

BALTIMORE, THE WIRE AND DAVID HARVEY

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One of the chapters of the book [Megacities](#) I was writing about a few days ago is entitled **Spaces for utopia** and is written by **David Harvey**. The introduction to that chapter includes just one page on the case of the city of **Baltimore** and reading those few lines gave me the feeling that I was reading a synopsis of [The Wire](#).

Searching the [Megacities Foundation](#) website, I found a document by D. Harvey (accessible at section of *Lectures*) on which the chapter mentioned above is based, but with more detail in the description of Baltimore. I leave here a few paragraphs, in which appear some of the [background themes](#) represented in the series:

I have lived in Baltimore City for most of my adult life. I think of it as my home town and have accumulated an immense fund of affection for the place. But Baltimore is, for the most part, a mess. Not the kind of enchanting mess that makes cities such interesting places to explore, but an awful mess. And it seems much worse now than when I first knew it in 1969. Or perhaps it is in the same old mess except that many people then believed they could do something about it. Now the problems seem intractable.



*Too many details of the mess would overwhelm. But some of its features are important to know. There are some forty thousand **vacant houses** (in a housing stock of 304,000 units) within the city limits (compared to eight thousand in 1970). The concentrations of **homelessness** (in spite of all those vacant houses), of **unemployment** and, even more significant, of the **employed poor** (trying to live on less than \$200 a week without benefits) are everywhere in evidence. The soup kitchen lines get longer and longer and the charity missions of many inner city churches are stretched beyond coping. The inequalities - of opportunities as well as of standards of life - are growing by leaps and bounds. The massive **educational resources of the city** (Baltimore City has some of the finest schools in the country, but they are all private) are denied to most of the children who live there. The public schools are in a lamentable state (two and a half years behind the national average in reading skills according to recent tests). Some of the **finest medical institutions** in the world are out of bounds to people who live within their shadow (unless they have the privilege to clean the AIDS wards for less than a living wage or have a rare disease of great interest to elite medical researchers). Life expectancy in the city, in the immediate environs of these internationally renowned hospital facilities, is among the lowest in the nation and comparable to many of the poorer countries in the world (63 years for men and 73.2 for women). The affluent (black and white) continue to leave the city in droves **seeking solace, security and jobs in the suburbs** (population in the city was close to a million when I 53 arrived and is now down to around 600,000). The suburbs, the edge cities and the ex-urbs proliferate (with the aid of massive public subsidies to transport and upper income housing construction) in an extraordinarily unecological **sprawl** (long commutes, massive ozone concentrations in summer, loss of agricultural land). Developers offer up this great blight of suburban conformity (alleviated, of course, by architectural quotations from Italianate villas and Doric columns) as a panacea for the breakdown and disintegration of urbanity first in the inner city and then, as the deadly blight spreads, the inner suburbs.*

*There has been an **attempt of sorts to turn things around** in the city. Launched in the early 1970s under the aegis of a dedicated and quite authoritarian mayor (William Donald Schaeffer) it involved formation of a private-public partnership to invest in downtown and **Inner Harbor renewal** in order to attract financial services, tourism and so-called hospitality functions to center city. It took a lot of public money to get the process rolling. Once they had the hotels (Hyatt got a \$35 million hotel by putting up only half a million dollars of its own money in the early 1980s), they needed to build a convention center to fill the hotels and get a piece of what is now calculated to be an \$83 billion a year meeting industry. In order to keep competitive, a further public investment of \$150 million was needed to create an even larger convention center to get the big conventions. It is now feared that all this investment will not be profitable without a large "headquarters hotel" that will also require "extensive" public subsidies (maybe \$50 million). And to improve the **city image**, a quarter billion dollars went into building sports stadiums for teams (one of which was lured from Cleveland) that pay several million a year to star players watched by fans paying exorbitant ticket prices. This is, of course, a common enough story across the United States (the National Football League -deserving welfare clients - calculates that \$3.8 billion of largely*

public money will be poured into new NFL stadiums between 1992 and 2002).

*This is what is called "feeding the downtown monster." Every new wave of public investment is needed to make the last 54 wave pay off. The private-public partnership means the public takes all the risks and the private takes all the profits. The citizenry wait for benefits that never quite materialize. An upscale condominium complex on the **waterfront** does so poorly that it gets £2 million in tax breaks in order to forestall bankruptcy while the impoverished working class - close to bankruptcy if not technically in it - get nothing.*

*There is, of course, a **good side to the [renewal](#) effort**. Many people come to the Inner Harbor. There is even racial mixing. People obviously enjoy just watching people. And there is a growing recognition that the city, to be vibrant, has to be a twenty-four hour affair and that mega bookstores and a Hard Rock cafe have as much to offer as Benetton and the Banana Republic. Here and there, neighborhoods have pulled themselves together and developed a special sense of community that makes for safer, more secure living without degenerating into rabid exclusionism. Some of the seedier public housing blocks have been imploded to make way for better quality housing in better quality environments. But none of this touches the roots of Baltimore's problems.*

There are no comments yet.