

Article

A Tale of Two Divvys: The Bicycle Sharing System of Chicago

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Abstract: How did Chicago develop one of the largest and most successful Bicycle Sharing Systems in a very short time, what benefits does this system afford to the city and its residents, and what developments threaten this success? Urban areas benefit significantly and in a variety of ways from micromobility, which contributes to an urgently needed sustainability transformation. In this qualitative, exploratory case study, we examine the foundations of the success and types of benefits of the second largest bicycle sharing system in North America, the City of Chicago's Divvy. We juxtapose our data, which consists of participant and non-participant observations, fieldwork, interviews, documents, and social media posts, with a typology gleaned from the academic literature on bicycle sharing systems to explore Divvy's wide-ranging positive impact. This typology includes economic, environmental, health and safety, and quality of life benefits. In addition, we identify two further benefits from our data: modularity and zoetic capacity. Despite this impact, we show how the consequences of changes in the ownership structure since 2018 are threatening the success and benefits. The emerging service model is no longer based on the initial pillars of its success: the city's policy and vision for Divvy, the funding and ownership structure, and the strategic deployment of bicycle stations to balance demand potential with locational equity. Based on our study, we conclude that it is unlikely that the new micromobility system, refocused on more profitable e-bike and e-scooter rentals in privileged neighborhoods, is viable in the long term because it is abandoning the core values that embedded Divvy into the fabric of the city. Worse, the emergent model may actually contribute to a systematic exclusion of poorer neighborhoods and less privileged residents of Chicago.



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1. Introduction

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* [1] (p. 1)

‘Bicycle paradise’ is not a term one would associate with Chicago, the Windy City or Chiberia (combining “Chicago” and “Siberia”) on the southwestern shores of Lake Michigan. As the third largest city of the US, Chicago is home to about 2.7 million residents scattered across 77 distinct neighborhoods and nearly 10 million in its metropolitan area. The city spans nearly 600 square kilometers, more than five times the size of Paris, and

is made up of a complex street system covering more than 6000 km [2]. Chicago experiences long and harsh winters with average temperatures of -3 degrees Celsius between December and February [3]. There are 25 to 30 days of severe weather per year, including tornadoes, winds of 120 km/h or more, and hail [4]. Like nearly all US cities, Chicago is car-centric, which means that urban planning and its infrastructure privileges automobility as a primary mode of transportation. According to People Powered Movement [5], Chicago has some of the worst bike safety rankings. The City of Chicago reports an annual average of approximately 1400 bike crashes [5]. The extensive geographic, meteorological, pollution, road, and traffic challenges make it difficult to imagine how a bicycle sharing system (BSS), which typically serves short distance and limited time goals [6,7], and which is one of the most effective ways to introduce sustainable micromobility, could be successfully integrated into the city.

Despite this, Chicago ranks high in terms of sustainable mobility. It is listed regularly as one of the most cyclable and walkable cities in the US [8,9] and, with the Divvy Bicycle Sharing System (Divvy), Chicago has implemented the second largest and one of the most successful BSSs in the US. To examine its broader societal impacts, the aim of this article is to answer two questions:

- (1) What benefits does Divvy offer to the City of Chicago?
- (2) What developments may facilitate or challenge Divvy's success?

To answer these questions, we first present a background section and methodological approach, followed by a first results section that focuses on the benefits of Divvy. The second results section examines recent developments that facilitate or challenge Divvy's current success.

2. Background

Chicago's Divvy embodies one of the most successful implementations of a BSS in the US. Launched in June 2013, it rapidly developed into one of the largest BSSs and, by 2018, it recorded 15 million rides and 4 million trip hours [10]. In 2022, Divvy recorded 6.3 million bike and e-scooter trips and nearly 45,000 members [11]. At its 10-year anniversary, Divvy has reached all 77 neighborhoods and become the second largest BSS in North America. In conjunction with Chicago's progressive public transportation policies, this development created "an extensive network of buffered and protected bike lanes and related infrastructure", which has earned Chicago the reputation of being one of the most bicycle-friendly cities in the nation [10] (p. 2). Case studies conducted by Smith and Schwieterman [10], Qian and Jaller [12], Bartling [13], Smith and O'Neil [14], and Zhang et al. [15] have mapped these initial achievements and tend to divide Divvy's development into four phases: the implementation phase in 2013, the first expansion phase to 2015, the second expansion phase from 2016, and a consolidation phase that started in 2018. Three unique characteristics underpin the rapid and successful deployment of Divvy during the implementation and first expansion phases: the city's policy and vision to develop a BSS, the funding and ownership structure, and the strategic deployment of physical bicycle stations.

Policy and vision: Divvy's success story began with progressive transportation policies, including the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act [16], the Chicago Streets for Cycling 2020 Plan [17], the Sustainable Chicago 2015 [18], and the GO TO 2040s [19,20], each contributing to a comprehensive regional framework that aimed to secure Chicago's long-term goals toward sustainability, inclusiveness, and future prosperity. Within these policies, mobility goals addressed traffic congestion mitigation and a reduction in private vehicle dependence, where a BSS was seen as an integral measure [14]. Chicago's City Council envisioned the new BSS to balance

demand potential (informed by population density, employment density, share of population 20 to 39 years of age, percent of bike and walk commute share, business concentration, proximity to parks, public transit boardings and frequency) and locational equity (informed by household income, percent non-white population, and educational attainment) [14] (p. 5).

Thus, the City Council pursued multiple aims from its inception, including the mitigation of environmental challenges, promotion of economic activity, and advancement of social inclusion.

Funding and ownership: Because these policies aligned with national and state objectives, the City of Chicago was able to access federal and state funding for its new BSS. Initial start-up capital came from the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) federal grant program, which provided \$18 million with the understanding that the BSS would “replace short automobile trips with bike trips, improve access to transit, and replace shorter transit trips” [14] (p. 4). Other contributions included direct allocations of taxes and various state grants that, among other projects, funded the program’s northern expansion into the abutting City of Evanston [7,21,22]. Significantly, federal and state support required the City of Chicago to align its policy objectives and vision despite the concurrent public–private partnership agreements between the Chicago Department of Transport and various companies, including Alta Bicycle Share, Motivate, and, later, Lyft.

Strategic deployment: Balancing demand potential with locational equity informed the strategic deployment of bicycle stations in several ways. To exploit demand potential and kick-start the program, Divvy initially launched 100 stations in Chicago’s urban core in June 2013, after which it rapidly expanded to 300 stations in 21 of Chicago’s 77 neighborhoods by October of that year [10,14]. Within these boundaries, the BSS station network was relatively dense and strategically integrated into existing public transit infrastructure, which, as planned, created an impressive transit-oriented impact: Within three months, Divvy overlapped with “84 CTA [Chicago Transit Authority] L and Metra rail stations and 2 549 CTA and Pace bus stops” [14] (p. 5).

To foster locational equity, subsequent expansion phases not only extended Divvy’s footprint across the city but explicitly included the lower-income communities of Englewood, Humboldt Park, and North Lawndale in 2015, and Austin, West Englewood, and West Garfield Park in 2016. Divvy also extended its reach beyond Chicago’s city limits by expanding into the prosperous neighboring communities Oak Park to the west and the City of Evanston, the home of Northwestern University, to the north, although the former canceled its participation in 2017 because it deemed the program not cost-effective. Nevertheless, Divvy expanded beyond the city center to lower income communities and beyond city boundaries in a short period of time.

Despite its initial successes, a number of challenges remained. First, Divvy’s expansion followed the same pattern as Chicago’s public transit systems. As it spread outward, the BSS infrastructure became less concentrated such that transit and Divvy stations were situated further apart. As a consequence, the BSS connected to fewer bus stops and metro stations [14]. Second, the BSS infrastructure remained concentrated in more affluent neighborhoods, while economically weaker communities are still underserved, which contributes to significantly lower ridership rates there [14] (p. 20) (see also [10,23,24]). While largely effective in many ways, mobility practices lag behind Chicago’s sustainable mobility vision, even within the limits of its BSS and especially in relation to the balance between demand potential and locational equity [10,14,24].

Nevertheless, Divvy altered large parts of Chicago in fundamental ways, bringing many benefits to the city and its residents. As a case study, this paper examines Divvy’s current benefits to the City of Chicago and potential challenges to its success.

3. Materials and Methods

The aim of this exploratory, qualitative case study [25–27] is to study Divvy, the BSS of the City of Chicago, in relation to its success, contributions, and challenges. As with most case studies, our data collection and analysis methods aim to investigate the unique, context-dependent characteristics that combine to yield insights into the specific case under investigation. Data for this case study include fieldwork, participant- and nonparticipant observations conducted between July 2021 and January 2024, as well as textual, audio, and visual materials, including policy and strategy documents from the City of Chicago and the

State of Illinois, academic publications, strategy and annual reports from NGOs, lobbying, and advocacy groups, websites, blogs, vlogs, social media outlets, newspapers, podcasts, and conversations with Divvy users and employees. We analyzed the data using Content Configuration Analysis (CCA) [28–30]. Related to thematic and content analyses, CCA is a qualitative method that can be adapted to analyze all non-numeric data, including textual, audio, and visual data. In the case study context, this method has been successfully applied in different research contexts (for example, [31–36]). In this study, we used CCA to conduct a three-step analysis: We first employed a literature review to identify benefits associated with BSSs in general and how benefits as outlined in the literature are evident in Chicago *in situ*. A second step explored our data for additional benefits of the Divvy system not listed in the general BSS literature. In the final analytic step, we explored current facilitators and challenges to Divvy’s success.

We used four protocols of triangulation to enhance the quality of findings for this case study [25,36–40]: First, methodological triangulation combines different data collection methods throughout the research process. We combined participant and nonparticipant observations and fieldwork with the analysis of textual, audio, and visual data. Second, data source triangulation refers to the process of comparing and contrasting different data sources to ensure that observations and reports converge and overlap [25]. In our study, we matched and compared textual, audio, and visual data with participant and nonparticipant observations from the field. Third, investigator triangulation concerns the process of collaborating with multiple investigators to enhance research quality. For this case study, three researchers collaborated in the fieldwork, data collection, and analyses. Fourth, theoretical triangulation enhances quality by embedding research findings in existing theoretical and empirical studies. For this case study, we conducted a review of the literature to assist in framing and interpretation, and to strengthen and enrich our research findings.

4. Results

4.1. The Benefits of Divvy for the City of Chicago

4.1.1. Benefits Associated with Micromobility and Their Manifestation in Chicago

The reasons for matching benefits of Divvy for the City of Chicago in line with the literature on BSS more generally are threefold: to explore the extent to which the benefits listed in the literature correspond to those in our data; to place into the specific Chicago context and our case study the benefits covered more generally in the literature; and to identify benefits in our data not covered in the BSS literature.

To develop a typology of the benefits associated with micromobility from the literature, we reviewed a range of topics relating to micromobility, including the adoption of BSS and its role toward sustainable mobility; operational studies focusing on basic features of usage, implementation, maintenance, optimization, and rebalancing of BSSs; promotion and marketing strategy studies; social science case studies that examine the environmental, economic, and social benefits of BSSs; methodological papers that conceptualize and predict BSS trends; and policy and planning research on micromobility.

Based on our review of BSS-relevant benefits in the literature, we created a taxonomy in Table 1 that reflects micromobility advantages based on economic benefits, environmental benefits, benefits associated with health and safety, and benefits associated with quality of life. This table also presents descriptions of how these benefits are evident in our case study data.

Economic benefits: The literature on BSSs highlights cascading economic benefits for the city, its neighborhoods and communities, individual residents, and local business. A bike-friendly reputation promotes cities as forward-thinking and appealing places to move to or live in, which draws and maintains human capital [6,12,41]. Micromobility connects residents to “the resources and amenities they need—from jobs and schools to services and more”, which contributes to cities’ quality and tax base [42] (p. 1) (see also [6,43–45]). Garnering economic benefits have indeed been an important motivation for Chicago’s

transit-oriented development as former Chicago Department of Transport commissioner Gabe Klein explained in 2013: When Chicago provides “services like bike share, the city seems cooler, and now maybe the college kid doesn’t move to the coast. That kid ends up staying in Chicago [and] we have to do everything we can to help stimulate this kind of growth” [46] (pp. 3–4). Promoting micromobility may furthermore revitalize and uplift marginalized communities [6,47–49], an important goal for establishing Divvy from the outset. Two examples illustrate how Divvy has played a role in securing economic benefits for Chicagoans: In 2015, the Chicago Department of Transport implemented the equity-based program Divvy for Everyone (D4E) [7,50], which provided low-income Chicagoans with an annual membership for \$5 [50,51]. To facilitate inclusion of people without credit cards, the city opened five D4E enrollment locations [52] and included social welfare programs, such as SNAP, WIC, LIHEAP, or public housing assistance as qualifying criteria for the program. Second, Divvy’s annual member subscription fee of \$75, introduced in 2013, only increased in 2020 to \$99 [53]. Alas, as part of the recent consolidation phase, annual membership has risen to \$144 per year under a new ownership structure. Divvy membership provides access to a non-electric Divvy bicycle in unlimited 45 min time blocks. Whether members require the bicycle for a five-minute ride to a public transit station, a longer commute to work, a trip to a nearby store, or a leisure ride shared with family and friends along Lake Michigan (docking the bicycle within the 45 min limit as often as necessary), the bicycle rental does not incur additional costs. Here is a rider recounting why they use Divvy for more than short trips:

Well, I obviously wouldn’t take a long Divvy ride when I am in a rush or to get to a place quickly. But there are two great things about taking a long Divvy ride—you can actually make a nice day out of it. I can pick a nice area away from where I live and take my wife, and we just go to a park or a cool neighborhood or whatever. So it gets you out of where you live with friends and family. And if you went too far or get tired or don’t feel like it anymore, you just park it and take the L [rapid transit system] back home. And the other thing is fitness. It is so much better than being in a stupid gym.

Table 1. A typology of BSS benefits from the micromobility literature and its manifestation in the City of Chicago.

Types of Micromobility Benefits According to the Literature	Chicago Benefits <i>In Situ</i>
Economic	
<i>City:</i> attract and retain residents, revitalization, benefit the housing market, improved tax base from and for residents and local businesses <i>Individual/Community:</i> affordability (esp. public transport in relation to private car ownership), reduced household expenditure, (travel) time savings, local investment <i>Local business:</i> commercial activity, especially for SMEs, higher revenue, local customer base and support	Affordable access, housing ads advertising bikeability, Divvy stations near public transport stations, parks, locally owned shops, and places of worship; example: “Divvy for Everyone”
Environmental	
Reduced dependency on private cars, access to efficient and sustainable mobility, traffic pollution and congestion mitigation, contribution to carbon neutrality, increase in environmental consciousness	Strategic Divvy infrastructure development; example: “Bloomington Trail”
Health and safety	
<i>Physical health:</i> active lifestyle, increased physical activity, noncommunicable and chronic disease mitigation <i>Mental health:</i> reduced stress, lowering depression, contribution to happiness and resilience <i>Safety:</i> safety in numbers, reduced accidents, and fatalities	Daily commuting habits, leisure activities; example: “Labor Day Holiday” and “Bike the Drive”

Table 1. Cont.

Types of Micromobility Benefits According to the Literature	Chicago Benefits <i>In Situ</i>
Quality of life	
Increased transport diversity and efficiency, expanded access and reduced barriers to mobility, complementarity with other modes of public transit, first-and last-mile solutions	Diversity, efficiency, and complementarity; example: “Divvy and Transit App”

While we have been able to confirm the accessibility, convenience, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness across a variety of bicycle trips as long as we stayed within the time-limits and well-serviced regions, various research projects have studied the tangible benefits to Chicago residents, including reducing household expenditure, time savings, and additional revenue to local businesses [6,7,47,49,54–56].

Environmental benefits: Reducing private car dependency is perhaps the most well-established environmental benefit associated in the literature on micromobility, but others include how micromobility generally and BSSs specifically promote more efficient and sustainable mobility options [7,47,49,57–60], how environmental pollution and road congestion are mitigated [7,49,61–64], how greenhouse gas emissions are reduced and thus contribute to carbon neutrality [6,58,65–67], and how environmental consciousness is promoted [6,49,64,68]. The potential for Divvy to contribute to environmental benefits is best illustrated by the scale of the development of bicycle-related infrastructure in Chicago. While more than 270 km of bike lanes existed in 2010 [17], mayor Emanuel Rahm announced in 2011 the construction of an additional 161 km of bike paths within four years [69]. This, in conjunction with associated policy frameworks, such as the Chicago Streets for Cycling 2020 Plan [17] and the Sustainable Chicago 2015 [18], introduced major bicycle-related infrastructure that coincided with the expansion of Divvy. During 2011 and 2012, a number of demonstration bike paths were completed to showcase the benefits of bicycle infrastructure, traffic calming, and increased safety [17,70,71], followed by an expansion of 35 km of new bike lines and 14 km of restriping of roadways to prioritize bicycling in 2013, 63 km new and 19 km of restriping in 2014, 41 km new and 26 miles of restriping in 2015, and 38 km new bike lanes in 2016 [72,73]. Such efforts corresponded with the expansion of the city’s green spaces. The Bloomingdale Trail is one of numerous illustrative examples: Developed between 2013 and 2015, this rail-to-trail project repurposed an abandoned elevated rail line, turning it into a nearly 5 km long green space for cyclists and pedestrians [74]. Significantly, this line stretches across four neighborhoods and connects four public parks, capitalizing on existing infrastructure to enhance access to nature and recreation [75].

Health and safety: Any mode of transportation that involves human-powered travel, such as walking or cycling, is beneficial to health [24,61]. Research links active lifestyles to a range of physical health outcomes including the prevention or alleviation of symptoms of noncommunicable diseases, such as hypertension, obesity, heart disease, and diabetes [6,7,49,58,76–80]. While these physical health benefits are often highlighted to advocate for BSS policies, Bateman et al. [81] discovered that bikeshare users themselves tend to prioritize other benefits, such as having fun and reducing stress, as their primary motivators. Other studies support these findings, reporting cascading benefits associated with reducing stress (especially compared to driving), alleviating depression, and improving overall resilience and quality of life [61,80,82–84]. While such physical and mental benefits are impressive by themselves, the potential impact of BSS-related micromobility is especially apparent in that it reorients routines.

We provide two Chicago-specific examples to illustrate this: The first relates to daily commuting patterns where Divvy stations situated away from the urban core empty out during the morning commute as people use the BSS to reach nearby public transit options to get to work. While this may pose challenges for a mid-morning bike ride, it also shows how this mode of transportation has become embedded in many of Chicago’s communities. The opposite trend, Divvy stations filling up during the evening commute as people return from

work, was also observed in a number of residential neighborhoods during our fieldwork. These commuting patterns are so well established that Divvy rewards riders with perks if they move bikes from full stations to stations with few or no bikes [85,86]. The second example connects to how Divvy is appropriated over weekends as people join family, friends, and colleagues for various recreational activities, whether taking a Divvy bicycle to the park, the beach, or to the many street festivals and cultural activities across the city. During these times, it is common to find empty stations in residential areas and overflowing Divvy stations at parks, beaches, and event venues. Most holidays, such as Labor Day and Presidents Day, or events such as Bike the Drive, are exemplary of the transformative mobility potential of Divvy. While weekends and holidays provide the opportunity for gatherings as people cycle along Lake Michigan's bike lanes, events such as Bike the Drive target residents who are not yet regular bicycle users to integrate cycling into their life. Organized by the non-profit Active Transportation Alliance (Active Trans), Bike the Drive is an annual event that turns DuSable Lake Shore Drive into a car-free zone for Chicagoans to enjoy [87]. The 48 km course is open to everyone, and Divvy provides the opportunity for those who do not own their own bicycle to participate and to foster a more sustainable city. In 2022, more than 16 000 riders participated in the event [87].

With regard to safety, the literature highlights how increasing bike-use results in what is known as Safety-In-Numbers or SIN [88]: When the number of cyclists in a city increases and drivers become more accustomed to sharing the road, it increases the safety for cyclists while reducing bicycle-related accidents [49,52,61,62,88,89]. In conjunction with this literature, millions of Divvy rides each year make a contribution toward Chicagoans health and safety. Indeed, we were surprised how many car drivers yielded to or accommodated bicycle riders, and how easy it was to ride bicycles even during traffic congestion or on busy roads.

Quality of life benefits: Transit-oriented micromobility improves the overall quality of life for residents because it introduces efficiency and mobility diversity into a city's mobility landscape [47,57,68]. On the one hand, it expands access by providing mobility options to those who do not have access to a car, and by reducing entry barriers for new and potential cyclists because they do not need to purchase, store, or maintain their own bicycles [6,90,91]. On the other hand, transit-oriented micromobility tends to complement other modes of public transit [47,48,92,93] because it provides fast and convenient first- and last-mile mobility solutions [47,94,95] and therewith significantly extends the footprint of fixed-route bus, metro, and rail services [6,64,94–97]. From the beginning, Divvy was strategically designed to complement and diversify the city's public transit network, while aiming to reduce congestion and expensive road extensions and parking infrastructure. While we have already highlighted the extensive overlap between Divvy and Chicago's bus and rail services in an earlier section, another example relates to the partnership between Divvy and Transit App that was introduced in 2016 [97]. A well-established public transportation access app, Transit App, was already in daily use by Chicagoans "to find the nearest and fastest way to get from Point A to Point B, [making it] a great match for Divvy" [97] (p. 1). From 2016, the transportation app enabled people to identify nearby Divvy stations, allowed access to Divvy bikes previously only possible with a Divvy member key, and the ability to purchase bicycle sharing passes within the app [97]. It created a seamless integration of the entire transportation system as a senior executive from Trans App explained during the partnership launch:

We show them all their options in one place: they can watch their next bus approaching in real-time, find nearby bike share and car share stations, or check the ETA for the closest Uber. Now, by adding payment functionality, we're enabling people to easily use innovative services like Divvy, and ultimately save them time and money in their daily commute [97] (p. 1).

The enhanced planning and access capabilities initiated by the partnership between Divvy and Transit App illustrates the success of Divvy as an integrated first- and last-mile mo-

bility solution, as well as a way to further develop a more efficient transportation system, while concurrently reducing traffic congestion and the need for expensive infrastructure investment.

The expansive and multidimensional benefits associated with BSSs outlined in the literature and their connections to the context of Chicago illustrates well the range of benefits that Divvy has introduced to the city, its communities, its residents, and its local businesses. It also illustrates how the city introduced a well-planned and wide-ranging BSS that created economic, social, and environmental benefits.

More generally, the benefits described in a well-established body of research are not only clearly present in Chicago but our case study furthermore illustrates the extent to which Chicago integrated Divvy into its policy landscape and infrastructure to make use of these benefits. Our literature review on micromobility, however, did not cover additional benefits that an analysis of our case study data revealed.

4.1.2. Motility and Divvy

Motility refers to the capacity of people, goods, data, knowledge, information, and services to be socio-spatially mobile. To be mobile in the sense of motility, people access and appropriate the capacity for socio-spatial mobility according to their abilities, desires, and circumstances [98]. Motility, akin to economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital [99], is a form of spatial capital that can be accumulated by, invested in, and exchanged between individuals. For example, when individuals can reliably and cost-effectively commute to school or university, motility as a form of capital can be transformed into cultural capital. Similarly, when people can reliably and cost-effectively commute to their place of work, motility can be transformed into economic capital. However, motility as a form of capital cannot only be held by individuals. Motility as capital extends beyond the mobile person and can be a quality associated with a particular place (e.g., street, neighborhood, or city) within which mobility capital is invested: A cyclable and walkable neighborhood with cafés and local businesses not only benefits from the micromobility practices of its residents and visitors, but it also “stores” motility in its corresponding infrastructure and identity. Accordingly, motility is not just about spatial mobility of individuals but refers to the interdependence between social systems and spatial displacement. In other words, an accumulation of micromobility of entities shape the structure of social systems (e.g., development of commuting infrastructure; development and evolution of a BSS; and transformation of socioeconomic and sociocultural interactions) as, reciprocally, a cyclable and walkable city imbued with motility capital creates value for its residents, visitors, and local businesses (e.g., public safety and health; local spending; improved tax base; and social capital investment). Beyond the actual ability to be mobile, motility can also be understood as potential: Living in a neighborhood where people have different mobility options not only in relation to the mobility modes but also travel destinations refers to mobility capital that is stored as mobility potential. In our current, privileged situation, we could walk, ride a bicycle or bus, hail a rideshare, or take a car to an office, workspace, different libraries in the area, different cafes, or a research colleague’s house. However, living in a cyclable or walkable place, i.e., one with high motility capital, also allows us not to have to travel elsewhere for errands or leisure. Motility, thus, not only means that we can ride a bus to a workplace, but it includes the potential of mobility—of using a mode of transport to reach a number of destinations including those nearby—that are reflected in this form of capital. The actual or potential capacity of persons to be mobile in particularistic ways (modularity) creates economic, social, health, and other opportunities not only for individuals within socio-spatial structures, but they affect the socio-spatial structure within which spatial mobility is accumulated and practiced (zoetic capacity). Let us examine each of these, modularity and zoetic capacity, in more detail.

Modularity: The strategic disbursement of Divvy infrastructure, including its integration into Chicago’s public transit network, places of business and commerce, park system, and neighborhood landscape, embedded the BSS into the City of Chicago in a profound way. Because it was not merely conceived of as a first-and last-mile commuting solution but

entailed many additional features, it introduced mobility flexibility features that go well beyond a bicycle ride between two points. The introduction of Divvy created a modular system in which Divvy is appropriated and adapted to fit a multitude of lives and, within these lives, to fit in a multitude of ways. Specifically, modularity refers to different types of users, different types of uses, and the flexibility to change mobility modes and destinations dynamically. Based on our observations and interviews, we identified a diverse and flexible use of this modularity: Even in inclement weather, we observed office workers using Divvy as a morning and evening fitness routine on the bike paths along Lake Michigan, which, concurrently, enabled them to avoid rush hour traffic. Others used Divvy to shorten the travel time to and from transit stations, but only if the weather was what they individually considered “nice”; otherwise, they would use their cars to get to work. Divvy was frequently used to traverse shorter distances between neighborhoods during leisure activities, for example, to go to a street festival or exhibition before or after meeting friends at a café or restaurant in the vicinity. Parents used public transport to get children to school, only to use Divvy to get to work more efficiently after the drop off, if public transport was not suitable for a particular trajectory. The diversity and flexibility that defines modularity is evident also among regular Divvy riders’ spatial displacement practices. One rider used a Divvy e-bike to get quickly and without much exertion to a rapid transit station for a business meeting in the Loop, the central business district of Chicago; a second Divvy ride, this time a regular Divvy, to get to a lunch date nearby; a third Divvy ride, also on a regular bike, for an early evening fitness session along the lake; and a final, short Divvy e-bike ride to pick up a dozen tamales for the family dinner. The same Divvy user may choose Divvy for a healthier lifestyle, to get to a local business efficiently, as a matter of principle because they are committed to climate change mitigation, for leisure activities with their partner or friends on the weekend, and as an economical form of transport. Finally, a bike ride may be interrupted by a rain shower, or a planned bus ride may be substituted for a leisurely ride home because the rider decided not to go to the gym that evening in order to make time for a dinner date. In sum, Divvy is not only a modular BSS that adapts to different individuals’ situations and circumstances, but it also adapts to situations and circumstances within daily trajectories. As such, modularity shapeshifts with people as they decide when, how, and for what purpose to use Divvy. It plugs into a wide range of different abilities, desires, and changing circumstances, to fit people’s needs, schedules, whims, and obligations. And, as it creates many tangible economic, social, health, and other opportunities, Divvy becomes much more than just a bicycle rental scheme that gets someone from point A to point B. Modularity in this sense allows riders to access, shape, store, and exchange their motility capital.

Zoetic capacity: The City Council’s vision and implementation of the BSS created scope for a multidimensional ownership structure. With the most recent expansion that, when completed, may include 7000 e-bikes, 9500 bicycles, 1500 e-scooters, and over 800 docking stations (the numbers vary depending on the source [100–103]), the City of Chicago intentionally developed Divvy with locational equity and affordability in mind. While the current membership fee has risen to \$144 per year, it remains affordable for many Chicagoans, and it includes the D4E program that provides access to many others. Divvy is not only co-owned by the city and partners but, because of its easy access, fee structure, geographic distribution, and ubiquity, it is also integrated in neighborhoods and thus often appropriated by different entities, including Divvy members, residents, city blocks, stores or shopping centers, community groups, and neighborhoods. Developing this level of ownership creates lock-in: The cascading economic, environmental, health and safety, and quality of life benefits associated with habitual use restructures features of a city that is greener, cleaner, safer, more active, attractive, and social; in short, more people-centric. This, again, may lead to further habitual uses, changes in routines, and an evolution of mobility practices, including an expansion of Divvy. The systematic introduction and expansion of Divvy contributes to usage patterns, infrastructure development, and socioeconomic and sociocultural transformations in ways that not only shape and interconnect communities

but change the form and function of the city. Serendipitously, Divvy introduces wide-spread socio-spatial motility that changes the features and character of the city. For communities and neighborhoods, this access and modularity shapeshifts the socio-spatial fabric of the city as Divvy becomes part of the infrastructure that slows the city down, making it healthier, safer, and more interconnected and social. The zoetic capacity of the city, or its capacity relating to life within it, can be profoundly impacted by a well-developed, functioning BSS: It fosters health, educational, economic, social, and cultural opportunities; it promotes local and cultural interactions, it connects people, groups, and neighborhoods; and it changes how socio-physical geography and the living spaces within it are arranged.

Our first line of inquiry aimed to better understand how Chicago was able to rapidly establish one of the largest and most successful BSSs in the US. We found that it was the combination of a deliberate vision and carefully framed policies, partnerships, access to various funding instruments and the potential for ownership, and the strategic deployment of the BSS to balance demand potential with locational equity that helped the city to achieve multiple environmental, economic, and social aims. To understand more systematically what this means, we presented a typology of the economic, environmental, health and safety, and quality of life benefits known to be associated with micromobility systems and examined the extent to which these are evident in the case-specific context of Chicago. This juxtaposition illustrated the positive contributions Divvy has made to the City of Chicago by expanding access to economic prosperity through affordable membership fees and equity-based programs such as D4E, by making the city a greener place to live, by contributing to healthier and safer lifestyles, and by intentionally developing a diverse and integrated transit system that improves the quality of life for a large portion of its residents. While these are impressive achievements, our analysis yielded additional features that changed the form and function of the city for the better. Specifically, we highlighted how the city has managed to lock-in and create multi-entity ownership, and how Divvy contributes to flexibility that is the foundation of modularity as another important benefit. It is therefore unsurprising that Divvy has become deeply embedded in the city, specifically as it has become an important community building tool, but also a significant means for individual and community empowerment. As Divvy has contributed to positive changes of city life we can add to the benefits of this BSS a zoetic capacity.

4.2. Developments and Challenges

4.2.1. The Consolidation of Divvy into a 4th Generation Micromobility System

Initiated in 2018, Divvy's latest development phase aimed at ending reliance on federal funding by selling the BSS to Lyft, an American mobility service company that includes ride-hailing, vehicles for hire, food delivery, and BSSs, which took over operations in 2019 [101]. The amended contract with the City of Chicago required Lyft to invest \$50 million in new bikes, stations, and hardware, and to generate \$77 million in revenue for the city over a nine year period [101,104,105], which would create more than 200 additional jobs with Divvy in Chicago and increase the service area to include the entire city [104,106]. An increase in the number of electric bikes in the Divvy fleet—3500 were introduced in July 2021 with the goal to reach 10,500 e-bikes by 2022 [107,108]—would provide users with the option to choose between regular pedal bikes and e-bikes, although upgrading to an e-bike includes an additional per-minute fee, currently at \$0.18 per minute, on top of the increased membership fee [104,106]. The integrated hybrid technology and built-in cable locks meant that new e-bikes could be parked at established Divvy stations, new e-bike-only stations, as well as regular, public bike racks, signposts, or any other legal bike parking spots [104,107,108].

Territorially expanding the BSS, however, contributed to further dispersion of services and fewer stations located near public transport and places of business or commerce. To counter the increasing service disparity between neighborhoods, Divvy initially waived e-bike fees in some regions (see Zone 2 in Figure 1 below), opting instead to price e-bikes in these regions at the same rate as regular pedal bikes [104,106].

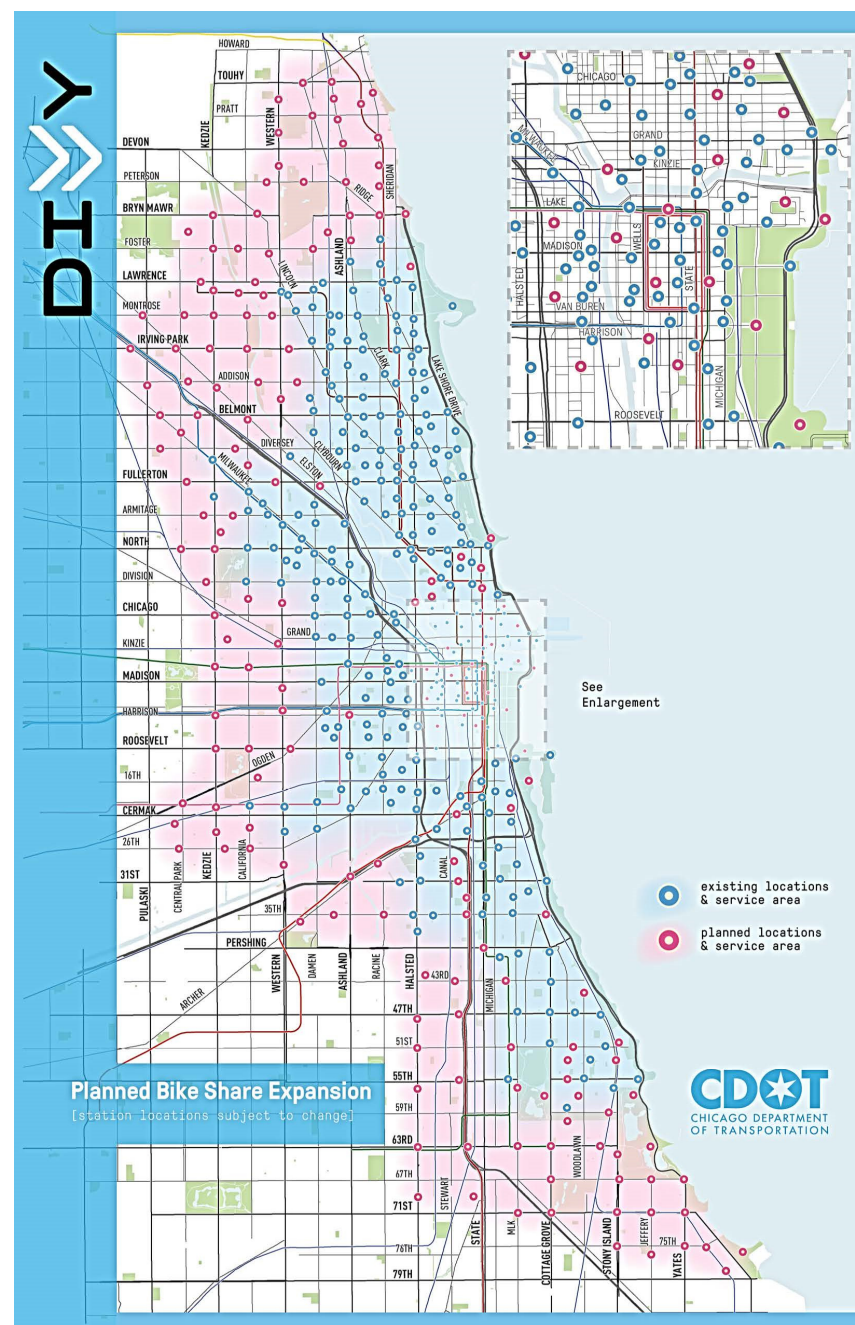


Figure 1. Divvy coverage map divided into Zone 1 (blue) and Zone 2 (pink) (originally published in [109]).

With an eye on diversifying services for more affluent customers, Divvy’s city-wide expansion and the large-scale introduction of e-bikes into the fleet was subsequently complemented with an e-scooter program as “a safe, sustainable, and equitable mode of transportation for the residents” [110] (p. 172). To examine the potential for access equitably, the Chicago Department of Transport’s e-scooter pilot program initially identified three priority areas. The priority area in the south served mainly African American residents “with the highest rate of households living under the poverty line and the lowest household density” [110]. The northern priority area served predominantly Latinx communities [110]. The final area had “a higher share of white people with a higher median household income and higher density of household and employment” [110] (p. 172). Lyft and nine other e-scooter companies (Bird, Bolt, Gruv, Jump, Lime, Lyft, Sherpa, Spin, Veoride,

and Wheels) participated in the pilot and, to ensure that equity goals were achieved, companies had to rebalance at least 25% of the pilot e-scooter fleet into the priority areas located in the south and north at the beginning of each day [110]. According to the City of Chicago, 2500 e-scooters were deployed during the pilot phase, generating more than 800,000 trips [111]. In June 2022, Divvy debuted 1000 scooters in downtown Chicago. This, in conjunction with e-bikes, meant that the City of Chicago succeeded in “creating the first docked bike and scooter share system in the country” [112]. However, a recent study conducted by Yang et al. [113] (p. 33) examined the impact of the e-scooters in Chicago and found that instead of expanding micromobility usage it tended to replace BS as “[s]hort, medium, and long duration bike sharing trips decreased by 15.8%, 21.2%, and 16.1%, respectively” during the study period. Research has also found that shared micromobility options such as e-scooters and e-bikes emit more CO₂ emissions than the alternatives they replace [114], raising important concerns about the benefits of these newer options, especially if we consider the loss of economic and health benefits associated with the electrification of micromobility.

4.2.2. Increasing Challenges

While tremendously successful—Divvy reported nearly a million trips in August 2022 alone [108]—the implementation of a 4th generation micromobility system in Chicago came about at a significant inflexion point for BSS systems more generally. The new contract with Lyft, aimed at creating a commercially viable funding model, ended Divvy’s reliance on federal funding. It also coincided with a reassessment and subsequent shift in Lyft’s business priorities. After five years of being the country’s largest bike-share operator, new leadership tasked with increasing Lyft’s profits announced a reprioritization on ‘pure’ rider shares [115]. This had sweeping implications for BSS programs as Lyft shut down systems, such as Nice Ride in Minneapolis in March 2023 [115,116], and announced significant price hikes to cover operating costs in San Francisco [117], Portland [118], and New York City [119]. Chicago’s Divvy was not spared: To meet its contractual obligations, Lyft improved its return on investment by hiking fares and further investing in scooters, e-bikes, and e-bike stations, and by disinvesting in less profitable pedal bikes. Examining a six-week period of ridership data from mid-August to the end of September 2022, for example, Lucy found that “about 20 percent of all stations had zero classic bikes for rent [and at] peak times when more bikes were in use, which occurred at about 6 p.m. most days, up to 25 percent of stations had no classic bikes available” [108] (p. 1). Our own fieldwork confirmed what seems to be an explicit divestment strategy by Lyft: While e-bikes were available in most regions and at most times, our own experience and that of the riders we interviewed confirmed that pedal bikes were either unavailable or in poor operating conditions. Seats were worn, torn, or broken, brakes unreliable, tires worn-out, and wheels bent, loose, or wobbly. Greenfield observes:

Back in 2020, when Divvy was being expanded into the South and West sides, Lyft explained during a stakeholder meeting that the company would eventually phase out the non-electric bikes. When asked for clarification, a representative said that when a blue bike wore out, it would be replaced with a new e-bike rather than a new non-electric cycle. While Divvy’s blue bikes are very durable and can remain in service for years, that meant that eventually the entire fleet would consist of e-bikes [120] (p. 1).

These service and business model changes were accompanied by new pricing structures: raising annual membership to \$144, increasing per-minute fees for e-bikes (now \$0.19 per minute) and scooters (now \$0.29 per minute), adding a lock fee for non-members, and eliminating the e-bike fee waiver zone (highlighted in pink in Figure 1; see also [121,122]). The latter is significant because the fee waiver zone was intended to improve service areas, which included minority communities that now have predominantly e-bike stations. According to Parrella-Aureli, Divvy defended this approach by stating that their

former waiver zone pricing reflected the fact that these neighborhoods [Zone 2] at the time had lower overall station density and fewer bikes. Since then, [Divvy has] made the system more accessible by steadily adding 7000 e-bikes, expanding the number of Divvy stations, designating more than 500 public bike racks as free parking locations, and expanding [the] Divvy for Everyone program to thousands of new riders [122] (p. 1).

Many Chicagoans have been quick to point out that these changes have effectively priced them out by making the Divvy system unaffordable and forcing them to consider less sustainable alternatives [122,123]. These changes have furthermore systematically excluded neighborhoods and communities that expected to be included in the final consolidation phase. Figure 2 is a visual representation of this. It shows the distribution of the Divvy system relative to mean household income and illustrates a trend toward demand potential rather than locational equity.

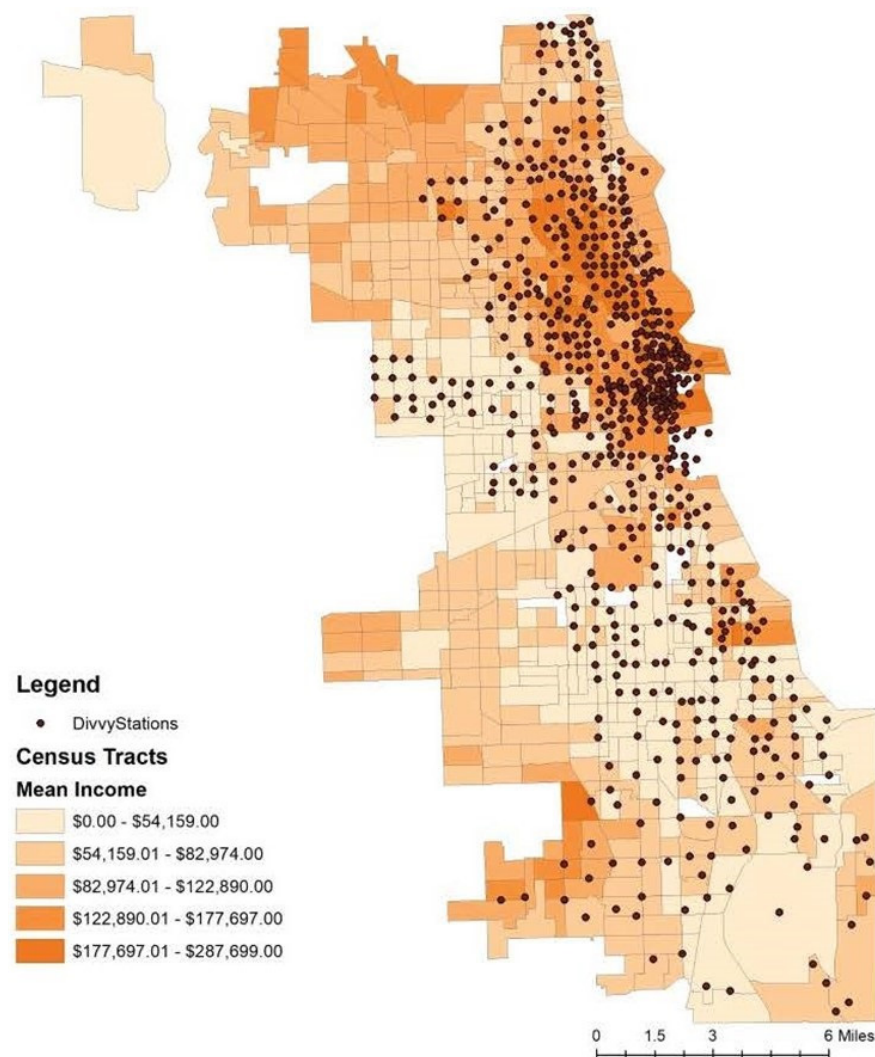


Figure 2. Divvy station dispersion by mean household income (originally published in [124]).

The popular area in Chicago known as Little India is a good example of this. The vibrant 15-block stretch of Devon Avenue in the West Ridge neighborhood is home not only to numerous Jewish, Indian, and Pakistani businesses, shops, eateries, health and community centers, and places of worship, but also to one of the most ethnically diverse communities in the city. Despite the potential for socioeconomic and sociocultural opportunities through access to everyone, Little India has only electric bike stations. Members and non-members can only use Divvy in and around Little India if they are willing to pay

per-minute fees to and from wherever they wish to travel. The following tweet is a good example of the sentiment we came across during our fieldwork:

@DivvyBikes @streetsblogchi the bait and switch of installing ONLY Ebike racks to ‘promote equitable transit’ and a year later removing the waiver zone effectively trapping us into only paying for pricey e-bike rides is why we were skeptical of Divvy expanding to our neighborhood (posted on Twitter 10 May 2022) [125].

What was initially planned as the final expansion phase of a public-private partnership turned into a consolidation phase where private ownership restructured the BSS in line with changed business priorities and improved profit margins. The current developments illustrate how this kind of optimization may be harmful to the Divvy program. The systematic implementation of a 4th generation micromobility system does indeed provide access to a modern and more profitable mobility solution. The new cost and service structure in conjunction with private for-profit interests, however, jeopardizes Chicago’s goals of creating a BSS system that is inclusive and equitable—the primary aim that served as the impetus for creating the system in the first place. While Divvy has provided more than 26 million rides since 2013 and contributed significantly to making Chicago a healthier, greener, and more bike-friendly place to live [107], it is unclear how current developments will retain the city’s goal of ensuring equity while meeting demand [120,122,123,126,127]. As a former Lyft employee pointed out in an interview: “At this point, the Divvy system can either be equitable, or it can be financially sustainable. But it can’t be both unless the city helps out Lyft financially” [128] (p. 1). During this consolidation phase, we too experienced Divvy’s shift from contributing to sustainable micromobility toward satisfying a more profitable leisure market, and from combining demand potential and locational equity toward the former at the expense of the latter. During the final phase of our fieldwork, we indeed concurred with many users who found Divvy to be less reliable, more expensive, and less practical for daily mobility needs. Here is an excerpt from a Divvy user reflecting on the changes they have experienced:

I’ve noticed many differences. The most obvious one was that there are a surprising number of e-bikes cluttered everywhere and much fewer normal bikes. Of these, many had dodgy gearing, cracked saddles that made your bum wet because they were soaked with rainwater, dodgy brakes and stuff. . . I don’t want an ebike or scooter or a drone or whatever. I just want a normal bike to get to the store or station. But once I couldn’t really count on finding a bike where I needed it, I lost interest and at the end of last year I did not renew my membership.

The latest developments caused a significant public backlash and a report commissioned by the Chicago Department of Transport assessing the barriers people experience when trying to access the Divvy network made five recommendations to overcome recent challenges. These include that prices should be lowered by expanding the D4E program to include more income brackets and reinstating the e-bike fee waiver zone, to improve outreach and service provision to especially marginalized and underserved populations, to increase the availability and maintenance of classic pedal bikes and stations, to continue bicycle network expansion, and to improve the connection between bicycle lanes [129]. The city furthermore announced that more than 250 new stations and 3000 new regular pedal bikes will be added until 2025 to address out-of-service and damaged bikes and to improve locational equity [11,73,130].

5. Conclusions

The purpose of our study was to examine the broader societal impact of the Divvy BSS in Chicago. This exploratory, qualitative case study focused on two questions: (1) What are the benefits that Divvy offers the City of Chicago? and (2) What developments may facilitate or challenge Divvy’s success?

To answer the first question, we presented a typology of the economic, environmental, health and safety, and quality of life benefits evident in the case-specific context of Chicago. We highlighted the diverse, positive contributions Divvy has made to the city by expanding access to economic prosperity, making the city a greener place to live, contributing to healthier and safer lives, and intentionally developing a diverse and integrated transit system that improves the quality of life for a large portion of its residents. By highlighting these multidimensional benefits, our analysis contributed more generally to the debate and potential of *motility* in sustainable mobility and specifically to the potential role of *modularity* and *zoetic capacity* of BSSs. First, our case study on Divvy illustrated that when a BSS is conceived as more than a mere first-and last-mile commuting solution it has the potential to be appropriated and adapted to fit a multitude of lives and, within these lives, to fit in a multitude of ways. This modularity refers to the way Divvy shapeshifts in accordance with people's life trajectories, flexibly accommodating to different situations and circumstances. It is this modularity that creates the many tangible economic, social, health, educational, and other opportunities because it allows riders to access, shape, store, and exchange their motility capital. The concept of modularity transcends the physicality of a BSS and the diverse benefits associated with it that are often discussed in research and policy. It shows how the sum is bigger than the parts and highlights the potential for sustainable community development inherent in a BSS.

Second, we discussed the widespread socio-spatial motility changes that Divvy has created and how these impact the form, function, and character of the city. We argued that the strategic deployment and systematic integration of the BSS goes well beyond providing access to a sustainable micromobility system in that Divvy contributes to the zoetic capacity of the city: The cascading economic, environmental, health and safety, and quality of life benefits associated with habitual use of this BSS restructures features of a city; it is greener, cleaner, safer, more active, attractive, and social—in short, more people-centric. While the zoetic potential of a city is difficult to quantify, the potential to cultivate this capacity is what lies at the center of many sustainable urban development policies. In this case study, we showed how successful Chicago has been in achieving this, although it would be important to operationalize findings from this qualitative case study in order to examine more systematically the scope and degree of modularity and zoetic capacity with a sociometrically validated instrument. With this contribution, our research nevertheless compliments and expands important works that survey the distribution and dispersion of the Divvy system with a focus on optimization and efficiency [10,14].

Our second line of inquiry aimed to better understand the developments that may facilitate or challenge Divvy's success. On the one hand, our case study outlined the success that Chicago's BSS has achieved in such a short time. Here, our analysis showed how the deliberate vision and carefully framed policies, partnerships, access to various funding instruments and the potential for ownership this created, and the strategic deployment of the BSS to balance demand potential with locational equity combined to facilitate the city's multiple environmental, economic, and social aims. On the other hand, we explored Divvy's trajectory to show how private ownership, evolving business priorities, and improved profit margins may jeopardize Chicago's goals of creating a BSS system that is inclusive and equitable—the primary aim that served as the impetus for creating the system in the first place.

Calculating the social and societal costs and benefits associated with Divvy is difficult, not only because the calculation will depend on what to include in terms of costs and benefits but also for whom. In this sense, the City of Chicago and Lyft are likely to present very different calculations. Many of the benefits we have identified in this article are difficult to quantify in spreadsheets and to make attractive to shareholders. Finally, many of the benefits are difficult to measure because they contribute to the mitigation of costs. Yet can a city council not take these into account when deciding on how to invest taxpayers' money wisely? While we are sympathetic to the nature of a corporation—Why would a corporation maintain services in unprofitable neighborhoods or for unprofitable services if

it can instead offer a more profit-focused portfolio in profitable neighborhoods?—a private-public partnership needs to transcend a facile dichotomy between public interests and shareholder profits.

The formidable success of Chicago’s BSS is rooted in the city’s policy and vision to develop a sustainable and inclusive BSS, Divvy’s initial funding and ownership structure, and the strategic deployment of physical bicycle stations that balanced locational equity with demand potential. These three have eroded over time and thus threaten the future success of Divvy. The increasing imbalance away from locational equity to demand potential needs to be rectified. Even from a profit perspective, we doubt that there is much money to be made in rental schemes for e-bikes and e-scooters in the Loop once they are detached from the vision that anchored Chicago’s BSS. For now, the current trend is not only away from locational inclusion, but current practices may indeed contribute increasingly to a systemic exclusion of poorer neighborhoods and the less privileged. Divvy remains impressive in its positive impact on the City of Chicago. The potential for a socially successful and financially viable public–private partnership remains as long as Divvy returns to a more visionary and reasonable foundation.

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