



# Baltimore

Baltimore was traditionally a steel town. In the 60's Bethlehem Steel was the mainstay of the economy, but since then the steelworks have shrunk and now the major employers are John Hopkins University and John Hopkins Hospital. The once great port, second only to New York as a port of embarkation for visitors from the old world lies 160 km upstream at the head of Chesapeake Bay. I arrived by container boat into the modest container port. As our vessel thundered upstream all night, the noise of water funnelling into the small gap (often only 1m) between the hull and the side of the channel, I wondered why it was feasible that such a port in what is after all a rather difficult location should continue, when Baltimore is no longer a manufacturing hub.

The reason the port has endured is because it offers particularly economical entre-port facilities and is a free port, in as much as taxes are not levied on goods that go in and then out, even if they are assembled or re-packaged there. As in Europe the Chinese vessel I was on was laden with cheap manufactured Chinese goods. By re-packaging or re-assembling on US soil, these goods can be "passed off" as made in the USA.

Today the naturally spacious harbour is more full of private vessels than commercial ones. I found, for example, that the easiest and definitely the most pleasant form of transport was the water taxis, which connect the downtown and inner (historic) port area to regeneration areas like Falls Point and Canton, where I was staying.

Baltimore is characterised by brick faced terraced town-houses, which were once occupied by merchants and seafarers, then by an even increasing urban poor, working in the factories and the

*Water taxis.*



ports, and eventually have been bought up and repaired by a new urban population who are either involved in the new industries, notably medical sciences, or who use Baltimore as a dormitory for working in Washington, Pennsylvania or even New York. A fast and cheap train - which does not use particularly glamorous rolling stock - links the four cities. The alternative luxury *Accele* train service is fast, smart and expensive and is less used, except for the most up-market of commuting.

As the cost of living in the neighbouring cities goes up, so Baltimore benefits. As befits a growing city with a young population it is lively and buzzy. The waterfront is lined with bars and cafes and was the focus of the original redevelopment, initiated to deal with the malaise of the collapse of the steel industry. The regeneration was spearheaded by the Baltimore Development Corporation (BDC) [1]

The BDC is a 501(c)(3) corporation i.e. non-profit and charitable. It is contracted with the City of Baltimore to provide economic development services. With a mission to retain and expand existing employers and attract new ones, they work collaboratively with the city, government and with private partners, to deliver services that are focused upon business growth.

The Development Corporation and its predecessors have existed in some form since 1959. The Baltimore Development Corporation was formed in 1991 through the merger of three non-profit organizations with different areas of service but similar economic development goals. In 1996, a private sector Board of Directors was appointed and BDC took on its current operational structure.

Nowadays the Corporation is a partnership between business owners and city agencies advocating for the interests of Baltimore city employers. They work with business owners to shepherd private development projects through public processes and offer to save time and mitigate expense. They are also sometimes developers, facilitating the reuse of publicly owned property for new and expanding businesses.

Thus the agency is very business orientated, though to date they have interested themselves in the development and regeneration of mainly housing areas. The quality and beauty of the townhouse areas makes them ideal places for small developers. Each house is approximately 2000 sq ft so can be converted as a spacious single family residence or made into flats. These houses lend themselves to conversion in the same way as Georgian townhouses in Britain or Ireland. (Baltimore was named after an Irish Lord and in the beginning took in many Irish immigrants.) However unlike in Britain the houses are timber framed and often less substantial than they seem.

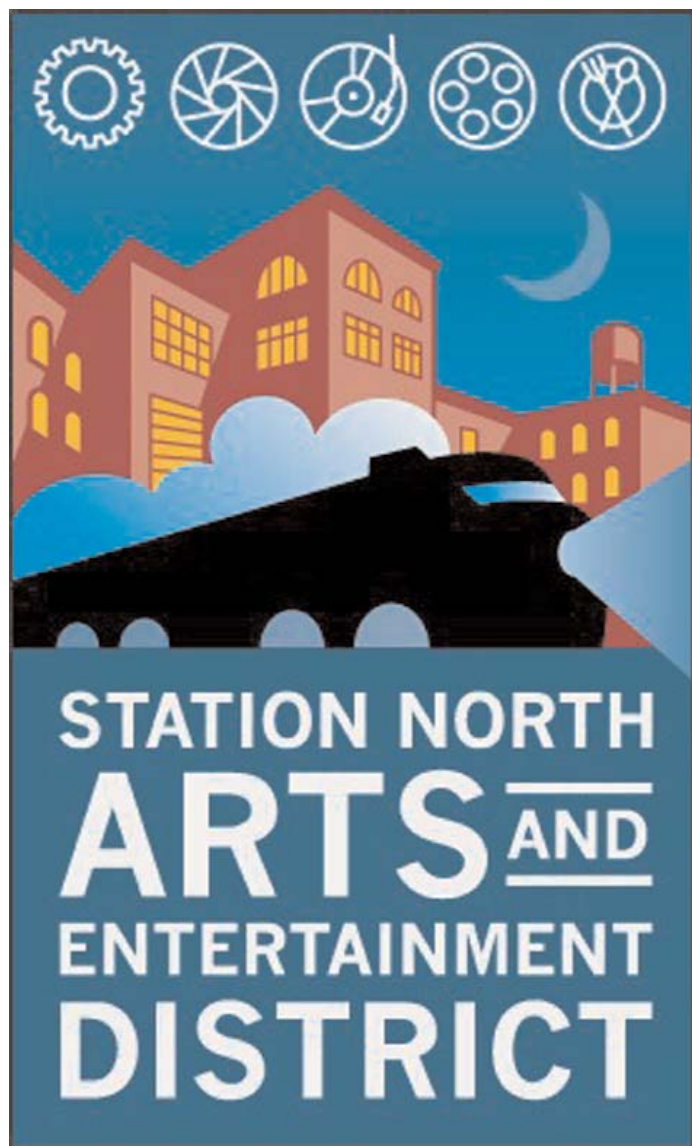


The week after I visited Baltimore I watched the, highly enjoyable, Adam Shankman film "Hairspray" which is set in early 60's Baltimore. In the film the white kids get quite excited about visiting North Avenue, which was to them off limits because it was a black ghetto. This amused me as recently this area has become a new focus of regeneration. It still houses a lot of African Americans, but it is fast losing its ghetto characteristics. But it can still be a tough neighbourhood. Located away from the waterside, it is close to the main railway station and thus convenient for commuters. It is also close to John Hopkins Hospital. [2] This hospital which is considered to be one of the most advanced in the States is one of the city's major employers. It has close links with the university and has spawned much first class research and a bio-engineering cluster.

The North Avenue area is also the home of MICA, the Maryland Institute College of Art [3], which boasts a refurbished campus. In 2001 MICA received a \$6 million gift from Eddie and Sylvia Brown to fund the construction of the Brown Centre. This landmark building houses the College's graduate and undergraduate digital technologies programmes, as well as a state-of-the-art 550-seat auditorium. It is the first newly constructed academic building at the College since the Main Building opened in 1907. Most of the campus is located in more modest refurbished buildings, making good use of redundant factories and depots.

Recently the college unveiled its Plan for the 21st Century which envisions a total merging of present and future facilities into a modern integrated urban campus of more than one million additional square feet of space for up to 1,800 students.

*Refurbished row housing in Fells Point*



The regeneration of North Avenue area has been influenced by the proximity of the Art College and students and artists have been encouraged to become the first colonisers, in what might be considered quite a rough area.

Artists and designers have now been living around here for quite some time. For example a graphic designer I met, who had lived for the last ten years in a mixed use loft near the station told me that most of his clients were located in Washington, New York or Pennsylvania, but that he preferred the lifestyle and cost of living of Baltimore than those other cities. He found no difficulty in doing business with each of them and found the geographical location beneficial.

*Left: The Poster*

*Below: The reality, housing on Calvert St await refurbishment.*



Whilst sampling tapas in a new bar and cinema complex a stone's throw from Baltimore's impressive Pennsylvania Station I spoke to a young couple who had recently moved into a converted loft in the area. He was commuting every day to Pennsylvania, she worked as a doctor at John Hopkins. The wife in particular was concerned about violence in the area. It's a tough looking area. There are a lot of poor and coloured people living around and though I didn't feel threatened as I walked about - I did feel conspicuous. This couple had decided to put off having children until the area improved or they moved elsewhere. As we spoke sitting out of doors on a balmy summer evening a police car screeched to a halt outside the café and a policeman enquired, " have you seen anyone running this way?". A police helicopter hovered overhead. Later we discovered that there had a been a drive by shooting a few streets away. This incident did not help to dampen the concerns of my fellow diners.

However I spoke to others who had lived in the neighbourhood for longer and found it quite safe. I spoke to one young coloured guy who had started a development firm. He had persuaded the council to sell their properties at a low rate, he then did them up and sold them.

In the States there seem to be a lot more smaller regional developers than we have in Europe, where developers are often national or have European-wide operations. Though the more diluted USA development market has recently led to problems with the mortgage market. The major developers do not take such risks. They may be less likely to default on their loans as the smaller developers, however the loan system allows astute smaller developers to take calculated risks where they see opportunity that the conglomerates do not see. The result is some interesting developments in marginal areas. In Baltimore the Development Corporation has gone into a form of partnership with these developers, helping them generate loans and grants and dealing with infrastructure development alongside the development or redevelopment of areas.

A company called midtown development [4] was offering to broker loans to homeowners in this area. They offered refinance/rehab loans, purchase/rehab loans, for those wishing to buy and redevelop and home improvement loans for those already in occupation. The loans were slightly lower than the prevailing rates, at 5.67% (at 16/07/07), the term was 30 years and owners could borrow up to 120%. They also help administer Historic Tax Credits. This process also encourages self build and small developers, but it will be interesting to see whether this system will survive a credit squeeze.



# Fells Point

The results of these sort of measures can be seen at Fells Point a now chi-chi neighbourhood of brick-faced townhouses which were regenerated in the 70's and 80's. This neighbourhood, which is adjacent to the waterside and now boasts marinas and waterside seafood restaurants, recalls Baltimore's maritime history. Shops and cafes are often owner managed, small scale and specialist.

Most of the warehouses have been converted into condominium apartments but one - *The Can Factory*- forms a commercial hub, with shops, cafés and restaurants. It has become a local gathering place. House prices are high in this neighbourhood and much sought after, however they are still considerably lower than in nearby Washington. The form of development, smallish terraced houses is more affordable than the much larger and thus much more expensive brownstones which are typical of Washington's historic suburbs.

Fells Point now forms just one of the attractive tourist stops which fringe the waterfront. Baltimore has heritage trails, an aquarium, parks and museums and art galleries, all close to the water. Critics observe that the development corporation has concentrated too much on the waterfront. They remark that, if you go a few blocks away from the water you come into neighbourhoods which are un-regenerated. However Baltimore's first wave of regeneration certainly paved the way for waterside development all over the world, including for instance London's Docklands. The lack of urban activity in some areas of Baltimore is evident in city density which is only 3.8 persons per hectare. That is low for the USA and positively rural by European standards! Today Baltimore faces the dilemma of the dormitory town. It is unlikely to be able to





*Above New row housing in Canton*

develop the thriving office sector or manufacturing centre that it once had so Baltimore has settled for tourism, healthcare, retail and other service sectors. Like Boston its concentration on mass tourism. For the downtown area this strategy has been counterproductive as facilities have become tacky and overused. There is the constant refrain that tourists do not spend enough money in the city. And Baltimore's GDP is low for an East Coast city at 51,793 Euros/head.

By concentrating on the service sector Baltimore has managed to provide jobs for a relatively unskilled and very mixed race workforce. Its household income coefficient is 4.24, slightly higher than that of Portland Oregon and lower than Chicago. Though it remains to be seen whether Baltimore's fierce concentration on tourism and inner city housing, at the expense of economic growth, will result in long term sustainability.

It is a great city to visit and house prices make it attractive for the colonisers, but whether it can attract and maintain a balanced family population and a sustainable economy remains to be seen.

*Over View of the container port from Canton a new housing district.*

*Notes*

[1] [www.baltimoredevelopment.com](http://www.baltimoredevelopment.com)

[2] [www.hopkinsmedicine.org](http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org)

[3] [www.mica.edu](http://www.mica.edu)

[4] [www.jubileebaltimore.org](http://www.jubileebaltimore.org)

[www.healthyneighbourhoods.org](http://www.healthyneighbourhoods.org)

