

**Obama's neighborhood, Hyde Park**, is on the South Side of Chicago, about seven miles from the Loop. Not counting time spent in college and law school, plus part of a year working for a consulting firm in Manhattan, Hyde Park is the only place Barack Obama has lived as an adult. He first moved there in 1984, when he came to Chicago as a community organizer, and he returned after graduating from Harvard Law School. Here he courted his future wife, who grew up in the nearby neighborhood of South Shore, and here his children were born and now attend (private) school. Here, too, is the mansion he bought in 2005, with the proceeds from his two bestselling books in which he speaks fondly of the life he has built here.

The affection is mutual. The Hyde Park Herald printed a gala issue when Obama announced his candidacy, in February 2007. "Despite national fame, Barack Obama remains a Hyde Parker to the core," read the banner headline. Inside were display ads from local businesses, full of good wishes and exclamation points: "Good luck, neighbor!"; "Wish Hyde Park's very own Barack Obama and family all the best!"; "Congratulations to Barack, our hometown hero!" There were pages of testimonials from neighbors, shopkeepers, political activists, and his barber, too. All agreed he's "down to earth." One local mother recalled standing next to him at a Halloween parade. "He greeted me with a friendly 'hello,' " she testified. A waitress at his favorite restaurant: "No matter what might be on his mind, he always asks how I'm doing." "He was always one of my quietest customers," said the owner of the local video store. "But when he did have something to say it was always soothing and stimulating at the same time. When he walked away he would leave that thought in your mind. It made you wonder." America has been having the same reaction, but Hyde Parkers experienced it first.

If you think this sounds improbably quaint and Norman Rockwellish, like Anytown, USA, Hyde Parkers think so too. They often refer to their neighborhood as a "small town." Hyde Park isn't a town but, with a population of roughly 35,000, depending on who's counting and how, it is pretty small: 15 city blocks from north to south, another 15 or so from Washington Park on the west to its eastern boundary at the shore of Lake Michigan. Its sense of urban intimacy is reinforced by its isolation. It is the most racially integrated neighborhood in the nation's most racially segregated city. On three sides it is closed in by some of the most hellish slums in the country, miles of littered streets, acres of abandoned lots, block after block of shuttered storefronts and empty apartment buildings left over from the 19th century. These terminate abruptly at the edge of Hyde Park and give way to shade trees and lawns and stately brick mansions and huge, tidied-up apartment houses. Surrounded, Hyde Park is different from any neighborhood in Chicago--different from anywhere in America, for that matter.

Some people call it a college town, since its largest inhabitant, the institution that defines the neighborhood's character, is the University of Chicago, one of the world's most prestigious universities. A friend once described Hyde Park as "Berkeley with snow," and it does indeed have the same graduate-student flavor, the same political activism and boho intellectualism, the same alarmingly high number of men wandering about looking like NPR announcers--the wispy beards and wire rims, the pressed jeans and unscuffed sneakers, the backpacks and the bikes. (This is a pretty good description of William Ayers, by the way.) But the similarities can be overdone. "Not 'Berkeley with snow,' " a U. of C. professor said, when I mentioned my friend's comment to him. "It's the snow that keeps us from being Berkeley. The snow and the cold keep the street people away. It drives everyone inside. You don't have all the students who dropped out of school or graduated and refused to leave. If they stay, they do something. If not, they get out of town. It's too cold just to hang around."

This contributes to the neighborhood's relatively low crime rate and, in part, to the university's reputation as a home for squares and nerds, a buttoned-down "bastion of conservatism," in the phrase of one magazine writer. And the conservatism, by popular account, infects the neighborhood at large, tempers its politics, and adds to its diversity. But the reputation for right-wingery is based on a simple if imprecise bit of data that shocks the delicate sensibilities of college professors: Of the tens of thousands of faculty who have taught at the University of Chicago over the past half-century, perhaps as many as 65 have, at some point in their lives, voted for a Republican. Many of these insurgents were either disciples of the university's most famous faculty member, the free-market economist Milton Friedman, or were drawn to the school because of him; others came under the influence of Allan Bloom, the Straussian philosopher, who ran the university's Olin Center for Inquiry into the Theory and Practice of Democracy, along with a few classically minded scholars. Bloom is dead. So is Friedman. The Olin Center closed its doors in 2005. Their disciples and colleagues who remain at the university aren't getting any younger. It's unlikely that the school's wobbly reputation for conservatism, and the neighborhood's, will survive them.

The reputation for diversity, though, probably will survive. It's not often noted that the neighborhood's diversity has its limits. "In Hyde Park," a resident told me, " 'integration' means white people and black people." The nation's fastest growing ethnic group, Hispanics, is scarcely represented at all; same for Asians. The neighborhood is better known as a haven for the black upper class, especially those who don't want to move to an all-white suburb but also don't want the crime risks and miserable schools associated with the neighborhoods to the immediate south, west, and north. Some of these people are famous--Harold Washington, Chicago's first black mayor, lived in an apartment by the lake, and Muhammad Ali lived down the block from Louis Farrakhan, who lives in Elijah Muhammad's old digs, around the corner

from the house of Joe Louis's widow. Most are lawyers and business executives from the Loop, doctors and technicians from the university hospital center, administrators and professors from the university--united to the white upper class through shared politics and aspirations, and delighting in, congratulating one another on, their unique neighborhood.

Hyde Park has always been relatively affluent, but the neighborhood's character was changed forever beginning in the mid-1950s, when university officials orchestrated an ambitious scheme of urban renewal, paid for by the city and federal governments. The project was the first of its kind in Chicago, and one of the first in the country, and it served for a generation as a model for other cities, for better or worse--usually worse. But in Hyde Park urban renewal worked like a Swiss watch.

"You have to understand the mindset," a neighborhood preservationist, Jack Spicer, told me. "In the middle of the 1950s, the university thought they were in the middle of an emergency. Alarms were going off everywhere." All around Hyde Park, white flight was transforming Chicago, goosed by racial panic and the sleazy importunities of "blockbusters"--real estate speculators who bought the houses of fleeing whites at fire-sale prices, then flipped them at a high profit to incoming blacks. "The university figured Hyde Park was next," Spicer said. The school was having trouble attracting students and faculty. Administrators considered moving the campus to Arizona or New Mexico--anywhere pleasant--but balked at the expense. At last they decided that if they couldn't move to a nice neighborhood, they would make their neighborhood nice.

The aim of urban renewal in Hyde Park, according to the university's president, was "to buy, control, and rebuild our neighborhood" until it was a "community of similar tastes and interests." The program lasted a decade. By the end of it the neighborhood had been reconfigured physically and redefined socially. Vast stretches of the old Hyde Park were bulldozed, including the main shopping and entertainment (that is, honky-tonk) district along 55th Street. Planners clear-cut an entire subneighborhood of wooden bungalows that housed workers from the nearby slaughterhouses and the Indiana steel mills, scattering the residents to parts unknown. From these razed blocks sprung parking garages, dormitories, classroom buildings, parks, and rows of townhouses suitable for students and faculty.

What survived the wrecking ball was equally desirable: the mansions built during the neighborhood's day as the city's Gold Coast, in the 1890s, when it drew Armours, Swifts, and other monied families looking for a lakeside home. Just to the south, turn-of-the-century apartment houses were saved, refurbished, and offered as housing for the administrators and faculty at U. of C. Having uprooted most neighborhood businesses, the plan concentrated all commercial activity into three small shopping centers, from which most of the old shop owners were excluded. A single saloon survived. Notably absent from the scheme was any public housing for the poor. After ten years of urban renewal, the neighborhood's population had dropped by 40 percent.

Hyde Park's isolation was by design. At its boundaries, the university bought and leveled city blocks that could serve as a buffer, or moat, from the surrounding South Side as it filled with impoverished blacks. The isolation brings a whiff of unreality to the neighborhood. The place seems unrooted. It's neither one thing nor the other. Hyde Park lacks the freewheeling energy of a college town, and it lacks the surprises and variety of a healthy city neighborhood. Strolling the quiet streets on a morning in May you'll admire the lilacs spilling over the low stone fences, the mansions with the squares of lawn marching to the edge of the boulevards, the funky, vine-covered apartment buildings shaded by overarching oak and poplar. Only after a day or so do you notice what's not here. There are no movie theaters, for example, and not much commerce generally. There's nowhere to buy a pair of pants or shoes. There aren't many restaurants, and only a single overpriced restaurant catering to the culinary affectations of the yuppie trade--strange for a neighborhood with so many wealthy residents. Only in the last few months did the neighborhood get a reliable, clean, and well-stocked grocery store.

And both of these, the fancy restaurant and the new grocery store, are creatures of the university's paternalism. The university has long been aware that the neighborhood it created lacks the amenities that urban dwellers demand as compensation for the discomforts of city living. So when the neighborhood's only large grocery store failed recently--it was a customer-owned cooperative, whose empty shelves and accumulated gunk attested to its Soviet-like disdain for market forces--the university subsidized a new outlet from a "gourmet" grocery chain. Now everybody's happy. The fancy restaurant, too, was encouraged by the university as something its cultured faculty would like, and as a place where parents might take their student children on campus visits; the university keeps the restaurant owners afloat by providing business for their catering service. And, having obliterated the neighborhood's entertainment district 50 years ago, it is now trying to draw bars and clubs back to Hyde Park, either through subsidy or outright purchase. U. of C. recently bought and moved the South Side landmark Checkerboard Lounge close to campus, to restore the nightlife that the 1950s urban planners hoped to kill (and did).

Hyde Parkers sometimes seem strangely unaware of how completely their neighborhood's uniqueness is a product of the university's noblesse oblige. An outsider sees it most clearly in the university police cars that patrol Hyde Park around the clock, and in the emergency call boxes spaced throughout the entire neighborhood, far beyond the campus proper, that anyone can use at any time to summon campus cops. (The university police force is the second largest

police force in Illinois.) The paternalism is less obvious because it has never been racial. Urban renewal drove out as many poor whites as poor blacks; for university officials in the 1950s, enlightened liberals all, the panic was over a decline in social and economic class. "They wanted a comfortable place for the upper class to live," said Spicer, the preservationist. "They didn't want only black families, or all black families, but black families of the right sort were welcomed." The neighborhood's famous racial harmony is the result. The comedian (and later movie director) Mike Nichols, who got his start in a club on the old 55th Street, defined Hyde Park liberalism for all time: "Black and white, marching arm in arm, shoulder to shoulder against the poor."

Right out of college, Barack Obama placed himself in the middle of this curious legacy. Culturally he's never been a "South Sider," because no one on the south side thinks of Hyde Park as a South Side neighborhood. It's an anomaly that the writer and cultural critic Andrew Patner, a native Hyde Parker, tried to explain to me as we drove around the neighborhood one day.

"There's a certain wariness toward Hyde Park among South Side blacks, most of whom are poor," he said. "If you're from another neighborhood, you might go to Hyde Park on the weekends. But there's a word, *sadiddy*. It means you think maybe you're better than you are. Pretentious. That's sort of the view of Hyde Park. It's too weird, too far outside what most of Chicago knows."

This had consequences for Obama's political future. Most successful African-American politicians in Chicago come up through the Democratic big-city political machine--either the old machine of Richard J. Daley or the gentler version overseen by his son, the current mayor, Richard M. Daley. Even Harold Washington, now canonized as the greatest of Chicago reformers, was machine-made. By contrast, politicians from Hyde Park, white or black, actively opposed the machine and the headlock it had on the city's politics. "Politically," wrote the Chicago political analyst David Fremon, "Hyde Park has never joined the city." Obama is a politician of Hyde Park pedigree, outside the normal bloodlines of Chicago's black politics.

"When Barack announced for president," Patner told me, "it was a total ho-hum in the black community"--beyond Hyde Park, that is. "It just wasn't that big a deal."

A political rival, State Senator Donne Trotter, put it this way in an interview with the Chicago Reader: "Barack is viewed in part to be the white man in blackface in our community. You just have to look at his supporters. Who pushed him to get where he is so fast? It's these individuals in Hyde Park, who don't always have the best interests of the community in mind."

"That's one of the downsides to his background, coming up outside normal channels," Patner went on. "He's always had to prove himself with the black community. He never had that seal of approval. But there are upsides, too."

One upside is that Obama, the Hyde Parker, was automatically more appealing--less threatening--to white liberals, in Hyde Park and beyond. The other upside, said Patner, is that "because he came up through Hyde Park instead of the machine, he stayed clear of all the corruption that's involved with that."

By Chicago standards, Obama's sweetheart real estate deal with the convicted fixer Tony Rezko--who purchased the lot next to the house Obama was buying, effectively giving him a bigger yard for free--is almost beneath comment: a cost of doing business or a small professional benefit, typical of machine-backed pols and reformers alike. None of the progressive politicians I spoke with in Hyde Park considered it dismaying--"disappointing," as one oldtimer said, but hardly disqualifying. Most found in Obama instead a mint-perfect expression of their particular brand of politics.

"Barack is perfect for the neighborhood!" Rabbi Arnold Wolf told me, when I stopped by his Hyde Park house one afternoon for a talk. He's as round and white-bearded as Santa, with the same twinkle. He came to Hyde Park before urban renewal and saw its effects firsthand. For 25 years he led the congregation at KAM Isaiah Israel, a synagogue across the street from Obama's mansion. (Recently, the Secret Service contingent has been using its bathrooms.)

"You can't say Barack's a product of Hyde Park. He's not really from here. But everybody saw the potential early on. We had a party for him at our house when he was just starting, back in the Nineties. I said right away: 'Here's a guy who could sell our product, and sell it with splendor!' "

I asked him what the Hyde Park product was.

"People think we're radicals here, wild-eyed!" he said. "Bill Ayers--I know Bill Ayers very well. Bill Ayers is an aging, toothless radical. A pussycat. And his wife, too. I sat on a commission with his wife a few years ago. My god, she was more critical of the left than I was! The two of them, they're utterly conventional people. They had a violent streak at one time. But now--they're thoroughly conventional, just very nice, well-educated people from the neighborhood."

As it happened, I'd spent the evening before reading Ayers's blog, and lingered over a manifesto he posted in early April, after his friendship with Obama became national news. "I've never advocated terrorism," Ayers wrote, "never participated in it, never defended it. The U.S. government, by contrast, does it routinely and defends the use of it in its own cause consistently." Capitalism, he went on, "is exhausted as a force for progress: built on exploitation, theft, conquest, war, and racism, capitalism and imperialism must be defeated and a world revolution--a revolution against war and racism and materialism, a revolution based on human solidarity and love" and so on.

Just another guy in the neighborhood.

But back to the product Obama could sell?

"The thing is, it's not what you might think," Rabbi Wolf said. "It's not radical. It's not extreme. It's a rational, progressive philosophy based on experience. You see it here. This neighborhood is genuinely integrated. We did it here, we really did it! Not just talk about it. Look around. And Barack and his family fit right in. This is their neighborhood."

As he walked me to the door he mused about the urban renewal that created the new Hyde Park. He said he'd always been ambivalent about it.

"Even at the time, you could see the university was saving us, and it was destroying us," he said. "It was keeping us afloat, but it was also taking away the old characteristics, the old buildings, the old trees, the old roots. But it made the neighborhood different, unique. You notice there's no class conflict here."

He twinkled.

"That's because there's only one class--upper!"

The irony would be funny if it weren't so jarring: Black America, after 400 years of enforced second-class status, offers the country a plausible presidential candidate, and what's the charge made against him? He's an elitist.

Hyde Park may be partly responsible. Obama does show signs of having imbibed its view of the America beyond the moat. David Mendell, in his indispensable biography *Obama: From Promise to Power*, quotes a co-worker of Obama: "[Obama] always talked about the New Rochelle train, the trains that took commuters to and from New York City, and he didn't want to be on one of those trains every day. The image of a life, not a dynamic life, of going through the motions. . . . That was scary to him." In his own memoir, Obama depicts his mother fleeing the "smugness and hypocrisy" of her small Midwestern town--a town that Obama visited for the first time this year, campaigning. Only a lack of familiarity with the benign flow of middle-class American life could inspire clichés like these.

"I never had roots growing up," Obama has often said. It's the theme of his life, as he himself tells the story. He even wrote a book, a small masterpiece, about his tortured attempts to locate himself in the larger world. From Hawaii to Indonesia and back to Hawaii, then to Los Angeles and Manhattan and Cambridge, Mass., and finally to Hyde Park: He's never lived in a part of the country that's like 90 percent of the rest of the country. This struck me one afternoon when I drove from Obama's house to Trinity United Church of Christ, the now-controversial church where he worshipped for nearly 20 years. It's a long drive, 30 minutes or more. Whether you take the freeway or the surface streets, the route jolts you from the manicured quiet of Hyde Park through one bombed-out neighborhood after another. Then you arrive at Trinity, hard against the roaring freeway, at the edge of a district of blond-brick bungalows, some tidy and trim, others obscured by weeds, the shutters off their hinges. After services, Obama would get the family in the car and go home.

Hyde Park's the neighborhood he returned to, the place he'd chosen to live, and its roots were torn out 50 years ago. A college town, it has all the churning and transience the phrase implies. Everyone seems from somewhere else. The Armours, Swifts, and the other first families of Chicago left long ago. The working men and their families, who replaced them, were driven out by the university. The poor were secured at a safe distance. Inside, harmony reigned between white and black residents, but the whites drawn by the university were often here only temporarily, and the blacks who moved here have the same sense of displacement, even if they arrived from another neighborhood nearby.

This is the perfect place for a man without an identity to make one of his own choosing.

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