

# URBAN BOULEVARD PLAN FOR FEDERAL HILL-MONTGOMERY STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT IN BALTIMORE

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The Federal Hill-Montgomery Street historic district in Baltimore was placed on the national register for historic places in 1970. A decade of Interstate Highway planning produced a great deal of neighborhood opposition to the Interstate roadway because of adverse impacts on the historic district. In 1974 the Interstate Division for Baltimore City developed a new highway alignment and mitigation plan for the district that was endorsed by the community. Mitigating features that protect the community from noise, traffic danger, air pollution, and aesthetic impairment include (a) landscape treatment of the roadside environment involving earth berms, brick walls, trees, and shrubs and (b) creation of new urban parks in keeping with the historic character of the district. Compromise among the differing groups was achieved primarily by direct involvement and open communication with residents of the district. The success of the Federal Hill project demonstrates the effectiveness of the Federal 106 Process in preserving and protecting an important historic neighborhood while meeting the needs of growing traffic demands.

•THE FEDERAL Hill-Montgomery Street historic district is one of several historic areas in Baltimore within or adjacent to proposed Interstate Highway rights-of-way. The plan proposed by the Interstate Division for Baltimore City for the highway alignment near this district is the first in the city to be developed with the full participation and cooperation of the residents and legal counsel of the involved community, who represented the interests of the historic district. The Federal Hill-Montgomery Street historic district was placed on the national register for historic places in 1970. It is historically significant because it is one of the largest eighteenth-century American working-class neighborhoods still in existence. The best historic structures in the community date from that century. These townhouses, rich in architectural detail and craftsmanship, exemplify urban architecture of the 1700s.

Federal Hill received its name in 1788 when the city celebrated Maryland's ratification of the Constitution. For more than a century after 1775, the open space on the hill functioned as a lookout point for ship owners awaiting the return of their vessels from sea. Shipyards at the foot of the hill launched and repaired merchant ships from around the world and continue to do so today. The waterfront location of the neighborhood and the Fells Point Historic District across the harbor make this area an important part of the heritage of the great port of Baltimore (Figure 1).

In the nineteenth century, the Federal Hill-Inner Harbor area became the center of a busy coastal trade in the port of Baltimore. During the Civil War, the hill served as a garrison for the Union Army, which was intent on keeping Baltimore from joining the Confederacy.

For more than 10 years, various Interstate Highway plans overlaid the area now designated as the historic district. This was a period of controversy and litigation between highway planners and preservationists. The result was a legal impasse in the courts. Some early highway proposals would have destroyed many of the historic structures, and 14 lanes of traffic were to tunnel under Federal Hill Park and bridge over the Baltimore Inner Harbor. A concept team changed the plans in 1968 by

Figure 1. Baltimore inner harbor.

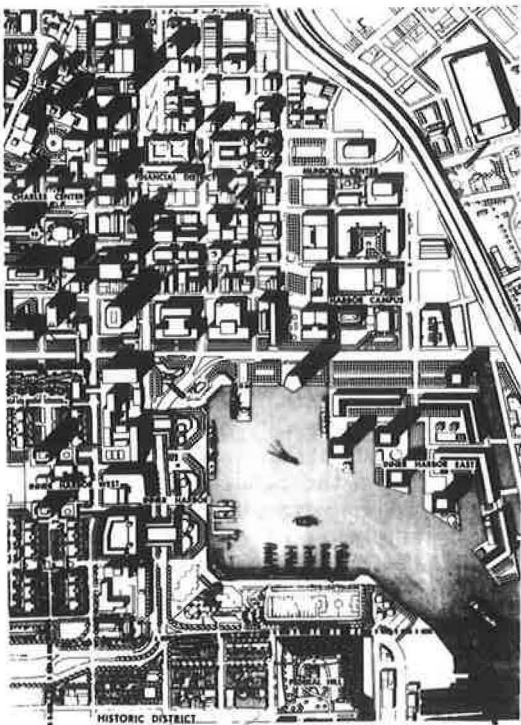
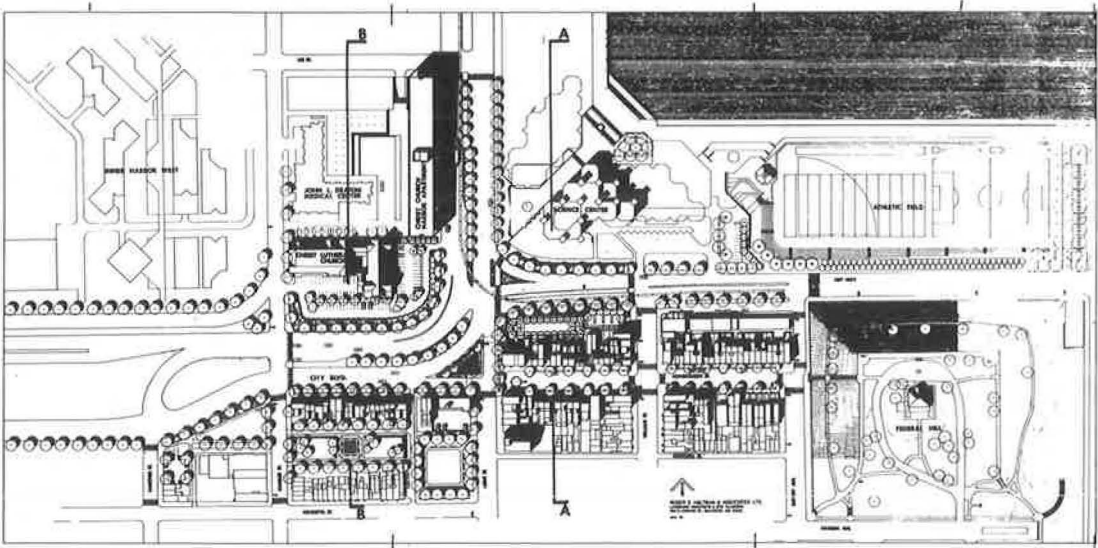


Figure 2. Proposed boulevard plan for Federal Hill historic district.

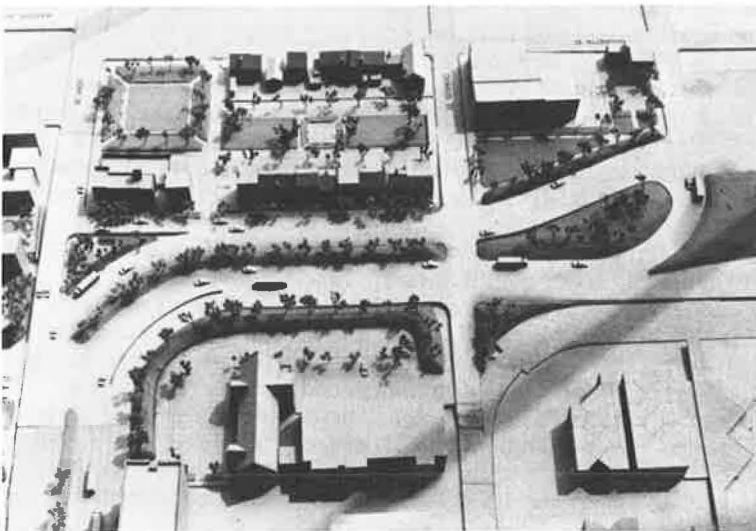


shifting the Interstate Highway out of the Federal Hill area and proposing an urban boulevard in its place. During the 10-year period of controversy, many structures were acquired, families moved, and vacant buildings were boarded up in anticipation of demolition. The unoccupied structures soon created sanitation problems and became fire hazards and targets for vandalism. The result was that many buildings were left in a desolate state.

Concerned Federal Hill residents contacted the mayor of Baltimore in the fall of 1973. They demanded a decision on the status of the highway and either demolition or restoration of the structures. Large-scale restoration was seriously considered but was deemed infeasible. On the other hand, the mayor and his staff indicated a need for the historic preservation societies to agree to the demolition of certain derelict structures that were subject to a lawsuit previously brought by residents to prevent demolition. A compromise was suggested by the mayor; the Federal Hill community was to be actively involved in developing a highway plan that would reflect its concern for the preservation of the historic area.

Community meetings were organized to help people to understand the many problems that had resulted from years of mistrust and indecision. A survey of the area was then conducted. This survey proved useful in clarifying the goals of historic preservation so that plans could be developed for an alignment that would meet those goals. A series of detailed drawings and scale models were prepared that enabled the residents to visualize the exact relation of individual historic structures to the path of the roadway. The result was a new boulevard alignment that was developed with the community and endorsed by it that requires the taking of only 2 historic structures (Figure 2). The boulevard passes through the northwest corner of the Federal Hill historic district, a corner shown not to be critical to the goals of historic preservation in the area survey. After the community's preferred boulevard alignment in this area was established, other highway traffic problems remained to be solved. Because through-street traffic in the historic area was considered undesirable, it was decided to close off Montgomery Street at Light Street. Pedestrian movement at the dangerous intersection of Light Street and Key Highway was studied, resulting in a recommendation that controlled crossing be allowed only at 2 locations. Another major problem was the minimization of the visual and acoustical impacts of the roadway on the historic district. The suggested solution involves the creation of an open-space buffer by means of brick walls and landscape earth berms along the entire edge of the boulevard adjacent to Federal Hill (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Proposal for minimizing visual and acoustical impacts.



Joint efforts also were made to achieve the restoration and beautification goals for the historic district. Federal Hill-Montgomery Street residents made several suggestions, including developing a garden or promenade park that would replace the vandalized row houses along Hughes Street. (It was questionable whether the Hughes Street houses could be restored.) The design and detail of a plan for the garden will accentuate the historic quality and beauty of nearby residential structures.

In an earlier plan for the boulevard, an attractive neighborhood fire station was to be taken. The community insisted that the station be saved along with the historic homes to the west of it. This resulted in the decision to have all these structures remain in their present location and the homes restored.

Landscape planning of streets and public spaces in the neighborhood and along the boulevard is most important for the initial stages of restoration of the district. Several urban parks surrounded by protective brick walls are to be created, all of which will be compatible in detail with the historic houses. On Churchill Street west of Light Street, in the center of the historic area, several derelict warehouse buildings are to be removed to allow for development or urban park open space that will be protected from the boulevard. The 2 blocks of Montgomery Street between Federal Hill and Light Street are to be changed from a 1-way, 3-lane street to a 2-way street, and new brick sidewalks will extend along the entire street on both sides. Reducing the scale of the existing street will render it more compatible with 2- and 3-story historic row houses.

Several important factors emerge as having been decisive in reconciling the various viewpoints involved in the Federal Hill project and in developing plans satisfactory to groups whose interests differ so greatly. Those factors, which figured in achieving the compromise between residents of the historic district and the Interstate Division for Baltimore City, are

1. Direct and open communication,
2. Concern for more issues than merely moving traffic volumes, and
3. Serious interest in minimizing harmful highway impacts.

The mayor of Baltimore and his staff established direct communication with the community organization. Opposing views thus could be aired, and the problems faced by each side were more readily appreciated. The design consultants found that their greatest effort lay in communication. Their initial task was to understand the goals of the community and its assessment of the highway. The design consultants came to appreciate the concern about the derelict and decaying structures on Hughes Street and the image that the residents wanted their district to project. The consultants felt it essential to substantiate the reasons for various aspects of the proposal with proper technical information. The scale model and detailed drawings prepared for the residents of Federal Hill helped in achieving that goal.

Schemes that emphasize traffic volumes generate the most adverse criticism. Collecting of traffic data is an imprecise science, and citizens attack the basis of traffic counts more often than they attack any other premise in arguing against highways. Traffic demands must be met, but they must be balanced against environmental concerns. The plan devised is one of the most traffic-efficient plans, according to the required engineering study.

A realistic attitude about the impacts of a highway and a serious attempt to minimize these impacts elicit warm responses from communities. Much can be done to minimize harm after it is accurately assessed, and simple methods often produce great reductions in impacts. For example, in the Federal Hill plan, the simple use of earth berms and attractive brick walls screens the roadway and softens the noise from it in its environs. The closing of Montgomery Street at 1 end to prevent through traffic is a simple solution to the problem of high traffic volumes. These methods proved satisfactory to many of the residents. Good judgment and flexibility, however, are required to ensure that the cure is not worse than the ailment. Higher walls and berms, for instance, would screen more of the road and its noise, but they would be completely out of scale with the historic district.

The example of the success of the Federal Hill project demonstrates the effectiveness of the Federal 106 Process. Working with the community in assessing alternatives and planning for minimization of harm has proved advantageous to the boulevard plans and to the residents as well. The proposed design creates a new boundary for the northern part of the historic district and allows for the efficient movement of traffic. Virtually nothing will be destroyed in historic areas, and the landscaped buffer, to be developed as part of roadway construction, will protect the area from any road-related impacts. Furthermore, the quality of the Federal Hill environment will be upgraded considerably by the replacement of derelict buildings with several park-like areas. Funding for this project is anticipated from the Federal Highway Administration because it supports required historic preservation under the new Historic Preservation Act.

Thus the Interstate Division for Baltimore City resolved a difficult problem of an urban boulevard right-of-way alignment, which is to be part of the Interstate Highway System, as it relates to the Federal 106 process for nationally registered historic places. It did so by engaging the active participation of residents and the Preservation Commission for the Federal Hill Historic District.