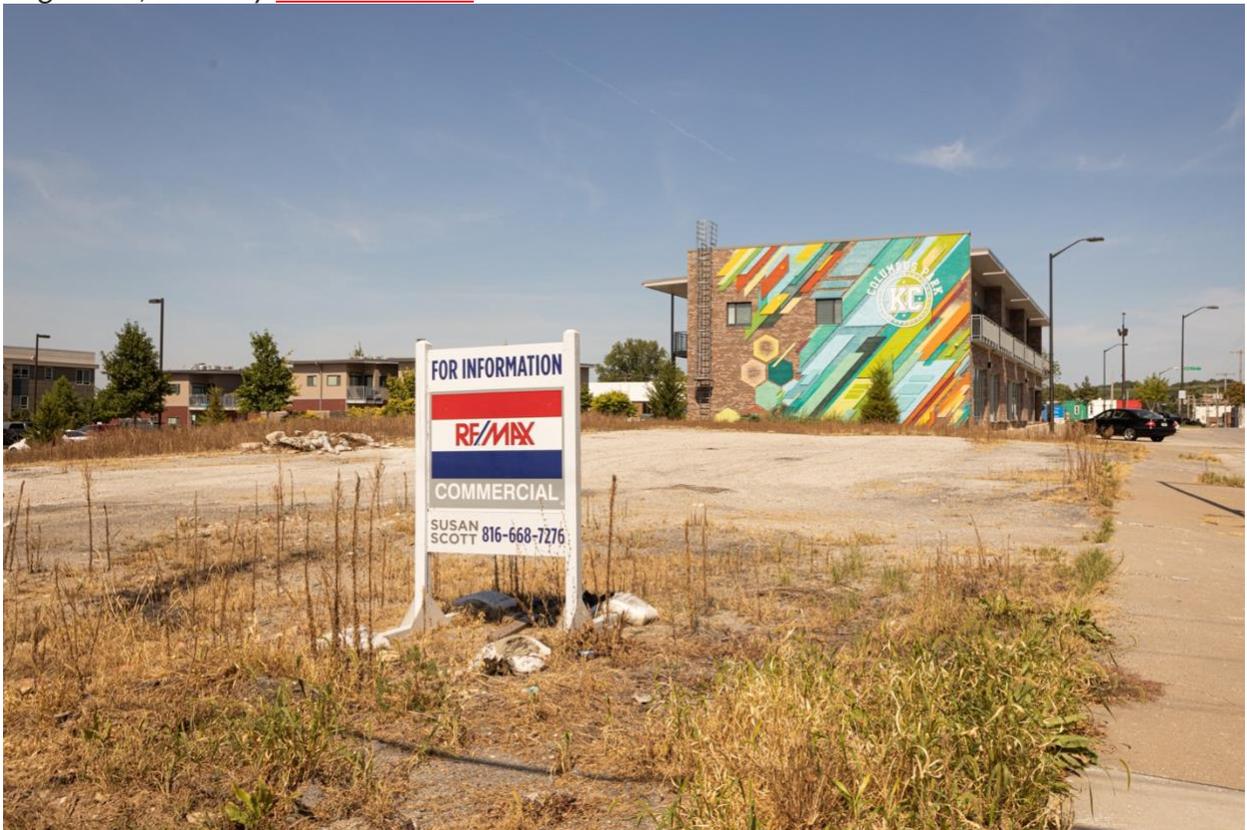


Broken Heart of the City: Who controls the future of Columbus Park?

August 31, 2022 by [Lauren Textor](#)



Vacant lot in Columbus Park. // Photo by Zach Bauman

[Editor's note: Do you have further information on the murky details about land development in this area? Email brock@thepitchkc.com.]

Driving through Columbus Park in the summer is like entering Kansas City's version of the secret garden. It's only about two miles off I-70, but it somehow feels like its own world.

A hybrid of Little Italy and Little Vietnam, Columbus Park is home to some of the best restaurants in the city, the Harrison Street DIY Skate Park, and century-old buildings.

Several residents lovingly refer to it as “Sesame Street” due to its close-knit community of colorful characters.

Down the street from the Vietnam Cafe are The Don Bosco Community Centers, where adults at every level of learning can participate in its English as a second language program. Walk down Missouri Ave. from Holy Rosary Catholic Church and you’ll find Garozzo’s Ristorante. And, of course, in the cul-de-sac green space that separates the neighborhood from Berkley, there’s the community-built skate park that attracted the attention of the Tony Hawk Foundation.

Many of Columbus Park’s family businesses have been here, in the heart of the city, for generations.

Garozzo’s was opened in 1989. The much-beloved [Vietnam Cafe](#) is immigrant-owned and run. Vocci Italian Foods has been around for over 50 years, and is now owned by Greg Falzone and his husband, Chuck Lowry-Falzone. The couple has lived in the neighborhood for 15 years.

“When anyone comes by my house, they wave,” Lowry-Falzone says. “They say hello. I’ve got good neighbors. If someone new moves in on my street, I tell them ‘hi.’ I tell them to make sure they come down to Vocci and get their welcome package. This is the neighborhood we want to have. I know pretty much everybody on my block. They know pretty much everybody on their block.”

Swoon Cookies founder and owner Sofia Varanka Hudson moved the business to its current location in Columbus Park over two years ago.

“Over 50% of our staff are immigrants from all over the world, so it’s a great mix,” she says.

Café Cà Phê owner Jackie Nguyen deliberately chose the neighborhood as the location for her brick-and-mortar business and her new home.

“When I first moved here, there weren’t too many places that I felt familiar with or that really spoke to me except for Columbus Park,” Nguyen says. “I saw that there was no coffee shop in the area. And then when I did more research, I found out that it was a huge area for Vietnamese refugees. The Don Bosco Centers in Columbus Park work with a lot of Vietnamese. There’s a Vietnamese tailor, a Vietnamese travel shop, a Vietnamese hair salon. I felt like my shop would enhance the neighborhood instead of gentrifying it.”

The café, located on East 5th Street, is already brightening up the neighborhood with a fierce dragon mural. It’s bold, colorful, and perfectly in line with Columbus Park’s vibe—a great example of how businesses can carve out a space for themselves in the area without suburbanizing it.

The Sewing Labs rents space from The Don Bosco Center at 526 Campbell Street. Within those brick walls, the first floor is occupied with sewing machines and fabric. The full-size commercial kitchen and the basketball gym on the second floor are rented out by other local businesses and organizations. The Sewing Labs offers basic sewing programs, kids' stitch camp, industrial production classes, machine rentals, and Open Sew Fridays. Partial and full scholarships are also [available](#) on a limited basis to make programs and events more accessible.

"Sewing can bring you so much financial dignity, but also emotional dignity," says The Sewing Labs Executive Director Eileen Bobowski.

This neighborhood prides itself on history and has been careful to preserve as much of it as possible. A significant chunk of its preservation is thanks to the legwork of resident Kate Barsotti—local artist and the Columbus Park Community Council president. She has been proud to call the neighborhood home since 2002.

"We moved here because we wanted a real community, and we got one," Barsotti says. "It's not perfect, but that's what we got."

Former resident Ryan Bernsten worked with Barsotti as part of a leadership training program at University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Barsotti maintains the [Columbus Park website](#) while Bernsten recorded [podcast interviews](#) with neighborhood residents to preserve its oral history. The three-episode neighborhood segment is a part of Bernsten's **50 States of Mind** Soundcloud channel.

Bernsten moved out of the area in December 2021, but he still feels strongly connected to it.

"My dream house is in that neighborhood," he says. "I would move back there in a second. It's one of those things where I had to get on the homeowner train while it was still relatively affordable for me. But I was gutted to leave, and it took a lot of arm-twisting for me to finally do it, because I really found a place where I respected the people and I respected the history. I believe in how they think about themselves not just as a neighborhood, but as a community."

Columbus Park has all the makings of a popular arts district. Authentic restaurants, green space, and nearby galleries should equal up to a successful River Market-adjacent locale. Although it's garnered more attention in recent years, the area also experiences high crime and a lack of accessible residential and commercial expansion.

Its problems today are rooted in a history of poverty, redlining, and predatory developers.

A Historic District For Those In Need



The Holy Rosary Catholic Church is a historically important gathering spot for the Italian and Vietnamese populations in Columbus Park. // Photo by Zach Bauman

Columbus Park is well-known as a neighborhood with strong Italian ties. The Holy Rosary Church was completed in 1903 and became a popular gathering site for community events and worship. Karnes School was completed in 1915. It was the largest grade school in the city at the time of its opening, with Italian and Jewish students making up 98% of the student body. In a time when Italian immigrants were discriminated against because of their nationality and religion, Columbus Park became a cultural enclave for families to settle.

Lesser-known is that [Garrison School](#) was built in 1890 for Black students. The Garrison Field House was built between 1913-1914, becoming the only settlement center in Kansas City for Black residents specifically.

In the early 1950s, large public housing projects were constructed in the city. One of these was [Guinotte Manor](#) in 1954, which required the demolition of large parts of the northern and northeastern sections.

[Vietnamese refugees](#) arrived in the 1970s, partially due to the nearby The Don Bosco Centers and Holy Rosary Church. The neighborhood still has one of the largest Vietnamese populations in the city.

The mix of cultures and customs is part of what Columbus Park owes to its increasing popularity today, as well as its locally-owned businesses and its eccentric vibe. It's also likely why the city regularly puts its problems on the backburner.

"You know, I'm not sure we're cool yet," Barsotti says. "It's funny to me, because it's basically the same place it was when we moved in, but now it's hip. Now it's trendy. It's like, it's the same place that you wouldn't come to after dark five years ago."

Barsotti says that she doesn't know if newcomers' interest in the area is sustainable, but that she welcomes an increase in activity because she believes it makes the neighborhood safer. She expressed concern over the high number of overdoses, car break-ins, and shootings.

"It's really hard to get the city to care about this part of town," Barsotti says. "It's hard to get them to take the violence seriously and figure out what's causing it. It feels like they think it's normal for certain parts of town to be dangerous or to have violence. And so no one's shocked anymore. And we are. It affects us. I mean, I'm just appalled every time."

NIMBY stands for "not in my backyard," and it's a pejorative term that's often used to label neighborhood advocates as overly involved and territorial. Columbus Park's neighborhood advocates are used to hearing that everywhere in Kansas City experiences crime and problems with developers.

Bernsten says this is the easiest narrative to construct, but it's nowhere near true.

"I think it's really easy for people to portray Columbus Park people as NIMBYs," he says. "You know, they're not that at all. They're organizers. And they like to help people in an organized way. They want them [the city's officials] to work as hard as they've worked over the past decades."

Nguyen says that while she hasn't experienced violence yet, she knows the area's gunshots, break-ins, and theft. She says she believes most problems result from a lack of community resources.

"My vehicle was broken into twice and I've seen other people's cars get smashed into," she says. "On the flip side, I'm starting to know the entire neighborhood already. A lot of people walk their dogs. I feel like I feel safe all the time. I don't feel like I'm in danger. I feel like those instances of car break-ins and stuff are out of desperation."

Community Services



Jim Schriever held a variety of titles in Columbus Park in his 30-year career. He was assigned to the area on all watches as a district officer, spent six years in the public housing projects, and then worked as a Community Interaction Officer for the Central Patrol Division before retiring in 2015.

Schriever recalls the tension between the homeowners and the public housing tenants when he was assigned to the area in 1987.

“Back then, believe it or not, they [Guinotte Housing Projects and Chouteau Court Housing Projects] were connected by an overpass walkway over I-35,” he says. “We got a lot of back and forth—criminal activity between both the public housing projects. Columbus Park was kind of sandwiched between both of them.”

Schriever says the police felt supported by residents, but the residents sued the Housing Authority of Kansas City over the criminal activity. As he remembers, this was part of the catalyst for the Housing Authority to be taken over by [federal receivership](#) in 1993.

“The Guinotte Housing Projects were postwar row houses,” Schriever explains. “They were just square boxes that looked like modified double-wide trailers. There was nothing unique about it, the structures had no character. It was the way that the system was that

you were putting people with social and economic struggles on top of other people with social and economic struggles. And there were no services or anything available to them to make a difference.”

During his time at Columbus Park, Schriever developed strong ties to the neighborhood, despite never living there. He trusted the residents and hoped that they trusted him.

“They are the eyes and the ears 24/7 down there,” he says. “They see it all, they know it all. They just have to have an avenue to get that information to the police, and then have trust and faith in us that we’re going to take that information and work it.”

For its part, the Housing Authority went under a massive revamping that cost over \$175 million, restoring local control in 2014. Although the Housing Authority has improved, the neighborhood’s relationship with the police department has become more contentious.

“I got spoiled because I thought that’s what community policing was, and we were always going to have that,” Barsotti says. “I think he [Schriever] prevented a lot of crime because he spent time in the neighborhoods with the kids. And if he saw a kid going sideways, he would be like, ‘Hey, let’s go to the Boy Scouts,’ or, ‘Hey, let’s go to basketball.’ Everybody knew him, he always showed up to neighborhood meetings. He would always answer his email. And then Jim moves on. And all of a sudden, it’s all different. Like, we were asking for the same level of service, and they [the police department] laughed at us at one neighborhood meeting. I remember this vividly. They’re like, ‘We don’t have the staff for that. What are you guys expecting?’”

Executive Director of Housing Authority Edwin Lowndes says he’s unable to answer why there is a high concentration of crime in the neighborhood.

“My question is: is there any more crime in the Columbus Park neighborhood than in any other neighborhood in Kansas City? I don’t have that information or that data,” he says.

Historically, Lowndes says, much of the crime was perpetrated by outsiders to the neighborhood who were passing through. His suggestion to residents is to rely on their close-knit ties to keep the neighborhood safe.

“It literally is ‘if you see something, say something,’” he says. “Make sure that you’re reporting activity, even if the Kansas City Police Department, because of their operations, can’t get to you immediately because of the nature of the crime. We have an excellent relationship with the Kansas City Police Department in working in the entire Columbus Park neighborhood.”

Pollution in Solution



Many of the “solutions” proposed by the city, its agencies, or development authorities put the emphasis and responsibility on the residents. The knowledge that no top-down change is coming makes for a bleak outlook on the future.

Barsotti and her neighbors are exhausted by their constant vigilance.

“There are times when I think about leaving, usually after a shooting or something that’s near us,” she says. “It makes me so sad. We had two houseless people killed by the tracks a couple of weeks ago. I just get so sad about it. Because it feels so complicated and so hard to solve. And then I get mad that I feel forced out.”

Barsotti is no longer convinced that the community’s problems are solvable by the police, although she does have sympathy for the city’s [lack of local control](#) over the department. Kansas City doesn’t have the power to appoint its members of the Board of Police Commissioners, who oversee the department—instead, the mayor and four other members appointed by Missouri’s governor get to call the shots.

Similarly, the neighborhood is also deprived of local control over who chooses to develop there, and frustrations are mounting with the empty promises that residents have received over the years.

“I think some developers look at that area [the skate park], and they just see dollar signs,” says long-time resident Dan Wayde. “They want to maximize how much they can get for it, and some aren’t as concerned with how it affects the neighborhood or what is the value of the development to the neighborhood. A lot of them just pay lip service. They say things like, ‘Oh, we’re gonna make a community garden here.’ And instead, it’s a place where they dump their trash.”

In 2021, a houseless encampment popped up on a “brownfield” at Chouteau. Its [2018 Olsson site assessment](#) identified 10 recognized environmental conditions signaling the likely presence of hazardous substances or petroleum products. Despite this, the city [would not assist in relocating the encampment](#).

Bernsten says, “It was a designated toxic site and the neighborhood was warning, ‘Hey, this is not a good thing.’ The city wouldn’t listen. And then all of a sudden, the city cleared it.”

Emergence Emergency

Columbus Park residents are also frustrated that neighboring areas like Berkley and Beacon Hill have experienced an economic boom while their home stays stagnant.

Lowndes says that Beacon Hill has experienced more development because it has more land.

“Conversely, when you look at what’s going on in Columbus Park, you’re limited as to what is available to redevelop,” he says. “And then there has been a considerable amount of redevelopment on the western side of Columbus Park. There are new apartments that have gone in, there’s new retail that has gone in the Columbus Park neighborhood. So I don’t think that has been ignored. I think it’s just what is available and what you can do with it. As far as our vacant land, we had an agreement through the city and then, in turn, the Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority (LCRA).”

Lowndes cites the Housing Authority’s agreement with the city and LCRA as the reason for the development hiatus but could not clarify who is in charge of specific properties. Lowndes did share that Columbus Park Developers is the “master developer” in the area and that it has been working with the LCRA for the past several years.

In response to residents’ concerns about the continued vacancies, the Housing Authority has promised to issue a Request for Proposals (RFP) for months. Lowndes says that the Housing Authority plans to issue the RFP by the end of September, although that may be delayed until October.

“Our RFP has been delayed for various reasons, including market conditions, coordination with the city, and ensuring the community is involved in our process,” Lowndes says.

Fourth District City Councilman Eric Bunch understands there is a dispute between the Housing Authority and a potential developer who believes they have the first right of refusal on the property. He says that the city has invested significantly in this area, although long-term solutions are needed for housing.

“We’ve provided several hundred thousand dollars in capital improvement at the district level, which my colleagues and I have awarded for playground equipment, lighting under bridges, and business,” Bunch says.

Skating the Line



Some residents are also pushing for redeveloping the Harrison Street DIY skate park.

Ben Hlavacek, one of the park’s founders, once lived in Columbus Park. Now he is a Turner resident who travels to build skate parks professionally all over the U.S., but he remains an advocate for the DIY to remain in its current location.

“We can build a new park somewhere else, but generating that same sense of space and inclusiveness and community is something that happened organically and is not very easy to replicate,” he says.

Taylor Stetler became involved with the DIY in 2015 when the park was in its early days.

Skaters originally used the road barriers on the street for quarterpipes and from there began cleaning the acres of greenspace up. They dug out the ground inside the cul-de-sac and poured the concrete bowl—a massive undertaking for a couple of young adults with a tight budget.

“After we managed to pull that off, I was hooked,” Stetler says. “For the next few years, most of my free time was spent working and skating up there until moving away in 2017 to build skateparks professionally.”

At the end of 2021, Stetler resettled in KC. Harrison Street DIY is still his favorite place to skate in the metro.

“It’s entirely different from any skatepark in the area in its terrain and atmosphere,” he says. “It’s a patchwork quilt of concrete which pinballs you through its array of hairball features with massive speed if you know the lines. I’ve built and skated parks from coast to coast, and it remains one of my all-time favorites.”

The DIY is in the city’s right of way, while the 6 acres of undeveloped land (which has caused many disputes) belongs to the Housing Authority.

Solving The Puzzle of Who Owns the Future



Historic buildings sit with their windows boarded up and their doors locked tight. Residents say they're confused as to why the space is going to waste. // Photo by Zach Bauman

Individual residents and city officials possess pieces of this puzzle, but no one benefits unless all of this information is shared. Who are the predatory developers with their feet on the neighborhood's throat?

Columbus Park, the heart of the city, has its arteries clogged. Despite the best efforts of its residents, the area is continually taken advantage of by those who value paychecks over people.

Individuals won't be able to make any further meaningful progress without the help of their more prosperous neighbors calling for action. The city needs to overhaul Columbus Park's infrastructure. Developers must be held accountable for empty promises and step up to do the necessary financial work.

For years, the neighborhood's residents have been toiling solo to keep the area safe and desirable. Some haven't lived long enough to see the fruits of their efforts. Current inhabitants hope this won't be the case for them, too.

"One of the reasons I got involved is I knew people who came before me," Barsotti says. "I know Phyllis Trombino, I know Rosalie Strada. And I was like, 'Oh, it's my turn.' I mean,

there's an obligation because I know their contributions. And those contributions outlasted them."

Barsotti is the latest in a seemingly unending lineage of Columbus Park's dedicated proponents. For decades, its neighborhood advocates have volunteered their time to make the community better, knowing they may never witness the change they've worked so hard to accomplish.

The Housing Authority and Columbus Park's developers owe it to the neighborhood's residents to be more transparent. After months of interviewing (or attempting to interview) residents, developers, and city officials, it's still unclear who's calling the shots in this corner of Kansas City.

The development plans remain murky, the residents remain frustrated, and the pathway forward is still littered with obstacles. You shouldn't have a legal background to understand what's going on in your neighborhood. Private interests shouldn't rule public lives.

This isn't just a call to action—it's a challenge. It's time for anyone with developing interests in Columbus Park to honor their promises and give the community the prosperity it deserves.





