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After the riots, Baltimore's best shot at redemption may be its arts community



By Frances Stead Sellers , June 10, 2015

BALTIMORE — On the April day when Freddie Gray died from injuries he suffered in police custody and a week before rioters took to the streets in protest, Karen Brooks Hopkins, president of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, gave a PowerPoint presentation to a small group of Baltimoreans about the future of their city.

With its low rents and offbeat entertainment scene, Baltimore has had an influx of young college-educated urbanites. But the city wrestles with a shocking number of shootings and a mobtown reputation that has driven many high earners to the suburbs. The symposium, in a state-of-the-art auditorium little more than a mile down North Avenue from the blighted block where Gray was arrested, centered on a question that has sparked revitalization efforts from Detroit to Dublin and from Miami to Marseille: whether arts can turn a city around.

They can, said Hopkins, who helped turn BAM into a catalyst for Brooklyn’s cultural revolution “where institutions small and large, ethnically diverse, and visual and performing arts exist side by side — a metaphor for how we live in this urban environment.”

Hopkins was speaking in a 1915 warehouse that has been repurposed as the Maryland Institute College of Art’s Lazarus Center for graduate studies. The \$19 million renovation, complete with a 130-seat auditorium, cafe and light-filled atrium, is named after MICA’s recently retired president, Fred Lazarus. But the building looks like something of a miracle itself, risen from streets still scarred by the riots of 1968. With its glass doors and open aspect, it provided a symbolic setting for a discussion about an experiment in urban renewal that has been underway here since 2002. That’s when Maryland recognized the kernels of creativity in the troubled blocks north of Baltimore’s train station and designated them its first “arts and entertainment district,” arming the 100-acre site with tax incentives to promote “community involvement, tourism and revitalization.”

Today, Station North is bookended by the facts of Gray’s short life: To the east lies a hesitantly gentrifying block of Victorian rowhouses where Gray once lived and where members of his family continue to reside; to the west is the intersection where protesters rampaged in anger at his death. In between are a coal-fired pizza parlor and a pop-up performance space; galleries, graffiti and giant murals. There’s a new public school focused on design and a recently renovated multistory public housing complex. The Maryland Film Festival and the nationally acclaimed street fair known as Artscape attract hordes each year, as do two methadone clinics, which receive 1,000 patient visits a day and provide an attractive hub for drug dealers.

Joe McNeely draws attention to these juxtapositions as he drives through the arts district and adjacent communities, slowing to show off decorative house-number plaques made locally and a trash-strewn lot where an apartment building for artists will soon break ground. McNeely is founding director of the Central Baltimore Partnership, an alliance of some 60 nonprofits and businesses, educational institutions and government agencies, artists and neighborhood associations, that is credited with helping to bring almost \$800 million of investments into the arts district and surrounding neighborhoods in less than a decade. As he drives, he talks about the challenges of nurturing commerce without luring in speculators who have little interest in the local culture. And about the bigger battle, particularly in the wake of April’s riots, of combating what many people here

refer to as Baltimore’s “perception problem” — and whether, as Hopkins suggested, a bohemian revitalization project can help turn Bulletmore, Murderland, back into Charm City.



Ally Silberkleit puts the finishing touches on her first hand-made kitchen knife at Station North Tool Library. (Lance Rosenfield/For The Washington Post)



Dennis Pradhan makes bee boxes at Station North Tool Library. (Lance Rosenfield/For The Washington Post)

“A no-brainer!” That’s what Kisha L. Webster calls her decision to move to “the heart of the city” in 2014. Webster begins a walking tour of one of the arts district’s residential pockets in front of a Montessori charter school. The squat brick building served as the set for a beleaguered middle school in the fourth season of David Simon’s TV series “The Wire.” Then it was used as a homeless shelter. Now, brightly colored paper cutouts decorate the windows, and outside four chickens scratch at the dirt beside fruit trees, berry

bushes, a freshly sown vegetable garden and play equipment. There is a waiting list of 1,200 to enroll in this oasis, which educates 340 students.

Webster, vice president of the neighborhood community association, strolls on past vacant rowhouses, subsidized housing and a brick facade teetering between wooden struts as it awaits a fresh interior and new inhabitants.

She exchanges greetings as she goes. She makes a point of keeping neighbors abreast of upcoming changes, she says, aware that she might have been viewed as “an interloper.” The newcomers “seem to want to help,” two women acknowledge from their mid-morning perch on a sunlit stoop. The possibility of having to move out, though, is always “a big worry,” they say.

For now, there’s little cause for concern about displacement here. Unlike cities such as Chicago, Boston and Washington, where thriving real estate markets send prices skyrocketing, much of Station North is empty commercial space, suitable for artists’ lofts. And in this rowhouse neighborhood, almost 60 percent of the 700 properties were vacant eight years ago, and half that number remain so today.

“More people are displaced by abandonment than investment,” says McNeely, who has a strong commitment to maintaining affordable housing. And ultimately, if there is some displacement, argues Richard Clinch, a consultant and former economics professor at the University of Baltimore, that’s the price of bringing back the city’s tax base.

Further down the street, where Webster points out a corner building about to undergo renovation, scavengers circle in trucks on the lookout for scrap metal.

“I’ve seen it go up, and I’ve seen it go down,” says Tina Knox, of the place she’s lived for five decades. Years ago, “it was terrible,” she says, alluding to the dealers on the corners. She nods as Webster explains plans for a vacant lot nearby, where Jubilee Baltimore, a nonprofit that develops affordable and market-rate housing, is about to build the apartments for artists. These days, Knox says, what worries her most is the dust that the repeated renovations kick up, with all the asthma and bronchitis around.

That's part of the "good and the bad" of gentrification, says Webster, who prefers to call what's happening here a "renaissance."



Delores "Tina" Knox, left, spends time with friends at her home on Barclay Street in Baltimore. (Lance Rosenfield/For The Washington Post)

The spirit of rebirth reveals itself in many ways. But nobody is talking about returning the area to the tailored elegance of a century ago. A print on the wall of St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church, with its soaring Tiffany windows, shows Baltimore's spiffy elite strolling these streets.

People speak instead about Station North's evolving "ecosystem" and refer to the changes as "organic." On the street, that can seem haphazard. Diffuse. And fragile.

The arts district lacks the thematic unity of another nearby project — the \$1.8 billion, 88-acre biopark underway just north of the Johns Hopkins Hospital. Nor does it have the singular commercial ambition that lies behind the 128-acre redevelopment of Port Covington, where Under Armour chief executive Kevin Plank is planning to headquarter his company.

"No national tenants," announces Carolyn Frenkil as she describes the businesses that will occupy the sprawling structure across from the Lazarus Center that her late husband bought with a partner after a fire in 1968. The former market now houses a performance

venue, an Irish pub and Red Emma's, a bookstore-cafe where a recent lunchtime crowd filled every table, tapping on laptops over banh mi sandwiches and black bean salads.

No Starbucks, Frenkil continues, to drive her point home. No Anthropologie. None of the chains that anchor developments such as Baltimore's Inner Harbor.

The cornerstones of this area instead are academic institutions: Johns Hopkins University to the north; the University of Baltimore to the south, led by Kurt Schmoke, the city's first elected African American mayor; and, most significant, MICA to the west. The art school doubled its enrollment during Lazarus's 36-year tenure and increased its footprint tenfold, expanding onto North Avenue where students used to be discouraged from going, says Dale Dusman, who enrolled in 1968 and is pastor of St. Mark's.

That combination — of artists and academics, thinkers and tinkerers — make this arts district a crucible for the concept University of Toronto professor Richard Florida advanced in his 2002 bestseller, "The Rise of the Creative Class." Florida argued that people who create for a living are part of an ascendant economic force that will determine which post-industrial cities thrive.

It's a controversial thesis that has been criticized for failing to demonstrate that any benefits accrue to the poor — for "pushing problems to the periphery," as Ben Stone, executive director of the nonprofit Station North Arts and Entertainment District, puts it. But in its small way, Station North is thriving and making the streets safer for everyone by putting more feet on them. Behind a new restaurant owned by Helmand Karzai, nephew of the former Afghan president, Baltimore-based developer Ernst Valery is proposing to construct a 100-unit residential building. The market is ripe: Apartments nearby have been snapped up, McNeely says.

It doesn't matter whether investors are nonprofit or for profit, he says. The success of redevelopment "depends on their values."

What McNeely and others worry about is speculation. And the name that comes up repeatedly is of Washington restaurateur and real estate mogul Tony Cheng and what

some describe as his “Is that for sale? I’ll buy it” mentality. Cheng owns a dozen prime parcels in the area and has shown few signs of putting money into them.

Cheng declined to comment for this story. But his Baltimore neighborhood has found its own quirky ways of sending a message about what needs to happen here. On one of the buildings Cheng owns — and with his consent — mural artists have been at work. A vast yellow smiley face adorns the bleak windowless wall of the former check-cashing plant, along with the words “Looks much better now!” But the smile is incomplete. Only the upper corners of the lips show.

And across the road on an open lot belonging to Cheng is a pop-up performance space with new grass and trees.

It’s known as the “Why Not Lot,” an apparent exhortation to free expression. But it’s spelled “Ynot Lot.” That’s “Tony” backward. A playful attempt to reverse the mogul’s ways.
