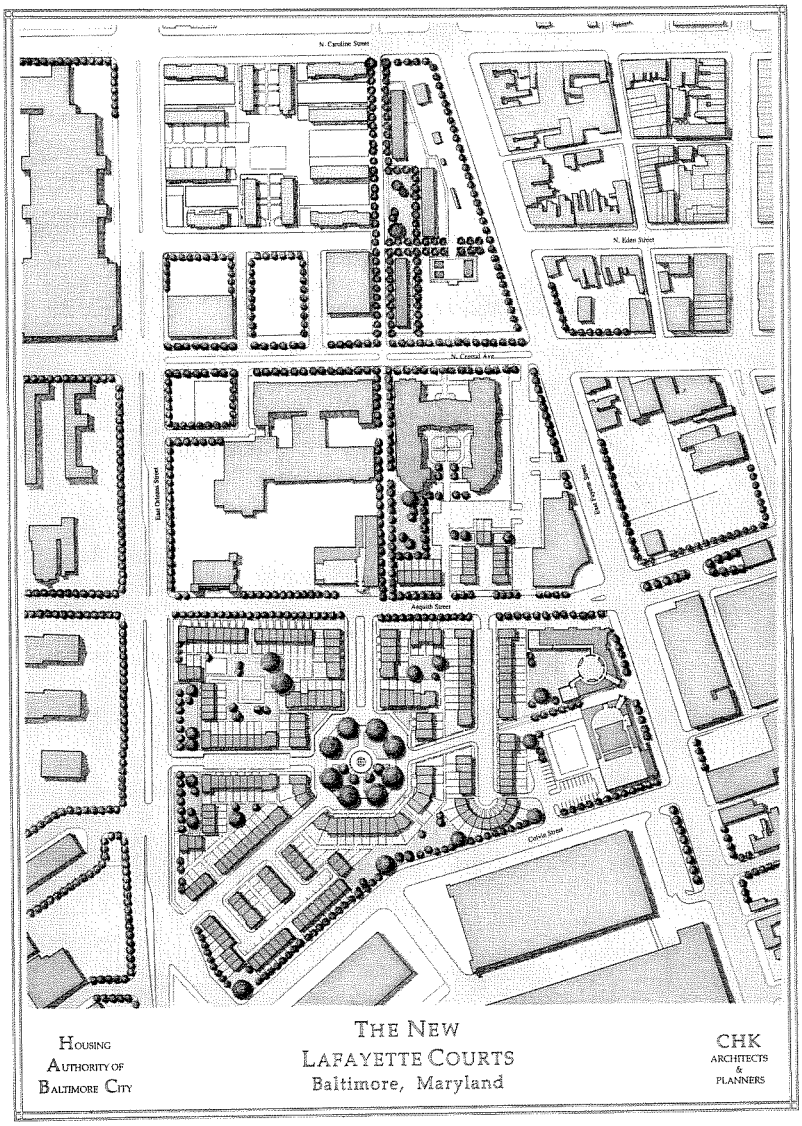
The redesign of Lafayette Courts aimed both to solve practical needs and to create a design imbued with the more profound qualities of a work of art and sense of place. The project was developed in conjunction with the Housing Authority of Baltimore City (HABC) and Lafayette Courts residents in accordance with the goals established by HUD's HOPE VI program.

At this early stage in its evolution, HOPE VI was focused exclusively on highly distressed, inner-city public housing projects, providing funds for demolishing them and constructing new housing. The program sought to improve residents' quality of life through better housing and neighborhood design (including reduced density) and expanded social programs, especially increased job training.

HABC, led by Executive Director Daniel P. Henson III, regarded Lafayette Courts as the first step in an ambitious plan to remove and rebuild all of Baltimore's high-rise public housing developments. Because the towers seemed out of place in a city overwhelmingly composed of row houses, and because the projects failed to provide decent housing for families, Henson has been a strong proponent of removing them and replacing them with neighborhoods.

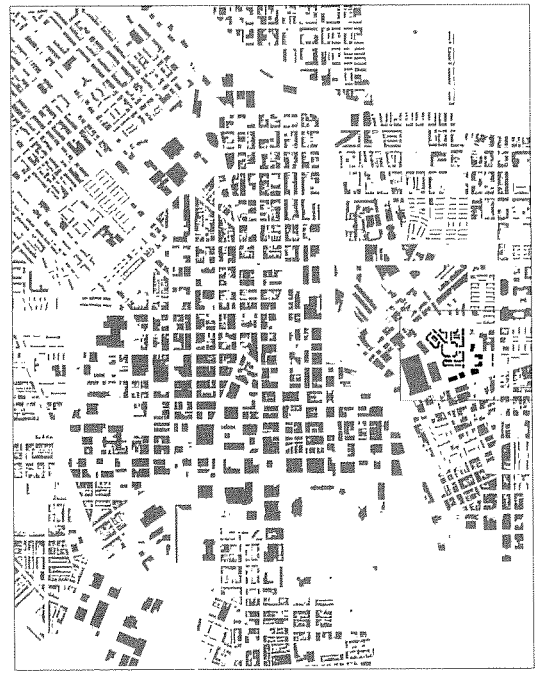
HABC further stipulated that the Lafayette Courts high-rise towers be replaced with low-rise row houses. Residents agreed, finding that row houses not only offered amenities like front doors, back doors, private rear yards and more privacy, but also helped eliminate the stigmatization of being in public housing by providing "houses just like everybody else has," as resident Janice Bagwell put it.[1]

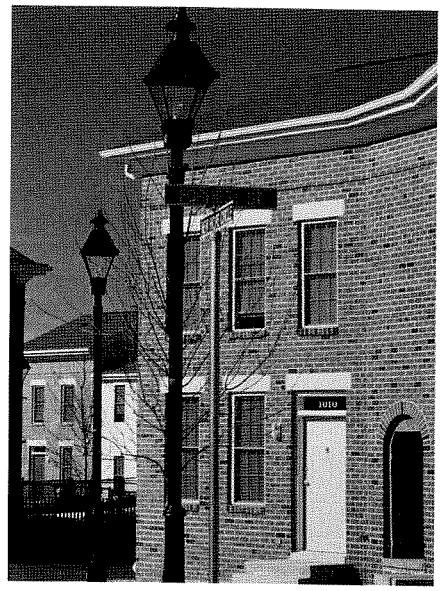
Below: **Pleasant View Gardens site plan**
Below right: **Downtown Baltimore figure ground, including Pleasant View Gardens and surroundings**
Graphics: **Torti Gallas/CHK**



Refining the Row House

The Lafayette Courts master plan was an investigation of the use of a repetitive housing type, the row house, to create a neighborhood with a strong sense of place.





Above left, above: **Pleasant View Gardens row houses** Photos: **Torti Gallas/CHK** Below: **Typical row house floor plan.** Graphics: **Torti Gallas/CHK**

Baltimore's residential neighborhoods, with their heritage of row house construction, were an inspiration. The richness of neighborhoods like Fells Point, Little Italy, Mount Vernon and Bolton Hill is established by the quality of the houses, the repetitiveness of the type and the subtle differences between individual homes.

While the features of the traditional Baltimore row house provided the pattern for the new homes, adjustments were made to accommodate modern living conditions.[2] The typical fourteen- or sixteen-foot-wide house, for instance, was modified to b eighteen or twenty feet wide, creating larger ground-floor living spaces. Similar adjustments were made in the pattern of external facades. The strict cornice line, repetitive window pattern, planar quality and front stoop, all dominant features of Baltimore houses, were all retained. However, building heights were set at two stories (lower than most older row houses) and roof profiles were modified with pitches, giving the units a more impressive mass on the street and permitting the use of relatively low-maintenance roof systems.

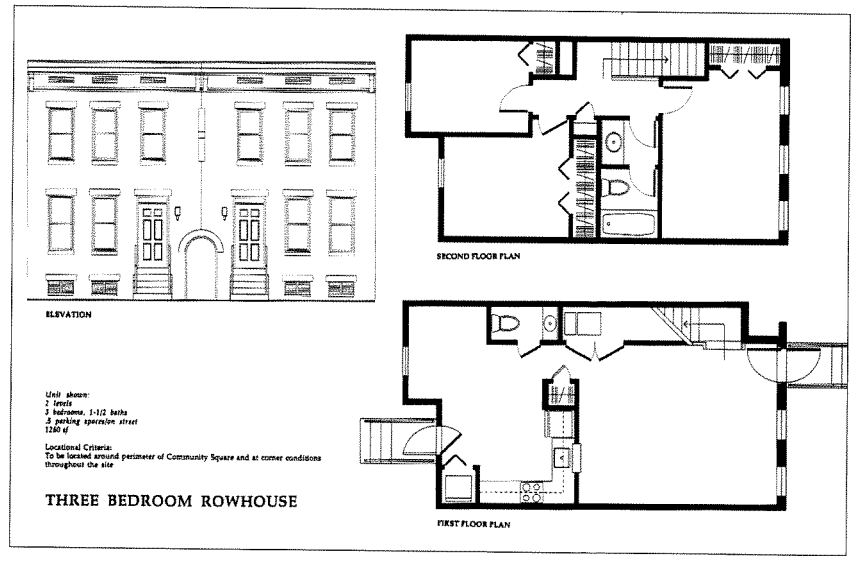
Modest variation within the house types helps to diversify the community; variants include end units and two-, three- and four-bay houses. Larger houses tend to be arranged around larger open spaces and smaller houses on smaller-scale streets, with the thought that larger families should have closer access to open spaces and that yards should be sized proportionately.

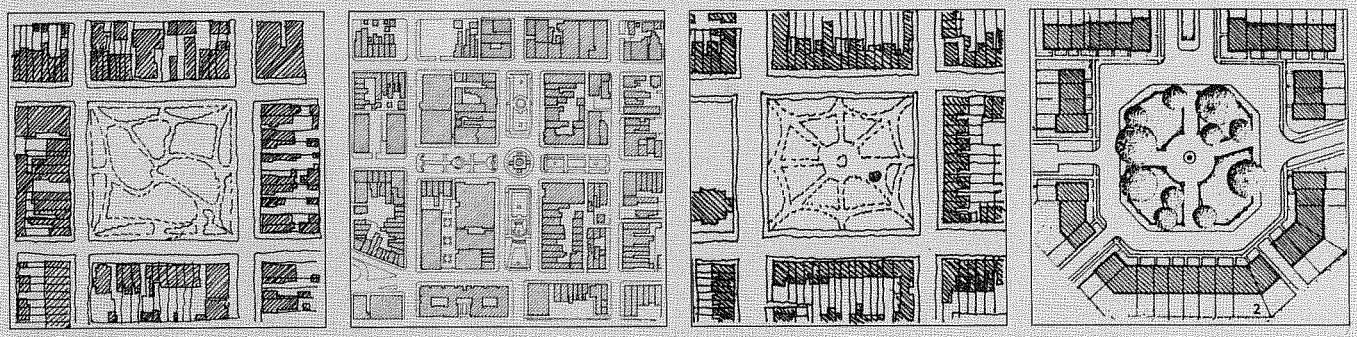
The use of two-story structures reflected a desire to keep construction costs low as well as changes in the use of residential space. In older row houses, the proportion of shared space to private bedroom space was one-third shared, two-thirds private. Today, it is appropriate to have a more even balance. Thus a third floor, which would generally have been bedroom space, was not incorporated into the design of these homes.

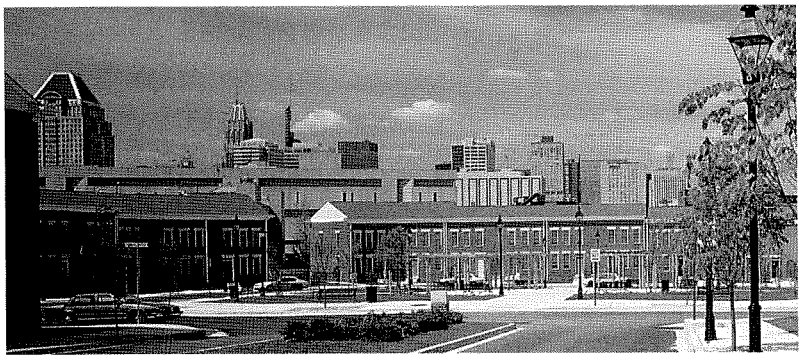
Neighborhood Streets and Spaces

The variation in architecture was enhanced by the variation in the character of the streets and spaces around the central square—axial streets, modest setbacks, such as that created along busy New Orleans street, and different relations to topography. These all further intensified the architectural variety, creating distinctive local settings.

The residential square, a semi-enclosed urban room surrounded by continuous row houses, also has a rich tradition in Baltimore, occurring with great frequency







Top: **Baltimore residential squares.** Left to right: **Lafayette Square, Mount Vernon Place, Union Square, Pleasant View Gardens.** Graphics: **Torti Gallas/CHK**

Above: **Pleasant View Gardens main street and square** Photo: **Torti Gallas/CHK**

as a defining neighborhood feature. Subtleties are found in shapes and sizes—including the stately quadrangle of Union Square, the unique cruciform of Mount Vernon Place and the linear boulevard-like character of Eutaw Place.

This spatial type provided a key strategy for the master plan. A square was located near the center of the site, away from heavily trafficked streets at the perimeter and on axis with the entrance to the community building, the one structure left remaining for both practical and emblematic reasons. Enclosed by house fronts, the square has sufficient spatial identity to provide both a usable community amenity and a recognizable feature that locates the site. Baltimore's skyline, visible from within the square (one of the more dramatic benefits of removing the towers) furthers this strategy, visually linking the neighborhood with the larger city.

The main square is equipped with many benches and a small loggia; the benches provide places for sitting and casual conversation while the loggia, insisted upon by the residents, is a piece of architecture that can be the setting for more formal community rituals such as fairs or even, as one residents proposed, a wedding. Neighborhood children have already commandeered the lawn at the center of the square as their play space.

Streets radiate from this center; they are oriented to the geometry of adjacent grids and to create links to significant neighborhood structures, such as the Bel Air Market and the tower of a nearby fire station. The streets are narrow in section, in contrast to the broad square, and also have a high degree of spatial enclosure. (The dimensions were possible because the city allowed reasonable right-of-way widths.) Yet the streets demonstrate variety through their relation to the topography and differences in length, breadth and orientation; these variations help identify and individualize the minor places in the plan.

These new community open spaces were complemented by a commensurate number of new public buildings. A new day-care and recreation center, sited on one of the more prominent edges of the site, offers services to Pleasant View residents and the city as a whole. The community building, the one building from the original development that was saved, is enlarged and given a new status with the addition of a tower and its prominent siting on axis with the square. This building is home to the new social and employment programs that are aimed at improving the quality of the lives of the residents.

A limited amount of commercial use was located in the new development, in part because of existing retail areas near the site, such as the Bel Air Market and a new drugstore on Fayette Street. Space in the recreation center was originally reserved for a fast-food restaurant, but for a number of reasons it was not built.

The plan also incorporates a strong defensible space strategy. Public open spaces (the streets and square) are clearly defined and scaled so they can be supervised by individuals; private exterior spaces are related to house forms so they can controlled by individual families.

Notes

1. *Baltimore Sun* (18 August 1995).

2. One reason we were able to take these design approaches is that for HOPE VI projects, HUD eliminated its design guidelines, such rules for bedroom sizes and provisions against closet doors and air conditioning. Plans are still reviewed by local and state housing officials, and HUD, if the project involves funding from other sources.

Lessons

In physical terms, one can easily say Pleasant View Gardens fulfills the HOPE VI program's goals. The project also resuscitates and convincingly realizes some tried and true, and entirely reasonable, patterns of city building. The wholesale building and rebuilding of the city is not a healthy practice, but the new plan, by reviving an urban pattern based upon streets and house lots, offers a flexibility that the high-rise towers did not.

Another important aspect of the HOPE VI process is the requirement that residents and the surrounding community be involved in the planning. That is necessary for making the process a positive one—and for making it work. In this project, there was not as much participation from the broader community, a problem that occurred in part because Lafayette Courts was so physically isolated. Wider participation would have helped link the project better to revitalization efforts in nearby neighborhoods, such as historic Jonestown, where the Baltimore Development Corporation has recently initiated a revitalization program.

In certain respects, Pleasant View Gardens raises questions about the efficacy of the row house type. The emphasis on reducing density and providing every household with a yard mandated a relatively expensive building type—row houses require more perimeter construction, foundation work, roof work and street infrastructure per unit than stacked house types. It may be that if the typological range were more diversified—some stacked units, some separate—there could have been more variety or better quality. An unfortunate legacy of tower projects is that they disavow the validity of any type of apartment construction, and that may be one of the drawbacks of this program. Fortunately, subsequent projects in Baltimore are trying other approaches, so it will be possible to compare the outcomes.

Some critics argue that the financial investment here is too great. Yet it is not so different from the investment that is made in new communities, built largely for the middle class, at the edges of metropolitan regions, where new infrastructure and new housing go hand-in-hand. The imbalance between inner-city and edge–suburban construction reflects powerful realities about class distinctions and our social values. Pushing the balance in the most minute way toward rebuilding the city is a positive step. Pleasant View Gardens should not be a model for affordable housing; it should be a model for the way we build communities.

Top: **Recreation center**

Center: **Senior housing**

Bottom: **Community center**

Photos: **Torti Gallas/CHK**