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Revival finally reaches Lincoln Park Ground broken on Part 1 of 4-year, \$150M project

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The Lincoln Park section of downtown Newark has always reflected its city's ups and downs.

As Newark came of age in the 19th and early 20th centuries, so did Lincoln Park: it is where Abraham Lincoln stopped on his way to his first inauguration in 1861, where beer barons and other turn-of-the-century industrialists built their majestic townhouses, and where a rollicking jazz scene gave birth to many nightclubs.

When the city's industrial engines were throttled by the Great Depression, so too were Lincoln Park and other Newark neighborhoods: the rich people left, and the decay set in. That downward spiral culminated with Newark's 1967 riots, which left Lincoln Park scarred by burned-out buildings and crime. The area remains a jumble of vacant lots, drug treatment centers, boarding houses and Victorian homes in various stages of rehabilitation.

But now Lincoln Park is finally joining the revival that has blessed the rest of downtown.

The first day of that awakening came yesterday, when developers ceremonially broke ground on the first phase of a four-year, \$150 million project that will transform 11 acres into an artists' enclave anchored by a 70,000 square-foot Smithsonian Institution-affiliated Museum of African-American Music. Eventually, the new district, bounded by Lincoln Park, Broad Street, West Kinney Street and Washington Street, will include 300 units of mixed-income housing, including two-family, live/work studios for artists, condominiums and apartments for low-income residents. There will also be art galleries, retail stores and other commercial spaces.

In short, the plan is to again make Lincoln Park a gateway to Newark's central business district.

"This place is a barometer of where the city is," said Baye Adofo-Wilson, executive director of the Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District, which is spearheading the redevelopment effort. "So it's not surprising that during this period of transformation in the city — new housing getting developed, an arena getting built, an election going on — that this neighborhood is also changing and participating in the renaissance of the city."

Lincoln Park is one of the city's oldest neighborhoods. It was originally called South Commons and was rechristened after Lincoln's assassination. At the end of the Civil War, it became one of Newark's prime addresses, and the remaining Victorian homes make the neighborhood one of New Jersey's best examples of 19th-century architecture.

As African-Americans flocked to Newark in the early 20th century, an adjoining neighborhood of nightclubs, called the Coast, sprung up north of the park.

Talk about a Lincoln Park revival dates back about as long as the decline, but it didn't pick up steam until the nonprofit Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District formed seven years ago.

The first phase of the project, to begin immediately, is the construction of the 29-unit rental house project on Lincoln Park and a 25-unit condominium project on Washington Street that will include lofts and energy-efficient appliances and lighting.

Poet Amiri Baraka, who has been calling for a revitalization for 25 years, said the plan was to create an "indigenous" cultural community.

"This won't only be artists and low-income housing. We're also going to build a museum that will be unparalleled throughout the world," Baraka said in a ceremony at the City Without Walls gallery on Crawford Street, which is included in the new arts district.

For the groundbreaking, the ceremony moved around the corner, to a vacant lot at Lincoln Park and Halsey Street (the site of a later phase of construction). Representatives from banks that lent money for the project, corporate foundations that provided grants and city agencies that approved the project all talked about how important it was to revive a neighborhood that represents so much of the city's cultural history.

The Newark Boys Chorus, housed in the nearby Newark Symphony Hall, sang a spiritual. Everyone grabbed gold-painted shovels and pressed them into the tightly packed earth.

Theresa Hooper Marshall, chairwoman of the board of the Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District, said her group had been working a long-time for that moment. "We've weathered the storm," she said.

So has the neighborhood.