

BLOGS

After 36 years, Neo leaves a changing Lincoln Park

by **Sasha Geffen**
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Credit: Seth Anderson/Flickr

When Callin Fortis took over Neo in 1982, Lincoln Park had no Gaps, no pet boutiques, and no day cares. It was a nightlife hub, with cheap rents and 4 AM bars and 24-hour diners—“like New York,” says Fortis. His own nightclub, one of the last of its generation in the area, is now sandwiched between a preschool and an Urban Outfitters in an alley on Clark Street, just south of Fullerton Avenue, less than a mile west of the Lincoln Park Zoo. Neo had been open for just two years when Fortis moved in, and at the end of July, it will close its doors after 36 years in operation. The preschool that occupies the storefront of the same building will move into the space that has served as a late-night hangout for Chicago’s misfits since 1979.

“The neighborhood has changed dramatically,” says Fortis over the phone from Miami, where he now lives. “Lincoln Park was still residential, but it was much hipper than it is now. It was still filled with art and cool stuff. Now, it’s not. Urban Outfitters is still there. That’s probably the coolest thing there is.”

Fortis and the owner of the building where Neo is housed, John Crombie, recently failed to come to an agreement on a new lease for the space, forcing the club to relocate. Currently, no new venue has been pinned down, although Fortis says he’s had offers come in from across the city, and that he’s eyeing a space in Wicker Park. Starting August 6, Neo’s Thursday and Friday nights will relocate to Debonair Social Club on Milwaukee Avenue in Wicker Park, just off the Damen blue line stop.

“He’s been a longtime partner of ours,” says Fortis of Steve Harris, one of the owners of Debonair. “It’s very much an inside family thing; it’s not a promoter deal. We also care about the people that work here. We’re trying to keep those kids employed while we find something else. That matters to us. It does mean something that those bartenders have a place to go the minute we close.”

The relationship between Fortis and Neo’s employees has always been somewhat familial. In 1988, when the club underwent its only major renovation, the idea for the new interior design came from one of the bartenders. “I went on to study architecture and I have a big hospitality design firm, but one of the guys that I learned from was a bartender at Neo,” says Fortis. “He was completely obsessed with the architecture of Lower Wacker Drive. His name was Mike Meza, and he was just a local genius. He came up with this concept to turn Neo into Lower Wacker Drive. It symbolically meant something—the underground of the city—but with a big heartbeat and a big pulse and something that was really unique and interesting, and somewhat scary to outsiders.”

Fortis always intended Neo to serve as a kind of refuge for “misfits,” a term he uses lovingly. “I always felt a little like a misfit my whole life. I never really fit in anywhere. And I think with nightlife specifically, if you take enough misfits and you put them in a room with a common goal, they become fits,” he says. “When I say ‘misfits,’ I mean that with total affection and dignity. I still feel like a misfit. I still look at things, even at my age, and go, ‘Wow, that’s how I felt when I was in high school.’”

In recent years, rapid changes in Lincoln Park’s culture and socioeconomic environment caused Neo to clash more dramatically against its backdrop. Fortis describes the conflict with Crombie over the space as a slow burn that only just came to a head. “The landlord was encouraging us to come up with a concept that fit the neighborhood,” he says. “I thought, ‘Wait a minute, I was the concept that fit Lincoln Park.’ At the end of the day, we were like, no, it’s Neo. No matter what you do there, it’s going to be Neo.”

Fortis fondly recalls the motorcycles that would line up in Neo’s alley during the club’s peak years. “Neo was constantly an adventure,” he says. “We used to do all of these underground, alternative fashion shows with

local designers. We would give them a place to show their art and their magic. I remember a group of guys that had designed this really funky swimwear line, and somebody opened the front door, and these guys rode their models in on dirt bikes into the jam-packed club. I remember watching that in slow motion as these two guys rode their motorcycles through a jam-packed Neo at two o'clock in the morning. There were so many moments like that that I think were precursors to modern-day nightlife.”

Though he describes the relocation as a “forced shift,” Fortis remains optimistic about Neo’s future in a new space. Mostly, he’s proud of the 34 years he spent overseeing the venue, a tenure that’s “unheard of” in the nightlife business. “I got up and felt really weird this morning,” he says. “I relived all the years, all the people—so much time marked in those four little walls. But sometimes all things to have to shift. Maybe this is what will make us more creative. I don’t know.” 

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