



## Sandtown: Too Far Down?

November 20, 2017 by Lindy Davies

When do we just walk away? How far down does a neighborhood, or a city (or a nation, or a planet) have to go before we accept that the cause is lost, that no reform or movement can save it?

Ursula LeGuin's "Hainish" series of novels deals with a federation of planets, far in the future. These stories represent our planet in a chillingly matter-of-fact way. Hundreds of years before, Earth had been rendered all but inhabitable by war and pollution. Little mention is made of this in any of the Hainish novels; it is just a sad fact of their history. As such — for LeGuin is a master at creating fully-formed, believable alternate worlds — this brief treatment of Earth's possible future is deeply disturbing.

There are a number of islands and low-lying regions, around the world, that will likely have to be abandoned as sea levels inexorably rise over the next few decades. The Indian Ocean nation of Maldives, for example, averages 1.3 meters above sea level, and is disappearing rapidly. In Bangladesh, a third of the country's land area floods every year, and farmers have been forced to develop rafted crops that can float above what used to be their land.

Mural of Malcolm X, Nina Simone and James Baldwin by Baltimore artist and teacher Ernest Shaw

And then there's Baltimore, Maryland, the once-proud port and industrial city, home of the Orioles, distinctive marble front stoops that rowhouse residents would lovingly polish, and more registered historical monuments per square acre than any other US city. These days, though, it's the setting of the dystopian TV hit "The Wire," and the scene of epic conflict between the police and the populace.

Baltimore's problems are particularly focused in the storied neighborhood of Sandtown (officially it's called "Sandtown-Winchester"). In years past, Sandtown was the city's preeminent African-American neighborhood. Prominent natives include Billie Holiday, Cab Calloway and Thurgood Marshall. Its nightlife was legendary; in the 50s and 60s all the top black performers made sure to perform in the nightclubs on Pennsylvania Avenue. The long-

enduring Arch Social Club on Pennsylvania has been bringing men together for games, music and drinks since 1905. Now it is an outpost in a desert.

## The Arch Social Club

Sandtown today is better-known as Freddie Gray's neighborhood. If you're just joining us, Freddie Gray was a 25 year old Baltimore man who was arrested for no reason other than fleeing the police (which Baltimoreans routinely do, just usually a bit less suddenly). After Gray was fatally injured in the back of a police van, six officers were initially placed on paid leave — and were then acquitted of homicide in his death. This led to widespread protests, some of which became violent.

Of course, there is more to it. After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968, Baltimore endured riots that were much larger and more destructive than the "Freddie Gray uprising." Furthermore, though Baltimore started losing manufacturing jobs in the 1960s, it was after the 1968 rioting that its population really started to fall. There are large swaths of abandoned houses in Baltimore that have stood empty since then. The sad truth of the matter is that many of Baltimore's neighborhoods were abandoned after 1968, and have never recovered.

In 1960, Baltimore City was home to 939,000 people. Its population today is just under 615,000. Along with this decline, the city's racial and economic composition changed drastically. The processes of "white flight and urban decay" were going on in many US cities during this period, but they seemed to hit Baltimore especially hard. The basic outline is well-known: the tax base dwindled, schools (and all manner of public infrastructure and services) suffered; crime burgeoned.

Nobody would deny that police officers in Baltimore have a hard job. Recently there have been reforms, body cams have been adopted and sensitivity training has been undergone. Yet these problems are deeply established. Addressing them will demand lots of time and patience. Today, 44% of Baltimore's police force is African-American, and less than 50% is white. Nevertheless, about 65% of Baltimore's people, and over 95% of Sandtown's residents, are black. The police seldom live in the areas they patrol. It's pretty much inevitable that they would come to be seen (and, perhaps, to see themselves) as an occupying force in hostile territory. In black neighborhoods there is no incentive to cooperate with the police, and strong reasons not to. "Snitches" are hated. In 2002 [a family of seven died](#) when their house was firebombed after they alerted the police to drug dealing and other crime in their neighborhood.

Jobs are scarce. For young black men, or for those with felony convictions, they are nonexistent. Drugs filled an economic void. There was a strong incentive to recruit kids, young enough to be prosecuted as juveniles, for handling and retailing illegal drugs. All of these factors led to a truly terrifying social spiral. In Sandtown, [every socioeconomic indicator](#) bottomed out. For example, unemployment in Sandtown stands at 21%; more than 55% of households have an annual income of less than \$25,000. There are twice as many stores that sell alcohol and tobacco as in the average Baltimore neighborhood. One in every four buildings in Sandown is vacant. Not surprisingly, this neighborhood has the highest number of felony convictions per capita in Baltimore.

I have been reading about Sandtown with sincere interest, but I've never been there. Were I to go, I doubt that I would feel either welcome or comfortable. I've had to tour the neighborhood using Google Street view — which shows people walking around, or sitting on stoops, their faces blurred out. In my virtual strolls, I noticed three pervasive aspects of the neighborhood. First, of course, is all the abandoned buildings; they're everywhere. Second is the striking number of churches. One can hardly travel more than two blocks without finding another one, and they range from proud century-old edifices to basement congregations with a cross painted on the street-side wall. Third, one sees how few businesses there are in this neighborhood. Baltimore counts a fairly high number of small markets and take-out places in Sandtown. But one soon sees that these “businesses” are very rudimentary. Any fool can see that there is little legal entrepreneurship in Sandtown.

As if to finally prove the hopelessness of the situation, in the 1990s the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood was given a big dose of special financial help. The Enterprise Foundation, an organization specializing in funding and constructing affordable housing, raised \$130 million to spend in Sandtown in an attempt to show that a comprehensive effort could succeed in revitalizing a single neighborhood. Unfortunately, there seems to have been little to show for all this investment. [A 2015 study](#) examined Sandtown's rates of various indicators of well-being, including educational levels, employment, lead-contamination, murder rates, etc. — and found that homeownership was the only indicator that improved during this time; it went up by some 30%. Unfortunately, this came at a time when homeownership in such a place is a precarious investment, for all the obvious economic reasons — and then, the great crash of 2008 delivered a body blow, causing home prices all over Baltimore to plummet, and creating a jump in foreclosures throughout the city.

Notwithstanding all of Sandtown's scary challenges, there are still people who raise children there, send them to school, go to church and to work. There are still people there who have neither fled, succumbed to addiction nor joined street gangs. There are still people in Sandtown, in short, who are doing their best to make a living.

Such folks are aware that Baltimore, which has been struggling for decades to fund adequate schools and basic services, has a conventional tax system. There is a property tax on land and buildings; there is also a small state property tax. There is a personal property tax, falling on various forms of movable and capital property; this imposes a particularly tough penalty on small business. And there is a flat city income tax of 3.12%. Given the many economic challenges that face anyone trying to make a living in a place like Sandtown, it seems likely that these tax burdens put the last nail in the coffin of entrepreneurial opportunity.

By now, Earthsharing readers should be somewhat familiar with the [Henry George Theorem](#). Briefly, this theorem, which is an accepted part of today's economic canon, states that in any reasonably well-run city, the annual rental value of its land is a sufficient fund for all of its public infrastructure needs. As a city invests in public infrastructure and services, these things enhance its land values. Public services that are paid for by land rent, in fact, finance themselves.

This suggests a modest proposal that could be made for a place like Sandtown. There is precedent for a program that targets a single needy neighborhood. But what's the use? Society

threw \$130 million at Sandtown and it didn't work. Yet it is possible the local entrepreneurial choices, small at first, can be better-targeted and more effective than a clumsily-targeted outside initiative.

Here is a suggestion for a pilot program. Suppose, within the boundaries of Sandtown-Winchester, we eliminate the city taxes on buildings, personal property and income. This would mean that a renovated residential building, or any new small-business investment, would be tax-free. Say someone wants to open a grocery, a bar, an auto-body shop or even (dare one dream!) a bookstore. Suddenly it would be more attractive to establish these businesses in Sandtown than in surrounding neighborhoods that still labor under conventional tax burdens.

If Sandtown eliminated all those taxes, where would it get its revenue? It's probably worth saying that today's Sandtown is not a huge revenue source for the city of Baltimore. Its underground economy is likely considerably larger than its taxable economy, in any case. But in our pilot project, anyway, what revenue Sandtown did bring in — which will probably not be far short of, and might even exceed, what it currently brings in — would come from a tax on its land value.

We can't expect miracles. Sandtown, along with other neighborhoods like it, has been deeply troubled for a long time. Yet one can imagine that the people who live there, who have had so little reason for optimism, might rally around new businesses and renovations — might help to support and protect them. If, indeed, it's ever time to give up on a neighborhood, that day isn't here yet. A basket case can still hold the building materials of a healthy community.

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## 2 thoughts on “Sandtown: Too Far Down?”

1.

*Catherine Orloff*

November 19, 2017 at 10:29 pm | Reply

I lived in Baltimore for a year or two in the 1970's. It was blighted then, but some of the suburbs were quite nice. There was plenty of land speculation going on then and surely now. This city would be a great candidate for land-value taxation, and its proximity to Washington, DC would make it easier for the benefits from LVT to draw national attention.

2.

*Gemma*

November 23, 2017 at 1:11 pm | Reply

If one thing is for certain, it is that even the most vehement naysayers against land value tax are well aware of how it destroys land speculation, and these plots of blighted urban land are owned by someone, somewhere. Land deeds are public record. If you look closely, you will find that this land is being kept purposely blighted in order to depress its value until such time as burgeoning economic activity in the city center begins the process of gentrification, when they will reap windfalls. The same is true in every city: Detroit and Philadelphia have suffered similar fates as Baltimore. The picture above is indistinguishable from West Philadelphia, Point Breeze, or Kensington neighborhoods in Philadelphia. If you look and the deeds, you will find the culprits.