

Re-imagining Baltimore's Inner Harbor as a place for residents rather than tourists | COMMENTARY

By Sally J. Scott and Joby Taylor

For The Baltimore Sun |

Mar 17, 2021 at 8:45 AM



View of the Inner Harbor and Harbor East from Federal Hill with Rash Field in the foreground. Feb. 16, 2021 p1 (Amy Davis)

Stand on the edge of Federal Hill Park and look out on Baltimore; it's an amazing view. Look closely, however, and you'll notice the Inner Harbor's visible signs of neglect and decay. You'll also notice skyline additions shifting our city center eastward, a vacuum more than expansion.

Now close your eyes and imagine people across time taking in that same view from the hill. Our native predecessors looked out over a grassy shoreline and woodland streams long before "Baltimore" existed. In recent centuries, people originating from all corners of the globe — arriving by choice, circumstance or capture — have rebuilt Baltimore many times over. Our cultural inheritance today is the sum of their experiences: booms and busts, triumphs and tragedies, hierarchies of power and privilege, and uprisings of resistance and resilience.

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We live in uncertain and troubled times, times ripe for transformative change. With new leadership in City Hall and the City Council, and thousands of engaged citizens taking action to improve their communities through volunteer, nonprofit and entrepreneurial initiatives, now is the time

to collectively determine the Inner Harbor's next act.

In 2019, a Baltimore judge [appointed a receiver](#) to take control of the pavilions on Pratt and Light streets, because the pavilions' owner couldn't afford to run it. Before a new owner demolishes or renovates Harborplace, we should commit to designing a central public place that reflects and serves the people of Baltimore.

While there are valuable anchor institutions within the Inner Harbor, the bulk of its attractions constitute an expensive playground for visitors and too often exclude the people and compelling stories of our city. And any benefits from the tourist economy have never extended far from the waterfront: Walk just a few blocks east or west, and you'll find communities that continue to endure unconscionable levels of structural racism, disinvestment and poverty.

The fundamental question has always been: Whose Harbor is this? As city residents and local educators, we believe that we now have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to re-imagine a harbor that's of, by and for the people of Baltimore — a shared public place that tells our diverse stories with courage and imagination, while inviting us to connect with Baltimore beyond the harbor.

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For example, re-imagine the Harbor not as a destination, but as a hub, connecting residents and visitors to authentic Baltimore neighborhoods and institutions. In addition to recreation and enjoyment, the Harbor can become a space for learning, culture, social enterprises, civic participation and more.

Any redesign should begin by affirming that process — both lively and inclusive — matters as much as plans and products. We must engage individuals who represent the city's many communities in the design and forge a vision from their aspirations and goals. City leaders could create a working group structured to truly represent diverse city stakeholders and provide them with the resources and authority to lead an engaged planning process.

Let's create a harbor that takes our city's complex history seriously and

catalyzes action for our future. A restorative start would be a truth and reconciliation process that places voices and visions of those who have been historically excluded and disenfranchised front and center. What healing invocations can we imagine, and what social change might flow from that kind of hub as our city center?

As a majority-Black city, we should pay particular attention to lifting up Baltimore's African-American stories, communities and institutions. Let's create a harbor that speaks truths to white supremacy, and is a catalyst for conversations and actions that disrupt racist structures and construct equitable ways of living together. There may be no city in America able to tell so many different strands of African-American history and culture as Baltimore. Let's create a harbor that teaches and celebrates this living legacy.

Baltimore also epitomizes our "nation of immigrants" story. Let's create a hub for retracing the courageous journeys of wave after wave of newcomers who are still bringing the world to Baltimore. By teaching and celebrating these stories, we can become a welcoming city for generations to come.

There are many more narratives we can imagine calling us in and sending us back out, enriched from this Harbor hub, stories of labor and industry, of creativity and the arts, of diverse natural environments and parks, of historic markets and food cultures, of social movements and of scores of unique neighborhoods.

Let's make Baltimore a bold model of a city center that speaks truths, addresses inequities, heals and sustains our communities, and lifts up and celebrates the lives and contributions of its people.

Look again at those aging pavilions; what will you imagine for our Baltimore?

Sally J. Scott (sjscott@umbc.edu) is director of Community Leadership

Programs at UMBC, where Joby Taylor (joby.taylor@umbc.edu) is director of the Shriver Peaceworker Program.

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