

The Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy
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Podcast transcript begins

[Azalia]: Hi everyone. Welcome to the season two of The Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy podcast, produced at the University at Buffalo. I'm your host and producer Azalia Muchransyah.

This episode I have Erkin Özay on the phone with me. He is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Architecture at UB, and the author of *Urban Renewal and School Reform in Baltimore: Rethinking the 21st Century Public School*.

Erkin, can you tell us a little bit about your book?

[Erkin]: This book focuses on a central case study. It's an urban redevelopment project that took place in east Baltimore that started in the early 2000s. At the center of the development is a public-school project called Henderson-Hopkins. So, the book looks at these interlocking case studies together and tries to situate it both in the history and the contemporary trends of urban redevelopment and the role of public schools in that equation.

So, actually, the idea was to do a book of case studies of public schools. So, when I started, I had been interested in public schools. I practiced for over a decade and I've been kind of obsessed with schools, really. Once I came back to academia, I had this idea of actually doing a book on contemporary public-school projects, and Henderson-Hopkins was completed in 2014 and it was one of the projects that I had on my short list.

Once I visited Baltimore to actually look at the school, I realized that there was a lot more to learn from the school because the entire neighborhood around it was basically torn down, and it seemed like a great opportunity to actually kind of reflect on the relationship between urban development, urban design, and schools.

So, the idea was, as opposed to decoupling them from each other, I could use this case study to provide lessons for urban designers, architects, planners, administrators, educators, you know. I had this sort of broad idea of a public scholarship that could be generated from this case study.

[Azalia]: Can you explain about the concept of anchor school?

[Erkin]: The notion of using schools as anchors for neighborhoods, anchors for communities, is this long-standing American progressive urban planning idea going back to the early 20th century. So, it's basically – this is the notion of community school, notions of neighborhood schools – the notion was this nexus that brought together both municipal progressives and educational progressives together, right? The notion that you would actually design a neighborhood, size a neighborhood based on the size of neighborhood school and that actually would serve as this kind of anchor for the entire community, you know. There could be extended uses to it beyond education.

So, this notion of these public educational institutions as being these schools of urban transformation by just kind of bringing the masses up and actually kind of anchoring these communities. So that has been kind of an incredible sort of touchstone of American planning all the way going back to the 1900s especially since the 1920s. And we kind of take those notions, quite often, at face value without really kind of interrogating how effective they were and whether all kinds of different publics – whether they were able to benefit from these institutions, too.

So, this case actually kind of provided the great case to, kind of, rethink whether some of those ideas are holding up because, in fact, the leaders of these projects did have very similar motivations at the beginning of the redevelopment initiative and school project.

[Azalia]: So, what's so interesting about this case study?

[Erkin]: The neighborhood, it used to be called Middle East. This is a neighborhood that's adjacent to Johns Hopkins medical campus. And the history of the neighborhood is really characterized by its conflicts with Johns Hopkins Medical Center that starved for space and expanded through an successive urban renewal project since the 1950s.

In 1949, there was an urban renewal legislation, the federal legislation that allowed universities to actually take on some of these projects. And, immediately, Hopkins did take on a project like that, displacing majority African-American families who lived there. And then there was another episode in the, in the 60s that kind of led to another sort of similar project that resulted in very little gain for the community. So, it wasn't as bad as maybe the 1950s but it just wasn't a great, sort of, level of development. So, that memory has really sort of shaped the relationship between the community and the university for a long, long time.

By the early 1990s, there was a lot of talk about how the rate of vacancy that was increasing at an incredible rate in east Baltimore. So, there was some expectation that a Hopkins-led project could come online. And it indeed, in 2001, mayor at the time, Mayor O'Malley announced the idea of this project which would follow this rulebook of an anchor-led development. By anchor here I mean a university or a, sort of, a hospital entity that can serve as an economic generator to actually sort of uplift and, kind of revitalize the community. This was sort of a very common approach.

Hence, he launched this project that would, as opposed to focusing on the larger area of east Baltimore, it would target this specific neighborhood just north of the campus and was just gonna transform it for good. He sort of said, you know, there was this phrase they used to use is, "scattered sites approach." The idea was this project, here and there, we would just focus on this 88-acre area and just transform it completely.

[Azalia]: Is it a unique case or does it also occur in other places as well?

[Erkin]: So, be sure, you know, that anchor led development has been taking place everywhere, you know, eds and meds approach. And in the book, I actually look at some other examples. One of the more prominent examples is Penn in Philadelphia and their west Philadelphia initiatives actually went through a similar episode in the 1990s. And, in fact, some of the actors who were involved with that project came and worked on this east Baltimore project.

And the question is actually not whether these institutions should play a role in revitalizing the communities. I think that – that's established that that should be there. The question is, how should they go about serving the needs of those communities? Because, as I tried to show in the book, the interests of these institutions and interests of the community sometimes clash.

Due to the methods of development, due to the ways that these projects are planned and implemented, uh, they're sort of – it's a very complex problem.

[Azalia]: Can you elaborate more about this project in Baltimore and its impact to the local community?

[Erkin]: The project started in earnest in 2004 and did a major demolition project. So, by 2006, a 35-acre area was sort of completely wiped out, what they called the phase one area. And by 2006, there were some interesting conversations about whether the plan was actually working properly. And the project was led by an entity called East Baltimore Development Incorporated, EBDI, which is this quasi-public entity that collaborated with Johns Hopkins and Annie E. Casey Foundation, who was also a partner in the project.

So, EBDI actually had a change of leadership around 2005 and the new director was not so fond of the first plan. So, actually, he engaged another set of urban designers and planners, and then they actually changed the plan and tried to incorporate more historic preservation ideas, as well as this idea of a new community school.

So, the idea was that, I think there's sort of inherent criticisms about, you know, how the project started in 2004, and then this new director actually tried to change the course a little bit, which kind of brought the idea of this new educational initiative. Until 2006, the neighborhood had the school, which was closed, and the notion was that it was decided that there will be a new school campus.

The problem though, between 2001 and 2005, you know, many families were already displaced and it was always in limbo, uh, just, you know, sort of acquisitions, relocations, demolitions, you know. There was this lack of clarity about the project. Which kind of caused incredible sort of stress for the community.

Another, really sort of major, shortcoming was, you know, how they went about the demolitions. There were incredible, sort of, public health hazards that were generated by the asbestos and things like that. There were actually, you know, particles that really made the neighborhood a very, very difficult place to live. So, I think there were some, sort of, attempts to actually kind of remedy some of those problems in the 2005-2006, which actually engaged the community to, sort of, design a new community school, which was done earnestly by invitation.

But, unfortunately, I think at that point, sort of, whoever was left from the community had very little, sort of, attention left to serve a new school project. That also kind of revealed the problems of the project. The notion was it's an 88-acre area with 1800 structures and about 800 households. By 2011, 740 of those households were displaced and almost all of those 1800 structures were gone.

So, the question was, while the, sort of, aspirations of the project was about redeveloping the neighborhood and revitalizing the community, in the meantime, it was displacing the community away from the neighborhood. Which actually kind of really crippled the project at the end because many neighborhood residents who were actually invested in the future of the neighborhood, and who were

active civic residents, like Lucille Gorham, that I sort of talk about, who could have actually been assets for the project were actually removed from the neighborhood, you know.

So, in a way, EBDI and Johns Hopkins did not really have a, sort of a viable partner to work with aside from this group called Save Middle East Action Committee, which was this incredibly active group, and without their participation, none of the— any positives that were generated from the project was thanks to them, actually.

So, the impact of the project is very complex. A 1.8-billion-dollar project. This, you know, anchor led development. And whenever I, sort of, present this project, you know, in conferences, et cetera, people know about this, especially the, you know, sort of the, the development communities, and things like that. And there are very, sort of, conflicting views.

But one of the positive views, one of the things that always comes up, is the residents who are relocated were compensated beyond the housing and urban development federal requirements. And the reason for that was the engagement of Johns Hopkins and Annie E. Casey were actually able to, sort of, shore up some of those compensation levels. But something that gets overlooked in that one is actually there's no proper way to, uh, rebuild the community. Because, sort of, the idea was that eventually they were displaced and not all of them wanted to leave.

There, of course there were those who wanted to leave, but there was a large portion of the community who were either undecided or did not want to leave. And at the beginning, the project never, kind of, showed them a path to staying in the neighborhood. Uh, that is something that I, um, I tried to kind of emphasize in the book – the burden of, you know, institution kind of showing up and, kind of, presenting these plans, and the community's inability to, kind of, see themselves in those plans were a major shortcoming for the project. I mean a fatal flop for the project that created major power imbalances in the way that the development was conceived. So, I tried to emphasize that in the book.

[Azalia]: What are the lessons we all can take from this case study?

[Erkin]: Number one, avoid mass displacement. The problem is, you know, we talk about legacy cities, shrinking cities, weak market cities. This was an, uh, 1800 structures, 88-acre area. It was between 55 to 70 percent vacancy rate.

There were ways to actually build housing at the, you know, very early on to actually address the needs of this vulnerable community right off the bat, as opposed to this notion of clearing it out and then just, kind of, restarting in the name of, kind of, creating – actually, and they always use this word, you know, like creating a market.

Like, sort of, the idea was that if we can only create a market that, sort of, could attract middle-class residents, this project will be a success. But it's just not a really proper way to start a project because that actually undermines the vulnerable community who actually were there in the first place trying to, kind of, improve the situation. It's not that they're not aware – they did expect something like this to come up.

And then the second is, I talk about why this school came so late in the game. It wasn't part of the early project. Once it was brought up by the first director in 2004 it took another five years to actually bring it online. And by that time, you know, most of the community was gone.

And the third, I guess is kind of obvious, it's just the typical ways of urban development – this regards the historically rooted distrust of urban communities in the development processes. We really need to come to terms with that and find a way to address it. As once a practitioner and, now, sort of a scholar, this is something that keeps coming up on and on and again and we just keep falling back to, kind of, the same patterns.

One of the things that I compare this project to is, you know, the Harlem Children's Zone in Harlem, New York, uh, led by Geoff Canada, which kind of included, you know, both sort of educational and sort of public health components, and many people sort of applaud it. And then, of course, there are, sort of, issues attached with it too, but at the end of the day, the difference between that project and this is, you know, Harlem Children's Zone actually started with addresses. Or, it wasn't about displacing the community and making a new one that they would like better. It was more about how do we go about addressing the ground condition as we found it. So, that – that did not happen here.

I sort of think about these things as design problems because urban design is not just, you know, us kind of drawing buildings and kind of deciding where the pads go and sort of where to put the trees and things like that. Urban design sort of goes beyond that formal approach and it looks at policy, it looks at ideas of planning, it looks at procedures. I kind of try to present that as, why not think about preservation, why not think about the housing idea, why not think about the school idea as, you know, sort of the policies and procedures of those, as part of understanding the ground properly, understanding the history of these communities properly.

Because without taking those concrete steps at the beginning and revealing those past injustices, I think we just keep falling off sides, really. We sort of lose grounding for our high-minded aspirations, let's say.

[Azalia]: What is the main takeaway from your book?

[Erkin]: There are right ways of doing this and, sort of, at the end I know I talk about the idea of Harlem Children's Zone, I talk about other developments in Milwaukee that kind of tie user education and housing and neighborhood policy together. The idea is actually really kind of interrogating them with an open mind as opposed to just taking them as is. I think this is, we as architects and urban designers do it, but I see that, you know, sort of education administrators and policy makers also fall into the same trap.

But details really, really matter, and understanding the ground conditions really, really matter. So, I hope that this book becomes a call and sort of a warning flag for us to, kind of, wake up from our common assumptions, let's say.

[Azalia]: That was professor Erkin Özay, the author of *Urban Renewal and School Reform in Baltimore: Rethinking the 21st Century Public School*, and this has been The Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy podcast produced at the University at Buffalo. Please visit our website buffalo.edu/baldycenter for more episodes, and follow us on twitter @baldycenter. Until next time, I'm your host and producer, Azalia Muchransyah.