URBAN FRAGMENTS IN A SEA OF SUBURBS

Urban Impressions of Three Neighborhoods in Indianapolis

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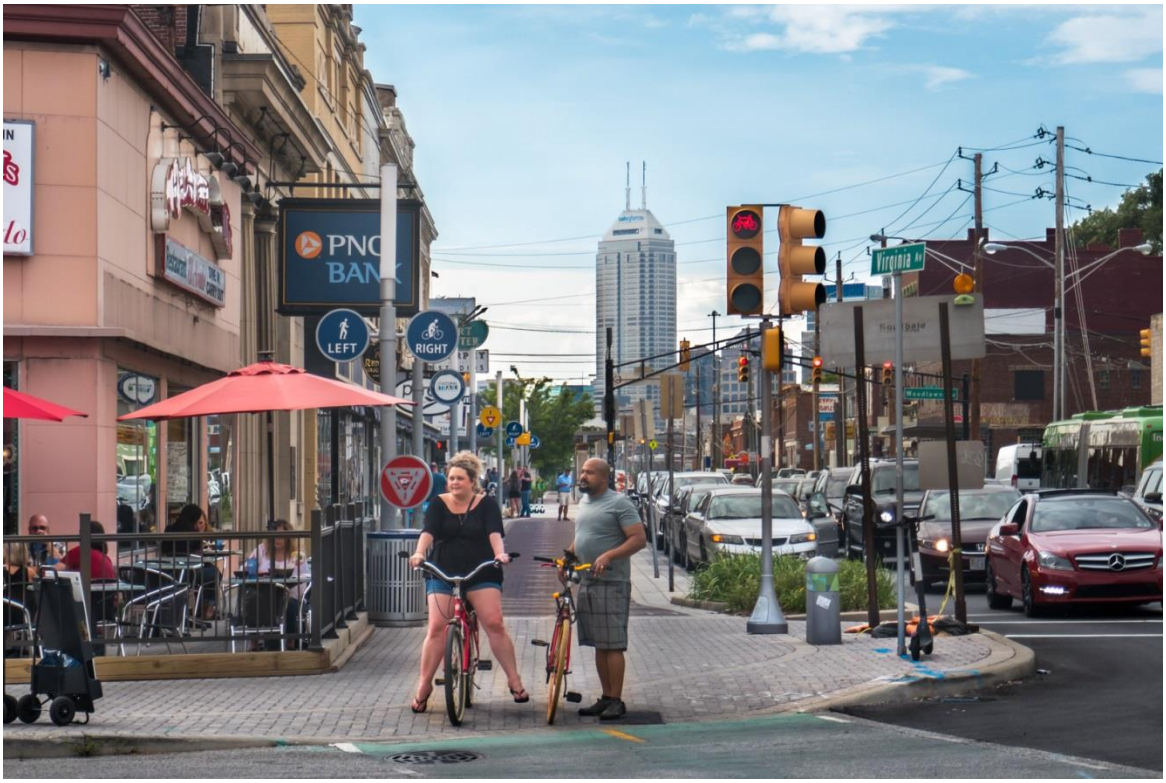


Looking at Indianapolis and Broad Ripple

Indianapolis had, for quite some time, been one of those cities which stuck in the back of my mind: a place I had an interest in exploring, but could never quite pin a reason on why—a feeling I think may be very familiar to those who study cities. Over this past summer, thanks to a new local friend, I finally had the opportunity to indulge that interest, and visit parts of the city and its environs. My timing was far from perfect: not only was my trip brief, but it came only a little more than a month before the opening of the city's new bus rapid transit Red Line. Still, the city has a lot going for it, and hopefully someday soon I will have to opportunity to return and do some more in-depth study.

In physical terms, Indianapolis is a predominantly suburban, auto-focused city—even more so than many of its similar Midwestern siblings. Of course, like almost every older American city, it did once have a large, thriving streetcar network, but much of the region's physical growth seems to have come at the tail end of the streetcar era and at the dawn of the age of auto-dominance. As such, outside of the downtown—most of which I sadly did not have time to explore on this trip—there is sadly little traditional urban fabric. Worse still, outside of downtown's famous Mile Square, much of what once did exist has been razed, either for urban expressways or in the name of progress. Even in outlying neighborhoods that developed before the car, the rigid separation of commercial and residential buildings and the reification of the detached, single family home are paramount. As you research the city, you are told that, thanks to the absence of natural boundaries and ethnic enclaves, most neighborhoods have fuzzy boundaries—if they exist in more than name, at all. The city can seem a uniform tapestry of large roads and suburban houses, sprawling in every direction.

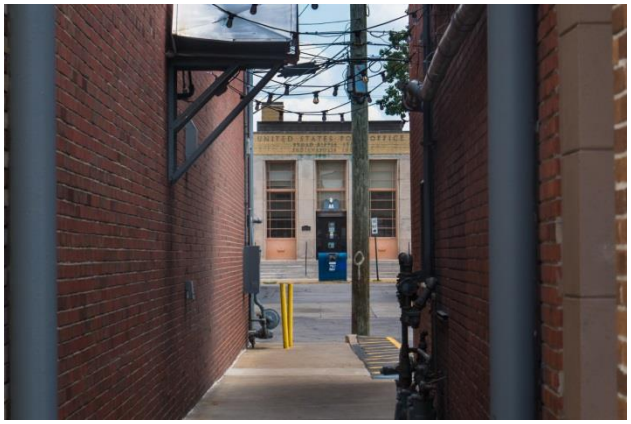
Still, like most any city with roots in the streetcar era, Indianapolis does have a handful of urban fragments: pockets of urbanity which now float disconnectedly in that seemingly endless sea of residential suburbs. In part, one can thank the city's transportation history for their existence. If one mode of infrastructure defined the urban form of greater Indianapolis prior to the automobile, it was the interurban. The city and its surroundings were laced with these small, electric railways, which ran like a traditional passenger train between cities and villages, and then like a streetcar within them. As a result, the landscape is dotted with shards of urban life left where these systems deigned to stop, many of which were once towns and villages in their own right.

Broad Ripple Village, one of these formerly independent towns, stands today as one of Indianapolis's most significant urban fragments. Located on an oxbow bend along the city's White River, and named after a poem by local poet James Whitcomb Riley, Broad Ripple lies a little more than seven miles (11km) north of Indianapolis's center. Primarily a shopping, entertainment, and residential district, the former village is now one of the city's hippest neighborhoods. And like so many fashionable urban quarters, it is chock full of small, unique restaurants, bars, independent stores, and the like—alongside the usual outposts of more well-known local and national chains.

One of the most interesting things about Broad Ripple is that, unlike many relatively isolated urban fragments, it spreads out in two dimensions instead of one. Urban life is not limited to a single strip of shops, but instead

spreads out over a small pocked of interconnecting streetscapes. This makes the area feel vibrant and alive, and somehow also makes it feel simultaneously larger and smaller than it actually is. The interesting grid means that everything is a short walk from one another, while the vistas created by multiple interesting streets make walking more engaging and intriguing than it would be along an isolated strip.

The neighborhood's buildings themselves mostly bear out the area's small town roots, seemingly presaging the era of suburban zoning. One or two story "taxpayers"—wide, short buildings with street level retail and, if it exists, office space on the second floor—are the primary typology. Broad Ripple Avenue, arguably the neighborhood's primary shopping street, is largely single story, and there are no mixed-use residential buildings in the quarter at all save for what has been constructed in the past decade. In fact, except for that welcome spate of new construction, apartment-style housing is nowhere to be seen: this is the realm of the single family home. All the same, the buildings present a mélange of ages and styles, ranging from nigh-suburban mini-malls to metallic Art Deco storefronts to a gorgeous, tower-like Masonic Temple from the early 20th Century. It is interesting how scale and landscape shape perspective: in my memory, it was soaring, but in reality, it is only 3 or 4 (admittedly tall) stories high.



Broad Ripple has been expanding, and it is noticeable. Perhaps most interesting are the many former single family homes which have been allowed to convert to retail, permitting the neighborhood to grow. Walking through them is a unique experience. Unlike many districts which have transitioned into mixed use—those in Portland for example, where adaptively reused former homes sit next to more traditionally urban-looking buildings—here the urban texture seems to abruptly end. You feel as if you have hit the end of the mixed use core and are entering a residential enclave—until you see the small signs in front of a neat line of "homes." It is a tremendous way to allow to neighborhood to grow organically, allowing for small to businesses to thrive without a huge capital investment. It also encourages you to explore the cozy streets in a way that you might not otherwise have.

There is also a fair amount of new construction. Even in predominantly suburban Indianapolis, there is a resurgent demand for urban environments, and few of the city's existing urban fragments are as tempting as this one. A handful of new four to six story apartment buildings dot the landscape, each with retail space at the bottom. In a nice shift, there is even a short office building under construction, proudly advertising its future coworking space. For a city with so few urban fragments, mixed-use infill like this is a very welcome sign.

As a formerly independent village, Broad Ripple has a significant history all its own, much of which is centered on the Indiana Central Canal. Funded by the state of Indiana, the canal was one of many projects began in the rush to build internal improvements following the success of the Erie Canal. The waterway was planned to be 296 miles (476km) long, connecting the watershed of the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restaurants, and a number of the new apartment buildings have taken advantage of the scenic setting and make the linear park almost function as a pedestrian-only street. While the canal was not the boon its promoters had hoped, the neighborhood today could have scarcely asked for a better amenity to develop itself around.

Even though the canal was not a success, the village of Broad Ripple continued to grow, especially once railroads, streetcars, and interurbans connected it to the surrounding towns and cities. Of particular note is the former Monon Railroad, which in the 1850s connected the town to the wider world: to Indianapolis and eventually the Ohio River to the south, and to Lafyatte, IN (the home of Purdue University) and Chicago to the north. As is so often the case, lying at the crossroads of local and regional transportation networks spurred growth, and the Great Lakes to that of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. The village, founded in the same year that construction began, 1837, sits at the northern mouth of the canal, where it is fed by water from the White River. Unfortunately, 1837 was as an inauspicious year to start an expensive project—to say the least. The ensuing financial panic would end the Central Cana almost as soon as it started. In the end, only 8 miles (13km) of the original course were built, all of them within the present city limits of Indianapolis.

Today, the canal has been almost entirely repurposed into a linear park and nature trail. In Broad Ripple, a pair of scenic, rainbow painted road bridges and a relatively new pedestrian and bicycle bridge beckon you to cross back and forth and explore the paths on both sides. Wildlife abounds, and waterfowl in particular are drawn to the murky, slow-moving water. Alongside the canal, a few businesses,


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village quickly grew into the outlying commercial district and relatively walkable neighborhood it remains today.

In 1922, as the first waves auto-drive sprawl—accompanied by the last waves of streetcar-driven development—pushed Indianapolis northward, the village was annexed into the city. Car and car centric policies would, of course, spell the end for most streetcars and many railroads, and the Monon was no exception. The line ended all passenger trains but one in 1959, and after a series of merges, the tracks through the former town would carry their last train in 1987.

Thankfully, twelve years later, Indianapolis would step in and convert the former railroad's right-of-way into a rail trail. Stretching across the city, it is a well-used link, carrying a plethora of bikers and walkers, while interfacing well with the local urbanity in the neighborhoods it touches. In Broad Ripple, the old railroad station has been adaptively reused, creating "BRICS"—the Broad Ripple Ice Cream Station. A sign of changing times and shifting economic priorities to be sure, the business is also a welcome piece of living history, and a physical connection to the neighborhood's past.

Sadly, Broad Ripple has its share of wrinkles, too, and as with so much of Indianapolis, the car is the biggest culprit. The neighborhood is wedged between two major north-south boulevards—wide, multilane highways that invite copious amounts of high-speed traffic. The loud noise, the barren vistas, and the long distances mean these are decidedly not human friendly spaces—no matter how many rentable electric scooters are deposited along them.

The center of Broad Ripple has warts, too. For one thing, parking and parking lots are plentiful—if thankfully not plentiful enough to fully interrupt the continuous urban texture. Far more problematically, the neighborhood's sidewalks are simply far too narrow. Pedestrians have clearly been given short shrift, with their space cut down to maximize road and parking space. As a result, even light posts and signs can end up as notable impediments, especially when two or more people attempt to pass one another. Perhaps because of this, a noticeable number of the storefronts along the major streets are vacant. It is not the most positive sign for the greater city's fledgling urban economy.

That said, things are looking up for Broad Ripple and for Indianapolis as a whole—and the recent opening of the Red Line has a lot to do with it. A full bus rapid transit line, it consists of electric buses, which run almost entirely in dedicated bus lanes, and which serves handsome, clearly delineated stations at frequent intervals. The line's current northern terminus is smack in the middle of Broad Ripple, and it runs south through Indianapolis's downtown, along the way connecting a number of the city's urban fragments with fast, reliable transit. It is an excellent start to the long, slow project of transitioning a mainly suburban city into a more

urban one.

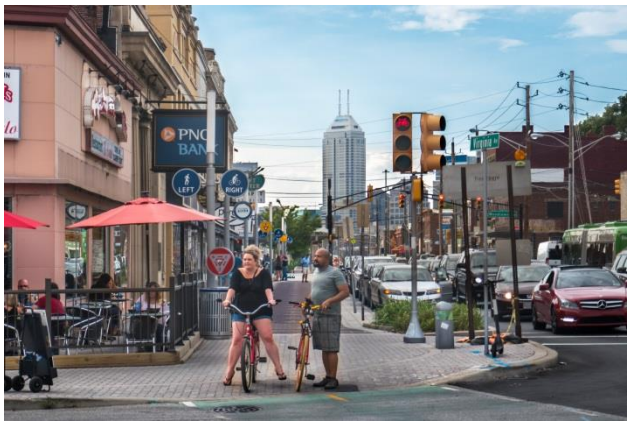
Here's hoping that Broad Ripple can continue its urban turn, and continue as one of Indianapolis's core urban neighborhoods—the kind that every urban city needs.

Fountain Square

The other urban neighborhood in Indianapolis proper that I had chance to explore during my brief visit was Fountain Square. Like Broad Ripple, it is another newly thriving urban fragment firmly lodged in a predominantly suburban city. Unlike its northern sibling, however, it is, in typological terms, a far more traditionally urban-looking place—and given the neighborhood's location and history, perhaps that should not be surprising. Fountain Square is an inner-ring urban neighborhood that lies a mere mile and half southeast of the city's center. One of the earliest satellite neighborhoods of downtown, it sits at the end of Virginia Avenue, a major commercial street that carves a straight line across the city's grid and into its core. That link has defined Fountain Square, for better or for worse, for its entire history. Indeed, this urban fragment is a fascinating place, as it seems to have embodied the entire Midwestern urban experience of the last 150 years.

It is almost impossible to discuss today's neighborhood without discussing how it came to be. The history of Fountain Square as an urban place essentially begins in 1864, when a horse-



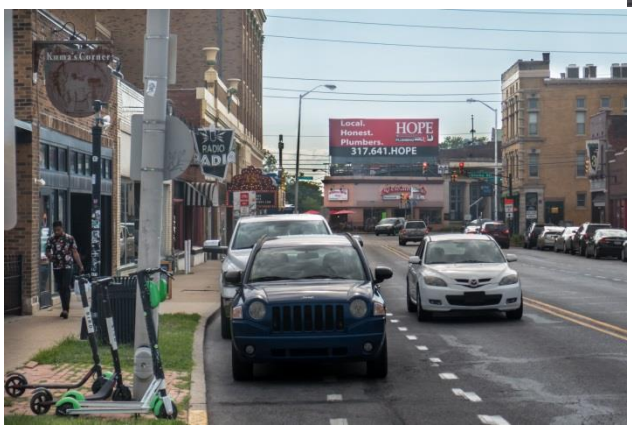
drawn street railway line out of downtown opened along Virginia Avenue. As was so often the case in 19th Century American cities, new transportation infrastructure enabled physical expansion, pushing the city's built up area southwards. All along its path, the railway spurred commercial and residential development, and nowhere was this more true than at its terminus, a loop built into the irregular intersection at the very end of Virginia Avenue. The terminal made the area an early transportation node, and locals soon found a fitting nickname for the nascent neighborhood: "The End." The name would stick around for decades—at least until a fountain opened at the foot of Virginia Avenue in 1889.

Today's neighborhood of Fountain Square is named after Fountain Square, the physical place: that same intersection which contained that early streetcar loop and fountain. By its very nature the square generates a sense of centrality: all of the area's major streets converge axially at its center. Each approach ends in a pleasingly terminated vista of brick and billboard. What's more, these views are framed by corridors of decidedly urban-looking buildings, which stand a few stories taller than most surrounding structures. As a result, your eyes are irresistibly drawn towards the center, as if each of the streets were punctuated by a shared exclamation point. The square visibly announces itself as a place, and beckons you inwards.

In that center, at the base of metaphorical punctuation mark, lies the namesake fountain, surrounded by a low, limestone parapet. Copper cast into an ornate female form, this is actually the fountain's second incarnation, built in 1924 some six years after its predecessor was destroyed under murky, probably accidental circumstances. The fountain is a true landmark, not only in the traditional sense, but in a technical one as well. According to the ontology of urban theorist Kevin

Lynch, a landmark is a memorable, highly visible object or building that plays a significant a role in shaping our mental maps of an urban place. The Lady Spray Fountain, as she is sometimes known, is a textbook example, and it is no wonder the neighborhood is named after her.

Given that major role, however, the actual physical location of the fountain within the square is a bit of a shame. For one thing, its base is more traffic divider than public square, with only a handful of paths to approach. There is an open space across the street, but it is far less visible and far less notable. Far worse, however, is how the fountain is pushed off to one side, away from the intersection's center. This was almost certainly a decision made by traffic engineers: it allows cars on the busiest roads to speed through the square unimpeded. To prioritize the movement of traffic, however, is to miss the point of this space entirely. Fountain Square may no longer be The End, but it is still very much a definitive place—a destination, not a thoroughfare. The intersection already encourages you to slow and linger, and the fountain should reinforce that natural inclination. It deserves pride of place at the heart of the square, an anchor visible from every direction.



With all that said however, from an urban design perspective, the actual streetscapes of Fountain Square are exemplary. Each major street entering the square is flanked by buildings two to five stories tall, creating the comfy, room-like sense of enclosure that makes urban space so comfortable and comprehensible. Sidewalks are wide but not too wide, and are lined with an unbroken wall of retail. Even though the square has some longer buildings, encompassing the better part of a city block,

which make the neighborhood both more accessible and more human-friendly. Perhaps the most visible of these is a fully protected, two-way bike lane which cuts through the heart of the square—part of Indianapolis's "Cultural Trail." There is also a new Red Line station, one block north of the fountain. It may not be in the exact center of the neighborhood, but it is close enough, and it provides fast, frequent transport to much of the rest of urban Indianapolis, much like the streetcar that preceded it. On the ground, curb bulbs, leafy green swales, and outdoor furniture combine to help make the street a more comfortable place. The local Business Improvement District has clearly been busy as well, putting up unified signage on everything from light poles to trash cans. Whether or not that is a good thing is an open question, of course, but on a beautiful late-summer day, I was more than willing to let it slide.

they do not dull the experience at street level. Instead, they are designed such that every storefront is distinctly delineated, creating an engaging visual texture which makes walking feel effortless. What's more, many of these storefronts have recessed entryways, creating deeply functional nucleation points for moments of urban life, whether to tie a shoelace, to window shop, to have a conversation, or anything else. Meanwhile, shops and cafes spill freely out onto the sidewalk, infusing the streets with life and creating even more points of visual interest. The physical layout of Fountain Square simply encourages you to slow and spend time in its cozy confines, observing and participating in the rhythms of everyday urban life.

What's more, while much of the building stock is older, not all of the successful urban design elements are a product of age: there are also numerous new urban niceties

In cultural terms, Fountain Square has a great deal in common with Broad Ripple. If the latter is the hot, young neighborhood which has come to dominate the urban imagination of Indy's northern reaches, then Fountain Square is its older, more established sibling, which has ruled the south side of the city for decades. Its stores alone paint a picture of what the neighborhood is—or at least, what it wants to be. One of the main reasons I had come to the neighborhood (beyond exploring) was to visit a bar that specializes solely in craft mead and cider—and it would be hard to imagine a better symbol of the specialized consumption that defines so much of modern American urbanism. As I exited the car (sadly still the most practical way to travel as of my visit), the first thing I encountered was a cat cafe, where human and feline intermingled behind an entrance proudly flying the rainbow flag. Walking, you encounter numerous small restaurants, bars, and cafes, as well as a vintage clothing shop, a fancy chocolatier, a comic book shop, and numerous other small boutiques. Fountain Square even possesses Indianapolis's best-known vinyl emporium, which includes not only a built in coffee shop but a well curated collection of both used discs and new releases. On the street outside its doors, a band was performing inside one of the Red Line's new electric buses surrounded by cameras and equipment, perhaps filming a music video or an advertisement for the service. In the most quippish way I can manage, Fountain Square sometimes feels like a postcard of modern Brooklyn brought to life—and I have no idea whether I mean that as a cutting remark or as a sign of honest appreciation. Something about it may bring out a bit of my cynicism, but I can't deny that I enjoyed the place all the same.

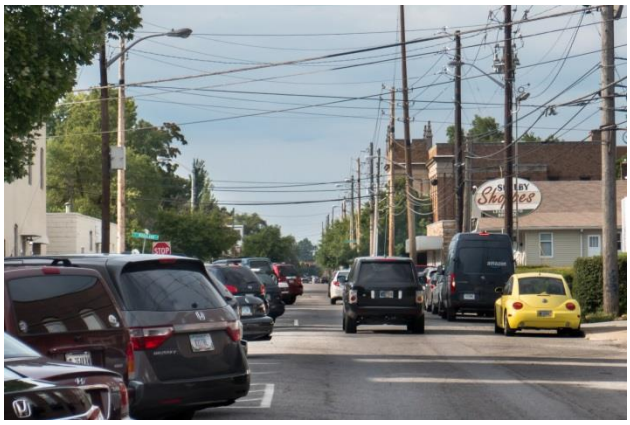
Still, Fountain Square is most definitely an urban fragment, and you feel it on the ground. While the square itself may be a cozy urban space, travel one block in almost any direction and the urban streetscape comes to a screeching halt. Shelby Avenue to the south stands out in particular. While the street remains commercial in nature, it quickly turns wider and more suburban—even feeling strangely rural in some

Square's businesses survive on people traveling to them, rather than on those living nearby. As a result, the neighborhood sometimes feels like a lonely, isolated oasis. Looking down the roads out of its urban heart, Fountain Square can once again seem like The End: the last fragment of a once-thriving, pedestrian-oriented city, now left adrift in a lonely sea of auto-centric sprawl and urban disinvestment.

To truly understand Fountain Square today, however, we have to take a more detailed look at its history. Luckily, it is an engaging topic: in many ways, Fountain Square is a microcosm of Midwestern urban development, decline, and partial rebirth, all in one neat little package.

Fountain Square's history can roughly be divided into five phases: two distinct periods of growth, a period of tumultuous decline, followed by a period of fumbling attempts to halt it, all ways, save for the protected bike lane—lined by as many parking lots and empty grass patches as it is stores and structures. In most other directions, the streetscape immediately dissolves into endless rows of detached single-family houses. While the stock is typical of older Midwestern cities—modest and built on small lots—it is still distinctly suburban in form and function. The worst, however, may be to the north. Virginia Avenue—by far the most urban street leaving the square—was a once trail of unbroken urban texture that linked neighborhood to core. Sadly, this connecting fabric, was obliterated by Interstates 65 and 70, replacing it with a wall of noise, pollution, and asphalt.

Things are not all bad: there are a handful of new apartment buildings around the square, either recently opened or under construction—undoubtedly a good sign for the future. Still, it's clear that most of Fountain

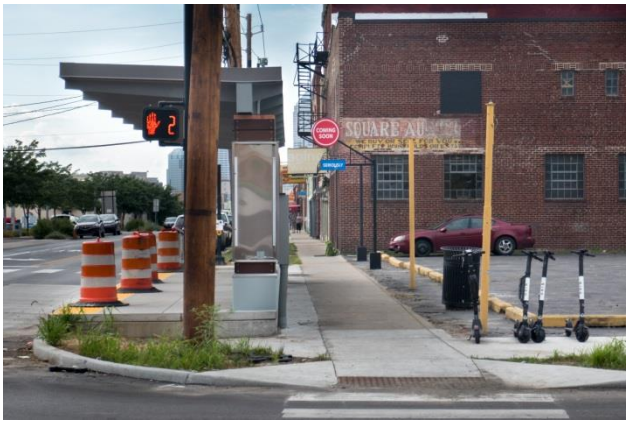


culminating in the decidedly mixed present. As was and is so often the case, Fountain Square was born in a flurry of explosive growth. Fueled by the larger city's expanding industrial economy, the construction and operation of the streetcar, and a wave of German immigration, the neighborhood all but appeared overnight, going from bare fields to thriving community in only a few short decades.

Slowly however, as the neighborhood's general outlines solidified, growth would begin to take on a different character: more mature and more capital intensive. Indeed, in the decades following the turn of the 20th Century, Fountain Square would cement itself as *the* outlying business district of Indianapolis's south side. Once again, the streetcar played a major role. New, electrified lines were built branching off from the original, transforming the square into a commercial hub closer to new suburban homes than the central city. This spurred commercial development, including neighborhood banks and large department stores—the bones of which still define the square today. The theater also took hold: following the opening of the first playhouse in 1909, Fountain Square would begin an over forty year run as the capital of the city's stage culture. This growth reached its zenith in the boom years of the 1920s, and perhaps nothing symbolized it better than the construction of the today's ornate fountain. Commissioned by local merchants in 1924, it epitomized the seemingly endless growth, boundless commerce, and civic capitalism that defined the pre-Depression American business district.

Fountain Square, however—like almost all American urban neighborhoods—was in for a rude shock following the tumults of the Great Depression and the Second World War. The story of American urban decline has been told countless times before, and it was little different here. Suburban home loans were subsidized, while redlining and other practices all but froze the flow of capital into mixed-race, urban places like Fountain Square. Auto infrastructure both enabled and further subsidized suburban flight, devastating traditional shopping streets. The streetcar, the original lifeblood of the neighborhood, ceased operating in 1955. Worse, in 1957 the first Interstate highway plans for the neighborhood were unveiled. While construction only started in 1970, later than many urban highways, the results were exactly the same. By the time they opened in 1976, most of the pre-1910 building stock had been demolished. As middle class residents fled, either in search of better pastures or to preserve their own home equity, poorer residents moved in—in particular, in a distinctive turn, poor whites from rural Appalachia. With fewer and fewer resources, businesses shuttered and theaters closed. Perhaps the ultimate insult, however, came early: in 1954, the neighborhood's namesake fountain was relocated to somewhat nearby Garfield Park in order to "protect" it. All in all, between 1950 and 1980, Fountain Square lost more than half of its population, much of its wealth, and a good chunk of its building stock.

The neighborhood did, however, have one trick left up its sleeve: the social, cultural, and human capital it had built up during its time as a center for the arts. It began with something



relatively common for the era: the remaining middle class population banding together and forming grassroots organizations dedicated to protecting the neighborhood and restarting its economy. One of their first moves was a clever one: they opened a service center for residents, which not only offered lessons on how to repair homes, but provided a place to share information on how to obtain scarce loans. Early success was hard won, but in 1969 theses groups scored a massive symbolic victory: the restoration of the fountain to its rightful place at the heart of the neighborhood.

This era of attempted regeneration did not really hit its stride, however, until the early 1980s, when the resources, energy, and talent developed by the grassroots organizations were transformed into full-blooded community development corporations. These non-profits began a thirty year period of what might best be described as "cultural regeneration urbanism." Scraping together capital from private donors, from other non-profits, and from a cavalcade of city, state, and federal programs for restarting moribund urban economies, they invested heavily in arts communities, cultural institutions, street festivals, and the like. The results of these projects were decidedly mixed, as they were in many cities. A cynical eye might see these as an attempt to jumpstart a boutique economy in the vein of New York's SoHo, while a sympathetic observer might point out how these programs not only supported local artists, but offered a rare influx of capital during decades of disinvestment. Either way, while success was decidedly mixed, the work of the CDCs kept Fountain Square in the public consciousness—something which would make it ripe for revival when the time came.

And as the urban renaissance has taken hold in Indianapolis, growth in Fountain Square has finally taken off of its own volition, and these efforts have finally begun to bear fruit. Many of the earlier non-profit organizations have been absorbed into today's Fountain Square Business Improvement District—perhaps a logical end to their economic and cultural development dreams. The cultural focus of the BID continues: during my Friday evening visit, for instance, a band began a free, sponsored outdoor concert in a dedicated performing arts space across from the fountain. There are other cultural amenities, too, including an arts center inside a converted department store, and a public library built into a prominent storefront right on the square—a nice touch. That said, there is a potential dark side to this BID-driven history—a term I use quite literally, given that the organization commissioned much of the neighborhood's public history. Its unified signage, outdoor concerts, and other cultural advertisements can sometimes make Fountain Square feel like it is trying

to be a consumption-oriented theme park, not a slice of urban life. Coupled with the neighborhood's isolated, fragmentary feeling, the neighborhood can almost feel fleeting and artificial, like a more down-to-Earth festival marketplace for the modern era.

That assessment is almost certainly unfair, and I'm not fully sure why part of me is drawn to cynicism. The line between a functional urban economy and a cynical entertainment district can often be a fuzzy one. True, the urban renaissance here—like in almost every other city across the country—is not only piecemeal, but distributed in a deeply inequitable way. But it is a real revival nonetheless, powered by local businesses and residents, old and new. Fountain Square today may not exactly match the bustle of its years as a commercial hub, but neither is it the place without hope as it seemed in the era of urban renewal. It is a growing, truly urban place in what has been a predominantly auto-centric city. Only time will tell whether this growth will be deep and lasting, or if the neighborhood will shake its occasional sense of fleeting artifice. But there are strong reasons to be hopeful: physically, Fountain Square offers some of the best traditional urban landscape in Indianapolis. Hopefully, the city and the neighborhood can translate that into true reurbanization, so that Fountain Square can be as important for Indianapolis's future as it was for its past.

Zionsville, IN

To be honest, Zionsville, IN is not the type of place I would normally explore, let alone analyze in depth. In fact, had I not been staying in this small, rural-turned-suburban town just northwest of Indianapolis, I might not have paid it a second thought. Sitting right outside Interstate 465—the gigantic, square beltway that surrounds the city—Zionsville is one of the epicenters of suburban growth in greater Indianapolis. Its population has been exploding, nearly doubling in the past ten years alone. But while the town is mainly suburban, what makes it truly unique—not to mention economically successful—is its quasi urban core. Zionsville is centered on a quaint, compact downtown full of quirky shops—all of which are supported by acre after acre of nigh-exurban single family housing developments and big box stores. It should, by all rights, be a place I loathe, one that sells itself on its small-town-America charm, its driving proximity to central Indianapolis, and its tourist friendly nature. And yet, as with anything related to cities—even small ones—nothing is so simple, nor so clear cut.

Of course, some of this may well be Stockholm syndrome. After a few days of suburban Indiana, downtown Zionsville's urban nature—no matter how kitschy or artificial—offered a welcome respite. Having somewhat likened parts of Indianapolis's Fountain Square neighborhood to a theme park, I am painfully aware of my own potential hypocrisy. After all, no matter how troubling I find some of that neighborhood's development trends, it is still a long-struggling urban neighborhood striving to be more—and that is something that should be commended. In contrast,

a place like Zionsville exists upon far more artifice: a cynical mind would not be entirely wrong to see its cute downtown as little more than an artisanal mall for rich, white suburbanites. And yet, just as a large part of me was uncomfortable with a cynical characterization of Fountain Square, I cannot bring myself to be fully smug and dismissive of this town, either. Zionsville is a far harder circle to square than it may appear at first glance. On the one hand, it is a surprisingly functional, delightfully gorgeous, nearly urban place, full of interesting shops and interacting people. The town stands as a shining example of the quasi-urban desires of the suburban class: of just how many otherwise proud suburban- and exurbanites still often seek out urban-like forms, at least on their own terms. On the other hand, however, the town is also a place founded upon rural and suburban fantasies of town life, on boutique consumption, and exclusion. In other words, Zionsville is a product of inseparable contradictions—and that, perhaps more than anything else, makes it quintessentially American.

Zionsville likes to sell itself as a destination for both tourists and local suburbanites by playing up not only its physical form, and since history and form are so deeply intertwined, that is as a good a place to start as any. Founded in 1852 by William Zion, the town was essentially a product of the railway, growing up around a station on the then-new Indianapolis and Lafayette Railroad. This was not necessarily the most auspicious start—the tiny line essentially only connected tiny rural communities to the still small city of Indianapolis—but it would soon prove somewhat fortuitous. As was so often the case in the nearly unrestrained capitalism of the late

Nineteenth Century, the line would be merged and merged again, becoming part of ever bigger companies and ever bigger networks, eventually becoming part of the Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago, and St. Louis Railway—a mouthful of a name by any measure. Zionsville was in luck: the Big Four Railroad, as it was more commonly known, not only offered the town a direct connection to the rest of the country, but also a place on the busy mainline between Indianapolis and Chicago.

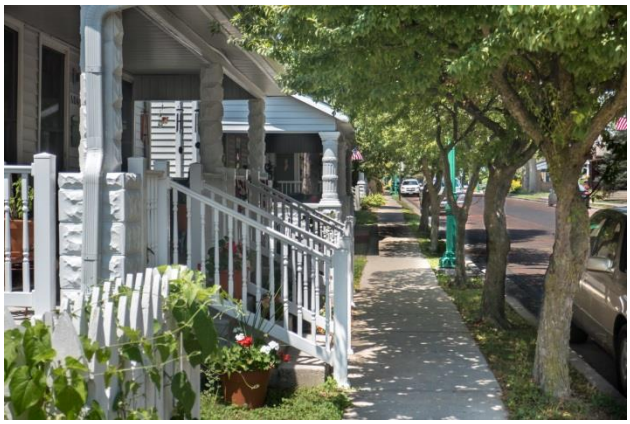
The impact of this national connectivity may best be highlighted by the name of a small square near the center of the town: Lincoln Park. Located one block off of Zionsville's Main Street, the park was not only the site of the town's original railroad station, but also its tenuous connection to Abraham Lincoln. The 16th president would indeed stop in Zionsville twice. The first time came in 1861, when the train carrying Lincoln to his inauguration stopped briefly in the town—long enough for the soon-to-be-president to give a whistle-stop speech. Lincoln would return, after a fashion, in 1865. This time, it was the train carrying the fallen leader back to his Springfield home that would momentarily break in the town, allowing mourners to pay their respects (on this visit, the president presumably did not give a speech). Zionsville is obviously proud of its small link to national history: beyond the name of the park and its commemorative brass plaque, there is also a bold, stylistic mural of the president across the street, proudly overlooking one of the main roads into town. While this may in part be a way to ginger up the history of an otherwise quiet, ordinary place—the real-world equivalent of the proverbial "Washington slept here" sign—it is also a living connection to a larger history, one which highlights just how impactful connections to national networks can be.

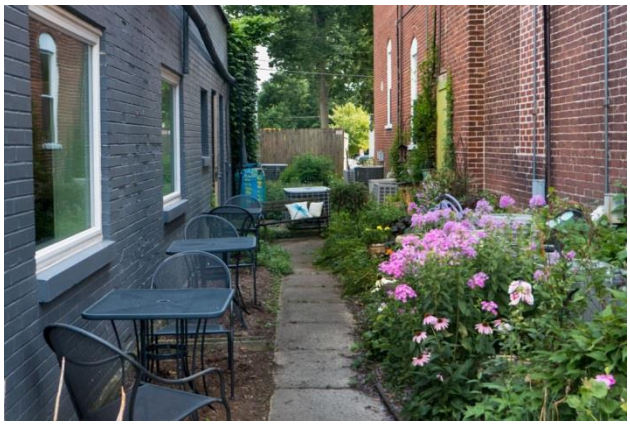
Still, what the railroad giveth, the railroad can take away, and early in the Twentieth Century, Zionsville would face a threat to its rail-based livelihood. The Big Four Railway had decided to straighten its mainline, which would include moving the station in Zionsville over a mile away from the town center—a huge impact in the pre-automotive age. Losing its connection to the outside world could well be fatal for any town, but Zionsville would have a savior: almost simultaneously, a new line would open that closely paralleled the old. In many ways, this new railway, the Terra Haute, Indianapolis, and Eastern—unwieldy geographic names apparently being in vogue at the time—represented a step up from the Big Four. It was an electric interurban, which directly connected downtown Zionsville and downtown Indianapolis with relatively frequent, comparatively inexpensive service. What's more, as was the case with many interurbans, the new line would run right along Main Street through the town, much like a streetcar. The line would prove formative: the vast majority of downtown Zionsville would be built directly along its route from the late 1890s through the 1910s. And again, the town isn't shy about embracing its history. Not only does the building which once contained the local depot bear a commemorative plaque, but Main Street itself is paved with bricks that roughly show the line's route through the town. It is a wonderfully clever, subtle nod to an important time in the town's past—one I readily admit I didn't recognize on my first visit.

Today, Zionsville remains centered on its small, urban-scaled core, having carefully maintained and invested in its downtown even as its population has exploded. It's easy to see why: so-called Old Zionsville is an undeniably cute, almost aggressively pleasant place to spend time. For around half a mile, Main Street is lined with small, attractive buildings, bountifully filled with small boutiques and restaurants. The short blocks and the tree-lined streets combine to create an intriguing environment for walking, one which not only invites you to stroll from one end to the other and back again, but makes doing so feel effortless. Like Indianapolis's Broad Ripple, shops are

some of Zionsville's exclusionary policies: the town has isolated itself enough that it no longer shares the (sadly common) worry about "undesirables." Still, it's very easy to see why tourists and suburban shoppers flock here: this is an almost idyllic vision of urban form.

Sadly, however, few people actually live right in downtown Zionsville, or even within easy walking distance. Instead, the vast majority of the area's population lives in the auto-centric sprawl that defines the rest of the town and its environs—and as such, must drive to the center. Like most American downtowns, Main Street itself is almost entirely devoted to commerce: there are no obvious mixed use buildings here. Off of Main Street, there are a fair number of handsome suburban houses lining a small grid of streets around the core. Built by an earlier era to be within walking distance of the shops and the interurban, they almost look like a prototype New Urbanist development: smallish lots and a not entirely limited to Main Street, and a number of side streets continue the retail theme, giving the urban environment depth. The building stock itself is both attractive and visually interesting. Evenly split between single story wood clapboard buildings and two to three story brick structures—both classics of American small town urban form—they tend to be painted in vibrant colors, creating an engagingly striated visual experience. Porches and sidewalk-covering, wooden arcades are surprisingly common for a Northern town, and even the buildings without them tend to have awnings or other decorative outcroppings. All of these protrusions create not only shade, but visual variety. Points of interest are everywhere: stores explode out onto the sidewalk with signs and displays, and pieces of street furniture, like benches, are ubiquitous. Of course, these welcome affordances also somewhat hint at

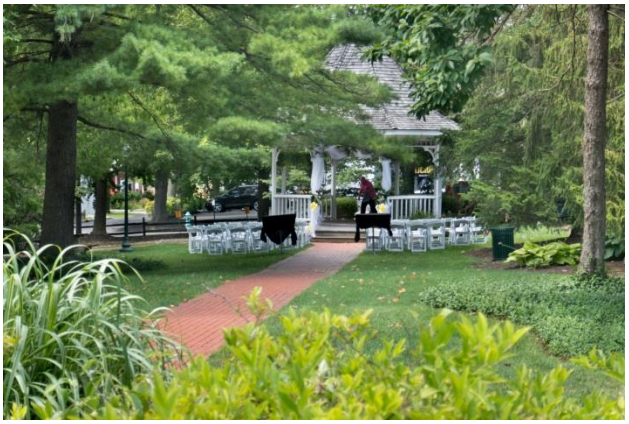




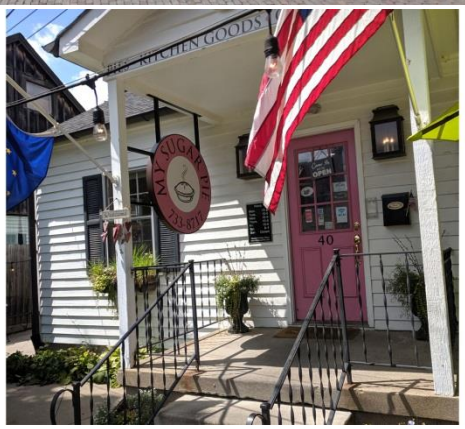
preponderance of porches encourage residents to walk and interact. Sadly, though, like all of America Zionsville sprawled instead of growing around its small, compact grid. Had it not, the town might be a very different kind of place, indeed.

Taking a step back and looking at it as a whole, however, downtown Zionsville is a maddeningly ambivalent place. On the one hand, there is no doubt that this is a rural/suburban fantasy of urban life—a real life version of Disney's Main Street USA where suburbanites can go to shop and dine in a comfortable, non-threatening, homogenous environment. Walking through the town, you *feel* the racial and economic uniformity. The shops paint an idyllic portrait of upper middle class life: the high-end used book and map store (dog included), the numerous clothing boutiques, the neatly organized antique stores, the art and yoga studios, the multitude of boutique bakeries, the high-end olive oil retailer, and more nice restaurants than I cared to count. At its worst, downtown Zionsville can feel like nothing more than an artisanal shopping mall. Even Lincoln Park's gazebo, which was being prepped for a summer wedding during my visit, felt spotlessly utopian: a picture perfect place for a picture perfect white wedding in a picture perfect white tourist spot.

And yet, try as I may, I can't quite maintain that level of cynicism with any honesty. For one thing, I am well aware that the lady doth protest too much: I am very much the target audience for a lot of this, and I can't help but find it somewhat charming—even through its cloyingness. More fundamentally, however, out and out cynicism does not offer a complete picture of downtown Zionsville. The town is not entirely a product of artifice. While its economy may be boutique, those boutiques are overwhelmingly small, independent businesses. It's not simply that chain stores and chain restaurants have been relegated out of downtown to the outlying suburban areas. This is a functional urban economy, operating on good, old-fashioned agglomeration economies. The scenic town and its quaint businesses pull in visitors like a magnet. This cavalcade of visitors, in turn, creates an even bigger market for more small businesses, which then attract more people, and so on. Zionsville's urban economy is a limited one, to be sure: it is based mostly on the consumptive dollars




BLACK DOG BOOKS




Zionsville olive tap
OLIVE OIL & BALSAMIC VINEGAR
TASTING GALLERY
zionsvilleolivetap.com
OPEN


KIMS
COOKIE
CAFE

of suburban shoppers and regional tourists. Still, it is real, functioning, and homespun. There are even a handful of businesses that seem to target more local consumption, including a fancy butcher shop, a wine store, and a pizzeria, amongst others. These businesses may exist thanks to a surfeit of local capital, but that capital has been put to productive, profitable use. Zionsville demonstrates how something akin to an urban economy can take root even in small, mostly suburban places.

That being said, it is always far, far easier for an economy to take root when it already has a lot of capital to play with, and even the briefest look at census data will show that Zionsville is a surprisingly wealthy town. Interestingly, you often don't feel this wealth when walking the streets. The stores may be niche and kitschy, but there are few boutiques or restaurants here that rise to Veblen-esuqe levels of conspicuous consumption. The buildings may be well maintained and the streets may be elaborately paved in decorative brick, but there is little overt grandeur: even the surrounding houses, while handsome, are not huge. The people may be overwhelmingly white and economically secure, but the town does not feel like an exclusive enclave for the leisure class. In fact, I was all but ready to say that there is a Midwestern, workaday quality to the town's wealth—at least until I turned a corner off of Main Street and came face-to-face with a Bentley dealer. Sitting across the street from a neatly trimmed Dairy Queen, you would be hard-pressed to find a more symbolically resonant image of Zionsville's contradictions.

Stepping away from the comfy confines of Main Street is also a wake-up call of a different sort: no matter how pedestrian friendly

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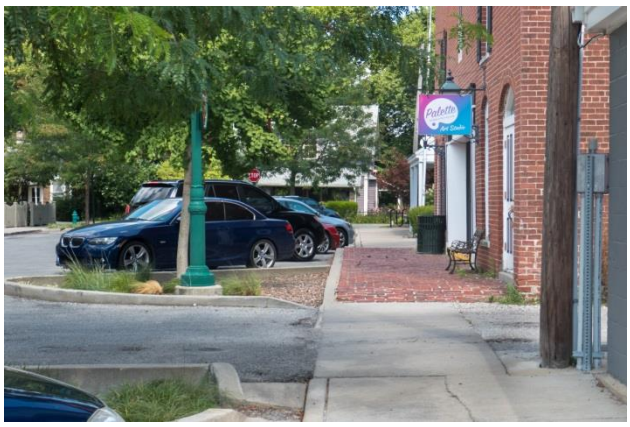
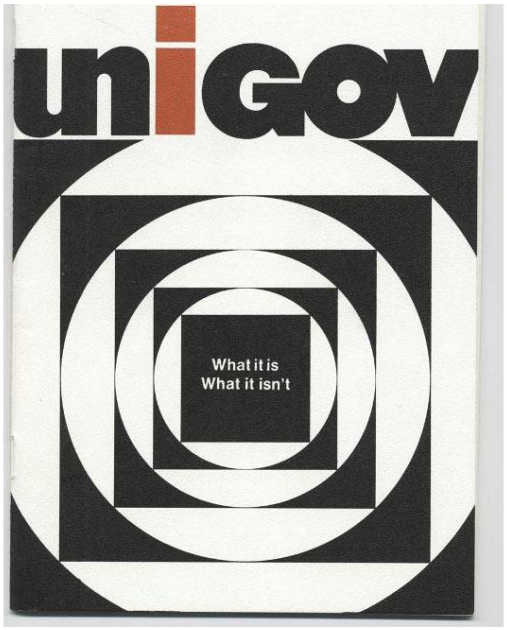


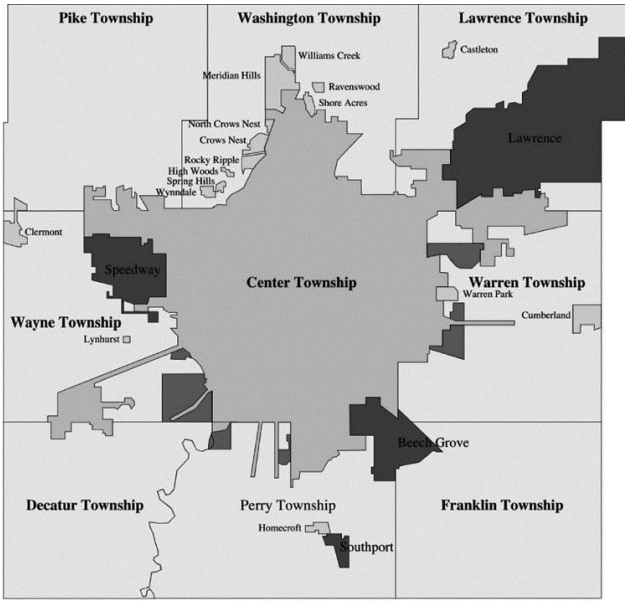
downtown Zionsville may be, the town as a whole is still fundamentally a suburban, auto-centric place. You don't even have to walk far to see it: South First Street, for example, which parallels Main Street one block away, is a deeply uninviting place. Once part of the old railroad right of way, it was at some point reworked into a wide road designed to allow through traffic to bypass the town. The street may well keep some traffic out of the core, but its dead-faced strip malls and lifeless parking lots are a far cry from the street life that exists only a few steps away. Of course, the rest of Zionsville is even more suburban. Subdivisions, shopping centers, and big box stores line fast, arterial roads, covering over the recently rural landscape. As a result, downtown Zionsville is very much a product of drive-to urbanism: most shoppers and workers must arrive via car. In that regard, the town has done about as well is it can. Numerous small parking lots sit just off of Main Street, which encourages you to get out of your car and walk, not circle for the closest spot. It isn't perfect—and a change to land-use regulation would be a far better long term solution—but given the small population living nearby and the absence of any transit options, it is an okay compromise. Still, if the Indianapolis region is serious about pursuing an urban future, it would be wise not to ignore Zionsville, which would still make an ideal stopping point for a reliable, regional system of mass transit—just as it was for much of its history.

Sadly, effecting such a connection may be an uphill political battle, thanks in large part to some uncomfortable history. One of the major reasons for the explosive growth of Zionsville—not to mention many of the other suburban towns surrounding Indianapolis—may well lie in a political decision made in 1970. That year, the city of Indianapolis and its surrounding county, Marion, were merged into one unified government—the ominously titled Unigov. Although the political union of city and suburb has long been advocated as a means of increasing regional equity, even at the time this union was often seen in stark racial and economic terms: it allowed a more affluent, whiter population to remain in control of a city that was fast becoming poorer and more racially diverse. Perhaps tellingly, while most city services were merged in 1970, school districts were not—and as with much of the country, they remain deeply unequal. Unigov *has* arguably had its successes: the larger tax base, for example, allowed the city to build a convention center, multiple major league stadiums, and downtown parks to reclaim the riverfront, all of which some credit with keeping the city on the economic map. However, it also allowed a distinctly suburban population to remain in

control of the central city for some thirty or forty years longer than might otherwise have been possible.

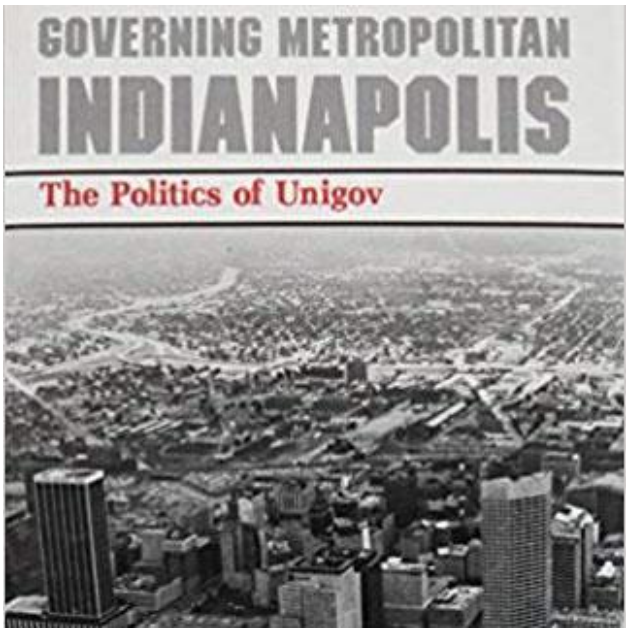
Zionsville, which lies just over the border in neighboring Boone County, did see a notable uptick in population between 1970 and 1980, right after the formation of Unigov. Explosive growth, however, has only really come in the last two decades—concomitant with Indianapolis itself beginning to tilt back towards more diverse political control. And while Indianapolis proper has grown, its exclusionary suburbs, such as Zionsville and nearby Carmel, have grown even faster. In fact, between 2010 and 2018, Zionsville nearly doubled in size, growing from approximately 14,000 to 27,000 residents. Of course, not all of this growth can be attributed to the ugly politics of race and class. Not only is Zionsville, as we've already discussed, an almost uniquely gorgeous oasis in a land of suburbs, but the movement of people is a complex topic rarely reducible to one or two simple factors. Still, even in this era of metropolitan growth, many of the country's past suburban fears obviously remain potent. America's subsidized suburban machine remains in full swing, and as a result, exclusionary





suburbs continue to grow at a breakneck pace.

All of which makes coming to grips with Zionsville difficult. If this were a high school essay—or if I were in a cheeky mood—I might write that, "In conclusion, Zionsville is a town of contrasts." Sometimes, an ambivalent reality demands a cliché—nothing else will do it justice. Zionsville is multiple places layered atop one another. On the one hand, it is an artificial piece of faux urbanism, supported by wealth, exclusionary policies, auto subsidies, and



above all, the artisanal consumption of tourists and suburbanites. On the other hand, it is also a real town, made up of real people, which has managed to maintain a gorgeous, deeply walkable downtown and an admirably homespun, thriving local economy amongst a backdrop of subdivisions and chains. There are many contradictions. The town thrives on its urban qualities, but loves to promote its own small-town-near-the-big-city virtues. All across Zionsville are heartfelt signs declaring that every race, sexual orientation, and gender is welcome here, and yet the town rests in large part on policies of exclusion and inequality. There is a part of Zionsville that is constantly searching for an imagined history, but the town has accidentally managed to mirror the promises and failures of American history better than any attempted artifice ever could. In that, Zionsville could not be more American.

All the same, there is something to be learned from Zionsville. The town offers an ideal example of what quasi-functional urbanism looks like in a region of suburban and exurban growth. It demonstrates that many proud suburbanites often want a taste of the urban—even if they want that taste to be sanitized and controlled. What's more, the same urban shine that has given the town its economic growth also gives it a unique potential in this land of endless suburbs. With an investment in regional transportation and a change to residential and commercial space production, Zionsville could easily mature into a major link in greater Indianapolis's archipelago of urban fragments. Of course, both national and local history indicate that such change will not be easy. However, integrating regional urban fragments into larger, non-automotive networks is one of the most important things we can do to help craft a greener, more equitable, and ultimately, more urban future.

In short, Zionsville is emblematic of the possibilities and the challenges of urbanism in the modern American suburbs. And for that alone, it may well be worth the visit.