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Underground Indianapolis

By [Julia Smillie](#)

Come visit Indianapolis. I know what you're thinking: "But it's in *Indiana*, for God's sake" — forgetting, as St. Louisans do, that they live in *Missouri*, for God's sake. I'm telling you, there's more to Indianapolis than you'd think. If you can get over that fact that people here consider the term "Hoosier" a matter of pride rather than an insult, you're sure to find something you like. C'mon, kids! I'll take you through it!

Civics 101—Urban Renewal

Although it's best to avoid comparisons of "better than" instead of "different from, I'll crawl out on a Midwestern limb here and announce that Indianapolis is kicking St. Louis' ass at one thing: being a city. A city with a thriving, living downtown. My very first week here, I beheld a site downtown that baffled and amazed me: people. On the streets. Walking. Going places. People who had come downtown *on purpose*. At night. On a weeknight! How it came to be is a moderately interesting tale involving government and sports with an outcome that must surely inspire envy in other Midwestern cities (naming names would be rude) that have tried for years, unsuccessfully, to achieve the same outcome.



In the early 1980s, Indianapolis city and county made the controversial decision to merge and form what is known as Unigov. (Which, unless you're a member of Indy's oh-so-conservative government, you might think sounds vaguely condom-ish.) Unigov (tee hee) has successfully eliminated the challenge of managing and streamlining government across different municipalities. In addition, Unigov expanded the city limits, landing Indy the rank of the 13th largest city in the nation. Who knew?

While St. Louis rightfully claims itself a sports town, Indy's claim to the same title has entirely different meaning. Indy is a town *because* of sports. (And we're not talking about the Indy 500, the largest single day sporting event in the nation, if not the world. Perhaps, even, the universe.) Nay, in the mid-eighties, city leaders desperate to revive a dying downtown, made a big bet on sports as their salvation. Over the course of the next decade, downtown sprung up as sports central, with the Hoosier Dome (home of the Colts) adding to the existing Market Square Arena (home of the Pacers). After hosting the Pan American games, Indy's evident lust for sports helped the NCAA's administrative headquarters and museum right out from under Overland Park, Kansas.

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In addition, downtown is home to Victory Field, the new Triple A baseball stadium, a complete nostalgic throwback to baseball's early days. Last year added Conseco Fieldhouse, a magnificent structure serving as a museum of the state's famous basketball history and the new home of the Pacers.

The bottom line is this: the city's plan worked. The geography of all these sports venues — downtown — generated enough foot traffic downtown for a thriving world of restaurants, retail stores, and nightlife. There, in the middle of it, stands Circle Center Mall, everything St. Louis Center had hoped to be. It's packed, day and night, any day of the week.

Get this. People don't just go downtown in Indy, they actually *live* here. Not in unjustifiably expensive loft space miles from any amenities. But in houses, apartments, condos, townhouses and, okay, some slightly pricey loft space. Community members are fierce and active in their efforts to aid Indy's revitalization. There is a pride in this community, to sustain livable space within and near the confines of downtown with all the amenities of suburban living (i.e., grocery stores, pharmacies and other retail outlets crucial to downtown living.)

The Accidental Tourist

Enough of all that, though. You probably just want to know why you should even bother visiting. To play tourist, my friend. You know you have it in you. Indianapolis is a walking tourist's dream. And everything is right downtown. Really! You've got [White River State Park](#), which houses the zoo and a 3-D Imax theater. There's the City Center which, apparently, is interesting to those interested in that sort of thing. Stroll not too far my friend and tada! You're at the NCAA Hall of Champions.



And you must check out the Canal Walk, a feat of modern landscaping, that snakes its way through downtown below street level. Daytime or evening, it's populated by workers on their lunch break or runners and cyclists. Plus it's got paddleboats! Paddle boats! It's even got an interactive war monument and if

that's your thing, you are in for a solid ride.

Thou shalt not want for monuments here in Indy, where Soldiers and Sailors Monument is the center of downtown. The streets radiate out from Monument Circle earning Indy the nickname "Circle City." Of course, you're not locked into memorializing, uh, whatever war Monument Circle's all about, because you're just walking distance from the five block Veterans Memorial Plaza where a Vietnam memorial is the latest addition to the peaceful stretch of perfectly manicured lawns, frothy fountains and a small, dense forest of local and foreign flags.

The Cultured Life

It's here. Somewhere. In all fairness, Indy's arts and culture scene may lack the sophistication of St. Louis', but it tries damn hard. We may not always get the big Broadway touring shows, but there's not a Disney On Ice spectacular that passes us by. What's your bag — symphony, dance, theater, opera? You got it. Plus, there are a number of small but hearty improv, comedy and independent theater productions. Many are along Massachusetts Avenue, a tiny slice of heaven, with storefronts featuring performance art, the funk of local artisans, jewelry, antiques and the Abbey coffee house that draws wayward smoking teens like flies on cool summer nights.

Then there's Broad Ripple — not quite Central West End, not quite

the Loop. It could well be argued that Broad Ripple has a leg up on either. It's bigger, more diverse and lacks any huge corporate store invasions. It seems to be the place to be seen both for disenfranchised youth and twentysomethings attached to their cell phones. You'll find overpriced trendy wear, loads of art/furniture, pubs, restaurants, and a truly impressive concentration of vintage clothing stores. (It's been said that these alone are worth the visit up north.)

Where Oh Where Is the Music?

Let me put the Indy music scene into perspective for you. I met a man here who claimed to be an agent/promoter for local bands, whose names he couldn't tell me for "obvious confidentiality reasons." I asked him, "What's the Indianapolis music scene like?" He looked me straight in the eye and said, "There isn't one." (Which left a number of questions about why he chose his particular profession, but I let it slide.)

I'm sure a lot of people would argue with his statement. Particularly, say, local musicians. Yet despite enough different venues to house all types of acts, the must-see shows in Indy are few and far between. It's said Indy misses out on up and coming regional acts because we're situated between West Lafayette and Bloomington, thriving college towns that provide a stronger, more passionate audience. Or it could simply be that the club bookers are idiots. I will tell you this: I've seen the concert calendar through May and the best I can offer is the Vanilla Ice on Ice combo concert/hockey game at Pepsi Coliseum next month.

The Voice of the People

Well, our options are limited here too, friends. On the one hand, you've got the conservative *Indianapolis Star*, which often makes the *Post-Dispatch* look like *Mother Jones*. Or there's Nuvo, the city's alternative weekly... which sounds, interestingly enough, like weakling. It's like the old, pre-corporate *RFT* had puppies and this was the runt. Sad, since this city could do better and the small and struggling alternative, music and artist communities need the backing.

Break Bread with Us

I saved the best for last yet, sadly, there seems to be no local food that speaks of Indy the way thin crust pizza and toasted ravioli scream St. Louis. No, the people of Indianapolis appear to be equal opportunity eaters, which is probably why the state recently received the honor of being named the fourth fattest state in the nation. I know that since moving here I have dutifully done my own part to keep that title alive.

In short, Indy has a feeling that St. Louis hasn't had in a while. It's going somewhere and the energy is palpable. It has beautiful streets, true civic pride and while it might have fewer offerings than a larger city, it has a few small things it concentrates on doing well. And it seems like it's working so far.

(Uh...there's also a bunch of historical crap to do around town, but you'll have to look it up in a tour book.)

Julia Smillie is a freelance writer living in Indianapolis, IN. Her semi-regular, semi-amusing column appears on her web site at www8.50megs.com/jcsmillie. She has excellent table manners and believes that spelling counts.

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