich in personal detail, they also reflect the subjective and selective nature of memory, leaving certain perspectives and data points absent. These interviews were also not oriented towards understanding or collecting information specifically about corner stores, which limited the amount and specificity of the evidence they provided. Furthermore, the broad definition of corner stores adopted here—encompassing everything from small groceries to locally owned drugstores—risks oversimplifying the unique differences among various retail formats. Finally, in analyzing contemporary corner stores, this project leaned mostly on observational evidence gathered through site visits. Although these observations can vividly illustrate spatial layouts and general store operations, they provide only a partial view of how owners and customers truly interact. More in-depth, first-person interviews or longitudinal studies of daily transactions would yield deeper insights into the lived social dynamics of present-day corner store culture.

Further Research

Future work might address these limitations head-on by incorporating more direct engagement with the people who operate and patronize Bronzeville's corner stores. Conducting interviews with current store owners, longtime residents, and newer arrivals could bring valuable nuances to the dynamics of race, community identity, and evolving neighborhood needs. Researchers may also benefit from deploying methods such as oral history workshops, where multiple generations of residents can converse and collaborate in the documentation process. Additionally, cross-referencing official datasets—ranging from business licenses to property records—with on-the-ground testimonies might clarify how broader economic or policy shifts continue to influence corner store distribution. By bridging first-person narrative with empirical investigation, such studies could deepen our collective understanding of the practical and symbolic forces that sustain corner stores as

vital sites of urban place-making. Ultimately, by tracing the humble presence of Bronzeville's corner stores through the past half-century, this study reveals the quiet resilience of neighborhood commerce in shaping community life and collective memory—reminding us that cities find and preserve their meaning in the most mundane of places.

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