Material Commons

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In this paper, I argue that the deconstruction of vacant buildings in historically disinvested neighborhoods can be leveraged to reimagine property and labor relations—and their attendant spatial configurations—toward a more socially just and ecologically viable future. The paper consists of three parts, offering Baltimore as a case study. First, I contextualize vacancy in Baltimore by summarizing the policies and practices that created zones of racialized disinvestment where residents lack access to adequate resources, which renders the private accumulation of capital ineffective in the creation of wealth and power. Second, I argue for a reconceptualization of urban space through systems of collective ownership and cooperative enterprise. Building on the history of Black cooperatives in Baltimore and elsewhere, I highlight the ongoing work of community land trusts and reclaimed material stocks to situate these efforts within a broader context of collective organizing. Third, I offer a framework for rightsizing a prototypical block through targeted deconstruction and material reuse in the creation of a neighborhood commons. To simulate redevelopment and promote agency among affected communities, I describe a boardgame in which players define the rules and control the outcome. And by way of conclusion, I summarize the debut of the game as part of a graduate design studio at Morgan State University, where students tested its range of possible outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

On March 13, 2019, Mayor Catherine Pugh climbed into the cabin of a hydraulic excavator and began carving into the two-story façade of an Italianate rowhouse in the Druid Heights neighborhood of Baltimore. In a city of more than 30,000 vacant properties and a population that continues to decline, Mayor Pugh's publicity stunt represents one of many efforts to address vacancy without confronting its underlying causes or lingering effects.[1] Druid Heights, like many neighborhoods in Baltimore, suffers from the cascading effects of racially discriminatory policies that prevented the accumulation of wealth and power through individual property ownership, ultimately leading to high rates of poverty and vacancy. Despite Mayor Pugh describing the stunt as "very energetic" and "ready to do more," the underlying issues remain unaddressed.[2]

Not to be outdone, months later the governor of Maryland, Larry Hogan, took to the excavator controls and performed a similar stunt in the Broadway East neighborhood. There, communities face not only the effects of racially discriminatory policies etched into the urban fabric, but also a growing threat of displacement due to gentrification. Citing vacant properties among the justifications for intervention, the Department of Planning classified Baltimore East among those neighborhoods requiring "comprehensive housing market interventions," a classification that has led to widespread displacement in Baltimore.[3] Discounting these compounding threats to an already vulnerable community, Governor Hogan smiled for the photographers and offered a thumbs up before climbing out of the cabin, using the stage not as a platform for racial justice and community advocacy, but to make light of the matter by commenting, "it's a lot more fun than what I normally do."[4] [Figure 1]

Relying on crude attempts at humor in the face of much suffering, publicity stunts like these lay bare the ineffectiveness of current actions to address vacancy and racialized disinvestment in Baltimore. Despite an outpouring of local, state, and federal support, the problems persist, suggesting that future interventions break from previous molds and reexamine the systems that created these patterns. In this paper, I argue that the deconstruction of vacant buildings in historically disinvested neighborhoods can be leveraged to reimagine property and labor relations—and their attendant spatial configurations—toward a more socially just and ecologically viable future.

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Figure 1. Baltimore Mayor Catherine Pugh (left) and Maryland Governor Larry Hogan (right) in 2019 (Images: Kenneth Lam)

cooperatives in Baltimore and elsewhere, I highlight the on-going work of community land trusts and reclaimed material stocks to situate these efforts within a broader context of collective organizing. Third, I offer a framework for rightsizing a prototypical block through targeted deconstruction and material reuse in the creation of a neighborhood commons. To simulate redevelopment and promote agency among affected communities, I describe a boardgame in which players define the rules and control the outcome. And by way of conclusion, I summarize the debut of the game as part of a graduate design studio at Morgan State University, where students tested its range of possible outcomes.

CONTEXTUALIZING SPATIAL INEQUALITY

Cities across the United States exhibit entrenched patterns of spatial inequality. Documenting the legal history of urban segregation in *The Color of Law,* Richard Rothstein argues that this spatial inequality constitutes "a caste system…with African Americans kept exploited and geographically separate by racially explicit government policies." Rothstein emphasizes their lasting legacy, describing how, despite the fact that most of these policies no longer exist, "they have never been remedied and their effects endure."[5] In Baltimore, these effects appear in the overlay of vacant properties on both the 1937 Home Owners' Loan Corporation map of redlined areas and the 2020

Census data of areas experiencing high concentrations of poverty. [Figure 2]

Refining the racial and spatial dynamics of urban segregation, political scientist Jessica Trounstine points to private property as central to the process Rothstein describes. For Trounstine, by protecting private property and controlling access to public resources, "the preferences of white property owners have been institutionalized through the vehicle of local land use policy."[6] Like so many American cities, Baltimore bears the hallmark of longstanding spatial inequality stemming from historic policies that created racial segregation and exclusive access to private property. However, Baltimore stands alone with its historical record of racial segregation. In 1910, Baltimore enacted the first municipal ordinance that explicitly segregated housing by race. From there, cities across the country followed suit, leaving a racially divided urban landscape. And for public health expert Lawrence T. Brown, Baltimore remains unique in how it "reveals the sophistication of structural violence deployed in city ordinances, real estate practices, mortgage lending, code enforcement, municipal budgets, zoning laws, urban planning, urban renewal, and urban redevelopment," resulting in what he calls "spatial apartheid."[7]
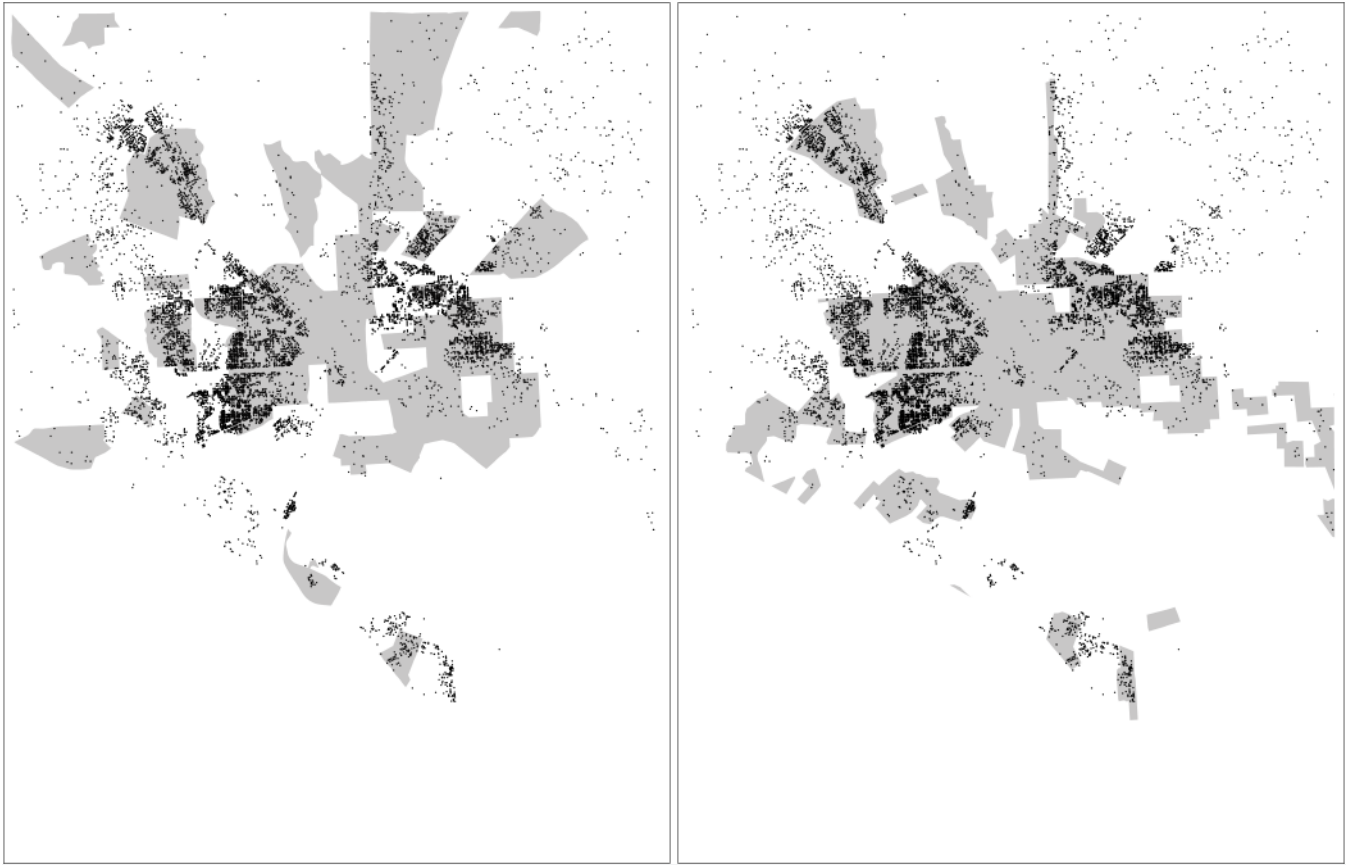
Figure 2. Vacant properties and redlined neighborhoods (left); vacant properties and concentrations of poverty (Image: Brent Sturlaugson)

One of the clearest indicators of "spatial apartheid" in Baltimore lies in the concentration of vacant properties. Once again, the explanation for why these concentrations exist points to the racially discriminatory policies that created zones of disinvestment. Clearly stated, city planner Eli Pousson suggests that "vacant houses tell a story about how racial and spatial inequality are built and maintained," underlining the contributing factors by arguing, "politicians and planners have consistently presented vacant buildings as the outcome of an inevitable, 'natural' process, rather than the result of specific actions, choices, and policies shaped by white supremacy and structural inequality."[8]

In addition to the "spatial apartheid" created by the layering of exploitative systems, Baltimore also hosts a rich history of cooperative enterprise and collective ownership that forges a different path toward the accumulation of wealth and power among historically oppressed communities. In the 1900s, W.E.B. Du Bois reported on the range of economic cooperation among African Americans, detailing efforts that lead to "co-operation in capital and labor, the massing of small savings, the wide distribution of capital and more general equality of wealth and comfort."[9] Among these efforts in Baltimore were beneficial and insurance societies (of which "there is probably no city in the land where there are as many"), orphanages,

hospitals, banks, coal yards, grocery stores, and other businesses.[10] In the 1970s, Baltimore also hosted a thriving group of socialist feminist organizations. In their historical analysis of these groups, Elizabeth Morrow Nix, April Kalogeropoulos Householder, Jodi Kelber-Kaye find that "Baltimore is a vibrant city capable of building radical and intersectional social movements and a collective consciousness based on the concept of equity."[11] Recognizing the challenges posed by widespread vacancy alongside the diverse traditions of collectivization, Baltimore has the potential for radically rethinking urban space toward more equitable ends through targeted deconstruction and commoning.

THEORIZING ALTERNATIVE MODELS
The widening racial wealth gap makes clear the inequalities built into a measure of prosperity that values private property over all else. In *Race for Profit*, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor outlines the structural racism endemic in financial institutions and questions "a social order that makes the quality of one's life and the substance of one's citizenship contingent on the possession of private property."[12] For Taylor, private property has come to define not only prosperity and wealth in the United States, but also life worth and basic rights. Identifying private property as the lynchpin of contemporary capitalism, geographer James DiFilippis and a team of coauthors sharpen the point: "Property

relations are at the heart of contemporary processes of wealth accumulation and concentration of power; thus, structurally troubling conventional property often seems to be an obvious, direct intervention toward more politically activated, transformation-oriented subjectivities."[13] Just as private property served as a wedge in the widening racial wealth gap, it may also serve as a device for dismantling these inequalities.

By design, wealth and power concentrated among specific groups of people—namely white, non-immigrant men—in specific areas of the city. To protect this wealth, those in power—usually white, non-immigrant men—restricted these areas of the city with special use and occupation categories, conventionally referred to as zoning. Underscoring the racist roots of zoning in the United States, planner Nolan Gray asserts that "zoning is perhaps the most successful segregation mechanism ever devised." Gray's book, *Arbitrary Lines*, includes a thorough analysis of this claim, grounded in historical precedent, leading him to conclude that "abolishing zoning is a necessary—if not sufficient—change if we want to build a more affordable, prosperous, equitable, and sustainable American city."[14] In many ways, zoning provided the design tool for enabling prosperity among specific groups of people in specific areas of the city, and as a corollary, zoning also led to neighborhood disinvestment and community disenfranchisement. However,

zoning—like private property—stems from deliberate design decisions and as such, might be designed differently.[15]

The number of vacant properties in Baltimore has remained relatively consistent for nearly fifteen years, which calls into question the methods used to address the issue. Rather than relying on conventional economic models that rely on individual property ownership, alternative models that embrace collectivizing resources might offer a more viable solution. Documenting the efforts of a coalition of community groups in Philadelphia, geographer Elsa Noterman argues "that outside or on the edge of legal recognition, the effort to collectively take back property functions not as an end in itself, but as a political tactic to challenge—or take on—the notion of possessive ownership, recognizing shared (and uneven) precarity as both a lived reality and an organizing principle."[16] More than simply a method for managing vacant properties, collective action serves to galvanize broader social change. Noterman's argument to "take back property" echoes a broader call from geographers Katherine Gibson, Julie Graham, Jenny Cameron, and Stephen Healy who assert that "our economy is the outcome of the decisions we make and the actions we take" and, as such, "individuals and communities across the globe are taking economic matters into their own hands to help create worlds that are socially and environmentally just."[17] Framing economic activity as the product of individual and collective

Vacant Units

As a result of decades of population decline, many areas of Baltimore consist of blocks where the majority of units are vacant. These vacant units are often cited as threats to public safety and public health, and have garnered the attention of both local and national elected officials.
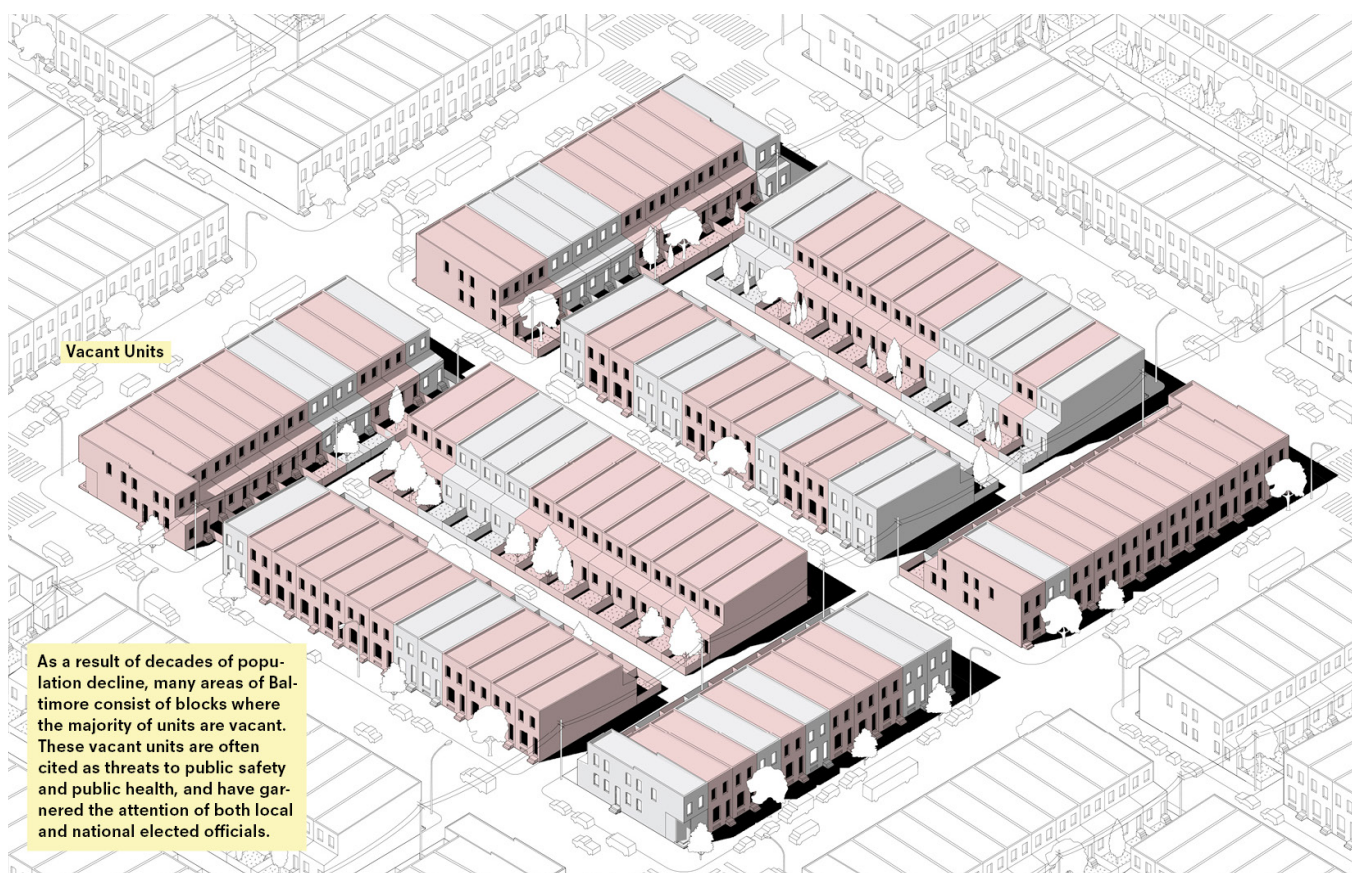
Figure 3a. Distribution of vacant units in an archetypal Baltimore neighborhood (Image: Brent Sturlaugson)

decisions, the authors embolden communities to intervene and "take back the economy."

Among the efforts to reimagine property relations and question the efficacy of zoning include a broad spectrum of residents and activists calling for expanded adoption of community land trusts. Tracing its roots in the United States to a group of civil rights leaders in Georgia, community land trusts offer alternative pathways to creating generational wealth while preserving permanently affordable housing. While many forms of community land trusts exist, they share the distinction of separating the ownership of land from the ownership of structures on that land. Typically, a nonprofit organization consisting of resident members holds the title to the land in trust, while structures on the land fall under a separate title. This arrangement has shown to create more affordable housing options and serve as a preventative measure to gentrification.[18] In Baltimore, after years of activism leading to an affirmative public vote, the Department of Housing and Community Development created the Affordable Housing Trust Fund, which has pledged more than $6 million to community land trusts.

In addition to collectivizing resources through community land trusts and other economic activity that operate at the fringes of capitalism, commoning practices also extend to material reuse. Recognizing the threats to further destabilizing the climate

through the production of new materials, Lindsey Wikstrom invites us to see existing buildings—like vacant rowhouses in Baltimore—"not as waste but as resources." For Wikstrom, the future of ecologically sensitive design rests with the reuse of building materials, claiming, "What has yet to be established is the way the above-ground reservoir of materials is documented, made accessible, and made aesthetic. Its projective futures need to be imagined."[19] Nicole Bouchard encourages a similar shift to "design approaches in a waste-filled world that begs us to consider working with what remains."[20] And for Ang Li, reusing materials at the scale necessary for avoiding the worst effects of climate change requires a reconsideration of the very role of architects, asking "how a distributed approach to architectural production could begin to shift the focus of design education away from the pursuit of objects and toward the organization of materials and labor systems."[21] Taken together, the collectivization of land and material resources creates opportunities for designing a more socially just and ecologically viable future.

However, the problems attendant to vacancy in Baltimore require more than a working theory of collectivizing land and material resources for meaningful change to occur. Highlighting the importance of process, Andrea Nightingale urges us to "focus on *doing* commoning, becoming in common, rather than seeking to cement property rights, relations of sharing,

Reclaimed Materials

Combined Lots

Rather than demolishing vacant units, deconstruction offers a viable alternative that retains embodied carbon, diverts landfill waste, provides skilled employment, and creates abundant material stocks. Portions of the original urban fabric remain intact by rehabilitating adjoining units.
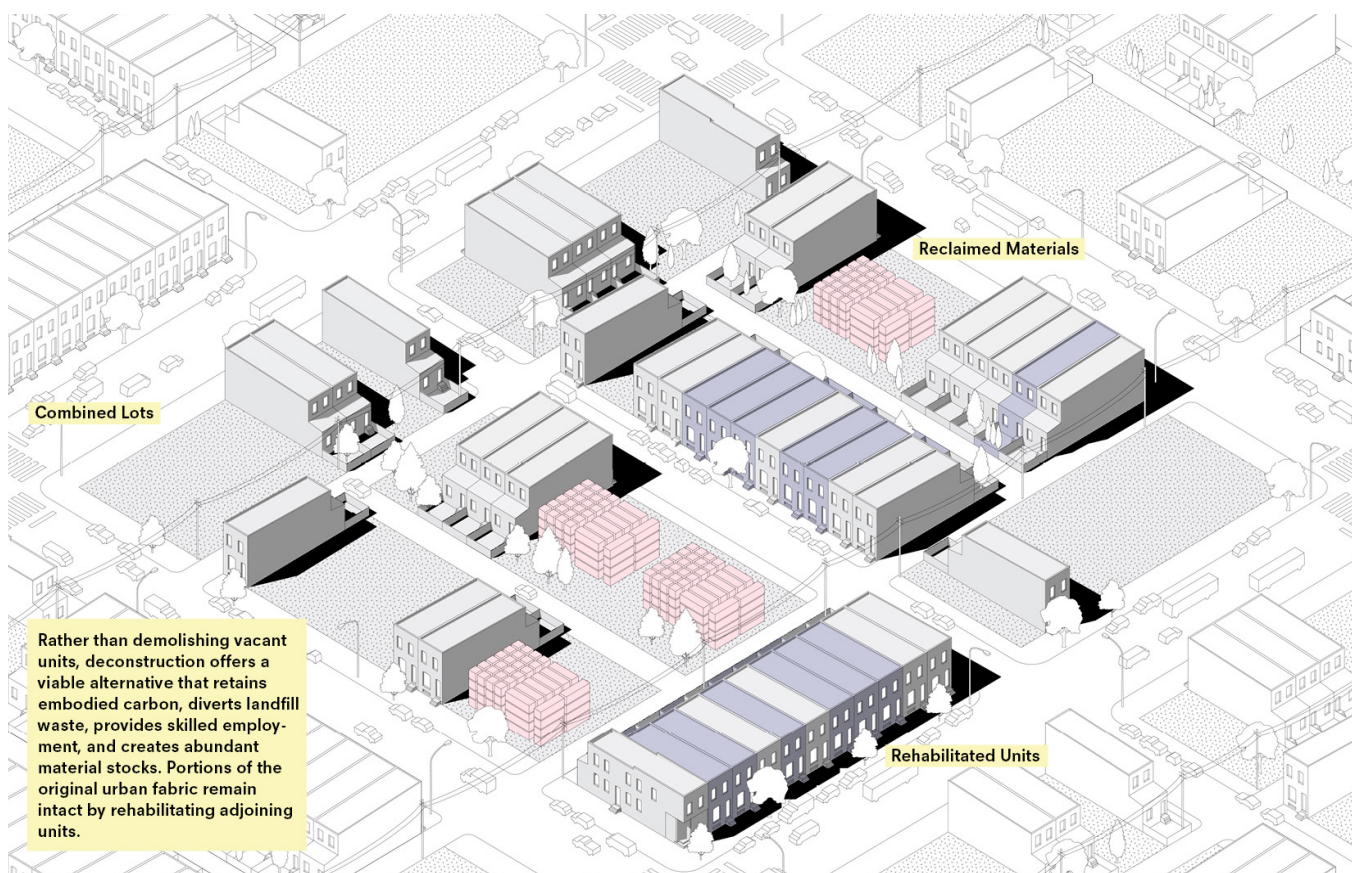
Rehabilitated Units

Figure 3b. Renovation of rowhouses to retain historic urban fabric and reclaimed materials from deconstruction (Image: Brent Sturlaugson)

and collective practices as the backbone of durable commoning efforts."[22] Nightingale recognizes the inherent conflicts that arise in commoning efforts, and rather than avoiding these conflicts, she argues, "a core part of the commoning project needs to be staying with the trouble, keeping in view the exclusions, others, and power over that commoning practices create."[23] More than an alternative framework for property ownership, "becoming in common" ensures that equity endures the test of time, enabling participants to continually reassess their position.

APPROACHING MATERIAL COMMONS

Following Nightingale's call for "becoming in common," my contribution to the groundswell of current activity around collectivizing resources is a boardgame that simulates redevelopment in an archetypal Baltimore neighborhood where vacant units abound. Called "Material Commons," the game is intended to facilitate conversations around equitable and sustainable development among architects, students, community leaders, and government officials in an interactive and accessible format. Drawing on decades of research into shrinking cities, the game simulates what Brent Ryan and others have described as "rightsizing."[24] Winning the game involves removing all vacant units and renovating or redeveloping those sites. Recognizing the structural inequality built into prevailing

development practices, the game also invites players to reimagine social, spatial, and material relationships in Baltimore.

Gameplay happens in three phases. First, players set up the gameboard by placing vacant and occupied units within the existing grid of parcels. The distribution of units can be adjusted to suit specific circumstances, and the grid of parcels can be similarly adjusted. For iterative play that seeks a variety of outcomes, the gameboard must be setup in the same configuration each time. The gameboard itself allows for notetaking and additional design ideas.

Second, players create the rules of the game by answering a series of yes or no questions. For each question, players provide a brief explanation for their answer, which is recorded by an appointed player. Some rules are intended to provoke debate. For example, one question asks, "Will you displace families in occupied units to make way for new development?" Another asks, "Will you change the zoning to allow for non-residential uses?" Other rules invite players to question the status quo. Invoking the widespread practice of profit-driven developers leading gentrification projects, one rule asks, "Will players allow an unelected person to make all decisions?" In another instance that highlights the value of community input in making design decisions, the rule asks, "Will players take turns making decisions without group consensus?" or "Will players take
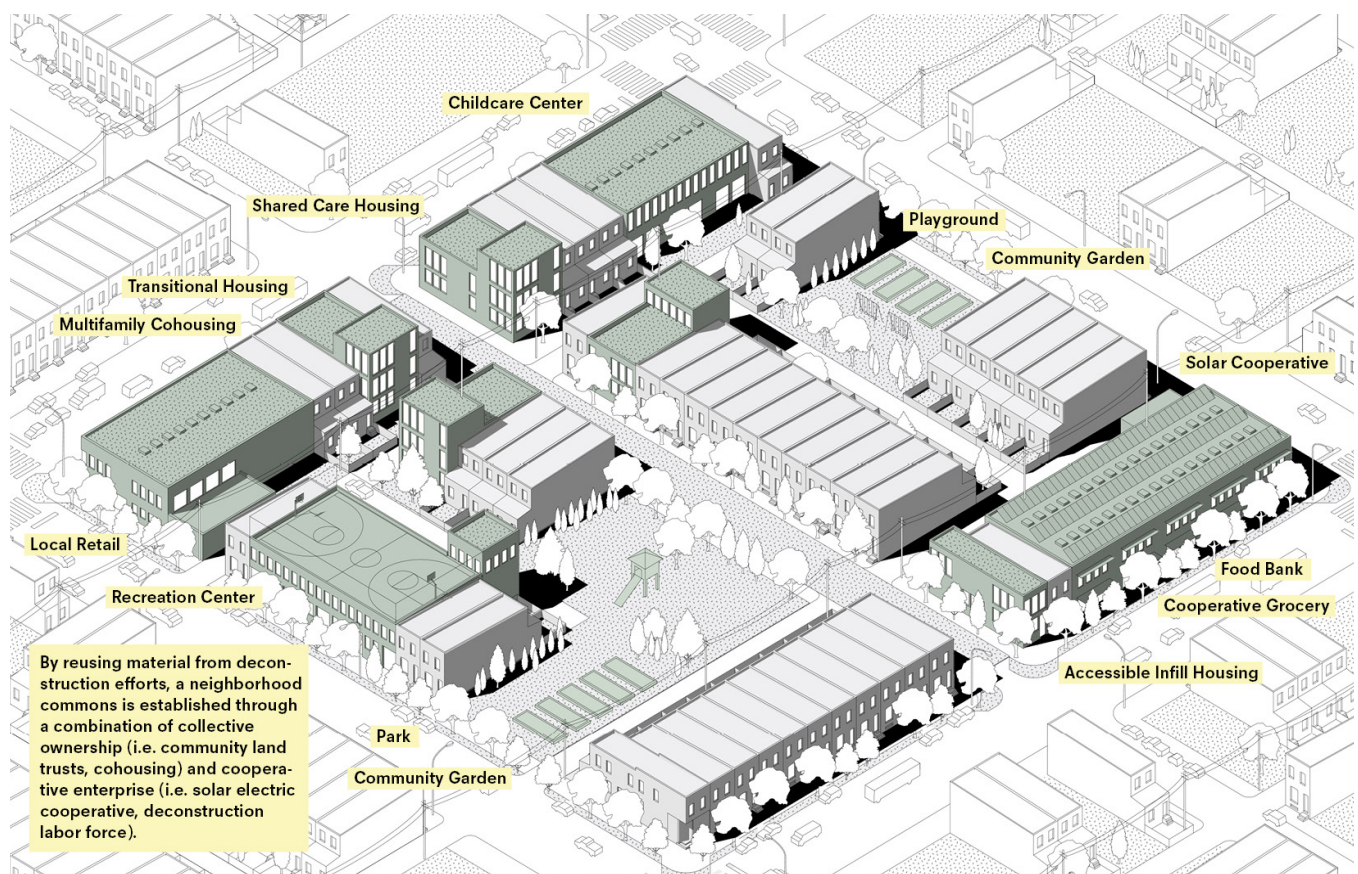

Figure 3c. Redevelopment of public spaces and community services using reclaimed material (Image: Brent Sturlaugson)

Figure 4. Stills from video documenting gameplay among students at Morgan State University (Image: Brent Sturlaugson)

turns making decisions with group consensus?" After answering all of the provided questions, players can choose to adopt additional rules, which must be written in the form of a yes or no question with an accompanying explanation to the answer. Importantly, the rules of the game must be collectively established and all players must agree to follow them.

Third, players choose to perform one of three actions, in accordance with the established rules: remove, renovate, redevelop. The sequence of these actions is recorded by the appointed player, along with notes that explain the decision. When choosing to remove, players may take away a single unit or take away multiple contiguous units, assuming the building materials will be reused. When choosing to renovate, players may replace a single vacant unit or multiple contiguous units. When choosing to redevelop, players select from a list of buildings or open spaces. The list of buildings includes: multifamily housing, transitional housing, shared care housing, health clinic, local retail, market and food hall, recreation center, childcare center, branch library, and cooperative grocery. Among the list of open spaces are: playground, community garden, dog park, basketball court, passive recreation zones, ball field, and splash park. The game is over when all vacant units have been removed or renovated, and all remaining sites have been redeveloped with either buildings or open spaces.

In Fall 2022, the boardgame debuted in a graduate design studio at Morgan State University, where students tested its range of outcomes and used one of the results as a starting point for their subsequent architectural design projects. In the first iteration of play, students chose not to displace anyone living in occupied units and to achieve consensus around each design move. In the second iteration, they allowed for displacement and decided to make design decisions without group consensus. In the third iteration, the students allowed for selective displacement with a condition to rehouse locally, and they returned to the method of consensus-based design decisions during gameplay. While the interpretations of these iterations fall outside the scope of this paper, future research will include a fuller analysis of redevelopment simulations through gameplay with both students and established community groups in Baltimore, including Charm City Land Trust, North East Housing Initiative, and South Baltimore Community Land Trust.

CONCLUSION

While politicians pose for photographs from behind the controls of excavators against a backdrop of material soon to be interred in landfills, residents and community leaders in Baltimore wield different tools in their forging of stronger social ties and more adaptable environments. In Curtis Bay, youth activists and organizers of the South Baltimore Community Land Trust grab

shovels and push wheelbarrows in the creation of a new park on formerly vacant lots. In the Four-by-Four neighborhood, contractors for the North East Housing Initiative—another community land trust supported by the Affordable Housing Trust Fund—remove lead-based paint from aging window frames in the renovation of permanently affordable houses. And in McElderry Park, residents tend to flowers, vegetables, and herbs growing on nineteen parcels of connected land, collectively referred to as the Amazing Port Street Commons. These actions demonstrate not only a desire for more just and equitable environments, but a path toward achieving them, to which "Material Commons" contributes.

ENDNOTES

1. Estimates vary on the number of vacant properties in Baltimore. Baltimore City Department of Housing and Community Development maintains a dashboard that tracks the number of designated "vacant building notices," but these do not account for vacant properties without official designation. Alternatively, the U.S. Census Bureau considers unoccupied dwelling units as vacant.

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