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Mobtown Beat

Brutal Reckoning

Developers are anxious to tear down the Mechanic Theatre and McKeldin Fountain, even without money to replace them

By Fred Scharmen

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The McKeldin Fountain (dedicated as The Waterfall), which is expected to be demolished in advertisement the next year, sits between the northbound and southbound lanes of Light Street at Pratt. Its upper reaches hold the skywalks that once spread across downtown in a network stretching for 10 blocks, allowing tourists to visit conventions and shopping centers without having to walk the streets of Baltimore.

Despite this inauspicious set of poor urban-planning decisions, the fountain itself was crowded on a recent warm day in early fall. Every family that visited stopped to take a photo of themselves in front before bounding up the steps to trace the flow of the water upward. This path was intended by its creator, Thomas Todd of the prolific landscape, planning, and architecture firm Wallace McHarg Roberts & Todd, to be reminiscent of a return to the source of the Susquehanna River, on its way to fill the Chesapeake Bay.

McKeldin Plaza, where the fountain sits, is named for former Governor Theodore McKeldin, who presided over the beginning of the Harbor's renewal. As mayor, McKeldin was an early advocate for racial integration in a city that remained starkly segregated. McKeldin fought for the removal of a question about race from all Baltimore City job applications in 1943. He also fought for the inclusion of African-Americans in a new housing construction at Fulton St. on the West Side.

From early October to mid-December 2011, Occupy Baltimore camped in McKeldin Plaza to protest the rising inequality in the distribution of wealth and the exploitative real estate development practices that led to the financial crisis a few years previous. Today, thanks to the efforts of the ACLU, the fountain and plaza are one of only a few "Free Speech Zones" in Baltimore, where limited public protests can take place without an application for a permit in advance.

The Downtown Partnership has raised \$1 million in public and private funds for the fountain's demolition, which has been approved and is expected to take place no later than next fall. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the site's history of protest against financial institutions, the two largest private donors to this effort are PNC Bank and T. Rowe Price, whose offices both look down on the plaza. The cost of the proposal to replace it

with, at the time of this writing, an empty green lawn is expected to be another \$2.5 million. This has not been secured, nor has the \$40 million that is the estimated price for the “Pratt Street Initiative,” the overall plan to improve the Inner Harbor, of which the fountain's removal is only one small part. This larger plan, with a new traffic pattern and, in an earlier version, a large undulating video screen, is the only proposal that has sought and gained public approval. As Downtown Partnership President Kirby Fowler told the Baltimore Business Journal, “I think it’s time to start on the McKeldin project even if the whole thing hasn’t been funded.”

The fountain, composed of concrete triangular prisms, with platforms at different levels for plantings and pools of water, is an example of an architectural style commonly known as Brutalism, from the French “béton brut” or “raw concrete.” This mode of late modernism is associated with some discredited city-planning models, such as the aforementioned high-speed traffic and skywalks. The fountain, and structures like it, are sometimes called eyesores; their abstract, expressive forms and direct approach to material can sometimes fail to withstand weathering and changing tastes. “It looks bad,” Fowler told the Baltimore Brew this summer. “The sooner we take it down, the better.”

Kathleen Lane and Tom Liebel, the executive director and president of American Institute of Architects Baltimore, respectively, don’t take issue with the fountain’s design. “The problem isn’t the fountain,” they said in a statement. “The problem is the traffic circulation around McKeldin Plaza. If the fountain is demolished, and the traffic issues are not addressed, then the problem will not have been solved.”

The destruction of another Brutalist monument is already underway just up the road. The Morris A. Mechanic Theatre is the first victim of what could be seen as a new wave of demolition. “In the end, this mess over the Mechanic represents a growing wave of historic preservation conflicts taking shape across the country. Modernist buildings from the middle of last century are increasingly falling out of fashion and facing the wrecking ball,” Baltimore Heritage's Executive Director Johns Hopkins told Urbanite in 2010, when discussing plans to destroy the theater. “In the 1940s and ’50s, Victorian buildings like the Engineers Club, the Winans Mansion, and the Marburg Mansion were all considered drop-dead ugly and not worthy of preservation, and those are among our most prized architectural possessions today.”

The Mechanic, which turns its back to Charles Street to face an underused plaza in the center of the block, has been vacant since 2004. The theater is due to be replaced by a mixed-use development comprising two apartment towers and a four-story shopping arcade at the base. Developer David S. Brown and the Baltimore Development Corporation have both repeatedly stated that construction will proceed as scheduled, once demolition is done. As the recent financial collapse has shown, a lot can happen between now and opening day, and Baltimore could end up with another vacant lot in the interim period between destruction and development.

Meanwhile, back at the fountain, where there is no funding in place for the construction of any new replacement, attendees at the yearly Otakon convention have started a petition to save the fountain. The Baltimore Book Festival, displaced from Mount Vernon by the reconstruction work on the Washington Monument, has recently brought a new influx of people to the fountain and surrounding plaza, despite the traffic on Light Street.

“This is so cool,” one Book Festival visitor said to his friend as they arrived at the skywalk on top. “I never knew this was here.”

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