



<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/ideas/bal-id.brewery16jul16,0,1235159.story>

From the Baltimore Sun

In a reporter's view

By Eric Siegel
Sun reporter

July 16, 2006



Last October, I attended a street-side wake on North Bradford Street for a man and a teenager who were shot to death there. I made the visit while reporting for articles about the blocks around the vacant American Brewery building in East Baltimore.

The resulting two-part series, "A Neighborhood Abandoned," ran late last month.

On July Fourth, I went back to the 1700 block, my third visit since publication to an area where about half the properties, including the historic brewery, are vacant buildings or barren lots and an equal percentage of the people live in poverty.

As on that balmy fall evening, hamburgers cooked on a charcoal grill placed on the sidewalk and children darted into the narrow one-way street as adults sat on the steps of their buildings. Unlike that night more than eight months ago, however, there were no heartfelt hugs between mourning friends and relatives, no stunned expressions on the faces of residents, no patrol cars and unmarked police vehicles cruising the street in a show of force.

Still, on this holiday to celebrate the birth of a nation there was no escaping the grimness of the surroundings.

For one thing, there were the remnants of the makeshift memorial tacked on the boarded up front door of one of nearly two dozen vacant buildings on the block. For another, there was the pile of debris topped by a discarded mattress on a small vacant lot at the end of the street that was impossible to ignore - and that residents went out of their way to point out to me. And a couple of people mentioned a shooting a few blocks away and a few hours before - at 5:30 on a summer evening.

In a three-decade career at this newspaper I've been in a lot of areas like that: the now-demolished and replaced high-rise public housing complexes and the decaying but still-operating low-rises; neighborhoods along Park Heights and Greenmount avenues; the vast swath of the east side north of the Johns Hopkins medical complex - and south of the blocks around the brewery - that is slated for a major redevelopment centered around a biotech park.

It is impossible to cover Baltimore without spending time in such areas. But I never spent as much time - a period of several months - or got to know as much about a neighborhood or the people in it as in the roughly 20-square-block area around the brewery, now the object of a proposal to turn it into the headquarters of a nonprofit social

services organization that the city and developers hope will help spark a wider renewal.

In the series, I noted that the blocks around the brewery served as a "reminder of the continuing gulf between prosperous and poor Baltimore." Still, when I go there, I'm struck by the dimensions of that gulf.

On July Fourth, for example, as I left my house in North Baltimore near [Wyman Park](#) and the [Johns Hopkins University's](#) Homewood campus, neighbors were having a holiday gathering in the small backyard behind their rowhouse.

On North Bradford Street, along with the charcoal grill, some residents had put up an umbrella and a pair of folding tables on the sidewalk; in the blocks around the brewery, few use their backyards because of the trash and rats in the alleys - and the views of the abandoned houses behind them.

In the series, I wrote about one mother, Yvette Smith, who saw both her teenage sons jailed as adults on felony charges within months after moving into the 1700 block of North Bradford, and of Leslie Funderburk, who lives in the 1600 block and worries that her children will be swept into the drugs and violence in the streets around her.

It's hard not to wonder whether the lives of my own children - one grown and doing postgraduate work, the other in college - would have been different had they grown up in an environment where so many of their peers were drug dealers and so many were regarded with suspicion by authorities.

Apart from insights into the area and the people who live there, working on the series provided a window on larger social issues as well.

One is the gap in the accumulation of wealth between whites and blacks, a ratio that some studies have pegged as high as 10-to-1. A key reason is the difference in housing values - with too many black neighborhoods having borne the brunt of the kind of urban deterioration so apparent in the blocks around the brewery.

In the 30 years since I bought my house, the assessed value has increased by a little over \$260,000. That's money that I can use to fund my retirement, pass on to heirs or whatever - money that has little to do with talent or hard work but rather the fortunes of geography.

In contrast, homeowners in the brewery area have seen the value of their homes increase by only a few thousand dollars, in some cases over a longer period; some, as the series pointed out, have seen their assessments decline in recent years.

The underlying poverty that is at the root of so many of the problems of the area around the brewery defies easy solution. So too, as I pointed out in the second part of the series, does a comprehensive fix to the area's housing woes.

Elsewhere in this section, others propose immediate strategies to help those who remain in the area in the absence of more costly, long-range policies and plans.

There's little doubt that any aid would be appreciated. In my visits back to the neighborhood, residents expressed appreciation for the attention - and hope that it would help improve their neighborhood.

In my view, one place the city could start is on that small vacant lot at the end of the 1700 block of North Bradford, the one with debris and a discarded mattress.

The city could clean the lot, then fence it off or plant saplings to discourage further dumping. Getting permission from the owner shouldn't be a problem. The property is owned by the city.

Copyright © 2007, [The Baltimore Sun](#) / [Get Sun home delivery](#)

> [Get news on your mobile device at www.baltimoresun.com](#)

