

Soft Sites: Four Case Studies on the Middle Branch

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The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time, and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not super-imposable on one another.

- Michel Foucault, *Heterotopias, of Other Spaces*¹

What follows is an investigation into an urban region of Baltimore in four parts. This is an area that is vast, complex and integral to the city's history, yet it resides both geographically and conceptually at its fringes. This is an area that is passed through on the way to other places, an area that most Baltimore residents do not know by name and have never visited. At the same time, this area has long existed at the confluence of various interlocking urban development plans, the latest of which are now determining where the future of Baltimore will happen. This paper is an effort to resurrect the histories of 4 sites in the Middle Branch Basin: Swann Park, Reed Bird Island, Port Covington and Masonville Cove, all located at the intersections of industry, infrastructure and commerce. These sites could all be seen as castoffs, the residue of larger projects built around them. Closer examination reveals a more complicated reality - these sites are in fact mirrors of their surroundings, visible evidence of the shifting political, economic, environmental

and cultural interests that compete to determine the creation of new space and development.

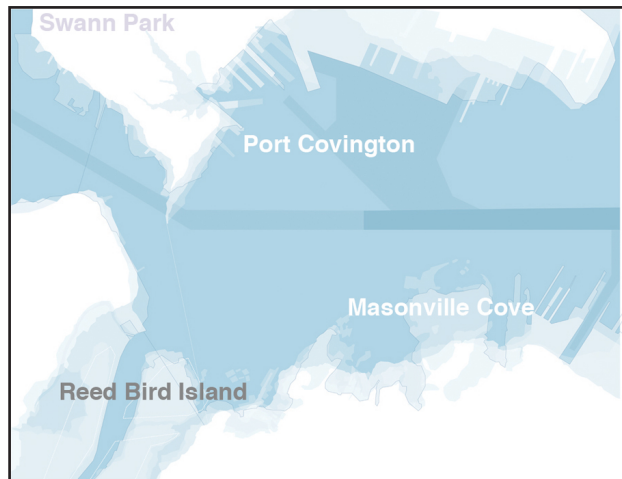


Figure 1: The Middle Branch Basin, 1820-2010, image by the authors

I: MASONVILLE COVE: THE CLAW, THE HEAD, AND THE SHIPYARD

Masonville Cove is a large, mostly open, waterfront plot in South Baltimore. It is currently the site of a complex engineering project overseen by the Maryland Port Administration: the Masonville Cove Dredged Material Containment Facility. Geographically, the site breaks down into three main pieces.

From west to east, call them the *Claw*, the *Head*, and the *Shipyard*.

The *Claw* is conspicuous, reaching out of the aerial photos like a mutant appendage. Squeezed between the double pressures of development and industry, this feral waterfront openspace is a striking anomaly, even for the spottily derelict Middle Branch. It is heavily vegetated, but walking the site, feeling the mossy bricks, remnants of ceramic powerline insulators and huge concrete blocks underfoot, one sees that this landscape is just a large pile of disparate things, a ground made of stuff.

The record in this area is lossy and unreliable, but old maps seem to show no *Claw* before the early 20th century. Instead of a peninsula, there's a bay, the original Cove. The shallows in the Cove are the product of churn from the mouth of the Patapsco River adjacent, carrying runoff from development in old mill towns and new subdivisions upstream.

In 1904, a catastrophic fire decimated downtown Baltimore. Firefighters from Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. were unable to connect their hoses to Baltimore's hydrants as the fire predated the advent of standardized infrastructure, even between cities that were relatively close.² With over 1500 buildings destroyed, the debris had to go somewhere. Locals pass down stories of wreckage hauled south to Masonville in barges. In maps made after 1904 a new peninsula at Masonville Cove emerges: the stub of the *Claw*.

Above these layers of rubble and ash are other, newer and more toxic layers of residue and sand, possibly mixed with arsenic and lye. In the middle of the 20th century this site was used as a yard for the preparation of new construction materials: concrete and pressure treated lumber. In the older portions of the peninsula, future cleanup is complicated by the many large trees growing between and among the chunks of masonry. Families of wild deer live and forage here. In the newer fields further out, large plants will not grow in the desiccated, chemical laden soil.

The future of the *Claw*, the scope of its cleanup, and the level of public access, is all uncertain. In planning documents, this portion of the site is either called out as a public park, or a wildlife sanctuary. In the first case, cleanup would be extensive,

possibly including complete clearance and capping; in the second case, cleanup would be minimal, and access would be discouraged or disallowed. In either scenario, large areas of the site would be completely remade: the ash fields regraded and channeled to create a non-tidal wetland several feet above sea level. In the water of the Cove, the wrecked barges, concrete blocks and other debris, currently home to complex marine ecosystems, would be removed. The Cove would be restocked with concrete reefballs, cast on site in educational workshops. An existing landscape is engineered into a constructed landscape in a kind of habitat gentrification process - the accidentally artificial is scraped away to create a new intentionally artificial overlay.³

Part of this engineering process includes a new nature center under construction at the Cove, which, along with the wildlife sanctuary, is conceived as a strategy for mitigating much larger processes afoot at the site. With erosion constantly filling the shipping lanes of the Baltimore harbor, the dredging of this accumulated sediment has become the invisible accompaniment of the city's transport and logistics economy⁴. More and more things need to be moved, ships get bigger, channels get deeper, and spoils from dredge are used to build new land and new terminals for larger vessels, which then create even more turbulent churn. Shipping, development, erosion, wakes, and dredging are then caught in a positive feedback loop, each link in the



Figure 2: The Shipyard at Masonville Cove, before the cleanup, from "Masonville Dredged Material Project and Mitigation"⁵

circle generating more of the next. The Maryland Port Administration needs a new place for the five million cubic yards of dredged material pulled out of its waterways each year. This place will be the *Head* at Masonville Cove.

This is the local effect of a global cycle that also began here. The first purpose-built container ships - the MV *Floridian* and the MV *New Yorker*, were built in 1960 at the Shipyard portion of the Masonville Cove site. These first container ships were made from oil tankers, cut, extended, and resutured together in a process called 'jumboization'⁶. Somewhere between the 1960s and the 1990s, the *Shipyard* at Masonville Cove stopped making ships and by 1995, the area was mostly used for ship-breaking— the ad-hoc, often unregulated, and extremely dangerous deconstruction of derelict vessels—often loaded with toxic chemicals— for recycling profit.⁷

Viewed from aerial photographs, the *Shipyard* is still marked by local vestiges of this industry: the rotting frame of a vessel named the *Seawitch* still exists as a visible land mass that shapes the peninsula around the cove. Towed to Masonville in 1973 for disassembly, the vessel was ultimately not broken down and cleaned up until 2008 when a consortium of federal and state agencies tapped into federal oil spill mitigation funds. Under increased scrutiny, it has become no longer profitable to take ships apart in the United States. Local⁸ pressure has pushed the practice elsewhere, and now images of shipbreaking have become part of the larger lexicon of Sublime Globalization Space. Shipbreaking is something that happens in the global East and South: frightening, exotic, and well suited to large format photography.

The Shipyard at Masonville will ultimately be covered by dredging spoils, with any remaining wreckage or toxicity buried along with the rest of the Head. When fully formed, this portion of the site is expected to become a terminal for vehicle, or RoRo shipping. The Port Administration leases facilities to port operators, and if demand for new car terminals is low when the project is finished, they can retool the site for other needs. Development on the Baltimore waterfront for residential, commercial, industrial, or logistic uses, remains a powerful motivator: 'There's Magic in the Water'. The Maryland Port Administration may be the only developer on

the Baltimore harbor with the ability to make new land from scratch.

II: SWANN PARK: MAGIC IN THE WATER

(e-mail correspondence with a co-author of this paper)

from: [-----]

to: [-----]

date: Thu, Nov 1, 2007 at 10:31 AM

Hi,

There's a public hearing at Digital Harbor High School (very close to you) this evening re. the Swann Park issue, which, much as I expected, is not dead yet. See *Balto Sun* last Friday. It's at 6.30 p.m. if you want and/or C. want to go. If you do I'll see you there.

best, [-----]

The Baltimore Sun, October 27, 2007

The waterfront park is owned by the city. But much of the cost of cleaning up the ball fields will be borne by Honeywell International, a New Jersey defense contracting giant that assumed liability for the factory's pollution after Honeywell was acquired by Allied's successor company in 1999.

Allied deliberately withheld test results three decades ago showing high arsenic levels in Swann Park, a city health department task force concluded in July. Allied allowed local health officials in 1976 to falsely believe that levels of arsenic in the park were low. But the company knew that large amounts of the carcinogen billowed through torn filters on smokestacks at the DDT factory, blanketing the ball fields "like snow," according to the city task force.⁹

- Tom Pelton, reporter

The Baltimore Sun

Meeting Notes, Nov. 1, 2007

Digital Harbor High School, Baltimore

Q: I understand the guys from Honeywell talked about the soil sampling, I wonder if anyone's tested the water in the Middle Branch of the Patapsco River to see if any contamination from runoff or seepage has taken place or is taking place?

A: (Horacio Tablada, MDE) There are plans for that testing to occur, yes.

Q: Everyone's talking about the park, when there are people living here, why are you guys worried

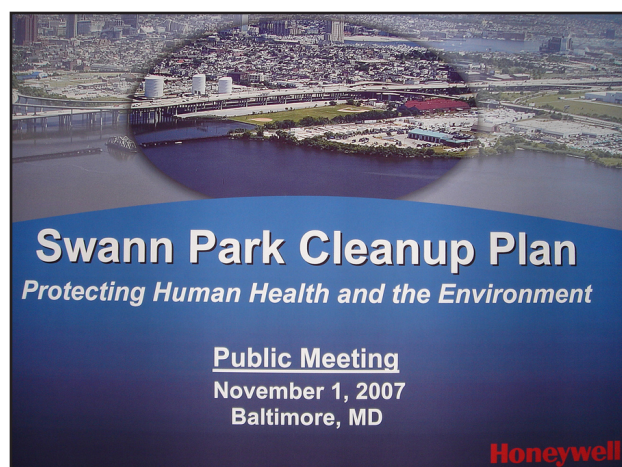


Figure 3: Swann Park Cleanup Plan, photo by the authors.

about a fucking park, when there's people's lives at stake? Those ten houses down there McComas St. -

A: There are seven houses.

Q: Okay, those seven houses, have got people in them, why are you guys spending - how much is this going to cost?

A: (Honeywell representative) 3.6 million dollars.

Q: Why are you guys spending 3.6 million dollars to rebuild that park, when you could use that money to relocate those people and get them out of there?

A: We've responded to the cleanup directives in the order that we've received them, we got the cleanup order for the park first.

Q: There's a new master plan for this area, the Middle Branch of the Patapsco, we know you're bringing in the [National] Aquarium and all that, and there are developers involved. We all know there's Magic in the Water. Given that the plan for these park improvements seemed to materialize pretty quickly, I want to know, does Honeywell have any stake or interest in any of the development plans for the region, or any connection to the developers?

A: (Horacio Tablada, MDE) Perhaps the gentlemen from Honeywell would like to respond to that?

A: (Honeywell representative) No, no interest.

Since early 2007, the website hosting the Middle Branch Draft Master Plan has included this footer:

"Site Architecture Provided by Honeywell", from <http://www.baltimoremiddlebranch.com/>, accessed November 10, 2010

Field Report by the co-authors, September 29th, 2007

At the south end of Light Street, go two streets west to Hanover Street and keep going south, after the highway, following the *Right Hand Rule*, it's the first right. The gate's still open, even though the sign says it's closed. The view here across the water of the abandoned Westport Power Station is framed, on one side, by the spaghetti tangle of the 95/395 junction, suspended over the Middle Branch of the Patapsco River, and on the other side, by a disused CSX railroad bridge, marking a channel that hasn't been dredged since the early 1980s.

Biking out of the park, there are two kids playing in front of the few existing rowhouses. One kid shouts at me: 'There's arsenic in there!'. 'I know, be careful!' I say, I'm not about to tell him that there's chromium in there too. 'Cory goes in there anyway!' the other kid says, as I ride back up the hill.

III: PORT COVINGTON: THE GHOST OF THE MASTERPLAN IN TINKERER'S PARADISE

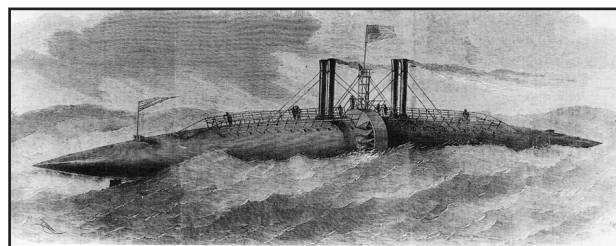


Figure 4: "The Winan's Ocean Steamer as She Will Appear at Sea", from Illustrated London News, 27 Nov 1858, found in "Winan's Cigar Ships", by Michael Crisafulli, <http://www.vernianera.com/CigarBoats.html>, accessed November 10, 2010.

In 1898, the City of Baltimore subsidized the creation of the Western Maryland Railroad, intended as an alternative that would compete with the high prices of the Baltimore and Ohio line, which had also been co-founded by the City over 70 years earlier. The two networks ran side by side to terminals on the South Baltimore peninsula, where they both unloaded coal from Appalachia to ships that would take it up and down the eastern seaboard.¹⁰

Port Covington, the site of the Western Maryland Railroad coal terminal, is today cut off from the rest of the city by Interstate 95 which carries motorists along the eastern seaboard. Historically, this site has always been defined by the goods, people, and raw materials moving through it. Before the

City expanded its boundaries in 1918, this was its southern limit. Light Street, the city's prominent north-south axis continued south via the now demolished *Long Bridge* to Curtis Bay.

Then, as now, the spaces on the ground between these lines of connection and transfer were largely forgotten and undeveloped. In the 19th century, this area was the backyard and back door to the city of Baltimore, and like any backyard, this was a place for recreation and storage, comingled with trash and half-completed projects. A citywide topographic survey from 1895 shows rowing piers and resorts among the marshes, along with a dog pound, a guano pier, and a "night soil dump".¹¹

The major landowners were the Winans, a family of engineers and entrepreneurs. Ross Winans had been sent to England by the B&O Railroad to study the state of the art in European rail technology. When he returned, it was as the lead designer for the B&O's new rolling stock.¹² The voracious Ross's other projects included a water wheel that powered the plumbing for the family estate, and, during the Civil War, a steam powered machine gun.¹³

An aerial view from 1869 shows Port Covington as a kind of tinkerer's paradise, with swamps, stockyards, chemical factories, and gas tanks. On the pier at Winans Cove, another of Ross Winan's projects is visible, a prototype *Cigar Ship*, the first all iron (not iron-clad) steamship in the country.¹⁴ Having solved the problem of efficient cross-country travel, the engineer and entrepreneur had then tried to work out better ways to get people across the Atlantic.

The Cigar Ships were symmetrical and tapered at both ends, with smokestacks in the center and a large waterwheel wrapping around the ship's waist. The first version was constructed here, with later models built and tested in London, St. Petersburg, and Le Havre.¹⁵ These were not submersible, they traveled on the surface of the water. As a piece of engineering, the design was impractical. But this ship may have had a greater influence in the cultural imagination, possibly inspiring Jules Verne's description of the Nautilus in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*:¹⁶

'Here, M. Aronnax, are the several dimensions of the boat you are in. It is an elongated cylinder with conical ends. It is very like a cigar in shape, a shape already adopted in London in several constructions

of the same sort.'

- Jules Verne, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*¹⁷

The Western Maryland Railroad was bought out by its old competitor, the B&O, in 1983, and shut down soon after. Subsequently, almost every trace of it at Port Covington has been erased in a cleanup of the site by the Maryland Department of the Environment.¹⁸ The major pieces that remain include the large trestle bridge adjacent to Swann Park, and several derelict piers. One of these is now used as a berth for two MARAD ships, the US Defense Department's ready reserve, part of a large network of vessels waiting to deploy personnel, vehicles, and supplies anywhere in the world.

The site is today littered with big pieces sitting incongruously close to one another: the piers, the ships, a factory that makes ceramic insulators, a power station, a newspaper plant, a Walmart, a sprawling seafood restaurant and marina. But the largest things here are the ghosts of failed masterplans.

In the 1980s, the Baltimore Sun wanted to move their entire operation out of downtown. With the city's help, the Sun acquired a large piece of land in Port Covington, on the south side of I-95. They moved the printing presses into a new building here, and then changed their minds. The facility now sits surrounded by empty, well mown, grass fields.¹⁹ As of this writing, the Sun's paper circulation continues to fall, over 9% in the past six months, with a near 6% drop in the six months previous to that.²⁰

The slow motion collapse of the Port Covington Shopping Center has left behind the most recent ghosts. In 2000, the Baltimore Development Corporation accepted a proposal from Connecticut retail development conglomerate Starwood Ceruzzi for the site. The city enabled the deal with tax incentives, rezoning, and an agreement giving the developer inculpability from health hazards related to contamination. Starwood promised to bring a mix of retailers, and agreed to consider community recommendations to orient the buildings toward the water, and to "substantially enlarge the park area, incorporate walking paths, add sports fields, create picnic areas and include fishing and crabbing piers."²¹ The city laid out roads, curbs, stop signs, streetlights, even fire hydrants in the grassy fields. Starwood Ceruzzi built only the Walmart and the Sam's Club, both with their backs to the water.

In 2007, the Sam's Club closed, the building was painted gunmetal grey, ringed with security cameras, emptied, and put up for sale. The Baltimore Business Journal quotes Starwood executive Arthur Hooper: "The final phase of development isn't something we were interested in doing, ... We're not long-term holders of projects. We brought in the big boxes. After that we're not in a position to deal with the local."²²

Ferry Bar Park, at the very southern tip of Port Covington is less a designed public space than the vestigial remnant of a railroad right-of-way given back to the city in 1979. Some parkgoers suggest that the park may have been encroached on by the shopping center's stormwater retention pond,²³ a pond that, given the large amount of planned but unpaved area, may be unnecessary.

The failure of the last laid plans is little deterrent to future projects, including at least one proposal that shows the existing Walmart gone, replaced by waterfront housing, and a new big box store relocated further inland.²⁴ Suspended somewhere between development and use, between stated intention, and actual condition, the gaps in this site between overreach and underinvestment are filled in by the people on the ground. The empty parking lots are activated by drifting shopping bags, idling commuter buses, and people napping in cars amid a sea of quiet. Desire lines are threaded across the fenced lots, trajectories for a new masterplan based a logic of informal land use. On sunny weekends, the derelict piers are covered with people, multiethnic families having picnics, playing the radio, and catching the fish that swim in the 150 year old piles of the Winan's Wharf.

IV: REED BIRD ISLAND

Field Report by the co-authors, Wednesday, April 30th, 2008

So, a friend and I are looking at off-the-grid type places in South Baltimore, these open spaces on the water that are shaped by pollution, erosion, development, industry ... all for a gallery project that is in turn part of the Baltimore Festival of Maps. And there's one spot we've been trying to get to, but we never make it there: Reed Bird Island. It always ends up raining, or it's getting dark, we visited all the other spots, but not Reed Bird Island.

Now Reed Bird Island is technically a city park, but only, as my collaborator and I found out, because

of a suggestion made by the Olmsted Brothers landscape firm in 1904. They pointed out that erosion from development upstream along the Patapsco River was leading to the accumulation of mud flats here at the river's mouth. These were being occupied and used for dumping.

The Olmsted Brothers, in their commissioned 1904 park plan for Baltimore, suggested that the city acquire these islands, (as land created from new sediment, their legal title was unclear) and cap them to form parks. Also suggested was a rerouting of a new bridge to cross these lands and increase their visibility and connection to the city.²⁵ Many years later, that's what happened.

On the north side of the river today, is Cherry Hill Park, which has an active public pool, ball fields, and bike paths. But Reed Bird Island Park, on the south side, has no signs, no fields, and no recognizable paths beyond those made by deer. You could drive by it on every side and never even know it's there.

Anyway, so the other Saturday, I finished something up early and the show's already up, but I'm like 'fuck it, I'm going to Reed Bird Island,' I hopped on my bike and rode down there. The only way in is just to go, I hit my brakes at the end of the bridge on Pottee street, and just hauled my bike into the woods.

And inside, there are these spotty clumps of trees, with bits of afternoon sunlight breaking through to this impossibly lush groundcover, that turned out to be composed almost entirely of stinging nettles. And I'm wearing shorts, and my shins are getting shredded, but I'm powering through, because it's Reed Bird Island, and I've gotta see it, you know?

So I come over a hill, and I see this clump of stuff, and I think it might be landfill debris that's made it back to the surface, but then I see there's an American flag on top of it. And I'm not wearing my glasses, and I notice that there's a guy sitting there, kicked back in a lawn chair with his feet up. It's too late to do anything else, so I'm like 'Ahoy!', and he's like 'Hey, how you doing!'

We shake hands and introduce ourselves. 'I'm just thinking about getting my camp back together,' he says, and I see that there's a furnace, a washbin, a storage area, a compost heap, and tent made of tarps. 'I used to camp up on the hill last summer, but I moved down here when the weather started to get cold, went home over the winter, but now that it's getting nice out, I'm thinking about setting this up again, I live in Curtis Bay, this is closer to my work. I call it *The Gost*.'

We talk for a few minutes about the area, and I ask him about rumors that Cherry Hill Park is partly made of rubble from the demolition of the old Camden Yards in downtown Baltimore. 'Oh yeah,'

he says, 'everybody knows that.' 'Well what's interesting to see around here?' I ask him. 'Well,' he says, 'I've got a map.'

He brushes the dirt off the bin he had just been propping his feet on, and shows me the map he had drawn on the lid with a sharpie pen, just a few weeks after he had first set up camp, in July 2007. 'Do you mind if I take a picture of that?' I ask.

So he gives me a tour of Reed Bird Island: the tubes coming out of the ground to vent methane from the dump below, the church he made on the hill from woven branches and a hand-tied cross, the traces of older camps, the deer trails he uses to get around. 'I chased some poachers out of here last November, guys had branches and leaves tied to their jackets, "Get the hell out of here!" is what I told 'em'.

He shows me the exit, back to Potee street, down one of the deer trails. 'If I were the city, what I would do, is buy this land and protect it from people building shit on it, protect it for nature.' I tell him that it's not likely anybody would build on it, the ground's too unstable, that's why the trees are spotty, and anyway, it's already city property, a park even. 'All the city cares about is making money,' he says, 'This is a park?' 'Yep,' 'Reed Bird Island Park, it's on Google maps'. 'Is that on the Yahoo, too?' he asks 'I'm gonna have to look that up the next time I'm at work.'

- Baltimore, 2007-2010



Figure 5: "The Gost", homemade map, photo by the authors

ENDNOTES

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12 Olsen, 105

13 W. Edward Orser, *The Gwynns Falls Trail: Baltimore Greenway to the Chesapeake*, (Charleston, 2008), 126-128.

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