

How a Black-led collective wants to change development in East Baltimore for as little as \$10 a month

By Glacomo Bologna
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When Tyra Thompson would pass the old Methodist church on East Monument Street, she rarely gave it any thought. Why would she?

Sure, Thompson, a 38-year-old single mother, has lived in the nearby Latrobe Homes for the past seven years, but this wasn't really her neighborhood. She's from West Baltimore, not East Baltimore. She's not a property owner, let alone a developer. Even if she'd wanted to do something about the dilapidated church in Oldtown, it didn't seem like Thompson had any power to change the vacant building.

Then a year ago she came across a flyer for a development group called [the Village Of Love And Resistance, or VOLAR](#), that was handing out food in the community. Thompson saw an opportunity to volunteer, started attending meetings and learned about VOLAR's plans to turn the empty church at 1025 E. Monument St. and the rectory next door into affordable apartments, with a day care center, exercise space, classrooms for organizing and training sessions, and more.

After Thompson joined VOLAR, which describes itself as a collective and has about 35 members, she began to care about the old church — a lot — and discovered a sense of belonging and agency within her community.

Soon, Thompson will be a co-owner of the development project through a community investment trust fund that VOLAR is setting up.

“If you own real estate, it's something. It's better than nothing. I don't care if I own 2%, I can say it's mine. ... I could pass it down to my son,” Thompson said. “Saying that I own something [has] me feeling so good, because I never owned nothing.”



Tyra Thompson with the Village of Love and Resistance, VOLAR, pictured at a former church the group plans to develop in East Baltimore. (Lloyd Fox/Baltimore Sun)

To become an investor, Thompson and other VOLAR members must take a class called “Own Our Hood.” Members also participate in meditation and nonviolent communication training and learn about community organizing.

At meetings, they discuss how development projects have historically benefited wealthy, predominantly white communities. They trace a line from slavery and Jim Crow through to urban renewal projects and modern-day Baltimore, where Black residents typically have shorter life spans, less wealth and more health problems than their white neighbors.

Most of VOLAR’s members are Black, low-income residents of the area surrounding the church. They sit on committees that make decisions for VOLAR.

Rauf Cann grew up a few blocks from the church and still lives in [Monument East](#), a nearby tower that rents apartments to [people with housing choice vouchers](#). Cann said he heard about VOLAR through its food distribution program.

“I love to volunteer and participate to earn blessings any way I can. And I was hungry. The pandemic had kicked in. My food supply was short. My income was short,” Cann

said. “So it was a gift from God through VOLAR to be able to come out and continue on ... this journey that I’m on.”



Tyra Thompson with the Village Of Love And Resistance, pictured at an abandoned church the group plans to develop in East Baltimore. (Lloyd Fox/Baltimore Sun)

Cann, 56, said he was destructive as a young man and nowadays suffers from loneliness. He said he’s benefited from the nonviolent communication taught by VOLAR, changing his temperament for the better.

“There were so many times that I was fed not just food, but spiritual guidance,” Cann said. “Someone that listened to me. Someone that wanted to talk with me. Not to me, but with me.”

VOLAR draws inspiration from [Market Creek Plaza in San Diego](#), a 20-acre abandoned factory that was redeveloped into a shopping center with a grocery store, a bank and restaurants. As part of that process, the developer surveyed nearly a thousand nearby residents, beginning in 1998. The developer boasts that the plaza is owned in part by hundreds of community investors.

This concept is rare but not unheard of in Baltimore. Across the city, a Chicago-based firm is [redeveloping Walbrook Junction Shopping Center](#). In 2021, Chicago TREND

invited anyone to invest in the project through crowdfunding, and CEO Lyneir Richardson said about 130 Black residents invested.

“The thesis is if people have ownership interest — even with \$1,000 — that they’ll patronize it, protect it and respect it in a different way,” Richardson said.



VOLAR member Marisela Gomez, left, leads a workshop on the history of racial discrimination and how to achieve racial equity. The participants behind her, from left, are Lanita M. Staton, Ammir Ansarullah, Sabriya Linton and Pamela Taylor. (Amy Davis / Baltimore Sun)

VOLAR has an even lower barrier to entry. Members can invest as little as \$10 a month. Many members, like Thompson, receive housing assistance from the government. VOLAR members aren’t expecting to get rich from this project, but, like Thompson, they believe they are creating a different kind of value that empowers residents and builds a sense of community.

“VOLAR brought love and respect,” Thompson said. “We laugh, we joke, and I appreciate everything they did for our community, and they still do for our community.”

The nonprofit evolved out of discussions among activists, including Marisela Gomez, a public health professional who is on VOLAR’s “care taking council.” Gomez has written

a book on development in the area called “Race, Class, Power, and Organizing in East Baltimore” that dissects the history of a nearby project called the [East Baltimore Development Initiative, or EBDI](#).

Started in 2003, the EBDI is an ongoing \$1.8 billion redevelopment project encompassing 88 acres north of Johns Hopkins Hospital. Leaders from Johns Hopkins, the city of Baltimore and other stakeholders spearheaded the redevelopment, which razed homes and displaced 740 families.

VOLAR’s redevelopment plans, which cover less than an acre, might seem relatively modest, Gomez said, but it could be a model for future developments — a model that avoids displacement and strengthens existing communities.

“Can we show in the city of Baltimore what even development looks like?” Gomez said. “If we can show that and prove it, then it can get replicated.”



Lyneir Richardson, CEO of Chicago TREND, appears in a video promoting local investment in his purchase of Walbrook Junction Shopping Center in West Baltimore. (HEZUES R. (Creative Gods))

Much of VOLAR’s initial funding, about half a million dollars, came from a white couple — Annie and Paul Mahon — who moved to Washington, D.C., decades ago and were uneasy about their role in gentrifying what was once a predominantly Black neighborhood. Annie Mahon said they felt it was important to give back to an organization led by people of color.

“That was one of the things that I really felt was unique and different about [VOLAR] is really its focus on building community and keeping community in place and also letting people who live there be part of the benefit of the housing market,” Mahon said.

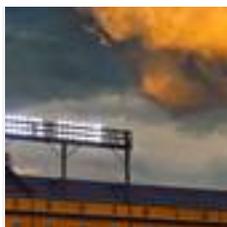
That donation allowed VOLAR to purchase the church and rectory in 2020.

A contractor was selected and construction is expected to begin this year, but there’s been a hitch. VOLAR wanted to avoid debt and use grant money to fund the renovation, according to Lenora Knowles, a member of the VOLAR’s care taking council, but the nonprofit lost out on multiple grant applications.

VOLAR’s members also asked the city to sell them a small nearby green space for \$5,000 under Baltimore’s [Vacants to Value program](#). Members have been tending the city-owned land, once overgrown with weeds and littered with trash, but the city has so far denied that request.

Knowles said if Baltimore wants to create an equitable city, it needs to be more receptive to smaller and especially Black-led development.

“We would like the city to actually lean into ideas of transparency, accessibility and resourcing — redistributing resources — in these processes of community development,” Knowles said. “All these things that the city does for these big, huge developers — but residents, taxpayers, folks deeply impacted by redlining and private and public disinvestment, what do our communities get?”



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A spokesperson for the Baltimore Department of Housing and Community Development, which oversees Vacants to Value, declined to comment due to the ongoing negotiations with VOLAR.



VOLAR member Marisela Gomez leads a workshop as the nonprofit works at creating a community from the bottom up before tackling the development of a mixed-use building with apartments and community space. (Amy Davis / Baltimore Sun)

VOLAR's site is in the district of Democratic Councilman Robert Stokes. Stokes said he has spoken with VOLAR members a few times and called their development plan a "good idea." He declined to comment further, deferring to neighbors of the vacant church.

Howard Roberts, 64, is one of those neighbors. A lifelong East Baltimore resident, he recently retired from the Archdiocese of Baltimore after working there for more than four decades. Roberts can see the vacant church from his home and has gotten to know the VOLAR members as they've done outreach.

"To be honest with you, it was like a dream come true," Roberts said. "What VOLAR did was old-school. They did the whole door knocking, brochure in the door."

He was excited to learn about a collaborative approach to development that will allow Black and brown residents to have a stake in the project, although he said he knows some neighbors have reservations about this new, untested group.

As a retiree, he's had opportunities to interact with VOLAR members, but most of his neighbors work. As more of them have time to learn about VOLAR, they will come around, Roberts said, calling VOLAR "neighbors in the truest sense."

"They're not talking about dictating, they're talking about collaborating. ... You can't ask for any more than that," Roberts said. "What they're talking about can grow on people and grow to East Baltimore, but we have to take part in it ... That's the prayer, but prayer is work and this is going to take work. I just think that we're blessed to have a group that is willing to do that."