During the Fall Semester of 2015, the University of Illinois Chicago Studio, a partnership between the Illinois School of Architecture and the Department of Urban and Regional Planning undertook an urban design and land use plan with the goal of providing public and private stakeholders with a vision for the future built environment of the Near North neighborhood.

Working with a broad range of stakeholders including Chicago Department of Planning and Development staff, professionals at the Chicago Department of Transportation, residents of the Near North community, a design team at VOA Architects, and current staff of the Chicago Housing Authority, the Studio team developed a plan for building types, land use, and transportation improvements commensurate with existing plans and input gleaned from the range of professionals and residents who graciously provided input over the course of the Fall semester.

The Chicago Housing Authority’s plan to redevelop the former site of the Cabrini-Green public housing complex as a mixed-income, medium-density community is slated to begin in 2017. Over 1,800 affordable units will be built.

The Near North TIF was established in 1997 and represents the boundary for this study. TIF spending within the district has primarily gone to capital improvement projects aimed at luring private development to the neighborhood.

Transit-oriented Development is a key theme in the Near North as plans to reconstruct an elevated rail station on the CTA’s Brown Line have been discussed. A station would add for denser residential development in line with the City’s TOD ordinance.

Planning for People Prosperity
Economic Development

While the Near North appears on pace for significant residential and commercial growth, the outcomes of long-time residents and the families moving into the yet-to-be-constructed 1,800 public housing units remains tenuous. Existing median household income reflects the largest cohorts of residents at the lowest and highest ends of the income spectrum.

An economic development plan based on workforce training presents a promising option. A plan similar to the short-lived Opportunity Chicago initiative which produced economic stimulus benefits on the order of $40 million and placed over 5,100 public housing residents into jobs offers promise. TIF funds, which have predominantly been used to spur private investment in the neighborhood would serve as the funding mechanism for programs in skills training, community college enrollment, sector-based training initiatives, and a range of other programs that can better connect public housing residents to long-term professional growth.

Place-Based Strategies
• Increase building density near the future Brown Line station, using this area as the neighborhood’s “front door.”
• Encourage private developers to include additional open space in development plans.
• Move forward with plans to construct a selective enrollment high school along the North Branch of the Chicago River.

People-Based Strategies
• Prioritize workforce development as a goal of TIF.
• Build partnerships with private sector employers to address skill gaps within in-demand sectors.
• Explore the possibility of renewing an Opportunity Chicago-style workforce program that focuses on the needs of public housing residents.
• Increase funding to Community College of Chicago programs that offer e-learning opportunities.

Myke Griseta, MUP ‘16
Faculty Advisor: Benjamin Lee
University of Illinois Department of Urban and Regional Planning