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East Liberty: No longer going in circles

BY [MELISSA MEINZER](#)



Salvation: The spire of East Liberty Presbyterian Church
 PHOTO: HEATHER MULL

Geographically and otherwise, East Liberty straddles the border between wealthier communities like Shadyside and more troubled neighborhoods like Homewood. And for good and bad, the area has been the poster child for urban renewal in Pittsburgh.

East Liberty itself started out as a wealthy enclave outside the hustle of Downtown, with rich farmers and lawyers making it a transportation hub. (Some of the city's first trolleys went through in the 1800s.) One section of the neighborhood still boasts orchard walls from an estate once owned by the Mellon banking family.

Some traces of the old affluence remain. **Motor Square Garden** (5900 Baum Blvd.), originally a marketplace built by the Mellons in 1900, hosted sporting events such as boxing in the '20s and '30s. After an unsuccessful flirtation as an urban mall, the distinctive blue-domed complex was purchased by the American Automobile Association in 1998. The building is still lovely, though there's no guarantee your driver's license photo will be. If it's spiritual fulfillment you're after, the beautiful **East Liberty Presbyterian Church** (116 S. Highland Ave., 412-441-3800) looms large. Also built with Mellon money -- and sometimes called the "Mellon fire escape" -- it is one of the most politically liberal churches in the region. Seekers of any stripe can walk its labyrinth in meditative reflection.


But prosperity began draining away in the '60s due to white flight compounded by bad urban-planning decisions -- including the notoriously confusing and diverting Penn Circle, which steered auto traffic away from small businesses that weren't on its one-way track. Decay and blight set in. Crime was a problem, and some public housing -- notably the huge towers along Penn Circle -- became dangerous and rotted out, earning the sad nickname "Crack Stacks."

But the tide is changing, thanks in part to creative types and homeowners taking advantage of housing prices that are depressed (though perhaps not for much longer). Spots like the **Shadow Lounge** (5972 Baum Blvd., 412-363-8277) put 'Liberty on the map as a destination for entertainment and culture seekers. Much can be made of this venue's effect on revitalizing the area. After beginning as a BYOB hangout, the lounge has morphed into a venue for comics, poets, musicians and artists. The cool has spilled over, and proprietor Justin Strong recently opened a second section, **Ava**, which fills with the fabulous for dance

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