

## ***Cui Bono? Who are Indy's Cultural Trails for?***

or

### **What happened to Fountain Square?**

*Gentrification*: noun [jen-truh-fi-key-shuh n] the process whereby places for cool cultural consumption develop an attractive image for an unlikely neighborhood, which then sparks a commercial revival, a residential influx of people with money, and, finally, the building of new luxury apartments with extravagant rent all of which displaces the original and poorer residents.

The spring issue of the prestigious *Indiana Magazine of History* published a scathing critique of the Indianapolis Cultural Trail initiative. Unpacking the concept, authors and professors of geography Dwyer and McCourt expose the initiative's disguised political-economic purposes in, "Placing *E Pluribus Unum* on the Indianapolis Cultural Trail." See: <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/imh/article/view/21231/27208>.

It appears that due to the debate over and the rejection of a proposed *E Pluribus Unum* sculpture and the "repositioning" of this slave freed by the Civil War (whose likeness was found on the Monument Circle), not only revealed our city's "racialized" heritage, it created intense debate regarding public art, civic life, and urban redevelopment.

Using the Fountain Square as the example, Dwyer and McCourt expose and examine the varying degrees of gentrifying redevelopment along the Cultural Trail. We now see the cultural and especially the economic empowerment of the long-time residents of neighborhoods through which these trails pass were not the purposes of the project.

The impact of redevelopment along the trail is not restricted to investment, in-migration, and revamped buildings, the authors say, it also spills over into the surrounding neighborhoods. They note the two generations of urban researchers who have described this process of gentrification and the toll it has taken on successive generations of city dwellers.

The authors point out that the kind of "cool cultural consumption" model--which the trail and its arts program promote--transforms neighborhoods into hotspots for real-estate speculation while displacing existing residents and their established modes of social life. The burdens of these displacements fall disproportionately on small property owners and working-class renters and, in the context of center-city Indianapolis, African Americans. The changes at Fountain Square are examples of urban displacement: just look at North "Gentry" Square and the gentrification of Hosbrook Street, which until recently, was the only predominantly African American street in the Fountain Square for decades.

These political/economic/realty/cultural changes allowed the authors to wonder: for whom is the Cultural Trail a compelling form of relaxation and leisure? The answer appears clear to them. The trail promotes art and sustainable urbanism to attract "creative-class" residents and workers--attracting suburban dwellers downtown to live, work, and play. To do this and attract "the right kind of people," Indy's Cultural Trail had to present "a nuanced, more accommodating mode of moving through fear-inducing public spaces" of the urban core neighborhoods through which the trails pass. They use Virginia Avenue for their example.

In conclusion, Professors Dwyer and McCourt question the city's priorities: "Given the city's longstanding commitment to oversized roadways and subsidized spectator sports, and its chronic rates of such environment-related diseases as obesity and asthma..." they ask, "...what happens to the traditional urban social justice agenda when bicycling, environmentalism, upscale condos, arts events, etc., become the signal values for new collective ventures?" Efforts, they note, "to secure a living wage, curb gun violence, and improve educational opportunities--urgent issues for many of those who opposed *E Pluribus Unum*--are displaced by the kind of redevelopment discourse that accompanies projects like the Cultural Trail."

So, *cui bono*: "Who benefits"? It is surely not long-time residents of Indy's pockets of poverty. Here gentrification brings "higher rents and real-estate costs, as well as new forms of social life" which not only reproduces the culture authority of the middle class over the minority and working-class cultures of these residents, but literally enables the displacement of these families and individuals elsewhere. In the end, it is central Indiana's corporations and business elites, needing professional-class workers to stay or arrive in Indy so they can maintain their power and wealth, who benefit from our so-called "Cultural Trail."