

Architecture's Role in Baltimore

Defensive architecture was the answer to the 1968 riots in Baltimore. How will architecture respond to the urban uprisings of 2015?

Written by Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson for *Architect Magazine*, April 2015



Matt Rourke/Associated Press Protestors marching to Baltimore's City Hall on April 29.

For many years, I have taught writing to graduate students at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), an art and design school in Baltimore city where I live. As professors are wont to do, I repeated a lesson plan on urban design each semester. I began by posing the same question: Why is it so hard to find a cup of coffee near campus? Until recently, there were no cafés adjacent to our school. The question inevitably stumped my students. They had noticed the lack of retail, but they hadn't thought to question why. The answer I supplied surprised them. It was because of the 1968 riots.

After Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in April of '68 and Baltimore rioted, communities near MICA petitioned the city to rezone the neighborhood as residential only. No more corner stores. No more restaurants. If people could not gather, the thinking went, then they could not riot. Four decades later, I would tell my students, and witness the ripple effect.

And the ripple effects are many. The architecture of cities changed after the 1960s. Here in Baltimore, we bricked over ground-level windows and turned our back on the street. Cultural institutions and universities hunkered inward. Public-facing front doors closed in favor of private, secure, bunker-like entrances. Baltimore wasn't alone. In cities across the country you saw an increase in concrete walls, barbed wire, berms, "bum-proof" benches, and soulless buildings that buffeted people from the street. As Mike Davis wrote in his essay "Fortress Los Angeles," we constructed cities where "the defense of luxury has given birth to an arsenal of security systems and an obsession with the policing of social boundaries through architecture." Today, we embed metal spikes in concrete to impale those daring to sit on the sidewalk. Fear and bigotry have found an outlet in zoning codes, in housing policy, in architecture.

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The seeds of defensive urban architecture were sowed long before 1968, of course. (For a broader perspective, read Ta-Nehisi Coates. Read Antero Pietila.) I wrote an article recently about a public archive that opened at Johns Hopkins University last year. The collection houses papers related to some of Baltimore's oldest and most prestigious residential developments, with documents dating back to the 1800s. Back then, it was high hedges and purposefully convoluted street plans that buffered neighborhoods from the city at large. It was deeds and covenants that dictated not only architectural aesthetics, but also forbade blacks from buying houses.

Today, many are comparing the uprisings in Baltimore following the murder of Freddie Gray to those of 1968. Baltimore made the cover of *Time* magazine this week with a photo of a young black man, his nose and mouth covered by a bandana, running from a phalanx of cops in riot gear. The cover line reads: "America, 1968" only the date is crossed out in red and replaced by "2015." Forty-seven years after King's death and National Guard tanks again occupy my city.

Baltimore has captured international attention not just for the fantastical scenes playing out on the evening news, but also for the significance of what is happening here. Baltimore is no anomaly. Entrenched systems marginalizing some in favor of others are coming home to roost. We are a nation grappling with gender and social equity, with race and class, with economics and morality. We are struggling to find our civic compass.

The architecture profession, like our nation at large, is also in the midst of a soul-searching moment. There are calls to equalize the vast gender and racial gaps in the profession. There are petitions to consider the ethics of what and where architects build. These outcries are premised on the notion that *what* we build—and *how* we build—speaks volumes about who we are as a culture. Architecture is nothing less than mankind's values writ large.

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Recently, I had to alter the narrative I tell my MICA students. Coffee shops have opened near campus. Retail has returned in places. The city is undergoing the arduous process of overhauling its antiquated zoning code. North Avenue, which borders MICA and was central in the 1968 riots as well as the social justice uprisings of today, has seen some reinvestment. I now teach inside a new classroom building there. Baltimore architecture firms like Ziger/Snead are helping restore long-abandoned buildings into mixed-use cultural hubs. The bricked-up windows are being reopened. These are small steps, but they are steps. I hope that we can maintain the momentum in the years to come.

On Wednesday, a symbolic piece of Baltimore architecture, Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall, became the backdrop to an impromptu peace concert performed by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. The musicians walked outside and played on the front steps. In its invitation to the citizens of Baltimore, the symphony quoted composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein, who said after John F. Kennedy's assassination: "This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before."

Can architecture respond in kind? Can our buildings move beyond the soulless structures and aggressive infrastructure that we saw in the wake of '68, and offer instead beauty, civility, and respect? In January, the AIA dubbed 2015 "the year of the advocate," and challenged members to become legislative activists. Will architects take up the cause of shaping the next American city into one that makes all of us—regardless of race, class, gender, and income—a welcome and vital part of civic life?

As I write this, warrants are being issued for those involved in what has now been determined as the homicide of Freddie Gray. Today Baltimore City State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby addressed Baltimore and said: "To the youth of this city: I will seek justice on your behalf... You're at the forefront of this cause, and as young people your time is now."

What, I wonder, will be the city that architects help to build for them?