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Diamond in the Rough [Place Debate: Pleasant View Gardens]

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opments were deemed the state's worst housing problem. By 1990, the nightly news documented all-too-regularly not only the buildings' decline but also the residents' despair. Drug dealers were so entrenched that maintenance workers took their lives in their hands when they attempted to make repairs. Machine-gun-toting drug dealers controlled the buildings, charging residents to enter their own units. During one drug raid gone bad, ten police officers were pinned down by automatic weapons fire for an entire evening until a tank was brought in from Washington, D.C., to extricate them.

Today, Pleasant View Gardens' 228 garden-style townhomes stand as some of Baltimore City's best mixed-income housing. A new day-care center, recreation center, community center and senior mid-rise buildings are interspersed with twenty-seven townhomes sold to former public housing residents. A new mini-medical center has moved in and housing for very young mothers is nearby. Working role models, not bold drug dealers, live next door.

At Lexington Terrace, ten blocks west, one-hundred homeowners will soon live at the new Townes at the Terraces. A business incubator will be housed on site, just across the street from the 26,000-employee University of Maryland Medical Systems complex. Some obvious linkages have already been established, such as on-site GED and college tutoring services and a medical transcription training program.

When the 758 units of Murphy Homes fall just a block north of the Terraces, Baltimore City will be just one development shy of a decade-long dream to eliminate its most troubled housing. Along with the vanishing bricks and mortar of the high-rises, so symbolic of failed policies of earlier years, go the stigmatized cages of despair that gave little chance for economic or personal empowerment. The social transformation may take slightly longer, but crime statistics and quality-of-life issues are underscoring this new dawn in Baltimore's public housing communities, which to many observers have disappeared through blending with the surrounding communities.

Even the crankiest critic of HUD'S HOPE VI program would be impressed by Pleasant View Gardens' attractive architecture and streetscapes. The new neighborhood boasts pattern and detail straight from the Congress for the New Urbanism canon: a central park, tree-lined streets, rear alleys and design details that reference historical row-house architecture. (No front porches, though, and no corner stores.) The success of this attention to form will largely depend on the caring it calls forth from its residents. Will this new community develop and maintain a civic infrastructure to complement its physical organization?

This project also combines many intriguing elements that point to a more comprehensive view than HUD and its public housing partners have typically demonstrated in the past. It has been conceived with attention to employment opportunities and incorporates a job-training center, health care, elderly housing and recreation. It is sited next to public schools and Baltimore's central post office, which, one hopes, would provide some residents opportunities to walk to work. Planners have long hoped to see economic development officials talking to housing authorities, though most of the promise is yet to be realized.

On the surface, we learn from Pleasant View Gardens that given enough money, about \$105 million, you can replace ugly, dysfunctional, public housing with 338 units of attractively designed public housing and related facilities. Beneath the surface, though, this project provokes two basic questions: Are we being truly comprehensive in our planning, and are we ensuring that implementation of these objectives is sustainable, both financially and physically? The specifics apply to Baltimore but the issues speak to HOPE VI projects elsewhere.

The quality of Pleasant View is a jarring contrast to the very harsh surroundings. The perimeter of the project is fenced attractively, and the sad brick-and-asphalt housing, vacant lots and abandoned commercial buildings on nearby blocks call for acknowledgment of their plight. Though it is possible to walk to adjacent facilities, the surrounding environment is not inviting enough to tempt one to do so.



Lafayette Courts implosion. Photos: *Baltimore Sun*

A great opportunity for reaching out to the surrounding area would be to redesign the Old Town Mall, a once-attractive commercial street that was closed to cars and has become a dirty, depressing and largely unvisited pedestrian mall. Some work is under way, including the recruitment of a supermarket, but to date there are no plans to reopen the street to cars. One of Baltimore's seven original public food markets is also located here. Recently reduced in size, Belair Market still needs to serve the residents of Pleasant View Gardens and others in the immediate area.

So, is there a bigger view of the city operating here? What are the plans for the public markets, critical elements of the city's identity and civic infrastructure? Will the Baltimore Development Corporation work with the housing authority to attract employment opportunities to the general area—and put hope behind the training?

Pleasant View Gardens, for all its positive aspects, cannot be replicated because it is simply too expensive. With public dollars dwindling, we must be more strategic in our approach to reinvesting in cities. HOPE VI can be credited with demonstrating concepts of community and pedestrian scale that urban designers have long advocated, but its impact on housing policy will be slight without comprehensive changes in federal investment policies and in local

economic development and education policies.

One issue relates to the long-range plan for each city. Once the decision is made to remove inferior public housing, shouldn't we look comprehensively at the future land use rather than assume we must replace housing with housing on the same site? Shouldn't we consider balancing new construction with renovation?

Baltimore, with at least 20,000 vacant houses, needs to put some of those units back in use as a complement to new construction. The Historic East Baltimore Corporation has balanced historic preservation and renovation with strategic demolition and new construction; a similar approach could help stabilize declining neighborhoods throughout the city. Healthy, attractive neighborhoods should get attention before they fall into trouble. Public dollars should be spent strategically to create mixed-income, mixed-use neighborhoods, rather than attractive but unsustainable enclaves.

What will Pleasant View Gardens look like in five years? In ten years? Unless the underlying issues of segregating uses and incomes, civic responsibility, education, economic opportunity and comprehensive planning are addressed along with site design, history may repeat itself at Pleasant View Gardens. Even worse, the rest of the city may continue on the long, painful course of managed decline.