

## MAIN SECTION

# Curating for Care in Mexican Chicago: How a Museum Gave Voice to a Migrant Community

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## ABSTRACT

This article looks at the practice of urban curating within diasporic communities through the lens of care. Urban curating provides a decolonial understanding of voice, responsibility and care within diasporic urban environments and across their expanded geographies. The Mexican neighbourhood of Pilsen in Chicago provides valuable learnings about how urban curating, enacted through the lens of care, has enabled a historically disenfranchised group to contest and confront prejudice, displacement, and injustice, by reinventing a classic institution of modernity, the museum. Through a close reading of the National Museum of Mexican Art and its curatorial program, this paper articulates the way in which the curatorial as a socio-cultural practice, has played a critical role in enabling migrants everyday engagement in the reconfiguration of the city. The curatorial practices of the Museum have provided forms of direct-aid to the community of Pilsen, cut across time and space for this multisited group and ultimately showed how art and culture can redefine the conditions under which urban transformation is contested and reframed, producing a new territory of and for Mexican Americans.

## KEYWORDS

*Urban Curating; Mexico; Chicago; Migrant; Art; Care; Curatorial*

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This paper explores urban curating as an emancipatory project for migrant communities within contested urban environments through a history of the Mexican community in Chicago, specifically the neighborhood of Pilsen.

Urban curating forges connections between economic, social, political, and aesthetic forces to transform a place from within its borders.<sup>1</sup> The practice of urban curating within the Mexican community in the city of Chicago, Illinois, contributes to this socio-spatial debate from a diasporic perspective.<sup>2</sup> It is a productive concept for the study of the transnational reconfiguration practices of sites of urban change through the lens of care, understood as a practice that valorizes the sharing of power, rather than its mere accumulation in the hands of the already powerful.<sup>3</sup> Urban curators can cut across time zones and multiple geographies, enabling the powerless to collectively contest the contradictions of neoliberal cities, marked by gentrification, austerity, inequality, and injustice.<sup>4</sup>

At the core of this study is Pilsen's National Museum of Mexican Art (NMMA) and its curatorial program. The research questions to what extent the curatorial, as a practice of care, has played a critical role in articulating the everyday engagement of a diasporic community in the transformation of the city, producing and protecting a new territory of and for Mexican Americans.

The paper engages the Museum, its leadership team and its curatorial archive in ethnographic methods such as participant observation, in-depth and elite interviewing, as well as textual and visual analysis of the curatorial material.<sup>5</sup> This study centers the analysis on three exhibition strategies through the lens of urban curating. The findings provide transferable learnings for migrant groups on how to engage with the city and its reconfiguration through transnational practices of care. This research, therefore, clarifies how diasporic communities can adopt the practice of urban curating to project and claim alternative possibilities through the built environment.<sup>6</sup>

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1 Elke Krasny, "Neighbourhood Claims for the Future: Feminist Solidarity Urbanism in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside," in *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture*, ed. Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal (New York: Routledge, 2017), 96-107.

2 I refer to diasporic perspective as a displaced and therefore transient perspective. For a discussion of the term from the perspective of urbanism see: Nishat Awan, *Diasporic Agencies: Mapping the City Otherwise* (Burlington, VT; Farnham: Ashgate, 2016).

3 Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York; London: Routledge, 2015)

4 Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal, "Introduction: The Social (Re)Production of Architecture in 'Crisis-Riddled' Times," in *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture*, ed. Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal (New York: Routledge, 2017), 1-13.

5 The fieldwork for this research paper took place between March and August of 2019. It is part of a research project on the Mexican American community in Pilsen and its hinterlands across Mexico.

6 Awan, *Diasporic Agencies: Mapping the City Otherwise*, 9.

The following sections will briefly explore the relationship between notions of care and curating as they relate to urban change. The study then refers to the central disciplinary debates emerging out of the conceptualization of urban curating as a practice in transforming the built environment and articulates how this practice is of particular relevance for diasporic communities. The research provides a background to Chicago and the urban struggles of the Mexican community in the neighborhood of Pilsen and its hinterlands. The final section looks at the NMMA and its curatorial program through the lens of urban curating.

The paper inquires how the Museum, through its exhibition strategy, has operated as an urban curator in providing direct care, expanding notions of territory and building resistance for Mexican Pilsen. Through the deployment of the arts and its performance within the public domain, urban curating has proved vital in unpacking “diasporic belongings and migrating knowledge”, claiming spatial justice for the Mexican community in the city of Chicago, Illinois.<sup>7</sup>

## From care to urban curating

Care is about what we do to “maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible.”<sup>8</sup> Curating, through its etymology, is directly associated with notions of care.<sup>9</sup> Derived from the Latin *curare*, the curator is originally a carer, a keeper of the museum collection and its relationships. The curator was understood to be in charge of its administration, organization, restoration, and comprehension, working in the back offices of the museum.<sup>10</sup> In the twentieth century, with the professionalization of the curator’s role that embraced an authoritative position, care took on a secondary role.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as we approached the new millennium, the stature and influence of the curator increased significantly, signaling the rise of the curator as creator.<sup>12</sup> Within the conception of the curatorial,<sup>13</sup> the practice of curating engaged the production of knowledge

7 Elke Krasny and Meike Schalk, “Resilient Subjects: On Building Imaginary Communities,” in *Architecture and Resilience: Interdisciplinary Dialogues*, ed. Kim Trogal (New York: Routledge, 2018), 179-189 (p.183).

8 Joan C. Tronto and Berenice Fisher, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring,” in *Circles of Caring*, ed. E. Abel and M. Nelson (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990), 36-54.

9 Charlotte Bates, Rob Imrie, and Kim Kullman eds., *Care and Design: Bodies, Buildings, Cities* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

10 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

11 For a more extensive discussion on the evolution of curating during this period see: Terry Smith, *Talking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2015), Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Lionel Bovier, *A Brief History of Curating* (Zürich: JRP / Ringier, 2008).

12 Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* (New York: Abrams, 1994).

13 The curatorial thinks beyond curating as the practice of a single author and focuses on everything that involves the event of knowledge in relation to one another. For a disciplinary context of this term and its implications, see: Maria Lind, “The Curatorial”, *Artforum International* (October 2009) accessed May 3, 2020, <https://www.artforum.com/print/200908/the-curatorial-23737>.

more broadly, beyond the exhibition space and its derivatives and towards what Irit Rogoff describes as an “expanding field” of broader contemporary knowledge bases and practices.<sup>14</sup>

Parallel to what Paul O’Neill has described as the “curatorial turn,”<sup>15</sup> the field of museum studies has also expanded its analytical framework to explore the museum as an epistemological tool for urban communities.<sup>16</sup> The need for inclusion and participatory policies gained traction within these institutional spaces. At the same time, museums gained recognition as spaces of intercultural exchange that question who has the power to create, to make visible, and to legitimate meanings and values.<sup>17</sup> Museums were increasingly understood as sites of hybridity, breeding new “areas of negotiation of meaning and representation” for communities operating at the margins.<sup>18</sup> Their capacity to enable negotiation and friction amongst hybridized societies<sup>19</sup> influenced the way museums can work curatorially.

Therefore, the curator’s role and responsibility grew in tandem with an expanded notion of the museum and its position within sites of urban change. The evolution of museums and curatorial discourse enabled a new reading of the performance of these institutions from the perspective of spatial practices.<sup>20</sup> In parallel, the understanding of the city as a social and cultural laboratory brought the curator closer to the work of urban planners and designers.<sup>21</sup>

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14 For an overview on the concept of the curatorial, including Rogoff’s notion of the Expanding Field see: Jean-Paul Martinon, *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (London: A&C Black, 2013).

15 Paul O’Neill, “The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse,” in *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*, ed. Judith Rugg and Michèle Sedgwick (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007), 13-28.

16 Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

17 Simona Bodo, “Museums as Intercultural Spaces,” in *A Museum Studies Approach to Heritage*, ed. Sheila Watson, Amy Jayne Barnes and Katy Bunning (New York: Routledge, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315668505-40>.

18 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2012)

19 Simona Bodo, Kirsten Gibbs and Margherita Sani, *Museums as Places for Intercultural Dialogue* (Dublin: Dark Printing, 2009). For further context on this discussion from a diverse set of scholars across the globe see European project Museums as Places for Intercultural Dialogue (MAP for ID). See the research project MeLa\* - *European Museums in an Age of Migrations* for a broad overview of how European museums engage with their place as a strategic opportunity to develop ‘more inclusive forms of representation, localize social differences and tensions, and create progressive senses of belonging.’ “The MeLa\* Project” *MeLa Research Project*, accessed May 3, 2020, <http://www.mela-project.polimi.it/> (accessed May 4, 2020).

20 Doina Petrescu, *Altering Practices: Feminist Politics and Poetics of Space* (London: Routledge, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203003930>.

21 Urban curators, while often also museum professionals, construct curatorial programs through the deployment of anthropological methods, the production of knowledge of local situations, and close observations of community, places, and interaction across geographical boundaries. See: Nirmal Puwar and Sanjay Sharma, “Curating Sociology,” *The Sociological Review* 60, no. 1\_suppl (June 1, 2012): 40-63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02116.x>; Meike Schalk, “Urban Curating: A Critical Practice Towards Greater Connectedness,” in *Altering Practices: Feminist Politics and Poetics of Space*, ed. Doina Petrescu (New York: Routledge, 2007), 153-65.

## The curatorial as an urban practice of care

In the context of urban planning and design practices, curating means caring for people, places, and the way they relate to each other.<sup>22</sup> Practices of care emphasize processes that extend backwards and forwards in time, and concern all of the relationships that are created.<sup>23</sup> An urban curator is continually pushing back against conventional modes of planning and design practice by establishing new methods of cooperation among relationships of care.<sup>24</sup>

This concept is only a couple of decades old. Artist and community organizer Jeanne van Heeswijk, along with the architects CHORA and Raoul Bunschoten, were the first spatial practitioners to purposefully identify the curatorial as a framework for their exploration of “a situation, space, a neighborhood and the people connected to these.”<sup>25</sup> They see urban curators as practitioners overseeing the production of speculative scenarios, cooperative modes of negotiation, and liminal spaces to engender new possibilities.<sup>26</sup>

In dialogue with van Heeswijk and Bunschoten, urban scholar Meike Schalk has subsequently developed this concept by highlighting how critical the collection of information is to the planning process in the first place.<sup>27</sup> Through the establishment of an “urban curating” platform, Schalk and her colleagues have argued for new modes of cooperation between the planner, the designer, the client, and the user, across space and time.<sup>28</sup> Urban curating—and its infrastructure—has the potential to enable both proximate and distant connectedness to disentangle past relationships and future expectations, central to the understanding of care in relation to a migrant community.<sup>29</sup> It is a practice that can build relationships of care between local everyday practices in one place and those in other distant areas, their migrant hinterlands, as we will explore further in the case of Chicago.

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22 Sophie Handler, “Ageing, Care and the Practice of Urban Curating,” in *Care and Design: Bodies, Buildings, Cities*, ed. Charlotte Bates, Rob Imrie, Kim Kullman (Chichester: John Wiley, 2019) 178-197 (p.190), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119053484.ch10>.

23 Angelika Fitz and Elke Krasny, *Critical Care: Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019). Page numb.

24 Krasny, “Neighbourhood Claims for the Future.”

25 Mirjam Westen, “Jeanne van Heeswijk: The Artist as Versatile Infiltrator of Public Space - ‘Urban Curating’ in the 21st Century,” *n.paradoxa* 12 (2003): 24-32; Raoul Bunschoten, “Stirring Still: The City Soul and Its Metaspaces,” *Perspecta* 34 (2003): 56-65.

26 Raoul Bunschoten, “Urban Gallery, Urban Curation,” CORP Symposium, 2004; *Architecture and Participation*, ed. Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu and Jeremy Till (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 56-57.

27 Schalk, “Urban Curating.”

28 For a more detailed look on how the term has evolved, see: Elke Krasny, “Urban Curators at Work: a Real-Imagined Historiography,” in *Planning Unplanned: Towards a New Function of Art in Society*, ed. Barbara Holub, Christine Hohenbuchler, (Vienna: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2015), p. 119.

29 Tim Gough, “Cura,” in *Curating Architecture and the City*, ed. Sarah Chaplin and Alexandra Stara (London: Routledge, April 16, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203876381-14>.

The practice of urban curating can also be read as a mode of direct aid.<sup>30</sup> Geographer Sophie Handler is one of the scholars critically exploring the political dimensions of care articulated by Fisher and Tronto in the use of art and performance-based interventions. Through her work with the elderly in London, Handler argues for embedding care in the curatorial process as a way to counteract stereotypical assumptions about different users and involve them on their terms, providing direct aid and support across their multiple geographies.<sup>31</sup>

Theorist Elke Krasny, through a “critical historiography” of urban curating, emphasizes the importance of care and reclaims the role of curating in “maintaining, continuing, and repairing our cities.”<sup>32</sup> The infrastructures that enable urban curating, through a constellation of caring relationships, are community centers, community museums, and even public art more generally. Underpinning these ordinary and conventional spaces of care are formal and informal networks of support from advocates, community organizers, artists, volunteers, and family members who seek to sustain the use of these spaces to avoid experiences of harassment and isolation in local neighborhoods and develop “resilient subjects.”<sup>33</sup>

This group of scholars, as well as the literature they draw from, sets the stage for an understanding of curating as a tool for those with an “outsider within” status in collectively transforming the city, positioning care at the center. From different fields, they argue for the potential of curating as a mode of engagement with the city that counteracts power imbalances. Their reading of the practice of urban curating is productive in the context of migrant communities, as it refers to a decolonial understanding of voice, responsibility, and care within contested urban environments and across their expanded geographies. Lastly, urban curating in this reconfigured context becomes an empowering mechanism that allows immigrants to lay claim to urban spaces and in turn open up a public platform of critical and reflective communication around their community. The Mexican community in Chicago provides valuable learnings about how urban curating, enacted through the lens of care, has enabled a historically disenfranchised group to contest and confront prejudice, displacement, and injustice, by reinventing a classic institution of modernity, the museum.

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30 Other relevant conversations with this approach to urban curation is led by theorist Jane Rendell who introduces the urban practitioner as a mediator, as well as Barbara Holub, who looks at urban curation as involving practice and research resembling the activist urban researcher, suggested within critical urban geography. *Planning Unplanned: Towards a New Function of Art in Society*, ed. Barbara Holub, Christine Hohenbüchler (Vienna: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2015).

31 Handler, “Ageing, Care and the Practice of Urban Curating.”

32 Jenna C. Ashton, *Feminism and Museums: Intervention, Disruption and Change*. Volume 2 (Edinburgh: MuseumsEtc, 2018).

33 Krasny, Schalk, and Schalk, “Resilient Subjects.”

## Caring for Pilsen

The first Mexican neighborhood emerged in Chicago during the 1950s, after many of the Mexicans that had congregated around Hull House<sup>34</sup> since the turn of the century were displaced due to the expansion of the Dan Ryan Expressway.<sup>35</sup> The area around 18<sup>th</sup> Street was one of Chicago's oldest neighborhoods, that had been settled by Irish and German migrants in 1860. By the mid-twentieth century, it had become a Polish and Czech neighborhood, and named Pilsen after a Bohemian city.<sup>36</sup>

The making of Mexican Pilsen from the 1960s onwards, aided by the lowest rents in the city and its proximity to jobs, was also contemporaneous with the white flight to the suburbs and the massive loss of manufacturing jobs.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, even if the abandonment of the neighborhood by its initial settlers opened up space for incoming Mexicans, political power was still very much in the hands of the incumbent groups, in this case the Italians.<sup>38</sup> Not having access to traditional sources of political power, young Mexicans mobilized to develop infrastructures of care within their community as a way to fight for control of the neighborhood, which, in the vein of the Settlement House movement, centered around the arts.<sup>39</sup>

Mexicans in Chicago had an urge for visibility; they were quick to establish restaurants and businesses named after their home towns to affirm their identity.<sup>40</sup> Positioning "Mexicanness" as a stronghold of the neighborhood was a vital aspect of the "making" of Pilsen.<sup>41</sup> Painting murals across the district that depicted Mexican leaders, from Benito Juarez to Cesar Chavez, was the first instance of an urban approach to building territory for this community.<sup>42</sup> A necessary step after the successful "taking" of the streets and facades through murals was the appropriation of local

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34 Founded in 1889 by reformer and Nobel Peace prize winner Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr. Inspired by Toynbee Hall in the East End of London, Hull House started a movement across the United States of Settlement Houses providing social work in disadvantaged communities. It quickly became a hub for the Mexican community, who started arriving in Chicago as early as 1919. For the history of the Hull House and the Settlement House movement, see: Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House: With Autobiographical Notes* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2012). For a detailed history of Mexicans at Hull House see: Sheryl Ganz and Margaret Strobel, *Pots of Promise: Mexicans and Pottery at Hull-House, 1920-40* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

35 Juan Mora-Torres, "Pilsen: A Mexican Global City in the Midwest," *Diálogo*, 9, no.1, article 2 (2005).

36 A. K. Sandoval-Strausz, *Barrio America: How Latino Immigrants Saved the American City* (New York, NY: Basic Books; Hachette Book Group, 2019), 57-60.

37 Rita Arias Jirasek and Carlos Tortolero, *Mexican Chicago* (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2001).

38 Mora-Torres, "Pilsen: A Mexican Global City in the Midwest."

39 Influenced by the Chicano movement taking place at the time. Lilia Fernández, *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Sandoval-Strausz, *Barrio America*.

40 Jose Gamaliel Gonzalez, *Bringing Aztlan to Mexican Chicago: My Life, My Work, My Art* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010)

41 Lisa J. Akey, "Community Canvas: The Murals of Pilsen, a Chicago Neighborhood" (Ph.D.thesis, Indiana University, 2008).

42 For a history of the first murals, see: Gonzalez, *Bringing Aztlan to Mexican Chicago*.

institutions.<sup>43</sup> Mexican activists took over Howell House, run by the Presbyterian Church, a settlement house for the Czech community of Pilsen since 1886. In the wake of the Chicano movement, the Brown Berets occupied the building in 1970, renamed it as Casa Aztlan and covered its façade with murals depicting Latin American political icons.<sup>44</sup> Casa Aztlan, with its mission of “finding self-determination,”<sup>45</sup> was to become an important center of community activism, art production, and social services for the Mexican community in Pilsen, similar to the role that Hull House had provided earlier in the Near West Side.<sup>46</sup>

The social movements of 1969 and the appropriation of Casa Aztlan was followed by four key building trophies emerging out of subsequent fights which are still standing: the first bilingual public library, the only local high school, an early education center, and the museum.<sup>47</sup> The next section will unpack the particular role the museum played in expanding its role as an institution of care, through urban curating.<sup>48</sup>

## Urban curating as tool for power

It seems fitting that a community of immigrants trying to understand and assert its place within a hostile urban environment would use this institution as a way to develop new modes of informal citizenship practices and claim their rights to a territory.<sup>49</sup> Museums have been formative institutions of modernity, playing a significant role in establishing a civic dialogue and putting into practice ideas of citizenship.<sup>50</sup> The museum has provided a public space to perform the ritual of citizenship, binding the

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43 Peter N. Pero, *Chicago's Pilsen Neighborhood* (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2011).

44 Antonio Zavala, *Memorias de Pilsen: Recuerdos de Lucha de un Barrio Mexicano en Estados Unidos* (s.l.: Tenoch Press, 2018).

45 Antonio Zavala, “Otras Ondas section [Casa Aztlán: Focus of Cultural Expression in the Midwest].” *Mirarte* (October 1, 1982), 4.

46 Ibid.; Crescencio Lopez-Gonzalez, *The Latinx Urban Condition: Trauma, Memory, and Desire in Latinx Urban Literature and Culture* (Lanham: MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Gonzalez, *Bringing Aztlan to Mexican Chicago*.

47 Rudy Lozano Public Library, the Benito Juarez High School, el Valor Health Clinic and the National Museum of Mexican Art were all established within a ten-year period. Lilia Fernández, *Brown in the Windy City*; Sandoval-Strausz, *Barrio America*.

48 Other institutions also were developed on the fringes of these larger publicly funded organisations such as the Taller del Grabado, the Prospectus Gallery, InkWorks and the Calles y Suenos Gallery, as well as the previous attempts to create a museum for the community under the MARCH and MIRA movements. For a history of these spaces see: Gonzalez, *Bringing Aztlan to Mexican Chicago*.

49 *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, 2nd edition, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 1991).

50 *Exhibiting Cultures; City Museums as Centres of Civic Dialogue? Proceedings of the Fourth Conference of the International Association of City Museums, Amsterdam, 3-5 November 2005*, ed. Renée Kistemaker (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Historical Museum, 2006).



community as a whole into a civic body.<sup>51</sup> In this case, the “contact zone”<sup>52</sup> of the museum went beyond its building and created a symbiotic relationship with a hostile urban context.<sup>53</sup>

The last decades of the twentieth century gave birth to a number of experiences of first-voice museums as tools to take charge of defining the role, breath, and understanding of a group of people and their own capacity to lead a conversation about how to go about transforming their neighborhoods on their terms.<sup>54</sup> First-voice museums became a productive response to the challenge of what DuBois called the African-American double consciousness, and later Gloria de Anzaldúa articulated as Mestiza consciousness, from the Latinx perspective. These spaces and their narratives provide tools to reconcile Mexican heritage with an American upbringing and therefore reidentify with a homeland they have been taught to reject.<sup>55</sup>

Differing from inclusive or participatory museum practices,<sup>56</sup> first-voice institutions provide a platform for diasporic communities to understand and care for themselves.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, first-voice institutions use their curatorial voice to subvert the notion of the seeing and display of oneself as an object that is common practice within the context of ethnographic or community museums.<sup>58</sup> In this case, it is about using the curatorial voice as a way to assert the Mexicans of Pilsen as experts, as their own sources of knowledge, to present them to themselves.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, it is essential to understand how the urban curating of Pilsen began, and its role in the evolution and maturity of this contested territory.

What we know today is that the National Museum of Mexican Art was founded in 1982 as the Mexican Fine Art Center by a group of six Chicago public school teachers in Pilsen, led by Helen Valdez and Carlos Tortolero, who later went on to direct the project.<sup>60</sup> The Center began as an itinerant exhibition project and public program, which partnered with local galleries

51 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); Carol Duncan, “Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, 88–103.

52 James Clifford, “Museums as Contact Zones,” in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, ed. James Clifford (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 188–219.

53 Bodo, “Museums as Intercultural Spaces”; Elizabeth Crooke, *Museums and Community: Ideas, Issues and Challenges* (London: Routledge, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203371015>.

54 John R. Kinard, “The Neighbourhood Museum as a Catalyst for Social Change,” *Museum International* 37, no. 4 (1985): 217–23, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0033.1985.tb00592.x>.

55 Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th ed. (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2012).

56 Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0, 2010).

57 Karen Mary Davalos, *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2001).

58 Ibid. 182.

59 Ibid. 183.

60 Nancy Villafranca-Guzmán and Carlos Tortolero, “The National Museum of Mexican Art: A New Model for Museums,” *The Journal of Museum Education* 35, no. 1 (2010): 83–92.

to start exploring notions of identity and belonging for Mexicans in Chicago through the power of the arts.<sup>61</sup>

The birth of the Mexican Fine Arts Center preceded the election of Mayor Harold Washington that was attributed in part to a broad coalition across the African American and Latinx communities in the city.<sup>62</sup> This new political context also transformed how minority populations were represented within the formal spaces of governance in the city. One example is the Parks Authority, home to Chicago's Museums in the Park.<sup>63</sup> Margaret Burroughs<sup>64</sup> appointment in the Parks District Board brought an impetus to the powerful institution to diversify its team and confront the pending allegations of discrimination and neglect amongst Black and Latinx neighborhoods.<sup>65</sup>

Omar Lopez, a Mexican community leader, was the first Mexican to join the team at the Parks Authority, at the point where they started looking into Harrison Park, at the core of Pilsen, in response to Washington's campaign promises to the Mexican community.<sup>66</sup> The main task at hand was to repurpose a boat repair facility that was no longer of use to wealthy Chicagoans.<sup>67</sup> In 1986, with support from the Park Commissions Board leadership, they signed a ten-year lease on what was a secondary structure at the south-eastern edge of the park, at least one-third of the size of the neighboring Field House.<sup>68</sup>

As a consequence of the volatile politics of the time, Adrian Lozano, a Hull House alumnus and an architect of Mexican descent, was chosen to design the project.<sup>69</sup> Lozano had a significant profile within Pilsen, mostly

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61 Carlos Tortolero, in discussion with the author, June 2019. Villafranca-Guzmán and Tortolero; Davalos, *Exhibiting Mestizaje*, 109-110.

62 His triumph is largely attributed to the effective organising of key Mexican figures such as Rudy Lozano; this was the first time that Mexicans, and Latinxs more generally, were seen as critical for Chicago politics. For a more detailed discussion of how this took place see: Sandoval-Strausz, *Barrio America*, 201-215.

63 There are currently eleven museums in the Chicago Park District (the Art Institute of Chicago, the Chicago History Museum, the DuSable Museum of African American History, the Field Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Museum of Science and Industry, the Chicago Academy of Sciences, the John G. Shedd Aquarium, the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts & Culture and the National Museum of Mexican Art). Established in 1903, Museums in the Park are institutions established in public land administered and partially funded by the Chicago Parks Authority. For a history of the establishment of this institutional arrangement see: Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Culture and the City: Cultural Philanthropy in Chicago from the 1880s to 1917* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1985).

64 She was an important activist and leader among the African-American community and had been founder of the DuSable Museum a few years earlier, the first of the Museums in the Park within a minority neighborhood. Diane Grams, *Producing Local Color: Art Networks in Ethnic Chicago* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

65 # Ibid., p.165.

66 Following his leadership in developing a community-wide sports league. Omar Lopez, in conversation with the author, June 2019.

67 The boat repair facility was being used only by 35 wealthy Chicagoans to house their boats, which proved offensive for the Mexican community now occupying most of that neighbourhood. Carlos Tortolero, 2019. Davalos, *Exhibiting Mestizaje*, 109.

68 Tortolero, 2019. Grams, *Producing Local Color*; Villafranca-Guzmán and Tortolero, "The National Museum of Mexican Art."

69 Tortolero, 2019. Davalos, *Exhibiting Mestizaje*, 109-110.

due to his history of engagement with the Hull House's arts program and the authorship of the first Mexican mural in the city.<sup>70</sup>

In a similar way to that in which Howell House became Casa Aztlan, the boathouse in Harrison Park became the Mexican Fine Arts Center-Museum (MFACM) through the appropriation of its facade.<sup>71</sup> The Parks Authority provided no additional funding for the refurbishment, so the structure remained almost intact, restricting the architectural intervention to a transformation of the building's skin,<sup>72</sup> and a somewhat more monumental entrance under the guise of a Mayan arc, amounting to an alleged \$900 investment.<sup>73</sup>

The MFACM developed a sense of responsibility, legitimacy, and belonging from both sides of the border, embodying Anzaldúa's Mestiza consciousness, through the notion of producing knowledge by being within a system while also retaining the knowledge of an outsider who comes from outside the system.<sup>74</sup> After the gallery opened its doors, it established a consistent curatorial program through the leadership of local artist Rene Arceo.<sup>75</sup> Arceo's first exhibition as curator was a solo show by Diana M. Solis, an artist born and raised in Pilsen and an essential member of Casa Aztlan and other politically active groups in the area.<sup>76</sup> Engaging so directly with the immediate neighbours was an important part of acting as simultaneously a multi-sited community center, art gallery, and assembly space for the growing community. The fact that this cultural institution was initially called both a center and a museum is critical for an understanding of their curatorial program from a perspective of care. Through its exhibitions and institutional partnerships, the MFACM

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70 At the age of twenty, Lozano created *Progress of Mexico* in the second floor of the Boys' Club Building of Hull House. He depicted himself in the midst of pivotal moments in Mexican history. The mural was destroyed during the late 1960s with the expansion of the UIC campus, acquiring mythical status within the community. Cheryl Ganz and Margaret Strobel, *Pots of Promise: Mexicans and Pottery at Hull-House, 1920-40* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 50-51.

71 The Benito Juarez High School, allegedly designed by Lozano as part of Bernheim, Kahn & Lozano after a proposal by Mexican architect Pedro Ramirez Vazquez, had also positioned mural work by local artists as its most salient design feature. Gonzalez, *Bringing Aztlan to Mexican Chicago*, 75.

72 Tortolero, 2019; Grams, *Producing Local Color*.

73 Its two subsequent expansions were also carried out by Lozano. In 2001: he added the Oaxacan motif from the archeological Zapotec site of Mitla around the entire building facade and tripled its footprint by including the adjacent natatorium structures initially built in 1914. Its current status is a result of its last refurbishment by Lozano in 2006, when it was rechristened as the National Museum of Mexican Art. Tortolero, 2019; Nancy Villafranca-Guzmán and Carlos Tortolero, "The National Museum of Mexican Art: A New Model for Museums." *The Journal of Museum Education* 35, no. 1 (2010): 83-92.

74 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

75 A graphic artist originally from Michoacán, Arceo moved to Chicago and established himself in Pilsen in mid-1981. SAIC. National Museum of Mexican Art and Julian Samora Library at the Institute for Latino Studies (University of Notre Dame), *National Museum of Mexican Art Records*, 1983; René H Arceo-Frutos, *René Arceo: Between the Instinctive and the Rational*. (Chicago, IL: Casa Michoacán en el Medio Oeste, 2010).

76 National Museum of Mexican Art, *National Museum of Mexican Art, Exhibition Schedule*, 1983-2019.

consolidated its capacity to care for the transnational community while enabling a “contact zone” at a neighborhood level.<sup>77</sup>

### Three instances of urban curating for Mexican Chicago

The Center-Museum is a clear example of urban curating, situating care at the center of its curatorial understanding through three main strategies, visible across their curatorial archive: direct aid from within the community, caring across time and space and as a way to fight for a caring future.

#### Direct aid from within the community

The Center-Museum developed programming that made its building a space of care, a safe space for an at-risk community. The Museum broke new ground, bringing in critical public services as part of an exhibition program. One example of this is the exhibition *Latino Youth: Living with HIV/Aids in the Family*. The organizers worked with Pilsen-Little Village Community Mental Health Center and the Illinois Prevention Resource Center to exhibit stories and drawings by Chicago Latinx children who were living with HIV/AIDS.<sup>78</sup> The controversial public health crisis at the time, not openly discussed within the Mexican community,<sup>79</sup> was supported by an exhibition catalog, but most importantly with the hosting of a blood drive for the Hispanic AIDS Network within the Museum’s Courtyard Gallery.<sup>80</sup> The Museum also continued to expand its educational program outside its doors and across Pilsen, building a bilingual radio station at the heart of 18th Street in 1996.<sup>81</sup> A youth initiative called *Yolocalli* was established a few months later, and continues to cultivate its territorial influence with a yearly exhibition program within the Museum as well as an independent venue and a program of murals across 18<sup>th</sup> Street and its surroundings.<sup>82</sup>

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77 Cesareo Moreno (NMMA curator), in conversation with author, Chicago, April 2019. Nancy Villafranca-Guzman (Former head of the education department at the NMMA), in conversation with author, Chicago, June, 2019.

78 Tortolero, 2019. Moreno, 2019. National Museum of Mexican Art, 1983-2019; National Museum of Mexican Art and Julian Samora Library at the Institute for Latino Studies (University of Notre Dame), *National Museum of Mexican Art Records*.

79 Lopez, 2019.

80 Exhibition Catalogue, “Latino Youth: Living With HIV/Aids in the Family | National Museum of Mexican Art,” <http://nationalmuseumofmexicanart.org/exhibits/latino-youth-living-hivaids-family>, (accessed May 3, 2020).

81 The radio station was sold in 2012. Villafranca-Guzmán and Tortolero, “The National Museum of Mexican Art.”

82 *Chicago’s Pilsen Neighborhood*; Davalos, *Exhibiting Mestizaje*. Tortolero, 2019. Moreno, 2019; Villafranca-Guzman, 2019.

## Expanding the notion of community across time and space

The Museum's subsequent exhibitions under Rene Arceo for its Main Gallery are evidence of its "borderless" approach across Pilsen and the communities of origin of its residents across Mexico. First, the Museum staff's strategy as urban curators went beyond the building, and included the neighborhood as a whole. A couple of months after opening the doors of the Center-Museum, Arceo launched *The Barrio Murals*, where he identified existing murals across Pilsen as centerpieces for the show. At the same time, he commissioned new work to be produced by these artists for the gallery space and published a catalogue that included all contributions.<sup>83</sup> For the first time, Mexican artists from Pilsen were being recognized as legitimate artists beyond their community centers and political groups.

Additionally, with the Museum acting as an art broker, a small market for their work started to develop amongst a group of burgeoning collectors from the community.<sup>84</sup> The value provided to their practice outside what previous centers were able to offer undoubtedly helped secure the role the Museum had within the Mexican artistic community around it.<sup>85</sup>

The second exhibition, a retrospective of the work of Alfredo Zalce, a highly respected artist from Arceo's native town of Michoacán, articulates a different territorial strategy. In this case, the project helped to establish a Mexican identity beyond Pilsen, most importantly across the communities in Mexico.

The "border thinking of multiple subjects contained within a single individual"<sup>86</sup> not being understood as "real Mexicans" by those back home, or as citizens of Chicago in their place of residence, is a sentiment expressed frequently by those growing up in Pilsen at the time.<sup>87</sup> The program of the Museum during those first years directly addresses this, looking at Mexico and the communities of origin of Pilsen residents as relevant exhibition platforms to engage with. Zalce's retrospective show was followed with a retrospective exhibition by Oaxacan artist Francisco Toledo, arguably the most prominent Mexican artist of the time. The MFACM offered the exhibition as a traveling show without cost to the Museum of Modern Art in

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83 National Museum of Mexican Art, *Exhibition Schedule*.

84 National Museum of Mexican Art and Julian Samora Library at the Institute for Latino Studies (University of Notre Dame), *National Museum of Mexican Art Records*.

85 Many of these artists, such as Marco Raya, were members of the rival Casa Aztlan. National Museum of Mexican Art and Julian Samora Library at the Institute for Latino Studies (University of Notre Dame), *National Museum of Mexican Art Records*.

86 Ed Morales, *Latinx: The New Force in American Politics and Culture* (London; Brooklyn, N.Y.: Verso, 2018), 16

87 Leonard G Ramirez, *Chicanas of 18th Street: Narratives of a Movement from Latino Chicago*, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Fernández, *Brown in the Windy City; Mexican Migration to the United States: Perspectives from Both Sides of the Border*, ed. Harriett D. Romo and Olivia Mogollon-Lopez, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2016).

Mexico City, as well as to smaller museums across the migrant communities most represented in Chicago, such as Zacatecas and Michoacán.<sup>88</sup> The archived correspondence across institutions shows an urge to create a show that would be recognized by established Mexican cultural institutions, as well as creating a presence amongst the communities of origin of many of Pilsen's residents.

The mixing of Pilsen-centric programming with exhibitions for communities across Mexico is an example of how urban curating, across all created relationships, defines new constantly evolving "borderlands" for a particular community in space and time.<sup>89</sup>

## Caring for Pilsen's future

As Tronto argues, all forms of care are embedded in relations of power. This last instance looks at how the MFACM leveraged their role as a cultural institution within Chicago more widely to build community resilience through their curatorial program. As their presence grew more robust and their platform more powerful, they partnered with local community organizations to exhibit work that documented and critiqued the urban development that had started to take place in the neighborhood after the 1990s.<sup>90</sup> In this instance, urban curating allowed for the neighbors in Pilsen to take control of the neighborhood through dialogue across planning, community activism, and the gallery space.

In 2006, after its last expansion, the Museum was officially accredited and renamed the National Museum of Mexican Art.<sup>91</sup> As the Museum has adopted a more national platform, the program has grown more robustly linked to other Latinx institutions across the United States, yet continues to strongly chronicle the artistic community of Pilsen.<sup>92</sup> Pilsen is now home to many organizations caring for those in Chicago and their Mexican native towns. This density of investment in Pilsen from the Mexican community

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88 Most of Pilsen's residents from Mexican origin came from Zacatecas, Michoacán, Jalisco and Guanajuato. See Ganz and Strobel, *Pots of Promise*; Sandoval-Strausz, *Barrio America*; Zavala, *Memorias de Pilsen*.

89 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

90 Exhibitions featured photographs of the area taken by its residents (*A Window to Our Neighborhood and Celebrate Pilsen: photographs by the children of Orozco Elementary School*, both in 1994; *El Punto Focal, Nuestra Comunidad Mexicana en Chicago*, 2007); murals were used to chronicle the history of the neighborhood (*Barrio Murals*, 1987; *Pilsen / Little Village: Our Home, Our Struggle*, 1997; *Outside In the Mexican American Street Art Movement in Chicago*, 2013; *40 años a la esperanza*, 2019) and the work of visual artists inside and outside gallery spaces (*Xicágo*, 2002; *Arte Diseño Xicágo*, 2017; *Placemaking & Landmarks - The Creation of Mexican Spaces in La Dieciocho (Pilsen)*, 2017; *Peeling off the Grey*, 2018) National Museum of Mexican Art, *Exhibition Schedule*.

91 The Museum gained accreditation from the Association of Museums of America in 2006 and broadened its collection to encompass more than 9,000 pieces. National Museum of Mexican Art and Julian Samora Library at the Institute for Latino Studies (University of Notre Dame), *National Museum of Mexican Art Records*.

92 National Museum of Mexican Art, *Exhibition Schedule*.

has been partly responsible for their displacement.<sup>93</sup> Gentrification in Pilsen is today at the heart of the fight for control of the neighborhood, with fewer Mexican-owned businesses and a smaller population, and a 22% increase in white population within approximately the last two decades.<sup>94</sup> One of the landmark events of this transformation was the closing and subsequent redevelopment of Casa Aztlan in 2017 into ten four-bedroom luxury apartments. Casa Aztlan's famous facade mural was painted over with a layer of grey paint.<sup>95</sup> The "greywashing" of this building sparked a significant backlash from community activists and artists who saw their work co-opted for increasing property value. The uproar around the city took on the slogan "Pilsen is not for sale." It surfaced the Museum's complicated position between being a source of power for the community and allegedly being leveraged by the gentrifying tide.<sup>96</sup>

In 2019, the Museum and its curatorial team, led by Cesáreo Moreno, decided to take a more vocal role and through an exhibition and public program entitled *Peel off the Grey*, alluding to the painting over of Casa Aztlan, sought to use art as a way to "pick, pry and peel off the layers of gentrification in Pilsen."<sup>97</sup> At stake, parallel to this exhibition, was the investment for a new office campus that used the mural typology to legitimize a renewal project. The project, decorated with new murals that resemble those found across Pilsen, is adjacent to the El Paseo public development project, where a community garden has been established as part of its first phase, and a proposed bike and pedestrian trail are planned to occupy a four-mile stretch of a rail line, while threatening to jumpstart a new wave of gentrification across the southern edge of the neighborhood.<sup>98</sup> The public project and its neighboring proposed development follows a different trajectory from the Museum and its creation, this time without what is now a much more robust community of organized Mexican artists and architects leading the design process.<sup>99</sup>

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93 Davalos, *Exhibiting Mestizaje*, 165. Matthew L. Schuerman, *Newcomers: Gentrification and Its Discontents* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

94 John Betancur and Yongjun Kim, (2016) "The trajectory and impact of ongoing gentrification in Pilsen." (Chicago, IL: Nathalie P. Voorhees Center for Neighborhood and Community Improvement, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2016)

95 Andrea Penman-Lomeli, "Developers Literally Whitewashed a Chicago Neighborhood's Historic Latino Murals", *CityLab*, <https://www.citylab.com/politics/2017/06/the-literal-whitewashing-of-chicagos-latino-murals/531156/> (accessed May 3, 2020),

96 Nunzia Borrelli and Kathleen Adams, "Analysing Pilsen Mexican Neighbourhood in Chicago through the Lens of Competitiveness and Social Cohesion," in *Moving Cities: Contested Views on Urban Life*, ed. Lígia Ferro et al. (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018), 133-51, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-18462-9\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-18462-9_9); Jorge Inzulza-Contardo, "Latino Gentrification? Focusing on Physical and Socioeconomic Patterns of Change in Latin American Inner Cities," *Urban Studies* 49, no. 10 (2012): 2085-2107; John Betancur and Janet Smith, *Claiming Neighborhood: New Ways of Understanding Urban Change* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

97 "Peeling off the Grey", *National Museum of Mexican Art*, <http://nationalmuseumofmexicanart.org/exhibits/peeling-grey> (accessed May 4, 2020),

98 "FAQ," El Paseo Trail [blog], January 19, 2019, <https://elpaseotrail.org/faq/>.

99 The architect of the winning project is a Chicago-based firm named Altamanu, an experienced design partnership with projects all across the city, but no discernible ties with the community. "About Altamanu Landscape Architecture", *Altamanu*, <http://www.altamanu.com/about> (accessed May 4, 2020),

The purpose of the exhibition was to expose the “dismantling of the heart of the community,” and included work from artists and activists protecting and defending Pilsen, yet with conflicting views on how to go about it. The exhibition space became a battleground in and of itself. One of the participants, who also happened to be one of the most ardent community activists, temporarily abandoned the exhibition before the opening, taking their work with them yet sparking a conversation that resonated across the city.<sup>100</sup>

The conversation around *Peeling off the Grey* culminated in a significant triumph for the community and its urban activism. The Landmarks Commission designated a 1.5 mile stretch of 18th Street as a Historic Landmark District.<sup>101</sup> This plan protects 800 late-nineteenth-century homes from being torn down and redeveloped, but also covers dozens of murals that have become icons of the neighborhood, thanks in large part to the scholarship and curatorial work of the National Museum of Mexican Art for the district. This conservation plan attempts to slow down gentrification and use historic preservation to preserve affordability, protecting both its cultural fabric and the existing residents living in it.<sup>102</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has argued for the practice of urban curating as it relates to migrant communities within sites of urban change. Urban curating allows for a detachment of notions of care from the rational abstractions of policymaking and operates as an alternative activating practice, within reach of migrant communities.<sup>103</sup> It is a tool for the powerless to lead the conversation about the future of their cities and allows vulnerable populations to lay claim to urban spaces for themselves.

The future of Pilsen and its relationship with its Mexican hinterlands is articulated by the National Museum of Mexican Art. Within the Museum building and across a transnational urban entanglement, urban curating is a way in which the Mexican community, not of Mexico or Chicago, but of Pilsen, has understood how to care for itself and its expanding territory. Through its curatorial work, the NMMA has enabled a hub of artists and activists to use their voice to shape and lay claim to their borderlands.

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100 The artists are part of Pilsen Alliance and used the exhibition space to protest against the alderman Daniel Solis and gentrification brought forward by housing developer The Resurrection Project. The leader of Pilsen Alliance was recently elected as alderman to replace Solis. “Our Response to Peeling off the Grey,” *Plus Gallery Chicago* [blog], May 13, 2018, <https://plusgallerychicago.com/2018/05/12/our-response-to-peeling-off-the-grey/> [accessed ...]

101 “Pilsen and Little Village Preservation Strategy,” *City of Chicago*, [https://www.chicago.gov/content/city/en/depts/dcd/supp\\_info/pilsen-and-little-village-preservation-strategy0.html](https://www.chicago.gov/content/city/en/depts/dcd/supp_info/pilsen-and-little-village-preservation-strategy0.html) (accessed May 4, 2020).

102 The Affordable Requirement Ordinance goes beyond the protection of the built environment and requires developers to allocate 20% of new units for lower-income residents, double the standard proportion across the city “Pilsen and Little Village Preservation Strategy.”

103 Handler, “Ageing, Care and the Practice of Urban Curating,” 195.



Through the use of urban curating as a way of care for and by migrant communities, the NMMA provides learnings for diasporic urbanisms elsewhere.<sup>104</sup> The practice of urban curating cuts across time and space, and engages the transnational territory that encompasses migrants' everyday urban existence. Pilsen and the National Museum of Mexican Art are clear examples of how art and culture have redefined the conditions under which urban transformation is contested and reframed. Urban curating proves to be a critical tool to render visible the hidden narratives of minority communities and shine a light on civic knowledge that is often unheard or overlooked in traditional planning and design processes. Using urban curating as "creative expression and everyday resistance," Mexican Pilsen has understood how to care for itself and its "migrant urbanisms", and provides learnings for other diasporic communities across the globe.<sup>105</sup>

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104 Awan, *Diasporic Agencies: Mapping the City Otherwise*.

105 Suzanne M. Hall, "Migrant Urbanisms: Ordinary Cities and Everyday Resistance", *Sociology* 49, no. 5 (October 1, 2015), 1.

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