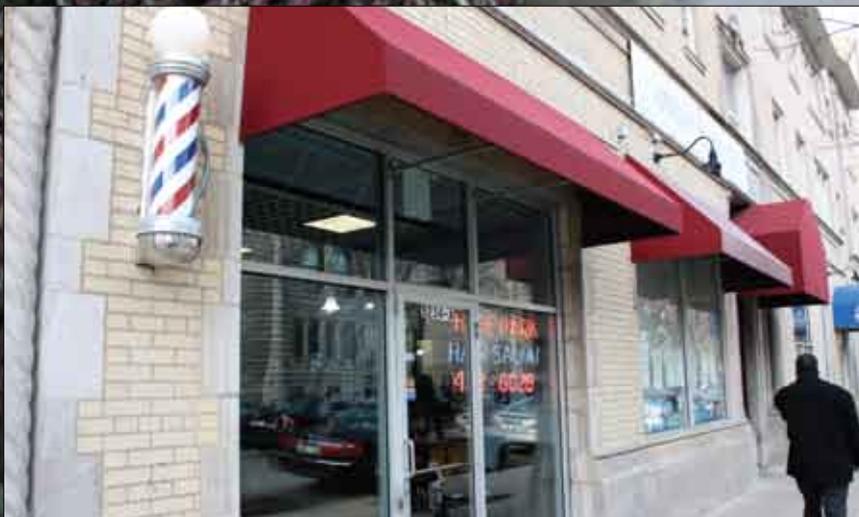


# ObamaLand

## CHICAGO'S IDYLIC AND INFLUENTIAL HYDE PARK NEIGHBORHOOD



By Kim Bookless

**ONE YEAR AGO** we elected our first president in decades to come from a major city. President Barack Obama's home is in Chicago's Hyde Park-Kenwood neighborhood, a tranquil leafy community just seven miles south of downtown. The Obamas' decision to raise their family here has aroused curiosity about how this neighborhood became so utopian, why it attracts so many powerful Chicagoans and, perhaps most importantly, how living there might shape the president's urban policy.

The community of Hyde Park was designed to be special from the beginning. With dreams of creating a summer resort area outside the city of Chicago, New York attorney Paul Cornell bought 300 acres of marshland in 1853 on the shore of Lake Michigan southeast of downtown Chicago. Naming the community Hyde Park, Cornell built a large hotel and sold the land surrounding it to buyers seeking an escape from the noise and dirt of the city. Staying true to his plans to create a suburban sanctuary studded with public parks, boulevards and plenty of fresh air, Cornell set forth strict rules against the development of heavy industry within the community. Cornell's park-building project was the beginning of both Chicago's exemplary park system and urban flight to the South Side.

Hyde Park was annexed to the City of Chicago in 1889 and saw dramatic changes from two events in the early 1890s: the founding of the University of Chicago and the construction of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. The university anchored the community and became the area's largest employer and landowner. The yearlong World's Fair had a lasting effect on Hyde Park and its surrounding areas, including construction to house fair workers and visitors and the improvement of transportation and other conveniences. The area experienced periods of building booms and slumps throughout the first half of the 20th century. By the 1950s the community was nearly a century old and showing distinct signs of deterioration, including overcrowding, blight and increased crime. The community became the site of the first federally funded urban renewal program, which garnered criticism from residents, neighborhood groups and the Archdiocese of Chicago. The renewal program continued, and a decade later the older and overcrowded parts of Hyde Park had been transformed into a stable and sophisticated small town environment.

*(continued)*

**Top:** The Obama family home is heavily guarded and hidden by vegetation.

**Middle:** East View Condos in Hyde Park where the Obamas lived before moving into their current home.

**Bottom:** President Obama's barber shop, the Hyde Park Hair Salon.



Before marrying Michelle, Obama lived on South Harper Street in Hyde Park.

**THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO** has drawn criticism for its prominent role in the urban renewal program (leveling entire blocks and hundreds of apartment buildings, among other things) and its voracious appetite for land outside the campus. Max Grinnell, University of Chicago lecturer and author of *Images of America: Hyde Park, Illinois*, agrees that while the university used a heavy hand in cleaning up and reshaping Hyde Park, its actions have kept the community from sliding into the marked decline seen in surrounding neighborhoods. Residents might consider it a utopia, but some neighborhood preservationists and historians feel the community was effectively sanitized and stripped of much of its character and culture. “The biggest failure of the urban renewal program was its lack of support for displaced small business owners and low-income residents, particularly artists,” says Grinnell.

The University of Chicago continues its give-and-take relationship with nearby communities, and neighborhood icons still occasionally get in the way of expansion plans. There are plans to bulldoze the highly successful 61st Street Garden, started a decade ago by neighborhood preservationist Jack Spicer in a vacant lot borrowed from the university. Jim Peters, president of Landmarks Illinois, says, “Like many large institutions, the U of C creates a love/hate relationship in Hyde Park. Its ongoing expansion creates tensions for adjacent neighbors, but its ongoing investments in area redevelopment also [have] created a very stabilizing force for the community.” The university invests significant funding and effort in its relationship with nearby neighborhoods. Susan Campbell, associate vice-president and director of the university’s Office of Civic Engagement, says, “The University of Chicago can contribute and engage the local communities and the city of Chicago in ways where the university’s research and educational resources can best be utilized.”

**SO WHAT IS IT** about Hyde Park, which covers just over one square mile, that draws people like the Obamas? While they are relative newcomers to the area, most of their friends are longtime residents of Hyde Park or adjacent Kenwood. Valerie Jarrett, a senior advisor at the White House and one of the Obamas’ closest friends, grew up in Hyde Park. Other friends live there partly due to its proximity to the University of Chicago. After spending years in a Hyde Park condo complex, the Obamas left multi-family living behind in 2005 when they paid \$1.65 million for a 96-year old red brick Georgian home in neighboring Kenwood. Hyde Park continues to figure prominently in the Obamas’ lives because

the Kenwood home, now guarded by the U.S. Secret Service, is just steps from Hyde Park Boulevard, the border between the two communities. Large portions of Hyde Park and Kenwood are in the National Register’s Hyde Park-Kenwood Historic District and Kenwood was designated a Chicago Landmark in 1979. Due in part to its diverse building types and eclectic nature, if Hyde Park is ever given Chicago Landmark status it will most likely be designated as multiple districts.

The Obamas likely settled in the Hyde Park area for the same reason many others choose to call it home: proximity to the University of Chicago, the lakefront, several parks, excellent public and private schools, and architectural icons like Frank Lloyd Wright’s Robie House. Interestingly, limited public transportation connections to the rest of Chicago have helped reinforce the community’s small town feel. “The Hyde Park-Kenwood community reflects many of the very best aspects of urban living in America: a wide diversity of housing types, an extremely walkable environment, proximity to neighborhood retailing and multi-ethnic character,” says Jim Peters. As a result property values continue to rise; the Grimshaw property at 5040 S. Greenwood Ave. adjacent to the Obama home is currently listed for sale at \$1,849,900. Prospective buyers are subject to a financial screen by the Grimshaws’ realtor and, presumably, a security clearance from the Secret Service. The “Obama Factor” certainly plays a part in the public’s intense interest in the property.

Hyde Park’s appeal is more than just neighborhood amenities and famous inhabitants, however. Residents here view their community as independent and progressive — unique but not elitist. The area is rich in diversity; a wide range of racial, religious and socioeconomic differences is represented here. The 2000 census showed Hyde Park’s total population was about 30,000. Roughly 46 percent of residents were Caucasian, 37 percent African-American, 11 percent Asian, 4 percent Latino, and 3 percent other. Kenwood, in contrast, was 76 percent African-American and 16 percent Caucasian, the rest Asians, Latinos and others. The area’s political climate is equally diverse; the University of Chicago is a bastion of conservative thinking surrounded by a mostly progressive and liberal community. This is a society that prides itself on the exchange of concepts and ideas and welcomes diversity and integration in its residents.

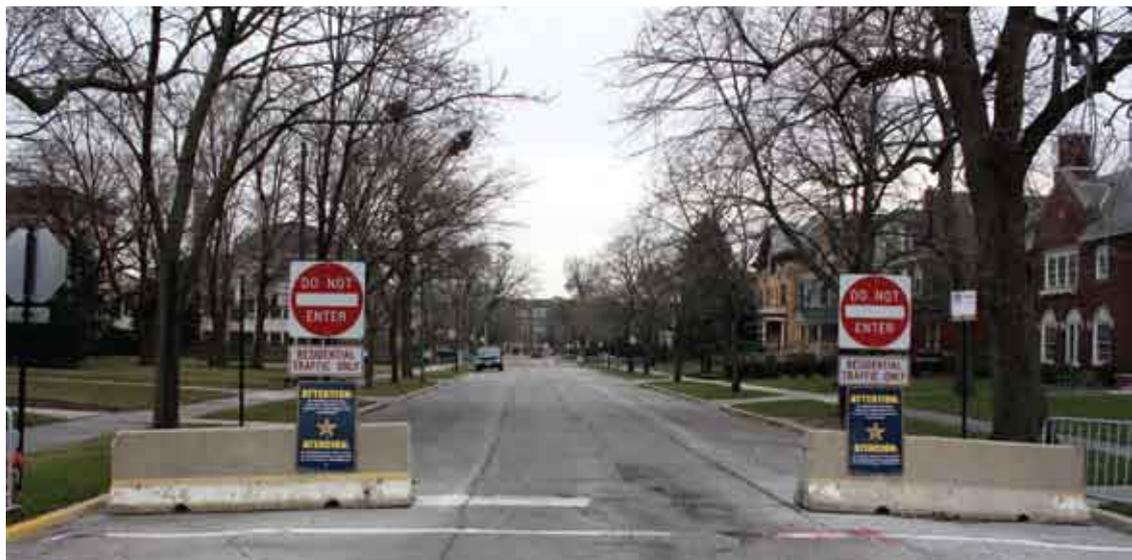


The Obamas frequented the Valois diner, a Hyde Park institution, during his tenure as a law professor at the University of Chicago.

**DURING THE CAMPAIGN**, Barack Obama laid out detailed and ambitious plans for his future urban policy. In February 2009 the president created the White House Office of Urban Affairs and signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to provide support and funding for urban communities. This office, which reports to Valerie Jarrett, still seems to be getting its bearings. Meanwhile, urbanists around the country are fretting at the perceived lack of accomplishments from the Urban Affairs staff.

It seems that, like his Urban Affairs Office, President Obama’s urban vision is still evolving. His experience as a community organizer on Chicago’s South Side gives him an understanding of inner city issues that his recent predecessors could not have had. Even though Hyde Park has been likened to an idyllic island set apart physically and culturally from inner city concerns, in reality the city of Chicago and its urban sprawl now surround the community. Perhaps President Obama will use Hyde Park as a model as he formulates his urban policy. “If someone is looking for an urban neighborhood to emulate, Hyde Park would be an excellent choice,” says Peters. Recognizing that the federal government has unintentionally encouraged pollution, congestion and urban sprawl, President Obama wants to focus on improving public transportation, sustainable development and energy efficiency. Cities across the U.S. are eagerly awaiting his next move.

*The last urban president was either James Garfield or John Kennedy, depending on how you look at it. Max Grinnell can be reached at [theurbanologist.com](http://theurbanologist.com).*



Barriers flank South Greenwood Avenue at 50th Street behind the Obama home. The area is known as the Mansion District.