

# 'Fountain Square might as well be Broad Ripple': Why artists say the quirky hub changed

[Domenica Bongiovanni](#) Updated 2:00 p.m. ET Oct. 31, 2017

On a balmy July evening, a group of people gathered at a worn red-brick building on Virginia Avenue in Fountain Square. They wanted to say farewell.

They affixed paper hearts, drawings and written testaments to the storefront that once housed art space and concept shop [General Public Collective](#). Candles were laid at its base. Also mixed in with the tender displays: profanities and drawings of male anatomy.

An "expression of frustration and gratitude" is what collective co-founder Lisa Berlin Jackson, 35, later called it. She and GPC staff didn't build the memorial, she said, but fans of the collective left the tokens the day after it closed.

The decorations toasted the collective's wild and creative four years, filled with exhibits like 2015's "Women 317: vagina dialogues." GPC, in the former Joe's Bike Shop at 1060 Virginia Ave., brought together all kinds of artists, and its live music shows became a destination — one that eventually caused trouble with neighbors. The collective left the space in July.

GPC's closing was the latest hit to Fountain Square's visual art scene, one

that enlarged the hole left by the 2016 departure of the Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art (iMOCA). Slowly, over a decade, the Virginia Avenue strip known for hosting Indianapolis' weirdest art and out-of-the-box First Fridays has been losing the galleries and artist studios that gave the neighborhood its offbeat reputation.

The shift has led art lovers to wonder what's next for Fountain Square - a well-known, affordable incubator for talent - and where city's next creative hub will be.

"Fountain Square might as well be Broad Ripple, you know; it's a place to go have some beers and listen to some music," said Steve Mannheimer, who is a former professor at the Herron School of Art and now teaches in media arts and science at IUPUI.

"And there's nothing wrong with that, obviously. It's just different."

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## 'More upscale, a lot less gritty'

Not all artists lament that Fountain Square's calling card is becoming live music, dining, craft drinks and \$400,000 houses — many highlighted by the Instagram account ["uglyfsqhous.es."](#) Some see the changes as a natural progression of a neighborhood near a surging downtown.

But others are worried that gentrification has chased away

the quirkiness that has defined the area between Virginia Avenue, Prospect and Shelby streets.

Highlights from the 2017 Art Squared Parade in Fountain Square, hosted by the Bates-Hendricks Neighborhood Association on Saturday, Sept. 17, 2017.  
Michelle Pemberton/IndyStar

"The stuff they're putting in is more upscale, a lot less gritty, do-it-yourself type of arts things going on," said Wildstyle Paschall, a music producer, photographer and graphic artist who attended and promoted hip-hop shows at GPC.

That the art scene in Fountain Square has shifted isn't news to those tightly connected to Indianapolis creative circles. But people who don't check in as often have noticed the change only more recently. [A comment on the Murphy's Facebook page](#), for example, said the neighborhood felt "dead unlike usual... the weirdness wasn't there" during the July and August First Fridays.

"The creativity outlet has changed — either theater or visual arts or music," said Joy Hernandez, who lives in Fountain Square and is a member of the Full Circle Nine gallery at the Circle City Industrial Complex on the Near Eastside.

"People are trying to declare, 'Well, the art scene's dead because Fountain Square is.' No, no, no, no, no. It just changed."

## **'People were awake 24 hours a day in there'**

Fountain Square as a visual art hot spot was born in the late 1990s, when artists Phil Campbell and Ed Funk connected with [Southeast Neighborhood Development](#) to lease, and then buy, the Murphy Art Center.

The Murphy, built in 1884 as a nunnery and boarding house, became a hub. Almost 20 studios, which included artists Lois Main Templeton and Gloria Fischer, became part of the building's fabric, along with Funk's Dolphin Papers.

"The Murphy building was owned by artists, right, so I think that we had a better understanding of what artists needed," Campbell said.

"We wanted people to paint on the walls. We invited people to exhibit in the hallways during our open houses. People were awake 24 hours a day in there."

Along with the Murphy, artists began populating the [Wheeler Community Arts Center](#) on Sanders Street, a former carburetor factory that was turned into Section 42 affordable housing. They lived and worked in 36 studio lofts, and the ground floor was a theater and classrooms for the University of Indianapolis.

"There was a migration to Fountain Square because at that time, just like Mass Avenue in the early days, space was available, rents were cheap, opportunities were there, it was still close to Downtown," said Mark Ruschman, who ran the Ruschman Art Gallery on Massachusetts Avenue and Alabama Street.



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**Shannon McKeon, Indianapolis, works up a piece of art work using cut up aluminum cans of varying brands for Art Squared, the fourth year event in Fountain Square that celebrates local art, Indianapolis, Saturday, September 20, 2014. (Photo: Robert Scheer / The Star)**

The Murphy's affordable studio space meant experimental organizations like [Big Car Collaborative](#) — which was programming music, art shows and spoken word — had room to learn what worked and what didn't.

"Your entry point into testing out a business idea, you could do it without bankrupting yourself," said Shauta Marsh, who ran the Big Car gallery and was executive director of iMOCA when both were at the Murphy.

Fountain Square, Marsh said, was the place where "artists would go to look at other artists' work." When the Indianapolis Downtown Artists and Dealers Association started First Fridays in 2004, crowds started heading to the Murphy to see what artists had cooked up, including multisensory exhibits

and intricate indoor sculpture gardens.

"You never knew from one month to the next who would pop up," said Mike Graves, a mixed-media artist and painter who has had a studio in the building for about 10 years.



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**Indianapolis artist Mike Graves works on a hallway mural outside of his studio in the Murphy Arts Center in Fountain Square, Indianapolis, Tuesday, Oct. 10, 2017. Graves has worked in the Murphy for about ten years and has seen a change in the building's dynamic and occupants over time. (Photo: Jenna Watson/IndyStar)**

But the loose atmosphere also created problems. Graves remembers having sculptures stolen from outside his door. In separate incidents, Campbell said he chased intruders out of the building and shooed away people who set up lawn chairs and drank in the parking lot.

The housing market crash of 2007 hit the art industry with force,



and Campbell himself left and sold the building to Craig Von Deylen and Larry Jones in 2009. Artists panicked when he left, worried that the Murphy would turn into apartments, Graves said.

"It was time anyway that some changes occur," Campbell said. "It's hard being an artist and a landlord to artists and being the landlord to, you know, 30 of your best friends.

"It's a very, very difficult thing when you want to take care of people but you have to survive as well."

## **'Communities are cyclical'**

Changes came as [La Margarita Restaurant and Tequila Bar](#), [Pure Eatery](#), the [Red Lion Grog House](#) and Heartland Truly Moving Pictures — now [Heartland Film Inc.](#) — went into the Murphy. [The Hi-Fi](#), a live music venue, opened in 2014, next to iMOCA.

Von Deylen, a well-known supporter of local creative talent, wanted first-floor retail to support the second-floor studios. He said artists' rents, which range from \$330 to \$500 a month, either didn't change or went up a small amount. Graves, who's had a studio during both owners' tenures, said his rent has been steady, which is why he stayed. But, as businesses and musicians began to move in, artists had a different work environment.

"Those guys have meetings in the middle of the day, and I can't be riding down the hallway in my boxer shorts on a skateboard," Graves said.

In 2014, iMOCA opened a 3,000-foot, second gallery at [CityWay at The Alexander](#), which allowed it to bring in larger exhibitions. In late 2016, the museum left Fountain Square entirely — its last permanent home to date. The neighboring Hi-Fi expanded into the old space.

[People for Urban Progress](#), the salvage-chic social enterprise that made its home in the Murphy for eight years, [moved to the Central State Hospital campus](#) on the west side in April [to be part of the design hub there and to have more space](#).

Big Car branched out to infuse emerging neighborhoods with art and creativity. The collective landed in Lafayette Square in 2011 and then another spot on the Westside before settling into its current home in Garfield Park on the Southside.



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The People For Urban Progress space at the Murphy Art Center. Friday December 8th, 2012, Art and culture lovers hit the streets for First Friday across Indianapolis. *(Photo: Michelle Pemberton/IndyStar)*

Individual artists also migrated elsewhere. Von Deylen ticked off examples, including Flounder Lee, [who now lives in Dubai](#); jewelry designer Elizabeth



Brooks, who moved to California; and painter MaryAnne Nguyen, who relocated to the United Kingdom.

Pinning down a single reason why artists have left the neighborhood is difficult. Some feel it is too developed, that it doesn't offer the same edgy freedom. The cost of living has increased. Other artists became successful and needed more space to work.

"Communities are cyclical," said Trinity Hart, vice president of Deylen Realty. "What was cool for the artists at (one) point wasn't necessarily cool for the artists at another point."

Artists have migrated away from the Wheeler as well. Paul F. Smith, the president of Southeast Neighborhood Development (SEND), said less than a third of the building's residents are deriving some part of their income from the arts. He's not sure why they left.

The mission to provide affordable housing has remained intact — people who make less than 80 percent of the area median income still occupy 34 of the 36 units, he said.

"It wasn't as if, all of a sudden one day, a sign went out in front and said, 'You know what, we really don't think we need artists here anymore, so could you all find someplace else to live,'" Smith said.

"This was all an organic transformation from primarily artists living there to where it is today."

Now SEND, which has owned the Wheeler for more than a decade, [will sell it to a developer](#) who has yet to be disclosed, Smith said. With the reduced rents, he said keeping up with building repairs has become financially impossible.



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The General Public Collective, made up of various local artists who use many mediums, are (from left) Abby Goldsmith, Benny Sanders, Jason Pittenger-Arnold, Rachel Peacock (front/middle), Jeremy Tubbs, Lisa Berlin Jackson and Jessica Lykens (front/right). The General Public Collective, made up of various local artists who use many forms of medium, are (from left) Abby Goldsmith, Benny Sanders, Jason Pittenger-Arnold, Rachel Peacock (front/middle), Jeremy Tubbs, Lisa Berlin Jackson and Jessica Lykens (bottom right). The building is located at 1060 Virginia Ave in Indianapolis. (Photo: Matt Detrich/The Star)

A more densely populated Fountain Square dampened the wild visual art spirit as well. General Public Collective left its location after landlord Berry Konijisky asked them to no longer host live music shows. Two fights broke out after concerts and neighbors complained, Konijisky said, so he asked the collective to decide between staying in the space and hosting the concerts.

"It's really sad this all had to happen like that," Konijisky said. "I mean, I would love to still have them there. I think the world of (Lisa Berlin Jackson

and the other GPC operatives). I think sometimes it just gets out of control."

GPC, which had been operating at a deficit, needed the money it made from the concerts, Berlin Jackson said. Over the collective's four-year stay in Fountain Square, the neighborhood changes were difficult to weather.

"Art spaces get the same fussy treatment from neighbors and owners as other entertainment establishments likely do for their programming and the behavior of the public at events," Jackson said.

"They're just a little more fragile than bars."

## **'I want it to be distinctly different'**

Every year, an odd assortment of people with goofy bikes, neon-painted faces, curly wigs and over-sized balloons march through the heart of Fountain Square in the Art Squared parade. They're living, breathing works of art, part of a day-long festival that embraces the neighborhood's visual quirkiness.

Local artists sell their crafts. And with "Masterpiece in a Day," founded by artist Campbell, people of all skill levels commit to finishing and submitting an artistic or writing project to be judged.

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**A woman hula hoops in the 2017 Art Squared Parade hosted by the Bates-Hendricks Neighborhood Association, in Fountain Square on Saturday, Sept. 16, 2017. (Photo: Michelle Pemberton/IndyStar)**

So to argue that art has vacated the neighborhood would be inaccurate. Fountain Square businesses hang local art and pop-up installations occur. Three visual artists still keep their studios in the Murphy, and a handful live in the Wheeler.

But the vibe of the neighborhood has changed.

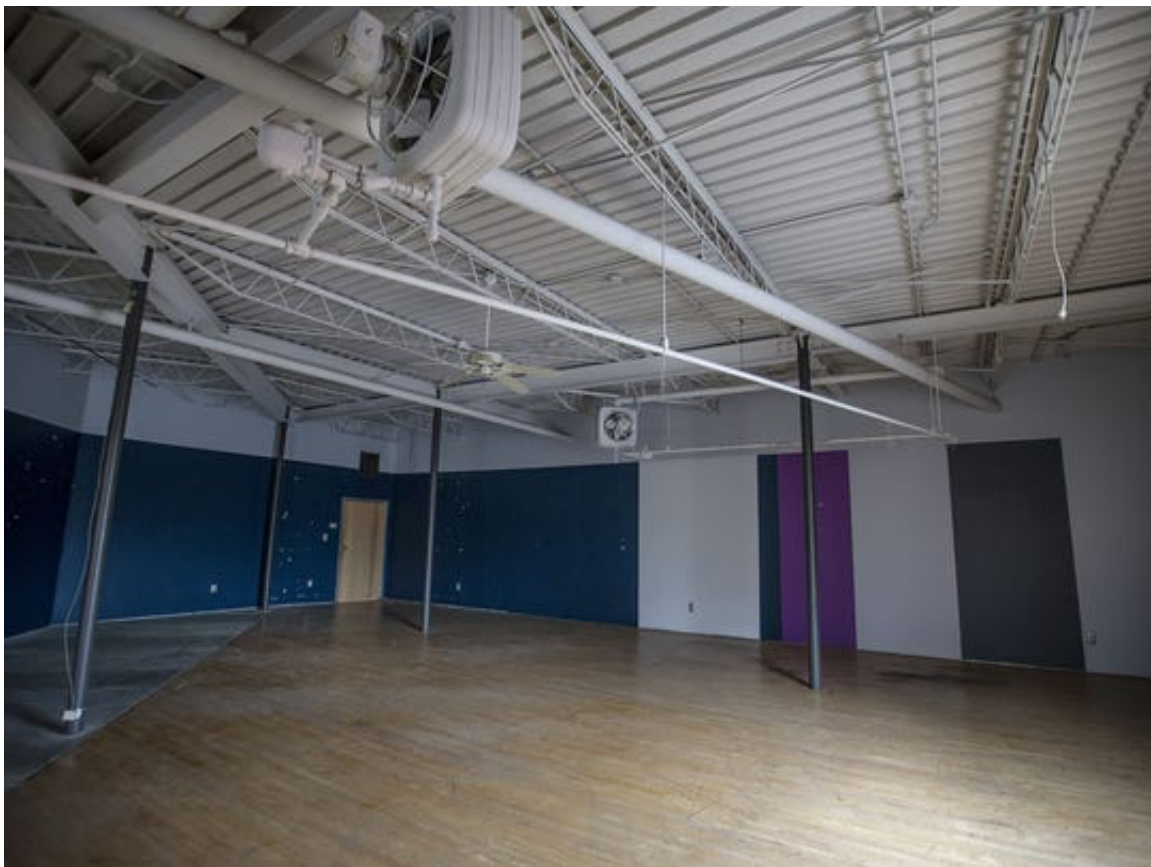
"I think a lot of other people do have that feeling of 'We want to get out of what's become a new Broad Ripple, a corporate wasteland, and we want to bring arts somewhere else,'" said Ariana Beedie, 26, who runs Face A Face, a publication geared toward artists and those of color. She became involved with GPC in 2015.



Dan McNeal, of the Fountain Square Arts Council, sees the issue of declining art in Fountain Square as part of a larger problem. Across the city, the number of art galleries is decreasing. If people can afford increasing real estate prices in the neighborhood, then they can afford to hang art on their walls, he said. But that's not necessarily keeping local artists in business.

Blaming redevelopment and gentrification is too easy, he said.

"I think that that is a very convenient excuse or a convenient answer to give when you really don't know what the real answer is," McNeal said. "This type of thing has happened all over the country."



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**Deylen Realty hopes to use this second-floor space as a new gallery in the Murphy Arts Center in Fountain Square, Indianapolis, seen Tuesday, Oct. 10, 2017. (Photo: Jenna Watson/IndyStar)**

To reintroduce more visual art, Deylen Realty is seeking an artist or group to



run a gallery on the second floor on the Murphy. So far, there have been no takers for the space, which would be open on First Fridays and during set hours during the week. The idea is to reconnect to the Murphy's edginess, the atmosphere that was created by flyers, graffiti and murals, the environment that hearkens back to [the neighborhood's history of theaters and entertainment](#).

"I certainly don't want it to become Broad Ripple," Von Deylen said. "I want it to be distinctly different."

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