

The Baltimore Rowhouse

Mary Ellen Hayward and Charles Belfoure

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A Review by Michael Carroll

Anyone who has lived or traveled in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States is well aware of the near ubiquity of fired red clay brick in the built forms of the cities and towns. Much as the bricks are lined up to form the pattern of a wall, the row houses line up to form the pattern of the “row” or “terrace” street. The visual interchangeability of each brick, each house, or each row leads some to recoil from the monotony but in cities like Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C., the perfection of this medieval technology though industrial techniques became commonplace though economy *and* popularity.

While many urban histories take as their point of departure the works of “great men” or the reflections of American culture though the urban experience, still others examine the influence of technical achievements on urban life. Among the most notable of this latter type is Sam Bass Warner’s, *Street Car Suburbs*. Of course, Warner’s book begins with the manipulation of technology by commercial institutions and ends with the adaptation of urban dwellers to a new residential institution. Throughout, the treatment of the material urban form – in this case the physical suburb – seldom transcends generalization. Here enter Mary Ellen Hayward and Charles Belfoure in their painstaking treatment of *The Baltimore Rowhouse*.

Where others have only provided generalizations about the building process that produced American cities into and through the industrial era, Hayward and Belfoure have sought to make the tectonic dimension of neighborhood development their centerpiece. Though not an expressly theoretical work, *the Baltimore Rowhouse* stands in the now well-established tradition of interpreting social structure and material condition from the analysis of vernacular architecture.

The authors seek to give their case a human dimension by following the fortunes of one German-American family from immigration to the U.S. in the late 19th Century to the middle of the 20th. This is partially successful in revealing the social climb that is reflected in changing ad-

dresses from generation to generation, and the accompanying architectural elements that were targeted to various social classes buying the row homes. Naturally, the authors find it necessary to cut across this level of analysis with narratives exposing the business of building and marketing such homes. This secondary approach most clearly demonstrates the morphological impact of evolving real estate speculation and construction practice on the city. Collectively, the study of row house developers overshadows the stated approach of employing family history, rendering it superfluous.

The authors give a thorough treatment of the practice of ground rent: a typically inexpensive, ninety-nine year lease on land after which land and structures revert to the owner. They demonstrate how the practice was indispensable to the proliferation of rowhouses, and to the dramatically higher rates of home ownership (at lower incomes in cities) where ground rents were commonly used. Unfortunately they scarcely deal with the obvious question as to what actually happened to properties after the lease was up, a gap that could easily have been rectified with a few examples.

Aside from a celebration of the rowhouse for its flexibility, affordability, and human scale, Hayward and Belfoure, never really present a thesis. Planners will likely be chastised for demolishing so many viable row house neighborhoods during Urban Renewal, and cheered by evidence that many successful preservation projects have revitalized historical rowhouse neighborhoods. Overall, despite its theoretical sheerness, the authors have succeeded in compiling a valuable resource for students of urban history, urban morphology and architectural historians alike.