

Developer still seeks to knock down historic “Superblock” buildings on Baltimore’s decaying west side — Developers want to demolish the Art Deco McCrory's Building

Joan Jacobson, *Baltimore Brew*, February 22, 2010

Some of the finest examples of historic preservation in Baltimore are on the rickety west side of downtown, right where the city may need them most.

There’s the ornate, wedding-white Stewarts Department store (now Catholic Relief Services headquarters), the flagship Hecht Company building on Howard Street and the regal, neoclassical BG&E building on Lexington Street (now both luxury apartments). Then there’s the Hippodrome Theatre on North Eutaw Street, that masterpiece of urban rejuvenation.

But just steps away, local preservationists are frustrated by what they see: one square block of empty, largely historic buildings, waiting for a city-designated developer who wants to destroy many of them to build modern retail buildings. Among the threatened buildings are some great examples of Art Deco architecture and some even older buildings — structures that survived the Baltimore fire of 1904.

For five years, an out-of-town developer, calling itself Lexington Square Partners, has submitted plans that call for bulldozing most of the buildings along the south side of the 200 block of W. Lexington Street, as well as the blocks of Howard Street, Park Avenue and Fayette Street that adjoin it, known as the Superblock. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way.

Decade-old agreement

The National Trust for Historic Preservation has called downtown’s west side one of the America’s 11 most endangered historic places. That’s why preservationists were thrilled in 2001 with a remarkable memorandum of agreement consenting to protect most of the buildings. It was signed by then Mayor Martin O’Malley and J. Rodney Little, director of the Maryland Historical Trust, whose agency must sign off on development plans before the bulldozers take over.

Preservationists thought the agreement was a novel way to preserve the buildings without going through the cumbersome process of landmarks protection from the city’s Commission on Historic and Architectural Preservation.

But all was not well when the city’s development arm – the Baltimore Development Corporation – chose a consortium of developers who have yet to follow the memorandum of agreement in their plans to convert the block for retail stores. Five years have gone by without an agreement that passes muster with the state historic trust. Meanwhile, the vacant buildings have languished behind chain link fences.

A year ago, Little sent an exasperated letter to BDC's director, M. Jay Brodie, noting that the latest plans did not meet even the minimum requirements of the memorandum of agreement.

Here are a few architectural details that might be lost from these buildings that the Lexington Square Partners is hoping to destroy:

- * The pretty and intricate inlaid yellow and blue tile designs on the Art Deco McCory's building on Lexington Street.
- * The gold eagles below the roof line of the ornate, terra cotta Schulte United Five and Dime Store, also on Lexington Street.
- * The terra cotta sailing ship panels on the façade of Read's flagship drugstore and the weathered copper mast spouting at the building's corner of Lexington and Howard Streets.
- * The last little Nickelodeon Theater, once known as the Pickwick Theater on Howard street across from the Hecht Company building.

Preservationists fear the worst

As executive director of the nonprofit WestSide Renaissance Inc., Ron Kreitner watches over the stalled Superblock development like a worried father. His frustration mirrors that of others hoping to preserve the area's historic urban character, while rebuilding the old retail district.

He points to proven historic tax credits used by other developers as a way to affordably develop the area and keep the old buildings intact. And he worries that the city, through the BDC, has abandoned its mission to preserve the Superblock, which is listed on the Maryland Register of Historic Properties and the National Register of Historic Places.

"I think that BDC has failed to grasp the significance of historic preservation for the west side," Kreitner said. "Beyond that, it's anybody's guess as to why they stuck with what was viewed early on as a flawed proposal."

Johns Hopkins is executive director of Baltimore Heritage, the city's private preservation watchdog that has many Superblock buildings on its 'watch list.'

"It's a disservice to choose a developer clearly not interested in preserving" the buildings, Hopkins said.

Hopkins asked the city last fall to end its relationship with the Lexington Square development team, but said he hasn't heard back from city officials.

Bailey Pope, Vice President of design and construction for the Dawson Company of Atlanta (one of Lexington Square's partners) declined to comment:

“I don’t think I want to discuss that in the press right now. We’re having discussions and I don’t want to taint it by debating it in public,” he said.

Wiggle room for the developer

Despite the clamor to get rid of the developer and start over, BDC’s director, M. Jay Brodie, defends his agency’s decision to stick with the Lexington Square team and says negotiations continue with the state to live up to the memorandum of agreement.

Brodie also, however, notes that the developers are trying to juggle preservation goals with the feasibility of creating 150,000 square feet of open retail space that will be inviting to consumers.

“We respect the memorandum of agreement; the mayor signed it,” said Brodie. But he added a caveat: “It’s somewhat like the bible. There is more than one interpretation.” For example, he noted that the agreement requires priority be given to preserving entire buildings – not just facades – “when economically and technically feasible.”

The agreement contains one list of five properties that must be saved. (Though the developer’s last plan called for saving only the facades of three of them, plus the other two in their entirety.)

A second list contains more than a dozen properties that should be preserved with “reasonable effort.” (In that category, the latest plans showed the preservation of only two buildings, one at the corner of Park and Lexington Streets that was the large Art Deco Brager-Gutman department store.)

Beyond repair?

Brodie said the developer cannot save the flagship Read’s drug store at the opposite end of the block (at Howard and Lexington) because it is badly water-damaged and infected with moss and mildew.

He said they are still negotiating the fate of several other historic buildings on Lexington Street. “We’ve come a very long way with the Maryland Historical Trust. Whether we can have absolute consensus, we don’t know, but everybody is trying,” said Brodie.

What further complicates the stalled project is a decision being awaited from the Maryland Court of Appeals that could overturn BDC’s award of the project to the Lexington Square partners.

Preservationists and a councilmember protest

The city’s insistence on keeping the Lexington Square development team, despite the five years that have elapsed, has prompted a collective teeth gnashing reflected in protest letters from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Westside Renaissance Baltimore

Heritage and the Baltimore Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, which implored (then) Mayor Sheila Dixon to live up to the city's agreement to save the buildings.

"There is nothing greener than the recycling of old, viable buildings," wrote Alan Brock, AIA's president-elect and Karen Lewand, executive director last October.

But perhaps one of the strongest letters of protest came last September from City Council member William H. Cole IV, whose district includes downtown. He bluntly asked Brodie to "terminate the Superblock partnership with Lexington Square Partners LLC."

Cole, in an interview with *The Brew*, said Brodie subsequently met with him and "insisted and guaranteed . . . that BDC would not allow the developer to tear down any historic properties and stick to the memorandum." Brodie promised, said Cole that, "No building would come down without full approval from Maryland Historical Trust."

Since then, though, Cole has seen no revised plans and wonders whether it might not be such a bad idea (despite Brodie's promises) to go out and find a new developer.

"I'm still wondering if five years isn't too long and have a fresh set of eyes look at property and put it out to bid," he said.

"I don't want to wake up one morning and find three buildings on that block were accidentally demolished. . . and everybody is going to say, 'oops.'"

"Oops isn't going to work here," he said. "Everybody knows we're watching very closely."

His last comment might seem far fetched, but not since Cole and local preservationists heard from their counterparts in New Jersey and New York City where one of the key partners in Lexington Square (BLDG Management) demolished a historic building in Jersey City and another one in lower Manhattan that was about to be considered by the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission.

"I have never witnessed such utter lack of regard for historic architecture," wrote Jersey City Landmarks Conservancy president John Gomez of BLDG Management, one of Lexington Square's partners. "I had never seen a developer treat the community in which it operates so disrespectfully."