

Free  
Baltimore  
1972

## ART TROUBLES IN BALTIMORE CITY

### Impressions and Preliminary Results on Research in Baltimore

#### Introduction

It seems kind of strange or maybe even pretentious to give a presentation on work that hasn't been finished yet. And only because it is the end of a stay. I don't like giving a lot of "hard facts" on issues I have been working on but which I haven't analyzed yet. At the same time, however, I don't like to leave without any trace or without revealing any of the art "troubles" in Baltimore.

My stay here is somehow different in 'content' than that of the other fellows. The Baltimore research is part of a bigger international research project that will take another 2 years to finish. I spent my four months here to gather as much information as possible and to interview as many people as possible, without an attempt to do some serious analysis. I needed my time here to get familiar with the city to find the "right" places to go to. Not only privately but also professionally. Although my research-project on the role of the arts and especially on cultural festivals and arts festivals in the city, enables me to get easier and quicker involved and familiar with a lot of places, cultural institutions and people, I shouldn't forget that I had some kind of "culture shock" during my first weeks here. At the same time, I needed to work on my "theoretical" framework of my research and getting some work done on literature, which is difficult to be found in Europe. Also I wanted to get into contact with American academics already working in this field which also consumed some of my time. Not to mention that I still had to finish some publications

for Holland the first weeks I was here.

So when I was thinking about the presentation, I suddenly realized that there wasn't much yet to be presented. But I do like to share now some of my impressions on cultural Baltimore which I will work out in the next months. For those who don't know exactly anymore what I was doing here, I will inform you briefly on my research-project.

The research to be conducted in the United States will focus on the role of the arts and more particularly on cultural festivals in cities in the United States. The aim of the American research is to compare finally developments in and experience with the arts and festivals in the revitalization of cities in the United States and Europe.

The well-being of the city is nowadays no longer viewed simply as a question of economic growth, favorable material conditions or geographical factors. The quality of life in towns and cities is more and more a major political issue. The presence of potential facilities, amenities, education, recreation and a flourishing cultural life receive a lot of attention and these amenities are considered to be able to attract residents, visitors and investors in cities. Cities are therefore building opera-houses, ambitious theaters, new museums or organizing international festivals. Festivals usually with a 'cultural' aspect or theme, more often food-oriented, entertainment-based with a little cultural flavor in order to attract people and/or media attention.

It is however not inconceivable that this 'new' interest

in the arts for different (economic) reasons will lead to tensions between the different participants in this process. City councils have probably different reasons to stimulate the festivals than arts councils. City (development) policy could conflict with arts and cultural policy on a local, regional or national level. An arts policy can conflict with the festivals on their own terms. And again, the mere economic interest for culture and the arts might prove to be a shortsighted one.

The research project comprises two main aspects:

- I Is there a relation between the festivals and the city and what is the (changing) role or function of the festivals in the city?
- II What is the 'impact' of the festivals in respect to the cultural infrastructure and the city?

Although I am not able to tell you yet if it is possible to answer these questions, I need time to analyze the interviews and the documentation, I would like to share some of my impressions and ideas I got during my stay here. Those ideas are of course somehow related to the two questions mentioned earlier. I will present some of my findings now, and I called them Troubles. First I will discuss some troubles and problems of getting around in a new city, then (most of the time) I will discuss several ART TROUBLES: Arts being used as a way of selling the city, second the importance of power and the role the arts can play in the city and third the lack of an arts 'profile' or an arts-scene.

### 1. Troubles: getting around

The first month I was here I personally had difficulties in finding a decent cinema, a "good" theater, an interesting performance place, information on architecture, and a challenging "cultural" hangout. Apart of course from the wellknown "Louie: the Bookstore Cafe" (which really is a cafe) I didn't seem to be able to locate any other "artsy-farty-hangout".

My opinion on Baltimore was very 'low' at that time, because I thought that there wasn't going very much (well at least not culturally). That was partly a misinterpretation; but nevertheless Baltimore isn't a easy city to get to know. When I found out that there was actually quite a number of nice places to go to, only IF you had a car or if you were able to find a TAXI. Places with an interesting cultural program like the Orpheum, Towson State University, the University of Maryland, the Cultured Pearl, School #33, Maryland Art Place, and of course the "centrally" located Morris A Mechanic, Center Stage or the Theatre Project, were suddenly within "reach". That seems so obvious now, but it took me quite a while waiting on busses to find that out.

More interesting for you is probably to hear that similar thing actually happened with my research. In the beginning I was unable to find some kind of written local document, book or publication on culture and the arts in Baltimore, let alone on the festivals here. Although there were a lot of (local) people continiously referred to the "Famous Balimorean Ethnic Festivals" which everybody seemed to know, but nobody seemed to be able to locate. Of course I blamed

myself for not looking hard enough, not working efficiently or not being able to find the right "key-persons". Only I forgot one major thing: I simply didn't take into account that the documentation I was looking for didn't exist. It took me some time, several interviews and a lot of asking around to find out or better to accept that there was no "overall" arts plan in Baltimore. Although quite recently people (as an initiative of the Regional Planning Commission) started working on trying to make one.

What is the 'morale' or message of this? Although I did some international fieldwork before, I had to go through this whole process of going from one side of the city to the other to find out that I was looking for something that didn't exist. Although I am (and was already before) aware that cross-cultural research implicates a lot of never-expected-problems because of major "cultural" differences between countries, it made me clear once more that one's own "colored" expectations and framework (mine is Dutch which means: being accustomed to a highly state organized and planned society where everything is somehow organized from birth to death) are at least handicaps when you are entering another -and differently organized- society.

## 2. Troubles: art troubles and the like

I mentioned earlier that I also tried to work on my theoretical framework during my stay here. People who met me here, know that I am not very familiar in that field. It is not that I am not interested in it, but I do research within a highly multi-disciplinary field (there is no such thing as a major theory on arts, festivals and the city) and I am not

very well trained in theory. The interesting thing is that I was really able to find here some interesting theoretical references and work within the anthropology of festivals and events, which might very well be helpfull to "use" later on. Also, I found some basis and sustaining "thinking" about my own ideas on the dilemma or foggy ground I foresee for the arts and the festivals within the city when the festivals are used as a way to "sell" the city. The ideas of Moloch about the Growth Machine-thinking might in a way be helpful as well as some of David Harvey's work. Of course I need to do more work on that.

At least it helped me to set up a parallel between the highly regarded but at the same time highly disputed "success" of the revitalization of the inner city and Inner Harbor (Andy), and the way the role of the arts and culture (and the festivals) are being seen within the revitalization of the city. The same kind of joy or pride you find among city coucil and business people when they talk about the "success of Charles Centre and the Inner Harbor and how they were able to reverse the going down process of the innercity", and you find similar things within the arts and culture in the city. Interesting here is to note the "we-brought-the-city-back-on-the-world-map-thinking" with the "help" of the arts and the festivals, which I will describe a little.

## 2.1 Arts and Festivals as a Tool of City Marketing

It has been repeated over and over again that during the sixties that many people left the city and that the city went "down the drain" (which meant that too many white

people and businesses left for the suburbs). The building of Charles Centre and the revitalization of the Inner Harbor apparently "saved" the city from a total eclipse. More important maybe whether this is "true" or not, Baltimore was at least able to make a lot of people believe that they succeeded in revitalizing the city. Baltimore gained a lot of recognition in the world (I am not able to count the number of delegations of Amsterdam and Rotterdam who went to visit Baltimore to see the miracle) and was able to create an image that seems to be attractive to a lot of other cities. The point I like to stress here is that Baltimore's success itself is not at stake here, nor the image that the city was able to create around it. But I would like to find out how "success" is defined, and who benefits from it. I am interested in this question because I see similar things within the reckoning of the "success" of the arts and festivals in the revitalization of Baltimore. This will need some further explanation first. I will give a brief look insight in the cultural life of Baltimore to stress my point.

In 1969 Shaefer felt that the Charles Center wasnot used enough. And to give the people of Baltimore more city/ or civic pride, the new revitalized innercity neighborhood had to become everybody's second neighborhood. So within the city, Sandy Hillman (then head of the Office of Pormotion and Tourism) and Hope Quackenbush (then a volunteer, now director of the Morris A. Mechanic) started to organize the City Fair. They tried to attract people to the (deserted) downtown area, to bring people together and appealing to large segments of the population. But at the same time they

were afraid there would be great problems because of the riots. It was considered as daring to do this in those times of severe racial riots at the end of the sixties. The City Fair turned out to be a "success". What ever that may be. Already in 1970 more than 340,000 people came to visit this ethnic-community food and fun (urban farmer's market) festival. First at the Charles Centre, later in the still then derelict Inner Harbor which was not revitalized yet. In 1973 there were already more than 2 million visitors. Later Rouse became interested in the Inner Harbor area. Harvey said: "Bigger but not necessarily better to the degree that neighborhood development was gradually giving way to mass commercialism".

Somewhere around 1982 a survey indicated that more than 50% of the visitors thought of Baltimore as a festival city or came for the festivals.

This image, as Sandy Hillman wrote in a Harvard report, "was equal to reality whether you ar talking about selling soap or selling cities...Image ends up being real dollars and cents"..

This raised my first doubts about the City Fair being a success for the fair's own sake. In Baltimore the need was not so much for developmnet of cultural areas, as it was the need felt by the business community, ~~chte~~ the city and the community to save the downtown and harbor areas of the city (Harvard).

When I read that in 1983 Mayor Schaefer wrote a letter to the NEA to tell them how much afford was put in the arts and culture as a way to make the city livable agoain. I got more suspicious.

It is at least surprising that the NEA was told (apparently



by the one who could benefit from it's very own success)  
that the "arts made a difference" in Baltimore. Schaefer's  
efforts resulted in a small book (paid by the NEA)  
"Baltimore the Arts in a Proud City". Where was stated that  
"the progress of Baltimore's renaissance owes much to the  
enlightened attitude of its municipal government". Schaefer  
insisted that the welfare of the city was "indivisible";  
cultural and economic development are interdependent. So  
arts were incorporated into city planning. Not for the arts  
and the festivals own sake, but merely with a very strong  
economic and international interest. [Also I should not  
forget to mention that already in 1978 people in this  
institute "proved" that the arts provide 1,175 full-time  
jobs, 29.6 \$ million direct and indirect and induced 1.9  
million local spending by out of towners. [ I have my doubts  
about economic impact studies in general, but I tend to  
believe in the meaning of the 1.9 million.]

When you start comparing selling soap to selling cities -and  
apparently by means of the arts and festivals!- then there  
is something special going on. I like to stress that I doubt  
very much the real interest in the arts for the arts sake.  
So what is "success" here ? Selling soap ? The fact that  
more than 2 million people visit the City Fair? But what  
does it tell you about: who is visiting, what they are  
looking for and what they get ? And isn't it just a one day  
affair ?

There are more things that happened to the arts and  
festivals in this city that sustain the doubts about  
"success" and the lack of interest in the arts for arts and  
culture sake.

- Similar things happened to the famous "ethnic/

neighborhood" festivals. Once they were important (and as you all know the "neighborhood" thinking is used and abused here in Baltimore for all kinds of things) to strengthen the somehow loose ties in the neighborhoods. Now their success (thousands of people who come to eat and browse around) is their own death. Most of them are incorporated in an anonymous Festival Hall at the Inner Harbor. Because it was easier to cope with them ? To me this is the ultimate symbol of total misunderstanding of the meaning of a festival. And more than ever the proof of no interest in the festivals and the people involved with it itself, but merely a way or means to "get people" or "selling soap".

- Another indication is the organized spontaneity of the street theater at the Inner Harbor, where every week the same groups perform with the same jokes. Luckily enough the Harbor is used mostly by out of towners, so they won't notice.

- Not surprisingly, the Festival department at City Hall is not interested in the festivals itself, but only in the renting out of foodbooths.

- And as I found out, Festival Hall doesn't even have the telephone numbers of the various (13) ethnic festivals.

## 2.2 Power in the City and the Role of the Arts and Festivals

Connected with the art troubles in this city, is the question of "Power". Again similar things can be noticed for the power in the city connected with the revitalization and also with the arts and the festivals. I see even some interesting similarities between the so-called former "shadow-government" of Schaefer and power within the arts

and cultural institutions at that time.

In 1974 the Mayor installed the Mayor's Advisory Commission on Arts and Culture, to advise him on the funding and planning of the arts. During a good deal of the eighties, Jodie Albright was the Director of the MACAC. The MACAC grew out into a powerful institution for the city, where arts and culture really were meaningful. Not only because of Schaefer but also because of the people who were involved at that time. Albright had a lot of power, many ideas and invented the still very "successful" ARTSCAPE in 1982 and was able to attract a lot of corporate money for the festival. Created School 33 and stimulated the ethnic festivals, that became a success.

[For people who don't know Artscape, a city council festival that celebrates the arts and crafts in the city, and tries to bring people from outside into the (downtown) cultural area. People in the arts have criticized it for being "too easy", Too much food and too much Bolton Hill. Not to forget it costs a lot of money while there is hardly any money for individual artists in the city (in 1989 only 46,000 \$ for individual projects). Some of the projects or artists that get grants from the local MACAC have to be presented at Artscape.

During the Schaefer years, the MACAC grew very powerful and with right (economic) times on their sides, the arts and festivals flourished in the city.

Although Schmoke still sustains the MACAC and Artscape, they lost a lot of their power and meaning within the city.

[Schmoke still sustains ARTSCAPE, but it will never be an (intern)national important event for the arts because too many different interests are involved. Although Artscape is

considered a "success" (more than 700,000 visits this year). There is a lot of criticism. A lot of the visual arts are local -"of a very uneven quality"- and the toppers of this 3 day free event are very famous (expensive) singers. Theatre or dance is too difficult; food, drinks and easy-listening music.....And the new director of the MACAC just seem to miss a certain passion which is so important. Surprisingly it was in 1989 one of the top 100 bus events in North America.

The fact that I like to point out here is that Albright, just like Hillman, Quackenbush and Jean van Buskirk (who I didn't mention but who was at the international Sister city Department, another of Schaefer's "toys"), had a lot of power within the city. So when Schaefer became governor and some of those powerful people were fired or left the scene themselves (mostly to work for Schaefer at the state), a lot of the power and possible roles of those institutions was heavily diminished. Albright took the (corporate) funding, the ideas and the power of the MACAC. Quackebush became involved with the Mechanic, Hillman went into private business and Van Buskirk went to the State where she does her own thing on the sistercity-relations. This left the city not only devoid of experienced people but also with rather powerless institutions in a bad economic time, with a mayor who has "other priorities".

### 2.3 Art Troubles: the Lack of an Arts Scene in Baltimore

- How about the rest of the Arts Scene of Balto?

Some people in the city will say that Baltimore is having a

thriving arts life, others will say that it is worse than a provincial town (and there is nothing to be expected from). Opinions differ and that depends on who's side you are on and in what condition you are yourself. The Morris A. Mechanic for example -presenting large Broadway show and considered "good" and second best after NYC for that cultural segment- has almost always sell outs, has over 20,000 subscribers and is actually the only real profitable theatre. Center Stage is doing pretty well with 2 halls now, the BSO survived more or less a strike of almost 2 years, the Walkers Art Gallery and the BMA are flourishing and don't have too many problems with their funding. On the other hand there is the Theatre Project, considered as one of America's first avant-garde theatres not only interested in bringing theatre, dance and performances, but also an institution that is "helping" performers to let them work in residence for 2 or 3 weeks on their show. Phil Arnoult brings already more than 20 years international performers to the city and the US, but the theatre is always on the verge of a bankruptcy and lacks a vast audience. What else. The Opera has financial problems, several galleries closed down, it is difficult to finance an alternative/small scale avant-garde arts scene, private and corporate spending on the arts is very small in Baltimore, the local governmental spending is also rather small (there is about 1 million for individual artists and groups grants per year, which is a very small amount) -although they spend easily more than 350,000 dollar a year on Artscape-, and the City Fair isn't anymore what it was, the ethnic festivals are "dead" and Artscape is Artscape. Some of these problems stem from "structural" problems which

are also the source of problems in other segments of Baltimore. Baltimore is a branch-plant city which means that there are not so many headquarters; especially the arts are dependent on corporate funding which comes from headquarters; the neighborhood-myth in this city results in a desinterest in other neighborhoods, the inner-city or things that happen just around the corner; there is no county for Baltimore, but almost half of the visitors of cultural institutions come from the suburbs but they don't pay tax for it (although they are trying to change that now). Schmoke has other priorities which means that he thinks that literacy is more important than the arts in general. With the economic decline it is expected that cuts in the budget will be felt first in the arts and culture. And there are more problems.

I realize that this sounds altogether quite depressing. Maybe it is. But personally I am not too pessimistic. One of the most surprising things I found here, is that there are a lot of artists who like it to work here. For the simple reason that it is still possible to find cheap housing and affordable studios. It is a lot cheaper than in NYC and DC, and these cities are close enough. Besides, DC is far too porvincial and conservative. And as someone pointed out to me: it is maybe a conservative town but you can do what you want if you pay for it. An artist said: "Some people ask 'How do you stay in Baltimore' I tell them that it is a pleasant environment, it's unprentious, it's a good place to live..We all want to prove that you can lie in Baltimore and still make important American art". There still seems to be a lot of people around here who are

really involved and who keep on trying to do things although it is difficult to find funding. Interesting things happen at School 33, the MAP and 14K Cabaret, the SoWeBo-festival, the BAU-house and international performances at Towson State University and UMBC. There is a new museum, the Museum for Contemporary Art and there are plans for a new small theatre in the city. Not to forget to mention the ambitious plans to set up (again) a new International arts festival, with Steven Muller, Jill McGovern and Christopher Hunt involved (under financial caution of Bob Embry).

Personally I think that Baltimore is a lot more interesting than DC for example. Although I missed the smell of the harbor and the sea at the Inner Harbor. And I am still unable to understand why shops and restaurants are closed on Saturdays in downtown. One of the most thriving things of B. is probably it's architecture.

I realize that I still have to do a lot of work on the analysis. And I was only able to give you a brief -and probably quite ad hoc- insight in the cultural life of Baltimore. And there are so many things left I even didn't mention. Like the role of the State arts council, the Regional Planning Committee's Cultural Plan, the other arts festivals in the city, the role of the business community here, the (dominant) role of the major cultural institutions, the difficulties in trying to cooperate of the smaller cultural institutions and not to forget the real doubt whether the National Endowment for the Arts will be able to survive the "conservative" attacks (= no "controversial" art) on their policy. The artists and cultural institutions have their doubts. So do I.