

FOX PARK (24)

LOCATION

This trapezoidal-shaped neighborhood is defined by I-44 on the North, Gravois Avenue on the South, Nebraska Avenue on the West, and by South Jefferson on the East.

HISTORY

Fox Park is a part of a larger neighborhood formerly known as Compton Heights. The original section was carved out in 1860, and subsequently named after Compton Hill, and the reservoir built upon it. It was chosen for its height, so that gravity would distribute water to the surrounding areas. The area began to develop along with the rest of Jefferson Ave. in the 1880's. Much of it was settled by first and second generation Germans, lured by thriving brick and lumber yards. Single and multi-family homes were summarily built to accommodate the population. As a result, the architecture is characterized by the use of similar materials, attention to details, and careful craftsmanship. Most of the housing was built between 1880 and 1950. Compton Heights was also unique in that it had a restrictive, non-racial covenant, which controlled the type of occupancy which could be built. The area was constructed to be mostly residential as a result.

Because of the early development of the neighborhood as a residential place, there is a long history of institutions. The first public school was built in 1884, the first hospital in 1900. There are a myriad of churches in the area, and some of the denominations have been there since before the turn of the century. Perhaps the oldest denomination in the division was the Roman Catholic Church, which began with the St. Francis de Sales parish in 1867. The subsequent influx of churches roughly reflected all the growth that accompanied the turn of the century in St. Louis, plus the added boom of the World's Fair in 1904.

The area has seen a decline in ownership, as well as absolute number of residents in the past years. The building of I-44 brought the demolition of a number of houses on the north side of the neighborhood and the loss of the major industries that had built up the area in the 1930s.

CHARACTERISTICS

Fox Park is largely a residential neighborhood. Residences comprise 86 percent of the Fox Park buildings. One of the neighborhood's greatest strengths is its attractive and affordable turn-of-the-century housing stock: stately townhouses, Victorian row houses, and two- and four-family flats. More than half of the neighborhood is within the Compton Hill Historic District, a locally and federally certified district. Nevertheless, the largest portions of buildings, 78 percent, are multifamily units, which is reflected in the large numbers of renters in the area. The 1990 Census reports about half of the units as rentals, one-quarter owner occupied, and the other quarter vacant. This fosters a certain amount of transience in the neighborhood and its members. Since 1975, DeSales Housing Corporation eclipsed Cox Parkee

The remaining 14 percent of Fox Park is zoned for commercial, industrial or institutional use. Some of these uses, particularly the commercial and industrial areas, are haphazardly arranged and inconsistently maintained. In the southeast portion of the neighborhood, inappropriate commercial or industrial enterprises encroach on residential areas, while factories and warehouses lay underutilized in other parts. Neighborhood residents and the neighborhood association are currently combating older industrial uses that no longer fit into the present residential setting, such as vending trucks and the industrial catering, gravel parking lots, and factories that abut community parks and automotive repair shops.



INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Fox Park is a neighborhood visually anchored by its centerpiece, St. Francis DeSales Catholic Church, sometimes referred to as “the cathedral of the South Side.” One of the neighborhood’s oldest and most prominent institutions, the church has played a major role in the provision of social services and in community development over the years. The church was instrumental in the creation of DeSales Community Housing Corporation in 1975. A program of collecting clothes in the church basement eventually evolved into a full food pantry and basic needs services provided by Hosea House. Named for the priest who first started the program, Hosea House is now a separate non-profit organization.

Near St. Francis DeSales, one finds a whole hub of social service providers, many of which were also once a part of the church. The Villa Maria Center provides services to young mothers during pregnancy and helps them by providing housing for up to a year after delivery. DeSales Day Care, now part of the Guardian Angel Settlement House, serves preschool and school-age children. Thus, organizations that arose around DeSales have drawn other social service entities to the area, such as Women’s Support and Community Services; South Side Catholic Community Services; housed in what was once Notre Dame Elementary; and Girls Inc., a United Way mentoring program for girls aged 4 to 18 years.

Other churches in the neighborhood include Emmaus Lutheran Church and Church of the Living God. Church of the Living God has been particularly involved with younger residents in the neighborhood, sponsoring youth groups and the annual Fox Park Youth Fair. From the site that was once Emmaus Lutheran Elementary, Today’s Lost Children Ministries runs a food pantry, clothing provision, a community garden, an after-school program, and a preschool program.

In 1978, Fox Park residents and the DeSales Community Housing Corporation formed the Fox Park Neighborhood Association. The association works toward creating a cleaner, safer place to live through active block units and monthly community meetings. They were instrumental in bringing Operation Weed and Seed to the neighborhood, a federally designed crime-prevention program. Since the inception of the program, some problems of crime and delinquency are still present, but gang and drug-related activity has been greatly reduced.

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Although formed in conjunction with St. Francis DeSales Catholic Church, DeSales Community Housing Corporation is today a completely separate entity. The organization serves adjacent neighborhoods, but its presence and involvement is particularly striking in Fox Park, where it is based. Over the years, DeSales has acquired and rehabbed large numbers of multifamily units throughout the neighborhood. In some areas, whole sections of neighborhood blocks fall into this category. These flats and apartments are leased to residents through the recently formed managing agent, Compton Heights Apartments. The DeSales Community Housing Corporation also supported new construction projects in Fox Park. They have worked with numerous developers and construction firms, especially the Johnson Group and Pyramid Construction. The construction of eleven homes on the 2000 block of Oregon was one of Pyramid's first full-block projects. These newly constructed homes with historic style motifs were then sold to new homeowners. The DeSales organization has recently undertaken a housing stock inventory. This survey, when complete, will rate properties in the neighborhood according to condition and will help the neighborhood refine planning strategies in the future.