

# The North Atlantic City

## LAI Baltimore Chapter – June, 2015 meeting

Charlie Duff, the founder and head of Jubilee Baltimore ([www.jubileebaltimore.org](http://www.jubileebaltimore.org)), visited the Baltimore LAI Chapter on June 17, 2015 to discuss his perceptions on the architectural evolution of “The North Atlantic City”.

Charlie opines that the brick rowhouse architecture that dominates many cities near the Atlantic coasts (on both sides of the Atlantic) in the U.S. and Europe as well as parts of Scandinavia actually originated in Holland. Specifically, Amsterdam. Holland and Amsterdam in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century were the first places to be run by middleclass merchants, like the cloth merchants made famous in Rembrandt’s “Dutch Masters” painting used to advertise cigars here in America during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Holland was the first place to be run more or less democratically, as opposed to the Nobleman/Peasant political structure common throughout the rest of the Europe during this time. Facing the difficult task of developing a city in what was then essentially a swamp, the middleclass merchants of Holland built canals to contain elevated groundwater and constructed rows of elegant masonry townhouses along the banks of those canals. This made for a markedly more attractive and cleaner arrangement than was the case in London, for instance, where horse droppings dominated the air and clumsy, stick built, “half-timbered”, housing lined most streets.

European cities all looked fairly similar in 1600 dominated by ubiquitous rows of “half-timbered” rowhouses broken up by the occasional nobleman’s mansion. A nobleman’s mansion in those days would stand in marked contrast to its surroundings, typically constructed of stone & masonry, with substantial columns and other impressive architectural features, and dwarfing its neighboring structures. In the 1640’s all that began to change with the overthrow of the English King by Thomas Cromwell and his followers. Following shortly on the heels of England becoming a Republic, a groundbreaking architect named Inigo Jones is the first to bring Italian architectural ideas to England, and about 1650 he is commissioned to design fine houses to attract wealthy Londoners in an area known as Covent Garden. His plan for Covent Garden, entails fine brick townhouses surrounding an Italianate square. Covent Garden becomes a prototype and by the mid-1650’s Londoners are emulating Holland’s example of upscale masonry rowhouses. Then in 1666, 80% of London burns down in 3 days, the result of a bakery fire run amok. The massive rebuilding effort, whose ostensible goal is to reconstruct London within seven years, follows the Dutch architectural lead, transforming London into the city of grand brick rowhouses that one sees today.

The Dutch style of rowhouse architecture spread throughout Europe after Londoners adopted it, and in 1670 Philadelphia is beginning to arise. It too follows the Dutch example. And the world witnesses the continuing spread “across the pond” of Holland’s innovative architecture.

Charlie distinguishes Paris and other southern European cities from the Dutch architectural style by showing his audience how Parisian apartment buildings were modeled after the 17<sup>th</sup> Century mansions of France’s noble class. These mansions were less “boxy”, more ornate, and on an even grander scale than the English version of a nobleman’s house. Hence Paris subsequently becomes a “city of apartments” which are made to look like the houses of French noblemen, and very different from the brick rowhouse model that London and northern Europe follow.

Mr. Duff is in the process of authoring a book on this subject to be named "The North Atlantic City". If Charlie's engaging verbal delivery of an architectural history lesson is any indication, his book should be extremely interesting and recommended reading for all LAI members!