

# Greektown's Rise No Myth

**Revival: Renovated rowhomes and other signs of new life have residents optimistic.**

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When a completely redone rowhouse sold for more than the \$150,000 asking price recently, it was seen as a harbinger of Greektown's comeback.

What made community activists particularly happy was that the two-bedroom Newkirk Street house was snapped up in just four days; properties in that Southeast Baltimore enclave used to languish on the market for months without as much as a nibble.

"It's an uphill battle, but we are turning the corner," said John E. Gavrilis, executive director of nonprofit Greektown Community Development Corp. "There is a lot of strength in this community, but there are also lots of weaknesses."

Walking along Eastern Avenue, near Ponca Street, within sight of Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center, Gavrilis passed an alarming number of empty storefronts next to thriving restaurants and coffeehouses where knots of men gathered to play cards or shoot the breeze in Greek. On side streets were boarded-up rowhouses, along with decrepit single-family homes that absentee speculators have illegally converted into multiple rental units.

Gavrilis, a retired city police colonel and former commissioner, thinks such problems can be corrected.

"People will invest in their properties if they know they can get a return," he said, listing Greektown's strengths: restaurants with a regional following; St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church; and homeownership that is climbing again after dipping perilously during the last decade.

The rowhouse at 402 S. Newkirk St. is the first of 20 houses the development corporation plans to rehabilitate during the next two years and sell to homeowners. A ribbon-cutting ceremony will be held there at 10:30 a.m. tomorrow. Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski, Mayor Martin O'Malley and Peter G. Angelos, the lawyer and Orioles owner, are expected to attend.

In a way, "Greektown" is a misnomer for the area. The neighborhood of 1,346 homes and 60 businesses is a melting pot—always has been.

When Greeks started moving to Baltimore in droves in the early 1900s, many settled in houses built on hills east of Highlandtown because Bethlehem Steel had jobs and the No. 26 streetcar ran to Sparrows Point, said Helen Johns, a lifelong

resident. At the time, the community had a strong presence of Finns—whose national flag's colors are the same blue and white as Greece's—as well as a sprinkling of German and Irish residents.

"It was always a diverse community," said Johns.

Ask Lefteris "Lefty" Tamaris, who has lost the lease on his corner grocery. The next operator will be Indian. Several years ago, Tamaris himself displaced a Chinese-owned restaurant, when he opened a fish store.

"This used to be very crowded with Greek families," said Steve Yianakis, who came from Greece in 1947 and put in "20 years, 6 months" at the Sparrows Point plant. He now operates Athenaikon, a music and souvenir shop.

Yianakis, who serves as host of a Greek-language radio show each Sunday, said that quotas dried up immigration.

Those few who come nowadays tend to be professionals, learn the language quickly and seek their American dream in the suburbs, he said. They are like the children and grandchildren of earlier immigrants who want to live in Essex, Timonium or Bel Air, instead of Greektown.

"If I was young, I would go, too," he said wistfully. His wife, Katina, nodded in agreement.

That geographic dispersal of the Greek community can be seen at St. Nicholas' afternoon school. Seventy-six pupils come there from throughout the region twice a week.

"The main focus is Greek language, reading and writing," said Carol Demetrios, a PTA member, who is not Greek, but learned the language after she fell in love with her future husband.

Efforts to revitalize Greektown have not been without disputes. An early confrontation—which continues to linger—erupted over Eastern Avenue nightspot owners' desire to increase adult entertainment. The development corporation fought a go-go bar and other nightclubs, insisting they had contributed to the decline of the neighborhood by harboring drug traffic, prostitution and the fencing of stolen goods.

Then there is the \$1.3 million cultural center of St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church. The new complex has been virtually completed for two years. But because of a quarrel between the church and the contractor over final tasks, it was never finished and stands empty and vandalized behind a padlocked fence.

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An agreement was reached with the contractor last year. George Perdikakis, board president of St. Nicholas, said construction will restart soon and that "we'll have some use [of the building] within 180 days."

Architect Jim Shetler, who has served as a consultant to the community development corporation, thinks "Greektown is going to be fine."

He said the area is desirable because it's close to a major employer, Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center, and to

major roads, such as the Harbor Tunnel Thruway and Interstate 95.

Shetler is also optimistic because the city is close to starting a \$7 million reconstruction and beautification of Eastern Avenue and the underpass that connects Highlandtown and Greektown. Whether it's road improvements or housing, construction increases confidence, Shetler said.

"Scaffolding is great for neighborhoods," he said. "When you see scaffolding and dumpsters, positive things are happening."

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