MONUMENT CIRCLE DISTRICT

HISTORIC PRESERVATION PLAN

HISTORIC AREA-40 (MCD)

A Part of the Comprehensive Plan
for Marion County, Indiana

Adopted by the Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission
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Photo Source: Christ Church Cathedral, 1928, Indiana Historical Society Collection
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Photo Source: Three Businesses on Washington Street, 1928, Indiana Historical Society Collection
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*Photo Source:* Indianapolis ArtsGarden, 2009, Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission Collection
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Photo Source: Three Businesses on Washington Street, 1928, Indiana Historical Society Collection
Introduction

Photo Source: East Washington Street, 2012, Indianapolis Historic Preservation Collection
INTRODUCTION

The area which the Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission has defined as the Monument Circle District (MCD) is the historic core of the City of Indianapolis. It retains a continuum of architectural styles dating from the Civil War to the present day, with structures that represent work of outstanding quality executed by some of the most talented architects from our state and nation. This district is significant as it encompasses the heart of our city which symbolically defines Indianapolis as “The Circle City.” The “Mile Square” with the “Circle” as its centroid was planned by Alexander Ralston as the capital city for the new State of Indiana in 1821. The City of Indianapolis was not shaped by geographical elements, commercial position, or natural resources, but rather by a desire of the Indiana legislators to create a new capital city at the very center of the state. Ralston’s plan emphasizes this in a most dramatic way: a mile square crisscrossed by four main avenues converging on a circle block and bisected by the Market Street axis that places the State Capitol at one end, the Circle with the Governor’s residence in its center and the Marion County Court House and City Market at the other. The plan was simple and created a strong stately image for a capital city. Preserving the principal elements of the Ralston Plan within the Monument Circle District is essential to retaining the physical identity of Indianapolis as the Capital City of Indiana. For these reasons, its preservation plan must protect contributing features in a way that retains vitality and promotes growth without compromising the identity of this important cultural resource.

The MCD is not only a collection of some of Indianapolis’ most notable architecture, but also defines a set of urban spaces that is unique to the state. Most primary public rights-of-way spaces within the district remain fairly intact from the original Ralston design, with the exception of the removal of three of the original four diagonal avenues that terminated at the Circle Block, lost in a twenty-year period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. These were important definitive elements of the Ralston Plan which had survived for 140 years, yielding some of the most distinctive and interesting “flat iron” structures within the district. The MCD includes the last diagonal, Virginia Avenue, within its boundaries. Once these resources are lost they are gone from our cultural memories forever. These spaces set the scale, establish the context and reinforce the ambiance of the Monument and its Circle. They are crucial to preserving and maintaining the identity and character of the MCD.

The variety of architectural styles and period structures reflects an evolution of the city over almost a two-century period. This district represents who we are, where we have come from, and the need to accommodate change. In developing this preservation plan, the Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission has

Photo Source: Postcard of English Hotel and Opera House, 1909, Indiana Historical Society Collection
endeavored to emphasize what is important and what must be preserved while allowing for change and continued evolution of Monument Circle and its environs. The MCD plan does not seek to create “frozen history,” but provides orientation and direction for future development that is responsive to the architecture and cultural resources of this special place.

The MCD plan is not a set of prescriptive rules or absolutes about how to plan or design new structures and additions within the district. Rather it is a “road map” to assist owners, city officials, architects and planners on how to preserve, rehabilitate, and infill new structures in an appropriate and sensitive manner. The plan emphasizes conserving the remaining historic structures and urban context because it is the fabric that defines the very character of the MCD. As one pages through the Building Inventory Section of this plan, one can’t help but be struck by the loss or alteration of significant structures that were once prominent features of the MCD. The Guidelines section of the plan sets forth a process that seeks to retain the maximum number of existing resources while permitting the design of new and creative reuses, additions, and new structures that will allow the public to appreciate and interpret the historic heart of Indianapolis. We recognize the need for change and growth within the MCD if it is to remain the vital and thriving core of Indianapolis and the State of Indiana.

James T. Kienle, FAIA
Past President
Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission

*Photo Source:* Postcard of Marion County Courthouse, James T. Kienle Private Collection
INTRODUCTION

FOREWORD

Platted in 1821, the City of Indianapolis was designed by prominent planner Alexander Ralston. Ralston located a circular street at the heart of his mile-square plat and named it “Circle Street,” intending it to be the site of the home of the Governor of Indiana. Less than one hundred years later the street would be renamed Monument Circle and the location of the City’s unofficial symbol, the Indiana Soldiers and Sailors Monument.

Ralston’s plan also designated Washington Street as the principal street in the new city. Its extra width and the fact that public land and major public buildings fronted it, such as the Court House Square and the State House Square, are evidence of the street’s importance. Washington Street also became a portion of the National Road, the first federally funded interstate highway stretching through six states from Cumberland, Maryland to Vandalia, Illinois.

Monument Circle District is located in the heart of this historic plat, today known as downtown Indianapolis. It includes surviving resources of the historic downtown established in the nineteenth century and resources from the early, mid- and late-twentieth century. It contains both historic and architecturally significant buildings constructed in a variety of styles, materials, shapes and sizes. Its streets symbolize a mix of unique functions: Washington Street historically commanded great prominence as Indianapolis’ “Main Street,” while the two blocks of East Market Street developed as the city’s financial district. Monument Circle evolved from a residential neighborhood into an urban public plaza with landmark buildings encircling and framing the Soldiers and Sailors Monument.

Even though Urban Renewal and the growth of suburban retail slowly eroded Indianapolis’ urban core in the 1960s and 1970s, the economic revitalization efforts of the 1980s and 1990s introduced new buildings bringing business, retail and entertainment venues to the area. Combined with the Indianapolis Cultural Trail, an urban bike and pedestrian path installed in the early twenty-first century to connect the city’s core to other area attractions, these improvements have given downtown a new lease on life.

It is this amazing collection of resources that defines downtown Indianapolis.

Photo Source: Postcard of West Market Street from Monument Circle, James T. Kienle Private Collection