

In Indianapolis, a Bike Path to Progress

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Photo



The Indiana State Museum is one of the sites along the Cultural Trail. Credit AJ Mast for The New York Times

For an old car town, Indianapolis has been doing a lot for biking lately. A new eight-mile landscaped bike and pedestrian pathway is helping residents rediscover their city and reshaping how outsiders view it. The trail is putting Indianapolis on the map as a place to see bold innovation, along with the Colts and some car races in a town long known as an international racing capital, home to the Indy 500 and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

The **Indianapolis Cultural Trail**, unveiled last May, took 12 years to plan and six more to construct. Funded by private donations and federal grants, the \$62.5 million result is an

accessible urban connective tissue — an amoeba of paths shot through with lush greenery and commissioned works of public art.

Paved with stylish two-tone patchworks of hexagonal and striped asphalt, the main loop of the path swoops past every major cultural and entertainment venue in the downtown area — from the Indiana State Museum in White River State Park to the Indiana Repertory Theater to the Indianapolis City Market. Straightaways veer off to the restaurants and shops of the historic Mass Ave and Fountain Square neighborhoods.

Residents and visitors from nearby cities like Cincinnati and Louisville, Ky., are using the trail to explore Indianapolis with new enthusiasm, city officials said, and more convention planners are now choosing Indianapolis because of it. Planners from cities including Cologne, Germany; Portland, Ore.; and Miami have also come to take stock of the trail that Indianapolis has blazed.

“The design team researched similar projects in cities around the world — Copenhagen, Paris, Bogotá, Boulder,” said Kevin Osburn, the principal designer of the landscape architecture firm Rundell Ernstberger Associates. “We discovered that there really wasn’t quite anything like what we were attempting to do anywhere in the world.”

Before the path arrived, Indianapolis didn’t have a mainstream bike scene — just streets designed to improve traffic flow. Now, children and the elderly have joined the spandex swarms of longtime cycling enthusiasts. The pathway has connected people with the places they want to go and encouraged physical activity in a state with the eighth-highest obesity rate in the country.

The public art along the trail accentuates the path’s role as a sculptor of the city’s evolving identity. For example, Donna Sink’s “Moving Forward” is a series of seven stained-glass-hued eco-friendly bus shelters covered in lines from poems by local writers. And in Sean Derry’s “Chatham Passage,” the whiff of roses wafts from an intricate steel grate concealing a “fragrance machine” — a witty nod to Mass Ave’s historic coal vaults.

The trail has also helped spark a sluggish local economy. Hundreds of millions of dollars in new commercial and residential developments surrounding the pathway have coincided with the trail’s progress, said Brian Payne, president of the Central Indiana Community Foundation, which oversaw its creation.

Fountain Square, a designated cultural district southeast of downtown, separated by freeways, has bloomed, its increasingly vibrant streets filling up with high-end dining spots as well as scrappy galleries.

“We have seen no fewer than 25 new businesses open in the last few years, all within a five-block area,” said Ed Rudisell, owner of three Indianapolis restaurants, including the popular Siam Square in Fountain Square.

Elizabeth Garber, the owner of Best Chocolate in Town, a shop in Mass Ave, a neighborhood situated around one of the city’s first streets, told a similar story. “The building across the street had been vacant,” she said. “Then it was torn down. Now it’s been reconstructed.”

“Two other businesses have arrived on our block,” Ms. Garber said. “There have been more bikers, joggers and people on skateboards. More people are taking the time to stop by.”

Yet the project has never been just about boosting business profits, creating jobs or linking up downtown hot spots, said Mr. Payne, who stumbled upon the idea for the pathway while biking around the city with his then-2-year-old son. “People use the trail to explore downtown because it’s beautifully designed,” he said. “They have spontaneous experiences. The journey inspires them as much as any of the destinations.”

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