The last days of Babe Denny, a south-side Indianapolis neighborhood sacrificed for progress

People who have grown up and raised families south of Lucas Oil Stadium have one day per year when they feel like part of a neighborhood: the first Saturday in August.

The annual picnic day at Babe Denny Park is when the residents who cling to the sparse houses south of McCarty Street reunite with the folks who have given up and moved to neighborhoods that, unlike Babe Denny, have not been sacrificed for the sake of progress. The former neighbors grill food, drink beer and recall when streets surrounding the inconspicuous, one-block park were dense with loving families who looked out for one another.

This year, though, Babe Denny shared its reunion with out-of-town visitors to one of the city's prized special events. The picnic fell on the same weekend as Gen Con, the massive convention for gamers, many of them in search of parking. The coincidental timing made it difficult for some people to attend the picnic and served as a reminder that whatever the future holds for Babe Denny, it does not include the people who have called it home.

Lucas Oil Stadium: What was projected, what happened and what's ahead the next 10 years

"We are powerless," Brent Darden, 56, said as he worked the grill at Babe Denny Park. "This neighborhood, we didn't have rich parents. Everybody worked for a living. Worked hard. They started developing things around here. I believe this is going to be the last picnic, this year, of the gathering of the families. It's mentally frustrating, to be honest."

That frustration has pitted a half-dozen or so Babe Denny homeowners, as well as former residents, in a battle against inevitable commercialization. They grew up in an improbable enclave of African-American and Jewish harmony, which formed because of — or perhaps in spite of — racist housing policies. Then they watched it disintegrate over several decades as an interstate ran through the neighborhood and an NFL stadium rose up.

A decade after the Indianapolis Colts moved into Lucas Oil Stadium, the area around it appears to be on the cusp of rapid growth, with new apartments, hotels, offices and retail in various stages of planning. That development comes as an affront to people who still consider the neighborhood a residential area. They want the changes to stop, yet they know there's nothing they can do about it.
Darden, who persists in a two-bedroom house on Meikel Street, could not explain why he thinks the annual picnic might end other than it seems like the next logical loss for Babe Denny. Darden has resisted leaving his home, where he says his grandparents raised 13 children. But in addition to fretting over the picnic, he acknowledges that this might be the last year of his holdout as companies continue to offer big money for properties such as his so they can be converted to parking for Colts fans.

"Just knowing that's going to happen, it hurts inside," Darden said. "There's nothing I can do about it. Progress is going to happen. It's going to come this way and take all this eventually."

**Redlining and racism**

Real estate developers until recently have shown little interest in the Old Southside (/story/news/2016/06/17/what-s-holding-back-old-southside/85253430/), an area that stretches from Lucas Oil Stadium down to a railroad bed north of Raymond Street (http://www.downtownindy.org/neighborhoods/old-southside/)

The modern Old Southside emerged from the belief — etched in decades of public policy — that the area was irredeemable. The Home Owners' Loan Corp.'s 1937 map of Indianapolis (https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=13/39.7449/-86.1700&opacity=0.8&city=indianapolis-in&sort=53&area=D18), which informed banks' decisions on which neighborhoods qualified as safe investments, shaded the Old Southside in red, the worst designation, because of the area's high percentages of black and Jewish residents.

A document associated with that map notes only a quarter of homes in the neighborhood were owner-occupied. The document includes a field for "favorable influences" and offers one damning word for the Old Southside: "None." This sweeping judgment of neighborhoods is known as redlining, a practice that starved urban areas of investment and doomed neighborhoods to systemic segregation and poverty.

Despite these challenges, Babe Denny — named after former city parks employee Bay Edward "Babe" Denny — was an integrated and vibrant community (/story/life/2016/10/31/old-indy-neighborhood-island-racial-harmony/92006442/) into the 1970s. Current and former residents remember bustling streets with retail and entertainment, including the Oriental Theater, Kraft's South Side Baking Co., Regen's Baking Co. and Passo's Drugs.

During the 1970s, construction of Interstate 70 ripped through the neighborhood, displacing businesses and residents — particularly renters — whose properties were taken by eminent domain.

"There is a connection in that if you look nationally at where interstate highways have been placed and the way they ran through cities and divided them up, you can see most of the interstate were put in neighborhoods that were red on the HOLC maps," said Susan Hyatt, an anthropology professor for Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis who has compiled a book on the history of Babe Denny (http://ulib.iupuidigital.org/cdm/ref/collection/NOS/id/2352). "Those were the poorest neighborhoods and the most unlikely to be able to mount an effective resistance."

**Another Indy neighborhood: What's holding back the Old Southside? (/story/news/2016/06/17/what-s-holding-back-old-southside/85253430/)**

**Shifting demographics**

The neighborhood started losing its Jewish identity even before the interstate came. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the G.I. Bill, granted upward mobility to Jewish men returning from World War II but remained largely out of reach for black veterans, Hyatt said.

Brian Shapiro, the owner of Shapiro's Delicatessen on Meridian Street, said redlining was a "long-term issue" for his family, but Jewish residents steadily gained access to credit markets.

"The Jews eventually got around the redlining, but if you're of color and you had to go in and fill out paperwork, the bankers were discriminatory," Shapiro said.

I-70 accelerated an exodus out of Babe Denny among people who had the means to leave and hastened the neighborhood's decline as a residential area. The businesses closed as people left, leading to disinvestment.

Indianapolis officials in 1989 announced that Babe Denny Park would become a horse stable for police. A saw cut through the park sign, the swing set disappeared and basketball hoops came down. After outcry, though, the city relented in 1990 and committed to maintaining the park.
The 2005 deal between the city, state and Colts to build Lucas Oil Stadium north of McCarty Street was the final dagger for Babe Denny. The new NFL stadium created an immediate need for parking lots and a long-term prospect of massive redevelopment.

By the time construction started, the area south of the Lucas Oil Stadium site already had descended into an industrial wasteland overrun with parked tractor-trailers and unsightly equipment.

"You can look at the sidewalks. You can look at the train viaduct. You can just tell that neighborhood down there, there was just no reinvestment in it," Shapiro said. "There's a bunch of empty lots and houses that need to be torn down. In some ways, it actually becomes an opportunity."

'I look for opportunities'

Steve Alexander might be the first person who saw the Old Southside's future. Alexander in 1995 moved his architecture firm to 21 W. Merrill St., two blocks east of what would become Lucas Oil Stadium.

Alexander relocated from 16th and Illinois streets, an area he moved to 12 years earlier "back when it was really bleak." Even without the stadium, he thought, the Old Southside was in line for a turnaround similar to the Herron Morton neighborhood on the north side.

"I look for opportunities where I think there's going to be a dramatic change in the economics of a neighborhood and try to get there before everybody else does and set up my business and work on economic redevelopment," Alexander said.

It is perhaps an indication of Alexander's success that he is preparing to move his office again, to a location he declined to disclose, because his building will soon be demolished to make way for a Tru hotel, a Hilton brand geared toward young travelers.

Alexander is working on the Tru hotel project, he said, as well as many of the other dozen or so construction projects that are in the pipeline for the area around Lucas Oil Stadium.

The list includes developer Crestline’s $72 million apartment project, Kraft Factory Lofts, at 915 S. Meridian St.; a $17 million TownePlace Suites by Marriott in the 600 block of Russell Avenue; and Good Oil Co.’s plans to build a gas station, convenience store and hotel at Morris and West streets, as well as redeveloping the former Lenny’s Gentlemen’s Club into a mixed-use project.

Business leaders have been working to rebrand the area around the Colts home to Stadium Village. The effort moved slowly for years but has recently gained momentum, said Tom Dale, president of the Stadium Village Business Association.
Colts parking

While professional sports venues tend to be pitched as generators of economic development — contrary to the conclusions of studies — football stadiums bring relatively few people because of the relatively few events they hold. Those inherent limitations, combined with the Great Recession that followed Lucas Oil Stadium's opening and dead areas that include an adjacent block with a post office building, have inhibited growth.

Now that the economy has improved and other areas of Indianapolis have been built up, though, investors and developers are attracted to the opportunity to build projects near Lucas Oil Stadium and Bankers Life Fieldhouse, Dale said.

"We have people coming every month with zoning cases and new developments for us to sign off on," Dale said. "We're starting to turn a corner finally."

Many of those zoning cases pertain to an unsexy land use: surface parking.

Two companies are partnering to accumulate every available parcel near Lucas Oil Stadium and turn them into event parking. IWS Realty LLP has acquired more than 60 properties near the stadium, according to city records, and contracted with former rival Gate Ten Events & Parking to manage them.

The partnership has created about 2,200 parking spaces near a stadium that was conceived with little regard for where football fans might leave their cars. The stadium authority's plan to seize the nearby N.K. Hurst Co. site through eminent domain and turn it into parking failed.

The hunger for parking, though, has raised more tension among the remaining homeowners of Babe Denny, who are faced with the decision to cash out and walk away from their history or remain and watch the neighborhood continue to become an extension of an NFL stadium.

'I can only speak to today'

When the Metropolitan Development Commission opened the floor to anyone opposed to a zoning change at 315 W. McCarty St. during its Aug. 1 meeting, 90-year-old Oretha Harris was the first to speak.

Gate Ten was asking to rezone the property, which includes a beige one-story building with barbed-wire fencing and loading docks, from an industrial designation to a commercial use that would allow a wide range of redevelopment projects. The request was consistent with the city's long-term plan for Babe Denny, which includes phasing out industrial properties.

Harris, with the help of a daughter, used a walker to step from the front row of the City-County Building's council chamber to the microphone. Harris spoke of living in her Senate Avenue home for 70 years, a residency that began about a decade after the Home Owners’ Loan Corp. deemed her neighborhood too black and Jewish to permit home loans.
Harris raised several grievances, many of which were not related to the issue at hand. But her conclusion was firm.

"I don't want the zoning changed," Harris said. "I want it set just like it is."

After some more discussion, the panel sided with Gate Ten based on the city's general policy that commercial redevelopment is better for the area than an industrial building. Babe Denny's current and former residents walked away with yet another defeat.

James Payne, the director of business development for Gate Ten, said he has tried to soothe relationships with residents as the company turns properties into parking lots and event centers.

"We've probably been the largest contributor to turning the area south of Lucas Oil Stadium into what it is today," Payne said. "It's not that we're trying to take over a neighborhood. We're trying to do a beautification project of this neighborhood that Gate Ten happens to be right in the middle of."

Payne acknowledged the conflict runs deeper than recent zoning changes.

"I can only speak to today," he said.

When asked during the Babe Denny picnic about the zoning decision, several current and former residents talked more generally about the long-term dissolution of their neighborhood. Gate Ten is only one face of the forces of change.

"They don't know the history of this neighborhood," Darden said. "I'm not going to say they don't care. They just don't know the history."

Hyatt, the anthropology professor, who attended the picnic, said the history of redlining and I-70 loom over everything else that is happening.
"Developers are dying to get their hands on properties because they can be used for parking, hotels and restaurants," Hyatt said. "There's this vision of south Indianapolis as the next frontier for development, but that's not going to be development that's going to benefit the people who have stuck it out living there."

The economic development pioneers of the Old Southside acknowledge they are benefiting to at least some extent from decades of decisions that choked the communities. But they see no way to reconcile the past. It is time to rebuild.

"There are egregious policies that have historically oppressed inner-city neighborhoods willfully and intentionally," Alexander, the architect, said. "But I'm not really here for that. That's another person's undertaking. My job is to find all of the assets of any given area and bring those out and paint them large."


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