

A Baltimore optimist

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) December 27, 2018



With the approach of a new year, there is much unease about the state of the city. Crime, including homicides, remains at unacceptably high levels and places a cloud over efforts to invest in the city and its neighborhoods. Reports, both anecdotal and based on hard realities, suggest that many downtown businesses, notably restaurants and drinking establishments, are struggling to maintain patronage.

The sad state of the Orioles, once a point of pride for many Baltimoreans, reflected in lower attendance at games in Camden Yards, can be cited as another factor for reduced levels of visits to the city during the six-month baseball season. Even the process of recruiting and confirming a new police commissioner to provide new leadership for the troubled Baltimore City Police Department is contributing to a sense of instability.

In the course of going through and tossing out office papers to get ready for 2019, I came upon an item that I thought deserved another look. It was an op-ed column penned in September 2014 by Martin Millspaugh. The item caught my attention because of its conditionally optimistic headline – “A Baltimore renaissance? The city is seeing a surge in construction and interest from tourists” — and because we had recently lost Millspaugh, a longtime Roland Park resident who died at the age of 92.

The ‘crown jewel’

Martin L. Millspaugh, Jr. had seen Baltimore at an earlier low point. Stepping away from his career as a newsman with the old Evening Sun, followed by a stint with the U.S. Urban Renewal Administration, starting in 1960 he organized and then helmed the Charles Center – Inner Harbor Corporation. His leadership there helped transform the waterfront’s decaying piers and surrounding area into what he would come to call the city’s “crown jewel” of the Inner Harbor. The work of Millspaugh and his team received many national and international awards in the planning, urban design and development fields.

The success of his more than 20-year commitment to reinventing Baltimore’s downtown core led to the next phase of Millspaugh’s work. Having collaborated with James Rouse to bring about

the development of Harborplace, he later joined Rouse's Enterprise Development Company. He took the lessons learned in Baltimore to consulting assignments across America and to 90 countries on five continents, including such places as Barcelona, Belfast, Osaka and Rio de Janeiro.

In his 2014 column, Millspaugh reflected on his earlier experience and his current observations of the construction in Baltimore of new apartments, the conversion of older office buildings into new residences and the net addition of new offices and hotels to the city's inventory. He marveled at the resurgence of tourism and noted it "received a welcome boost when the international tourism group, FODOR Travel, ranked Baltimore among the 15 best waterfront cities in the world, a list that includes only two other U.S. cities: San Francisco and New Orleans." Millspaugh also noted that "The bicentennial of the 'Star-Spangled Banner' was celebrated with a week-long series of spectacular events bringing an attendance of more than 1 million people – a replay of the visit of the tall ships that kicked off the birth of the tourism industry in 1976."

An even lower point

We know, of course, this commentary was written just seven months before the disturbances of April 2015 and the ongoing upsurge of violence we have seen since then. To provide some perspective, however, we must remember that Martin Millspaugh was operating at an even lower point in the city's history – the rioting, looting and burning that occurred across the city in the aftermath of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968.

Fifty years after that defining point in Baltimore's history, we should take heart from what Martin Millspaugh saw a few years ago. There are new cranes in the sky in Little Italy and Harbor Point. Major investment is still on tap from Port Covington and Locust Point to Jonestown and Penn Station.

Unlike many legacy industrial cities that have seen steady declines over the last half century, Baltimore continues to reinvent itself. This city has assets that many communities would wish for – major research universities on the leading edge of medicine, science and technology; world-class art museums and a rich array of other cultural institutions. And, we still have major league teams to root for.

As you know, in baseball it's always "wait 'til next year!" Here's to a better 2019.

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