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LOST AND FOUND IN BALTIMORE

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(https://landscapearchitecturemag.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/bedit_img_9152.jpg)

The grim 1960s-era highway architecture east of Druid Hill Park is no more inviting, or more pedestrian-friendly, in the rain.

The wild and rebellious vegetation sometimes found under a highway overpass is an easy thing to forget—especially when you’re whizzing past at 55+ miles per hour. But to the pedestrians whose only option is to dare the uncomfortably narrow sidewalk parallel to these busy roads, it is an environment unlikely to be forgotten. These are exactly the kinds of spaces Graham Coreil-Allen (<http://grahamprojects.com/bio/>) wants you to see, and love. Every Saturday in September, Coreil-Allen has been guiding a pack of urban enthusiasts as part of his SiteLines (<http://grahamprojects.com/sitelines/>) walking tours to explore “invisible public spaces” in the city of Baltimore. Along with 14 other people, I braved the elements to join Coreil-Allen on a tour, dubbed Reservoir Chill, where we scrambled up, around, and through varying levels of the Jones Falls Expressway in search of oddball nooks and passageways created by 1960s highway architecture gone to seed.

It doesn’t take a trip to Baltimore to find these forgotten realms: These hauntingly beautiful sites have a sense of untapped potential, similar to visions of the High Line before it was redone, and they ask—if a passion for ownership of these spaces could be instilled, as it was in New York City—could they become an asset not only to the neighborhood, but to the city as well?

Under a pedestrian bridge at the end of Park Avenue, Coreil-Allen points out a road that once led to the entrance of Druid Hill Park, but was cut off by the repurposed and expanded Druid Park Lake Drive when the Jones Falls Expressway was implemented. The bridge runs parallel to this busy street and towers over one of its exits, acting as a divider that visibly separates the Reservoir Hill neighborhood from a labyrinth of car-dominated interchanges and the park beyond.



(https://landscapearchitecturemag.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/bedit_img_9134.jpg)
A glimpse of Druid Hill Park from across Druid Park Lake Drive.

“Back in the day, back when they had built Mount Royal Terrace and Park Avenue, and they had completed [Druid Hill Park], there was a very formal, classical gate that stood right there,” Coreil-Allen says as he points to a spot nearby. The pedestrian bridge still managed to function as a gateway, though rather than a beautiful iron structure, there was instead a dreary cement barrier that subconsciously read “cars only.”

The view from the top of the bridge wasn’t much more impressive, but it allowed for a better look at the small triangle of green caught between the highway overpass and Druid Park Lake Drive that Coreil-Allen points out. “Then you have this leftover space, this lost space, this green space still planted with trees, still reiterating some of the landscaping nearby, but it is completely inaccessible to pedestrians.” As forbidden as this isolated green oasis seemed, people still managed to make their way there.

Our journey continued across the bridge, and we stopped momentarily to observe the bustling expressway as Coreil-Allen explained that its construction in the 1950s and 1960s was a result of Baltimore’s attempt to keep business in the city as more and more people migrated to the suburbs. Druid Hill Park’s surrounding neighborhoods had been lucky they were spared the bulldozer. But seeing the result of the questionable pedestrian path throughout the interchange, as

well as the neighborhoods' disconnection from the park, it did not look quite so lucky. It seemed as if the neighborhood and its residents were shortchanged for the convenience of suburbanites, their access to park amenities severed in favor of awkward, small patches of green space they could hardly get to. But rather than reiterate the ills of 1960s urban renewal, Coreil-Allen is trying to call our attention to these types of awkward spaces, which are scarcely limited to Baltimore.



(https://landscapearchitecturemag.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/bedit_img_9138.jpg)

A fallen pipe partially blocks the already obstacle-laden pedestrian path near the Jones Falls Expressway.

After precariously crossing the busy southbound entry ramp, we arrived at the foot of a hill that defined the southern edge of Druid Hill Park, a 700+ acre park created in 1860, according to Coreil-Allen. These grassy slopes, he says, are part of the massive earthwork dam that forms Druid Lake above them, and we eventually found ourselves scrambling up the banks toward a beautiful Moorish-style tower. The park's picturesque views were a strange contrast to the wild, spontaneous vegetation we had just explored—almost uncomfortable to the eyes. "Public space is everywhere—public space isn't just Druid Hill Park," Coreil-Allen says as he points to the messy interchange we had just traversed. "That is public space, and we're entitled to it, even if it's terribly designed. This is a public space, but we have to make it public."

Urban landscape architecture is often seen as carefully planned spaces for a variety of functions, not patches of scrappy vegetation beneath a highway underpass. With so much emphasis on how to make cities more sustainable, it is worth reclaiming these areas rather than allowing them to



A look at the tangled roadways of the Jones Falls Expressway and arterial roads, as seen from Druid Hill Park.

stay forgotten corners that accumulate trash. “I believe we’re all entitled to this,” Coreil-Allen tells me as he looks back out to the Jones Falls Expressway. “This is where democracy happens. These are our spaces; we should take control of them.”

SiteLines’s last tour — Power Plant Alive!—meets Saturday, September 27 at 1:00 p.m. behind the Old Power Plant in Baltimore. The tours will then be made into a web series which will be available on YouTube. For more information on Graham Coreil-Allen’s work, visit <http://grahamprojects.com> (<http://grahamprojects.com/>).

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