



divercity

The Outer Harbor

As Downtown Baltimore thrives, other parts of the city struggle to remain viable communities. Here's how two different neighborhoods are facing their futures.

By Harold McDougall. Photography by Mitro Hood.

When asked about the overall state of Baltimore—and Black Baltimore, in particular—attorney Billy Murphy offers a frank assessment. “The biggest difference is the real estate market, gentrification,” he says. “It’s really booming—luxury condos, new restaurants. People are leaving the stock market and investing in real estate. In Baltimore, you can find waterfront living for much less than in New York or Philadelphia, and so people are moving into the Inner Harbor area from all over the Eastern Seaboard, commuting to work from here. They’re paying millions, but those are bargain prices.

There are some black entrepreneurs who are fairly big players in all this.

“Now, the ‘Outer Harbor,’ where the black folks live, that’s another story. The rest of town is in a condition of emergency— unemployment, crime, drugs, HIV, school failure. There are no signs of life. Middle-class blacks are leaving town, all the role models are disappearing because they want to raise their kids in a safe environment with great schools. There’s an absence of a civic movement in the city to push against the negative ‘macro’ conditions that ‘Outer Harbor’ people face. Small groups around the city are trying to make progress, but they face a downward spiral.”

The “hurts” are great, says Homer Favor, an economics professor at Morgan State University. “Outside the Inner Harbor, one-third of the houses are vacant, boarded up. . . . The politicians have no plan for the ‘Outer Harbor,’ other than physical redevelopment. The social problems seem to be beyond their imagination.”

“Baltimore is still a city falling apart at its core,” says Bart Harvey, CEO of the Enterprise Foundation (as of January 2006, the foundation was renamed Enterprise Community Partners, Inc.), “We lost white middle class people from 1980-1990, and black middle class people from 1990-2000, but we’re no longer facing a net population loss. Our problem now is the increasing level of poverty among the lower income groups, a work force with a very low level of skill, and the disappearance of manufacturing jobs.”

So how best to address these issues? “There’s agreement among the funders about doing something in our most distressed areas,” says Harvey, “but good faith disagreements about how it should be done. It’s hard to get everyone to focus on a single neighborhood, to agree on one way to address a problem.”

With that in mind, I decided to look at the “micro” level by comparing two urban redevelopment projects: one in Sandtown-Winchester, which I studied closely in my 1993 book, *Black Baltimore*, and the other in the Mid-East neighborhood on the East Side. I wanted to see if the two projects differed in their approach. Sandtown-Winchester and Mid-East are two struggling communities almost the same size—Sandtown is 72 blocks, Mid-East 80—but they lie on opposite sides of the Charles Street “line” dividing the city. And the approaches being taken to their redevelopment seem very different.

Sandtown is the site of the Community Building in Partnership (CBP) initiative, involving then-Mayor Kurt Schmoke’s office, BUILD, Enterprise, the Sandtown-Winchester Improvement Association, and Sandtown Habitat For Humanity. Mid-East is the site of another Enterprise project, partnering with Mayor Martin O’Malley’s office, Johns Hopkins University, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation to build a biotech center and a new residential area.

The Sandtown and Mid-East projects are emblematic of differing approaches to addressing these problems. In Sandtown, community—social capital, civic infrastructure, support networks—is being slowly, painstakingly renovated and rebuilt, along with some impressive physical redevelopment. The CBP charter calls for the organization to work in the areas of health, employment, economic development, community outreach, planning for new development, and advocating for public safety. They are doing some of that, but economic development has yet to occur.

The Mid-East project, on the other hand, is focused first on economic development, recognizing that community may get displaced, or even destroyed, in the process. They hope to restore community when the “economic engine” is in place.

Allan Tibbels is rebuilding community in Sandtown with a very personal investment. Tibbels and his wife Susan moved their family to Sandtown—a neighborhood south of North Avenue and west of Pennsylvania Avenue—almost 20 years ago, and went to work. They were part of a small group of white, suburban, religious families who had recently moved into the area when I was writing *Black Baltimore*.

They had come, Allan said then, out of “servanthood and out of repentance.”

“The living conditions of Sandtown have been caused to a significant extent by institutional racism and classism, things that we personally as suburban, middle-class whites have benefited from,” said Allan at the time. “We are complicit in that system. We’re here to do our small part to make amends.” They had moved into the community itself, he said, because “Jesus didn’t commute to Earth.”

The Tibbelses and their pastor, Mark Gornik, started New Song Urban Ministries, a faith-based community development initiative, and also sponsored a Habitat for Humanity project in Sandtown. Community was very important to them. Gornik has moved on, to Central Harlem in New York City, and is engaged in similar work there. The Tibbelses remained in Baltimore.

“It’s been a long, hard road,” says Tibbels, now New Song’s executive director. “A lot has happened, tempered by the realities. We just kept building, hiring people. There’s still so much more to do.”

Tibbels’s focus area is 15 square blocks in the middle of the larger 72 square block Sandtown urban renewal area. New Song has gone considerably beyond the Habitat model of building or rehabbing houses alone. They have also developed a range of institutions and services designed for the community’s needs. In addition to the 222 houses they have worked to rehab, they have a health center, a job center, a school, programs in the arts, a transitional house for women with substance abuse problems, and more.

“We’re doing community development rather than urban renewal,” notes Tibbels. “We try to make it possible for families to stay here rather than relocating them. We don’t knock other people’s approaches. We just want to make sure that the long-term neighborhood residents are the ones who benefit.”

New Song seems to have achieved a very advanced understanding of how civil society is built and rebuilt. It's clearly a slow process, because community takes almost as long to rebuild as it takes to build in the first place.

Susan Tibbels is principal of the New Song Community Learning Center. She dispenses hugs, discipline, and direction with equal aplomb. She seems to know each of the 143 children by name in this \$5.5 million, K-8 school, with its 15:1 student/teacher ratio and uniformed kids who seem really excited about learning. (Classes are separated, boys from girls, beginning in fifth grade, and classes are "looped"—teachers stay with the same class for two years.)

"The school is built on relationships, and on trust," Susan says. "We have 96 families in the school, and at least 50 of them are represented at each Parent Organization meeting. In many instances, the kids have inspired their parents to go back to school. Many of the parents are working and going to school, as well as attending Parent Organization meetings. It's really impressive."

The Sandtown Children of Praise, a community youth choir, rehearses at the New Song Worship and Arts Center. The award-winning group, with upwards of 40 members, has performed up and down the East Coast and recorded three CDs, two of which have been released on the New Song Arts & Media label.

Elder Harris, pastor of the Newborn Community of Faith Church, talks about the New Song approach in which he participates. "We all collaborate," says Harris. "All the different missions interlock, a total of about 75 staff members. We're the best-kept secret in Baltimore. We're out in the street all the time. The whole of Sandtown is our church, the sky is our steeple. There are 52 churches in this 72-block area we call Sandtown. Imagine what we could do if everyone was in the street, not just feeding the faithful of their particular church, but all the people in the community who need help."

Initially funded by Enterprise, Community Building in Partnership (CBP) was founded in 1994 to help coordinate such efforts throughout the neighborhood. "It's wonderful work that we get to do," says CBP executive director Emmanuel Price, a big, friendly, bear of a man. "We have new homes, and more coming; the schools are off the watch list. New Song Charter School is here. We're doing better. We have a youth development focus also. We have a Pop Warner football team—six teams, six age groups.

"But we still have pockets—poverty, vacant lots, areas with drug problems. We try to design our expansion and development to counteract these things."

Rev. A.C. Vaughn, pastor of Sharon Baptist Church sees Sandtown as a "desert beginning to bloom. People are getting an opportunity to own their own homes. In some cases, that's a dream that's been in their family since slavery. People see the new houses going up and it gives them hope, and pride."

But, as Price notes, some things still haven't improved and there's work yet to be done. "You're blessed if you want to do ministry here," says Vaughn, "because there is so much to do."

Community engagement is vital to continue turning things around. "You can get things done if you work together," says Price. "I'd like to see the new people step up in leadership more. Not just when you're against something. They have to come out. It's hard, I know. Some of them are working two jobs to pay for these new homes and support their families."

The new homeowners usually come from outside the community, though many have Sandtown roots. "They have to understand that their homes are the product of struggle carried on by the residents, people like Ella Johnson, a trailblazer who lives in a senior home now," notes Price. "These were the strugglers, the activists who lobbied Kurt [Schmoke] and [James] Rouse so the project went forward. They came to meeting after meeting, protested, walked the streets, wrote the applications, and got the funding.

"They have to vote, too. Politics is a part of community development. The higher the percentage of voter turnout, the more attention they'll pay to you downtown. It helps the community if you

are part of the process. It makes them respect you. Elections take place every other year; it's not a lot to ask."

Clarence Snuggs, who heads Enterprise's Baltimore office, stresses the importance of collaboration for the sake of a unified Sandtown. "It all depends on people coming together," he says. "There's been a disappearance of the old veterans, people who knew how to work the system. We need to get these community veterans together with the new people who have moved in, so they can learn the skills they will need to rebuild the community from within, with most of its physical features remaining intact."

But funders are loath to spend money on the "civil society" end of community development, preferring infrastructure projects like housing construction and rehab. "Every year there's less money for this kind of work," says Price. "We appreciate all that funders like Enterprise have done; we know how hard it is to make a long-term commitment."

"We feel like we've made real progress in Sandtown," says Enterprise's Harvey. "Not as much as we'd like, but a lot of positive indicators have improved—home ownership, median income, school performance. Crime is down, unemployment is down. Sandtown is a national leader among urban neighborhoods of its type in terms of indicators of recovery."

At the same time, Harvey acknowledges that a major challenge for Sandtown will be "how to organize community leadership to take the reins. No one will fund that, it's too subjective. We've tried to get the grassroots groups to coalesce to take over for the CBP entity, but it's not happening. We're cash-constrained and give them less and less money every year. Eventually we'll need to withdraw, and leave a better physical plant than was there before, but will the community continue? Will it thrive?"

Elder Harris and others see the "economic engine" as a key way to get the money needed for community civic infrastructure. "We need community-minded businesses," he says. "We should be buying groceries from our neighbors, getting our clothes cleaned and shoes repaired by people who live here. Our children should be schooled by people invested in the community. We should have a neighborhood legal clinic."

"So much money leaves the neighborhood," he continues. "Who will invest in poverty? Who are our investors? No one will trust us with any money. If we had some money, we'd be rockin'."

For Bart Harvey, the difference between the Sandtown project of ten years ago, and today's Mid-East project, is the presence of an "economic engine": Johns Hopkins Medical School. "We learned from Sandtown and we're applying those lessons in Mid-East," he says. "You need an economic base. You've got to create jobs. We're projecting that Hopkins will provide a lot of the income stream for Mid-East, in its own self-interest and because it's an economic generator in the project."

The East Baltimore Development project is an \$800 million revitalization of an 80-acre site near Hopkins's medical campus. The project, which could generate between 4,000 and 6,000 new jobs, will include a 2-million-square-foot biotech park, approximately 1,200 units of mixed-income housing, and new retail space.

"The approach in East Baltimore is 180 degrees opposite of what was done in Sandtown," says Clarence Snuggs. "In Sandtown, you're rebuilding the community, the human networks. In Mid-East, you're rebuilding the entire physical plant, and the community is being moved en masse. However, there are a host of players, led by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, working to make sure current residents have the opportunity to return to the 'new' community if they wish."

Lisa Williams, president of the Save Middle East Action Committee (SMEAC), says, "The residents were completely blind-sided by the biotech project. We had been asking for redevelopment in our community for years. We expected some when Kurt Schmoke from the West Side was elected, but Sandtown got it. Now that O'Malley is in, from the East Side, we figured it was our turn. But we didn't see anything happening. Vacancies, deterioration continued. Then we read in the papers that our neighborhood was going to be taken over and we were going to have to move. Eight hundred families!"

The residents went ballistic and held protest rallies. With some help from the Casey Foundation, they formed SMEAC to voice and address residents' concerns and help organize at the grassroots level. Their goals are to insure that each family gets a suitable relocation package, and that all those who want to return to the community are able to do so. "[Casey's] support lets us be independent," says Williams. "So many of the people in Mid-East and the surrounding neighborhoods work for Hopkins or the city, and they're limited in what they can do and say. No one's talking about the damage the project is doing, what's the down side. People need to know the entire story, the hardships, not just sugar-coat everything."

To some, the redevelopment plan, although it came as a surprise, also confirmed longtime suspicions about Hopkins. "We have 60-year-olds who tell us that when they were young children, their parents told them 'One day, Hopkins is going to take our homes,'" says SMEAC Executive Director Marisela Gomez, who happens to be a Hopkins graduate. "And they've experienced it more than once. Some of them have been relocated twice in five years. They've lived their lives wondering 'When will it happen?' or thinking, 'Hopkins will move us 10 blocks and then expand and swallow us up again.'"

Williams contends that "[Hopkins's] track record on helping us—even recognizing that we're here—is not good. They're a major medical institution. They should be helping the community, but they're too busy putting us out of our homes."

Calling Hopkins "a sanctuary on a hill," she recalls an encounter she once had with a hospital visitor who had parked in the neighborhood. "She went on and on about 'How can people live like this, with trash everywhere?'" says Williams. "We were like, 'Welcome to our world, lady. If you paid for parking at Hopkins, you'd never even know we existed.'"

Jack Shannon, the CEO of East Baltimore Development Inc. [EBDI], the development entity for the Hopkins project, came to Baltimore from Philadelphia, where he worked as the Associate Vice President in charge of Economic Development for the University of Pennsylvania. "[In East Baltimore], I came across some of the most significant disinvestment I'd ever seen," he observes. "It reminds me of my old neighborhood in Camden, only worse."

Shannon, who grew up in an inner-city community himself, recalls that his grandfather's house was taken for urban renewal in the 1920s. "I've lived in urban areas like this my whole life," he says. "We can't keep writing off cities like Baltimore, Detroit, D.C., if we're going to compete economically with the rest of the world."

Shannon acknowledges that "there's a lot of history between Hopkins and the community. It's out there, no doubt about it. We need to recognize that, learn from it, and move on together. We know some people will be skeptical of Hopkins, of the city government, and we may never win their trust. But we're going to try to reach as many people as we can, case-by-case, delivering what we promised. We've done pretty well. But we know we're only as good as the last family we've worked with."

As Shannon implies, there have been problems. The principal point of contention is a piano-shaped piece of Mid-East, with its tip around Gay Street, comprising perhaps two-thirds of the neighborhood's land area. This is where housing will be built. (The remaining third is for life sciences buildings, at the southern end of the community, adjacent to the Hopkins medical center.)

"They started out offering us \$22,500 for our homes," says Williams, "then with supplemental funding from Casey and other foundations, it went up to \$70,000, plus a \$1,000 resettlement fee. But this is a billion-dollar project. We've been paying taxes and mortgages and rent on this property for years, with no help from the city, keeping the place alive. Now we're sitting on a gold mine, and they figure they can buy us off cheaply, because we're black."

"People in Mid-East are being asked to give up their only asset," says Gomez. "Many of them own the homes they're being put out of. They may have only paid \$30,000 for them, but home ownership is the way people move out of poverty. You're taking their land, and not paying them

what it will be worth. And you're certainly not compensating them for the loss of their community."

The relocation package, as advocated by SMEAC, has increased substantially. It now includes the fair market value of the house, a supplemental relocation benefit (based upon the needs of the homeowner and the state of the housing market), a \$1,000 relocation fee, and a range of social services. The package, according to Shannon, currently averages about \$150,000.

SMEAC also moved to stop demolition until the residents have all been moved out, for health and other reasons. "We stopped them after they had demolished the first few blocks," says Williams. "But we still have to contend with a whole range of other issues, and be vigilant. They're tearing up the streets, putting in new water pipes, and residents have been without water for three days at a time."

"We have a kind of village system here," says Marisela Gomez, "where there may be three elders on the block, people in their 80s, who are being taken care of by someone 60 years old who also lives on the block. This is the kind of contact and support that keeps older people alive. You can't rebuild systems like that at such an advanced age."

In Mid-East, community is being shredded. There's just no other way to describe it. The entire neighborhood's physical plant will be rebuilt, and the economic engine is already there. But the community that once inhabited the area will be gone.

Shannon says relocated residents will have various services to aid their move and transition. "We need to pay attention not only to the physical circumstances of those who are relocated, but also to their health, even their networks," he says. "The Family Advocates are in place to do that, providing financial counseling, emergency food and healthcare, workforce preparation and development. They work with families long before they're contacted by the city or the relocation authorities. Then they keep in touch for at least three years after relocation takes place.

"Our goal is to [totally] resource their decision. We want them to have access to legal services, counseling on home equity loans, even after they've moved. We also have a Home Ownership Academy that teaches people ways to properly maintain their homes and save money to purchase a home if they're not already a homeowner. Like how to change washers in your sink and avoid having to call a plumber.

"People sometimes jokingly refer to our staff as being like telemarketers, because they're calling them so much, checking on how things are going."

And residents who have been relocated will have the option, at some point, of returning to the neighborhood. "Not everyone wants to come back, though," says Shannon. "Some people have taken their checks and bought a new home outright, in a high-quality, yet affordable neighborhood, so they won't have to worry about a mortgage note. But for those who are moving nearby—Patterson Park, Berea—and for those who want to return, we have to take steps to strengthen the surrounding community.

"As we raise property values in the core, we have to also make smart investment and development decisions in the surrounding areas. In McElderry Park, for example, there's a strong, proactive, community-driven process underway, but it's precarious and needs to be supported. Market forces could overwhelm McElderry, gentrifying the whole neighborhood. On the other hand, development could pass it by completely, leave it to wither on the vine, with no investment at all. What's the proper balance?"

Shannon is optimistic that subsequent phases of the project will go more smoothly. "I think we'll be able to do a much better job with Phase II and III families, because by that time we'll have some housing in the community they can move into," he says. "We hope to have a new community school campus, a training and professional development center, and other facilities to serve the community, as well as a real diversity of housing stock."

He also hopes to strengthen ties to the community. "Along with President Brody and many others at Hopkins, I'd like to see the great wall of Madison Street continue to be broken down," says Shannon, "so that even more bridges between the community and the institution can be built."

Gomez and others would welcome that. "They have to open up, see the kind of pain they're inflicting, rather than have it suppressed," she says. "We have to get them to see this as a community-participatory process, not just top-down urban renewal."

In some ways, Mid-East has become the "miner's canary" for the East Side. It's hard to convince the "people with money" Elder Harris talks about, foundations and others, that building civil society is a process that can be sufficiently measured to merit their investment. Maybe what's happening in Mid-East can sensitize them to what happens when community is destroyed. If not, Baltimore's black communities will have to grow the leadership and the citizens they need to withstand the market and political forces that are developing citywide at hurricane force.

"When elephants fight, the grass gets trampled," says an African proverb I quoted in *Black Baltimore*. I find myself personally attracted to working at the grass roots, where the "grass"—community—is being trampled. That's where Allan and Susan Tibbels, Manny Price, Elder Harris, Lisa Williams, and Marisela Gomez are working.

But for others, it's about the elephants. For Billy Murphy, attacking the drug problem is the heart of any strategy to win back Black Baltimore. Homer Favor agrees.

For Freeman Hrabowski, President of UMBC, the heart of the strategy to save Black Baltimore is education. "Education is the key," he says. "Community development begins with teaching people to read. . . . We must focus the attention of the black community on what we need to do to ensure that all black children are properly educated, while we continue to press for the larger community to play its proper role.

"Some of our giants, like Pete Rawlings, have passed on. He insisted that the state, the city, and the black community all look in the mirror to ask themselves what they needed to do. He was a strong advocate for our children and was always willing to take an unpopular position if it was in the best interests of the kids. We need that kind of courage today."

Where does that leadership come from?

Paul Coates, publisher of Black Classics Press, is the last person I interviewed. I ask Coates to think of himself as he joined the Black Panther Party at the age of 23. What would he advise a young person of that age to do today?

"I would say develop yourself to the fullest, so you can make the greatest contribution to the community you possibly can," he replies. "And also, find a group or organization that's doing good things for the community and join it.

"One more thing, on the self-development side, don't wait until you're on top of your game to make a contribution. Start right now. Keep growing and getting stronger so your contributions increase as well. But start in right away."