



## Shaker Square's rescuers ready to pivot from urgent repairs to pursuing new vision for a Cleveland landmark

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Old Glory flies over the doorway to EDWINS in Shaker Square, the fine-dining dining flagship of the organization's Leadership & Restaurant Institute, which trains formerly incarcerated adults to work in hospitality.

By [Steven Litt, cleveland.com](#)

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Merchants at the nearly century-old [Shaker Square shopping center](#) on Cleveland's East Side can be a tough audience.

They're impatient for change more than three years after the historic property fell into foreclosure in late 2020, jeopardizing a regional landmark and a retail anchor as important to the city as the [West Side Market](#).

It took nearly another two years before Cleveland City Council [voted in 2022](#) to spend \$12 million to enable a pair of local nonprofit community development agencies to buy the troubled property from creditors and carry out a 21st century reboot.

Since then, the nonprofits Cleveland Neighborhood Progress (CNP) and Burten Bell Carr Development, Inc., (BBC) have raised and nearly spent \$5.25 million on urgently needed repairs.

The work so far has included replacing flat roofs that account for 85% of the total roof area at the square and replacing 60 of the 120 rooftop heating, ventilating and cooling units. Contractors have replaced some of the square's rotting woodwork and will continue that work this spring and summer. They've fixed a nasty sewage backup, doubled the intensity of street lighting, and repaved the square's two large parking lots.



An aerial view of Cleveland's Shaker Square shopping district in late January, 2024 shows off new roofs installed as part of a revitalization effort.

Other items on the to-do list included adding private security patrols and initiating discussions between Shaker Heights and Cleveland police on how best to collaborate at the square.

CNP and BBC have cleaned up chaotic leases and paperwork and hired architects to provide up-to-date drawings of plumbing and wiring and other basics after discovering that the original blueprints were lost. More repairs are scheduled for this spring and summer, including the installation of new fabric awnings over shop windows.

Despite all the work, merchants are divided over whether the square's revival is moving quickly enough. They're also worried about perceptions of safety after a spate of smash-and-grab break-ins over the holidays and the first few weeks of January.

(Cleveland police said late last month a suspect allegedly responsible for the spree was [in custody](#) after having been arrested previously and released on bond.)

Perhaps the biggest complaint is that many of the new physical repairs, which aren't visible from ground level, have yet to improve the square's generally tired appearance. Sidewalks, for example, are still a patchwork of contrasting materials and old repairs.



Contractors have indicated with pencil markings the location of woodwork at Shaker Square to be replaced in the spring or summer of 2024.

“They’re working, but nobody sees it,” said Elina Kreymerman, owner of Shaker Square Dry Cleaning and Tailoring, a key business at the shopping center. Speaking of the roof repairs, she said, “It has to be done, but if you ask what I’d like to see, it’s something that catches the eye of the customers.”

### **Repositioning a treasure**

In response, the square’s new nonprofit owners are asking for patience and understanding as they get ready to pivot from carrying out basic repairs to forging a more ambitious vision for the future.

“You’re not going to turn around 10 years of disinvestment and two years of receivership in 15 months,” [Tania Menesse](#), CEO and president of CNP, told [Cleveland.com](#) and The Plain Dealer in a recent interview.

As if to finish the thought, Joy Johnson, BBC’s executive director, said in the same interview that “while people may want us to hurry up and do something, we’re going to take our time and do it right.”

As spring 2024 approaches, Menesse, Johnson and others involved in the revitalization project have plenty of news to announce, suggesting that the pace of recovery is about to quicken. The new developments include:

**A new planning effort:** CNP and BBC, working with the city and a 15-member neighborhood steering committee, have chosen the Boston-based firm of Agency Landscape + Planning to lead a new, nine-month, \$250,000 planning effort for the square. Details on dates of meetings and events will be forthcoming at [ShakerSquare.com](#).



Aerial view of Cleveland's Shaker Square shopping district.

In contrast to an earlier round of planning in 2018-2019 that emphasized redesigning the square's public spaces, the new project will focus on getting the retail and commercial basics right before figuring out what to do with the outdoor spaces.

"We are talking about a commercial strategy and an open space strategy that are symbiotic," said Andrew Sargeant, director of open space and planning at CNP and a member of the Cleveland planning commission. "The previous thought was: *do the central space and everything will fix itself*. These things have to be in unison."

**A major lease renewed:** Dave's Market, an anchor tenant at the square and a critically important source of fresh food on the city's East Side, has signed a new six-year lease. The nonprofits and Dave's have also agreed to split the cost of \$700,000 in improvements inside the store 50/50.

Aaron Saltzman, a Dave's vice president and fifth-generation member of the regional grocery dynasty, characterized the lease renewal as a vote of confidence in the square's direction. "We want to express our appreciation to the City of Cleveland, Cleveland Neighborhood Progress and Burten Bell Carr for stepping in as they have and for all the positive improvements they've already made, and the thoughtful plan looking ahead," he said.

In other leasing news, Menesse said a new photography studio is opening in the square's southeast quadrant, along with a new visitor's center. CNP and BBC also hope to sign leases soon on a new eatery to replace the former Balaton Hungarian restaurant, and a new coffee shop to replace the former Biggby Coffee, which closed last year.

**A blighted property heads for demolition:** The vacant, 2.1-acre "Bonwit Teller" shopping strip, built along Van Aken Boulevard behind the square's southeast side in 1939-40, appears to be headed for demolition this year. Clearing the site would remove an eyesore and open a path toward redevelopment, possibly with new apartments.

Robert Zimmerman, a lawyer for Joseph Shafran, trustee of the trust that manages the LLC in charge of the Van Aken property, said that early prep work for asbestos removal and eventual demolition began Monday. Zimmerman said it's unclear whether the entire property, including a two-story curved brick building at the corner of Van Aken and Shaker boulevards, will be demolished.





An arcade fronts the vacant former "Bonwit Teller" shopping strip along Van Aken Boulevard southeast of Shaker Square's southeast quadrant in Cleveland. The shopping strip, which has been an eyesore, is to be demolished later this year.

The work could address a dispute with the city over building code violations that has precluded redevelopment by Shafran, or the sale of the property to a new owner. Developer Dan Whalen, whose credits include the new Intro apartment complex in Ohio City, has expressed interest in buying the Van Aken property but he and Shafran said they haven't reached an agreement.

**Street repairs scheduled:** The city announced that by fall it will complete more than \$8.8 million in repaving and streetscape improvements on North and South Moreland Boulevards, extending from Larchmere Boulevard north of the square to Griffing Avenue on the south.

The work, involving a mile of roadway, will include new and repaired sidewalks, crosswalks with high-visibility countdown signals, curb ramps, bike lanes, improved access to bus stops, and changes to travel lanes designed to eliminate merges and to require lower turning speeds.

**Public events:** Coming this spring and summer, CNP and BBC plan to increase the frequency of free public events and concerts in the square, building on the success of staples such as the Summer on the Square series, the North Union Farmer's Market every Saturday and the annual Garlic Festival.

#### **A key anchor**

All of this activity may sound of interest strictly to nearby residents. But Menesse, Johnson and city officials see Shaker Square as a linchpin amid a larger initiative to improve struggling East Side neighborhoods scarred by decades of redlining.

Big efforts underway near Shaker Square include the Cleveland Metropolitan Housing Authority's Woodhill Homes project. Leveraging a \$45 million federal grant, the housing authority is building 800 new units worth \$281 million on four sites in the Buckeye Woodhill neighborhood west of Shaker Square.



The Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority is nearing completion of the first of six phases of construction in its \$281 million Woodhill Choice project, aimed at improving housing options on Cleveland's East Side.

Last year, City Council approved Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb's plan to invest \$15 million in federal aid from the American Rescue Plan Act to jumpstart additional private investment in the Mt. Pleasant, Union-Miles and Lee-Harvard neighborhoods south and southeast of Shaker Square.

Plus, BBC won [city approval in 2022](#) for a plan to revive the Buckeye Road commercial corridor south of Shaker Square as an arts-oriented innovation hub. The revitalization will proceed as a new vision for Shaker Square unfolds, Johnson said.

### **Once and future crossroad**

Shaker Square's present and future importance is rooted in its history and original design. Built in the late 1920s by the Van Sweringen brothers, the developers who also built Cleveland's Terminal Tower before going bust in the Depression, the square is said to be America's second automobile-oriented shopping center following the Country Club District in Kansas City, Missouri.



Shaker Square in 1937. (Plain Dealer Historical Collection)

The square features more than 168,000 square feet of retail, commercial, restaurant and office space in one- and two-story buildings designed in the Georgian-style with red brick facades and white trim.

Despite the square's name, its buildings form an octagon that wraps around a 5.5-acre central space bisected by the east-west tracks of the rapid transit Green and Blue lines operated by the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority.

For much of the 20th century, the square functioned as a high-prestige destination for shopping and dining at the edge of Cleveland and the upscale suburb of Shaker Heights.

But the square's immediate past owner, Cleveland-based Coral Co., struggled under an \$11 million mortgage as the property gradually declined. It also faced competition from newer food, retail, housing and/or office developments that emerged further east in Cuyahoga County, including the Van Aken District in Shaker Heights, Legacy Village in Lyndhurst, and Pinecrest in Orange.



January sunlight highlights the neo-Georgian architecture of Shaker Square in Cleveland.

CNP and BBC bought Shaker Square out of foreclosure in 2022 with the city's help to avert the risk of seeing the property sold in a sheriff's sale to an out-of-town buyer who could have turned a quick profit while allowing further physical decay that would have rippled across the East Side.

Ultimately, the city and the nonprofits want to prepare the shopping center for sale to a new, for-profit owner. Half of the \$12 million the city invested in the purchase is a first mortgage repayable when the nonprofits sell to a future owner, and half is a forgivable loan.

Today, Johnson and Menesse see new possibilities for the square as a vital crossroads at the edge of a racial and economic divide.

"It's one of the few places where people of immense wealth live among and interact closely with people who are really struggling, and everyone in between," Johnson said.

"When we talk about building common understanding among people, the square is a place where people really do come together," she said. "We feel really strongly we cannot lose something like that."



Johnson sees the success of the nearby Larchmere Boulevard corridor, just north of Shaker Square, as proof that a vibrant housing retail, and commercial district can thrive where racially and economically diverse communities abut one another.

## DISTRICT FRAMEWORK



A map from a 2018-2019 planning project shows how Shaker Square could be better connected to shopping districts north and south of it along Buckeye Road and Larchmere Boulevard, with a trail connecting to the Shaker Lakes trail along Doan Brook.

### Clashing views

Few would disagree with the potential for a Larchmere-quality vision at Shaker Square. But local leaders with long experience in Cleveland community and economic development disagree over the best way forward.

Brandon Chrostowski, the nationally respected chef and social entrepreneur, is an outspoken critic of efforts to revive the square, where he established his nonprofit EDWINS Leadership and Restaurant Institute in 2007 to prepare formerly incarcerated adults for work in hospitality.

“There is no plan because there’s no leadership, so you’re left disengaged,” he said.



Brandon Chrostowski watches a community meeting at the York Rite Masonic Temple in Cleveland on Friday, Dec. 3, 2021.



Chrostowski opposed the last round of planning at the square, which was spearheaded by CNP before Menesse became its director in late 2020.

The earlier plan resulted in a recommendation to close the east- and westbound lanes of Shaker Boulevard to enhance the square's central green space. Chrostowski helped organize a street protest against the proposal in November 2019 which effectively killed the idea.



Brandon Chrostowski, founder of EDWINS Leadership & Restaurant Institute, which operates a French Restaurant on the Square, participated in the protest on Saturday, Nov. 9, 2019, against the proposed closure of Shaker Boulevard in the square, saying it would hurt businesses and divert traffic onto residential side streets.

In 2021, Chrostowski made an unsuccessful bid to buy the square for \$5 million. He remains disenchanted with CNP and BBC, even though he's expanding his nonprofit business in the area. He said he'd participate in the upcoming new planning process, "as long as it's not a smokescreen, a smoke show."

In contrast, Aaron Saltzman at Dave's Market said the efforts by CNP and BBC convinced his family's company to stay in the square. He praised the installation of the new roof on his market, the repaving and re-striping of its adjacent parking lot, and the installation of new lighting.

"All of that has been very meaningful," he said.

Courtney Laves-Mearini the owner and artistic director at Cleveland City Dance, which has operated at Shaker Square since 2008 and provides classes for 270 students from children to seniors, is also pleased by the work underway.

Like Menesse, she sees a need for patience as the square's revival gathers momentum. For example, she said she understands that it has taken time to contract with skilled carpenters who could reproduce original architectural details that had rotted.

"It's not like you can go to Home Depot," she said. "They have to find craftsmen do it."

Laves-Mearini said that like other merchants at the square, she'd like to see things moving more quickly. But she's confident the square is on the right path.

"I've seen it great, and I've seen it go down," she said. "It's going through a cycle. It has risen up before and it will rise again. It's moving in that direction."

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