

CASE STUDY

Charles Center, Baltimore, Maryland, USA: a central city redevelopment (1954–70)

It is difficult to imagine how later developments such as Inner Harbor (1968 to the present; see Figure 8.72) and the even later baseball stadium (1988) could have taken place without the earlier development of Charles Center. By 1994, Charles Center's success as a catalyst in spurring other developments meant that it was no longer the heart of Baltimore. Few urban redevelopments can claim that type of success. It is also an example of an urban renewal project that did not begin by totally clearing the site and then rebuilding it *de novo*.

Baltimore, like many other American cities, found itself facing strong competition from suburban centres from the 1950s onwards. Department store sales in the city dropped 10% between 1952 and 1957. There was a similar decrease in tax revenues. The office space occupancy rate was, however, healthy (97%) suggesting that the area had potential for renewal if problems with the aging infrastructure and decaying buildings could be addressed. No new building of consequence had been erected in the downtown area for 20 years.

In 1954, the business community formed the Committee for Downtown, Inc. A year later the Greater Baltimore Committee, Inc. (GBC), a private business group was established. The groups merged to form a non-profit, private-planning group, the Planning Council of the GBC. It became, in essence, a planning consultancy. Being a private and local group not only was it removed from much political infighting but it knew Baltimore. It also had considerable energy, if for no other reason than it saw the future

of the investments of its members at stake. The Planning Council hired Dr David Wallace, later a principal in the Philadelphia urban design firm of Wallace, McHarg, Roberts and Todd, to develop a design for a sloping, 33-acre (13-hectare) area in the heart of Baltimore linking the retail, financial and government districts of the city. He, in turn, brought on board other consultants such as George Kostritsky and Dennis Durden.

The GBC was aware of the work of Victor Gruen in Rochester, New York and his proposal for Fort Worth in Texas (Gruen, 1964). The latter design consisted of a ring road around the centre of the city with parking garages feeding off it (see Figure 8.53). The whole area within this loop was proposed to be a car-free pedestrian precinct. The GBC wanted something similar but implementable, financially and politically. On a smaller scale they got it.

The goal of the GBC team was not only to revitalize the blocks that were to be later called Charles Center, but for any developments there to also encourage investment on adjacent sites. The objective was to have a project large enough to have a significant impact, but not large enough to fill all the potential demand that might be generated by an improved physical environment. By 'improvement' was meant that access to downtown offices and shops had to be clear and easy, that parking had to be convenient to destinations and that the buildings had to be both modern and look modern.

The legal responsibility for achieving the specified development goals lay in the