

ARE YOU THERE, LORD BALTIMORE? IT'S ME, OLIVIA ROBINSON, CITIZEN JOURNALIST

I am sitting in a folding chair at the New Greenmount West Community Association meeting. The meeting is being held in the basement of the old P.A.L. Center on Guilford. (1) Right now, a member is reporting about the second affordable housing structure to be built in Greenmount West - like the first, this building will be for artists-only. After twenty years the tax credits will run out and then the affordable pricing limits will be removed and market rate prices will be allowed. In general, those at the meeting seem positive about development activity taking place in their neighborhood.

The Greenmount West, Charles North, and Barclay neighborhoods make up the "Station North Arts and Entertainment District," designated in 2002. This title, mainly propaganda for attracting interest from outside the district, calls attention to a special minority in the area: generations of artists and art students. According to 2010 census data, there are almost an equal number of construction workers living in the area as those working in the arts, and even more people who file under the title "Education Services" (including health care and social services). An "Arts and Entertainment District" creates a promotable image of leisure and culture, while a "Health Care and Social Services District" is simply not sexy. Instead, it points to poverty and services needed, rather than wealth and cultural services rendered.

Our Arts and Entertainment District is a smart marketing tool for attracting people and money to the area - yet it does feel covertly classist and racist. The vast majority of people who recognize themselves as artists in the Arts and Entertainment district are white and often from privilege. Again, according to the 2010 census, 72% of the general Arts District population are black while 82% of the artists are not. During the meeting when I hear about the second artists-only affordable housing project, I cringe. It's not overt racism, but it's not far from it either.

Second on the NGWCA meeting agenda are updates from Senator Catherine Pugh, MICA President Fred Lazarus, and Principal Nathan Burns about the newly finished Baltimore Design School, a magnet high school for design students. C. Pugh and F. Lazarus have been instrumental to the Arts District's successful momentum. While I am generally wary of development, I believe in their good intentions. BDS now inhabits an old factory that was vacant for 25 years. In Greenmount West, the vacancy rate went down from almost 50% in 2000 to 33% in 2010. It seems that the development in the area is effectively bringing in live bodies. How our city became so vacant, though, is rooted in ugly, racist property laws and policies of the 20th Century. The rows of boarded up buildings should remind us to be critical about how we 'develop' the city and for whom - even with good intentions of the landlords and leaders. (2)

In the 1930's (and as part of the New Deal), the federal government drew city maps to designate where federal, state, and city funds would go for public services. Middle and upper class, white neighborhoods were seen as "good investments" and outlined in green or blue. African-American neighborhoods were outlined in red, indicating undesirable neighborhoods that were not worth investment. Private banks also used these maps as guidelines for lending money: green means go, red means no. This practice would come to be known as Red-lining.

Additionally, during the Blockbusting of the 1940's and 50's, real estate moguls were able to use the societal racism to make a profit. (3) Such profiteers would cheaply buy homes from white families by scaring them that a black family was moving in. Then they would sell the properties at a higher rate to black families looking to move into those same neighborhoods. Since the highest paying jobs were held by white people, the city's tax base began to decrease. Demographics in some neighborhoods inversed. The city continued to lose population for the next 60 years as people who could afford to move to the suburbs, did.

As people left their homes, many were left vacant and rotting. Vacant properties with unpaid taxes slowly became the city's property. In Greenmount West, about half of the vacant homes are owned by the city and HUD. When there is a critical mass, the city issues an RFP (Request for Proposals) from big development companies, frequently providing enticing tax incentives. In addition to RFPs, a variety of "plans" are created for neighborhoods in Baltimore.

The density of data and plans for property and renewal is overwhelming to digest. The process is not transparent to the uninitiated. I found the most recent Urban Renewal Plans dating back to 1978 with multiple updates since. (4) Vision Plans and Master Plans are more recent creations. The Charles North Vision Plan is a powerpoint presentation. Its creation was a lengthy undertaking, coordinated through one of the many non-profits in the area and then approved by the mayor in 2008. It lays out lovely new spaces full of people. The 2010 census tells us that 65% of the people living in Charles North are African-American. Why then, in the Vision Plan's illustrations of the future, are 95% of the people of European or Asian descent? Is it part of the Vision Plan to change the demographics of the area? If this is not the plan, it seems incredibly uninformed of the hired planning company to not know, reflect, and include the current makeup of the neighborhood - and not just the demography of the people who own land in the commercial portion of Charles and North. (5)

In contrast to the Charles North Vision Plan, the Greenmount West Vision Plan (and more detailed Master Plan) champions the inclusion of neighborhood renters and homeowners in the development process. It suggests CBAs (6), planned affordable housing, and encouragement of neighborhood association input and approval of plans prior to their execution. Perhaps the Greenmount West area may be able to leverage a more equitable development process and model.

I hang around after the NGWCA meeting. The informal conversation is touching on the large new construction projects. I hear concerns about whether or not the construction jobs were actually going to any local residents. Ultimately, because our current system for investment and development is not community or democratically controlled (7), it remains to be seen if the good intentions of landlords and people in power who initiate projects are able to integrate the voices and aspirations of those who are already present. Will they grow into enforceable CBAs, environmentally progressive construction, affordable rent, and provisions for rising property taxes - all written into the contracts of growth? (8)

FOOTNOTES

(1) Fifteen years ago I used to volunteer in the afterschool program that the Police Athletic League ran in the building. Friends of mine lived in a row house on Oliver Street around the corner. The houses on either side of theirs were occupied by individuals, families, children. I left Baltimore in 2002 and when I returned for a visit in 2010, the entire block was vacant. One of my friends who had lived there, Flo, died in the Haitian earthquake earlier that year. I remember the boarded up row-homes feeling like a physical manifestation of the sadness and emptiness left in the wake of his death. It seems the entire block of nine vacant homes was sold to TRF (a developer from Philly) for \$190K in 2011. The housing market, left to its own devices, fluctuates drastically. The same block was purchased in 1994 for \$113K and sold again in 2005 for \$315K.

(2) Prior to WWI, the House of Lords was an arm of government made up of "Lords" - men who had received land and the official title of Lord by birth. Lords were born with the presumed wisdom (through inherited culture and education) and responsibility (with their wealth came the sufficient time) of ruling. In this position of power they were expected to benevolently govern while also keeping their class position stable. The eruption of the two World Wars effectively helped speed the dismantling of these assumptions, but certainly not eradicating them.

(3) Morris Goldseker was one such real estate tycoon who made millions in Baltimore during the 1930s to 1960s.

(4) In the past, Urban Renewal Plans have often been re-termed as "Negro Removal Plans" by those living within sites of development.

(5) The Goldseker Foundation (founded by Morris Goldseker) helped to fund the creation of the plan. It also helped fund the Open Walls mural project, a mural program that supported a cadre of international muralists work in Baltimore.

(6) Community Benefits Agreements, including but not limited to ensuring training and jobs for neighborhood residents to find employment within the new construction.

(7) The Housing Commissioner alone ultimately selects the winning proposal from the bids made on RFPs.

(8) Or even better, the creation of Community Land Trusts? A Community Land Trust is a nonprofit corporation that develops and stewards affordable housing, community gardens, civic buildings, commercial spaces and other community assets on behalf of a community. "CLTs" balance the needs of individuals to access land and maintain security of tenure with a community's need to maintain affordability, economic diversity and local access to essential services. For more information on Community Land Trusts: <http://www.cltnetwork.org/>