



Arts Districts Without Artists

Meghan Ashlin Rich

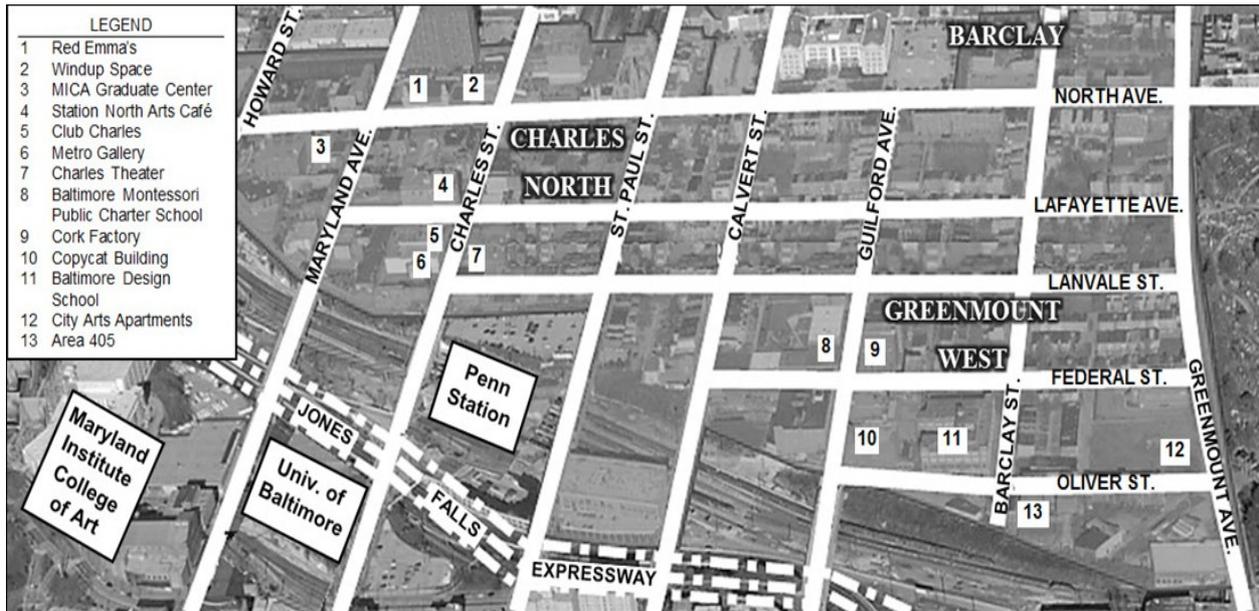
Numerous studies have examined gentrification's harmful effects for low-income residents, but few examine the consequences for its "pioneers," the artists who jump-start the process. Focusing on a Baltimore neighborhood turned "Arts & Entertainment District," sociologist Meghan Ashlin Rich shows what happens when artists' work intertwines with the city's agenda for revitalization.

A "naturally occurring" Arts & Entertainment District is born in Baltimore¹

Baltimore's Station North neighborhood was one of the first areas to receive an Arts & Entertainment (A&E) District designation from the state of Maryland in 2002. The program aims to "develop and promote community involvement, tourism and revitalization through tax-related incentives that attract artists, arts organizations and other creative enterprises" (Maryland State Arts Council 2015). In the geographic center of the city, near Penn Rail Station, this area consists of two neighborhoods, Charles North and Greenmount West. The area experienced severe decline beginning in the 1960s: white flight, property abandonment, and rampant crime. Beginning in the 1980s, however, artists and musicians claimed space here, and the past 10 years have seen gentrification ratchet up. Coffee houses, restaurants, bars, theaters, warehouse loft spaces, and galleries have opened, and new residences in former commercial and manufacturing spaces became available through changes to zoning laws and rehabilitation of existing structures. From 2000 to 2010, median household income increased from \$18,089 to \$33,906 (US Census Bureau 2015), and the number of white residents increased by 333% (whites still only represent 26.4% of the 1,751 residents, and blacks 68%).

¹ William Tsitsos (Towson University) and I conducted an ethnographic study of Station North between June 2013 and June 2014, completing 39 interviews with 42 participants. Interviewees were selected through snowball sampling, and all belonged to one or more of the following categories: persons actively involved in neighborhood institutions or organizations focused on Baltimore neighborhood revitalization; local business owners or employees; residents (homeowners and renters).

Figure 1. Station North Arts & Entertainment District and selected points of interest



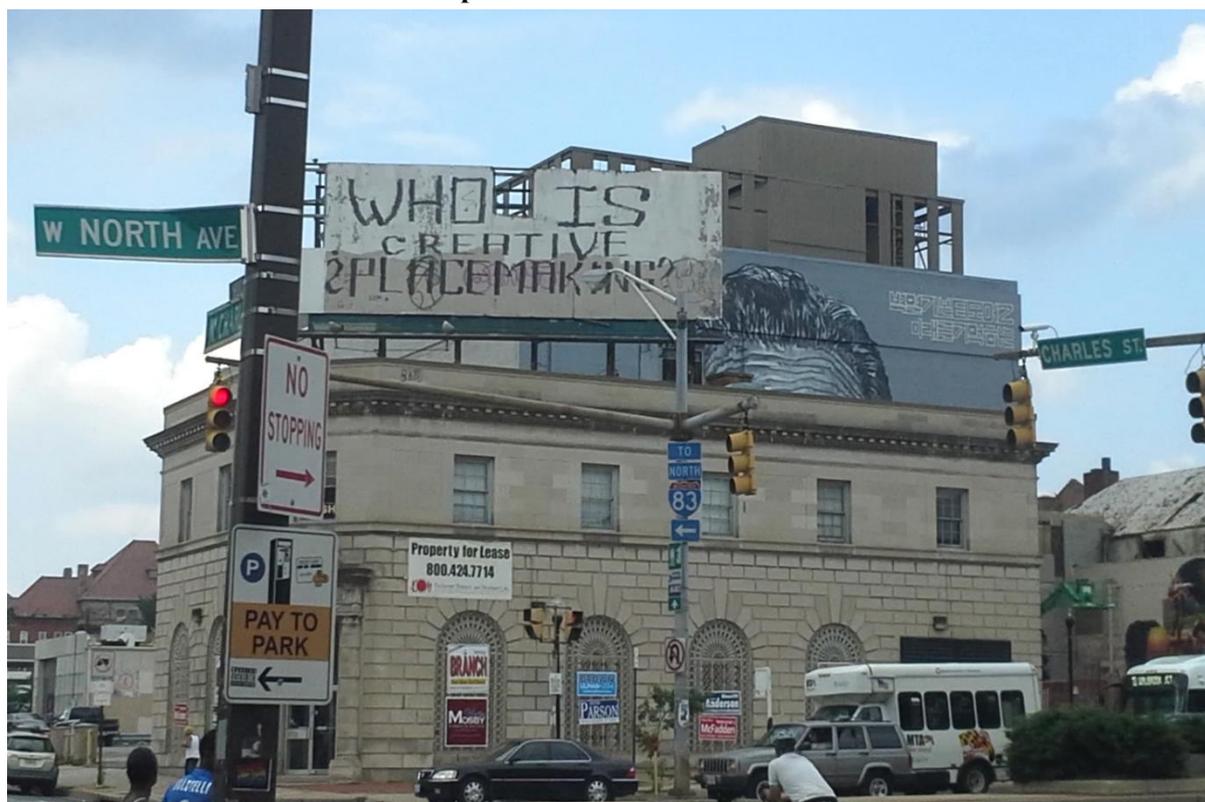
Map by Lee Ashlin.

Station North has been touted as a “natural” cultural district, one that other cities should replicate (Stern and Seifert 2013). It is “natural” in that the neighborhood has not followed the standard gentrification process of revanchism and displacement, as outlined by Zukin (1982) and Smith (1996), but rather a “third wave of gentrification” (Cameron and Coaffee 2005): revitalization informed by neighborhood stakeholders with little or no displacement of lower-income communities, spearheaded by government in the interest of “regeneration.” Because the success of Station North A&E District and the economic health of Central Baltimore are mutually beneficial, community development groups, private foundations, and the surrounding universities (in particular, Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) and Johns Hopkins University) work closely with the A&E District and neighborhood groups. Even with these seemingly favorable conditions, two key questions remain: can revitalization happen without displacement, and can and should *artists* be specially protected as neighborhoods transform?

Artist-led revitalization without gentrification?

In June 2013, the Station North A&E District hosted the “Artists & Neighborhood Change” conference to address some of the most worrying aspects of artist-led gentrification. It began with a direct plea from speakers and attendees that Station North “avoid the SoHo effect,” or the “process by which New York City’s SoHo neighborhood transformed to an outdoor shopping mall” (Currid 2009, p. 374), drastically raising property values and rents and displacing the artist communities that had stabilized the once declining neighborhood.

Figure 2. Questioning the murals: “Who is creative placemaking?” graffiti in Charles North; “official” Open Walls mural behind it



© William Tsitsos.

Interestingly, the audience did not hear much about displacement of so-called “legacy” residents, the poor African-American residents of Greenmount West who have lived in the area for generations. As one white panelist bemoaned gentrification—specifically, his transition from an “anything goes” living environment in a warehouse to a traditional rental in the City Arts Apartments—an African-American community leader of Greenmount West reminded him, “We were here before you. Artists can move on, but we are still here.”

Conflicts of interest do not just exist between artists and longtime residents. As Station North has changed over the past decade, the paths of very different communities have begun to intersect: young, old, newcomer, longtimer, artist, white-collar professional, business owner, renter, homeowner, student, parent. Although “legacy” residents are overwhelmingly African-American, a renter in Greenmount West explains that class is also one of the major conflicts in the neighborhood:

I think the diversity is mostly skewed in [terms of] socioeconomic status. You have these black people that are moving in that have master’s degrees. And so for them, they feel just as far away as maybe white people do to these legacy residents who didn’t finish 8th grade ... They can’t rely on their race to be some kind of a bonding card ... I think that the main resistance is that people tend to think of artists as white and more well-off. It’s sort of having the luxury to be an artist.

Generally, artists do not have high incomes but are often viewed by outsiders as being white and middle-class, “choosing” to live in poverty for their art (Strom 2010). Even if artists do not have economic resources to fall back on, they tend to have more social and cultural capital in comparison to poor inner-city African Americans. Complicating the situation, artists are courted and protected by large institutions in Baltimore. This is not lost on legacy residents and is a major source of tension.

Deterring displacement?

To combat potential artist displacement, significant public and private funds have been set aside to support artist projects, housing, and studios, including the 69-unit City Arts Apartments built in 2010 with a \$10 million low-income housing tax credit. City Arts was built to house artists in a new, clean, secure, and low-cost apartment building just a few steps away from the grungy warehouses where many previously lived. This model of subsidized housing for artists has proven so popular that a second development, City Arts II, is under construction. Other large warehouse redevelopments have also been earmarked for artists' studios and galleries. The director of a philanthropic private foundation explained:

There was a perception that the facilities were substandard for the artists and that that wasn't healthy or sustainable and I think we had begun to appreciate a trend that people would [graduate from] MICA or would come to Baltimore from other places because it was cheap, but over time, they would move away—we wanted to stem that ... we also wanted to have a positive impact on the broader communities that they're part of. We recognize that artists can be great anchors for a community, but you have to lift up the whole community.

There are clear ties between neighborhood revitalization strategies, public-private partnerships, and artist enclaves. While financial organizations may support artists and artist spaces for their inherent value in society, culturally led urban redevelopment policy maintains that what is good for artists is good for whole communities, and, in turn, will "lift all boats," including impoverished residents, non-artists, and the city as a whole. Even though a focus on culture and artists as sources of inner-city neighborhood revitalization is a different tactic than had been adopted during the 1980s era of downtown waterfront marketplaces, the critique of the public-private partnership trickle-down economic model is similar (see Levine 1987). Today, urban revitalization strategies may aim to be more inclusive of diverse stakeholders' interests, yet an overemphasis on culture and artist communities leaves out the "average" Baltimore citizen. Many interviewees, particularly non-artist residents and business owners, expressed irritation at this. As one business owner says:

The neighborhood is all about the artists and it's not about creative industry ... they talk a lot about the demographic changes that happened to the neighborhood, about what manufacturing jobs left and the neighborhood went down. But how they've chosen to solve that issue is basically by warehousing artists here. And all the activity seems to be geared towards putting artists ... in "maker spaces," essentially. But there's nothing about any of these spaces that are conducive to commerce, which would keep them here. So basically they've created ... a ghetto, of sorts, of artists and ... it seems like they may feel like they're in the zoo ... that they're zoo animals on display in the district and they're also resistant to the gentrification aspect of it.

Public-private partnerships have been the model for revitalizing Station North and protecting artists from displacement, yet it is these exact partnerships that make it difficult for artists to stay in the neighborhood. A number of citywide public-private programs, including Healthy Neighborhoods—a neighborhood stabilization program—and SCOPE and Vacants to Value—programs to sell Baltimore's many vacant and city-owned properties for rehabilitation—have helped drive real-estate values up. While benefiting people who already own homes and can take advantage of homeowner tax-credits and freezes, the increased values are a major hurdle for those looking to buy inexpensive "fixer-uppers" in the area. The sweat equity that artists put into the warehouses in the district has made the A&E District designation possible. Yet because larger organizations have "piggybacked" on this sweat equity, artists cannot count on their hard work when banks will not extend credit. A Greenmount West homeowner explained, "[Speculators] take advantage of the [housing] programs. They're just going to wait until they can sell it for a million dollars." When speculators instead of individual homeowners buy and warehouse property, the neighborhood not only stagnates, because properties continue to be vacant, but fewer artists and/or longtime renters can take advantage of the public programs available to help them become homeowners. If Station North A&E District and private community development organizations

discontinue subsidizing working artists through grant programs and public–private workshop and housing developments, they risk a future where the connection to the arts is purely symbolic.

Figure 3. Open Walls mural in progress in Greenmount West



Artist: Betty Casanas. Photo © William Tsitsos.

The possibility of arts districts without artists

There is little evidence that low-income residents, who can take advantage of tax credits for property assessment increases and subsidized housing protections, will be displaced *en masse*. While “the gentry” have certainly arrived in Station North as consumers and residents, the main displacement that is likely to happen in the near future is artist displacement. The public–private partnerships that seek to retain artists through subsidies and grant programs are paradoxically sowing the seeds of the demise of an arts district with artists as residents. Once artists “grow out” of the new subsidized rental apartments and warehouse living, they are left with few options, as the barriers to owning a single-family home—market-rate prices, lack of available units, and ineffective city programs—become insurmountable. Because much of Baltimore’s housing is still inexpensive and vacant, there is little to keep artists, who have more mobility than legacy residents through high levels of social and cultural capital, in Station North. In fact, many artists and musicians in Baltimore already maintain creative activities and/or studios in Station North but live outside the district.

Baltimore, like many post-industrial cities, has faced economic and social challenges for many decades. However, Central Baltimore’s unique geographic location and anchor institutions (education and transportation) represent an opportunity for community developers to fill the “hole in the doughnut.” The conflict over maintaining existing artists (“keeping them in the zoo”) versus attracting newcomers by improving quality of life will likely continue as long as the A&E District retains funding. This case illustrates the complexities inherent when government rides the wake of artist-led neighborhood revitalization and serves as a cautionary example for other cities currently implementing or considering A&E Districts.

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Dr. **Meghan Ashlin Rich** has been teaching in the University of Scranton's Sociology/Criminal Justice Department since fall 2007. Dr. Rich's research involves studying race, class, and social change in urban neighborhoods. She is particularly interested in how cities use arts- and culture-based strategies to renew blighted areas. She has completed ethnographic studies of neighborhoods in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and Baltimore, Maryland, and has published research in *Sociological Forum*, *Sociological Spectrum*, and the *Journal of Urban Affairs*. Her last study was a qualitative investigation into the effects that a state-designated Arts & Entertainment District has on the revitalization of a central-city Baltimore neighborhood and the neighborhood's residents.

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