

Impact of ICA's Uptown 5 Program - 1973-1979

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[\[Potential cover photo\]](#)

“Uptown is a great place to be alive” was the zeitgeist of the Institute of Cultural Affairs’ activities in the eponymous neighborhood during the 1970s. This decade witnessed the deepening of many issues associated with urban decline, such as unemployment, poverty, and environmental degradation, that became unavoidable realities for many cities across the United States. The Chicago neighborhood of Uptown was no stranger to these developments. In spite of its laudable diversity--ICA documents cite at least 29 different language groups residing in Uptown in 1974--its material wealth and income paled in comparison to its cultural wealth. Once a model for successful, up-and-coming “suburban” neighborhoods and a port of entry for immigrant families, Uptown was marked by abandoned buildings and other signs of decline after the evaporation of federal funds and social action projects by the end of the 1960s.

The Institute of Cultural Affairs moved to Uptown in 1972. Coming off of the cusp of their achievements thus far with the Fifth City community project on Chicago’s West Side, the Institute saw an opportunity to further pursue its mission of empowering community development in Uptown. In 1973, it began holding weekly meetings with community members to plan activities and cultivate relationships that would help flesh out and execute broader [plans](#) of demonstrating, enacting, and building community in Uptown. To better address issues and represent constituents within Uptown, the Institute implemented a “[Ward System](#),” by which the community was divided into five sections. In so doing, the Institute sought “closer contact with

the issues and needs of the community, and for the caring of each individual and family,” while also allowing for additional feedback and program-building through bimonthly meetings in each of the Wards.

In keeping with their objectives, the Institute’s action plans in Uptown were based on three dimensions: economics, politics, and--most importantly--culture. The implementation of “Problem-Solving Units” (PSU’s, for short) was fundamental to the effort of the Uptown 5 to address the various issues confronting the community. Initially implemented effectively in Fifth City, PSU’s were planning sessions in which groups within the Wards would meet to “break loose new insights” and pinpoint problems and potential solutions that task forces would later translate into concrete action. From “elderly engagement” to issues surrounding housing and beautification, these units helped members of Uptown 5 to better conceive of their immediate priorities as an activated community.

Cultural work ran through the heart of the activities and objectives of the Uptown 5. The Guild was founded as the result of some of the first cultural programs implemented in Uptown. In the summer of 1973, the Institute facilitates a LENS (Leadership Effectiveness and New Strategies) course, where representatives of social agencies, businesses, and residents of Uptown agreed to form the Guild to better organize and “demonstrate” Uptown as a community with shared priorities and values. It was through Guild meetings and LENS courses that the Wards articulated their founding [objectives](#). These included analysis of the economic, political, and cultural forces (external and internal) that were driving issues within the community; to build

cultural structures and programs by which Uptown residents could better see itself as a community; and to “catalyze participation in community concerns,” among many other goals.

The Guilds were particularly engaged with assisting the elderly in the community with education and social events. Programs were crafted, for instance, to redress issues that elderly residents reported to the ICA, including the creation of a “victim image” based on their inability to work and participate in a “work ethic society.” In response, the Guild devised [events](#) called “miracles” intended to better engage and integrate senior residents with the Uptown Community. Such events included annual Christmas celebrations, an elders’ “Impact Day,” and an annual elders’ “Valentine’s Ball” at the Aragon Ballroom, as well as regular LENS courses.

With regard to economics, the Institute conducted multiple studies in order to better understand and construct plans around issues with which residents most contended. Reports issued by the guilds detailed the unequal distribution of income and housing quality between and within the wards, among other measures of class and material wealth. These [efforts](#) allowed the Guild to collectively propose plans to better equalize the affordability and quality of housing to residents across lines of class and race in the neighborhood. In addition, the Uptown 5 recognized day labor as a prevalent condition and driver of inequality in the neighborhood during the 1970s, and pursued avenues of addressing it.

The “political” activities undertaken by Uptown 5 tended to be both indirect and complementary of economic and cultural priorities. Documents issued by the Guild’s “Community PSU” implied

that the political work served an auxiliary role to the Ward's objectives primarily because it sought to limit work or improvement directed by outside forces.

Indeed, much of the "political" programming fell in line with community work intended to make immediate improvements to the image and conditions of Uptown. This work included beautification programs. In 1973, among its earliest programs, the Guild planned and built "mini-parks" to add much needed greenery and leisure space to Uptown. Beginning in 1975, the Guild also implemented "Clean-Up," "Paint-Up," and "Plant-Up" days as part of a broader [Community Beautification Program](#) to make use of vacant lots in a way that would benefit and uplift the self-image of Uptown as a community. In the Fall of 1976, alone, five vacant lots (one in each ward) were cleared, cleaned, and planted as mini-parks in the effort to "dramatize the possibility of space care and improvement."

Towards the end of the decade, the Wards also instituted Global Women and Community Youth Forums to activate and prompt group-oriented issue-building among constituents it identified in the community. For example, in a one-day Youth Forum in November of 1978, participating youth cited issues of unemployment, poor protection and harassment by police, and a lack of "street sense" or community pride. By providing spaces to discuss such issues in the context of the ICA's mission and history, the Guild was able to help members of the Uptown community to better articulate their grievances and visions for the future. [EMBED AND CITE "COMMUNITY YOUTH FORUM PACKET"--YOUTH FORUM FOLDER, UPTOWN 5]

In short, the ICA proved instrumental in helping to organize and innervate Uptown through the Guild system between 1973 and 1979. Its members, programs, and community partners sought to make and, in many ways, achieved improvements both material and intangible for the North Side community--from helping to better understand and organize around concrete economic or political issues to reinforcing a sense of community identity and spirit. While the issues surrounding housing, crime and the like remain ongoing concerns, the work of the ICA serves as testimony to the idea that community improvement and enrichment begins with the culture and the people of the community themselves.

Related documents already on archive site that we could include a link to:

ICA--Institute's History

[What Happened in Summer '73](#)

[The Year of the Guild](#)