

More people are living and designing in this old Indy mental hospital site

Emily Udell, *IndyStar* correspondent Published 6:00 a.m. ET Aug. 20, 2017 | Updated 4:29 p.m. ET Aug. 23, 2017



(Photo: Provided by Holladay Properties)

Heidi Lofton enjoyed renting in historic Woodruff Place on the east side for the past three years, but when it came time to buy a house, she and her husband wanted something different. [Fullscreen](#)

“This is kind of a millennial stereotype but I’ll lean into it: **Central State campus becomes one of Indy’s new pockets of cool**,” said Lofton, a 28-year-old interior designer. But the couple didn’t want the overly artsy, bohemian experience either.

“We wanted something that’s cool and unique,” said Lofton, who in April bought one of the first new homes on the west-side campus of the former Central State Hospital.

From Downtown, drive past White River State Park and the Indianapolis Zoo for two miles — the same distance between Monument Circle and Fall Creek — to find an unlikely hub for the creative class: What was first known as the Indiana Hospital for the Insane and now the home of the quirky [Indiana Medical History Museum](http://www.imhm.org/).



The 150-acre Indiana Hospital for the Insane is now the home of the quirky Indiana Medical History Museum. (Photo: Indiana Medical History Museum)

The tranquil 150-acre campus is mostly owned by the city, which is working with developers to preserve the history of the site while also building something new. Designers and makers are opening studios there, [Blue Indy](https://www.blue-indy.com/) has set up a fleet of electric cars and plans include retailers.

The process started about a decade ago, when the city began looking to create a master plan for a long-term project called the Villages at Central State.

“More and more people want to be a part of something that’s special,” said Emily Mack, director of the Indianapolis Department of Metropolitan Development. “Creating that sense of place, and offering the chance to be part of something that’s being reinvented and revitalized, people want to be part of that.”



The city of Indianapolis, Holladay Properties and Nottingham Realty Group have teamed up to develop the Central State campus into a vibrant, mixed-use community. (Photo: Provided by Nottingham Realty)

Known for restoring the historic Penn Arts on the north side and Audubon Court in Irvington, [Reverie Estates \(http://www.reverieestates.com/\)](http://www.reverieestates.com/) is renovating the campus' old buildings. The city, Holladay Properties and Nottingham Realty Group have teamed up to develop the campus into a vibrant, mixed-use community.

Old brick structures that housed a laundry facility and other hospital operations will become home to a brewery and — developers hope — other commercial businesses that will cater to 1,000 eventual residents.

For inspiration, developers looked at successful transformations of similar sites around the country, including the [Village at Grand Traverse Commons \(https://www.thevillagetc.com/\)](https://www.thevillagetc.com/) in Traverse City, Mich., and [St. Elizabeths \(http://www.stelizabethsdevelopment.com/index.html\)](http://www.stelizabethsdevelopment.com/index.html) in Washington, D.C.

"Indianapolis is not the only city with an abandoned mental hospital, but a lot of cities haven't figured out what to do with them," said Derek Naber of [Holladay Properties \(http://www.holladayproperties.com/\)](http://www.holladayproperties.com/), which is part of the development team. "Indianapolis is way ahead of the game."

The hospital was founded in 1848, when the philosophy behind caring for people with mental illnesses was changing as part of a national humanitarian effort led by Quakers.

Some progressive goals were explored and realized at Central State, including during the 1880s, when upstart director William Fletcher hired the institution's first woman doctor and banned mechanical restraints like straps, shackles and straitjackets. But the hospital was plagued with allegations of abuse and neglect until its closure in 1994.

Except for the Old Pathology Building, which houses the museum, many of the old brick buildings had been falling to ruin in recent decades. The future of the site looked uncertain.

"There was a time when they were going to tear it all down and we were bracing ourselves for having a horrible big box store in our backyard," said Sarah Halter, executive director of the medical museum. She's hopeful the project will work to honor the patients who lived and died there, giving them the voices they didn't have during their lifetimes.

Halter looks forward to the development of sites like The Grove, a serene, wooded area that was a rare spot for reflection and recreation for patients on the hospital's campus.

"We want to make sure these people are respected and their memories are honored," Halter said. "Pretending (history) never happened won't sell houses."

Developers predict the site's unusual past will attract residents, and the affordable housing prices will appeal to homebuyers who can't afford properties Downtown and its adjacent neighborhoods.

"There is urban core growth and density, which is great, but Center Township isn't. You have a shortage of stable, affordable neighborhoods," said Mark Nottingham, founder of [Nottingham Realty Group \(http://nottinghamrealtygroup.com/\)](http://nottinghamrealtygroup.com/). The smallest home, at 1,406-square-foot, with two stories and two bedrooms, starts at \$210,000. Seven of the first 17 homes currently planned have been presold, Nottingham said.

The Steeples on Washington apartment complex, which opened in 2012, is already home to about 200 people, and plans for revitalization include townhomes and senior housing. Developers say the site increases the income diversity of the area and will integrate seamlessly into the surrounding area.

"We know that's what makes the most stable neighborhoods," Mack said.

Along with the housing prices and sprawling acres of old-growth trees, Lofton was attracted to the modern, airy and streamlined aesthetic of [the homes \(https://www.livecentralstate.com/\)](https://www.livecentralstate.com/), which are being built by [Compendium Group \(http://www.cg317.com/\)](http://www.cg317.com/), and also the low-maintenance yards. At first she was unsure about the location, but has since convinced her best friends to build on the lot next door.

"It's different when you get out there and see what the property is like," she added. "This is a gem."

The nonprofit [People for Urban Progress \(http://www.peopleup.org/\)](http://www.peopleup.org/) — or "PUP" — set up shop last April in Central State's old carpentry building, where Jessica Brinker, director of design and fabrication, was hard at work on a recent summer day. PUP used to be headquartered at the Murphy Building in Fountain Square.

"We want to be part of the revitalization here," Brinker said. "We're not far from Downtown and I like that you can walk outside and there's a ton of green space."

PUP wanted more space, and Central State met its storage and fabrication needs in one location. It doesn't hurt that partners [Ignition Arts \(http://ignitionarts.com/\)](http://ignitionarts.com/) relocated to the campus, and [Project | One Studio \(http://p1-studio.com/\)](http://p1-studio.com/) is about to.

These organizations, along with artist-friendly studios in the old Central State Mansion building, suggest the property might be poised to become a new locus for Indy's creative class. The campus is also home to 1899, an event space, the [Christel House Academy West \(https://chacademy.org/index.html\)](https://chacademy.org/index.html), a charter school serving elementary students, and the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department's horse patrol, which plans to remain on campus and upgrade its facilities and paddocks. There's also a track and field area that hosts Wednesday night recreational soccer matches played during the summer by the co-ed neighborhood clubs of [Indy City Futbol \(https://www.indycityfutbol.com/\)](https://www.indycityfutbol.com/).

Lofton looks forward to taking advantage of what the revamped Central State has to offer when she moves to her new home this November.

"We get all the things that are really good about the suburbs — a planned development with a lot of amenities, but we also still get to walk to the nearby brewery, we could bike to Downtown, we could walk to White River State Park and the zoo," she said. "We get the best of both worlds."

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