Envisioning Land Use

Imagine standing at the intersection of West Washington Street and Senate Avenue in Indianapolis looking east. What would you see? Today, you’d see the Indiana Statehouse, modern office buildings and hotels, and skyscrapers in the background. At the end of the nineteenth century, Washington Street, also known as the National Road, was the city’s main commercial thoroughfare. But what was behind the painter, Theodor Groll, in this streetscape?

The White River was the largest feature to the west of (and behind) this scene. In many respects, institutions, enterprises, and builders built up the city by turning their backs to the river. They treated the White River as the city’s garbage disposal, allowing industries like slaughterhouses and canneries, as well as the municipal sewage system, to dispose of waste directly into this waterway. These industries required workers, and blocks of modest workers’ housing were platted and constructed in narrow lots along nearby city blocks. The proximity of housing near industry, including the railroad industry to the south, was ideal for workers.
However, these developments and uses lead to a key question: how do we plan growing cities in ways that allow them to maximize their potential? The variety of land uses in such a small area reveals how cities developed in the time before zoning, in a piecemeal process with little oversight or intentionality. Zoning, or the tool to protect desirable characteristics of a community while guiding its future development, was a city planning strategy for managing land use and development over time. Indianapolis passed its first zoning ordinance on November 20, 1922.

As these land use and city planning ideas evolved over time, so did Washington Street. Groll captures a moment in time as the city is developing and industrializing, prior to zoning and the professionalization of city planning.

![Bird's-eye view of the business district of Indianapolis, IN, about 1913. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.](image1)

Although Indianapolis has enjoyed a steady and orderly growth without the aid of any governing body to give direction to its expansion, new questions of various kinds are arising which rightly fall within the jurisdiction of a planning commission. Such a body could oversee the platting of new additions on the outskirts of the city, preserving the continuity of the principal streets and preventing countless jogs which mar the city’s beauty and make traffic difficult if not dangerous. The growth of our


![Workers' cottages from the 500 block of West Maryland Street, about 1960s. Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission Image Collection.](image2)

Resources:


**Program Website:** Interested in zoning, planning, and current land use? Learn more from the City of Indianapolis’s People’s Planning Academy on topics including zoning, affordable housing, transportation, and waterways, [https://www.indy.gov/activity/peoples-planning-academy](https://www.indy.gov/activity/peoples-planning-academy).

**Activity:** Learn more about the original city grid through a classroom activity with primary sources related to the establishment of Indianapolis via the Indianapolis Bicentennial’s Founder’s Day lesson, [https://indyturns200.com/projects/indianapolis-founders-day-project/](https://indyturns200.com/projects/indianapolis-founders-day-project/).
In response to Dolly & Rach

Dolly & Rach
About 1930
John Wesley Hardrick (American, 1891-1968)
Oil on board
TR10207
© John Wesley Hardrick
Lent by Constance Stubbs

Remembering Neighborhoods and Honoring Local Artists

John W. Hardrick lived in the Indianapolis community of Norwood, a Black neighborhood to the east of Fountain Square and sometimes associated within the boundaries of the Twin Aire neighborhood today.

Norwood’s boundaries are generally considered to be Southeastern Avenue to the north, Vandeman Street and the Belt Railroad to the west, Terrace Avenue to the south, and Sherman Drive to the east. This neighborhood, formed by formerly enslaved and emancipated African Americans, was established in the 1860s and consisted predominantly of homes with commercial and religious structures along Prospect Street and Sherman Drive.

Hardrick’s family first came to the northside of Indianapolis in 1888 or 1889. Shepherd Hardrick purchased land in the Norwood area around 1892, which was listed in the 1894 City Directory as “s s Prospect l e of Belt Ry.” A T-plan-shaped, wood-sided, single-family residence was constructed soon after

Hervey B. Fatout, Atlas of Indianapolis and Marion County, Indiana, 1889. Indiana State Library, Map Collection.

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Resources:


**Report:** Learn more about the industrial use of the site and contamination issues from Tim Maher, Jason Ward, and David Allender, “When the Ovens Go Cold: Industrial Contamination and Community Response,” University of Indianapolis, 2009, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AtR2n7Ug9oWh8HWVwUQlZsQ1rPnVI0kO/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AtR2n7Ug9oWh8HWVwUQlZsQ1rPnVI0kO/view).

In response to
*The Canal—Morning Effect*

The Canal—Morning Effect
1894

Richard Buckner Gruelle
(American, 1851—1914)
Oil on canvas
94.1
Public domain
John Herron Fund

**Water Quality and Quality of Life**

In the 1800s, the White River appeared to be a promising waterway for transportation and commerce, leading to the Indiana Mammoth Internal Improvement Act of 1836, which intended to connect growing towns by a series of waterways, canals, and roads.

One strip of canal, the Central Canal, was completed in Marion County from Broad Ripple south to the Washington Street pumping station. The project ultimately failed as it bankrupted the State of Indiana because the White River was unable to accommodate large boats. The river was used for smaller flat boats before a decent road system was constructed, and by the mid-nineteenth century, roads and railways were the main modes of transit. One of the greatest tensions of Indianapolis waterways is how they can be both a site of recreation and leisure while also being a site of pollution.

Same view of the canal 23 years later, “West Street Bridge,” 1917. Indiana Historical Society, M1400.
Some early printed evidence of water quality discussions began in the 1860s, with newspapers debating in 1864 how population density may have negatively impacted water quality, and how one could use taste as a metric for such water quality evaluation. The following decade, a compelling editorial posed questions about the city’s water quality: “When we take into consideration how small amount of sewerage it takes to infect a stream for miles along its course, that drainage from villages, barnyards, stables, pig pens and feeding grounds for stock, as well as the washing from manured lands, tend to render water unfit for use? We have only to travel along White River and note the amount of filth that flows and is washed into it to decide at once, that no people can be healthy who use water from it.”

Yet, intermittently, public opinion seemed to take a more complimentary perspective regarding the river. The City Beautiful Movement, a civic ideology popular from the 1890s to 1910s that sought to beautify and celebrate cities in terms of design and leisure use of public space, may have factored into these sentiments.

One 1907 article described “country walking” on the riverfront: “Everybody who is not possessed of an automobile or carriage walks on Sunday. The bypaths of the river, creeks, and canal are thronged on Sunday afternoons with ‘hikers.’ They are out to see how nature is getting along and to drink in the pure fresh air of the country. No city in the country has it on Indianapolis for beautiful suburban scenery. I have wandered up and down every stream around here and there is something new to be seen every time I go back.”

Do you play in or near the City’s waterways today? Where? Why or why not?
Resources:

Dashboard: Learn more about Newfields’ conservation efforts involving the built environment, energy, food and agriculture, natural resources, transportation and land use, and public health and safety, https://discovernewfields.org/about/governance-administration/greening-newfields/sustainability-dashboard.


Report: Read about the collaborative plan between two counties to leverage the river’s assets in sustainability and redevelopment efforts, from the White River Vision Plan, https://www.discoverwhiteriver.com/vision-progress/plan-vision/.


What Can a Streetlight Tell Us?

This painting tells a deeper story about neighborhood investment. Richardson painted this scene at 4314 North Central Avenue in the Meridian Kessler neighborhood of Indianapolis. It represents middle-class America in the 1930s: a thriving neighborhood with tree- and streetlight-lined streets.

What happens after this point in time is a disinvestment in urban core neighborhoods. Housing policies like redlining, urban renewal, white flight, and suburbanization removed investment from older neighborhoods, leading to real-life impact on tax revenue, resources, and infrastructure.

The painting’s location was redlined “A,” meaning “best.” Redlining was the discriminatory practice by which banks, mortgage lenders, appraisers, and insurance companies refused or limited loans, mortgages, and insurance within specific geographic areas. This practice was based on guidance initially issued by the Federal Housing Administration in the 1930s and was particularly utilized in older and inner-city neighborhoods. Redlining created cultural and financial dynamics that favored white and middle-class homebuyers while adversely affecting racially oppressed and/or economically oppressed homebuyers, particularly in Black communities.

It is interesting that this is one older neighborhood section evaluated as “best,” whereas most of Center Township is devalued as “definitely declining” or “hazardous.” These other neighborhoods did not fare as well in upcoming decades, as limited resources dictated inequitable infrastructure, utility, and maintenance policies. One such disinvestment policy was the city streetlight moratorium of 1981.

Mayor William Hudnut initiated the moratorium on installing new streetlights as a cost-cutting measure. Grappling with the additional consequences of a unified city-county government, called UNIGOV, the city now had to maintain services and needs within a much larger boundary. In 2016, Mayor Joe Hogsett lifted the 35-year moratorium on new streetlights, adding 4,000 new streetlights to the city by converting 27,000 streetlights to LED technology. The lower maintenance costs and energy usage helped to pay for the installation of the new streetlights.
Streetlights are just one way to look at infrastructure and services in terms of equity, but they have wide outcomes. Have you ever walked down the sidewalk of a shadowy street, feeling unsafe? Have you ever hit a pothole you couldn’t see early in the morning? Streetlights are a quality-of-life issue for our residents, one metric to measure equity and safety, and an obligation of our public service officials.

Resources:


**Web:** Learn more about the City’s Operation Night Light initiative at the City of Indianapolis website, [https://www.indy.gov/activity/operation-nightlight](https://www.indy.gov/activity/operation-nightlight).

**Action:** Use the Request Indy app to request a new streetlight, either through the app ([https://apps.apple.com/us/app/requestindy/id445471885](https://apps.apple.com/us/app/requestindy/id445471885)) or the website ([https://request.indy.gov/citizen/home](https://request.indy.gov/citizen/home)).


**Article:** Discover more about Indianapolis’s redlining story, including an interactive redlined map of Indianapolis linking to primary sources and contemporary SAVI Community Profiles data, enriching our understanding of the long-range impact: [https://indyencyclopedia.org/features/residential-segregation-in-indianapolis/](https://indyencyclopedia.org/features/residential-segregation-in-indianapolis/).