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Perspective

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Planning with 'the genius of the landscape'



"Cannot we create from a beautiful, natural landscape an environment inhabited by man in which natural beauty is retained, man housed in community?"

*Plan for the Valleys of
Baltimore County, 1962*

By TOM HORTON



SUN GRAPHICS

PERSPECTIVE

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At the time he was born on the outskirts of Baltimore, the view from Doug Carroll's bedroom window had not changed appreciably from his grandmother's day. The big sunlit rooms looked over lawns and huge old trees that verged onto a landscape textured delightfully by streams and pasture and fields. This in turn gave way to forest-cloaked slopes on both east and west that walled the long sweep of the valley floor. It was, he recalls, at once both "beautiful and ordinary - most of the country around here looked that way."

By 1950, when Mr. Carroll was a boy of 10, unprecedented changes were altering much of the Maryland landscape, especially the Baltimore region. Population in the region would balloon by nearly a million people in the next decade, and a beltway would encircle the city with eight lanes of concrete, passing within half a mile or so of the Carroll house.

Still, the scene in the valley remained as peaceful and timeless as the sheep grazing on the green pastures outside, as natural as the trout finning

in the clear shallows of creeks feeding the upper Jones falls.

During the 1970s and '80s, yet another million or so persons flooded into the state. Again Baltimore County, where Mr. Carroll lives, would outpace most of Maryland in growth and development. As the suburbs rippled outward, more than 10,000 acres of the Baltimore region's forest and farmland vanished before the bulldozers.

But save for the faint swishing of traffic now nearing gridlock on the beltway beyond the forested slope, the valley and the bedroom-window view inherited by Galen Carroll, born to Doug and Deirdre in 1990, remains nearly as it has been for four generations. There are days when Galen's parents dare to hope it may remain so indefinitely.

Across the multi-state Chesapeake Bay watershed, where suburban sprawl has consumed more open space in the last few decades than in the previous few centuries, and where another 2.6 million persons are projected to settle by the year 2020, there is a desperate search for new ways to pattern development - allowing

growth without wrecking what is left of our natural heritage.

"One of the most fascinating innovations in protection of the environment," wrote *Fortune* magazine when it devoted its whole February 1970 issue to the environment on the occasion of Earth Day, was taking place in the Baltimore county valleys where Mr. Carroll grew up. Twenty-one years later the achievement there - thousands of acres of lovely countryside retained amid some of the most intense development in the nation - holds valuable lessons, both encouraging and sobering.

In the valleys, it all began not from any environmental movement or enlightened government, but with a group of Baltimore businessmen, recalls Robert Levi, former CEO of the Hecht Company department stores and a valley resident for 50 years.

The Greater Baltimore Committee, a group concerned primarily with planning the revitalization of downtown Baltimore, began to realize that the surrounding county was also ill-equipped to cope with the growth pressures that were being unleashed in the early 1960s. Spurred by this, and by an imminent large-scale development proposal for a cornfield in the Greenspring Valley, residents contracted with a former GBC planning chief to plan an alternative future.

The Plan for the Valleys, as it was called, would include the Green Spring, Worthington and Caves valleys. It would involve Ian McHarg, who was to win fame as one of the nation's most

visionary landscape planners. It would cost \$300,000, a huge sum of money in an era when planning was thought by many landowners a frivolous, if not downright communistic exercise.

The landowners in the valleys raised the entire sum. Some were wealthy, but some had little more than their land. "It was fascinating to me how many of them, even though they felt the plan would devalue what they could sell their property for, really cared deeply about the future of the land," Mr. Levi said.

Mr. McHarg, who would later write a classic book, "Design with Nature," believed, as he wrote in the valleys plan, that "the natural land form has an inherent sense of order." By his second trip to the valleys, the land had given him the broad outlines of his plan.

In the parts where developers would most naturally have developed, the broad, open valley floors, no development would be allowed. On the forested slopes that walled the valleys, only very restricted development could occur. In these elements resided what Mr. McHarg called the "genius of the landscape," and they must be kept intact.

His vision was far from being a "stop-growth" plan. Indeed, it saw growth as both inevitable and socially desirable. The plateaus surrounding the valleys were designated for more intensive growth than even most developers of that time (or this) would have sought. Mr. McHarg saw the plateaus as a series of densely clustered villages, surrounded by green spaces of

their own. To this day, there remains room within the context of the plan for decades more population increase without the need to rezone any of the protected areas of the valleys.

The Plan also saw the open space of the valleys as a "region-serving facility" - an amenity in its own right serving all the residents of Baltimore county and city, just as a regional shopping mall elsewhere might serve other needs.

Valley residents also established their own, private Valleys Planning Council to administer the plan and represent it to county government. It still exists nearly 30 years later, funded by donations from a thousand families, ranging from \$25 to \$1,000 a year.

By many standards the valleys represent a success. In 1991 the "genius of the landscape," the forested slopes and broad, open sweeps of the valley floors remain intact, amid some of the nation's most intense suburbia. It is no slight to Baltimore city to say that one of the finest things about it is how quickly you can leave it. Crossing under the Baltimore Beltway on Green Spring Avenue, one goes from urban center to idyllic farm valley in the space of a few minutes.

A key to this success was the plan's ability to define a very specific vision - exactly where development would not go (the valley floors) and where it would go (on the plateaus). Just as important, it dealt upfront with the entire region, an integral whole whose essential character was the valleys.

Across most of Maryland and other states in the bay's 64,000-square-mile watershed, no such visions yet exist, other than pablum such as "keep our county green" and "we want controlled growth." Neither have we designated in any meaningful way areas that should receive high growth or areas that should not receive growth. We have never identified, let alone protected with zoning codes, the "genius of landscape" for our counties, or recognized those qualities of land and water that fundamentally shape unique regions like Maryland's Eastern Shore, Virginia's Northern Neck and Pennsylvania's Lancaster county.

Ironically, it was the part of the Plan for the Valleys that encouraged dense growth that proved most difficult to implement and fell shortest of its original goals. Attempts to create better land-use patterns around the country are finding this to be generally true - it is harder to get people to accept high-density growth than it is to set aside no-growth or minimal-growth areas.

Around the valleys, Baltimore County was not rapid enough in providing the infrastructure, such as sewerage, nor the zoning tools rapidly to achieve the dense "village and greenspace" concepts on the plateaus. They have succeeded in accommodating growth around the valleys, but all too often in typical, suburban-sprawl fashion.

Another concept of the plan was that planned development ultimately would be of more economic benefit to the region than unplanned growth (\$40

million versus \$33 million was the original estimate). This differential was to be used to compensate owners on the valley floors and walls for loss of development potential on their land.

It never happened. "I never thought it would," Mr. Levi says. "We simply have never developed the mechanisms for that kind of [compensation] in this country."

Despite its success, and the encouraging lessons to be learned from it, there is a more daunting side to the story of the valleys, as a tour of the Green Spring Valley with Mr. Carroll quickly makes evident. Although Baltimore county adopted in 1962 the concept of the private Plan for the Valleys, it has only in very recent years begun to enforce those concepts through zoning and subdivision codes. That meant residents have had to fight constantly to hold the plan together.

"There is hardly a property in this valley without a long history of attempts to develop it," Mr. Carroll says.

Across Green Spring Avenue from Mr. Levi's home a few new houses are going up, set back from the road. "The owner died and left it unexpectedly to a 24-year-old relative who had no attachment to the land or to this area anymore. Our local land trust offered him \$1.5 million for the parcel [160 acres]. He thought the money was OK but he didn't like one of our board members, so he sold to a developer," Mr. Carroll says.

"It just brought our basic problem into focus. Here's a property at the corner of Green Spring Avenue

and Green Spring Valley Road that's absolutely key in preserving this corridor of green clear to the Beltway, and here's this kid, with no urge to ever live here, who's got this immense power to influence the look of the whole region . . . a loose cannon."

Residents were able to undermine most of that particular property's development potential by digging up its history of ownership.

The valleys' success story provides valuable guidelines for the rest of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. But the long, frustrating efforts that were required caution against optimism.

Since title had been transferred in increments, it did not meet Internal Revenue Service tests for subdivision to its maximum potential of 26 homes. Only four will be built, and the developer, who has decided to live in one, is now quite attached to maintaining the existing order of the valleys, Mr. Carroll says.

On another key parcel of land - the same cornfield whose imminent development in 1962 helped galvanize residents around a plan for the valleys - the owner still is contending for a rezoning three decades later.

On one of the forested slopes, a 53-acre property willed to Baltimore City and zoned for one house per acre, fierce infighting has been occurring between the money-strapped city

government and valley residents. They have persuaded the city to leave it intact - for now; but there are no guarantees.

In adjoining Seminary Valley, Mr. Carroll stops by a newly sprouted mass of suburbia. It was once the holding of a man who thought the 1962 plan smacked of socialism at best, and fiercely and successfully opposed it for his area.

"They thought enough of that place that they built a big fence around it, but they never really protected the land," Mr. Carroll says: "Now the Seminary Valley is gone."

It boggles the mind, Mr. Carroll says, what it will take to preserve a quality landscape across the whole watershed, given the long, frustrating, efforts just to fight for the integrity of a few valleys in one county.

Mr. Levi agrees, and thinks fundamental changes in the way government works are going to be necessary for optimum land planning. Only a true metropolitan area government covering a region like Baltimore city and its surrounding counties can do the job, he thinks.

"Until you can work on that scale you are never going to solve the problems in the city and in the counties. they are connected, and we're just kidding ourselves if we don't recognize that," he says.

Mr. Carroll, who splits his work time between farming, rehabilitating old buildings and two days a week as an emergency-room physician at Greater Baltimore Medical Center, also works on getting land

owners to grant permanent conservation easements on their properties.

He thinks the valleys will never be saved forever until all the land is restricted from development by easements (or similar protection, such as agricultural preservation districts, local land trusts, etc.). To date, such protections in the three valleys extends to perhaps five per cent of the 75 square miles of land there.

Mr. Carroll has taken to heart Ian McHarg's original concept of the valleys as providing regional open-space amenities. He is working to open private property to hiking and biking rights-of-way. More public access, he says, will give more people a stake in the valleys' preservation. County planners say there is still considerable resistance among many valley residents toward more public access, for fear of crime and vandalism. To date the McHarg vision of the valleys as a regional open-space amenity remains only partially realized.

In sum, most observers of the valleys' success story feel it provides valuable guidelines for the rest of the watershed. Many of the concepts in the controversial "2020" growth plan proposed by a gubernatorial commission last year involved measures to foster dense growth in some areas and eliminate it in others - techniques that sound much like Ian McHarg's 30-year-old Plan for the Valleys.

The 2020 plan was rejected by the legislature and currently is the subject of a study committee. Without passage of such a plan, or some other

fundamental change in governments' current approaches to land use, it is unlikely that the success of the valleys will be duplicated on a wide scale solely by private interests. neither can any governmental effort succeed, however, without a clearer vision from private citizens of what they want for the landscape of their regions, for the characteristics of place that make them special.

The real genius of the Plan for the Valleys is ultimately something less definable than identification of growth and non-growth areas. It is recognition that absolute freedom of choice for each property owner to dispose of owned land results inevitably in destroying options for society as a whole.

To continue developing land without vision for landscape is like carving a Matisse oil painting into thousands of equal squares. Many more people end up with a share, but a share of what? Confetti, perhaps, but not art. If the Greenspring Valley were to be parceled out in quarter-acre lots it would be in the narrower sense, a victory for the average homeowner, a more equitable distribution of the American Dream; but the genius of the place would be forever lost.

What worked for the valleys can work elsewhere. Essential ingredients include clearly articulated visions backed by comprehensive and enforceable growth-management plans. Provisions must be made both for putting land off limits to further development, and also - usually the harder chore - mandating intensive, compact development on other lands.

All of this must be supported at local, regional and state levels to succeed.

The benefits range from clean air to lower property taxes, to something that Robert Yaro, of the Center for Rural Massachusetts once characterized this way: "the basic human right that the place you grow up caring about will be there for you when you're ready to start a family of your own."

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