

# Cases of arrested development

Joe Nathanson//May 30, 2024//



Early this year demolition began on the Bard Building in downtown Baltimore. This looming, dark-brick building has a prominent location, fronting Lombard Street at its corner with Market Place. The five-story, 172,000-square-foot structure was built in 1976 as a satellite campus of Baltimore City Community College (BCCC). The college never fully utilized the building and in more recent years it was left vacant. A final blow came with a fire that caused significant damage in 2020.

According to announced plans, once the demolition is complete, “the site will be turned into a large open lawn with shade trees, restored sidewalks, and lighting.” Eventually, BCCC plans to use the site for other purposes, including workforce development programs and GED classes. If this were to happen, it would be a far better outcome than another demolition project not too many blocks away.

The Morris A. Mechanic Theatre, with its bold concrete forms designed by John M. Johansen, was seen as a proud addition to downtown’s Charles Center when it opened in 1967. In its early years, the facility served as Baltimore’s primary venue for touring Broadway plays or as a tryout site for productions bound for the Big Apple. However, as productions grew more elaborate and larger, the Mechanic’s stage and backstage proved inadequate. Also, the Mechanic’s finances were unstable, and its days were numbered as plans for a grand renovation of the Hippodrome Theater moved forward.

Starting in 2004, the Mechanic Theatre sat unused. While various plans for its future were considered, eventually Davis S. Brown Enterprises was granted a permit to raze the building. (Apparently, I was in the minority, lamenting the passing of this exemplar of the brutalist architectural style.) Plans were to build a multistory, mixed-use building on the site. Mired in legal controversy, the development has not moved forward, and the demolition site has remained an ugly scar in the downtown landscape for the past decade.

For some reason, I’ve had sitting on my desk a small, slick brochure promoting Westport Waterfront, a Turner Development Group project dating back to 2004. Patrick Turner’s firm had a track record of successful adaptive reuse efforts, most notably the conversion of the 290-foot-tall former Archer Daniels Midland grain elevator in Locust Point into Silo

Point. This structure, with its commanding views of the Baltimore waterfront, included 228 luxury condos, shops, restaurants, and office space.

With Westport, Turner had much grander ambitions. The proposed development along the Middle Branch waterfront called for 2.5 million square feet of office space, 2,000 residential units and 500,000 square feet of retail, on a site graced by a long waterfront promenade. It never materialized. After demolishing existing buildings on the site and remediating some of the land, the developer encountered financing challenges and the property went into foreclosure. It was sold at auction to Plank Industries.

Two decades later, a new development group, Stonewall Capital, hopes to move forward with its vision for the site, ONE Westport, which includes up to 1,575 residential units, along with office and retail space. But Stonewall had to deal with its own legal entanglement involving Baltimore Washington Rapid Rail LLC, the group promoting the Baltimore-Washington Maglev.

The list of major projects with their fits and starts goes on. The “Superblock,” the collection of properties located near the city’s former retail core at Howard and Lexington Streets dates back to 2007 in the closing days of the Martin O’Malley administration. Later, the redevelopment of the site became the leading economic development priority of Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. But again, problems with financing, challenges from historic preservationists and civil rights activists, and ultimately a sense on the part of city hall that the out-of-town development team could not deliver led to another period of stagnation. A new development team, this one local, came on the scene in 2022. We are waiting to see whether Superblock 2.0 will bring new life to this part of town.

And then there was 300 East Pratt Street, a skyscraper proposed in 2003 at a location known as the former site of the Baltimore News-American building. The newspaper ended publication in 1986, and its building was demolished. The site was long vacant and then used as a parking lot for decades. The site is now controlled by MCB Real Estate LLC, the would-be developers of Harborplace, located just across Pratt Street.

Speaking of Harborplace, given the record of unrealized development dreams that Baltimore has experienced over these many years, would it not be prudent for city officials to see that the redevelopment plans are finalized, financing has been secured, and every contingency has been buttoned up before the demolition of Jim Rouse’s twin waterfront pavilions is authorized?

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