

The Block survives despite fires and police raids

By Peter Hermann, *The Baltimore Sun*, Dec 12, 2010

Civic leaders long ago erased references to the entertainment zone from tour books and promotional pamphlets, yet visitors still come to gawk and to indulge.

A hundred federal agents converged on the clubs in 1971. One mayor tried to buy the clubs out. His successor tried to move them to the city's industrial hinterlands. State police sent 500 troopers in on raids in 1994. A grand jury investigated alleged kickbacks to liquor board inspectors.

All the efforts kill it failed.

On Monday, fire destroyed several buildings, including Gayety Show World, shutting down most clubs on the strip on East Baltimore Street through Thursday. Work crews are still shoring up buildings as federal investigators search for a cause.

But as spectacular as the fire was, and if history is any guide, the blaze that sent plumes of flames shooting into the cold night air will probably not accomplish what a long line of police, politicians and civic leaders have tried to do but couldn't: close the clubs permanently.

"I think The Block will come back," said Peter Ireland, who owns Norma Jean's, a strip club just off the main strip on Custom House Avenue that was able to stay open. "They're going to have to work hard to stay alive."

Club owners, attorneys and city officials note that The Block is struggling to make money. Executives and conventioners for the most part stay away from East Baltimore Street, scared of crime and turned off by the gritty facades and sleazy, dangerous atmosphere, and head to more upscale venues where steak and football on flat-screen TVs accompany the naked dancers.

Some Block stalwarts worry that the city may use the fire as an excuse to force or cajole owners into closing or moving. City officials tell me that they're concentrating on the buildings that burned and haven't yet thought about the rest of the strip, and that it would be unseemly to use a fire as a pretense to try to eradicate it.

In recent years, it appears, authorities have given up on an all-out assault on the clubs, preferring instead to wage a quiet war of attrition. Let The Block fade away under the forces of capitalism rather than abruptly under the forces of government.

"I believe there are people who definitely want to see The Block shut down," said Stephan Fogleman, the chairman of the city liquor board, which polices the adult district. "It certainly gives Baltimore a quirky destination."

"People want The Block returned to some part of its former glory," the chairman said. "But that question is for City Hall, not for us." The real question is whether to "promote The Block or let it wither. The market itself can reduce The Block."

We have mixed feelings about East Baltimore Street.

We wonder how it can survive so close to the Inner Harbor, to City Hall, to police headquarters, to a state office building.

We detest the clubs as raunchy affronts to common decency even as we embrace them as historic icons of the city's splendid past. The strip may be lined with historic buildings, but this is no throwback to the heady days of vaudeville or the more tawdry days of burlesque.

Their survival is a testament to these conflicted feelings -- the nostalgia of Blaze Starr strutting on stage at the 2 O'clock Club -- which she still owns -- competes with the reality of strung-out women stripping for their next high. Starr has said she got out of the business when the pasties and g-strings came off.

The clubs survived its biggest threat -- a frigid January day 16 years ago when hundreds of state troopers descended on East Baltimore Street, raided two dozen clubs and rounded up 87 people in handcuffs.

Gov. William Donald Schaefer proclaimed the strip closed for good -- "a detriment" rather than an attraction, he told reporters. Troopers ripped liquor licenses from the walls and hauled away cuffed dancers and doormen in buses.

The raid cost taxpayers more than \$300,000 and ended with just a handful of convictions. And it was revealed that troopers had misspent money and succumbed to the very pleasures and vice they had been called upon to enforce. Prosecutors dropped every misdemeanor charge and one-third of the felony charges. Not a single case of prostitution came to fruition.

Instead of Block denizens being hauled off to prison, three state police commanders were ousted from the drug squad. Prosecutors had to abandon a grand jury probe into the liquor board, and the raid became more of a fiasco for the cops than for the strip club owners. City police were not part of the operation, and the mayor at the time criticized the intrusion.

The Block survived, but it did not flourish.

Frank Boston, a lawyer who in years past represented several Block clubs, said the owners "aren't making too much money" anymore, "but they are survivors."

Boston, who now represents Scores, a more upscale strip club away from East Baltimore Street, said Block owners persevere because "of the people they are and their toughness."

If you speak to any one of them, they'll be the first to tell you, 'We'll leave, but you got to pay us.'"

And that could be an expensive proposition. Many own not just the clubs but, through a tangle of limited partnerships, the buildings as well as both the liquor and adult entertainment licenses. The expense could be prohibitive if not controversial.

"The Block," Boston said, "is part of Baltimore whether you like it or not."

The Block thrives by pushing legal and moral limits.

And for Ireland, the owner of Norma Jean's, that is pushing its downfall.

He complains that the Downtown Partnership, a business advocacy group, is not hard enough on troubled clubs. He thinks the barkers, or doormen, should be sent packing. He says the liquor board is too lenient on transgressors and should yank licenses instead of imposing fines.

And he says other owners have ceded their traditional customer base -- the businessmen, the convention goers -- scaring them away by tolerating crime, drugs and prostitution, in exchange for younger, more rowdy patrons.

"The kids are ruining The Block," Ireland said. "Bring your 17-year-old son down here. He'll be able to get into a club. Bring your machine gun with you. You'll be able to get into a club."

The Downtown Partnership is trying to organize the strip club owners to pay into a pool for police protection -- it costs about \$150,000 for cops on overtime to patrol The Block on weekend nights -- but thus far only four of the clubs have anteed up. And three owe the partnership money.

Take a quick glance at The Block's liquor board docket (perhaps containing the most x-rated verbiage published by the city) and it's easy to see that the insides of the clubs haven't changed much over the years. Fines levied for open displays of sexual conduct, fondling, prostitution and drug use are common to the point of being routine, with fines and suspensions typically regarded as the cost of doing business.

City Councilman William H. Cole IV, whose district includes East Baltimore Street, wants heftier fines, increased police enforcement and club owners to take more responsibility.

"We're fighting decades of neglect," Cole said. "Making it more attractive and appealing may attract even more of the tourist group that the owners admit they're so desperately seeking. There is nothing wrong with a healthy nightlife and an adult entertainment district. I don't think we need to do away with it, but gosh, we certainly need to clean it up."

Cole's talking about more than just paint, though that is needed too.

"I think the goal is to make sure it's clean and safe and there's no drugs and prostitution," the councilman said. "The Block eats up lots of police resources. The club managers have to police themselves. They know which of their dancers have addiction problems, and that brings in the drugs and the drug dealers."

Kirby Fowler, the head of the Downtown Partnership, talks about the residents who live downtown, about a new luxury condo on nearby Water Street, about the 106,000 people who work within a mile of the strip, and of the 40,000 people who live in the same area. He complains about the violence and of the all the police it takes to lock down East Baltimore Street as the clubs empty after last call.

"Certainly if it were to stay the property owners need to wrap their arms around that problem," Fowler said.

But he's reluctant to say that The Block needs to go. "There's an appeal for an area like this for tourists, for perhaps other downtown stakeholders," he said. "But the concentration of Block property owners in this downtown area is not ideal."

He's hoping that the lure of stuffing money into g-strings will fade quicker than the memories of Blaze Starr.