

CREATIVE ADAPTIVE REUSE CASE STUDY

WHEELER ARTS COMMUNITY CENTER
Fountain Square | Indianapolis, Indiana



PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Wheeler Arts Community Center is a historic adaptive reuse project that transformed a vacant early-20th-century industrial building into a creative, residential, and educational hub in Fountain Square in Indianapolis. Originally constructed in 1912 as the Wheeler-Schebler Carburetor Company, an early reinforced concrete factory and prominent local employer, the building was abandoned by the 1990s before being revitalized as an artist-oriented community space.

CHALLENGE

Industrial Vacancy and Neighborhood Decline

By the late 20th century, the once-active Wheeler factory had been vacant for years, contributing to economic stagnation and underutilized built assets within Fountain Square. Its abandonment exemplified the broader challenges of post-industrial urban neighborhoods seeking new identity and purpose.

Lack of Affordable Space for Creative Workers

Fountain Square's growth into a cultural district lacked sufficient affordable live-workspaces for artists and creatives, constraining the ability of emerging talent to remain in the community and contribute to its cultural ecosystem. This posed both an economic and cultural sustainability issue.

Disconnect Between Education, Creative Practice, and Community

Local universities and creative practitioners lacked centralized venues where students, artists, and residents could interact, collaborate, and build professional experience in an urban creative district.

SOLUTION: ADAPTIVE REUSE INTO THE WHEELER ARTS COMMUNITY

In 2000, a collaboration between Southeast Neighborhood Development, Inc. (SEND) and the University of Indianapolis (UIndy) repurposed the historic building into the Wheeler Arts Community Center, an integrated arts, residential, and education space.

Primary Components

- 36 affordable live-work lofts designed for artists and creatives
- Classrooms and studio space to support arts education and practice
- Gallery and theater spaces used for exhibitions, performances, and community events
- Partnerships with UIndy faculty and students, integrating academic engagement and real-world creative activity

The project preserved historic fabric while converting industrial space into affordable artist housing and a central creative hub for the rapidly revitalizing Fountain Square district.

The Wheeler building's transformation emerged from local civic and institutional alignment around arts-driven neighborhood revitalization. UIndy faculty and SEND leaders envisioned a space where students could learn from real artists and community members. For students, the Wheeler Community Center provided practical experience, professional mentorship, and immersive creative community far beyond classroom boundaries.

Monthly events like First Friday reinforced community connections, drawing neighbors and visitors into open studio experiences that showcased resident work and fostered public engagement.

EVOLUTION & CURRENT STATUS

By the late 2010s, economic pressures and rising market demand in Fountain Square shifted redevelopment priorities. The historic Wheeler structure, after two decades as a creative community hub, began transitioning toward market-rate housing under private ownership, increasing the unit count and repositioning the asset within the broader neighborhood housing market.

This evolution underscores the tension between cultural preservation and market forces in rapidly gentrifying creative districts, a key consideration for future policy and community planning.

KEY TAKEAWAY

The Wheeler Arts Community Center exemplified how adaptive reuse can catalyze creative-industry growth, foster affordable artist ecosystems, and integrate education with community cultural life. Its legacy highlights both the transformative potential and sustainability challenges of arts-anchored redevelopment in dynamic urban neighborhoods.

This investment in the creative economy yielded an estimated \$6.9 million in total economic output and generated an estimated \$886,000 in total tax revenue spread across federal, state, and local governments.

SOURCES

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