The City of Indianapolis, Indiana practices a particularly unique spatiality in its community development efforts, which serves to promote corporate interests and to attract new investment and well-paid, highly-educated residents to the downtown core. These processes ultimately produce a distinct pattern of uneven investment across the city that is evident in the rapid gentrification and redevelopment of some neighborhoods and the decline of others. As a result, particular areas like West Indianapolis endure a holding pattern in which city funding dwindles and the interests of local corporations take center stage. West Indianapolis struggles to create any new residential development as the city discourages it by promoting greater industrial/commercial development. In contrast, the city government has recently gained interest in investing within the Martindale-Brightwood neighborhood as residents there, through the Martindale-Brightwood Environmental Justice Collaborative (MBEJC) have called for a greater response to their concerns. Additionally, Martindale-Brightwood sits adjacent to a neighborhood (Fall Creek Place) which has undergone rapid development and gentrification over the last decade. The results include the production of a hopeless mistrusting populace in West Indianapolis and a hopeful, co-opted resident activist group (MBEJC) in Martindale-Brightwood.

Environmental Damaged Communities

Martindale-Brightwood

Martindale-Brightwood, located northeast of city center, has long been a "warehouse" for various manufacturing and industrial processes in Indianapolis and the associated environmental hazards. Several hazardous manufacturing facilities, including a Superfund site, are located in and near the community. In 2004, a church organization in the neighborhood paid for an environmental site assessment to be conducted as part of an application for a loan to be used for planned church renovations. The environmental site assessment revealed historical practices in the area that indicated a potential for site contamination. Further investigations were conducted eventually revealing high levels of lead (Pb) in the soil surface of the site at 250 residential properties in the area. Most of these properties were subsequently remediated and replaced with clean fill. The contamination propelled some in the community to form an activist organization (MBEJC) to learn more about the status of their neighborhood and to push for additional state and federal cleanup efforts.

West Indianapolis

West Indianapolis, a highly industrialized area with heavy traffic volumes, is comprised predominantly of Caucasian residents. The area has a history of industrial operations, with the majority of releases to the environment coming via smoke stacks and atmospheric deposition. Many of these operations, including a Superfund site, are located adjacent to residential areas, potentially placing residents at risk. While this area has been the subject of some environmental sampling and extensive news reporting, no persistent environmental activism has occurred or contributed toward the founding of a community group. Because of the difference in citizen response between the two proposed study areas, this investigation offers insight into the various drivers and forces which allow for or prevent citizen involvement in environmental justice activism.

Co-Optation, Influence, and Different Responses

The different forms of activism being practiced in the two study areas have been shaped through interactions with different co-optative and constraining forces in varying social, political, environmental, and historical contexts. As a result, this research has illustrated how activism is a nuanced concept that is both geographically and historically specific. Various parties (MBEJC, IKE, City of Indianapolis, USEPA) both facilitate and constrain environmental activism among residents and impact cleanup activities by government agencies themselves. The non-governmental organization Improving Kids’ Environment (IKE) assisted the MBEJC in establishing contacts with city and state officials as well as in securing funding for the MBEJC (with IKE as the grantee). However, IKE’s grantee relationship with the U.S. EPA (grantor) and its formal and legalistic approach to activism combined with the City’s response have limited the MBEJC’s vision and held more antagonistic or confrontational protest in check. Particularly problematic was IKE’s conflict of interest in using EPA funding to challenge the EPA remediation effort, which redirected some of the initial MBEJC agenda. The City’s influence is apparent as the agenda of the MBEJC offered support for the City’s goal of redeveloping Martindale-Brightwood as a ‘sustainable community’. Additionally, corporate actors in West Indianapolis (El Lilly Rolls-Royce, Vertellus) exert their influence on residents through the offering of various community meetings at their sites and on local organizations via various funding mechanisms.

Two Communities, Two Different Imaginaries

The review of historical planning reports reveals how the City of Indianapolis leadership has envisioned the futures of West Indianapolis (industrial, no more residential growth) and Martindale-Brightwood (underutilized property, ripe for injection of capital using brownfields and sustainability), creating powerful images of the communities that shape residents’ responses to environmental issues. Moreover, abundant ties to local and federal government agencies in MB, while certainly beneficial to MB residents, have also heightened the risk of co-optation. The MBEJC and residents of MB must see the line of accepting technical and financial assistance from government sources while continuing to challenge local, state, and federal government agencies to address the environmental hazards in their community. The different images of the study areas constructed by the City have created a hopeless mistrusting populace in West Indianapolis and a hopeful, co-opted resident activist group (MBEJC) in Martindale-Brightwood.