

Baltimore "Superblock" Talks Deadlocked

By Tricia McCarter-Joseph, *Preservation Magazine - Online Only* | Sept. 25, 2009

Baltimore's "Superblock" was listed as one of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places in 1999.

Redevelopment plans have stalled between Maryland preservationists and a New York developer chosen to revitalize a group of buildings on the West Side of downtown Baltimore. The stalemate has prompted calls by at least one member of the Baltimore City Council to replace the developers, who have been working on the project for five years.

Earlier this month, Councilman William H. Cole stated in a letter to the Baltimore Development Corporation that the time had come to terminate the partnership with Lexington Square Partners, LLC. He said that they have been unable to produce a suitable and agreeable proposal, which included preserving historic buildings in the area.

"Councilman Cole has put his finger on the fundamental problem as to why this project has been stalled," says Ron Krietner, Co-Chair of the West Side Project Area Committee.

The so-called "Superblock", which covers one city block and includes 16 historic buildings largely owned or leased by the city, was slated for demolition in the mid-1990s as part of an urban development strategy. However, a joint effort by members of Preservation Baltimore, Baltimore Heritage Inc., and the Maryland Historical Trust enabled them to save the block. In 2001 a memorandum of agreement was formed between the city council and the Maryland Historical Trust that outlined several redevelopment criteria for the buildings, which a potential developer had to maintain as part of the revitalization project.

But Johns Hopkins, executive director of Baltimore Heritage, says that he has yet to see a proposal that satisfies the agreement.

"There is a high priority for preserving corner buildings and this proposal doesn't meet these requirements," Hopkins says. "We believe that at least one building that pre-dates the civil war is scheduled for demolition."

However, according to a report last year in the *Baltimore Business Journal*, the developers were concerned that the structures' varying degrees of disrepair would make it hard to attract retail business and had reduced their budget from \$250 million to \$150 million.

"Do we want to cling so tightly to the concept of 'Just preserve something' that we end up preserving something that doesn't work?" said Bailey Pope, a member of the Lexington Square development team, in the report.

In 1999, because of the threat to the Superblock, Baltimore's West Side was listed on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 11 Most Endangered List.

The National Trust has so far provided \$9 million in rehabilitation financing for the West Side's development through the National Trust Community Investment Corporation.

Moving forward, Krietner hopes that if the time comes, more heads will be at the table when it's time to choose a new developer. "There should be some brainstorming on how to offer the Superblock area for development. The ideal is to see the historical buildings used in their entirety."