

# Neighborhood near Mass Ave. welcomes renaissance but worries about what it could lose

[Domenica Bongiovanni](#) Updated 10:11 a.m. ET March 8, 2019

Windsor Park last June greeted a newcomer that grabbed the attention of the entire city. A local ownership group announced it would turn a nearly century-old church into [Indianapolis' first homegrown indie filmhouse in a decade.](#)

Many residents of the triangle-shaped neighborhood, which grows out of the corner of Mass Ave. and 10th Street, widely supported the project.

Still, some unease lingered. The cinema would come when the rate of new businesses and flipped houses bear all the markings of a common urban fear: gentrification. Rapid revitalization spurs higher property costs that can lead to a neighborhood becoming out of reach, both financially and culturally, for longtime residents.

"This is very much an area that's undergoing some growth and change," said Deb Ehret, [manager of the Spades Park branch of the Indianapolis Public Library](#) and a supporter of the cinema.

"It's almost a renaissance in a way, and I know the neighborhood associations involved are trying really hard to make sure that it's handled

well. The G-word that's going around, we try to be very careful."

The Windsor Park Art Cinema can be viewed as a harbinger of the neighborhood's future. What that future is, however, remains uncertain. It hinges on a number of initiatives underway now.

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Neighbors want to keep Windsor Park's newly built homes from clashing with older ones while protecting residents from cost-prohibitive preservation requirements. They want to embrace new businesses while securing affordable housing prices. And they want to welcome the art cinema's plan to grow Indianapolis' film scene while ensuring that neighbors remain comfortable.

But the developers' initial vision was unexpectedly uprooted, and with it, some feelings of reassurance.

## **A desire to 'build a vocabulary around film'**

Father-and-son duos Tom Battista, Edward Battista, Sam Sutphin and Benjamin Sutphin set out in 2017 to create the cinema in the same way they began other projects. They would bring a creative, local business into a landmark building in a historic neighborhood. The approach had proven successful for popular restaurants Bluebeard and Milktooth in Fletcher Place.

The ruddy brown church surrounded by low green shrubs and a slightly

cracked sidewalk was to be the new home of a grassroots art cinema, the likes of which the city had not seen [since 2008 when Key Cinemas closed](#).

The ambitious goal is to screen smaller-budget indie films and movies by local filmmakers. An artisan restaurant under the same roof would help subsidize the theater. And the Indianapolis Film Project, which would partner with existing festivals and invite film experts to host forums, would help create a regional cinephile hangout.

"We want to really build a vocabulary around film, build a better understanding of what people like about film," Edward Battista said.

Renovating the church would prove a challenge, the Battistas and Sutphins knew. Nearby creek Pogue's Run made the soil soft. Still, they thought they could stabilize the foundation. But more than year into the rehab, they found the cost of overcoming that problem to be too high.

The church, amid a neighborhood clinging to its cultural significance, would have to come down.

## **A lost sanatorium and a 97-year-old church: Windsor Park's origins**

After the Civil War, Indianapolis' booming population required housing — and quickly. Part of the answer came from farmland that had once belonged to civic leader Calvin Fletcher. Starting in the 1870s, developers built wood-frame houses in a delicately winding street pattern similar to Irvington's.



60 Photos

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The community was popular with Downtown store owners and workers, said Joan Hostetler, historian and director of the [Indiana Album](#) digital archive.

"The benefit of living in these neighborhoods is because they were on the streetcar line on 10th Street, so it was very easy to get Downtown to work," Hostetler said.

The neighborhood produced some of the city's architectural gems.

Some have been preserved, such as the William Prosser House at 10th Street and North Arsenal Avenue, whose ornate plasterwork [resembles a wedding cake](#), and the [Thompson-Mesker Cottage](#), with its colored glass

windows and mythical faces carved into a paneled oak interior.

Other staples didn't make it. A lush Victorian mansion built by Fletcher's son Stoughton A. Fletcher Jr. became the exclusive Norways Sanatorium from 1898 to 1957. It was razed for a Kroger grocery store. Supply store [Teachers' Treasures](#) and Family Dollar now reside there.

Like the areas around it, a bustling Windsor Park slowly slid into decay beginning in the 1940s. But between North State Avenue and Windsor Street, the ruddy brown church fought the grasp of the soft soil beneath it and stuck out the changes.



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**The Norways Sanitarium. (Photo: Indianapolis Star file)**

The Heath Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church opened in 1922 with an auditorium that sat 800, basement gym and Boy Scouts room. Its backstory

stretched to the 1880s, when a religious leader named Sarah Heath started a small mission in a vacant storeroom.

When the Battistas and Sutphins bought the building in 2017, it housed the Christian Unity Missionary Baptist Church, led by Senior Pastor Robert Smith. The church faced one of Windsor Park's characteristic triangle-shaped greenspaces at the corner of Windsor Street and Commerce Avenue. Its 46-foot-tall facade had settled into a slight incline the way any neighborhood stalwart would after reigning from the same perch for 97 years.

Over almost two decades, Smith saw the building sink further into the ground. He learned that stabilizing the entire church could cost about \$1.5 million.

"It was in bad shape. We couldn't afford to keep it going the way it was," Smith said.

As the new owners tested the thickness of the foundation, they realized they would have to construct individual buildings inside the church to bear the weight of soundproof walls and other production equipment.

"We could've made it work, but it would have been much more expensive and not as efficient," Sutphin said.



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This undated photo shows the interior of the Spades Park Branch of the Indianapolis Public Library. It's one of two remaining Carnegie Libraries in the Indianapolis system. *(Photo: IndyStar archives)*

"Our decision to take it down," Edward Battista said, "wasn't on a whim."

Even those excited for the cinema were disappointed over the church's demise.

"Any time a 90-year-old building comes down, it's a little bittersweet," said Jen Eamon, president of the Windsor Park Neighborhood Association. "Even if it's not architecturally significant, it did have a cultural importance in our neighborhood for a long time."

## Preserving affordability before it's too late

In less than a year, Windsor Park has welcomed [one of America's most anticipated restaurants](#) in Beholder and the Mayfair Taproom. This summer,

a coworking spot with a climbing space and bar will open just north of the neighborhood. And the [Circle City Industrial Complex will open a restaurant and retail shops](#) at the end of 2019.



Residents welcome new businesses. But gentrification, and specifically displacement, is something they are concerned about. They do not fault the Battistas or Sutphins. But they do worry what more ripples might bring.

"It was just like, 'Whoa, things are happening really quickly,'" said Katherine Hinkle, co-chair of Windsor Park's Conservation Committee. "There were a lot of demolitions that started taking place ... a lot of houses that were being flipped, a lot of multifamily houses that were being turned into single-family homes. And we noticed that just the demographics of the neighborhood were changing.

"What could happen in two years if we don't get people together and start talking about what's going on?"

[Japanica Brown-Saracino](#), an associate professor at Boston University who specializes in urban, community and cultural sociology, said displacement is inherent in gentrification. Displacement can be physical, social, political and cultural, she said.

Affordable-housing mandates and holding back property tax increases for longtime residents can help, she said. So does starting early before gentrification becomes too advanced. But small efforts can only go so far. A lot of affordable housing and rent protections go further toward the goal.

"Without very robust and a sort of wide-reaching set of policies to protect existing residents from increases in rent and property values, some of those efforts can be a drop in the bucket," Brown-Saracino said.

The area's median household income in 2016 was about \$29,300, around \$25,000 less than the Indianapolis metropolitan area overall, according to [IndyVitals](#).

Windsor Park hopes that status as a [Conservation District](#) can keep many residences reasonably priced. Less stringent than a Historic District, a Conservation District allows a historic neighborhood to draw up a plan that serves its specific needs, Hinkle said.



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**Beholder, located at 1844 E. 10th St. is a new restaurant by Milktooth owner and Chef Jonathan Brooks, Tuesday, June 12, 2018. Beholder is located at 1844 E. 10th St. in Indianapolis. (Photo: Michelle Pemberton/IndyStar)**

That could mean requiring new apartment buildings to have a certain percentage of housing available to low- or median-income residents, she said. Or that new homes built in place of unsalvageable residences must be set back a certain distance from the street to be in line with neighbors.

The committee is in the beginning stages of the process of creating the Conservation District.

A nonprofit developer might be able to help, too.

The board of Near East Area Renewal voted in June to establish a community land trust, Executive Director John Franklin Hay said. The nonprofit will develop 20 to 50 houses that would be available at 80 percent or less of the area median income.

Unlike the homes the nonprofit already has refurbished in nearby St. Clair

Place, owners of a land trust residence who later want to sell the home would have to sell it to someone else at 80 percent of the area median income, no matter how much time has passed, he said.

The nonprofit developer has not yet decided where the land trust homes will be, he said. But Windsor Park is a possibility.

Whether cultural stalwarts like the church come down or people work to maintain historical character, maintaining affordable housing is key, Brown-Saracino said.

"You can promote the cultural heritage of a place," she said, "without worrying that doing so is going to lead to widespread physical displacement."

## **Earning Windsor Park's trust**

The most tangible proof of how the art cinema wants to earn the neighborhood's trust sits at the front desk at the Spades Park library branch.

Under the counter sit a block of elongated bricks, a small sheet of ribbed metal siding, rusty-colored steel and a square of tropical hardwood. These are samples of the materials that will be used for the new Windsor Park Art Cinema. Residents can ask to see the items, turn them over in their hands.



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**Ribbed metal siding, CorTen steel and tropical hardwood are some of the materials on the outside of the building. (Photo: Domenica Bongiovanni/IndyStar)**

The new building, which will open about a year from now, will include [three theaters, a flexible screening room, a restaurant and event spaces](#). To keep the building from sinking like the church, Edward Battista said contractors will install up to 200 compacted rock columns as long as 25 feet into the ground under the foundation.

The building materials are part of a series of trust-building efforts from the cinema owners. They spent more than a year gathering the proper permissions from the city to operate the theater and renovate three nearby residences into locally run artisan shops. At city hearings and neighborhood meetings, most residents voiced support. They were pleased with the owners' major investment in a business and increased opportunities for arts access.

"Although not everybody's a big fan of a contemporary building going into a fairly historic neighborhood, this building is lower in elevation, so it won't be quite as imposing as the old church building was, the design is solid" and architect Jim McQuiston made changes in response to neighbor concerns, Eamon said.



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A sign welcomes those visiting the Windsor Park neighborhood, near the site of the former Christian Unity Missionary Baptist Church, (1258 Windsor St.), where construction of the purpose-built Windsor Park Art Cinema will take place, Tuesday, October 16, 2018. Initially, the developers planned to use the existing church building but were disappointed to find it wasn't feasible. *(Photo: Michelle Pemberton/IndyStar)*

But some vocally opposed the project. Resident Jared Carter said multiday film festivals and late showings would cause excessive traffic and noise. Low- to moderate-income families wouldn't be able to afford to attend.

Resident Kathy Siner said she aligned with neither side and was OK with the new use for the property. But she was concerned that not enough on-site

parking or greenspace existed, that taking down trees would cause flooding in nearby residences and that the owners' commitments in these areas are too weak.

"I agree that that's a nice addition; however, it needs to be compatible with the residential area and the parkway ambiance that's always existed here and without costing neighbors down the road," Siner said.

Throughout the process, the owners attended neighborhood meetings, outlining 29 commitments to Windsor Park in the process. They include promised support if neighbors decide to have a residential parking permit system, a landscape plan with low plantings, arrangements for emergency vehicles to have alleyway access and no outdoor speakers on the grounds.



**Jim McQuiston is the architect who designed the new building for the art cinema in the east-side neighborhood of Windsor Park. (Photo: Photo provided/Jim McQuiston)**

The Battistas and Sutphins also agreed to limited business hours, supported the pursuit of a Conservation District and are in the process of developing film programs with the library and local schools. And they are

planning a hyperlocal hiring program with the John H. Boner Community Center to find and train east-side residents to fill positions.

Hinkle said watching the neighborhood change has been difficult, but she thought the cinema owners have gone about it well.

"The people who've remained engaged with the process have seen that this is kind of like a family project, less of a big corporation coming in and taking over," Hinkle said.

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