

**MARYLAND HISTORICAL TRUST  
DETERMINATION OF ELIGIBILITY FORM**

NR Eligible: yes   
no

Property Name: Somerset Court Inventory Number: B-5136  
 Address: 500 N. Central Avenue City: Baltimore Zip Code: 21202  
 County: Baltimore City USGS Topographic Map: Baltimore East  
 Owner: Housing Authority of Baltimore City Is the property being evaluated a district? NO  
 Tax Parcel Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Tax Map Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Tax Account ID Number: 05-10-1295  
 Project: Disposition of Somerset Court Agency: Baltimore City Planning Department/CHAP  
 Site visit by MHT Staff: \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_ yes Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Is the property located within a historic district? \_\_\_\_\_ yes  no

*If the property is within a district* District Inventory Number: \_\_\_\_\_  
 NR-listed district \_\_\_\_\_ Eligible district \_\_\_\_\_ District Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Preparer's Recommendation: Contributing resource \_\_\_\_\_ yes \_\_\_\_\_ no Non-contributing but eligible in another context \_\_\_\_\_

*If the property is not within a district (or the property is a district)*  
 Preparer's Recommendation: Eligible \_\_\_\_\_ yes  no

Criteria: \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ B \_\_\_\_\_ C \_\_\_\_\_ D Considerations: \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ B \_\_\_\_\_ C \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ E \_\_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_\_ G \_\_\_\_\_ None

Documentation on the property/district is presented in: CHAP files, HABC annual reports Baltimore City legislative reference

Description of Property and Eligibility Determination: *(Use continuation sheet if necessary and attach map and photo)*

**Description**

Somerset Court is a 1943 public housing project located in East Baltimore. Bounded by Orleans Street to the south, Central Avenue to the east, an alley (formerly Edythe Street) behind Monument Avenue to the north, and Aisquith Street to the west, Somerset Court comprises seventeen apartment buildings and two community buildings. The block is surrounded by redevelopment projects that include two 1970s-era schools, a 1970s garden apartment complex, a senior high-rise public housing project, and other nonhistoric structures. In addition, the Eastern Female High School (B-42), an individually N.R. listed property, is located directly south of Somerset Court.

The apartment structures range from L to U to M shape and are three stories high and approximately seventeen bays long, depending on the shape of the building. The ornament-free brick façades are

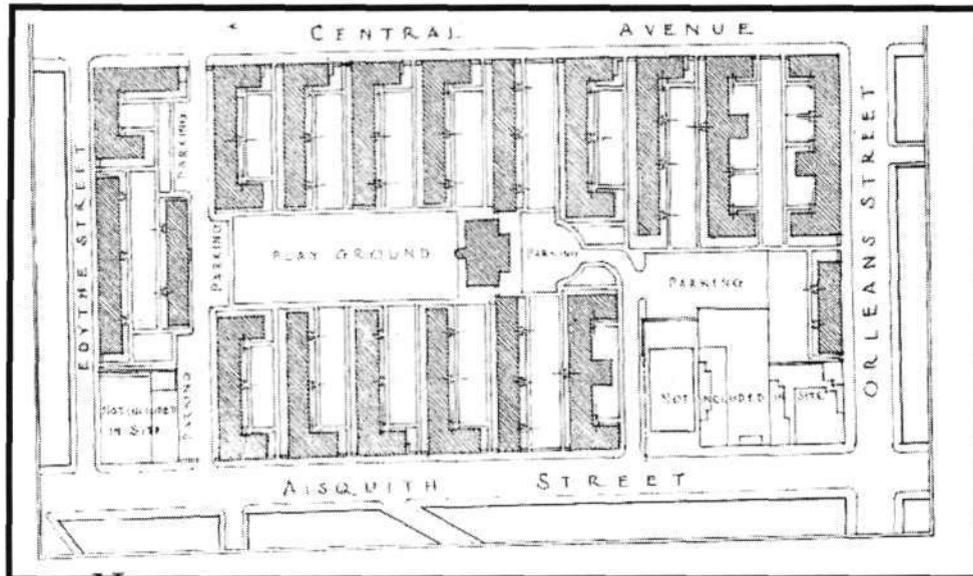
<b>MARYLAND HISTORICAL TRUST REVIEW</b>	
Eligibility recommended _____	Eligibility not recommended <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Criteria: _____ A _____ B _____ C _____ D	Considerations: _____ A _____ B _____ C _____ D _____ E _____ F _____ G _____ None
Comments: <u>1980s alterations have compromised integrity for NR evaluation.</u>	
<u>Andrew Lewis</u>	<u>01/03/07</u>
Reviewer, Office of Preservation Services	Date
<u>[Signature]</u>	<u>1/5/07</u>
Reviewer, NR Program	Date

MARYLAND HISTORICAL TRUST  
NR-ELIBILITY REVIEW FORM

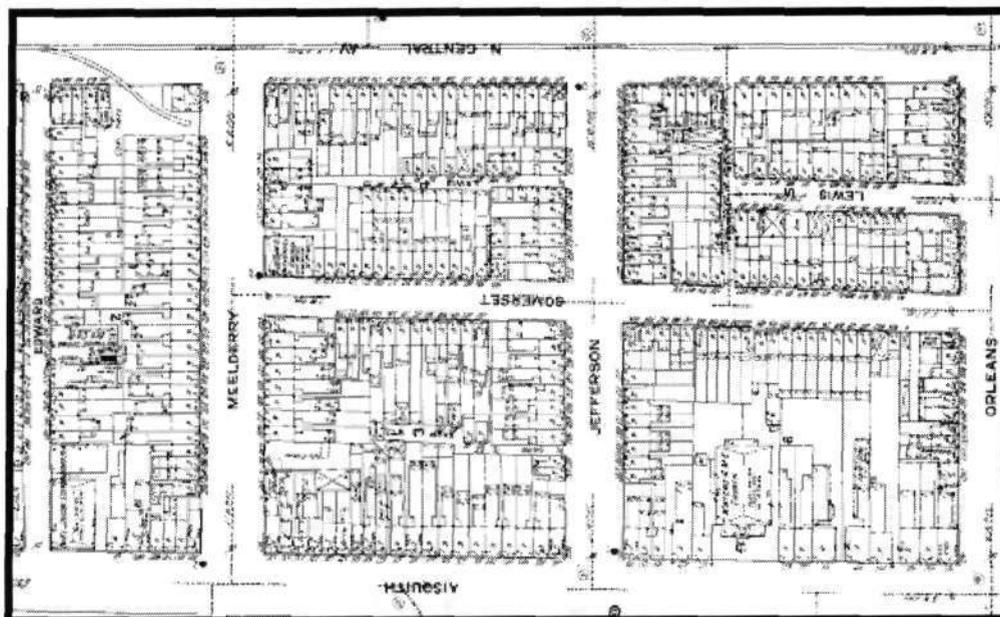
Continuation Sheet No. 1

B-5136

patterned in common bond in flemish variation with brick quoining. Double-header, segmental-arched windows, singled or paired, create an asymmetrical fenestration. Aluminum drip-edges top the structures, and stone foundations rise approximately 18 to 36 inches from the sidewalk. Straight and quarter-turned concrete steps with steel tubular hand rails frame the rear (north side) entrances to the buildings. Interior court yards comprise concrete and asphalt parking lots, concrete play spaces, and poorly maintained green spaces. Single or paired front doors open onto an interior court yard. Concrete steps and raised bunker-like planting beds flank the front doors. Today, many vacant units have been bricked up or boarded. Two other structures, a 1940s community center with a heating facility in the basement and a 1999 community center, occupy the center of the site.



Original site plan for Somerset Court, from the 1943-44 HABC Annual Report



Area of Somerset Court in 1914

MARYLAND HISTORICAL TRUST  
NR-ELIBILITY REVIEW FORM

Continuation Sheet No. 2

B-5136

### History of Public Housing in Baltimore

In 1937, Congress passed the Wagner-Steagall Act, which created the United States Housing Authority (USHA) for the purpose of eradicating slum neighborhoods and providing decent, safe, and healthy housing to low income citizens. To implement this goal, the USHA provided long-term, low-interest loans to local housing authorities, essentially allowing local jurisdictions to plan, design, and build public housing, according to their own needs. Between 1937 and 1941, 622 local housing agencies were created in the United States. Pursuant to Maryland Code Article 44-A enacted in 1937, Baltimore established the Housing Authority of Baltimore City (HABC) on December 13, 1937.

Prior to the creation of HABC in 1937, Baltimore, along with other large cities, began addressing housing and public health issues as early as the 1890s. The earliest known report in Baltimore, *Streets and Slums: A Study in Local Municipal Geography*, written by Frederick Brown in 1892, pointed out the relationship of street width to areas of concentrated poverty. Two years later, Carrol Wright, the first U.S. Commissioner of Labor, submitted to Congress *The Slums of Baltimore, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia*. In 1907, Janet Kemp, a social worker, published *Housing Conditions in Baltimore* which identified the location and described the conditions of several slum areas in Baltimore. Other reports followed as Baltimore began to document and address many of its public health and housing issues. By 1937, City officials were ready to seize the opportunity provided by the 1937 Housing Act to rebuild their slum communities according to the most up-to-date thinking.

In 1937, HABC began an ambitious program, building seven slum clearance projects and one green-field housing project, which resulted in the demolition of 800 slum dwelling units. By 1943 seven slum clearance projects had opened: Poe Homes, Latrobe Homes, Douglass Homes, McCulloh Homes, Perkins Homes, Gilmore Homes, and Somerset Court. In addition, O'Donnell Heights was built on vacant land in East Baltimore.

During WWII, HABC shifted its mission from replacing slums with affording housing to providing housing for war workers. In 1940 Congress passed the Lanham Act, imposing federal control onto local housing authorities in areas affected by defense industries. Between 1941 and 1945, HABC and/or federal agencies affiliated with the War Department built ten war housing projects in and around Baltimore: Cherry Hill, Lyon, Fairfield, Westport, Holabird, Banneker, Sollers, Turner Station, Armistead Gardens, and Brooklyn Homes. After the war, HABC acquired Cherry Hill, Fairfield, Westport, and Brooklyn Homes for use as low-rent housing. In addition, the federal agencies sold Armistead Gardens, Turner's Station and Lyon homes to private entities.

In the 1950s, HABC built several housing projects, including two Cherry Hill expansion projects, Westport Homes, Claremont Homes, Lafayette Court and Flag House Courts high-rises, and others.

In the 1970s, HABC began a vacant house program that acquired vacant houses and rehabbed them (mostly rowhouses) for use as public housing. In the late 1990s HABC demolished all of its multi-family public high-rise projects, disposed of hundreds of vacant scattered-sites projects and built Pleasant View Gardens based on new design and planning principles that support mixed-use, mixed-income neighborhoods. Several more mixed-use, mixed-income public-private development projects have been

**MARYLAND HISTORICAL TRUST  
NR-ELIBILITY REVIEW FORM**

Continuation Sheet No. 3

B-5136

initiated such as Heritage Crossing and Albemarle Square. Baltimore became the first city to demolish all of its multi-family public high rises.

A 1998 Preservation Magazine article entitled *New Hope for Failed Housing*, described how HUD has embraced the New Urbanism design principles in new housing projects, essentially reweaving the historic fabric of cities with new, compatibly designed developments. Preservationists hailed this change as a victory for cities. Baltimore embraced this new set of principles as stated in HABC's Planning and Development Division's mission to redevelop its "public housing stock through the use of the mixed-finance public development method. The goal, using a combination of public and private financing and partnerships, is to develop public housing that is integrated physically, socially, and economically with the greater community, thus improving job availability, community services, and citizen self-sufficiency."

### **History of Somerset Court**

Somerset Court opened on November 12, 1943, with 420 apartments for "Negro" war workers. Originally planned as a slum clearance project, it switched to housing migrant African Americans who came to Baltimore to work in war-related industries. The project was designed by Fischer and Taylor architects as Baltimore's "first experiment in a development of walk-up apartments" (HABC annual report, 1942). The buildings were planned differently from the original street pattern and rowhouse buildings in the immediate area. All dwelling units were two rooms deep with windows more than fifty feet from adjacent walls. Entrance doors were opened onto interior court yards, not public streets. Open space was reconfigured from private backyard space and pedestrian/automobile public streets to inner courtyards.

The first change to the project occurred in the 1950s when HABC added heating equipment to the community center. In the early 1980s, the City widened Orleans Street, resulting in the demolition of two apartment buildings, which compromised the original site plan. During this time the housing units were completely remodeled. HABC removed all cornices, doors, windows, portico roofs above the front entrances, stone front steps, and concrete cantilevered string courses projecting 18 to 24 inches from the façade. They bricked-up original front door openings and created new openings to provide separate entrances for apartments units. The interiors of the buildings were completely gutted, removing almost all the historic fabric. This renovation left only the brick walls and window fenestration as components of the original design. In 1999, HABC constructed another community center in the open space, further compromising the original site plan.

### **Eligibility Determination**

Baltimore's public housing has had a negative impact on the development and revitalization of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Baltimore, even though it has provided housing for thousands of Baltimoreans. In the beginning, public housing provided a remedy to squalid living conditions; however, by the 1960s and 1970s, many of the housing projects became unsafe and deteriorated. The reasons for the failure of public housing to provide safe, healthy living environments on a long term basis are many, including the design of the buildings. This failure of public housing is historically important and deserves close attention in the history of Baltimore. Nevertheless, public housing has accelerated deterioration and abandonment in

MARYLAND HISTORICAL TRUST  
NR-ELIBILITY REVIEW FORM

Continuation Sheet No. 4

B-5136

Baltimore and stalled the revitalization of many historic neighborhoods surrounding public housing. Public housing in Baltimore has had a significant impact, but not **significant contribution**, to the development of the City. Public housing, including the slum clearance projects built between 1937 and 1943, have created and perpetuated concentrations of poverty based on class and race. In a 1994 class action lawsuit, *Thompson v. HUD*, the ACLU successfully argued that HABC had significantly segregated race by their housing policies.

Slum Clearance projects, *Somerset Court* in particular, had a detrimental impact on the surrounding communities. The housing projects were not compatible in site plan and design with the surrounding neighborhoods. Instead of integrating the project with the surrounding community by continuing the street grid, these projects interrupted the street grid, creating an isolated pocket of low-rent housing. In essence, the projects turned their backs to the streets and built their front entrances onto communal courtyards. These courtyards, owned by all tenants, became the responsibility of no one. The 1943 annual report stated, "all entrance doors, instead of opening directly on a public sidewalk, open on a quiet interior court where the tenants are free to rest, walk, or play without interference by the general public passing by." This idea failed to create lively, healthy activity within the courts and by the 1960s created a market area of drug dealing and prostitution. This design provided hidden corners for the surrounding communities which were notoriously difficult to police.

In summary, Baltimore's slum clearance projects built between 1937 and 1945 have impacted the development of Baltimore in a negative way. Their ability to arrest blight was ephemeral; moreover, these projects perpetuated the decline and deterioration of Baltimore's inner city neighborhoods from the 1950s through today. Their success at housing people in safe, healthy environments was short lived also, ending in the 1960s. Therefore, *Somerset Court* is not eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places based on criterion "A" in that Baltimore's Slum Clearance Program did not significantly contribute to the development of Baltimore and by the 1960s did not provide safe, healthy environments for Baltimoreans of modest means.

In addition, *Somerset Court* is not eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic places because it lacks physical integrity. In the early 1980s, two apartment buildings were razed, and the rest were completely remodeled. Original cornices, windows, doors, door openings, steps, railings, cantilevered band courses, and porticoes – all defining characteristics of the project – were removed. All character defining elements, including the site plan, have been significantly altered or removed.

MARYLAND HISTORICAL TRUST  
NR-ELIBILITY REVIEW FORM

Continuation Sheet No. 5

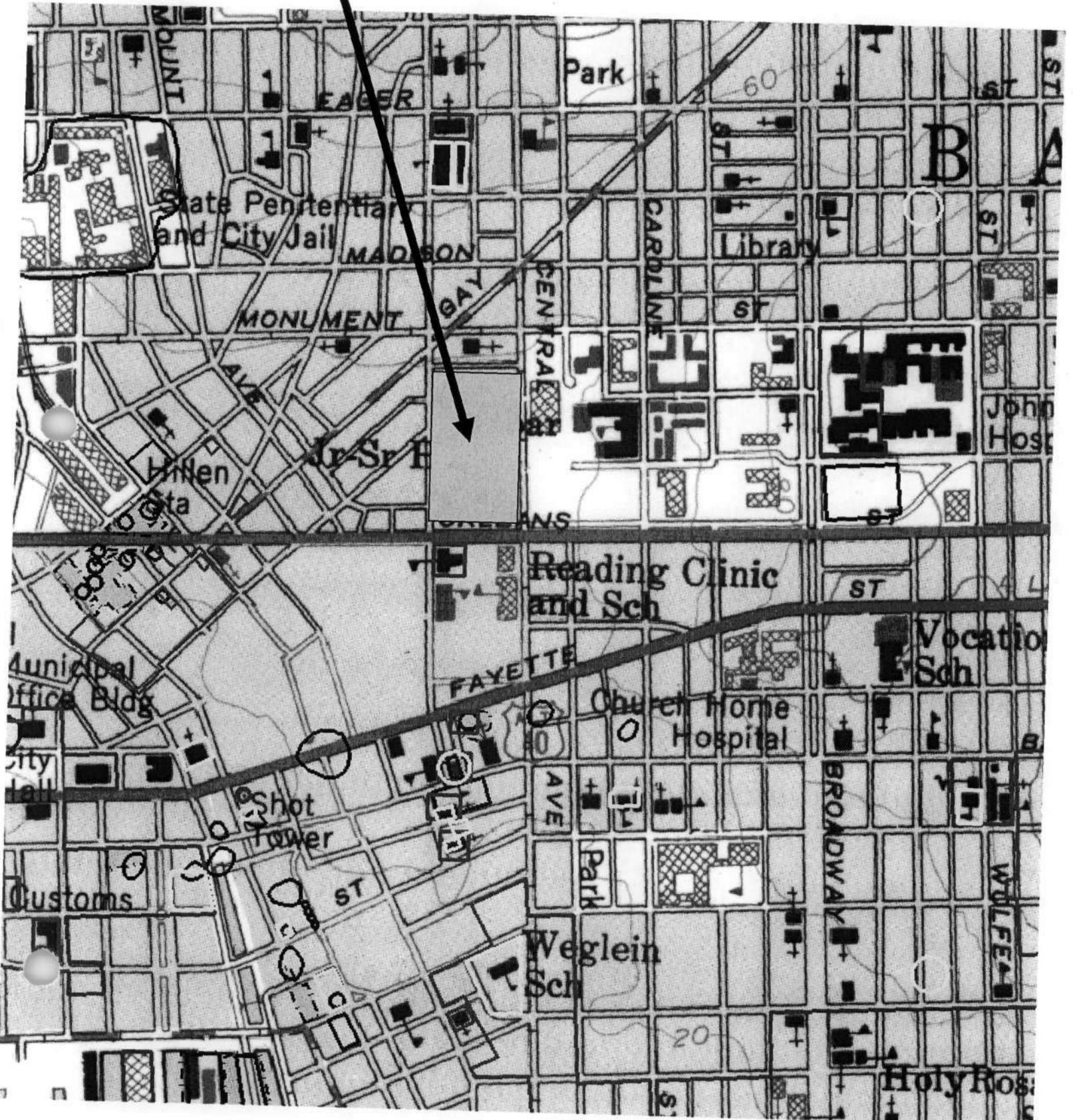
B-5136

Prepared by: Eric Holcomb

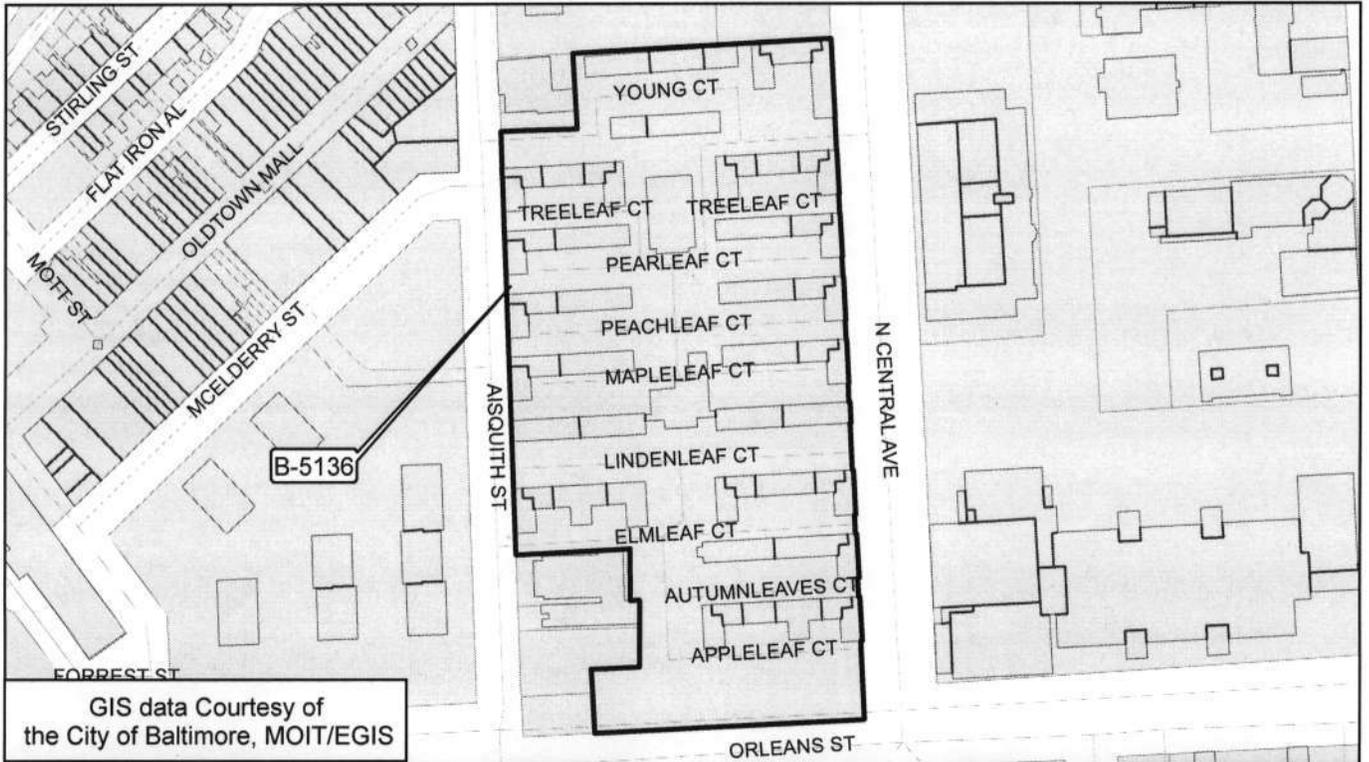
Date Prepared: 12/19/06

B-5136  
Somerset Court  
500 N. Central Ave.  
Baltimore, Md.

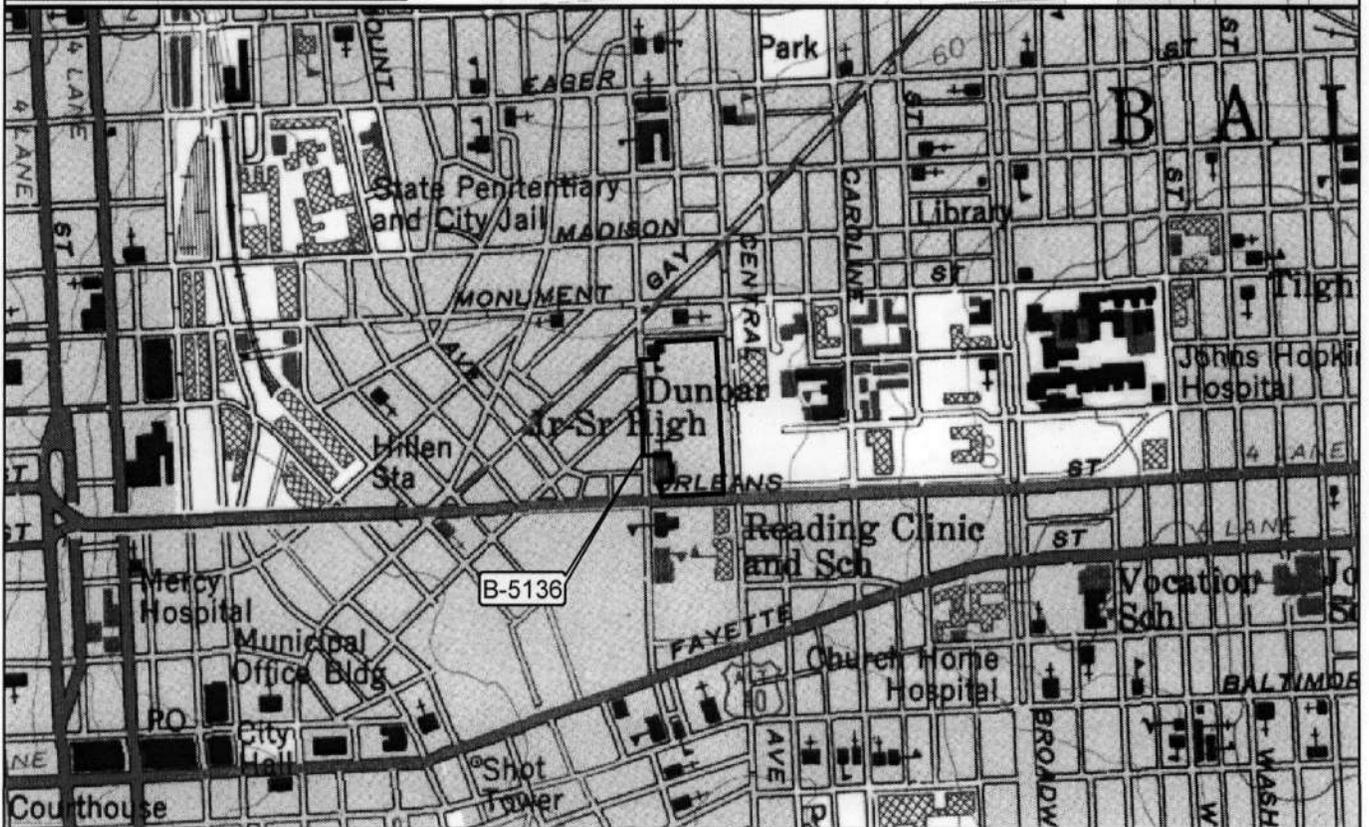
Baltimore East Quad



B-5136  
Somerset Court Housing Project  
500 N. Central Avenue  
Block 1295, Lot 001  
Baltimore City  
Baltimore East Quad.



GIS data Courtesy of  
the City of Baltimore, MOIT/EGIS





B-5136

Somerset Court

Baltimore City, MD

Eric Holcomb

12/2006

Negative location: MD STPO

North facade facing parking lot behind Monument St.



B-5136

Somerset Court

Baltimore City, MD

Eric Holcomb

12/2006

Negative location: MD SHPO

North Entrance of Community Center built in 1999



B-5136

Somerset Court

Baltimore City, MD

Eric Holcomb

12/2006

Negative location: MD SHPO

Asquith Street facade



B-5136

Somerset Court  
Baltimore City, MD

Eric Holcomb

12/2006

Negative location: MD SHPo

looking east from Aisquith Street



B-5136

Somerset Court

Baltimore City, MD

Eric Holcomb

12/2006

Negative location; MD SHPO

Interior courtyard, east view



B-5136

Somerset Court

Baltimore City MD

Eric Holcomb

12/2006

Negative location: MD SHPS

Aisquith Street facades, South view



TREELEAF COURT

1012

B-5136

Somerset Court

Baltimore City, MD

Eric Holcomb

12/2006

Negative location: MD STIPO

Corner of Central Avenue & Treeleaf Court



B-5136

Somerset Court

Baltimore City, MD

Eric Halcomb

12/2006

North facade 1201-03 Somerset Court (Young Court)

Negative loc: MD STIPs



B-5136

Somerset Court

Baltimore City, MD

Eric Holcomb

12/2006

Negative location: MD SHPO

Somerset Court facing Central Avenue



B-5136

Somerset Court

Baltimore City, MD

Eric Halcomb

12/2006

Negative location: MD SHPO

Interior Courtyard Northeast bldg (Central & Edyth Street [Now alley])