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INDIANAPOLIS, Ind. — Any stranger can strike up a conversation at the Fountain Square Theatre Building.

Late last year, some Indy locals told me about the Fountainview Inn, which consists of 11 boutique-style hotel rooms. The inn is above a barbecue smokehouse, a diner with 15 local draught beers, and a popular bar called Imbibe. Want to get a tattoo or a haircut? The Fountain Square building also offers those services. While you wait.

The adjacent Fountain Square Theatre opened in 1928 as a 1,500 seat vaudeville-movie house. The Italian garden-themed theater with twinkling stars closed in 1959. It is now a banquet hall and the home of popular all-age live swing dance concerts on the second and fourth Fridays of every month.

The third-floor hotel is beneath the Action Duckpin Bowling alley.

Seriously.

A couple of Fridays ago I retired around 11:30 p.m. and I heard bowling balls rolling down the alley above me. No worries. The bowling was over by midnight. Fountain Square offers the only authentic duckpin bowling in the Midwest. (There's another Atomic Bowl Duckpin alley, circa 1950s, in the basement of the complex.) Duckpin bowling deploys smaller pins and hole less balls slightly bigger than a softball. The game flourished in the 1920s along the East Coast.

All this is a labor of love from Fountain Square Theatre Building owner Linton Calvert and his wife, Fern. They acquired it in 1993 and live in a 3,200-square-foot home on the second floor of the historic building.

I've stayed at the Fountainview Inn twice. Each time I've been given Linton's number with instructions to call him as I approach downtown Indianapolis. The hotel has no check-in desk; Linton met me downstairs with my room key and room instructions. Guests get to their third floor rooms on 1928 valet service elevators. Sometimes I take the stairs. In 1993 the building was a huge thrift store, the kind of place you find dusty memories.

“It had been a gutted-out Woolworth’s,” Calvert said during a late afternoon conversation in the Imbibe lounge that retains the original Woolworth’s counter and pink tile.

“It is a great building that has a lot of character. We have a picture of our marquee that has Charlie Chaplin’s name on it. It was prior to movies so we suspect it was a vaudeville performance. People say it gives a European feel with the fountain in front. It’s none of those things, but it does give a sense that is different for the city. No one else believed enough in this building and this area to invest in it.”

The fountain is known as “Lady Spray” (and I’m not going there). It was constructed in 1880 and restored in 2010.

Calvert, 65, grew up six blocks from the neighborhood when it hardscrabble German, Italian and Irish.

“I never realized there was a bowling alley on the fourth floor,” said Calvert, who had a natty bowling pin pen in his left shirt pocket. “I was an avid bowler in the city, very successful. Everything here has evolved off that bowling alley. We never intended to have restaurants, a bar or banquet hall. There were five rent-to-own [businesses] within a block when we started. People asked how we were going to get rid of them. I said, ‘Five rent-to-owns means something. That means there’s hard-working people here.’”

The building has an elegant terra cotta exterior. The fourth floor alley originally opened in 1928 as Fountain Square Recreation. The alley was restored in 1994 with authentic 1930s duckpin bowling equipment.

“We’ve heard that Minnesota Fats played pool in the bowling alley,” Calvert said. “It was a billiard parlor after the bowling alley. The one story we believe is that Steve McQueen set pins in this bowling alley. He lived in Beach Grove, just south of here. One of our customers came here all the time when he was growing up. He said one time someone called Steve ‘Queenie’ and then Steve just beat the [heck] out of him. His reputation was very much of that style.”

Calvert’s father was an Indianapolis barber. Calvert studied architecture at Purdue University before heading off to barber college in Virginia. He was also a barber in the United States Navy.

“After the service I opened eight hair salons and five beauty schools in this city,” he said. “I had over 100 employees and over 300 students. Dealing with the public was my forte, which made me more comfortable in doing this.

When the Indy 500 comes to town, people pay \$500 to stay at a Red Roof Inn. I don't get \$500 in a month. Our rates never change. These rooms are ideal in size. Structurally sound. Plumbing was there, so the renovation of putting a bathroom in each unit wasn't difficult." A rooftop garden and bar opens up on the weekend of the Indy 500 and is open through Labor Day.

In 1969 while stationed at America's largest naval base in Norfolk, Va., Calvert took a road trip to go bowling outside of Baltimore.

"I walk in with my bowling ball and the guy says I can't use the bowling ball," Calvert recalled. "I looked at him like was a smart aleck. So I go, 'Can I use my shoes?' He said, 'Yes, you can use the shoes but you just can't use that ball.' Then I go down to the lanes and see all these little balls. I had never heard of duckpin."

A duckpin bowling ball weighs 3½ pounds and is five inches in diameter; a regular bowling ball weighs 16 pounds and is nine inches in diameter. When Calvert's barber business took off he flipped some money in 1981 to buy a small 12-lane regulation bowling alley in downtown Indianapolis. It only lasted five years, succumbing to the larger suburban bowling alleys.

"After I closed it I thought I'd try duckpin," he said. "I bought machines out of Wheaton, Maryland, put them on a semi and brought them here. I opened up a duckpin bowling alley in 1986 in Indianapolis. It was successful. It is a team-building activity. It is a game where women are as good as men."

It is a good reason for a road trip.