

# **The Partnership for Building Reuse – Baltimore City**

## Presentation on a unique initiative to enhance building reuse

On February 18, 2015 Jon Laria of Ballard Spahr and Tom Liebel of Marks, Thomas Architects, gave a presentation to the Baltimore Chapter of LAI on The Partnership for Building Reuse.

The Partnership for Building Reuse was created by The National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) and the Urban Land Institute (ULI) in 2012 to enhance the likelihood of building reuse in six major U.S. cities, specifically Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago, Louisville, Detroit and Baltimore. Jon Laria began the presentation by extolling the exemplary work of the National Trust's Preservation Green Lab located in Denver, Colorado. Jon advised that there are over 100 people involved in the effort to produce the final report, which can be accessed here: [www.preservationnation.org/greenlab](http://www.preservationnation.org/greenlab). Evidencing the consensus that this is a worthwhile effort with high profile support, both the President of ULI as well as the NTHP President, attended the meeting at which the report was officially issued.

For Baltimore's part of this reuse initiative, Tom Liebel advised the LAI audience, that an extremely broad based effort was undertaken including City planners, For-profit developers, architects, Non-profit developers, urban planners, affordable housing advocates, Real estate attorneys, historic advocates, and tax credit specialists among others. Tom indicated that the NTHP was quite impressed with the breath of participation in Baltimore's effort. Because Baltimore leads the Nation in the percentage of historically designated buildings, the City's reuse committee made it a goal to have Baltimore be seen as a model for other cities in adaptive reuse and therefore took its work very seriously.

As a first step, the reuse committee identified barriers, both real and perceived, to adaptive reuse in Baltimore. These barriers were categorized to include market obstacles, financial obstacles, technical barriers, and regulatory hurdles. The most prominent of these numerous barriers are:

- Weak market demand due to an oversupply of building inventory
- Acute economic and social challenges in many neighborhoods
- Conflicts between reuse of existing buildings and energy/building code requirements
- Difficulty adapting certain building types for today's modern needs
- Unpredictability and high costs associated with many reuse projects
- Difficulty utilizing tax credits and other incentives for smaller projects

Further complicating the environment within Baltimore City is a Zoning Code revamp that started in 2011. The City's Zoning laws have not been updated since the 1970's so they are largely outdated and anachronistic. In 2012 a complete revamp of the City's zoning ordinance was introduced into the City Council, but it has been stuck in limbo there since then. Due to a growing groundswell to promulgate new, more modern zoning regs (including the efforts of the reuse committee), the City Council Chairman has agreed to make its passage a priority.

Acknowledging that a modern zoning code is a prerequisite to progress in Baltimore, the reuse committee developed the following recommendations to optimize building reuse in Baltimore, as follows:

- 1) **Adopt innovations to the zoning code** that would allow selected commercial and other non-residential uses that align with the existing character of older neighborhoods. Create new industrial mixed use zones that make it easier to repurpose vacant industrial structures for residential, commercial, and light industrial use. Eliminate parking requirements for buildings more than 50 years old. Streamline the conversion process for non-conforming uses into specific commercial uses through a conditional use process.
- 2) **Promote creative building and energy code solutions.** Create a “Code Solutions Database” for common compliance issues, based on lessons learned over the years by designers, contractors, and code officials. Create “Code Innovation Zones” to model creative building/energy solutions to facilitate the reuse of small commercial and industrial buildings.
- 3) **Improve and promote incentive programs.** Increase funding for the Maryland Sustainable Communities Tax Credit (SCTC). Promote the use of recently enacted by-right SCTC for small commercial projects in historic districts and older commercial corridors. Package local, state and national incentives and promote greater use in areas of the City with high opportunity for successful revitalization. Develop a matrix of all existing reuse incentives to identify gaps and needs. Create a City –wide map illustrating areas of reuse potential. Explore the use of Federal demolition mitigation funding to support the creative reuse of older and historic buildings.
- 4) **Focus attention in high-opportunity neighborhoods and districts.** Encourage building reuse and test innovative approaches in specific areas/ Focus policy, programs and resources on areas that have both a concentration of older, smaller buildings as well as healthy social, economic, demographic and real estate indicators. For example, efforts could build on existing Main Street, or Arts and Entertainment Districts that suffer from vacancy and disinvestment but are well positioned for successful, near-term revitalization.

Both Jon and Tom emphasized during their presentation that the NTHP’s Preservation Green Lab group in Denver is a remarkable resource doing some highly innovative work. The Green Lab has developed an analytical tool to identify areas of a city that have not yet benefited from reuse and revitalization, but have a high potential for a near term turnaround. This map quantifies (using an easy to read color code) the geographic areas ripest for reuse and is a remarkable use of data as a focused, redevelopment tool. A copy of this innovative map is attached hereto.

Jon and Tom concluded by advising that Baltimore City’s Mayor accepted the recommendations of the reuse committee and has moved to implement its recommendations through an upcoming task force. In addition, a website is in development that will allow developers to access the key materials, incentives and zoning innovations intended to facilitate expanded reuse of the city’s historic building inventory.



Messrs. Laira and Liebel, at end of the table, speak to a packed conference room in Ballard Spahr's Baltimore conference room about the Partnership for Building Reuse.

