A look at how McKeldin Plaza came to be, and the plans to undo it all

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It's hot and sunny in McKeldin Plaza at the Inner Harbor on a summer day between the mid-morning and late afternoon thunderstorms. Traffic slides past the plaza on three sides: at Pratt Street in front of us going east, on the left headed south on Light Street, and on the right, cars are peeling off on a spur to travel northbound on Calvert Street. Al Copp, one of the key people who helped make this place, is talking about an experiment with a traffic engineer in 1968.

Copp had some ideas about rearranging the car and pedestrian traffic flows for the area. "[The engineer] and I went up on the roof of the building that housed the Department of Transit and Traffic, which used to be right over there where the World Trade Center is," Copp says. "It was a four story building; we could see this

intersection from the roof, and all the way south to where Key Highway is now, traffic was flowing. He pulled out a radio and said to someone waiting inside at the stoplight controls, 'Okay, go ahead and change it over,' and we watched. Within about 10 minutes, traffic was backed up half a mile all the way down Light Street. 'Alright, change it back.' And then we watched again and traffic cleared up over the next several minutes. 'Okay, do it again.' Ten minutes later, the street was clogged. 'Alright, now back the way it was.' He did this three more times before I turned to him and said, 'You've convinced me.'"

A spur was added linking Light Street to Calvert Street.

Copp is now retired, but from the 1960s through the '80s, he was the Executive Vice President of Charles Center - Inner Harbor Management Inc., a private nonprofit formed by Baltimore City to create and oversee a new master plan for redevelopment and public space at the Inner Harbor. This organization later morphed into what is now known as the Baltimore Development Corporation, the city's quasi public development agency. Copp's primary job as director of the team was working with designers to refine and implement the 1964 Inner Harbor Master Plan. Today, another nonprofit business development group, the Downtown Partnership of Baltimore, is leading an effort to revisit, redesign, and rebuild much of that work. McKeldin Plaza and McKeldin Fountain—both dedicated to the former Mayor and Governor Theodore McKeldin—are the focus of their most recent efforts.

As the Downtown Partnership of Baltimore, the Baltimore Development Corporation, and others push plans forward to redevelop McKeldin Plaza, it's clear that the process is no simpler than it was in the late 1960s. The original creation of this space was a long and complicated process, bringing together private philanthropists, public agencies, and an alphabet soup of groups and committees that exist somewhere in between. William Donald Schaefer, a strong mayor, was known for listening carefully to the experts before making clear decisions marked by his oft-quoted signature line: "Do it now."

Today, the groups remaking one of Baltimore's major entry points and tourist destinations seem to have a different relationship with the experts in traffic, urban design, art, and architecture than the previous generation of planners. While they still have to jump through certain bureaucratic hoops, the parties with the power and money to influence the fate of McKeldin Plaza are steamrolling ahead with their vision, even if it counteracts some of the thoughtful design choices of Copp and his peers.

The Downtown Partnership's efforts to redesign began in 2008, with the "Pratt Street: Avenue of the Inner Harbor" plan, commissioned by the Baltimore Development Corporation, continuing through 2013 with the "Inner Harbor 2.0" plan. Citing degrading infrastructure, unmet opportunities, significant wear, disrepair, and underutilization of space at the harbor, these plans proposed repairing and reorganizing the way

pedestrians and cars moved around. They would create a new pedestrian bridge over the water from Rash Field to Pier 5, close the spur to car traffic from Light Street to Calvert Street, and link McKeldin Plaza back to Harborplace. None of the renderings show the existing fountain in place, but none of the itemized construction and budget timelines explicitly mention its removal, either. To make space for the new traffic lanes that would have to be added back to the main stretch of Light Street, the plans implied, McKeldin Fountain would have to go.

In the late 1960s, activists and some city officials were busy persuading the state and federal highway authorities that running multi-lane elevated expressways through the Inner Harbor was a bad idea. Copp and his colleagues had ideas of their own, and a mandate from Baltimore's planners and governing institutions to implement them. But some of those ideas, as the city traffic engineers demonstrated in real time, weren't so good either. The plan for elevated highways was about to be gone, but that meant that cars had to enter the city here on the ground, competing for space with people on foot. Copp's notion for re-organizing car traffic so that northbound vehicles had to make a hard right at Pratt Street and then a hard left at Calvert wouldn't work. Neither would the longer stoplight timing for pedestrian crossings to the waterfront. He'd doubted the traffic experts, and the experts had proved him wrong. Northbound Light Street would have to curve around in the spur to Calvert Street, leaving a triangular island in the middle of the intersection, which would become McKeldin Plaza. And if the cars couldn't be above the ground, then maybe the people could.

From the middle of the 20th century on, city planners were trying, and often failing, to deal with the effects of the huge masses of cars moving through cities. In the 1950s, widespread optimism about the growth potential of cities led many local governments to invest in expanding their cores, building housing, office space, and highways. Within a decade after World War II, it was apparent that many people had used those highways to leave, only coming back for day jobs in high-rise downtown areas that would empty every evening. The middle class was moving out of Baltimore just as poor and largely black Baltimoreans were moving into the public housing on the east and west sides of downtown. Between 1950 and today, Baltimore has lost nearly a third of its population—dropping from 949,708 residents to around 621,000 in 2015.

After the workday, if the middle class came back at all, it was likely on the weekends for evenings out, returning to the city center for shows, sports, and cultural events, with maybe a quick meal before heading back to suburban bedrooms. Baltimore's first large scale redevelopment downtown was planned in 1954, the "Charles Center" half of Charles Center - Inner Harbor Management. Several blocks of downtown real estate were taken by eminent domain, cleared, and built out into office space. Workers could drive into the city from I-95 into a large underground parking garage. Stairs and elevators would go right up into Hopkins Plaza in the middle of the development block, or up one level more, to a network of skywalks that linked

parking, workspace, restaurants, and the Morris Mechanic Theatre (which was demolished in 2015 in an earlier initiative supported by Downtown Partnership).

In the 1964 master plan developed by urban design firm Wallace McHarg Roberts and Todd for the "Inner Harbor" half of CC-IHM, these skywalks would extend to the harbor. In theory, a visitor to Baltimore could go from the theater, to the convention center, to hotels, and to the commercial pavilions at the waterfront, all without touching the ground or fighting for space with cars. The Harborplace component of the master plan was conceived for tourists—but even more so for city dwellers—to be, as CC-IHM Chief Executive Martin L. Millspaugh would write, "a public playground for Baltimoreans along the shoreline."

The skywalks were, according to Copp, a necessary part of that playground: "We had to get people across [Light Street], so we ran a skywalk." The traffic engineers wanted Light Street to be 11 lanes wide here. As northbound cars were split off on the spur to Calvert Street, the island that resulted was developed into a sort of refuge. "We needed a big mass to the south, something like a mountain, to block the sound and exposure to traffic," Copp says. "And if we ran water through it, that would quiet things down and mask noise even more. So we needed a fountain." At some point in the planning process, the skywalk, mountain, and fountain merged into a multilevel composition, with people and water flowing through in all directions. The design of this piece was given over, in the late 1970s, to Wallace, McHarg, Roberts, and Todd partner Thomas Todd, and construction was completed in 1982.

On the day I visited the Plaza with Copp, the running water in the fountain—meant to mask the sound of traffic and help cool the space—was turned off. A city employee in hip waders was thigh deep in the water, skimming off leaves and debris. Copp says that the fountain had been intended to run all year, the shape of the pools designed so that ice could form in the winter without causing damage. The responsibility for keeping the fountain clean and operating falls on either Baltimore's Department of Public Works, the Department of Transportation, or Department of Recreation and Parks, depending on who you ask.

Those who advocate for the fountain's removal often complain about its maintenance. "It is used by the homeless to bathe and do laundry and by other people to get high. The City has to do better. It is nasty and should go for something with less upkeep," said one commenter on Facebook. "It looks bad and there is some graffiti on it now, and I don't believe the pumps are working," Downtown Partnership president Kirby Fowler told the Baltimore Business Journal in 2014. "The sooner we can take it down the better."

The Downtown Partnership has already had two of the skywalks crossing Pratt Street removed, with the goal of increasing foot traffic for retail businesses, as Fowler told the Baltimore Sun in 2013. In early July of this year, the Downtown Partnership began dismantling one of the two skywalks connected to McKeldin

Fountain. After the skywalk removal, as Downtown Partnership has told several media outlets, comes the demolition of the fountain itself, and its replacement with a temporary grass lawn. "The temporary Phase 1 landscape design will be in place for a few years while the final design is being developed," the Downtown Partnership said in a July 2016 press release about the temporary lawn. After the spur is closed, some kind of yet to be designed—and yet to be funded—new public space would be created. When the second skywalk, running from the fountain to the Light Street Harborplace Pavilion, is gone, pedestrians crossing Light Street's 11 lanes will once again be forced to share the ground with vehicles. Fowler will have begun to reproduce the conditions that Copp and his traffic engineer friend were trying to test in 1968. Only this time, the experiment will be much more difficult to reverse.

Early versions of these new plans for Pratt Street, Light Street, and the Inner Harbor had big aspirations, including a proposal to restore both streets to two-way traffic. The spur at Light Street and Calvert Street would be closed to cars and transformed to public pedestrian space, making the fountain's function as an anchor for skywalks unnecessary, and getting rid of it to make room for more lanes on the other side. By 2008, the idea that two-way traffic could be restored was gone from the plans. Fowler presented this change to the Baltimore City Department of Planning's Urban Design and Architecture Review Panel (UDARP) in September of that year. The panel, which is charged with evaluating new design work for the city, expressed disappointment that this part of the proposal had been left behind. The 2008 plan was never formally adopted, but, as the Department of Planning's director Thomas Stosur noted in 2012, the Downtown Partnership and other groups were still implementing aspects of it in piecemeal fashion.

When the City of Baltimore announced the original 1964 Inner Harbor Master Plan, it was put to a public vote as a bond issue, and passed. The Planning Commission worked side by side with CC-IHM at every step of implementation. The city's Board of Estimates discussed and approved agreements with developers and contractors in open sessions. Traffic wasn't the only problem that led Copp and his group to consult with experts. Decisions about urban design and architecture were subject to the advisory review of a panel that included the deans of several prominent schools of architecture, like the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, and MIT. As the primary point of contact between the designers and CC-IHM as the client, Copp also hired an architect to advise his office in-house. He didn't hesitate to call his architect out when he didn't like what he was hearing from him. "I'm not an aesthete, and I'm not a designer," he said. "I wanted independent eyes and thoughts. When I suspected he was giving me the answer that he thought I wanted to hear, instead of the correct answer, I told him so, directly."

In 2015, Downtown Partnership formed a team of three firms to create a new landscape, new urban design, and a new water feature for McKeldin Plaza. One of the three firms, Ziger/Snead, is an office for which, in full disclosure, I worked six years ago. The other two firms are Mahan Rykiel and Ayers Saint Gross. The

UDARP has reviewed and rejected these new plaza designs twice. At these review meetings, the panelists expressed concern that the removal of the existing fountain and plaza set a high standard for any replacement to uphold, and urged that the character of the new design reflect the civic nature of the existing public space, more than the commercial nature of the privately owned open space at Harborplace.

A plaque on the side of the fountain records that its creation was "provided through the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. Harvey M. Meyerhoff, and the Citizens of Baltimore." In 2014, Baltimore City's Public Art Commission, responsible for overseeing gifts of public art to the City, wrote to the Mayor's office to ask specifically if the demolition of the fountain constituted the decommissioning of a piece of artwork in the city's collection. Minda Goldberg, a lawyer for Baltimore City, visited the next Public Art Commission meeting to respond in person, telling them that they had no authority to prevent decommission. "You could have recommendations, advice, but you don't have the authority to say 'I like this piece of art, I think it's in good condition, I think it's still serving the public purpose, so it stays,'" she said. Several members of the commission disagreed and, in response, signed a letter stating that in their opinion, contrary to the city's counsel, the fountain is a public art gift, and therefore part of the inventory that they are charged with caring for and maintaining.

The city's largest architecture advocacy group, the Baltimore chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), has also written letters about the fountain to city government. In a statement mailed to Council President Bernard C. "Jack" Young in 2016, they suggested that no demolition should happen "before a new design has been publicly presented, vetted, approved by a review agency and fully funded." Citing the city's history of site clearings that sit empty for years, they wrote: "The city forbids demolition of properties in the Central Business District before new plans are submitted—why would we hold a public space in the heart of the city to any lesser of a standard?"

Like Copp in 1968, the AIA was also concerned with traffic, emphasizing that the McKeldin Plaza design must include pedestrian access on Light and Pratt streets, "which is based on best urban design principles and not solely traffic-engineering." Today, traffic studies are done with computer simulations, not by messing with drivers in real time. The traffic engineers at the Baltimore City Department of Transportation have not yet studied or approved the Downtown Partnership's plan for the eventual closure of the Light Street spur.

All of these expert opinions illustrate the murky status of McKeldin Fountain as an object. It is, at least according to the Public Art Commission, a work of public art. Its designer, Thomas Todd, is an architect, but does this fact make the fountain automatically a work of architecture? As a series of platforms with water and plantings rising up out of the plaza, the fountain is arguably also a work of landscape architecture. As a

series of public pathways and walks, it is definitely a well-used piece of transportation infrastructure, too. What sort of approvals are needed in order to remove an inhabitable sculpture, full of plants and water, partly funded by private money as a gift on public property, with two bridges that cross busy streets to connect an office building courtyard with a waterfront indoor shopping mall? The plaza is a publicly owned place, but does the Department of Recreation and Parks control it? Or is it subject to the many semi-public nonprofit organizations with overlapping mandates here?

There is at least one expert in town, besides Fowler, who wants the fountain gone: Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. When an audience member at the 2014 Mayor's biennial Cultural Town Meeting on the state of the arts in Baltimore asked her about closed-door decision making with regard to the fountain's removal, the mayor was momentarily confused. It seemed to take her some time to understand the intent of the question, that someone in the city might want the fountain and plaza to stay. The budget submitted by the Mayor's office and approved by the City Council this year includes $500,000 to the Downtown Partnership, earmarked for "McKeldin Plaza," presumably for demolition, with more to come in subsequent years. The removal of the fountain, and its replacement with a grass lawn, is expected to cost over $4 million. When Todd, the fountain's designer, was told about the estimated cost for demolition, he said, "Good luck. That area of the harbor is built on fill. If you think there's a lot of concrete above the ground, wait until you see the foundation." Private donors, including members of the McKeldin and Meyerhoff families, have also contributed to the Downtown Partnership.

As the plaque on the fountain's side reads, the Meyerhoffs were funders of the fountain's original construction as well. A memo in the archives of former Mayor Schaefer records his memory of a lunchtime meeting with the heads of a few prominent city groups, where they had the chance to see a design model of McKeldin Fountain. "Very pleasant lunch," Schaefer wrote, "Mr. Eney [attorney H. Vernon Eney, an adviser to the Mayor] then inspected the model and said it would be the outstanding crown jewel in the Inner Harbor. Cost is in excess of $3.3 million [$9.7 million in 2016 dollars]. We have funds in the amount of $2.7. It would be up to the business community to raise $500,000. Bill Boucher will see Buddy Meyerhoff in the Bahamas, possibly taking the model with him. They will let me know in a short time whether the business community can raise the money."

In April of that year, a letter from Meyerhoff to Boucher confirms that their conversation in the Bahamas had been successful, and that he and his wife would cover the difference. Meyerhoff concludes his letter, "As you know, both Lyn and I are quite pleased to be a part of the continued revitalization of the downtown area and equally delighted to be able to make this contribution to it."

That model of the Inner Harbor's "crown jewel" came at the end of the design process. Copp remembers, as a

client, giving wide latitude to Todd during the creation of the fountain: "He knew what he was doing." Todd said last year that it was Harborplace developer James Rouse who came up with the idea that the fountain should recall the rocky source of the Susquehanna River, on its way to feed the Chesapeake Bay. The hard-edged concrete geometric abstraction—every angle in it is a multiple of 30 degrees—makes the fountain, like the city, legible as many things to many people. This compositional style, known as "Brutalism" for its rough concrete, can be brutally honest and brutally uncomfortable at times. As scholar Joan Ockman writes in an essay on this topic, "It may be said, in sum, that the New Brutalism was an idealism about realism." Love it or hate it, this is design that's meant to draw out an emotional reaction.

Today, the public process of design development and fundraising is sometimes more complicated than sitting down to pleasant lunches and transporting architectural models to the Bahamas. After the two unsuccessful presentations to UDARP, the Downtown Partnership abruptly announced in June that they were abandoning design work previously done by their team of three offices, and would be holding an open design competition for the site instead. Mike Evitts, a spokesperson for Downtown Partnership, said that the city's Department of Planning would oversee and guide the competition, though details have yet to be announced.

"Sometimes I think this city needs something like a design czar." Copp says, as we cross the last remaining skywalk at the Inner Harbor across Light Street, back to the parking garage at the Hyatt. "We have four or five different organizations that are working here, and if there's no one keeping track of the original design intent, all of that knowledge will be gone." The James Rouse Company, Copp remembers, would issue a design and maintenance manual for each of their projects. If they made one for the Inner Harbor, it's now lost.

Alongside the intentions of any designer or planner, the users are often the best experts on public space. Ask people in Baltimore about how the McKeldin Fountain is used, or read the online comments sections on articles about the place, and you'll inevitably hear plenty of the aforementioned speculation about homeless people taking baths in it and teenagers smoking pot. You'll also probably hear someone reminisce about how when their parents brought them into the city from the suburbs as kids, they would visit the fountain and also jump in to cool off. That's what attendees at the yearly anime convention Otakon did in 2013, after someone dumped an extra large load of wash soap into it on an August night, in a unique twist on Martin Millspaugh's "playground for Baltimoreans along the shoreline."

McKeldin Plaza, a designated free speech zone where large, spontaneous, unpermitted protest can take place, has been used to launch marches and protests throughout the city. It was the site of the Occupy Baltimore camp for nearly three months in 2011 to protest income inequality. The fountain's irregular

geometry made it particularly difficult for authorities to remove the protesters. Since the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, it has been the site of numerous protests affiliated with the Black Lives Matter movement, Baltimore Bloc, and others. This past spring, as part of Light City Baltimore, Luminous Intervention projected images of black Americans killed by police onto the fountain; at another point during the festival, the dance group Fluid Movement staged a dry water ballet about the history of the site. An ongoing international project, Nonuments, is working with students and faculty at UMBC to record and document the fountain's existence. In 2007, Baltimore rap artist Rye Rye shot the video for her song 'Shake It To The Ground' here, with performers and dancers in and on the fountain, cross cut with shots of the maintenance workers who keep this public space clean.

"The flexibility of the open lawn expanse encourages programming now, and reinforces and anticipates opportunities for gathering in the coming years," says David A. Rubin, UDARP member and the designer of the Phase I landscaping plan that will replace the fountain. Copp's team of experts and planners might never have anticipated that the fountain and plaza would be used for parkour, pot smoking, foam parties, or protests against racism and capitalism. Their major functional goal was to help people cross the street, and to give them a nice place to stop along the way. Without a manual, and without expert consultation, even these simple ends seem to have been forgotten. After the design process is all over, an urban place like this becomes whatever people use it for. If something as specific, and as versatile, as the existing fountain and plaza is going to be replaced by an open lawn, then the test for its success or failure might be in this flexibility. But, like the spaces they make, the intentions of designers and planners also are embodied in their effects. A lawn will be easier to maintain, but also, maybe, easier to control.

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