

2023 MERIT AWARD

Clare Fentress

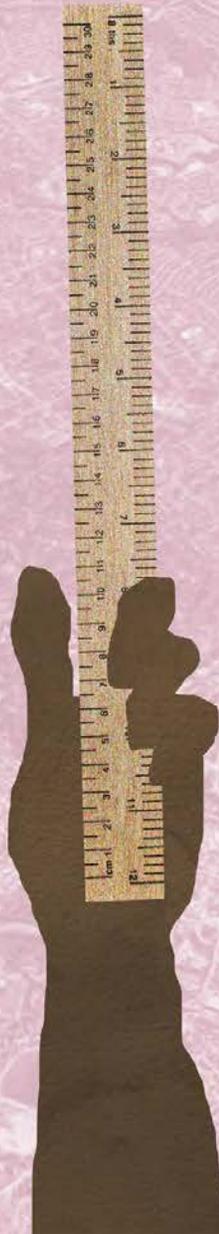
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Not the Master's Tools



**Self-Determination
at Baltimore's
Old Town Mall**

LF-11494

Project Narrative

The poet Audre Lorde famously wrote that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Old Town Mall is unfortunately a case study in how top-down urban planning and architectural initiatives cannot undo centuries of racial and economic violence, no matter how good their intentions. For the past sixty years, such attempts to bring this site back to its former liveliness—before redlining, urban renewal, the war on drugs, and white flight—have failed.

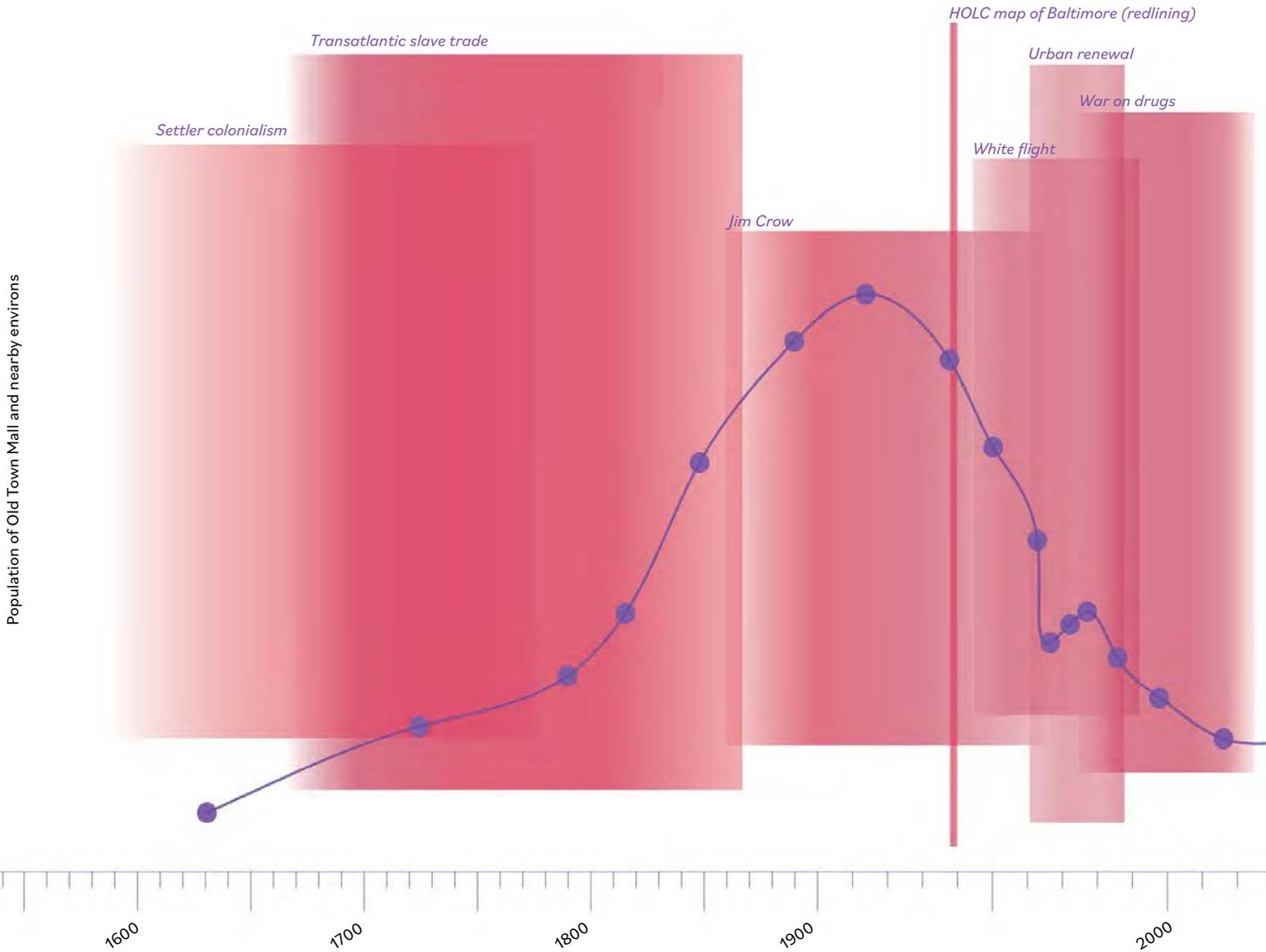
This proposal posits that for deep, radical (radical meaning, after all, “at the root”) change to occur at Old Town Mall, we must use a different toolbox than the one architects and planners typically turn to. Rather than outline a specific vision for new programs and formal moves, it proposes introducing

- + **a new form of land tenure** at Old Town Mall that will invest profit back into the community, instead of developer’s pockets, and

- + **a long-term educational design-build program** through which young Black designers, urban planners, researchers, construction workers, and makers might take the future of this place into their own hands.

By taking Old Town Mall out of cycle of real-estate speculation and retooling the notion of property, this vision aims to center land-based redistributive, reparative futures in Baltimore that are led by its neighborhood communities.

Racialized dispossession in the Baltimore region



A Long History of Racial Dispossession

The Old Town Mall is sited within one of Baltimore's oldest settlements. By tracking its rise and decline over time, we can see the mechanisms of racial capitalism at work.

The City of Baltimore was a key harbor in the domestic slave trade; the entire municipality profited greatly from the sale of human beings right up until 1864, mere months before the federal government passed the Thirteenth Amendment. The Old Town Mall was no exception, with its main period of growth happening between 1818, when its Belair Market opened, and the 1870s. It continued to prosper for only a few decades after the abolition of slavery.

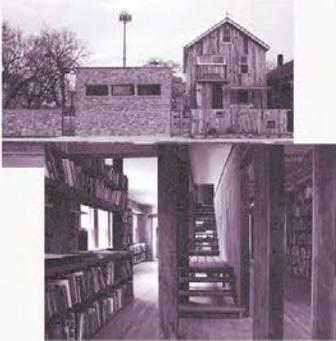
In the 1930s, redlining and Jim Crow laws spurred white flight and an increase in difficulties for Black home- and landowners in the area: the Old Town Mall area was given a high-risk, "hazardous" rating, the most damaging one for a neighborhood's future. The precipitous decline was exacerbated by early urban planning efforts and the events of the 1968 riots here. Attempts to revitalize the retail area in the 1970s and 80s were unsuccessful.

Learning from Radical Visions

Studying alternative, Black-led spaces in the recent history of U.S. urbanism—including the present urban fabric of Baltimore itself—yields many fruitful paths toward envisioning a way that Old Town Mall might be a site for neighborhood self-determination rather than a top-down planning vision from the city.

These six initiatives, which have all been launched in the past half-century, offer lessons and ideas for how Old Town Mall could be removed from standard cycles of capitalist development.

Esther’s Orbit Room / East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative offers perhaps the closest and most successful model for Old Town Mall, as it deals with an abandoned retail corridor (in Oakland, California) and is creating a new future for it that will allow for both businesses and services as well as affordable housing to return to the area. Crucially, the primary profitters and designers are the residents and cooperative members themselves.



Dorchester Projects
Chicago, Illinois
2009-
Theaster Gates

Soul City
Warren County, North Carolina
1969-1979
Floyd McKissock



The Black School
New Orleans, Louisiana
2016-
Shani Peters, Joseph Cuillier




Duncan Street Miracle Garden
Baltimore, Maryland
1980s-
Lewis Sharpe



Last Resort Artist Retreat
Baltimore, Maryland
2022-
Derrick Adams



Esther's Orbit Room / 7th Street
Oakland, California
1959-
Esther Mabry, EB PREC

New Modes of Tenure and Designing

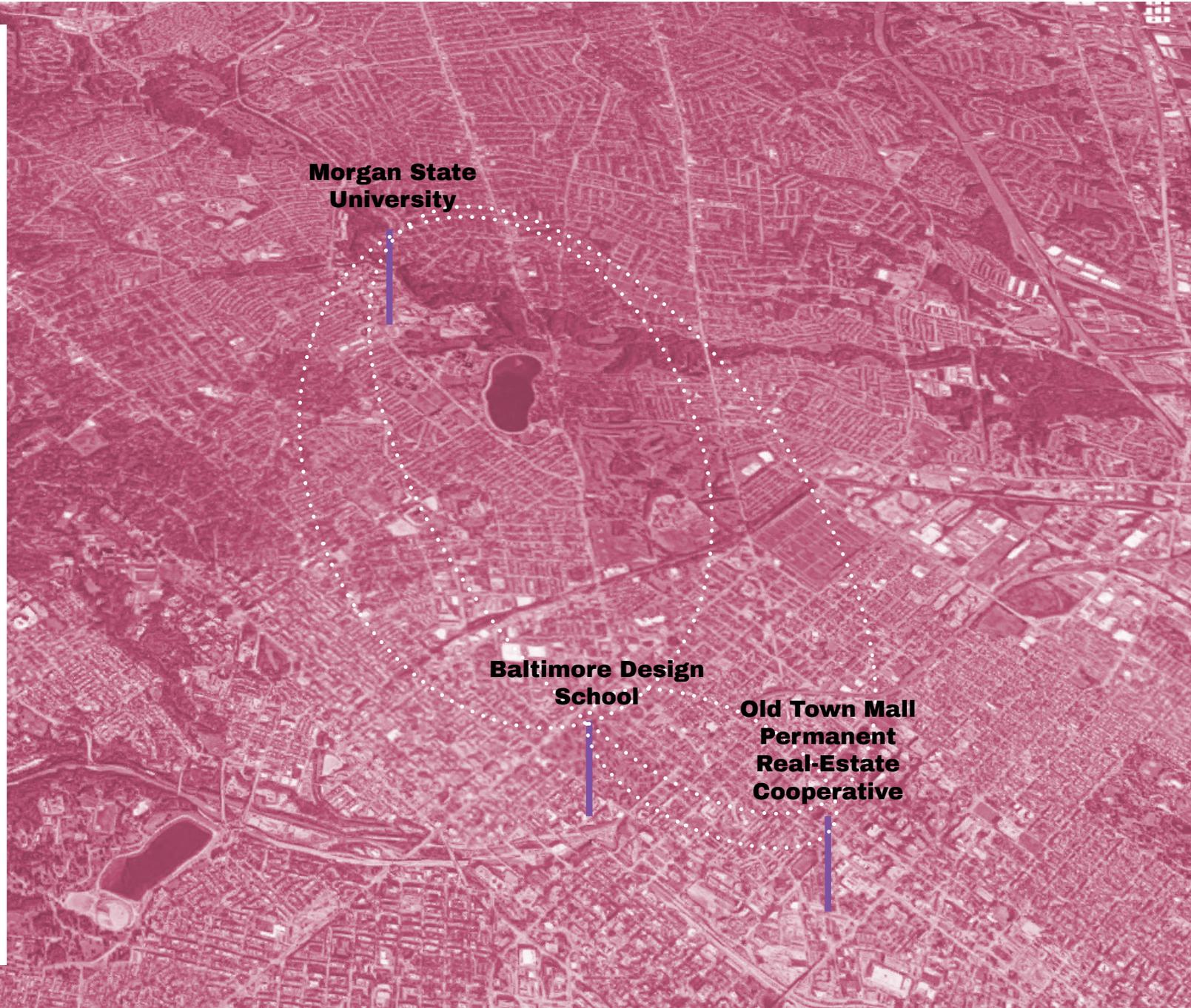
This proposal eschews a formal “revitalization” plan in favor of deeper, structural changes to how profit, investment, and design decisions occur.

It envisions that, first, the City allows the current residents and business owners in the Old Town neighborhood to form a **permanent real estate cooperative (PREC)**, which keeps power decentralized and ensures that returns stay in the community.

This model is currently being successfully piloted in Oakland, California, as a way to breathe new life into the city’s Seventh Street Corridor.

The Old Town Mall PREC then joins forces with the **Graduate Built Environment Studies department at Morgan State University**, Baltimore’s preeminent HBCU, and the nearby **Baltimore Design School**, a neighborhood charter high school that has a three-year Construction, Design, and Management program.

These three partners co-design a **ten-year plan for a design-build program** in which Morgan State and Baltimore Design students will bring the PREC’s visions to life.



The Road to Community Ownership

Process Statement for the Old Town Mall PREC

start here!

Co-Education

October 2023 - March 2024

The City of Baltimore hosts a six-month series of meetings in Old Town about PRECs, bringing members of the East Bay PREC in to share their experiences and knowledge.

Community Meetings

April 2024 - March 2025

Old Town residents and business owners meet biweekly over a year to determine the structure, bylaws, and long-term goals of the nascent Old Town PREC.

PREC Formation

April 2025

The Old Town PREC officially forms. It employs five full-time staff members, whose salaries are funded by an endowment established by the City of Baltimore.

Shares Sales

May 2025

Shares of the PREC are released, allowing anyone to invest. Residents of Old Town are given discounts on shares in the first year of sales.

Property Consolidation

June - August 2025

Private landowners in the Old Town Mall sell their property to the PREC and then enter into long-term leases with the PREC, thereby maintaining tenure without ownership. City-owned property is donated.

Ten-Year Plan

September 2025 - August 2026

Old Town PREC members work together to determine a ten-year plan for Old Town Mall, prioritizing community needs and desires. In the meantime, share sales increase and liquid finances begins to grow.

Design-Build Program

September 2026 - April 2027

PREC staffers work with the Graduate Built Environment Studies department at Morgan State to establish a design-build program. The program will allow Morgan State and Baltimore Design School students to earn course credits and hands-on experience by working on long-term projects for the PREC. The PREC will receive design and construction services at a reduced cost.

Stewardship and Growth

May 2027 -

As the design-build program enacts the PRECs visions for new and adapted buildings and landscapes, the Old Town Mall transforms from a case study of discriminatory urbanism to a site of self-determination, homegrown design talent,



Staging the Design-Build Projects: An Example Timeline

Developing the design-build program between the Old Town Mall PREC and Morgan State/Baltimore Design School requires time, practice, and the dedication of all three parties. During the planning of each project, members of Morgan State's Sustainable Urban Communities graduate certificate program are at the table, guiding and learning from the discussions.

To help the program launch smoothly, projects that are less capital- and labor-intensive are foregrounded in the first three years of the program.

Landscaping initiatives (e.g., gardens), simple upgrades (e.g., solar-panel installations), and small architectural projects (e.g., a tool library) are good fits for these early years.

By 2030, the design-build program is robust enough to take on full-scale projects such as new builds, ambitious adaptive reuse initiatives, and street rerouting.



Old Town Mall PREC
Garden Market Every Saturday, 10 a.m. - 2 p.m.

Corn and Sunflowers		Corn and Sunflowers	
Tomato Green Bean	Zucchini Watermelon	Potato	Zinnia
Cosmo	Marigold	Marigold	Cucumber
Pepper / Onion	Winter Squash	Cosmo	Cosmo Peas
Tomato Marigold	Carrot Watermelon	Cucumber	Tomato
Pea	Marigold	Pea Zinnia	Winter Squash
Cosmo Tomato	Tomato Pea	Tomato	Watermelon Zinnia