

# Hampden Vitalization

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## Speculation about strengthening the Hampden Neighborhood... *How?*



We all think we know what characterizes an existing neighborhood, for good or ill. We all look around, we see things we like and dislike, and we have a sense of something different or common with other places around the City. Although those impressions may as often as not be *inaccurate*, even our embedded biases towards what we see give a sense of something even more important to the planning of a region: *What we would like our City to be.*

Hampden appears to be a poor-but-healthy, traditional streetscape amidst a region ever more dispersed, suburbanized, and polarized by wealth. Although much of Hampden's commercial vitality is due to commuters' visits and to businesses run by nonresidents, the *impression* of local charm is as important to Hampden's self-image as is the reality. But to strengthen that self-image, to strengthen those qualities that make Hampden *special* among other neighborhoods in Baltimore, the community must reinforce the "impression" with reality: a better mass-transit infrastructure, more pedestrian traffic both within Hampden and from surrounding areas, more local commercial activity, and an even stronger local business presence.

I'd like to propose three main categories of possible interventions, in order to organize subsequent criticism and additional brainstorming:

- 1) Plan Concepts which might use rezoning or other legal tools to direct development. These ideas might also include specific architectural and landscape proposals which would affect the neighborhood at a large scale.
- 2) Institution Suggestions for new organizations or groups which can operate in ways not possible with the current public groups.
- 3) Microcosm Ideas for changes at the smallest urban scale: street furniture, landscaping, materials, &c.



Hampden's most pressing problems are, nonetheless, *not* problems of planning. Continued poverty among some residents makes itself felt even in public places. Drug activity is apparent throughout the neighborhood. A bankrupt school system discourages new residents from relocating to and investing in the area. And continued neglect by many property owners effect a sort of urban "inertia" upon others' efforts to revitalize both commercial and residential blocks.

It is hard to describe a "vision" for Hampden in which those ills, among others, still persist. Nevertheless, we can suggest that in a vital neighborhood, those problems may be more fruitfully addressed than in a place which is moribund . American society, so directed towards *growth* as an end in itself, seems most willing to deal with its own pathologies when healthy sectors are expanding.

But how can growth be achieved within a neighborhood's geographical limitations? How can growth be promoted without disturbing the qualities of the status quo?

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### A Plan of Three Parts: Problems... or Potential?



Sketch Diagram of East/West Pedestrian Axis

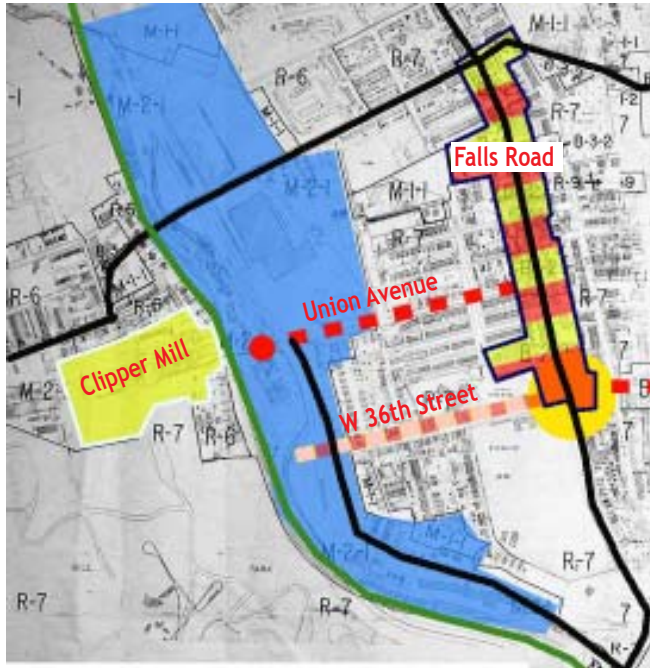
This essay proposes the creation of an east/west *pedestrian* axis. Leading through Hampden's natural focus, West 36<sup>th</sup> Street, this axis will link the Johns Hopkins campus (and neighborhoods east of Wyman Park) to the commercial area around the Light Rail stop and the new development at Clipper Mill. This link will depend upon three new projects: a bridge over Wyman Run to JHU; revised business planning for the existing Clipper Mill commercial area; and, most crucially, a radical rethinking of the character of the Falls Road corridor.

*Falls Road, to this day seemingly considered Hampden's "back door," must be conceived to be the very heart of Hampden's future residential and commercial growth.*

Rather than competing with West 36<sup>th</sup> Street's iconic character, Falls Road should be a contemporary example of aggressive planning, greater residential density, good design, and a commitment to urban values.

## 1.1

### Clipper Mill and “the Rest of Us”



*No amount of additional parking has ever solved a parking problem. Only public transportation and a dedication to a pedestrian-based urban environment can defuse critical traffic conditions at the local and regional level.*

The most exciting and immediate challenge for Hampden right now is the new development at Clipper Mill. The coincidence of Clipper Mill’s future success and the inevitable, increased use of the Light Rail stop must obviously be leveraged to the advantage of the rest of the neighborhood.

But if the last thirty years of Baltimore development is by any indication, Clipper Mill’s success runs a great risk of isolation. On the one hand, Clipper Mill’s great potential reflects the source of Hampden’s own vitality: a rare connection to mass transit, proximity to Baltimore’s Downtown, and the mixed presence of business and residential properties nearby.

Yet the poor integration between the Clipper Mill site and the rest of Hampden carries the threat that Clipper Mill residents will see themselves as members of a separate enclave, with little need for connection to the rest of the neighborhood. Far from promoting a “Canton Effect” (at once anticipated and feared by various Hampden residents), in which properties adjacent to Clipper Mill will themselves be swept up by development, the physical barrier of the JFX and -- more importantly -- the weak urban condition along Union Avenue and other possible links might well remain the buffer between rich and poor.

So the first priority for Hampden should be to rethink the neighborhood’s connection to the Light Rail stop. The existing “Shuttle Bug” transit link should be a community priority, with even greater frequency and penetration into the Hampden residential area. *Proposals by the MTA to decrease service (or even cancel service) must be seen by the Hampden Community as an existential threat.*

But a transport link from A to B is not enough. More thought must be given to the physical link itself. The obvious traffic corridor, Union Avenue, has currently neither the proper zoning nor the physical characteristics which will encourage pedestrian traffic. (The large incline from the Light Rail Stop to Falls Road is an unfortunate impediment.) Changes in zoning along Union Avenue, more appropriate to heavier use and development, might be considered for long-term change.

Yet there are other potential corridors. Clipper Mill Road south of Union Avenue has the potential for much denser light-industrial and business development than currently permitted. A pedestrian connection from Clipper Mill Road up to West 36th Street is architecturally feasible, but has yet to be explored strategically. It should be obvious, however, that the connection between Poole School and the Light Rail cannot remain neglected; and that other institutional presences on 36th Street west of Falls Road (the Rec. Center, Roosevelt Park, and nearby churches) may well benefit from a continuous connection between the new Clipper Mill Development and The Avenue.

## 1.2

### Bridging between Hampden, JHU

Campo Volantin  
Footbridge,  
Bilbao, Spain

*Santiago Calatrava*



At the other end of the neighborhood, Hampden's relationship to the Johns Hopkins University and its dynamic student body has for years been largely ambivalent, made more so by the natural boundary of Wyman Park and unnatural disagreements about the Park's provenance. That attitude should change to one of active engagement with Hopkins, in order to encourage patronage and participation at an institutional and individual level.

*This new attitude can be dramatically embodied in the construction of a new pedestrian bridge over Wyman Run, linking Hampden to the Hopkins campus.*

Right now, getting to Hampden from Hopkins is a round-about route over the viaduct at Remington Avenue. This route hardly directs foot traffic to The Avenue; and its physical isolation makes the journey to Hopkins more difficult (and threatening) than needs be. A bridge at the end of 36th Street would afford pedestrians an easy walk to, from, and *through* Hampden's commercial heart.

A beautiful pedestrian bridge has become a treasured feature of many urban renewal projects across the world. If the Hopkins administration can join the Hampden community in this vision, private donors for design and construction could easily be found. The advantage for both Hampden and Johns Hopkins would be the immediate provision of Hampden's amenities to students and faculty.

## 1.3

### A New Falls Road



*Technical challenges such as traffic control, parking, design guidelines, and commercial feasibility should all be considered tools of an overall concept, not entirely determining factors...*

Because of a slip of the surveyor's pen, the potential for the great East-West axis founders at Falls Road, across which there is no simple movement either for vehicles or for foot traffic. The Avenue's intersection with Falls Road feeds northbound traffic onto Falls; the turn left towards the southbound JFX is made hazardous and frustrating by a slight geometric twist and a poorly-designed traffic signal. The intersection between Union and Falls is better, but only because of its innocuous dead-end into Falls Road. Either way, Falls Road is the inevitable backbone of Hampden -- more so, for most vehicular purposes, than the Avenue.

*So why not accept and exploit this fact?*

The Hampden Community should encourage the replanning of Falls Road as a high-density, mixed-use community showcase. A simple zoning change, together with stricter guidelines for mandated mixed use, could at the same time attract larger-scale investment to less-sensitive location than 36th Street and also increase the local population density for the benefit of local business.

One of many possible suggestions is this: Between 36th Street and 41st Street, rezoning to B-2-3 zoning would allow five-story structures along a Falls Road. With an integrated plan including wider sidewalks, design guidelines, and a commitment to intensive residential construction mixed with limited commercial use, Falls Road might become a large new source of local patronage for both 36th Street and additional development around Clipper Mill. Learning from Baltimore's successful, traditional urban examples, four stories of residential units (whose typological character would be fixed to encourage occupant ownership) would afford a great pool of consumers for local commerce. That commerce would itself become an amenity which will energize movement from east to west, effecting the flow of people which is the mark and generator of a healthy cityscape.

*What's needed is a public consensus about what a City should be! Perhaps an organized public debate of conflicting visions must be the Hampden's first priority.*

## 2

### Organization and Change

If the Hampden community is serious about making a difference in its own physical infrastructure, examples from other cities may be helpful. Especially in the climate of public debt as threatening as Baltimore's, the Hampden Community Council might look at ways to attract philanthropy for capital investment at a small scale.

What is needed is money for playgrounds, renovation of public property, and matching grants for private redevelopment. It is clear that Hampden cannot depend neither on Baltimore City nor the State of Maryland to meet even their basic fiscal *obligations* to the neighborhood. So, for now at least, investment *beyond* those obligations are beyond the means of political action. But if actively solicited and properly used, private philanthropy can fill a gap left by the fiscal problems at the state and local level.

The Hampden Community Council might consider establishing a nonprofit organization which can be active in such fund-raising for neighborhood projects.

An example of one such charitable organization would be Jerusalem's "Jerusalem Foundation" [[www.jerusalem-foundation.org](http://www.jerusalem-foundation.org)] Set up more than three decades ago by Jerusalem's then-mayor, Teddy Kollek, the organization solicits charitable donation from around the world. Its projects span an enormous range of scales and types, but included among them are projects of enormous importance at the *local* level: new equipment for playgrounds, public spaces, and new community buildings.

Although Hampden cannot draw on the public attention that Jerusalem commands, what is possible is to move the emphasis for private support from "underwriting" community functions towards the canvassing of donation and funding from individuals, businesses, and foundations. Within the Baltimore community, Hampden's special iconic role is more than likely to draw positive attention in the competition for donors. What is now lacking is the *institutional* mechanism to solicit funding.



**Liberty Bell Park, Jerusalem**  
Funded by the Jerusalem Foundation

### 3

#### Microcosm



*Room for Improvement*

There seems to be a swarm of initiatives concerning how to better the appearance of the Hampden neighborhood. Some of them seem successful, such as the facade improvement program, which has resulted in a higher standard of visible architecture among the many neglected storefronts.

This kind of program should be imitated and turned to a different focus, less concerned with “image” and also extending beyond the West 36th Street corridor. Matching grants for individual homeowners’ facades is an obvious example, but more crucial will be renovation on the other side of the house: the alleys. A “rear-yard” improvement program, to encourage homeowners to renovate rear fences, trash receptacles (and their decorative covers!), and lighting would raise the standard of Hampden’s environment immeasurably. Emphasizing public health and safety, design-guidelines for trash-enclosures and fences would improve a too-often neglected “aesthetic” problem. If such a program were joined to a cost-sharing proposal to repave the alleys, the inertia of such block-by-block improvement might come to include the City’s agreeing to renovate drainage systems.

Another sort of amenity which is addressed only fitfully is the condition of playgrounds, which are easily vandalized and not so easily repaired (by the City). Although the Hampden Community Council is working hard on its plans for Roosevelt Park, there are other pocket parks throughout the neighborhood whose local impact can be quite meaningful, especially for potential homebuyers with children.

One might consider joining renovation of existing playgrounds (and the development of new ones) with small, adjacent commercial spaces (such as snowball and snack stands for summer use) whose proprietor might assume responsibility for maintenance of the facility.

The challenge is to move the public perception of a playground from “forum for delinquency” to “pleasant public space” which may be used by residents of all ages.

## 4

### In Retrospect...

Every first-year design and planning student hears Daniel Burnham's famous slogan, "Make no little plans." But what is too-often interpreted by developers to connect the scale of a project with its financial return was intended to speak to our vision:

*Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood and probably will themselves not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will not die.*

Planning for the neighborhood of Hampden certainly doesn't need Burnham's grandiosity. But thinking about the neighborhood needn't begin with the details of "getting things done" without some bigger idea of how its own characteristics can be reinforced -- and, if need be, *transformed*.

All of the suggestions written here are possible, even if many may not be immediately *feasible*. Some may not be deemed desirable. More significantly, some will be frightening to many, since all of these ideas involve a change from the *status quo*. But that fear is, in itself, neither recommendation nor reason not to consider these proposals -- or others from elsewhere. But the community is obligated to consider many options, both for preservation and for change.

Unlike Burnham's words of a century ago, Martin O'Malley's slogan "Better Isn't Good Enough" evokes mostly *bathos* and irony. But, taken seriously, it is not a bad reminder to move beyond the commonplace in our thinking about the future.