

A gem in Greenmount West

Joe Nathanson//December 28, 2023//



The building has a storied history. It was first home to Crown Cork & Seal, the bottling and canning company that invented the familiar bottle cap. In later years, Baltimoreans driving north on the Jones Falls Expressway approaching Penn Station might have noticed the Lebow building looming ahead on the horizon. A manufacturer of high-end men's suits and coats, the Lebow Brothers Clothing Company occupied the structure starting in 1950.

It flourished for a few decades, but then, as men's tastes in attire changed and demand for fine suits ebbed, the company suddenly stopped its operations and abandoned its facility. Hundreds of suits and coats were simply left on their hangers with the plant shuttered.

Today, the building, a major presence in a revitalizing Greenmount West neighborhood, has a new purpose as the Baltimore Design School.

I had a chance to visit the school in mid-November and saw highly engaged groups of students, their teachers at work in their classrooms and studios, and committed Baltimore community members who serve on the school's board of directors.

In a follow up telephone call with Fred Lazarus IV, president emeritus of the Maryland Institute College of Art, he explained that an early vision for the new

institution was that it be a fashion design school. Lazarus, who has chaired the school's board since its inception, indicated that that initial vision was deemed too narrow. It was determined that in addition to fashion design, the school would also offer instruction in graphic design and architecture.

With that mission in mind, the Baltimore Design School, Inc. embarked in 2010 on a campaign to acquire the 115,000 square foot Lebow building, notwithstanding the suits and coats still on their hangers. With Seawall Development serving as developer for the \$26.5 million project, and the firm of Ziger/ Snead as architects, the building had its groundbreaking in 2013. The school opened for the 2013-2014 academic year.

Today the school has about 500 students in grades 6 through 12 with roughly 60 to 80 students in each grade. In information provided to those of us attending the November open house, Baltimore Design School is described as "a Baltimore City public transformation school offering a comprehensive college preparatory program that integrates design through the academic curriculum and provides Career and Technology Education (CTE)."

Transformation schools, a designation adopted by Andres Alonso, the former city schools superintendent, "are operated by independent education entities (in this case, the BDS, Inc. board), and each has a specific theme and a unique curriculum that focuses on college, career, or alternative programming."

BDS is one of only a handful of public design schools in the nation. It's the only one that includes students in both middle and high school.

Any Baltimore City student with an interest in design can apply to enroll. Middle school students are asked to complete an art and design "interest survey" to determine if the school is a good fit. High school applicants are asked to attend a portfolio review day and then to submit a portfolio of their work to be considered for enrollment.

BDS has more students interested in attending than there is space available. Once in, the students make the most of the opportunity. The school reports a 90 percent attendance rate and a 100 percent graduation rate.

Principal Darrin Brozene, a veteran of nearly two decades in the Baltimore school system, has headed the school for six years. In a telephone interview, the principal made clear that the students participate in a rigorous academic program, including such opportunities as taking Advanced Placement courses, in addition to pursuing their particular design interests.

He also discussed the enrichment provided by community partnerships that the school maintains, such as those with faculty and students at MICA and at the Morgan State University architecture program.

We noted that the school had its first graduating class in 2017. BDS alumni are now in college, and some are launching their careers. The principal mentioned one student, having followed his interest in fashion design, is now an entrepreneur, designing costumes for the theater. Others are finding success as students in Morgan's architecture program.

Not all will end up as designers. For example, we learned of one graduate who took her skills to Parsons School of Design in New York; she has since returned to Baltimore to pursue a degree in art therapy at Notre Dame Maryland University.

Brozene is confident that his students are gaining a solid foundation for college and careers. He hopes to continue the school's mission, "Designing Baltimore one student at a time." Baltimore Design School stands out as another gem in Charm City.

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