

A CONSCIOUSNESS OF TIME

Reinvigorate the city of Baltimore through the responsive re-imagination of the abandoned row house.

Baltimore is a city of a very different attitude depending on which century it is being examined. Through the very different mottoes of a seemingly realistic but actually quite exaggerated “The City that Reads” to the entirely ridiculous, “Greatest City in America,” recent Baltimore has turned to ignoring the negativity within the city with the hope that a blind eye will make it disappear. The fact remains: The Baltimore that exists now is in remission. Like a cancer growing from within, the center of the city has become a black pit of despair that is continuing to choke out the life. The once booming industry has left and along with it, the sense of pride that citizens hold in their city. Abandoned buildings, industrial at first but quickly spread to the residential and commercial, are rampant throughout the city. Entire blocks of row houses stand vacant and decaying. Those that were able moved to the periphery of the city or away entirely. How can Baltimore change to repopulate and reinvigorate the once thriving metropolis? **What changes can be made to bring the people back?**

It is imperative to find why this revitalization has not already happened. The flight of industry from the city has played a large part in the current recession in the city. Without the jobs giving the people in the city a purpose to be there, citizens looked for work elsewhere and moved accordingly. Another contributing factor to this abandonment has to do with city policy. Current property tax has caused a significant amount of abandonment in the city as well as the high property values of any attempt of renovation of the plethora of dilapidated structures.

In changing the city, it is imperative to be mindful of the past. Would it be appropriate to tear down abandoned row houses throughout Baltimore in favor of cookie-cutter subdivisions that are entirely separate of each other? Most of the afore-mentioned periphery that has played host to people who have fled the city features this typology. Maybe the correct answer is to renovate these row houses to their original state, masking entirely the cynicism that once gripped the impoverished areas. My argument is to say that there must be something in between. These scars should be embraced and learned from as a reminder of what the city has endured. This is not to say that every bullet-hole or broken window should serve as a shrine to a drive-by shooting or turning these abandoned buildings into museums that celebrate their abandonment (which one could argue has already happened). This does nothing to improve the landscape of the neighborhood or the people within it. The row houses should instead be renovated as an architectural response to the history of the neighborhoods and city. Learn from the past rather than mask its occurrence. **These responses need to act as a seed that can be planted within an abandoned row house and grow/spread to revitalize the surrounding areas.**

Before anything can happen architecturally, policy must be addressed. Tax incentives, be it through renovation of condemned or dilapidated homes or just returning to the city, must be given to those attempting to come back to the city. Renovation of these abandoned spaces should not be punished through driving up the property values of these and surrounding spaces. This would only repeat the same pitfall that started the flight from the city. It is also important to remember that once these neighborhoods are abandoned, this desertion takes hold of the neighborhood, leaving people discouraged to attempt revitalization. Different levels of abandonment, while vast in specific problems and differences, can be narrowed into three groups. There are the row houses that need merely cosmetic repairs such as new drywall or repaired windows while the basic structure of the home remains intact and the homes slightly more in need such as a new roof or floor structure but pieces are still repairable. The third grouping is a major point of the built and social abandonment of Baltimore: The entirely desolate, the urban ruin. Buildings that lack the potential for repair and would require an architectural overhaul to restore them to a livable state are the spaces most in need. **There should be a clear delineation between the existing and the new construction so that subversion of either is avoided.** An architectural honesty that works with the existing in its different levels of deterioration is the most efficient way to renovate the neighborhoods. The retrofitted shipping container typology fits this specific theory. Also in extreme surplus in Baltimore, shipping containers have the ability to be retrofitted to act as a volume of conditioned, livable space that fit into the row house as a clear architectural separation. Addressing these spaces by taking two abandoned, unused typologies to create a codependence could greatly improve this specific marginal space throughout the city.