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*From the Baltimore Sun*

**Sun special report: Part 1**

## A neighborhood abandoned

**Devastated by crime, decay and neglect, the area around the old American Brewery in East Baltimore is again the focus of revival efforts. But is it too late?**

By Eric Siegel [Sun Reporter]

Photos by Karl Merton Ferron

June 25, 2006



Wearing work boots and carrying flashlights on a spring day last year, a band of architects and developers picked their way through the dim interior of the American Brewery. They looked like archaeologists combing through an ancient ruin, which, in some ways, is exactly what the brewery is.

Built in the 1800s, the American Brewery has stood empty these past 33 years, a ghostly reminder of a distant past when the city's manufacturing muscle was on display in working-class neighborhoods such as this one in East Baltimore.

Rain drips from a hole in the roof and puddles on the floor. Ankle-deep piles of pigeon droppings and feathers soil the concrete floors. Holes and graffiti deface walls. Rust has corroded most metal surfaces.

The deterioration doesn't end at the doors of the old factory, which stands at an isolated, impoverished corner of the city near the point where East North Avenue dead-ends at the Baltimore Cemetery. The view from the brewery's vacant arched windows is equally desolate.

In a roughly 20-square-block area around the brewery, about half the properties are empty buildings or barren lots. Rowhouses and stores stand empty. A building that was once a schoolhouse and then an apartment house has been abandoned. So has a one-time post office that was reincarnated as an auto parts store, before it, too, failed.

The area has been in decline for more than three decades, most precipitously during the 1990s. City Hall has alternately ignored or unsuccessfully tried to stem the deterioration. Either way, the consequence has been the same, the unending disintegration of a neighborhood, with all the social ills and misery that go with it.

"It's depressing," said Leslie Funderburk, one mother who lives in the neighborhood. "How can you expect someone to have a positive outlook on life, when all they see is destruction?"

The dissolution evident around the brewery is not confined to that area of Baltimore. Even as many city neighborhoods are in the midst of a housing boom unprecedented in recent times, and other communities are being readied for rebirth, 18 percent of residential areas are categorized by the city as distressed, based on such factors as sales prices and vacancy rates.

Portions of Baltimore, such as Park Heights in Northwest, the neighborhoods abutting Carroll Park in Southwest and large swaths of East and West Baltimore have decayed badly, with acres of abandoned houses and buildings in deplorable condition. Not surprisingly, those areas are rife with drug dealing and crime, poverty and despair. They provide compelling evidence that the revitalization so apparent in some sections of the city has left many other parts untouched -- a reminder of the continuing gulf between prosperous and poor Baltimore.

To understand the dynamics of a degraded neighborhood and its chances for rebirth, it is useful to explore the cycle of cause-and-effect in one such area, such as the one that surrounds the American Brewery.

While the shuttered plant symbolizes the wider abandonment of the area, it has also been a cause of the neighborhood's stagnation. Failed attempts to redevelop the brewery have created a developmental Catch-22: With the future of so commanding a building in doubt, investors have been deterred from putting money into the surrounding area. And because those blocks have declined, developers have been reluctant to invest in the brewery property.

Other grim economic logic contributes to the downward spiral of this section of Baltimore. Landlords don't want to make investments in properties that they do not expect to recoup in rents, and tenants don't want to, or can't, pay more rent for buildings that are in poor condition. Retail businesses don't move into neighborhoods without a critical mass of customers to support them, but no one willingly moves into neighborhoods with no amenities. One negative reinforces another. The only change is further deterioration.

On some residential streets around the brewery, only a handful of houses have people living in them. On many blocks, the boards covering window openings have been ripped out, giving those buildings the eerie look of Formstone jack-o-lanterns.

To be sure, a couple of blocks boast well-maintained homes with polished marble steps and planters filled with flowers, houses that would not be out of place in Canton or [Federal Hill](#). They hint at what the neighborhood once was, and some hope might become again. But they are exceptions.

Walk the streets on any given day, and you're apt to find city police making an arrest, often for drugs; last year, the police averaged about 70 arrests a month in the area.

Walk the alleys, and it won't be long before you come upon drug addicts stumbling down the stairs from the second floor of an abandoned building. A local methadone clinic treats 600 patients; one describes the blocks around the brewery as part of a larger "all-night [drug] shop."

Many streets and alleys are strewn with refuse, which provide the food for rats, just as the abandoned buildings offer them shelter. The city responds to dozens of complaints each year, but litter and discarded furniture remain problems -- the result of the willingness of illegal dumpers, transients and even some residents to sully an already degraded neighborhood.

On blocks once dotted with shops, there's no bank or full-scale grocery or sit-down restaurant. The only chain drug store closed five years ago. One of the few -- and most popular retailers -- is an unlicensed "house store" run by a retiree on the first floor of his rowhouse on a block that is otherwise blighted. He sells cans of soda for 50 cents and Mary Jane candies for a nickel.

What's left, for the most part, are a few churches, barber shops, corner stores and carryouts. Near the end of East North Avenue is a small commercial cluster that includes an auto supply store, a gas station and an oil delivery company

For many who remain, the brewery area is a neighborhood of necessity, not choice. Interspersed among the vacant houses are low-wage workers, driven there in a desperate search for affordable, decent housing that keeps them on the move from one rundown neighborhood to another; and longtime homeowners, tied to houses they bought decades ago, worked hard to maintain but can't afford to leave.

Funderburk and Edward Cole Jr., the father of her two small children, long for the day when they have the resources to leave the bleak blocks that surround their rented rowhouse. Their closest neighbors on either side -- if you don't count the vacant houses between them -- are Nikki Rochester and Milton Bell, both retirees who have been there for decades and are bound by the reality of the real estate market: Their homes are worth a fraction of what it would cost to buy in a better neighborhood.

Many others have deserted. A neighborhood once home to nearly 7,000 people, the brewery area has shrunk to fewer than 3,000 residents, nearly half of whom live in poverty.

Now, the city is once again counting on a revitalized brewery to help end the slide in the neighborhood.

On that spring day in 2005, Baltimore officials opened the American Brewery, which the city acquired after the factory closed in 1973, to potential builders. Months later, the city selected a group led by a prominent local firm to turn the brewery into the Baltimore headquarters of a nonprofit social services organization. The hope is that the reborn building will spark a broader renewal in the area.

It is not a new hope, nor one that everyone is willing to embrace. The Rev. Milton Williams, pastor of the neighborhood's New Life Evangelical Baptist Church, has heard talk of the brewery's great promise since he opened his church 20 years ago.

And the result of all past renewal efforts linked to the brewery?

"Nothing happened," the minister observed.

### **Afraid for the kids**

As Leslie Funderburk walked home on an October night, her nerves were still jangling from the event she had just left -- a street-side commemoration for a man and a teenager gunned down the night before just a half-block from her rowhouse.

Funderburk, 38, moved slowly along North Bradford Street, past the corner at the end of her block where drug addicts swarmed all summer long to traffic with a crew of young dealers. Her two small children, Taescha, 5, and Trevijon, 4, sometimes use the sidewalk as a drawing board for their chalk pictures. She would prefer that the kids play in the safety of their concrete backyard patio, but she and their father, Edward Cole, worry about the rats that rule the back alley. So Funderburk lets the kids loose in front of the house, while she and Cole sit on guard on their front steps for hours at a time.

Twilight faded as Funderburk, a sturdy woman with her first name tattooed in script on her biceps, approached her house. A vacant bar, the Federal Lounge, stands on one corner, a fitting gateway to a block with 19 boarded houses. In April, city contractors took down the rear additions on three of those houses (at a cost to the city of about \$2,400 each), deeming them in such precarious condition they were in danger of collapse.

As she reached her house, Funderburk spotted a group of young girls across the street prying off the plywood covering a basement window. The girls intended to salvage nails from the sheet to tack up a remembrance to the two shooting victims.

It was a heartfelt gesture, but all Funderburk saw was yet another neighborhood menace. She shrieked.

"You're going to let the rats on the street!"

A few days later, Funderburk explained her reaction. "Things were bad enough. And then they were going to make the neighborhood worse."

Funderburk and Cole rent a two-story, two-bedroom rowhouse in the 1600 block of N. Bradford St. It is no bigger than many apartments but is warm and tidy with a kitchen floor they re-tiled themselves. Hanging in their tiny living room above a vinyl sofa is a framed homily that belonged to Funderburk's late father. "Lord," it says, "help me to remember that nothing is going to happen to me that you and I together can't handle."

When they were seeking new housing, this rowhouse looked better on the inside than other places they had seen. What keeps them here is economics. Funderburk brings in roughly \$1,100 a month as a customer service representative for a furniture company. Add the \$185 a month in temporary medical assistance that Cole receives after having surgery two years ago, and the family's monthly income is still below the poverty level.

Their rent runs \$400 a month, and winter utility bills add another \$300, driven up in part by the cold seeping in from the empty houses flanking theirs. "Every time they try and raise the rent," she said, "I remind them that I live between two vacants."

To live in a better neighborhood would cost them more, which wouldn't leave enough for items such as the two bicycles -- one pink, the other black and orange -- that were their kids' Christmas presents. It's hard putting any money away, but what they manage to save they intend to use to pay off debts and, with luck, to buy a car.

"I got to bear it out and make sense of it," Cole, 43, said. "If I moved somewhere else, I couldn't afford for my kids."

Both struggle, psychologically and practically, with what goes on around them.

Cole gets tired of clearing the trash that accumulates in the crevices of the broken steps of a house across the street. Residents say drug dealers cracked the steps to create a hiding place for drugs.

"We're just forgotten about," he said. "Look at the neighborhood. Everybody's moving out. Every time somebody's moving out, they're boarding it up."

Funderburk is worried enough about the neighborhood that her two teenaged children from a previous relationship live with her mother in Baltimore County. "I sacrifice seeing them every day," she said.

On occasion, she is able to overlook the problems, as when she watches Taescha and Trevijon happily running down the sidewalk. "Sometimes, when I look at my kids and see them playing and having fun, I feel like I'm not hurting them by living here," she said.

A moment later, though, her frustration spills over: "The neighborhood is dirty, and it sucks. I can show you five bars. That's our entertainment."

Scanning her street from the front of her house, she adds: "I can't change the fact that 10,000 people want to buy crack on Lanvale and Bradford every week. I just want to see something positive happen to the neighborhood. I want to see some life."

The shooting death of the teenager, who lived in Parkville but hung out on North Bradford Street, hit her particularly hard.

"He was an intelligent young man. He was here dealing. He got caught up in that world," she said.

She can't help worrying that his life could be a template for her children's. "You look at your children, and your heart hurts," she said. "Are those people going to recruit them? Are they going to be attracted to what goes on? That's my biggest fear."

## No bargain

When landlords in a neighborhood charge as little as \$300 a month to rent a rowhouse, it isn't necessarily a sign of a bargain. It suggests an area in trouble, which is exactly the case around the brewery.

Throughout the area are rowhouses in near-squalid condition that rent for under \$300 a month, like one on the 1700 block of N. Bradford St. with a broken stove in the kitchen, holes in the living room walls and a barely functional faucet in the second-floor bathroom. While the city issues violations for such properties, there are also economic realities that militate against improving housing in distressed areas.

Tenants can't afford to pay more, so landlords can't charge more and are less willing to invest in renovations. Housing deteriorates, properties are abandoned and real estate prices plunge. As this cycle accelerated in the 1990s, landlords joined many residents in flight from the brewery area.

Complicating the matter is a 1994 law that set conditions and deadlines for landlords to rid rental units of dangerous levels of lead. While the law provides much-needed protection for children, it imposes significant costs on landlords, which some claim encourage abandonment. It can cost up to \$10,000 to bring a rowhouse into compliance with state and city lead reduction laws, officials say.

"Everyone's on the edge -- landlords are on the edge, and tenants are on the edge," said Sandra J. Newman, director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Policy Studies. "The problem is that we have continued, persistent poverty."

It's a problem in many poor areas of the city, Newman found in a study last year that was funded by the Abell Foundation and published by the Urban Institute.

In 1994, Eduardo Tarver, then in his 20s, bought two rental properties in the 1600 and 1700 blocks of N. Bradford St. -- part of a package of five properties that he purchased for a total of \$60,000. But he was soon driven off Bradford Street by tenants who didn't pay their rents and vandals who then trashed the places.

Returning to the street last year, Tarver peeled the boards off one of those houses, revealing a littered, stripped-out shell that is still listed in property records as owned by Tarver Realty but that the city is moving to take over because of thousands of dollars in unpaid liens.

"I thought it was something to do to make good money. It was harder than I thought," said Tarver, who remains interested in renovating houses in the area.

As an owner of real estate, Tarver is relatively small-time. That wasn't the case with R. William Connolly Jr. Last July, as a consequence of Connolly's bankruptcy, the city wound up with 250 of his vacant properties, 19 of them in the area around the brewery. The city must decide whether to demolish them and try to sell the land -- or entice developers into renovating them.

Stanley Sugarman, a long-time inner city property owner and manager, sits in his office just south of [Charles Village](#), and pulls up 10 years of computerized rental records for a North Bradford Street rowhouse he managed for a Pikesville man. Expenses generally ran around \$1,000 a year for taxes, insurance and maintenance, on rents that topped out at \$355 a month (\$4,260 for the year). But in 1996, when the property brought in \$3,660 in rent, it incurred \$8,600 in expenses because of a major plumbing repair and other costs.

Such large bills could doom small or novice landlords, especially if they had to be paid out before cash reserves can be built up, Sugarman said. "If your cash flow was \$3,000 a year and you had to spend \$9,000, you lost three years of cash flow," he said.

In August, the rowhouse was sold to a pair of Northeast Baltimore investors. The price: \$17,850.

## Dealing with landlords

Community leaders blame landlords for hastening the area's decline by milking properties for rent and abandoning them when they need major repairs. Some landlords, like Stanley Rochkind, blame government for failing to keep communities clean and safe. Also, they criticize the state for holding landlords accountable for lead problems instead of following the example of Rhode Island, which has sued the paint manufacturers, seeking damages.

Companies controlled by Rochkind -- long one of the city's main owners of low-rent properties and a controversial figure -- paid \$50,000 in penalties to the state in 2001 for failing to comply with interim deadlines in the 1994 lead law as part of a consent order that set a schedule for addressing the lead paint problems in nearly 500 properties. Last fall, the companies paid an additional \$10,000 for falling 77 units short of the goal.

Rochkind's companies owned about 40 rowhouses in the blocks around the brewery until late last year, when he began selling them off. All but a handful were vacant, but he says that was not his fault.

"Where has the government been to let a whole neighborhood go down?" he fumed. "Landlords abandon properties because it's impossible to operate."

"You think I want vacant houses?" he added. "I saw my investments go down."

To make his point, he took a reporter on a tour of Forest Park in Northwest and Poppleton on the west side, which are both starting to show signs of rebirth. He says he has been fixing up his vacant houses in those areas and selling them. Records show that he has sold some at prices from \$84,000 to \$284,000.

Around the brewery, one of the properties owned by a Rochkind-controlled company was a boarded rowhouse at 2018 E. Lanvale Street, in the most attractive block in the area. The property had a housing code violation dating back to 1996. The city had initiated legal action to get Rochkind's company to fix up the property. But before the case could be heard, the rowhouse was sold to a newly-created corporation. The sales price was \$35,000 -- just \$170 more than he paid for it in 1986, records show.

In a faxed statement, Rochkind said he decided to sell that property and others around the brewery "with the understanding that the purchaser" would "gut the homes and rebuild them."

Even if some longtime landlords have given up on the brewery area, some newcomers still see a chance to profit there. But changes in ownership doesn't necessarily end problems with properties.

Last summer and fall, Amadou Diallo and his company, Bibah Realty, bought three vacant houses in the 1700 block of N. Bradford St., including one owned by Rochkind. He paid a total of \$15,000.

A Montgomery County resident and systems engineer turned real estate investor, Diallo said he put another \$10,000 to \$15,000 into each of the properties to renovate them. Diallo said he would have preferred buying in neighborhoods that already seemed to be on the upswing but couldn't afford prices there.

"I just want to get established before it's too late," he said. "Eventually, people have to come in and renovate these properties. I'm hoping this will bring bigger profits down the line."

Two days before Thanksgiving, Diallo put the North Bradford Street properties up for auction, hoping to get \$40,000 each, or \$100,000 for all three. But only one potential bidder showed up, and he failed to meet Diallo's price.

The day before the auction, a young mother named Shameka Johnson moved into one of the Diallo rowhouses.

Johnson, 26, had three children and a fourth on the way when she agreed to pay \$625 a month for the Diallo rowhouse. It was more than most renters on the street were paying and more than her \$620-a-month Department of Social Services check. She also receives \$450 a month in food stamps and works as a hairdresser in her home to earn extra money.

Yet when Johnson moved into her new place with her three pre-teen daughters, she found conditions weren't what she expected. Parts of the living room floor sagged. A kitchen cabinet was missing, and so were the doors to a second-floor bedroom and to the basement. "A lot of stuff, [Diallo] just patched over," said Johnson, whose fourth child, a son, was born New Year's Day.

City housing officials agreed.

Officials were first alerted to Diallo's renovations by a sanitation worker who complained the owner was illegally dumping debris from the houses into the rear alley. They discovered that his work had been done without proper building or occupancy permits, and that it violated city codes. They filed civil and criminal complaints against Diallo and his company for the North Bradford Street rowhouses and five other properties he owns.

Among the most egregious of the alleged violations: a rowhouse four doors down from Johnson's with a furnace that "appears to be patched together with tape and insulation in [an] unworkmanlike manner," according to court documents.

In March, a Baltimore District Court judge found the Bibah firm guilty of violating criminal statutes for that property and another, and fined the company \$100 plus costs on each of two charges. He set a mid-April deadline for Bibah to fix the heat problems, which a city housing lawyer said the company complied with. Diallo and Bibah also agreed to a civil consent order to properly rehabilitate seven properties, including Johnson's, by July.

"I didn't know about all the laws," Diallo said after the court hearing. "Right now, I'm just trying to understand how to do things properly."

For her part, Johnson remains a reluctant tenant.

"This house isn't worth \$625," she said. "If I find something better, I'm going to move."

## **Violence lives here, too**

The street-side wake Funderburk attended that balmy Oct. 19 evening was for Stanley Dorsey, who grew up in the area, and William "Loose Kanon" Kirkpatrick, whose official address was in Parkville but who spent much of his time at the corner of North Bradford and East Lanvale streets.

The pair had been gunned down the night before at this spot, in front of Yvette Smith's house in the 1700 block of N. Bradford St.

Four homicides occurred in the blocks around the brewery last year; five the year before, three the year before that. For many on the street, the double slaying punctuated the dangers and difficulties of living in the neighborhood, and highlighted the immediacy of violence in distressed communities. "Most of the areas I've lived in, there are people shooting and getting shot," said Smith, who lived most recently in Harlem Park. "But I never went through so much since I lived in this block."

At the wake, music poured from a pair of speakers, and the fall air filled with smoke from two barbecue grills placed side-by-side on the sidewalk. One cooked hot dogs, the other hamburgers. Neighbors congregated, as well as friends and relatives of the deceased.

Kirkpatrick, 16, died on the sidewalk; Dorsey, 31, stumbled through Smith's front door and collapsed after he had been fatally wounded in what police later said was a dispute over drug territory. Dorsey had had a relationship with Smith's 18-year-old daughter.

A makeshift memorial of balloons, stuffed animals and scrawled eulogies blossomed a day later. Pint bottles of liquor were emptied into plastic cups, then lined up on the sidewalk, beside a pool of dried blood. One resident of the street circulated through the crowd wearing a white T-shirt, which mourners signed with black markers.

Last year, Smith moved with her mother into the \$375-a-month rowhouse. A single mother, Smith, 34, works part-time as a \$7-an-hour custodian for a cleaning contracting company; her mother makes \$8.50 an hour working for a Southwest Baltimore manufacturer of wire products.

Through much of last summer, Smith worried about the drug addicts who shot up in the vacant house next door, a concern grounded in her experience.

"I've caught three people getting high in there," she said. "It's every day. I went through it before with a house on North and Greenmount. My house caught on fire. We lost everything."

Within months of moving in, she saw both her sons, who had juvenile records, jailed and charged as adults with felonies.

Just being in the neighborhood was enough to get them into serious trouble. One son, Antonio Watts, then 17, spent months in jail after being wrongly charged in the nonfatal shooting of a drug addict, who identified the boy from a photo array but later admitted he had been mistaken. He said the gunman was actually "Loose Kanon."

Watts, who became a father in January, was more fatalistic than angry at his incarceration. "I thank the Lord I was locked up," he said. "If I wasn't, I probably would have been right there beside Loose Kanon."

As the wake went on the night after the shootings, police cruisers and cars of plainclothes officers made a show of force, frequently riding up the one-way street, parting the small knots of people.

Within days, they mounted a flashing blue-light surveillance camera on a light pole at the end of the street. They also dismantled most of the memorial to the two victims.

Eastern District Police Sgt. William Colburn said he wanted to send a message.

"We took everything down aside from the teddy bear, the goal being not to let the young people see that as a way to lead their lives. It's glorifying a lifestyle that led to a young man's death. It's trash," he said. "We want to break that cycle."

## **Making the best of it**

Moving is not an option for many longtime homeowners. Not in an area where housing values have fallen so much.

There are roughly 400 homeowners, many of them elderly or retired, in the 20-square-block area. Nearly half bought their homes before 1970; fewer than one in five moved in after 1990.

Having stayed while so many others have left, they seem unlikely to leave now. Some feel comfortable in the homes they have been in for decades and long ago paid for. Others know they couldn't get enough money for their homes to move to a better neighborhood, and are resigned -- and resolved -- to making the best of where they are.

Two of Leslie Funderburk's nearest neighbors in the 1600 block of N. Bradford St. are Milton Bell and Nikki Rochester, retirees who each live alone and mainly keep to their well-appointed homes.

Bell and his late wife bought their house in 1957 for \$7,700 in what he describes as a "wonderful, [racially] mixed block."

In 1972, Nikki Rochester and her former husband bought a vacant house at the end of the block for \$350; it was one of the few abandoned properties in the area. They stripped out everything but the hot water heater and fixed it up the way they wanted to, with an open ground-floor design and stippled ceiling.

Neither Bell, 72, nor Rochester, 56, has any illusions about the street today.

Bell, a former Air Force clerk and bank and postal worker, has had his basement window broken so many times, he boarded it up himself. "It's way too many people in this block who don't care about anybody but themselves," he said. "It's way too many drug people on this block, way too many people who know the drug people on this block."

Bell's house is paid for. Today, its assessed value is \$10,200. Over the years, he considered moving but never followed through.

"My friend told me I might be moving into an area as bad as this one," he said. "Here, it doesn't cost me anything."

Three years after retiring from her job as a computer programmer for the [Social Security Administration](#), Rochester maintains an outwardly fatalistic, and sometimes sardonic, attitude toward her street.

She had been on the phone with a friend from suburban Washington the night of the double murder Oct. 18, when she heard the gunfire a half-block away, followed by sirens and the sound of a police helicopter overhead. The friend, hearing the noise through the open receiver, thought Rochester had the TV tuned to a crime show.

Crime is "commonplace enough," she said, "that it's not something you get all worked up about."

One of her worries is that even more buildings on the street will be abandoned and the city will bring in bulldozers, making use of a "quick take" law that allows the government to condemn all properties on a block where the percentage of abandoned properties is 70 percent or greater. A housing official said the city uses that authority several times a year.

"Periodically, when I leave the block, I count the houses to see how many are vacant," she said.

Moving seems out of the question. Her house is worth a fraction of what it would cost to buy a new home in a better neighborhood.

"The finances of my retirement are based on the fact that I own a house," she said.

During the latest property assessments, her house was re-valued from \$19,000 to \$12,000.

"What is \$12,000?" she asked. "If I had to sell, that wouldn't pay rent anywhere."

Rochester bought her house the year before the closing of the brewery. "To me it was just a big building," she said. She knows little about the plans for its revitalization. She guesses that it would probably be a good thing, though she questions how much of a difference it would make.

At this point, she's not counting on the neighborhood getting better. "My hope and concern," she said, "is that it doesn't get worse."

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