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## In Baltimore's West Side, Preservation Story Unfolds

By CHARLES BELFOURE

**BALTIMORE**— TWO and half years ago a development plan that would have demolished hundreds of buildings in Baltimore and filled the cleared area with retail stores, parking garages and residential projects, seemed inevitable.

The structures that faced demolition included many historic buildings, ranging from Federal-style row houses to an Art Deco store. But the plan involved a section of the city in deep decline, and it had the support of an impressive roster of public agencies and private interests.

Now, however, that strategy, known as the West Side Master Plan, has been abandoned. On Jan. 8 an agreement was signed between the city and the Maryland Historical Trust, the state's preservation agency, to scrap the original plan and approach development with an eye toward preserving the neighborhood.

The new approach, which came about largely through the efforts of two groups, Preservation Maryland and Baltimore Heritage, will protect more than half of the historic buildings in the 28 blocks that make up the Market Center Urban Renewal Area.

For preservation advocates, the agreement is a milestone in the way in which cities handle redevelopment, using preservation instead of a bulldozer.

"This is the largest revitalization plan of its kind in the country," said Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, who worked with the groups to revise the development plan.

The plan has been changed to preserve 270 buildings out of about 400 with an additional 105 to be reviewed case by case. The remainder are likely to be demolished. The agreement also calls for any new construction to be aesthetically compatible with the neighborhood.

In addition, in any development proposals, the city must require the preservation of the designated buildings, most of which are late 19th century and early 20th century commercial structures. Among the buildings to be preserved are an S. S. Kresge Company store, which was built in 1938 and is one of the few Art Deco structures in downtown, and four other buildings with cast iron facades, including the city's most ornate, the Alberti, Brink & Company building, which was erected in 1867.

The Market Center Renewal Area straddles Howard Street, once Baltimore's most elite shopping thoroughfare, and extends west to Lexington Market and the Baltimore campus of the University of Maryland. The project is expected to cost \$355 million while creating 2,500 parking spaces, 350,000 square feet of retail space and 500,000 square feet of residential space.

Two projects -- the \$56 million renovation of the Hippodrome Theater and Bank of America's Center Point project, a \$50 million development of retail and residential space -- are scheduled to begin this spring. Projects that are already under way include a \$12 million conversion of the former Hecht's department store into apartments and a \$15 million conversion of the former Stewarts department store into a "telecom hotel," which contains space rented by telecommunication and Internet companies to house their equipment.

The battle to preserve the area started in 1998 when the renovation plan was originally unveiled. The plan was financed not by the city but by one of the West Side's biggest property owners, the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, a charitable trust. Harry Weinberg, an investor who died in 1990, bought up buildings in the late 1970's when the area was in decline. The foundation, which has assets of \$2.5 billion, owns the Stewarts building. The plan recommended demolition for residential buildings, parking garages and "big box" retailers like T. J. Maxx and the Sports Authority. About 150 historic buildings were threatened with condemnation.

IT was not just the destruction of the buildings but also the suburbanlike solution in the heart of downtown that dismayed

residents wanting to preserve the neighborhood. Another crucial issue was the displacement of more than 100 small merchants.

"The plan responded to what the city wanted at that time," said Bernard Siegal, president of the Weinberg Foundation, which, with the University of Maryland and the Baltimore Development Corporation, helped to develop the renovation plan.

Mr. Siegal said the mayor at the time, Kurt L. Schmoke, wanted to renovate the area quickly and change the character of the neighborhood. Along with the merchants, members of Preservation Maryland and Baltimore Heritage were among the few who spoke against the plan at the time.

"It was definitely a David and Goliath battle," said Tyler Gearhart, executive director of Preservation Maryland. "No one initially paid any attention to us."

But gradually, the preservation groups built opposition, initially by unveiling a preservation-based development proposal that stressed two issues: the high cost of city acquisition and the economic benefits of using federal and state tax credits to preserve the neighborhood.

The National Trust entered the picture in June 1999 when it named the West Side as one of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. At the same time, Preservation Maryland and Baltimore Heritage were surveying the buildings and putting together a nomination for the National Register of Historic Places.

But it was a 10-minute film, "Baltimore's West Side Story," that played an important role in turning the tide in favor of preservation explaining what would be lost if the plan went ahead. In January 2000, the film was shown before the feature film at the Senator Theater, the only remaining Art Deco movie theater in the city.

About the same time, preservation advocates received another break. The new mayor, Martin J. O'Malley, had voted against the redevelopment plan as a city councilman.

"O'Malley was a great ally," Mr. Gearhart said, "who understood there had to be a balance between preservation and new development."

Then in February 2000, part of the West Side was listed on the National Register, creating the Market Center Historic District, which largely coincided with the renewal area.

IN the end, State Senator Barbara A. Hoffman of Baltimore became a crucial ally. In April 2000, Senator Hoffman attached language to a bill financing the renovation of the Hippodrome that required the city to minimize demolition and offer fair financial packages to displaced merchants. That requirement led to last month's agreement along with a revised master plan.

"Historic buildings are what make a city different," Senator Hoffman said. "You can go anywhere and see a shopping mall."

The Hippodrome is considered the catalyst to the success of the entire project. The 2,300-seat vaudeville theater, built in 1914 and vacant since the early 1980's, will be combined with two adjacent late 19th century banks into a venue for Broadway-style shows. The Hippodrome block is next to the campus of the University of Maryland and is expected to be the crucial link between the rejuvenated neighborhood and the university.

While the western edge of downtown Baltimore deteriorated, the university stayed and expanded, and both plans envision the university campus as an anchor in the neighborhood.

The new agreement means some projects like the Weinberg Foundation's proposed \$150 million retail development along Lexington Street will have to be redesigned. But Mr. Siegal of the foundation is unperturbed.

"The city's requirements have changed, and we're working to come up with a plan," he said. "One or two buildings at a time will be converted and leased."

Photo: Renovation of the Hippodrome Theater, left, is to begin in the spring. (Marty Katz for The New York Times) Map of Baltimore highlighting Market Center Urban Renewal Area.