Beyond the Pink Flamingo:
Surveying the Ecology and Vernacular Culture of Baltimore

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An ecological urban landscape must have one foot anchored in local history and culture, and the other foot striding towards a new and adaptive future. Baltimore, with its diverse ecosystems and unique cultures, provides fertile ground for generating place-specific urban landscapes that have the potential to evolve over time. Diverse cultural hallmarks such as window screen paintings, John Waters' films, Cockeysville marble, and the Chesapeake Bay Blue Crab are surveyed for their potential use as inspiration for a lasting urban ecological design.

It is hard not to notice the three-story pink flamingo as you walk down Thirty Sixth Street in the Hampden neighborhood of Baltimore. This giant, pink bird clings to the side of a brick row house and guards Café Hon, an institution whose name proudly pays homage to the local dialect. The bird is a reference to a movie by local filmmaker John Waters, whose works were often inspired by the quirky and kitschy Baltimore culture. Indeed, Baltimore is home to a variety of other fascinating folk arts and traditions. In the past, many attempted to flee this cultural history. But today, both locals and transplants celebrate this unique vernacular. Designers often look to such iconic images as a way to better understand a local person's view of his or her city and the landscapes with which it is interwoven. This essay examines Baltimore's culture, drawing from both outside sources and my own knowledge, and discusses how it may be used in urban design to create a place that is locally relevant, sustainable, and ecological.

Ecology and Aesthetics

An emerging body of work is changing urban landscape practice by addressing the role of ecology in design. Galen Cranz and Michael Boland, in their description of a Sustainable Park model, have suggested that truly ecological places "must transcend the traditional notion of design predicated on a fixed, static image and develop an evolutionary aesthetic (Cranz and Boland 2004, 116 (emphasis in original)). Louise Mozingo—contrary to the common rhetoric that places ecology and aesthetics at odds—stresses that an ecological landscape must become iconic in order to be an effective promoter of environmental change (Mozingo 1997, 58). Along these lines, one of the best principles for ecological design and policy is to combine two key aspects of sustainability: ecological function and socially-recognizable signs of a beautiful landscape (Nassauer 1995). An example of this type of design can be found in the Louisville Park system. Meadows and savannahs of indigenous grasses have replaced lawns, a move toward ecological function, while the simple act of mowing orderly pathways through the site was a socially-recognizable way to indicate intentional care instead of lack of maintenance (Cranz and Boland 2004, 109).

A second component in developing and maintaining ecological landscapes is to use the above themes of evolution and social aesthetics to link to community involvement. As noted by Cranz and Boland (2004), this changes "the role of the designer from one of artist-visionary to a medium through which the forces of nature and society express themselves" (118). The National AIDS Memorial Grove in San Francisco provides an example. Here, community members concerned about a derelict local park and the need to honor their lost friends chose to design and construct an evolving park space over a seven-year period (ibid.). While the park design may not have had a traditionally ecological premise, it provides a great example of how important it will be to involve people in an understanding of and a partnership with these changing landscapes.

Baltimore's Ecology

The first step towards developing a sustainable, evolutionary aesthetic for Baltimore is to uncover the ecology of the region. The urban matrix of Baltimore

straddles the "Fall Line," the boundary between the gently rolling hills of the Piedmont Plateau and the flat expanse of the Chesapeake Bay, the world's largest estuary (USGS 2000). The Chesapeake plays a central role in the identity of Baltimoreans and Marylanders in general, and it remains an essential part of the local economy and environment. It has long supported a major fisheries industry, and is currently a regional source of renowned seafood like blue crab and rockfish. As noted by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, "[a] profound relationship exists between the water of the Chesapeake Bay and the 64,000 square miles of land comprising the Bay's watershed." Sadly, these fisheries and ecosystem processes are severely threatened and in need of significant restoration and management (Chesapeake Bay Foundation). Importantly for our discussion, the Chesapeake provides myriad recreational opportunities and connections to nature, which fosters the link between ecology and society.

Geography plays a major role in the fate of Baltimore. The fall line noted above creates interesting dualisms within the city's landscape. The western half of the line is on the Piedmont Plateau, an eco-region characterized by lush oak-hickory forests, cooler temperatures, and a generally humid, subtropical climate (USGS 2000). The eastern half is a coastal plain characterized by vast wetland and marine habitats, grasses, and sandy soils (USGS 2000).

The Chesapeake has allowed the city throughout its history to serve as a major port, fishery, and economic center for a burgeoning east coast population. In terms of its urban spatial relationship, Baltimore has an important placement within the broader context of the northeast megalopolis. Many workers from Washington, D.C., live in the city because of its affordable housing market. In addition, Baltimore is only an hour and a half from Philadelphia and three hours from New York, which both provide residents with a variety of opportunities. This geographic good fortune is arguably the core reason why this formerly industrial city has escaped some of the travails that have befallen the more isolated and single-industry-dependent cities in the Rust Belt.

Local Resources

With increased environmental awareness and a push toward localism and regionalism, many have started to re-examine the origins of the resources and materials used for buildings and landscapes. A notable example of how regional materials can foster a local aesthetic and tradition is Baltimore's famous marble stoops and doorsteps (Mitchell 2001, 52). This attractive and valuable stone, also used for numerous monuments in Washington, D.C., is a point of pride among the local residents who have been known to take meticulous care of it (Hayward 2004).

The Baltimore region is not known, however, for its brick quality. Bricks produced in the area tended to deteriorate rapidly, and this led to a peculiar solution: Formstone. This "polyester of brick," as local filmmaker John Waters liked to call it, is a façade made of plaster and intended to look like stone (Hayward 1999; Waters 1981, 71). The Formstone was very cheap and was particularly popular in the working class neighborhoods of East Baltimore, where it was used to give the appearance of wealth.

These two materials point to opposing ends of the ecological spectrum, and to the urban evolutionary aesthetic at work through building materials. Marble is a naturally-occurring local resource (from Cockeysville, just a few minutes north of the city), a continued source of historic pride and a relatively permanent fixture. Formstone is its artificial counterpart, once used to convey status but now garnering a more mixed reception. While both are part of the Baltimore narrative, the former speaks more to themes of sustainability and preservation. Moving forward, this voice can continue to guide the city. Perhaps the most promising material resources for future design projects are recycled or renewable. Recycled steel and sustainably harvested wood have considerable potential given Baltimore's past and its above-described ecology.

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One also begins to see long-term environmental benefits of the city's industrial past: much promise may exist in recycling materials like steel, but even greater potential lies in simply appropriating industrial spaces and artifacts for new uses. The added benefit is that the city's history is preserved in the act of environmental design. Many examples already exist in the city and region, and two are worth mentioning for illustration. One is the recent redevelopment of the former National Brewery, maker of Baltimore's local National Bohemian beer, into a mixed-use complex. The conscientious developers saved the giant "Mr. Boh" sign, which is a visible landmark for miles, and also converted the giant brewery tanks into rainwater catchment cisterns. (Struever Bros. Eccles and Rouse 2008). A second example is the Chesapeake Bay Foundation office, which lies outside the city borders but follows the same principle of localization. On this project, the designers reused giant wooden pickle barrels from a local source to capture rainwater and to build a latticework of sun louvers on the south side of the building (PMEC 2002). These conscious links between social history and design are essential for creating a more ecological aesthetic.

The Rowhouse Rembrandts

Baltimore's peculiar geography, economy, and urban forms gave birth not only to engaging physical features but also unique cultural traditions. An excellent example is the screen paintings that were done by the working class populations of East and Central Baltimore (Beckham 2008). The process involves painting a colorful scene onto a window screen and placing that screen on a front window of a row home. William Oktevec, a native of Czechoslovakia, painted the first screen in Baltimore in 1913 (Eff 2008). His goal was advertising, so he painted vegetables—which could not sit outside in the summer heat—onto a screen and placed it in his corner grocery store window (Eff 2008). A patron noticed the artwork, and observed how one could see out of the screen but not see in. This marriage of individual expression and practical function became a key selling point in the further adoption of screen painting. Oktevec eventually sold his business and became a full time screen artist. Many others would follow in his footsteps and pick up the trade as a viable career choice. In the heyday of painted screens in the 1940s and 1950s, resourceful men and women plied the streets of every neighborhood, by foot, by car, and from modest storefronts, supplying as many as 100,000 screens to eager homeowners (Eff 2008).

Baltimore's neighborhoods and the houses within them drove the expansion of this folk art form. The brick rowhouses are generally small, with tiny backyards for gardens and usually no front yards (Runge 2008). On some blocks, one finds few trees. As a result, privacy is even harder to come by than natural vegetation (Runge 2008). During the summer residents also must deal with sticky summer heat and often a lack of air conditioning. The painted screens thus serve multiple functions by enabling the residents to ventilate and decorate their homes while maintaining a sense of privacy (Eff 2008).

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The aesthetic and symbolic roles of this art form should not be undervalued. The paintings are a small and valiant attempt to beautify what is seen as an unending sea of concrete and brick. Symbolically, they often represented a resident's dream of escape to the countryside (Eff 1988). In fact, the most common scene painted on the screens is of a red roofed cottage nestled in an English pastoral landscape, with a pond and white swan or two in the foreground. It is a working class family's dream vacation home, and variations of this theme are repeated over and over. Later screen painters followed different artistic paths, depicting city landmarks or even planets and an American flag floating in space (Eff 1988).

Like the use of marble and Formstone, these scenes represent a diverse, evolutionary aesthetic. But whatever their subject, these paintings' unifying theme is pride in ownership. Through them, residents build a fascinating connection between physical design and social narrative. The neighborhoods have changed significantly with the loss of industry and urban flight, but while the screen-painting phenomenon has ebbed and flowed in popularity it has helped sustain the spirit of ownership and community.

The Hairdo Capital of the World

Screen paintings, with their endearing kitschy aesthetic, by no means represent the full spectrum of quirkiness to be found in Baltimore. In recent years many residents have taken to celebrating another local vernacular: the "Hon" culture. The name of the culture comes from Baltimore accent and slang Hon; the word is an abbreviation of "honey" and serves as an informal way to refer to another person, usually someone unfamiliar to the speaker. This manifestation of the regional dialect came with its own fashion codes, inspired John Waters' films, and is now celebrated in local festivals. The symbol of this culture is the plastic pink flamingo lawn statue, which John Waters used in his film Pink Flamingos. As mentioned earlier, little lawn space can be found in the city for such ornaments, so it is likely the bird statue is simply symbolic of bad taste.

Despite its seemingly benign quality, not all residents appreciate the celebration of their city's culture in this way, with older, long-time residents being less supportive. This is an important lesson about intergenerational tension. A half-century ago, the children of working class families received a good education along with decent salaries and promptly fled to the suburbs for a version of the country home painted on their childhood window screen. Today, the children of that generation are fleeing the suburbs and returning to the city center in search of the quirkiness and culture that was lost in suburban existence. New arrivals such as artists and professionals are also regularly seeking authenticity and community, and Baltimore's folksy "hon" culture provides this feeling.

The key for a sustainable, ecologic urban design is to use this available culture and its symbols in a broadly appealing but honest way. If too narrowly conceived, it

risks alienating long-time residents and disabling them from recognizing their perception of Baltimore culture in the surrounding landscape. If too diluted, the suburban transplants and newcomers will be less able to forge a connection to their adoptive city. Urban designers face the challenge, but also embrace the privilege, of creating spaces that will flexibly navigate this dynamic.

Conclusion: Merging Folk Arts and Ecology

Baltimore, with its diverse ecosystems and unique culture, provides fertile ground for generating locally- and regionally-specific urban landscapes with the potential to evolve over time. This survey of Baltimore provides a base for site-specific design exploration. Urban landscape design must be conscious of city, neighborhood, and site, drawing from a broad history but applying it in appropriate, socially-recognizable ways. For instance, some of the cultural artifacts of white, working class neighborhoods mentioned above will probably prove irrelevant if used to inspire design in the upscale districts of north Baltimore, or the primarily black districts of west Baltimore. However, the city as a whole does have a strong working class identity in its recent history and tapping into this past—in the methods, materials, and symbols used—can provide the foundation for landscapes and urban places in the future.

Many Baltimore traditions, like the screen paintings and backyard gardens, are small in scale and provide a readily-adaptable resource. For example, designers could revitalize backyard garden ecology through community education, taking one part of the historic urban form and function and creating new social ties to it. Forward-thinking local artists could be used as partners to promote the new ecological landscapes on rowhouse window screens. Just as these once symbolized a suburban dream, they can be re-adopted to grow and inform a vision of a sustainable urban environment. Most importantly, these symbols may reawaken the communal spirit and pride that gave birth to Baltimore's singular cultures in the first place. This is just one example of how the characteristics of a city can be used, and it is the spirit of intimate involvement with a place that is the cornerstone of a successful long-term urban ecology.

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