

Baltimore's Harborplace

Reimagining large-scale urban design and development on the city's waterfront

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MORE THAN a century ago, the Baltimore waterfront was a working harbor. After a massive 1970s redevelopment that turned the area into the centerpiece of Baltimore's tourism industry, the American Institute of Architects called it "one of the supreme achievements of large-scale urban design and development in U.S. history." Yet it became insolvent in 2019. Key lessons learned here can prevent this cycle from repeating as we envision what the next 100 years might hold for the center of Charm City.

In 1729, the colonial establishment of parcels on the north side of the Chesapeake Bay watershed—now known as the Inner Harbor—created Baltimore Town. By the late 1700s, the town's population had exploded, fueled largely by international trade of tobacco and wheat. The city's first "master plan," known as the Poppleton Plan, was established in 1816. The city continued to grow rapidly through the 19th and early 20th centuries, with more than a million European immigrants arriving at what, by then, was the third-busiest port of entry in the United States. During



Rendering of the reimagined Harborplace, showcasing an accessible waterfront with vibrant public spaces, mixed-use developments, and enhanced connectivity, designed to revitalize Baltimore's urban landscape for future generations.

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the same period, waves of Black Americans were migrating to the city from the South. These various newcomers and the cultures they brought with them shaped each neighborhood's character fundamentally, creating the distinct "City of Neighborhoods" that Baltimore is known as today.

Like cities throughout the United States, Baltimore experienced a period of urban decline that followed a wave of rapid suburbanization fueled by the post-war economic boom of the late 1940s and 1950s, deindustrialization, and the ongoing struggle between segregation and civil rights. The Inner Harbor area devolved into a dirty, uninhabited swath of dilapidated wharves. To turn the tide of disinvestment and increasing deterioration, and in response to then mayor Theodore Roosevelt McKeldin's call for a reinvention of Baltimore's waterfront, the city created the Inner Harbor Master Plan in 1964.

The Inner Harbor Master Plan envisioned a restored downtown core centered on roughly 240 waterfront acres (97 ha). Through the proposed incorporation of residential towers framing open spaces for passive recreation and gathering, as well as a continuous promenade, the city sought to draw people back to its most underused asset: the waterfront.

In 1974, a decade later, the waterfront promenade was completed, connecting the various park spaces along the harbor. Meanwhile, a visionary local developer named James Rouse responded to a city-issued request for proposals to activate this new waterfront promenade. His idea was to construct a pair of two-story pavilions as a "festival marketplace." Two years later, after a contentious battle involving competing ballot initiatives, voters approved a referendum to dedicate 3.2 acres (1.3 ha) of waterfront park to be redeveloped as Harborplace.

Harborplace opened on July 2, 1980. According to a *Baltimore Sun* article, in its initial years it had more visitors than Disneyworld. In the decades following its dedication, Harborplace enjoyed tremendous success. The Harborplace pavilions featured popular retail and dining destinations. The promenade was always busy

with pedestrians, and the entire waterfront was bookended by two popular cultural attractions: the National Aquarium, opened in 1981, and the Maryland Science Center, opened in 1976. In 2004, General Growth Properties (GGP) purchased the Rouse Company and its assets, including Harborplace, for \$12.6 billion.

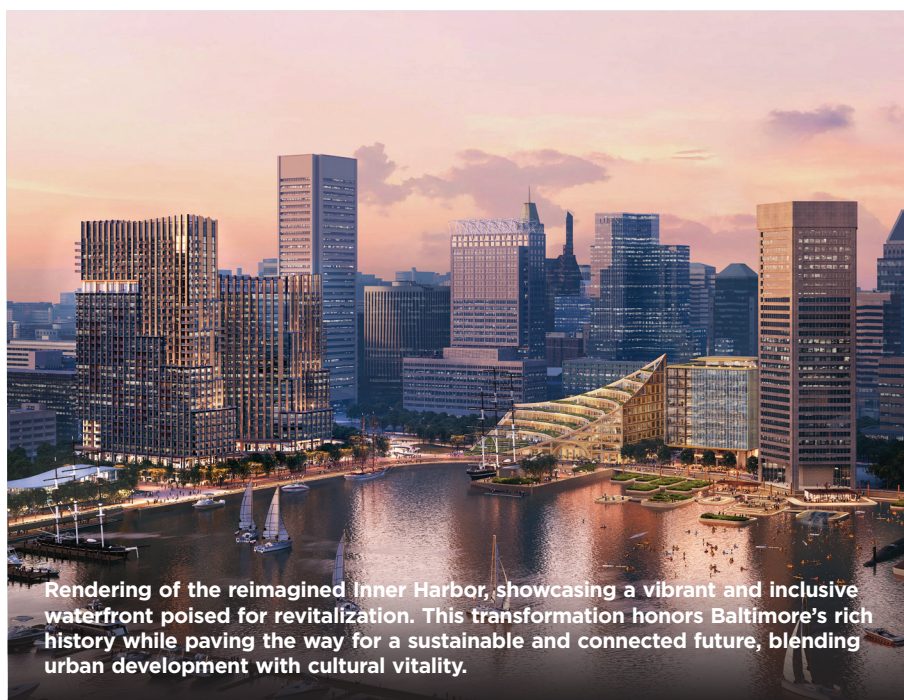
After the Great Recession in 2008, GGP filed for bankruptcy—one of the largest such cases in U.S. history. Amid the fallout, Ashkenazy Acquisition Corporation acquired Harborplace in 2014 for \$98 million, but Ashkenazy's efforts to attract new tenants to the existing pavilions failed. In 2019, Harborplace was put into receivership by a Baltimore City Circuit Court judge.

In 2022, a circuit court judge ordered the sale of Harborplace to MCB Real Estate, an institutional investment manager and developer headquartered in Baltimore. As the current era of Harborplace ends, many of its sister locations—developed by following the Harborplace model in such cities as Jacksonville, Miami, and New York—have already been demolished and reimaged. In Baltimore, a new generation now has the opportunity to build a more resilient and inclusive waterfront that maintains a vibrant cultural heart for

all its residents and visitors under ownership by MCB.

This reinvention, however, does not occur in a vacuum. Baltimore's Inner Harbor is the culmination of centuries of history, growth, and learning. The early agrarian waterfront, grounded in trade, was remade in the Poppleton Plan of 1816 as the city moved toward industrialization. Under the Inner Harbor Master Plan, Baltimore's downtown further evolved as a postindustrial economy geared toward public enjoyment of the waterfront and creation of a thriving central business district that ultimately attracted many Fortune 500 headquarters.

To reinvent Baltimore's downtown for the next century, the city must both take guidance from the past and be willing to break from established paradigms that arose during the preceding six decades. The challenges and opportunities in such an endeavor are vast. Nevertheless, choosing to reposition aging infrastructure, revitalize disinvested corridors, and revise assumptions from previous generations as catalysts for economic growth are steps all cities can take as they seek to modernize themselves to reflect a vision for the 21st century and beyond.



Rendering of the reimagined Inner Harbor, showcasing a vibrant and inclusive waterfront poised for revitalization. This transformation honors Baltimore's rich history while paving the way for a sustainable and connected future, blending urban development with cultural vitality.

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Lessons from other cities

Beyond studying the history and context of a place, evaluating how peer cities are approaching common issues generates important insights. Cities across the United States have large, underperforming land parcels left behind by urban renewal, deindustrialization, or other shifts. Through work exploring case studies from Detroit, Chattanooga, Cincinnati, Seattle, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Phoenix, as detailed in a 2018 Brookings report, we learned that successful catalytic projects have key shared characteristics.

Those characteristics often originate from a point of crisis that, among other impacts, results in a potent triad: the place involved undergoes substantial devaluation, even though the place has strong underlying fundamental assets to leverage, combined with strong political will for change.

Such developments tend to be led by an experienced leader, who brings to the project atypically patient equity that extends the timeline for delivering returns, and who can credibly engage the broader community. The programs are mixed use, walkable, and transit-oriented, maximizing flexibility and diversity across phases rather than delivering a megaproject. Finally, the projects represent long-term aspirations for the place overall, embodied in a commitment to design, place management, and a big, inclusive vision.

The size of the vision plus the infrastructure and entitlement changes needed to implement a catalytic development mean that these endeavors are typically a partnership between the private and public sectors. In every case, there is some sharing of risk and reward, where the public sector is a co-investor and the private developer takes on a larger set of problems beyond what the public sector has been able to deliver alone. Although it would be easier for the public and private sectors to play their traditional roles, the harder and messier work to create various policy structures for collaboration have produced extraordinary positive outcomes in service of the big vision.

Furthermore, cities around the world have engaged in waterfront revitalization. We looked for lessons from proximate cities and faraway places alike, including Washington, DC; San Diego; Toronto; Vancouver; Hamburg, Copenhagen; and Marina Bay, Singapore. Despite their geographical dispersion, climate disparities, and cultural differences, each city has elements applicable to Baltimore—often similar elements representing an emerging set of best practices in waterfront development.

Each of these reconstructed waterfronts features integration of past history for authenticity; robust open spaces or open space networks, including promenades, parks, and piers for public use;

environmental, resiliency, and sustainability initiatives; significant mixed-use density; distinct public transit and mobility networks; and public realms oriented toward pedestrian experience and retail success, not vehicles.

Engaging Baltimore

Today's vision for Baltimore's reimagined Inner Harbor did not begin with an individual, an architect, or a precedent project. The process began with community engagement to define planning principles reflective of the vision and values of the residents of Baltimore City.

Engagement started even before MCB acquired Harborplace. MCB held an open meeting and invited every neighborhood association and community development corporation in Baltimore, so that those groups could understand the upcoming engagement process and ask questions of the developer. Over the subsequent 18 months, MCB and the Harborplace team interacted with Baltimore City residents representing more than 100 neighborhoods.

The development team solicited input through traditional, large format, charette-style meetings; small format "dinners with the developer," wherein groups of 10 to 12 city residents had an opportunity to share their memories, thoughts, and goals for Harborplace; youth engagement led by four members of the mayor's YouthWorks program; senior engagement at senior centers; and website engagement. Signs on the sides of city buses advertised a text platform to provide thoughts and feedback.

After tens of thousands of interactions and thousands of direct inputs, a series of themes began to emerge:

- ▷ Build for economic sustainability
- ▷ Embrace connectivity with the water
- ▷ Make it accessible
- ▷ Keep it local
- ▷ Design for resilience
- ▷ Make it safe and welcoming
- ▷ Build equitably

With these core pillars, alongside four publicly distributed community engagement reports, the project team distilled the aspirations of a community into a vision for its future.



Community members gather to discuss the reimagining of Baltimore's Inner Harbor, emphasizing the importance of resident input in shaping the vision for the future. MCB initiated such engagement even before acquiring Harborplace, connecting with residents from more than 100 neighborhoods to ensure their values and ideas are reflected in the redevelopment.

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A new vision

Cities around the world are reinventing themselves by prioritizing investments in infrastructure, public space, catalytic development activities, and walkable urban places to promote resilience and growth. Baltimore is no exception, and the 2024 Inner Harbor Master Plan prepared by MCB and approved by the city of Baltimore uses this same playbook.

Today, Harborplace totals approximately 175,000 square feet (16,260 sq m) of retail space that blocks access to the water from the surrounding street grid. MCB's vision for a new Inner Harbor removes barriers to the water while adding more than four acres (1.6 ha) of public space, approximately 400,000 square feet (37,160 sq m) of commercial space, and 900-plus apartment units. This density will drive activity to restaurants, vendors, and the surrounding retail corridor.

Investments of this kind do not yield new spaces alone. In its 2025 economic impact analysis, the Jacob France Institute at the University of Baltimore forecasts that the implementation of the 2024 Master Plan, in combination with Mayor

Brandon Scott's Downtown RISE initiative, will have the following impacts:

Construction:

- ▷ Generate more than \$2.1 billion in economic activity in Baltimore
- ▷ Create more than 11,000 jobs that bring in excess of \$850 million in labor income
- ▷ Generate an estimated \$96.3 million in state and local government revenues

Operation:

- ▷ Annually create or support more than \$500 million in economic activity in Baltimore
- ▷ Support more than 2,500 jobs that bring more than \$200 million in labor income
- ▷ Annually generate an estimated \$15.7 million in Baltimore City government revenues

This once-in-a-generation opportunity should catalyze growth in Baltimore through investments in infrastructure, open spaces, transit, and targeted density.

Looking ahead

This vision cannot come to fruition without the support of an entire city and the

forethought of its policymakers. According to reporting by WYPR, Harborplace has the support of Governor Wes Moore, Mayor Scott, city agencies, and the voters of Baltimore. They all recognize that Baltimore has reinvented itself over the centuries, and now is the time to do so again.

Harborplace was a proverbial rock in the pond that spread ripples of economic activity far beyond the Inner Harbor, creating the central business district as Baltimoreans know it today. A half-century later, the pond has gone still. The time for the next reinvention—the next “rock in the pond”—is here, moving away from the CBD model of the 20th century and creating a more lush, pedestrian-oriented, connected downtown poised for future growth.

Seemingly every city in the United States is experiencing an existential crisis due to macro-economic conditions. Like Baltimore, every city has the opportunity to reinvent itself. Each need only look to the past for guidance and learning, look to the present for inspiration, and look to its citizens and leaders for vision. **UL**

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