

A CITY TRANSFORMED

1980 - 1989

In the 1980s, the ambitions of city planners were stunningly fulfilled as Downtown Indianapolis experienced the most sweeping changes since the 1920s.

Those involved would later look back on 1982 as the year when two pivotal events took place. One was the construction of the American United Life tower and the other was the city's successful hosting of the National Sports Festival. Both were the result of months, or years, of effort by city officials and both sparked continuing success.

The city had spent 18 months pursuing AUL before the insurance company decided to build its headquarters downtown.

When it opened, the AUL Building was briefly the city's tallest structure, but the Bank One Tower would soon surpass it. At least six other office buildings went up as well. Had the AUL deal fallen through, some of those projects might not have happened either.

When the Hilton on the Circle (which later became the Radisson) opened in 1970, it was the first major hotel to open Downtown in nearly 50 years. But during the '80s, 1,700 new hotel rooms were completed. Several historic preservation districts were also created as preservationists laid claim to an area that stretched roughly from Fountain Square on the Southeastside north to 22nd Street in the Herron-Morton district.

Renovation revived Monument Circle, the Indiana and Walker theater buildings and the Lockerbie Hotel, which was transformed into the lavish Canterbury Hotel.

Union Station was brought back to life as a festival-style marketplace with shops and restaurants. The Indianapolis Zoo spread its wings in White River State Park, and work began on a retail complex to be called Circle Centre.

On the near Westside, the campus buildings of IUPUI seemed to sprout out of the ground like mushrooms. The Hoosier Dome, with its distinctive inflatable roof, quickly found a new tenant — the former Baltimore Colts.

Opposite page: A view of Indianapolis looking northeast across the eight-acre fabric roof of the recently constructed Hoosier Dome, July 1987.

It was no accident that Colts owner Robert Irsay chose Indianapolis. Mayor William Hudnut and other city officials had courted Irsay as early as 1978. The Hoosier Dome (later re-named the RCA Dome) was built with NFL football in mind, but planners insisted it be viable if necessary on conventions and concerts alone.

Sports wasn't just a weekend diversion anymore. It was a new industry — and a pollution-free one at that — which city planners had begun nurturing the previous decade.

As part of the 1978 Amateur Sports Act, Congress required that national governing bodies be established for nearly 40 sports. Those organizations had to be headquartered somewhere, so why not Indianapolis? The Indiana Sports Corporation was created in 1979 to turn that idea into a reality.

If the city wanted to pursue multi-sport events, it needed some unique or world-class facilities in some of the sports. Out of that came the Track and Field Stadium (\$5.9 million) and the Natatorium (\$21.5 million), both at IUPUI.

When the city successfully hosted the National Sports Festival in 1982, it was both the culmination of that early planning and the beginning of a new identity for a city that had been described as a cemetery with lights and given the nickname "India-noplace".

Then came the Colts in 1984 and the announcement that Indianapolis would be the host city for the 1987 Pan American Games. In 1985, the city reveled in a Newsweek story that labeled Indianapolis the Cinderella of the Rust Belt.

Things had happened so fast that some advocated a breather. In 1980, the city had created a regional center plan that was supposed to guide Downtown development until 2000. Yet within six or seven years, it was essentially completed. Why not slow down?

But there was one piece of the puzzle not yet in place — the Downtown mall.