

A prototype for the next Baltimore

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) May 28, 2021



The recently released 2020 U.S. Census apportionment data revealed that Maryland had managed to keep pace with the nation in terms of population gains over the last decade. Population data for City of Baltimore, the counties and smaller pieces of geography will not be available until August. But separately, the Census Bureau has issued its 2020 estimates for county level data, indicating that the city's population will have fallen below 600,000 for the first time in a century.

That citywide population slide, of course, does not apply all across town. This was made clear on the occasion of the recent Charles Street Promenade, which entailed the one-day closing to vehicular traffic of the city's north-south spine from Saratoga Street to North Avenue for most of the daylight hours. The promenade also afforded the opportunity to latch onto tours of various neighborhoods along the corridor led by local experts.

One of those guides was expert indeed. Charlie Duff, who in his day job is president of a nonprofit development company, is a walking encyclopedia of Baltimore's history and architectural legacy. Meeting near the giant Man-Woman statue in front of Penn Station, Duff led us eastward to Guilford Avenue in the heart of the Greenmount West neighborhood.

He explained that Penn Station was one factor in the growing number of residents choosing this location. Many of those now occupying formerly vacant row houses commute to jobs in Washington. Some have moved north from the nearby Mount Vernon neighborhood. Others have moved from Washington to take advantage of Baltimore's lower housing costs.

The creative community

Proximity to Penn Station is not the only reason that the neighborhood's blocks, formerly 50% or more vacant, are now largely occupied. Standing in front of imposing red brick edifices on Guilford, Duff explained that these 1890s buildings were once the home of Crown, Cork and Seal, the company that invented the bottle cap. Today, the buildings, one named Copy Cat and the second the Cork Factory, are occupied by artists, often living in groups of up to eight people and enjoying large loft units of 2,500 square feet.

One of the driving factors attracting this cluster of creative folks is the nearby Maryland Institute College of Art, anchored in Bolton Hill and spreading eastward into Station North. Duff noted

that a generation ago MICA's enrollment was 900, drawing its students primarily from Maryland. Today, MICA is a national and international magnet for art students.

As MICA's website notes, "From Argentina to Vietnam, international students from over 30 countries have enrolled at MICA, accounting for more than 26% of our overall student population – a number that has more than doubled in recent years." And a good number of its graduates choose to remain in Baltimore.

To respond to the growing demand for affordable housing on the part of local artists, Charlie Duff's company, Jubilee Baltimore, in 2010 completed the 69-unit City Arts Apartments on Oliver Street across from the entrance to Greenmount Cemetery. The residences are open to qualified and income-eligible artists, curated by a panel of the current occupants. Demand for these affordable units remained strong, and five years later Jubilee broke ground on City Arts 2.

Other signs of a vibrant, creative community abound. Looking south along Greenmount Avenue from City Arts is Open Works, a makerspace opened in 2016. Containing 34,000 square feet of fabrication shops, studio space available for rental, classrooms, a coffee shop, and a wide variety of tools, from 3-D printers to sophisticated sewing equipment — all under one roof — Open Works stakes its claim as the largest makerspace in the country.

On a more modest scale, around the corner, is the Station North Tool Library, providing affordable access to tools, skills and workspace for the community.

The neighborhood also hosts the Baltimore Montessori Public Charter School, serving 475 students from pre-K through 8th grade. Other gems are the community garden plots being carefully attended in the spring growing season.

But the crown jewel of the neighborhood is the Baltimore Design School, housed in the abandoned Lebow Clothing building. With an enrollment of 600, this city public school founded in 2010 offers instruction to students in grades 6 through 12 interested in pursuing careers in three fields: graphic design, architecture and fashion design.

With all these signs of new life in this corner of town, Charlie Duff refers to it as "the prototype of the next Baltimore." Other neighborhoods must find their own special spark, whether from a thriving anchor institution or a destination Main Street.

While the city's population may be declining, there are multiple paths to building the next Baltimore.

Joe Nathanson is the principal of Urban Information Associates, a Baltimore-based economic and community development consulting firm. He can be contacted at urbaninfo@comcast.net.