

# The ‘Baltimore Plan’: case-study from the prehistory of urban rehabilitation

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**ABSTRACT:** Federally funded ‘urban rehabilitation’ began with the Housing Act of 1954 in the United States. Baltimore’s Harlem Park was selected to pilot this experimental programme; a logical choice seeing how the pilot largely built on a programme dating from the prehistory of legislated urban rehabilitation that originated in Baltimore. This article lays bare the history of this programme, known as the ‘Baltimore Plan’, which offered empirical evidence that substantiated the potential of participatory urban planning. Beyond transferring upon minority communities a level of control over housing that black communities had seldom possessed before, the Baltimore Plan also constituted in an alternative to public housing.

After nearly a decade of experiments with slum clearance and low-cost housing in Baltimore, efforts to rehouse the poor branched off in two principal approaches in the 1940s. The first continued to deliver new housing via public housing. The second followed a new approach focused on keeping communities in place by upgrading existing dwellings instead of replacing them altogether. This new approach broadened the fields of architecture and urban planning and pushed the case for participatory processes in the housing sector.

The project known as the ‘Baltimore Plan’ embodies one of the earliest examples of non-conventional housing policy targeting the urban poor in the US. Originally labelled as a code enforcement programme, this scheme became the blueprint for a new approach to inner-city redevelopment that would be known as ‘urban rehabilitation’.<sup>1</sup> Housing code citations had previously been used to punish landlords that opened up dwellings occupied by whites to black families in segregated neighbourhoods. With the Baltimore Plan, the city’s legal framework would be used in minority areas to increase living conditions rather than coerce landlords impervious to the logic of racial harmony. The Baltimore Plan used new partnerships to develop an alternative to public housing. This early experience with

<sup>1</sup> BURHA, ‘It’s happening in Baltimore!’ (BURHA, 1957), RG48 S2 box 6, Baltimore City Archives.

*in situ* redevelopment brought forward methods of particular importance for blighted neighbourhoods and created a concrete precedent with the potential to inform and substantiate an architectural and urban planning theory in the 1950s.

While most scholars interested in the Baltimore Plan have addressed its role in influencing the Housing Act of 1954, this work proposes that the Baltimore Plan had a decisive influence on urban rehabilitation and participation in urban planning theory. This article offers a detailed history of the formation of the programme.<sup>2</sup>

### Redevelopment, rehabilitation, conservation: urban renewal

While few would openly object to the aspirations to eliminate blight forthright, many would contest the means of renewal initiatives. In *The Federal Bulldozer*, Martin Anderson, who later became a domestic policy advisor in the Reagan administration, wrote: 'the federal urban renewal program is very costly, destructive of personal liberty, and is not capable of achieving the goals put forth by Congress'. His analysis mirrored that of other pro-market advocates, who believed that 'the federal urban renewal program [would] not achieve its goals as rapidly and effectively as the means employed by the free enterprise – if at all'.<sup>3</sup> Other critics argued that urban renewal institutionalized racial segregation and was synonymous with 'negro removal'.<sup>4</sup>

The use of urban renewal programmes to perpetrate racist urban planning and housing programmes was predicated in part on legislation that allowed local authorities to select sites for slum clearance and public housing projects. Immediately after being appointed chairman of the Joint Committee on Housing, W.W. Emmart divided Baltimore's so-called

<sup>2</sup> Alexander von Hoffman presents the most complete overview of the Baltimore Plan to date, even as it leaves out or under-discusses certain elements such as the Housing Court, the Hearing Board, the Fight Blight Fund, community-based programmes spearheaded by the First Church Brethren and national publicity campaigns. Some of the community-based programmes are at the centre of another important work on the Baltimore Plan in Elmore McKee's *The People Act*, where the story of this programme is told as a personal narration, generally relying on first-hand experiences and interviews but with limited references to the literature or other important primary sources. Her work also provides an incomplete picture that makes it impossible for the reader to understand the Baltimore Plan's various programmes' relations to each other. As I show, this is particularly problematic as the Baltimore Plan's strength lies precisely in its integration of multiple approaches and programmes. See E. McKee, *The People Act: Series of how Americans Are Coming Together to Deal with their Community Problems* (New York, 1955); A. von Hoffman, 'Enter the housing industry, stage right: a working paper on the history of housing policy', Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies, Harvard University, working paper W08-1 (Cambridge, MA, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> M. Anderson, *The Federal Bulldozer: A Critical Analysis of Urban Renewal, 1949–1962* (Cambridge, MA, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> James Baldwin on 'The negro and the American promise', interview by Kenneth Clark, video, 24 May 1963, PBS Online Archives, [www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/bonus-video/mlk-james-baldwin/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/bonus-video/mlk-james-baldwin/).

'undesirable districts' into 'blighted areas' and 'slum areas'.<sup>5</sup> As *The Sun* wrote:

'Slum areas' were defined as parts of the city in which a large percentage of dwellings were inhabitable by decent people. A 'blighted area' is one in which there is a high percentage of delinquent tax property, either occupied or unoccupied, on which repairs had not been made for a long period.<sup>6</sup>

The definitions were odd, and noticeably non-material. The description of 'slum areas' relied on the character of residents to define the quality of domestic spaces, instead of the character of the space itself. The definition offered Mayor Howard Jackson's administration the opportunity to establish which areas would be identified as a slum and subsequently cleared for redevelopment. The definition for 'blighted areas' was hardly more suited, even if it did include elements pertaining to the quality of dwellings.

By the late 1960s, legal definitions for 'substandard housing' – dwellings which the city could condemn for redevelopment projects – proposed standards so specific and demanding that even decent middle-class houses could be deemed unfit for habitation and doomed for demolition. The official definition set by the Baltimore Urban Renewal and Housing Authority (BURHA) allowed it to clear areas at wish, selectively establishing which sites would be inspected and which areas would not.<sup>7</sup>

By the 1960s, the arguments against the old model of urban renewal had made their mark. Planners, policy-makers and others were looking for new ways to solve the housing problem. One was urban rehabilitation. But it also came under attack, as several people argued that it rerouted funds away from public housing projects. But as some of the supporters in Baltimore noted, urban rehabilitation was meant to complement rather than replace public housing. For a growing number of people in Baltimore, the rehabilitation of existing buildings would enhance dwellings and neighbourhoods at a lower cost to the city than public housing, limit displacement, allowing owners to remain owners, and better service larger families, which were not eligible for public housing until 1956 in Baltimore.

<sup>5</sup> "'Blighted" areas in city discussed: Rehabilitation Committee decides Baltimore is without slums', *The Sun*, 14 Oct. 1933, Baltimore Sun Archives.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> The term 'substandard housing' referred to dwellings that did not meet each of the following conditions in 1967: 'a solid structure with cement basement, one window opening directly on the out-of-doors in each room, plumbing in good working condition, hot and cold running water, adequate heat for every room, safe wiring, two separate means of exit'. Other items included 'well-ventilated kitchen with range, sink and plenty of storage space for cooking and utensils and food, and inside, well-ventilated bathroom and sufficient rooms to provide your family with privacy and avoid overcrowding'. See J. Lewis, 'BURHA changing the city's face', *The Sun*, 23 Jul. 1967, sec. R, Baltimore Sun Archives.

### Responding to the housing crisis: the pre-war origins of the Baltimore Plan

The 'Baltimore Plan' embodied one of the earliest recorded examples of non-conventional housing policy targeting the urban poor in the US and was a model programme to the first federal pilot for urban rehabilitation, Harlem Park in West Baltimore – only a few kilometres from the site of the Baltimore Plan Pilot Area.<sup>8</sup> The municipal programme cemented collaborations between citizen-driven efforts, local business interests, the Housing Bureau of the Health Department of the City of Baltimore and the court. It involved unconventional partnerships, including alliances between parties with divergent interests united by the common objective to develop an alternative to the prevalent strategy pertaining to rehousing the urban poor. Rather than seeking a solution to urban ills through the replacement of the built environment, the city adopted an approach that aimed to redress neighbourhoods through the multiplication of small interventions – many of which were to be carried by property owners and tenants themselves and thereby aligning with the principles of 'self-help'.

The condition of working-class housing in the US left little to envy in the 1940s. Living conditions were particularly dire for African Americans who had less salubrious and more expensive accommodations than whites. In 1919, a local reporter noted that it had become 'apparent to thinking people that the situation [was] fast becoming intolerable within the confines of a city like Baltimore and that some drastic methods of productive action [had to be] quickly devised'.<sup>9</sup> Six days earlier, the same newspaper had reported on the disparity in mortality rates between white and black residents.<sup>10</sup> Referring to abnormal death rates in the black population, Dr Beitler from the Statistical Bureau of the State Board of Health stated, 'it is a fact that our statistics show that the negroes in Baltimore are dying off faster than they are being born. The cause? There are several. Too much crowding together in homes, too little attention to sanitation, underfeeding, lax morals and other reasons.'<sup>11</sup>

*The Sun* reiterated the role played by environmental factors by charging the city itself for being responsible for the disparity in living expectancies between races. It noted, 'Poorly constructed houses of bad design and in need of repair, streets and alleys with defective drainage, congested living conditions – these are some of the factors which prevent the negro from attaining the standards of health which the white race reaches without difficulty.'<sup>12</sup> Later surveys of health conditions proved more optimistic, but mortality rates continued to be as much as one third higher for blacks by

<sup>8</sup> BURHA, 'It's happening in Baltimore!'.

<sup>9</sup> 'Negroes seeking space', *The Sun*, 19 Aug. 1919, Baltimore Sun Archives.

<sup>10</sup> 'Birth rate of whites during war contradicts alarming prophecy', *The Sun*, 13 Aug. 1919, 20, Baltimore Sun Archives.

<sup>11</sup> 'Negroes seeking space', *The Sun*, 19 Aug. 1919.

<sup>12</sup> 'The negro and the community', *The Sun*, 2 Jan. 1925, Baltimore Sun Archives.

1933.<sup>13</sup> Representing only 17 per cent of the population of Baltimore City, blacks were victims of over 73 per cent of all deaths from venereal diseases and over 47 per cent of all deaths from tuberculosis.

Overcrowding only worsened in the years that followed as the black population in Baltimore jumped from approximately 140,000 to 225,000 between 1930 and 1950, with little to no increase in the size of residential areas open to blacks.<sup>14</sup> While poor white citizens also lived in substandard conditions, black communities were at much greater odds to reside in overcrowded neighbourhoods, especially in a place like Baltimore where migration from the South was so important, and where Jim Crow lingered.

Living conditions inside Baltimore's poorest neighbourhoods came into the public eye again when *The Sun* published a series of articles inspired by a detailed report from social worker Frances Morton.<sup>15</sup> Morton documented an area where 30,000 people lived, mostly African Americans.<sup>16</sup> The public responded to the series of news articles by 'demanding that property owners no longer have the right to do as they damned please'.<sup>17</sup> For Lucien Gaudreau, rent director for the Baltimore Defense Rental Area, landlords who failed to maintain their properties in good repair were directly to blame for the unacceptable condition of most inner-city neighbourhoods.<sup>18</sup> Many dwellings in inner-city ghettos suffered from decaying structural elements, windowless rooms and rampant vermin infestations, where a lack of sanitation infrastructure affected most working-class residences in Baltimore.<sup>19</sup>

Dr Williams, Baltimore's health commissioner in 1937, also drew connections between the material conditions of inner-city neighbourhoods in which many blacks lived and the disproportionately high rates of

<sup>13</sup> Mortality rates in 1933 were 1,663 per 100,000 blacks in Baltimore City; see S. Macaulay, 'A study of the negro's problem: how they touch all of the city', *The Sun*, 31 Mar. 1935, sec. MS, 1, Baltimore Sun Archives.

<sup>14</sup> P.A. Groves and E.K. Muller, 'The evolution of black residential areas in late nineteenth-century cities', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 1 (1975), 182.

<sup>15</sup> F. Morton, 'A social study of ward 5 and 10 in Baltimore, Maryland' (Baltimore: Baltimore Council of Social Agencies, Apr. 1937). Following graduation, Morton joined the Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1938, but quickly decided to refocus her attention on community-based work. She formed the Citizens' Housing Council, a small group of eight that included six social workers as well as her brother and mother, which worked towards community organizing and provided professional assistance enabling grassroots participation. The group would be renamed Citizens' Planning and Housing Association (CPHA) in 1941, and played a significant role in assuring citizen participation in the Baltimore Plan and in the establishment of the Housing Court. See, McKee, *The People Act*, 123.

<sup>16</sup> McKee, *The People Act*, 123.

<sup>17</sup> Clark Hobbs, cited in *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> 'Slum outlook is called bad: rent director says conditions will get more serious as war goes on', *The Sun*, 31 Oct. 1942, 13, Baltimore Sun Archives.

<sup>19</sup> According to data from the 1950 census, 45,187 dwellings remained without flushing toilets and 17,111 without bathtubs in Baltimore. This data indicates that the housing conditions had degraded as the 1940 census suggested that a little over 34,000 dwellings remained without flushing toilets and nearly 6,900 without bathtubs in Baltimore City. See A. Pietila, *Not in My Neighborhood: How Bigotry Shaped a Great American City* (Chicago, 2010), 97.

tuberculosis that affected Baltimore's black communities.<sup>20</sup> Williams began to enforce the building code to condemn unsafe houses in 1941 as he simultaneously prepared a new law that would afford him 'powers to fix health standards for housing and to act on complaints'.<sup>21</sup> As he told the *Baltimore Sun*, 'so-called "lung blocks" have been cleared, but other neighbourhoods have fell into almost as desperate disrepair and become grave dangers to the health of the city as a whole in turn'.<sup>22</sup>

The Baltimore City Council responded to this problem by passing the Hygiene of Housing Ordinance in 1941, which 'made it clear that slum conditions were in violation of city law'.<sup>23</sup> The ordinance described minimum housing standards and supported the application of these benchmarks through legal provisions. It revived the century-old practice to protect housing stocks through the legal system at a time when landlords and poor owner-occupants had grown increasingly negligent or unable to maintain properties in a state of good repair, especially so in urban areas inhabited primarily by black families. This new measure stood at the core of the Baltimore Plan, which would soon constitute in the first major rehabilitation programme focusing on an entire neighbourhood in the US.

### Building the housing code and giving it tooth

The Hygiene of Housing Ordinance added to existing but seldom enforced Baltimore's nuisance abatement laws that dated back to the colonial era. In 1770, for example, the City Commission of Baltimore legislated a resolution forbidding the abandonment of dead animals in backyards. Similar laws were successively passed, such as Ordinance No. 15 of 1797, which required households to maintain clean properties and the sidewalks directly outside of them. Baltimore's 'Mayor's Ordinance' of 1908 also introduced useful sets of legal provisions, such as forbidding the construction of houses on streets less than 40 foot wide,<sup>24</sup> or denying building permits for fire hazards.<sup>25</sup> As opposed to these earlier and scattered measures, the Hygiene of Housing Ordinance provided a *comprehensive* set of minimum *modern* standards encompassing a wide

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Kelton Roberts Jr, *Infectious Fear: Politics, Disease, and the Health Effects of Segregation* (Chapel Hill, 2009), 213.

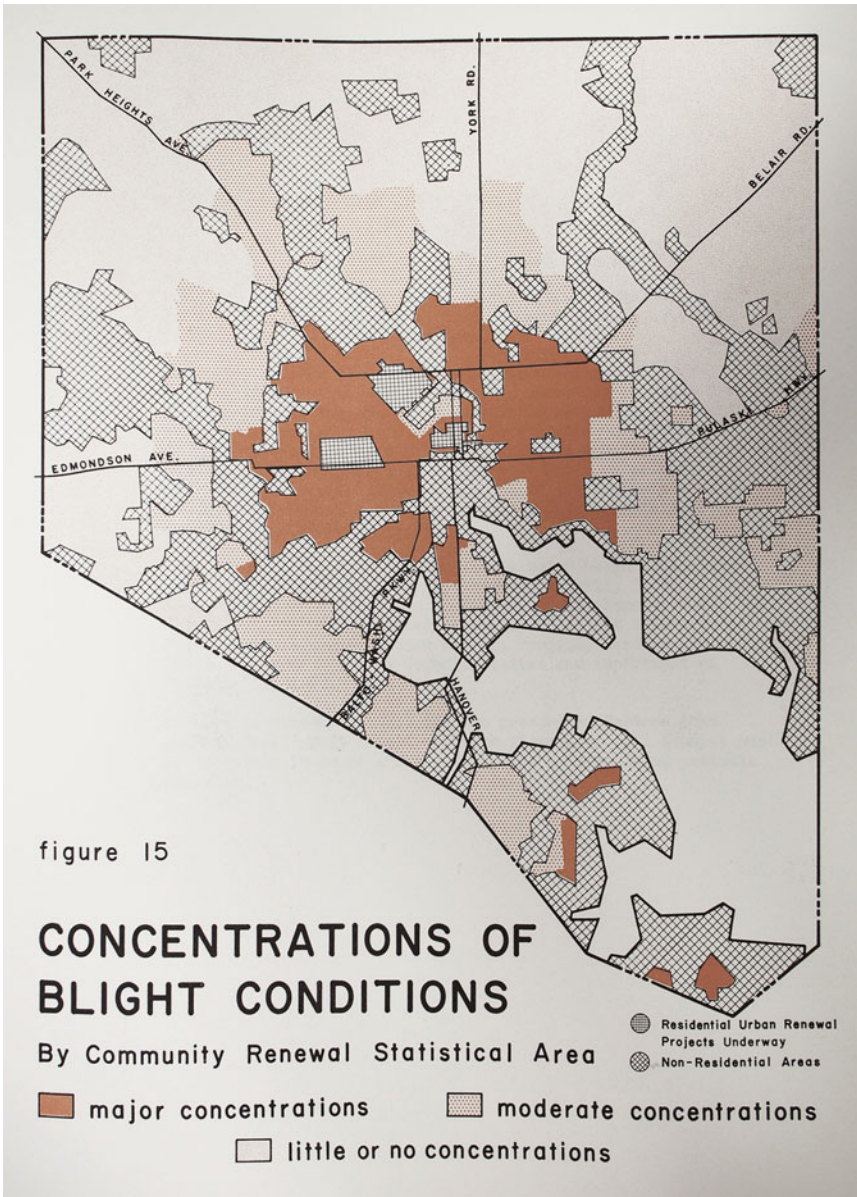
<sup>21</sup> McKee, *The People Act*, 125.

<sup>22</sup> Huntington Williams, cited in 'Tuberculosis data put city among worst', *Baltimore Sun*, 21 Nov. 1938, Baltimore Sun Archives. For a study on the racial politics of contagion in Baltimore from the late 1800s to the 1920s, see Roberts Jr, *Infectious Fear*.

<sup>23</sup> 'Baltimore's unique experiment: a report on the Baltimore Plan and its effects on our slums', *The Evening Sun*, 4 Jan. 1954, sec. The Family Section, 17, Albert Greenfield papers, Maryland Historical Society.

<sup>24</sup> M.E. Hayward and C. Belfoure, *The Baltimore Rowhouse* (New York, 1999), 119.

<sup>25</sup> G. Power, 'The unwisdom of allowing city growth to work out its own destiny', *Maryland Law Review*, 47 (1988), 628.



**Figure 1:** (Colour online) Concentration of blight in Baltimore, 1964  
Published in 'Inventory of Residential Blight' in 1964 by BURHA,  
available from the Baltimore City Archives, call number RG48 S2 box 10.

range of aspects pertaining to dwellings and their immediate outdoor environments.

The 1941 Ordinance represented the backbone of the Baltimore Plan and provided the legal impetus for a system whereby city blocks would be inspected one after another and brought up to the new standards as a result of a combined effort between municipal departments and the participation of affected residents. The local government created a taskforce in charge of administering the law, which would inspect each structure, provide lists of necessary repairs and administer fines to non-compliant individuals – while the private market actors (owner-occupants, landlords and tenants) were required to carry out adequate maintenance and renovation work.

The health commissioner of Baltimore assigned Yates Cook as the chief of housing and law enforcement within the Health Department, who began by designating specific blocks scattered throughout the inner city. He encouraged city departments to canvass the area for violations of the 1941 Ordinance. He organized 'slum tours'<sup>26</sup> and told the story of this other side of Baltimore.<sup>27</sup> Cook requested for the City Planning Department to do the same as soon as it was created in 1943,<sup>28</sup> much like he had asked for every other relevant municipal department previously.

By 1950, 100 blighted blocks totalling over 400 dwellings<sup>29</sup> had been rehabilitated at a cost to the city of \$200,000, which included the salaries of the Sanitation Squad – a division of the Baltimore Police trained to enforce housing laws. This, however, did not solve the problem. Over 2,000 blocks remained blighted, while many of the rehabilitated ones quickly fell back into a state of disrepair after inspectors moved their efforts to other target areas.<sup>30</sup>

Lacking the oversights of a cross-departmental authority, the enforcement of the Ordinance was marked by overlaps and the development of

<sup>26</sup> The concept of 'slum tourism' has triggered important debates that question the ethics and value of such activities. While this type of voyeuristic endeavours have been rightfully condemned in certain contexts where poverty tourism is used primarily for entertainment, the literature acknowledges contexts where this type of phenomenological experience can serve a valid pedagogical purpose, cultivate socio-cultural awareness that have led scholars of poverty tourism to conclude that 'categorical condemnation of poverty tourism is unjustified' (E. Selinger and K. Outterson, 'The ethics of poverty tourism', Boston University School of Law, working paper 09–29 (Boston, MA, 2009), 2). In the context of the Baltimore Plan, these visits led to the funding of public programmes and informed school teachers on the living conditions of some of their pupils. In one case, for example, an art teacher quit making cookie cutters in class and started making things for crowded rooms instead, such as corner brackets, closet shelves and utility benches (McKee, *The People Act*, 128). See Selinger and Outterson, 'The ethic of poverty tourism'; McKee, *The People Act*, 128.

<sup>27</sup> McKee, *The People Act*, 125.

<sup>28</sup> M. Pritchett, 'Theodore Roosevelt McKeldin, 1900–1974', in Lenora Heilig (ed.), *Baltimore: A Living Renaissance* (Baltimore, MA, 1982), 233–6.

<sup>29</sup> N.D. Bloom, *Merchant of Illusion: James Rouse, American's Salesman of the Businessman's Utopia* (Columbus, 2004), 69.

<sup>30</sup> M. Millspaugh and G. Breckenfeld, *The Human Side of Urban Renewal: A Study of the Attitude Changes Produced by Neighborhood Rehabilitation* (New York, 1960), 4.



a punitive approach that would prove inefficient. *The Sun* paper noted in 1951, 'What progress ha[d] been made ha[d] been only a fraction of the programme's potentiality.'<sup>31</sup> According to *The Evening Sun*, the six-year effort had managed to clean 6 per cent of so-called 'slum blocks' in Baltimore.<sup>32</sup> The conspicuous lack of co-ordination between municipal agencies culminated in wasted efforts, 'and sometimes to extreme confusion, as, for instance, when one municipal agency ordered a slum property torn down and another ordered that the same property be repaired'.<sup>33</sup>

By 1950, nearly a decade after the start of the housing standards implementation programme, no measures had been developed to address these shortcomings, with the exception of the creation of the nation's first Housing Court. Legal cases dealing with the maintenance of residential properties were commonly deferred as judges prioritized violent crimes over housing violations. The result was that hearings regarding non-compliance to the Hygiene of Housing Ordinance were commonly put off and treated as unimportant by the court. The delay for the court to pass judgment was exacerbated further by the general unfamiliarity of criminal judges with housing laws. Created by the executive order of the governor of Maryland in 1947,<sup>34</sup> the Housing Court would at last enact the legal devices of the Baltimore Plan by making minimum housing standards a legal requirement enforceable under the criminal code.

As local public officials recognized other defects in the experimental rehabilitation programme that remained unaddressed in 1950, the city council proposed institutional restructuring that would help the Baltimore Plan tap into its full potential.<sup>35</sup> The city council 'responded to that plea by passing Ordinance No. 2527, which established a new Housing Bureau within the Department of Health'.<sup>36</sup> Its purpose was to centralize the enforcement of the 1941 Hygiene Ordinance with the hope to eliminate conflicts and overlaps between municipal authorities.<sup>37</sup> Mayor Thomas D'Alesandro, Jr, selected Cook to become director of the bureau that same year.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>31</sup> 'The law spelling out the "Baltimore Plan"', *The Sun*, 7 Feb. 1951, 12, Baltimore Sun Archives.

<sup>32</sup> *The Evening Sun*, 20 Feb. 1951, cited in W.T. Durr, 'The conscience of a city: a history of the Citizens' Planning and Housing Association and efforts to improve housing for the poor in Baltimore, Maryland, 1937-1954', Johns Hopkins University Ph.D. thesis, 1972, 379.

<sup>33</sup> 'Putting a little more "plan" in the Baltimore Plan', *The Sun*, 22 Oct. 1949, 8, Baltimore Sun Archives.

<sup>34</sup> R.F. Sweeney, 'Baltimore's slum housing clinic', *Public Health Reports*, 76 (1961), 693.

<sup>35</sup> This development was triggered by the CPHA (founded by Frances Morton), which pressured McKeldin to appoint an interdepartmental law enforcement committee and to focus on a single-block as a starting point.

<sup>36</sup> 'The law spelling out the "Baltimore Plan"', *The Sun*, 7 Feb. 1951, 12.

<sup>37</sup> Durr, 'The conscience of a city', 380-1.

<sup>38</sup> W. Andrews, 'The Fight Blight Fund, Inc., six-year experience', Non-Profit (Baltimore, Unknown), 2.

As bureau director, Cook benefited from greater autonomy seeing that his previous position allowed him to do little more than designate blocks for rehabilitation and enforce Department of Health violations. This change reportedly increased his efficiency by 50 per cent, and by 'mid-1950, 133 blocks were inspected, 108,000 violations handled, including the removal of 24,000 outside toilets and their replacement by modern inside units'.<sup>39</sup> Cook's Housing Bureau formed inspection teams that would cover all built environment matters enforceable under the Hygiene of Housing Ordinance. After inspections, property owners were handed a single report detailing ways by which their dwellings failed to meet the minimum standards set by the city irrespectively of whether the offences pertained to the health code, the housing code, the fire code, the zoning code or otherwise. Owners were given 30 days to execute repairs with the possibility for extensions in extenuating circumstances, and swift legal prosecutions in cases of non-compliance.

The Housing Court differed from other criminal courts on one major aspect as the crimes continued to be perpetrated throughout the trial and after the judgment, suggesting that defendants either misunderstood their legal requirements in the modernizing city or were indifferent to the repercussions. Recognizing the social circumstances of many offenders – especially tenants and owner-occupants, many of whom were recent migrants from the rural South – the Housing Court attempted to provide an educational service from within the courthouse.<sup>40</sup> The magistrate scheduled all cases to be heard at the same time of the day, forcing defendants to sit through numerous trials. As the Citizens Planning and Housing Association (CPHA) reported, Housing Court judges 'viewed their function as more to induce compliance than to impose punishment'.<sup>41</sup> Judges were generally lenient towards first offenders, especially so when they believed that code violations were the result of ignorance rather than negligence. This alleged inability of residents to acculturate to the demands of the new ordinance was accentuated by territorial forces that limited the exposure of black individuals to the life space of the majority culture that established standards, codes and norms in Baltimore and beyond.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> McKee, *The People Act*, 132.

<sup>40</sup> The original depiction of the typical participant of the Great Migration was that of an uneducated rural worker, who migrated north to escape the blunt racism of the South and its taxing agricultural economic activities. See St Clair Drake and H. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago, 1945); E.F. Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago, 1940). More recent studies have nuanced this profile by underlining that the stream of migrants from the South was more diverse, but generally less educated and less familiar with urban living than second- and third-generation migrants.

<sup>41</sup> Citizens Planning and Housing Association, 'Housing Court – no bark, no bite', Non-Profit (Baltimore: Citizens Planning and Housing Association, 31 Jan. 1986), 18.

<sup>42</sup> Drawing upon Hubert Blalock's 'Threat Model', many social scientists have observed that majority groups responded to rapidly changing racial compositions of northern cities

With additions of pedagogical elements to the Housing Court's operational structure, the Baltimore Plan nuanced its original punitive disposition with the introduction of an educational agenda. It offered information to offenders on the negative effects of certain practices, such as the improper disposal of refuse, the pathological effects associated with antiquated sanitation infrastructure or windowless rooms. Each year and on a rotating basis, a single judge was assigned to preside over the Housing Court, allowing him or her to become well familiar with the Hygiene of Housing Code and to differentiate repeated offenders who acted out of negligence from tenants and owner-occupants unfamiliar with the modern code or limited by their lean incomes.

### **In comes the private market**

While the Housing Court provided an essential pillar to Cook as he spearheaded the Baltimore Plan, many more problems were still awaiting their solutions. For one, first-time homeowners were sometimes unable to afford the repairs necessary to meet modern standards. Whether because of irresponsible banking practices, unscrupulous sales contracts or otherwise, the cost of mortgages alone was already taking a toll on many working-class property owners who could seldom cover the cost of major home improvements. Moreover, some houses were deemed unfit for rehabilitation and slated for demolition.

The destruction of such buildings was unavoidable and perhaps traumatic for those who could not afford to live elsewhere in Baltimore, whether because of their race, income, or both. These limitations were especially important for blacks who remained confined to specific areas of the city in the 1950s. Those residing in such houses did so out of necessity as the market for decent rental properties at decent prices available to blacks was unarguably smaller than the demand. A 1951 United States Public Health Service study concluded that in one area targeted by the Baltimore Plan, blacks paid approximately 32 per cent more for housing subject to 20 per cent more code violation.<sup>43</sup>

Other setbacks pertained to exploitative contractors who were quick to take advantage of uninformed owner-occupants with little to no experience dealing with the construction sector. It was common for builders to overcharge for work that would fall short of bringing houses up to standard despite having been hired specifically for that purpose. As *The Evening Sun* reported in 1954, 'unsatisfactory work include[d] temporary

during the Great Migration through discriminatory responses that further exacerbated race-based socio-economic and cultural differences. See H.M. Blalock, *Toward a Theory of Minority-Group* (New York, 1967); D.S. Massey and N.A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

<sup>43</sup> R.J. Johnson and R. McCaldin, *Evaluation of Housing Law Enforcement in Housing Rehabilitation*, Public Health Monograph No. 34, Public Health Services Publication No. 451 (US Government Printing Offices, 1955).

cardboard partitions, plastering over loose paper, cheap five-and-dime store electric extension cords instead of cables, taped leaks in water pipes, sand-softened concrete'.<sup>44</sup>

James Rouse, a prominent mortgage banker, had significant influence over Cook as the chairman of the Housing Bureau's Advisory Council. Especially savvy in politics, Rouse advocated for a public-private sector approach to address urban issues.<sup>45</sup> Notwithstanding his allegiance to the private sector, he agreed with the New Deal objective to provide better houses for the poor but opposed big government programmes in the 1950s, a position he would later reconsider. Rouse believed that private contractors should be able to earn a respectable profit building and renovating low-cost housings.<sup>46</sup> Described as an 'honest businessman, a philanthropist of note, and a truly decent human being' by scholar Nicholas Dagen Bloom,<sup>47</sup> Rouse believed that the private sector could legitimately do more for marginalized groups than an inefficient political machine constantly held back by administrative red tape and delivered by individuals with no proven ability in the business world.

Rouse disagreed with the common idea that upgrading physical spaces would automatically mean upgrading the people. He outlined that public offices should 'work with [the people's] spirit as well as their houses. Education and recreation are perhaps the most obvious', he noted.<sup>48</sup> He believed that the circumstances of impoverished and marginalized residents would only be alleviated if housing improvements would be paired with educational programmes, and that buildings alone were not up to the task.

This ethos together with Rouse's political influence triggered new efforts to introduce social and economic programmes designed to support the Baltimore Plan. Rouse introduced Cook to his colleagues at the Baltimore Real Estate Board, including the organization's chairperson in 1951, Guy Hollyday. Concerned by the failings of the otherwise promising anti-

<sup>44</sup> '5,400 blighted homes razed in 15 years, more than 50,000 are still occupied', *The Evening Sun*, 16 Sep. 1954, sec. The Family Section, 35, Albert Greenfield papers, Maryland Historical Society.

<sup>45</sup> As a mortgage banker and head of the Moss-Rouse Company, Rouse specialized in residential mortgages, especially those backed by the Federal Housing Association (FHA), which was unconventional for mortgage bankers who generally preferred to focus on industrial and commercial loans then. See J. Olsen, *Better Places, Better Lives: A Biography of James Rouse* (Washington DC, 2003), 18.

<sup>46</sup> Rouse's belief that business and moral interests could co-exist is evident in a letter written to his business partner towards the end of World War II. He writes: 'Perhaps you and I are each a bit unbalanced on the subject of how to properly conduct a business, but we certainly found little satisfaction in the cold, dollar-conscious approach which seems to be associated with most business. That our philosophy is correct, I have no doubt, and I am sure that it contributed more than any other factor to our success during the three years in which we had the opportunity to explore possibilities.' Rouse, cited in *ibid.*, 27.

<sup>47</sup> Bloom, *Merchant of Illusion*, xx.

<sup>48</sup> James Rouse, in 'The Baltimore Plan of Housing Law Enforcement' (The Housing Bureau, Baltimore City Health Department, May 1952), 16, RG9 box 263 S 23, Baltimore City Archives.

blight programme, Hollyday volunteered resources to support Cook's rehabilitation programme. He created an interest group that included influential realtors, bankers and brokers with a vested interest in finding alternatives to public housing programmes.<sup>49</sup> The group suggested to establish 'Fight Blight Fund Inc.', which provided financial support and guidance pertaining to the world of banking and construction.<sup>50</sup> Fight Blight was officially launched in 1951, with William Andrews as director.<sup>51</sup>

Andrews, a realtor and attorney, was charged with the broad task to iron out the problems of families unable to make home improvements, and he set up an office on the site of the Baltimore Plan Pilot Area in East Baltimore to that effect. As he explained, the Fight Blight Fund 'established the principle that the strong should help the weak', and that this approach was the 'dignified way of helping people help themselves'.<sup>52</sup>

By the time that Fight Blight Fund became operational, Cook had agreed to abandon the scattered block-by-block strategy in favour of a neighbourhood-wide approach that Rouse had for long defended.<sup>53</sup> Whereas the block-by-block programme had suffered from the negative impact of being surrounded by untouched blighted areas, taking the rehabilitation programme to a larger scale was seen as a significant move that would allow for the provision of localized services and benefit from the rehabilitation of an entire area.<sup>54</sup>

The Pilot Area, a 27-block territory bounded by Caroline, Chester, Chase and Preston Streets in East Baltimore, was a 'changing neighbourhood' of about 4,000 inhabitants,<sup>55</sup> where what had been an all-white community was well on its way to becoming all black. Each of the 1,042 dwelling units contained within the site dated back from the previous century and displayed clear signs of decay.<sup>56</sup>

The Fight Blight Fund's on-site office offered specialized services to families affected by the Baltimore Plan within the Pilot Area. Andrews reviewed cases one-by-one and aimed to find solutions that would preferably not require owner-occupants to borrow from the Fight Blight Fund's \$10,000 available for loans. He identified citations that could readily be tackled by the owners and provided lists of trustworthy contractors for major jobs. He helped tenants obtain estimates, and advised them on drafting contracts where payments would only be due after a satisfactory

<sup>49</sup> Andrews, 'The Fight Blight Fund, Inc., six-year experience', 3.

<sup>50</sup> Fight Blight Fund, Inc., was organized by Robert Merrick as a non-profit.

<sup>51</sup> Rouse and Hollyday were both members of the CPHA board at the time.

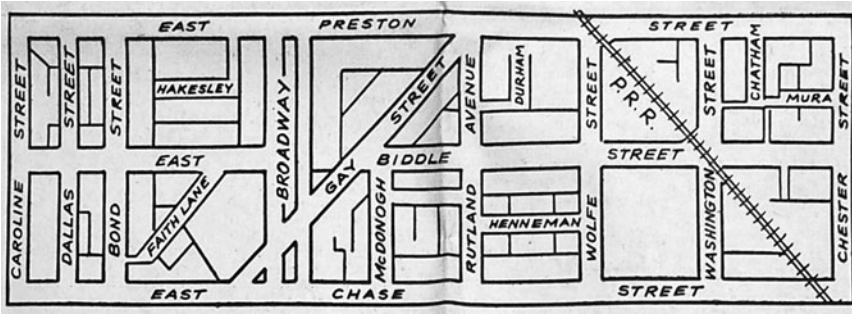
<sup>52</sup> William Andrews, cited in McKee, *The People Act*, 136-7.

<sup>53</sup> 'The "Baltimore Plan" goes on formal trial', *The Sun*, 16 Dec. 1950, Baltimore Sun Archives.

<sup>54</sup> This approach would finally align with a vision that Cook already defended in early 1950. When he was taking Elmore McKee around some of Baltimore's 2,100 blocks in need of repair to make her aware of the scale of the problem, he proposed, 'Next time we've got to take a whole section, line up all the agencies, go after real rehabilitation, including the people themselves.' Cook, cited in McKee, *The People Act*, 134.

<sup>55</sup> Durr, 'The conscience of a city', 384.

<sup>56</sup> Millspaugh and Breckenfeld, *The Human Side of Urban Renewal*, 4.



**Figure 2:** Baltimore Plan, map of Pilot Area, 1954  
 Map published in *The Evening Sun*, 4 Jan. 1954. Courtesy of Maryland Historical Society.

inspection of the work by the Housing Bureau. Building on his knowledge of the banking system, he studied financial arrangements and identified ways by which repairs could be paid through refinancing or transfers of debt. Andrews' ability to sort through the paper-legal-banking maze allowed him to find financial solutions that regularly made it possible for owner-occupants to pay for renovations *and* achieve savings on mortgage payments, seeing that residents of the expanding black ghetto were often the subject of unlawful financial exploitation.<sup>57</sup> 'Although the Fight Blight Fund had \$10,000 at its disposal, it soon became apparent that even the poorest Pilot Area families needed advice and education far more than money', one study concluded.<sup>58</sup> In a few rare cases, the Fight Blight put up its own money to provide last-resort loans to families unable to access low-interest loans in other lending institutions despite their apparent ability to repay.<sup>59</sup>

Andrews' efforts were supported further when the Housing Bureau inaugurated a special Hearing Board; an independent panel tasked to decide whether a non-compliant owner-occupant should be taken to court. The Hearing Board proved especially useful for families willing to correct housing violations but unable to do so within the prescribed 30-day

<sup>57</sup> In one reported case, Andrews had managed to obtain a quote of \$512 on behalf of an elderly couple for repairs including rewiring a cellar, 'ratproofing' the entire house, replacing windows and plastering two rooms. The couple had previously been quoted at \$1,525. Andrews then consolidated the \$300 still owed on the house with the \$512 for repairs into a new mortgage over five years, while three years remained on the previous mortgage. With this arrangement, extending the life of the house by well over two years, Andrews' advices had brought down the elderly couple's monthly payment from \$27 to \$17, giving them an almost 10% increase in usable income. See *ibid.*, 31.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>59</sup> Durr notes that over the first six years of operation, the Fight Blight Fund directly granted only 51 loans, totalling \$19,194. During the same period, Andrews was able to resolve 275 of the 309 cases he received through counselling. See Durr, 'The conscience of a city', 425-6.

period. It examined the financial situation of struggling families, where they sometimes discovered new ways to alleviate residents from financial hardships related to housings:

In one case, the Hearing Board discovered that a seller had been deducting an annual ground rent of \$69 from the buyer's payments, although no legal ground rent existed. On the same contract, it was later charged in court, excessive sums had been applied to interest, and although the weekly payments were supposed to cover all expenses, the year's taxes had not been paid and were accruing penalties.<sup>60</sup>

Realtors often drafted instalment sales contracts as working-class blacks seldom had the finances to pay for a property outright or were able to gain access easily to standard bank-issued mortgages. A news report on such arrangements held that 'dealers in the field acknowledge[d] with great frankness that they [did] not sell houses under contracts of sale at their fair market value'. Realtors, the article noted, argued that they had no option but to demand from \$1,000 to \$3,000 in excess of the open-market price to make up for the 'hazard of the business'.<sup>61</sup> The hazards were not as grave as realtors suggested, however, since non-payment resulted in the immediate loss of property for borrowers who did not possess the titles of their homes until payment in full. The same so-called hazards were also offset by high interest rates and long repayment terms that reduced the likelihood for these families to ever have the house transferred to their name, or for it to be worth anything at all after having been completely paid off.

### Introducing community-based planning

Community-based programmes were introduced in the Baltimore Plan alongside these new services policing exploitative practices and providing financial advice. Some local communities emerged when it became apparent that the Baltimore Plan would raise the social and economic value within the Pilot Area, while other community groups were created by municipal social services. Being trisected by two major roads, the affected territory 'had had no name before its designation as the Pilot Area'.<sup>62</sup> The area had in fact been oddly defined as it included parcels that had previously been part of three separate neighbourhoods. As the site had never been a neighbourhood or district, the work of community organizations was of paramount importance to cultivate a sense of place.

According to a 1954 *Evening Sun* report, 'Miss Biddison, combining a wide knowledge of the subtle currents in City Hall with a militant

<sup>60</sup> Millspough and Breckenfeld, *The Human Side of Urban Renewal*, 13.

<sup>61</sup> O. Smith, 'Small clique turns "house-selling" business into get-rich scheme', *The Sun*, 13 Dec. 1954, Baltimore Sun Archives.

<sup>62</sup> Durr, 'The conscience of a city', 388.

indignation at the plight of slum dwellers, became a ubiquitous and almost legendary figure to the residents.<sup>63</sup> Together with other leaders like Viola Jackson, chairwoman of a newly formed Neighbourhood Committee<sup>64</sup> (as well as principal of the nearby School no. 176), women like Biddison 'spent hundreds of evening hours trouble-shooting the complaints of residents who were receiving the painful notices from law-enforcement agencies'.

The Neighbourhood Committee headed by Jackson had been established by the CPHA. It had many roles. It interpreted the Baltimore Plan programme to residents, and 'enlist[ed] community support and ma[de] suggestions to those in charge'.<sup>65</sup> Its members mediated the recurrent disputes between eager inspectors and suspicious homeowners.<sup>66</sup> They assisted Cook's office with in-house visits or inspections; warned against loan sharks; listed trusty contractors; published the *Pilot News*; and eventually appointed 27 block captains.<sup>67</sup>

These community-based organizers played an instrumental part in stimulating the interest of citizens to upgrade their homes and the establishment of vocational schools and local associations, which earned the Baltimore Plan wider acceptance locally. Citizens who were invited to participate in the rehabilitation of their neighbourhood, however, faced several obstacles. Some complained that block captains were appointed by outsiders rather than elected by the community. Some discerning voices also wondered why city hall could not find a single person within a 27-block radius to chair the Neighbourhood Committee, knowing that Jackson actually lived a mile away from the Pilot Area.

The block captains' work was supported through organizations such as the First Church of the Brethren, which had turned a tiny and dilapidated house at 1214 North Durham Street into community centre to train handymen and builders.<sup>68</sup> With financial support from the Maryland Home Builders Association, the group had purchased and rehabilitated the house, quickly turning it into a 'command post where neighborhood people could talk over their problems and where representative of Cook's Baltimore Housing Bureau could hold interviews'.<sup>69</sup> The house was also a 'social agency referral centre, law enforcement headquarters, meeting place for the hearing board and neighbourhood committee, quarters for

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

<sup>64</sup> The Neighbourhood Committee was formed by the Advisory Council, together with an Education Committee, a Social Services Committee and a Law Enforcement Committee.

<sup>65</sup> Durr, 'The conscience of a city', 402.

<sup>66</sup> Martin Millspaugh, 'Morale boosted in pilot area', *The Evening Sun*, 6 Jan. 1954, sec. The Family Section, 33, Albert Greenfield papers, Maryland Historical Society.

<sup>67</sup> McKee, *The People Act*, 135.

<sup>68</sup> As McKee writes, 'Yates had long felt the need for an Area spot where people of the neighborhood and the agencies could meet, get acquainted, then go to work together. He also knew that the Brethren were old hands at training volunteers to stick at a job.' McKee, *The People Act*, 139.

<sup>69</sup> Durr, 'The conscience of a city', 386.



male volunteers'.<sup>70</sup> This centre played a role in fostering feelings of trust and ownership over the Baltimore Plan precisely because of its location within the community and the people-centred services it offered. Even as these various services were part of Cook's and Rouse's vision for the Baltimore Plan, the fact that organizations based out of the pilot house focused on the cultural and socio-economic conditions of residents rather than on the material conditions of their dwellings resulted in residents developing positive views of groups that appeared to work with the grassroots; feelings that were seldom extended to the Housing Court and even less frequently to building inspectors.<sup>71</sup>

### Selling the Baltimore Plan

The Baltimore Plan achieved national recognition as an alternative to slum clearance cum public housing programmes. According to one report, 'the Baltimore Plan of slum rehabilitation ha[d] reached what must be close to the zenith of nation-wide publicity in the nonentertainment field'<sup>72</sup> after it had been written up in laudatory terms by several national magazines in a single week of January 1953, including *Life* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. Realizing that efforts to rehabilitate the Pilot Area should be packaged and marketed via a catchy name to assure dissemination and publicity, Hollyday had in fact coined the term 'Baltimore Plan' himself.<sup>73</sup>

As news and rumours about the Baltimore Plan travelled, its essence and purpose became increasingly distorted, leaving mayors throughout the country to believe that the great city at the shore of the Patapsco River had abandoned its conventional public housing programme altogether. Politicians peppered Mayor D'Alesandro, Jr, with information requests, who reiterated in personal communications with officials from Dallas and Los Angeles that the Baltimore Plan was complementary to public housing. He made the same case at national public forums where he was increasingly being asked to speak.

Realtors avidly regarded the programme as a powerful device that legitimized the efficacy of public-private partnerships, which held a precious place in their tactical agenda designed to keep big government out of the housing sector. To strengthen its effects, the Fight Blight Fund decided to bring the Baltimore experiment deeper into the mainstream via a short documentary film distributed by Encyclopaedia Britannica Films. The Baltimore Mortgage Bankers Association<sup>74</sup> and the Home Builders

<sup>70</sup> McKee, *The People Act*, 140.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 139–44.

<sup>72</sup> 'The Baltimore Plan is ready for appraisal', *The Sun*, 31 Jan. 1953, Baltimore Sun Archives.

<sup>73</sup> 'Oral history interview, Mrs. Frances Morton Froelicher', 7, Maryland Historical Society.

<sup>74</sup> The Mortgage Bankers Association (MBA), of which Hollyday and Rouse were members, had two purposes: 'to encourage certain practices amongst mortgage bankers, and to lobby government on behalf of the business'. Rouse was heavily involved with the first, serving 'as chairman of a committee concerned with the financing of minority housing,

Association of Baltimore raised \$15,000 to finance the venture, with the University of Chicago covering the remaining costs.<sup>75</sup>

The film opens on the Pilot Area in East Baltimore, an area with some of the worst slums in the country. Banking on visual images to shock as well as confirm preconceptions shared by the film's intended audience – presumably white and middle class – the documentary preys on compassionate spirits likely to be swayed by this pornography of poverty featuring Baltimore's poorest black communities. The notion that such places failed to meet the lowest imaginable living standards in the US drive the film's narration, while the filmic sequence remains careful not to include images that could possibly undercut the pity of the audience.<sup>76</sup> The film relies on creative licence to present the charismatic Viola Jackson as a role model living in the neighbourhood; a token African American leader that erases a white guilt that only began to exist in Baltimore's 1950s. Narrated by a person meant to be Frances Morton, the voiceover immodestly admits that 'somehow, I must have felt that all the people in the neighbourhood were waiting for me'. Despite the objectionable paternalistic and racialized tone of the movie, the work depicted the voices of progressive Baltimoreans at a time when many more citizens continued to refuse to work with and live alongside African Americans. The film describes the foundation of the Baltimore Plan:

Here is the shame of our American Cities. Here is the face of our cities we hide. Endless blocks of houses scarred beyond belief, overcrowded firetraps, tenements, shacks, human dwellings unfit for human beings to live in. In Baltimore as in all our cities, such conditions went untouched for years. Then a new approach. A young social worker just out of school went into a blighted area to report on the work of social agencies. She was shocked by the housing conditions she saw. Her report – an indictment of Baltimore's indifference – interested three people: the director of public welfare, the commissioner of health and a newspaper editor. The newspaper

or – since the 1940s – the lack of financing'. Around half of Baltimore's mortgage firms refused to consider loans for blacks. Rouse would later be involved with MBA's second objective, providing testimonies before Congress as an expert on mortgage banking, which would directly affect elements of the 1949 Housing Act. He supported more liberal mortgage credit in the FHA programme and spoke against public housing as a strategy that 'segregates people into lower-income groups and advertises their less privileged economic decision'. He would later support public housing for families displaced by slum clearance programmes, a position that the MBA did not endorse. Olsen, *Better Places, Better Lives: A Biography of James Rouse*, 30–1.

<sup>75</sup> P. Henderson, 'Local deals and the new deal state: implementing federal public housing in Baltimore, 1933–1968', Johns Hopkins University Ph.D. thesis, 1993, 337.

<sup>76</sup> This approach is radically different from works of cinematic realism, including the relatively recent rendition of Baltimore's underbelly in David Simon's *The Wire*. Contrary to the documentary film, *The Wire* depicts Baltimore's inner city as more nuanced and varied, offering narratives that sometimes glorify life in the ghetto while also introducing struggling characters particularly hurt by the reality of their living environments. See B. Leclair-Paquet, 'The wire as speculative research', *Architectural Research Quarterly*, 18 (2014), 135–44.



**Figure 3:** Still frame from documentary film, *Baltimore Plan*, produced and directed by John Barnes, 1953.

hit hard. To the people of Baltimore, such conditions were impossible. But there they were, as common as the daily paper.<sup>77</sup>

Notwithstanding this quasi-apocalyptic description, the site ‘was not a rock-bottom slum, but it had every variety of blight and deterioration’.<sup>78</sup> Around 42 per cent of the properties were landlord-owned, leaving 58 per cent in the hand of owner-occupants, who were not the city’s worst-off.<sup>79</sup> The film myopically focused on the Baltimore Plan’s successes, while leaving out any failures.

Various shortcomings notwithstanding, the Baltimore Plan offered invaluable lessons to the discipline of urban planning in the 1950s. Its contribution to *in situ* redevelopment supported an alternative to the preferred mode of development during the New Deal where *tabula rasa* had been the prevalent remedy to renew blighted areas. According to a before and after study of the Pilot Area published in 1955, ‘the average scores for facilities and maintenance [had been] statistically significant’. The study further noted that the median income of families had not

<sup>77</sup> J. Barnes, *The Baltimore Plan*, Documentary (Encyclopaedia Britannica Films, 1953), [http://archive.org/details/baltimore\\_plan](http://archive.org/details/baltimore_plan).

<sup>78</sup> Millspaugh and Breckenfeld, *The Human Side of Urban Renewal*, 4.

<sup>79</sup> ‘5,400 blighted homes razed in 15 years, more than 50,000 are still occupied’, *The Evening Sun*, 16 Sep. 1954, 35.

changed significantly after the rehabilitation, suggesting that enforcement efforts had not forced lower-income families out of the neighbourhood.<sup>80</sup> 'While a substandard area was not changed into a beautiful residential neighbourhood', the report did note that 'the residents developed a new pride of occupancy.'

### Criticisms

As the documentary film did not speak to the defects and limitations of the Baltimore Plan, it obscured the reasons behind the success or failure of the experiment. Seeing how real estate interests had funded large parts of the documentary film, it was no surprise that its narrative was skewed to serve the agenda of Baltimore's real estate lobby. 'Exaggerated claims' for some,<sup>81</sup> 'powerful propaganda' according to others,<sup>82</sup> Mayor Frank Zeidler of Milwaukee described the Baltimore Plan as little more than a matter of first aid medicine after visiting the site.<sup>83</sup> When walking through a cleaned-up block in the Sharp Street neighbourhood with Cook, Mayor Oscar Holcombe of Houston reportedly told his guide, 'In Houston we'd still call this a slum.'<sup>84</sup>

Important flaws in the Housing Court also went unreported. For example, the film's description of the special court failed to mention that fines for Housing Code violations were often considered as the cost of doing business in Baltimore by absentee landlords.<sup>85</sup> *The Evening Sun* reported in 1954 on a case where the landlord was fined \$75 for failing to make repairs while the work would have cost him \$1,000 – \$2,000.<sup>86</sup> The documentary film rightly stated that judges could fine offenders for each day of non-compliance as separate offences, but the use of this law, or of the judge's rights to impose a jail sentence, was rarely if ever imposed even on the most flagrant offenders.<sup>87</sup>

### The plan that wasn't one

As this description of the Baltimore Plan lays bare, this alternative approach to public housing was more of an attitude towards urban

<sup>80</sup> R. Johnson, H. Williams and R. McCaldin, 'The quality of housing "before" and "after" rehabilitation', *American Journal of Public Health*, 45 (1955), 195.

<sup>81</sup> Henderson, 'Local deals and the new deal state', 330.

<sup>82</sup> Bloom, *Merchant of Illusion*, 68.

<sup>83</sup> 'The plan: for people, not just for houses', *The Sun*, 5 Sep. 1953, 8, Baltimore Sun Archives.

<sup>84</sup> Oscar Holcombe, in 'Houston mayor visits slums', *The Sun*, 15 Feb. 1950, Baltimore Sun Archives.

<sup>85</sup> Citizens Planning and Housing Association, 'Housing Court – no bark, no bite', 6.

<sup>86</sup> '5,400 blighted homes razed in 15 years, more than 50,000 are still occupied', *The Evening Sun*, 16 Sep. 1954, 35.

<sup>87</sup> Citizens Planning and Housing Association, 'Housing Court – no bark, no bite', 7; '5,400 blighted homes razed in 15 years, more than 50,000 are still occupied', *The Evening Sun*, 16 Sep. 1954, 35.

rehabilitation than a strategic plan. Its multiple components, such as the Hygiene of Housing Ordinance (1941), the Housing Court (1947), the Fight Blight Fund (1951), the Hearing Board (1952), the Pilot House of the First Church Brethren (c. 1951), the establishment of vocational schools, or the introduction of community-driven activities, were deployed in a piecemeal manner under no formal institutional umbrella. The programme publicized as the Baltimore Plan effectively amassed all efforts aiming at rehabilitation of a Pilot Area, irrespectively of authorship. These efforts were deployed by various actors and sometimes for contrasting reasons that ranged from developing alternatives to public housing in order to protect the local real estate industry, to the betterment of housing conditions for blacks residing in slums or blighted areas in the Baltimore ghetto. The Baltimore Plan, a plan without a plan produced as a fluid device capable of adapting to unforeseeable drawbacks, came to represent an alternative to orthodox master planning as the lines that formed this experimental programme had been drawn with more pens than the one.

When the Pilot Area of the Baltimore Plan neared completion in 1952, the Advisory Council urged Mayor D'Alesandro, Jr, to augment Cook's authority once again so as to grant him with the necessary power to coordinate the multiple undertakings that constituted the Baltimore Plan. As the project had expanded into other fields, such as recreation, education and financial services, it became apparent that the Baltimore Plan was no longer limited to enforcing Hygienic of Housing regulations. Still chairman of the Advisory Council in 1951, Rouse formally recommended for the Baltimore Plan to be moved out of the Health Department and to be handled on an interdepartmental basis by what he called an independent Commission on Blight.<sup>88</sup> But conflicts of social philosophy had emerged early into the years of the Housing Bureau, when the 'young, restless, dynamic and aggressive' Cook, 'no respecter of protocol, bureaucratic divisions of responsibilities or precedents', had aroused the anxiety of his conservative superior at the Health Department.<sup>89</sup>

Cook, with the support of his Advisory Council, 'composed of seventeen Baltimoreans of substantial reputation', defended the Baltimore Plan as being much more than an enforcement programme of the minimum health and sanitation standards for housing.<sup>90</sup> The Advisory Council supported him, noting in a letter addressed to the mayor that the programme had in fact evolved into a vast interdepartmental effort largely exceeding the purview of the Health Department:

The Baltimore Plan now directly involves the work of the Fire Department, Police Department, Bureau of Buildings, the Zoning Enforcement Office, the Bureau of Highways, the Bureau of Sanitation, the Department of Parks and Recreation, the

<sup>88</sup> 'New status for Baltimore Plan urged to cut red tape', *The Sun*, 7 Apr. 1952, 7, Baltimore Sun Archives.

<sup>89</sup> EL J, 'Strong letter to the mayor', *The Sun*, 6 May 1952, sec. E, Baltimore Sun Archives.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

Department of Education, the Department of Public Welfare, the Council of Social Agencies, the CPHA, the Women's Civic League, the Home Builders Association of Maryland, the Real Estate board, Brethren Volunteer Service, and three non-profit corporations formed by Baltimore groups specifically to deal with the Baltimore Plan, namely, Brotherhood Service, Inc., Fight Blight, Inc. and the Fight Blight Fund.<sup>91</sup>

The Housing Bureau's Advisory Council's 1952 report explained why it considered the current institutional structure totally inadequate to deal with this complex assemblage of efforts. 'Despite the fact that the matter at hand may have little or no direct relationship with the work of the Health Department, the Housing Bureau must proceed through the Commissioner of Health rather than through the Advisory Council to reach the department involved.'<sup>92</sup> This structure, burdened by a layer of authority with no expert knowledge on the problems at play, moved ineffectively, according to the report, and demanded 'an inordinate length of time and an extravagant quantity of letters, memoranda, and conferences to produce simple, worthwhile results which should be accomplished quickly, easily and directly'.<sup>93</sup> The Advisory Council thus concluded that the Baltimore Plan should fall under the administration and direction of a non-paid, five-men Commission on Blight at once.<sup>94</sup>

As the mayor had been unable to agree to such organizational restructuring, Cook resigned in February 1953.<sup>95</sup> His supervisor at the Health Department communicated his intention to continue to provide a home to the Housing Bureau within his department, and to limit the Baltimore Plan to a public health endeavour despite the recommendations of Rouse, the protests of Cook and the relative success of the Plan as a multifaceted programme acclaimed nationwide.<sup>96</sup> Only 43 years old in 1953, Cook would soon be recruited by the National Association of Home Builders, where he would head the Department of Urban Redevelopment later that same year.<sup>97</sup> Not long after, Rouse decided to resign as chairman of the mayor's Advisory Committee in protest.<sup>98</sup>

Rouse transferred his efforts to the state capital, Annapolis, where he proposed Senate Bill 449, 'an enabling act which would authorize

<sup>91</sup> Housing Bureau Advisory Council, 'Report to the mayor on operations of the Baltimore Plan' (Baltimore: Housing Bureau Advisory Council, 19 Mar. 1952), 1–2.

<sup>92</sup> Housing Bureau Advisory Council, 'Report to the mayor on operations of the Baltimore Plan'.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>94</sup> While other influential proponents of the Baltimore Plan agreed with Rouse's position, they disagreed with his pace, underlining that changes at city hall happen in evolutionary rather than revolutionary ways. As it happened, the special housing agency that Rouse had called for would be formed three years later.

<sup>95</sup> E. Burks, 'Cook resigns as housing bureau head', *The Sun*, 5 Feb. 1953, 32, Baltimore Sun Archives.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> 'Cook to head nation-wide slum drive', *The Sun*, 8 Mar. 1953, 34, Baltimore Sun Archives.

<sup>98</sup> 'Cook, retiring "Baltimore Plan" director, extolled at reception', *The Sun*, 28 Mar. 1953, 15, Baltimore Sun Archives.



**Figure 4:** Mural depicting James Rouse and an unknown man planting seeds, West Baltimore  
 Photograph by author, 2012.

independent Baltimore Plan agencies throughout Maryland'.<sup>99</sup> The Senate gave the act a favourable vote, but specifically eliminated Baltimore City from the bill. Rouse's new Housing Committee included four former members of the Advisory Committee, including important figures such as Guy Hollyday, John Ramsay Jr (vice-president of the Urban League) and Harry Kruger (magistrate of the Housing Court). For them, the explicit elimination of Baltimore from the bill turned the favourable vote into a major loss as most neighbourhoods in need of rehabilitation in Maryland remained precisely in the historical city. As Rouse observed, over 10,000 code violations had been corrected in two years under the Baltimore Plan. 'This is good', he wrote, 'but at this rate it will take 300 years to cover Baltimore's 2,100 blocks of blight.'<sup>100</sup>

### **In case you prefer self-help**

All was not lost, however, as the Federal Housing Administration selected Baltimore to pilot the very first federally funded project for urban

<sup>99</sup> 'Rouse announces formation of new housing committee', *The Sun*, 1 Apr. 1953, 18, Baltimore Sun Archives.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

rehabilitation a few years later in 1954. The Harlem Park Pilot Area would become the first neighbourhood to take advantage of the new provisions presented in the Housing Act of 1954 under the Eisenhower administration.<sup>101</sup> Building on the lessons taken from the Baltimore Plan, the act took advantage of the fact that Republicans did not object to low-cost housing programmes *per se*, as long as projects would not be funded, built and delivered by the government alone. In fact, the Housing Act of 1954 reconciled many Republicans to some of the original goals of the Housing Act of 1949, which expanded the role of the Federal government in mortgage insurance and public housing as it turned away from the central reliance on public housing that progressive housing activists had demanded since the 1940s.

Building on theories grounded in what became known as the support paradigm in housing theory, the Housing Act of 1954 offered a policy framework 'for the conservation and rehabilitation of housing and neighbourhoods threatened with deterioration',<sup>102</sup> instead of replacing dwellings by public housing. This partly satisfied the Democratic Party's agenda to support the urban poor and create jobs in the construction sector, as well as the Republican Party's belief that the private market was best suited to carry out the work.<sup>103</sup> While it would be a mistake

<sup>101</sup> The selection of Baltimore for this pilot programme was influenced by the city's earlier experiment with urban rehabilitation, but also by James Rouse, who consulted for Dwight Eisenhower's presidential campaign through a National Housing Task Force in 1953. Rouse would also chair the Subcommittee on Urban Redevelopment, Rehabilitation, and Conservation of President Eisenhower's Advisory Committee on Government Housing Policies and Programs. Cook and other Baltimoreans served as consultants to that committee, presumably on Rouse's request. As von Hoffman explains, 'Rouse's subcommittee proposed and the full committee accepted the new "urban renewal" approach, based on stabilizing neighborhoods and rescuing slums through building codes and renovations' (von Hoffman, 'Enter the housing industry, stage right', 37). This recommendation led to the development of the Urban Renewal Administration, which provided loans and grants that would eventually fund pilot projects such as the Harlem Park Redevelopment Plan in Baltimore. Such projects would have to satisfy the objectives of workable programmes, which required cities to include citizen participation to access federal funds for urban rehabilitation. See von Hoffman, 'Enter the housing industry, stage right'.

<sup>102</sup> B.T. McGraw, 'The Housing Act of 1954 and implications for minorities', *Phylon*, 16 (1955), 171.

<sup>103</sup> While the Housing Act of 1954 makes little explicit reference to race, its content as well as Eisenhower's 1954 State of the Union address suggest that the new act aimed to address critical issues of the Housing Act of 1949 that allowed local housing authorities to use federal funds for slum clearance and public housing projects that promoted segregation. As Arnold Hirsch noted, Eisenhower vowed to prevent the 'misuse of slum clearance programs' that displaced minorities and to offer African Americans of all income the opportunity to live in decent housings in decent neighbourhoods (A. Hirsch, 'Searching for a "sound negro policy": a racial agenda for the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954', *Housing Policy Debate*, 11 (2000), 420). Despite the president's ambitions, racial politics lived on through the Housing Act of 1954, taking new forms to adapt to the particular circumstances of this alternative policy framework. It should also be noted that some progressives, including the NAACP, objected to urban rehabilitation projects and demanded public housing instead. See Hirsch, 'Searching for a "sound negro policy"', 420.



to overlook the fact that the Baltimore Plan was motivated by a double agenda – the realtors' search for control of the housing market, and public administrators' desire to create middle-class, black neighbourhoods that would reduce movement outside the ghetto – this ambitious project nonetheless created palpable positive changes on the ground.

In order to restrict the autonomy of the private sector in matters of residential rehabilitation, the 1954 housing policy included provisions that allowed the federal government to offer financial support to urban rehabilitation projects developed in collaboration with community members. It required loans and grants applicants to design what became known as 'workable programmes'. The Housing and Home Finance Agency published a circular to explain the steps necessary for a community to create a so-called workable programme: the establishment of an adequate housing code; a comprehensive plan for community development; an analysis of the current condition in the community; the establishment of a sound administrative organization; the assessment of financial capacities; an adequate relocation strategy for displaced families and full-fledged citizen participation.<sup>104</sup> The emphasis on community rehabilitation as well as active citizen participation constituted the most innovative features of the programme.

Building on the model established through the Baltimore Plan, the Harlem Park project integrated principles that promoted public-private partnerships, resident participation as well as community support programmes. Harlem Park – and the Baltimore Plan before it – enabled policy-makers to reconceptualize best practice in residential rehabilitation by acknowledging at last the significance of support systems and qualitative changes in spatial transformations.

These accounts pertaining to early experiments with *in situ* rehabilitation in Baltimore show that notions of democratic governance had started to integrate the practice of urban planning in the 1940s. Citizen participation in the transformation of the built environment was central to the Baltimore Plan – an informally structured project conceived in collaboration between the private and public sector – and later in Harlem Park on the other side of town in West Baltimore where the federal government's original self-help programme was tested for the first time in the US. Citizen participation predated these two initiatives, however, as individuals had been self-helping themselves long before business interests and the political class of Baltimore became interested in the predicament of blighted neighbourhoods, slums or ghettos. Paradoxically, the central feature of the Baltimore Plan, the establishment and enforcement of housing standards, aimed in large parts to rectify, overhaul or eradicate things that residents had created to help themselves.

<sup>104</sup> United States Housing and Home Finance Agency, *How Localities Can Develop a Workable Program* (Washington DC, US Government, 1955); S. Greer, *Urban Renewal and American Cities* (New York, 1965), 10.

This included the subdivision of large expansive housings into smaller affordable ones, the partitioning of double bedrooms, the extension of power supplies to rooms created from this partitioning, the expansion of overcrowded dwellings through annexes, the creation of workspaces in backyards via sheds and garages, the transformation of basement storages into dwellings for the very poor, et cetera. The modernization of the city would offer valuable advantages to the urban poor of Baltimore, no doubt, but not without yielding collateral damages worth careful evaluation seeing that modernization also represented an attack on the tactics of those living on the margins.

### Deconstructing housing standards

The strategies behind the Baltimore Plan functioned by moving working-class African American communities closer to a way of life defined by a white spatial imaginary. Within the domain of housing theory, the questioning of prescriptive standards in housing is associated with a critical framework that did not exist when the Baltimore Plan was inaugurated. This framework largely builds on the writing of the architect and theorist John Habraken, who believes that the problem behind the so-called housing crisis of the 1960s was grounded in dysfunctional relationships between forces acting upon housing.<sup>105</sup> Habraken has argued against the production of dwellings as consumer articles and defended the importance for users to be intensely involved in the housing process at an existential and practical level.

Habraken does not stand alone as a radical critic of the *provider paradigm* that continues to drive slum clearance, redevelopment and public housing programmes in low- and middle-income economies worldwide. Another theorist and architect, John Turner, has been equally unconvinced by the prevalent *modus operandi*, and while his views on the role of architects and urban planners in relation to the housing crisis do not align with those of Habraken, together they provided the impetus for the inception of an alternative framework in housing theory: the *support paradigm*.<sup>106</sup>

In contrast to *provider* programmes, where housing projects are to be evaluated in quantitative terms only, the *support paradigm* complicated the terrain by attributing importance to something decidedly harder to evaluate: the quality of relationships between individuals and their residential spaces. Writing on the shortcoming of *provider* programmes, Turner noted that projects designed to satisfy quantitative principles failed

<sup>105</sup> J. Habraken, *Supports: An Alternative to Mass Housing*, trans. B. Valkenburg (The Urban International Press Edition, 2011) (London, 1972), 6.

<sup>106</sup> For a full exploration of the influence of Habraken and Turner on the theories of practice of the *support paradigm*, see N. Hamdi, *Housing without Houses: Participation, Flexibility, Enablement* (London, 1991).

'to distinguish between what things *are*, materially speaking, and what they *do* in people's lives'.<sup>107</sup>

Turner recognized that 'standards of course have their uses', but, he maintained, 'it is entirely improper to use them as *measures* of human value'.<sup>108</sup> Modernism's narrow interest with the dwelling as an object – or housing as a *noun* – turned a blind eye to the pre-eminent process of housing, or, as Turner would have it, of the term 'housing' being used as a *verb*.<sup>109</sup> The prioritization of objects over processes prompted the unwarranted evaluation of housing performance based on standards *alone*; a method that could be disputed on other grounds, seeing that material standards are generally defined by protagonists outside communities principally affected by housing standards. For Nabeel Hamdi, this condition transforms housing standards into an expression of cultural dominance.<sup>110</sup> To be sure, wealthier neighbourhoods in Baltimore like elsewhere in the US were rarely if ever visited by housing inspectors.

As the sociologist and urban planner Herbert Gans noted, physical standards fail to recognize the distinction between 'slums' and 'low-rent' districts, where the former would be defined 'as those which are proven to be physically, socially, or emotionally harmful to their residents or the community at large'.<sup>111</sup> In contrast, low-rent areas and dwellings provide 'housing and the necessary facilities which are not harmful, to people who want, or for economic reason *must* maintain, low rental payments and are willing to accept lack of modernity, high density, lack of privacy, stair climbing, and other inconveniences as alternative costs'.<sup>112</sup> While it may be true that people lived in places such as the site of the Baltimore Plan because rents there were more affordable than in middle-class areas, the larger truth is that many residents of the Baltimore Plan could have borne the cost of decent accommodations in neighbouring white enclaves, where rents were statistically lower for housing units of equal sizes and better quality. In fact, the significance of racism at a place and time where integration of a black family in a white neighbourhood would normally result in hostility or violence warrants the distinction between slums, low-rent districts and a third category, 'the ghetto', where people lived in overpriced and under-maintained dwellings sometimes because of economic pressures, and always because of race.

While self-help programmes such as the Baltimore Plan did lead to the improvement of housing conditions for thousands of black Baltimoreans, they also constituted a discriminatory initiative as they

<sup>107</sup> J. Turner, 'Housing as a verb', in J. Turner and R. Fichter (eds.), *Freedom to Build* (New York, 1972), 152.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>109</sup> Turner, 'Housing as a verb'.

<sup>110</sup> Hamdi, *Housing without Houses*, 13.

<sup>111</sup> H.J. Gans, 'The human implications of current redevelopment and relocation planning', *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 25 (1959), 16.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

reinforced segregation. Rehabilitation programmes lowered the pressure exercised by blacks to break through racial barriers in order to reside in decent neighbourhoods and failed to recognize the spatial confinement of blacks as a primary reason for overcrowded living arrangements. Both the Baltimore Plan and the Harlem Park rehabilitation programme simultaneously reinforced the clustering of blacks while imposing upon them standards selected, enacted and enforced by their historical oppressor. The Baltimore Plan defined solutions within a conflictual social framework, which legitimized the confinement of blacks in segregated enclaves and manipulated its inhabitants into believing that viable solutions could be devised within an apartheid society. Despite these criticisms of the Baltimore Plan's most celebrated element – the development and enforcement of a comprehensive housing code – this programme and others enabled by the Housing Act of 1954 recognized the promise of grassroots participation, citizen-driven rehabilitation and financial tools responsive to local conditions ultimately to transfer upon minority communities the opportunity to achieve a level of control over housing conditions that blue collar African Americans had seldom possessed before.