Unlike our medieval European ancestors, who built massive stone walls around their cities to protect themselves from outside attacks, Americans build invisible walls inside our cities to protect ourselves from our fellow citizens. As anyone who has read Antero Pietila’s *Not in My Neighborhood: How Bigotry Shaped a Great American City* knows, Baltimore—great city of firsts—was to the invisible wall-building industry what Detroit was to the automotive industry: an innovative workshop where creative minds worked to think up, invent, test out and ultimately export methods of exclusion. Roland Park’s pioneering racial and religious covenants taught a nation of anxious, aspiring homeowners how to protect themselves from African Americans, Jews and the working class by building restrictive clauses into the deeds of their homes. Bolton Hill’s pioneering racial zoning ordinance, which prohibited “coloreds” from moving to blocks where whites were the majority, was rubber stamped by at least 40 other cities. And in the early 1910s—almost a decade before New York City’s pioneering zoning code and almost 40 years before the Federal Urban Renewal program—Baltimore Mayor James H. Preston used condemnation powers to evacuate the entire neighborhood around Baltimore’s courthouse so that poor blacks wouldn’t encroach on fashionable, nearby Mount Vernon.

In the ensuing decades, Baltimore’s invisible wall-building industry boomed. When Baltimore built some of the nation’s first public housing projects in the 1940s, it built segregated public housing projects, which it often located in the poorest black, most isolated parts of the city. Baltimore’s real estate brokers took a sworn oath to never introduce “inharmonious elements” into white neighborhoods, and Baltimore’s neighborhood associations organized massive campaigns to boycott brokers who did. Churches in Baltimore regularly used the pulpit to warn parishioners about the evils of integration, newspapers in Baltimore editorialized in favor of segregation and individuals deployed or threatened violence to send a clear signal to blacks brave enough to cross the color barrier.

1968’s Fair Housing Act outlawed discrimination in the sale, rental and marketing of homes, in mortgage lending and in zoning, but Baltimore’s wall-building industry continued to thrive, especially in the county, where, between 1950 and 1970, the percentage of African Americans declined, even though the county’s overall population more than doubled. Baltimore County Executive Dale Anderson, who more or less ran on a platform of keeping African Americans out of the county, pioneered what came to be known as “expulsive zoning,” whereby African-American neighborhoods were rezoned for business and areas around African-American areas were rezoned for low density, thereby preventing neighborhood expansion.

These invisible walls suggest that Baltimore hasn’t always been a very “open city,” which the Exhibition Development Seminar defines as a place where everyone feels welcome, regardless of such things as wealth, race, age or religion. Openness in cities is important because of the links between location and life chances: as anyone who has ever looked at a Census map of the Baltimore Metropolitan area knows, opportunity is not evenly distributed. Basic things like good education, stable property values, fair mortgages, decent jobs, clean air and inexpensive, healthy food are things you find in some parts of Baltimore’s metropolitan areas but not others; building walls and restricting access to these places deprives people on the outside of health, wealth and education.
The purpose of Baltimore: Open City—which was planned to coincide with National Fair Housing Month—is to generate a discussion about the ways in which Baltimore is and is not an “open city.” Taking cues from earlier exhibitions like Martha Rosler’s If You Lived Here, Hans Haacke’s Shapolsky et al., REPO History’s Lower Manhattan Sign Project and the work of Group Material and Colab, the exhibition brings viewers face-to-face with the above-outlined history but also tries to understand links between location and life chances in present day Baltimore. It has been more than 40 years since the passage of the Fair Housing Act, and still Baltimore is radically segregated, full of student, tourist and privilege “bubbles” that make “inharmonious elements” feel unwelcome, create an uneven distribution of opportunity and undermine the heterogeneity that can make a great city.

By what means are we building and maintaining walls today? What effects do they have on the health, wealth and overall well-being of Baltimore citizens? What can be done to dismantle them?

As artists and designers, we recognize that creativity has the power to challenge the ways we perceive and experience the built environment. With Baltimore: Open City, we hope to create a lively, diverse and lasting dialogue that will contribute to a fairer, more open city.

*Curatorial statements do not necessarily represent the views of MICA. For more information about Baltimore: Open City, contact MICA’s Office of Communications at 410.225.2300.

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