

Longtime owner of Fountain Square Theatre sells building

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Linton Calvert never seriously entertained the unsolicited offers he received over the years for the iconic Fountain Square Theatre Building—until presented with the one he couldn't refuse.

It came from North Park Ventures LLC. The Chicago-based real estate firm took ownership Oct. 27, ending Calvert's nearly 25-year run as owner of what's long been considered the anchor of Fountain Square, even before its rebound.

"It's one of the most important buildings in the neighborhood," said developer Craig Von Deylen, whose properties in the area include the Murphy Arts Center and The Hinge and Forte apartment buildings.

Neither party would disclose the purchase price, but a source pegged it in the \$6 million range.

That's 10 times the \$600,000 Calvert paid in 1993 for the then-vacant structure at the corner of Prospect and Shelby streets. The price reflects not just Calvert's extensive improvements but also just how far Fountain Square has progressed in the last quarter-century.

Key to the deal, struck without the building's ever being listed for sale, is North Park's agreement to let Calvert and his wife, Fern, hold onto their business ventures in the building for at least seven years—a caveat that separated its offer from others Calvert had received.



In 1928 some businesses opened at street level in the new building, even before the theater did. (Photo courtesy of Bass Photo Co. Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

"I get to have my cake and eat it, too," said Calvert, 70, from his vacation home in Florida. "We cashed out of the building, but we still control the businesses."

Duckpin bowling alleys in the basement and on the fourth floor are the only ones of their kind in the Midwest. Duckpin bowling uses shorter, wider pins and smaller, lighter balls—without finger holes.

An event center in the former theater space, along with the Smokehouse on Shelby restaurant and Imbibe bar, sit on the ground level. The 10-room Fountainview Inn occupies the third floor, and in the summer months, the Rooftop Garden bar serves drinks atop the 70,000-square-foot building.

The Calverts make their home on the second floor, while first-floor tenants Sidekicks Pizza, Fountain Square Barber Shop and Shag Salon are independently owned.

For North Park, the acquisition represents its first foray into Indianapolis. The private-equity firm partnered with locally based Hageman Group to make the purchase. Another local company, Coldwell Banker Commercial Shook, has been retained to lease and manage the property.

Launched early this year, North Park has quickly grown to include \$50 million in real estate holdings in Chicago and Indianapolis, counting the Fountain Square Theatre Building.

“It’s a really important asset to Fountain Square,” said Matt Cremer, North Park’s Indianapolis partner. “When the opportunity presented itself, it just really stood out. We may never have had a chance again to be a part of this.”

The building was designed by Frank Hunter—appointed the city’s “official architect” in 1922—and opened in 1928, a year before the start of the Great Depression.

Despite the challenging economic times, the 1,500-seat theater served many years as a premier entertainment venue, showing movies and hosting vaudeville entertainment with a full orchestra pit and organ. It eventually fell into disuse and closed in 1960, three years after the fourth-floor bowling alley went silent.

Woolworth’s followed with a five-and-dime on the ground level that closed by the end of the 1960s—a victim of suburban flight. In the meantime, the national retailer had removed the theater marquee and covered the exterior with an enameled porcelain skin.

“Back then, they looked at this building as the bright light of Fountain Square,” Calvert said. “And it went to heck when the interstate came in,” referring to construction of I-65 in the 1960s and early 1970s, which severed Fountain Square from downtown.

Various businesses, including a used-furniture store and the Value Village thrift store, kept the building afloat through the 1970s and 1980s. Second- and third-floor offices, which previously housed doctors, dentists and other professionals, were vacant and falling into disrepair.

Enter Calvert, a local businessman, who began his rescue mission in 1993 by restoring the façade and installing a new roof, and heating and cooling system. The building previously had no air-conditioning.

“Pigeon poop was everywhere,” he said, recalling the sad shape of the building’s interior. “Most of my friends told me how crazy I was.”

His lease-to-buy arrangement with previous owner Joe McNeal called for Calvert to close on the sale within 42 months. The building officially became his in April 1997.

Having grown up in the Twin Aire neighborhood east of Fountain Square, Calvert knew the theater building well. Its fourth-floor bowling alley is really what drew his attention.

In 1981, Calvert had purchased a 12-lane bowling alley called Rocky's, which was next to Iaria's Italian Restaurant on South College Avenue in the adjacent Fletcher Place neighborhood. Five years later, in 1986, he converted it to duckpin bowling, which he discovered in Norfolk, Virginia, years earlier while serving in the U.S. Navy.

Calvert closed the College Avenue duckpin bowling facility and moved the operations to Fountain Square after buying the theater building. The structure on College now is owned by Von Deylen, who converted it to the Pin co-working bureau.

From the mid-1970s through the 1990s, Calvert operated eight hair salons and five beauty schools. But he's tied more to Fountain Square's resurgence.

"I think Fountain Square turned around when Linton came in," Von Deylen said. "It takes a long time and a lot of work to get areas like this turned around. It's an ongoing process, and it started with Linton in the early- to mid-'90s."

Circle Centre mall then was nearing completion, and Linton fully expected Fountain Square to reap the benefits and "explode" within five years. Instead, Massachusetts Avenue took off before Fountain Square. Still, Calvert has no qualms about his decision to invest in the neighborhood.

Fountain Square's ability to attract outside investment shows how far the neighborhood has come, said Catherine Esselman, Downtown Indy's real estate development manager.



Catherine Esselman

"Having a larger investor pool behind it opens up some more opportunities," she said. "It's a nice signal to the market."

North Park intends to explore some "creative lease deals" on the first floor where there is opportunity, Cremer said, and Ratio Architects has been hired to design space buildouts.

The result for Calvert will be more time spent outside the building. In the six days he and his wife had been in Florida, he'd been contacted only once.

"I'll be there periodically," he said, "but I don't know that I have to be there."•