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Madison Park Neighborhood – Baltimore, Maryland

In the fall of 1999 I moved from Milwaukee, Wisconsin to Baltimore, Maryland to attend college at Maryland Institute College of Art. This move would forever change my life.

The college is located in the Bolton Hill neighborhood of Baltimore, which is two miles directly north of the downtown area. Bolton Hill is a residential neighborhood, comprised of very grand Italianate row houses and large stand-alone Queen Anne Victorian mansions. Upon arriving for orientation, counselors gave very specific instructions on the “no go” zones around the neighborhood. “Do not go north of North Avenue, west of Eutaw Place and east of the railroad tracks.” Basically everything north, west and east of campus was explicitly off limits. This peaked my interest. What lay beyond these preset boundaries? Over the next several years I explored these neighborhoods slowly only venturing in a block or two to see what the forbidden land was all about. One neighborhood, Madison Park, was located seven blocks west of the college campus. The neighborhood was full of incredible Italianate row homes that were completely abandoned, burned out and boarded up. There were entire streets of Madison Park that were completely desolate. Growing up in the Midwest, I had not experienced abandonment as I had found in Madison Park. These incredible pieces of architecture lay in complete ruins. Something was incredibly beautiful about these buildings although initially I could not put my finger on what it was.

In the spring of 2003 I was given a project for my senior thesis class. “Choose a word or phrase that starts with the letter B that depicts Baltimore.” I was set. Within thirty

seconds of the words coming out of my professor's mouth I had my phrase - "Boarded Up." Now I had a reason to return to Madison Park. Initially I started by photographing the streets of the neighborhood early in the mornings when there was no one around. As I had been warned, these were dangerous streets. In some of my initial findings I saw an abandoned fire station, completely desolate schools and entire blocks of the city that were abandoned and boarded for as far as the eye could see. One block of Madison Park specifically sticks with me to this day. I was photographing a block of two story row houses at 6:30 on a Sunday morning, when I realized that only one house on the block was still occupied. In the street stood a car on blocks and down the block a stray dog wandered across the street. An old refrigerator sat in the doorway of one of the row houses. This block symbolized everything that intrigued me with this neighborhood. Somehow so forgotten but somehow so incredibly peaceful and exquisite. All the architectural details were still there. The cornices, the corbelled brickwork, the limestone details still remained, giving a sense of time and place to the block. The only thing missing were the people that made this neighborhood, truly a neighborhood.

In the process of photographing Madison Park, the question arose, "how many abandoned properties are there in Baltimore City?" From my visual inspection of the neighborhoods that lie around Bolton Hill, it was probably quite a few but of the exact number, I had no idea. One phone call to Baltimore City Department of Housing, added a level of complexity to this project that I had never expected. A woman on the other end of the phone said that from their statistics one in every six buildings are abandoned in Baltimore City and as she said, those are only the ones that they know about. I requested the

addresses of the boarded up properties and she was willing to provide them but I was going to have to be pretty specific in my inquiry because of the sheer volume of the properties in the database. I narrowed down my choice to what I thought would be a pretty small inventory. I requested only properties located in zip code 21217, which is where the college campus was located and it included the adjoining neighborhood of Madison Park. The spreadsheet that I received from her contained over 2,000 addresses. I was stunned.

For the background image of the poster I chose an abandoned building listed in the spreadsheet. It was a three story Italianate row house located at 1544 Druid Hill Avenue. With its torn off front porch, partially boarded up windows and the tree growing out of its roof, the condition of the building was typical of what I found in Madison Park. The type overlaying the photograph was drawn directly from the spreadsheet that I received from the administrative assistant at Baltimore City Department of Housing and it lists all of the properties in zip code 21217 that have been boarded up previous to 2003. The project was well received by the thesis class but more importantly it led to further documentation of other partially demolished and abandoned structures throughout Madison Park. As of April 2010, the property still remains abandoned and the neighborhood of Madison Park has seen very little gentrification. The housing boom of the early 2000's saw a dramatic increase in redevelopment in Baltimore City although more recently studies of the downturn in the market has signaled less positive news for the city as a whole. Some studies now estimate that close to twenty percent of the buildings in the city sit vacant.

I have always had an interest in architecture and historic buildings but the social aspect of this project is what changed me as an artist. Now in my second semester of graduate studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago I have specifically sought out projects that deal with master planning and urban renewal incentives on a legislative level.