

Metro+St



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COMMENTARY

Urban repair gets toehold near Lafayette Square

As I listened from one corner of an arrangement of tables at Machu Picchu Restaurant this week, well-dressed business and community leaders gushed over their experiences at ethnic restaurants in the Lafayette Square neighborhood.

They used words like “amazing” and “authentic” and “beautiful.”

And they're right. Some truly great restaurants thrive in this Northwestside neighborhood, recently dubbed the International Marketplace.

Yet the neighborhood itself isn't much to look at. It's an aging concrete jungle, as much a victim of suburban flight as the Near Eastside.

The roads are wide and imposing, inviting people to speed through instead of stopping to linger. Parking lots are pocked with potholes the size of a THINK City electric car. When it rains, those potholes turn into moats that guard half-empty, horribly lighted strip malls. Even Lafayette Square Mall struggles to keep tenants.

Few of those at Machu Picchu for the Indiana Humanities Council's Chew on This event seemed like the type who would venture to Lafayette Square if they didn't know the neighborhood was home to amazing ethnic restaurants.

And really, who would? Urban decay isn't exactly inviting.

So, the question is: How do you make a neighborhood like Lafayette Square more enticing and cohesive?

The question is important as developers begin to run out of places and spaces to renovate near Downtown.

The next stage of urban revitalization in Indianapolis won't be converting old warehouses into cool condos, art studios and offices. It will be repurposing vacant big-box stores and strip malls.

Big Car, the Fountain Square-based arts collective, is taking a stab at transforming the area with its new Service Center for Contemporary Culture and Community.

Based in a former Firestone Tire & Service Center near Lafayette Square Mall, the building will be one part community art gallery, one part urban garden and one part gathering place, with a lending library and (maybe) free Wi-Fi.

“There really isn't a center to this neighborhood,” said Jim Walker, executive director of Big Car, “and that's what we're trying to create.”

Without a doubt, the most visible part of the Service Center when it opens this summer will be the garden. Walker and others are building it on top of the parking lot between the building and Lafayette Road.

So on a humid day, the smell of hay and mulch now mixes with the smell of oil and rubber. One of the garden beds is being built in the shape of Indiana. Another, as a double helix.

“We look at it as a functional art project,” Walker said.

The hope is that the garden will tie the Service Center to the neighborhood. The plan is to have an international market, with food on sale from the garden and local restaurants, and art on sale and display from local artists.

There's also a room in the Service Center that will air short documentaries on the neighborhood. At a small open house after the Chew on This event, a few people paused long enough to watch a documentary on Abyssinia Ethiopian Restaurant.

What Big Car and its handful of partners are creating is promising.

Combined with new bike lanes on Lafayette Road and the repaving of West 38th Street, the Service Center could be the next step in making this neighborhood actually *look* like the amazing, authentic and beautiful place that those of us who eat there know it to be.

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