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Trading Chinatown for Costco: The Future of Commercial Gentrification on St. Louis' Olive Boulevard

America loves to enjoy Chinese culture, embracing popular items like boba tea, dim sum brunches, and Bruce Lee but as history has proven time and time again, it does not actually care much for the Chinese people. From blatantly racist laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to the recent rush of Sinophobia brought on by the labeling of COVID-19 as the “China Virus,” we have been subject to harassment and discrimination for centuries. Similarly, the relationship between St. Louis' Chinese community and its government has been fraught for decades, with the 1966 destruction of the original St Louis Chinatown (Ling 85), “Hop Alley,” displacing hundreds of Chinese immigrants in order to make way for Busch Stadium's parking lot. In the past three years residents of the area have witnessed history tragically repeating itself, with city officials announcing in 2018 their plan to construct a massive \$189 million redevelopment project on Olive Boulevard, an area that many consider to be St. Louis' surrogate Chinatown (Kukuljan, np). Approved in March by University City's council of seven representatives, none of whom are Asian, the project repeats the same patterns of gentrification that have antagonized the Chinese community for decades. Specifically, the Olive controversy can be viewed as a test case for the two opposing concepts of commercial gentrification and cultural community, the consequences of which this paper will examine.

While traditional gentrification focuses on the displacement of *people*, newer models suggest that the forced displacement of *businesses* now qualify under the concept of commercial gentrification. “Commercial gentrification” was defined in *The Death and Life of Great*

American Cities by the famous journalist and author Jane Jacobs and quoted by Jessica Ferm, a Professor of Planning and Urban Management at University College London, in her 2016 article as “the process by which ‘jobs get squeezed out’...as a city district becomes successful, competition for space develops and the winners will be those who emerge as most profitable in that locality...one or a few uses become dominant and destroy the patterns of economic and social mutual support that existed” (404). Jacobs’ definition can be applied to Olive Boulevard, where the “competition for space” between the original local businesses and University Council’s plans for redevelopment was ultimately won out by the Council in March 2021, when they officially voted to rezone 16 acres of land to make way for a Costco, the final measure in a series of decisions designating the area to be demolished in order to make way for their “Market At Olive” concept (Special, St. Louis Post-Dispatch). As Ferm notes in her article, “there is often disregard for the important role that local businesses can play in contributing to the identity of an area”, which is created through unique “relationships between buyers and sellers, where trust is built over time” (405).

Although we cannot know for certain the fate of St. Louis’ unofficial Chinatown until the construction on Olive is finished, we *do* know that many stores there align with Ferm’s model of local business. The choice to build a Costco certainly overlooks these businesses’ role in upholding the street’s culture, warning signs that Jacob’s prediction of an end to the system of “economic and social mutual support” may become actualized (404). Thus, as the dominant land use for the area increasingly caters towards the commercial wholesale giant, the locally owned businesses previously residing there will move out, bolstering fears that they are merely the first in a mass relocation echoing the one that followed the 1966 destruction of Hop Alley.

Huping Ling, a Professor of Asian-American History at Truman State University traces how, after a mid-century period of population decline, St. Louis' Chinese population began to increase once again as professionals immigrated from overseas to pursue careers in engineering, medicine, and higher education, settling in various suburbs rather than in a concentrated urban neighborhood (*Reconceptualizing* 85). In her 2005 paper, "Reconceptualizing Chinese American Community in St. Louis: From Chinatown to Cultural Community," she introduces a new model of defining this second wave of immigration, arguing that the modern Chinese population of the city is a "cultural community" rather than a physical one. This community is defined through organizations like Chinese churches, Chinese language schools, and Chinese businesses, all of which contribute to "a strong sense of being Chinese and...keen desire to preserve the Chinese identity" that are the pillars of Ling's model (*Reconceptualizing* 94). Urban development is often unavoidable, as city officials desire for the economic growth that projects bring through tax revenue and renovated commercial, office, and industrial spaces cause them to see it as "an evolutionary process integral to the way cities function" (Ferm 404). However, their expansive aspirations oftentimes cause them to overlook the cultural value these areas hold and disregard their historical importance.

Understanding the historical context of St. Louis' Chinese community is imperative to understanding the specific controversy surrounding the Olive Boulevard development, as it continues the cycle of injustice that started with the demolition of the city's original Chinatown. Hop Alley was what many consider to be a "traditional" Chinatown, its homogenous population occupying the physical area between "Seventh, Eighth, Market, and Walnut Streets" (Ling, *Hop Alley* 184). The restaurants, businesses, and residences in the neighborhood survived for decades as the heart of the area's Chinese community, before being demolished in the mid-century urban

renewal wave to make way for new buildings, parking complexes, and most notably, Busch Stadium. With construction beginning on Olive Boulevard, Chinese locals are once again forced to witness the city sponsoring a development that threatens the very future of their cultural community, as the organizations and restaurants that bind individuals not connected by physical proximity will be replaced by an expansive construction of apartments, parking complexes, anchored together by a massive Costco.

The 2021 controversy did not occur in a vacuum, for it is only through the antagonism of St. Louis government officials that Olive Boulevard even came to function as a surrogate Chinatown in the first place. Only after the original Chinatown was razed did people relocate to new locations throughout the city, Olive being one of them. The 1966 demolition of Hop Alley fell under what many consider to be the standard model of gentrification, which encompasses the eviction of people from their area of residence due to forces like rising prices or government intervention. Domenic Vitiello, a professor of Urban Planning at the University of Pennsylvania, describes in a 2020 article how “City Beautiful” planning swept America in the early 20th century, where “rising downtown property values, rents, and redevelopment displaced people in every early Chinatown” due to their perception of it as a “cramped jumble of land uses breeding vice, disease, and other social ills” (148). While city governments still grapple with the issue of individual displacement due to urban renewal efforts in recent years, development projects such as the one on Olive Boulevard threaten the existence of businesses more so than specific people. St. Louis journalist J. Ryne Danielson reported in 2020 that University City’s development efforts effectively condemned a church, Chinese-owned Urgent Care facility, and several other businesses in order to clear space for their expansive project (Danielson). Although these buildings are not the primary residences of their owners, many of whom reside in the city’s

suburbs, they help create the area's unique cultural landscape, and their forced relocation is an effective signal that no one is safe from the city's wishes.

Some argue that the Olive development project will bring economic prosperity to University City's Third Ward, an area which city officials have described as "a historically lower income neighborhood," as Steph Kukuljan reports for the *St. Louis Business Journal*. This is significant when considering University City has the highest income disparity of any city in Missouri, where "the top 20% of households by earnings account for 61.2% of all income in the area, while the bottom 20% of households account for just 1.8%" (Stebbins, *24/7 WallStreet*). The local government has noticed this issue and plans to combat it by boosting the economy through stimulating projects such as the one on Olive. The Costco alone is expected to create over 700 jobs in the area and bring in additional millions in sales tax revenue, a prospect that was appealing enough for the city Council to approve \$70.5 million in tax-payer funding to finance the project (Kukuljan, np). This mindset fits into the patterns of urban development outlined in Vitiello's 2020 article, where he states that "downtown redevelopment sought to replace 'slums' and older industries with precincts of public and civic buildings, larger-scale commerce, and transportation infrastructure" (152).

Therefore, the replacement of historic Olive Boulevard establishments, such as the ones displayed below in Figure 1, are not viewed as negative consequences, but rather the intended effect of a city that hopes to bolster revenue through revitalizing what they see as dilapidated areas in need of renovation. Nevertheless, these "dilapidated" buildings that City Beautiful planning views as a necessary cost to improving the city actually hold unprecedented cultural value, the exact characteristic that Huping Ling identifies as crucial to her cultural community hypothesis. Although they may appear to be unassuming storefronts, when examining the image

closer one can see that there are at least two ethnic businesses: Olive Green, a local Ugandan owned restaurant, and Fish and Chicken Grill, which offers a blend of Cajun and Creole cuisine. Replacing these businesses with characterless parking garages, hotels, and a commonplace Costco would be detrimental to Olive Boulevard's current identity as St. Louis' diverse, inclusive, pseudo-Chinatown.



Figure 1: Current Olive Boulevard businesses in Jeffrey Plaza, similar to those in the area rezoned by University City

Source: St. Louis Post-Dispatch



Figure 2: NOVUS development's proposed designs for Olive Boulevard

Source: St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Despite arguments supporting the project, Olive Boulevard's commercial gentrification would greatly endanger the area's Chinese cultural community, placing the question of whether there will be more losses in the future in the forefront of people's minds. As Figure 2 above shows, if the "Market at Olive" development expands any further in the future, it would be residential homes—not businesses—that are at risk of getting bulldozed. If the city council was genuine in their intent to combat University City's staggering income disparity, they should consider the possible collateral damage that "renovating" one area would impose on other citizens. With multiple homes directly bordering the construction site, it is difficult to predict a future where their owners' lives are not disrupted by the project. Even when the construction is completed, the neighborhood is still going to be perpendicular to a noisy parking lot, possibly leading even more residents to relocate. This is a scary prospect for many, and as Sarah Fenske noted in a 2018 article published for local news outlet the *Riverfront Times*, many of the businesses not directly in the path of the development still risk being pushed out by diminishing

subsidies as rents in the area increase. Jessica Ferm argues that in order to prevent commercial gentrification from erasing “an urban area’s unique identity,” “the challenge for urban policy makers is to protect lower-value businesses from displacement” (403). St. Louis officials would do well to listen to her advice before considering any further expansion, as Olive’s integral role in connecting the city’s Chinese community through its schools, churches, and restaurants cannot be understated. Driving the city’s Chinese population out for a *second* time, especially in order to make space for something as arbitrary and spiritless as a Costco, unfortunately shows how history cannot help but repeat itself.

The exact future of St. Louis’ Chinatown remains to be seen, with construction starting in late October and the only progress thus far being a half-finished brick wall (Currie). Huping Ling’s cultural community hypothesis states that a Chinese community’s cohesion relies on cultural organizations like the bulldozed church and Urgent Care facility to provide the social spaces desired by individuals who do not live in close proximity to one another. It may be easy to dismiss unofficial Chinatowns such as St. Louis’ as insignificant when compared to the monolithically Asian neighborhoods on the coasts, but Olive Boulevard’s importance cannot be understated to Midwestern Chinese Americans like me. I still vividly remember the two-hour drive to St. Louis my family would make every month in order to visit Olive’s Asian groceries, ending every trip with a meal at LuLu’s. This was a common occurrence for many in the Central Illinois Chinese community we were a part of, since St. Louis was the closest cultural center in an otherwise homogeneously white Midwest. Already difficult to find, with the relocation of some of these Asian organizations and increased rents causing others to fear for their future, many Olive businesses will have to find cheaper rents in other areas of the city (Fenske np). Where before, first generation Chinese-Americans could send their children to learn Mandarin at

Chinese school, attend a church service, and then enjoy a meal with friends at a nearby restaurant afterwards, they may now have to drive to three separate locations to do the same, a prospect that threatens the very core of the Chinese cultural community.

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