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BALTIMORE TRIES TO HEAL WOUNDS FROM RIOTS – 40 YEARS LATER

Through dance, drama, and candid conversations, city residents erase lingering marks of the social chaos that erupted after Martin Luther King Jr.'s death in April 1968.
By Elaine F. Weiss | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor
from the April 24, 2008 edition

BALTIMORE - Robert Birt's contribution toward healing his native city was to draw stick-figure people, orange flames, and a military tank onto a ceramic tile. It was his way of expressing a painful civic memory and it was long overdue.

For 40 years, the violent civil disturbances that erupted in this city following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. have been a taboo subject. In a feat of willful community amnesia, the citizens of Baltimore have tried to erase the events of early April 1968 – when grief, anger, and frustration exploded into looting, arson, and street violence – devastating neighborhoods and rending the city along racial lines.

Families didn't talk about it, teachers didn't plan civic lessons around it, and policymakers didn't draw valuable examples from it. And two generations of Baltimoreans have grown up with no idea it ever happened.

Yet the scars from that time are still evident, and entire swaths of the city have still not recovered. Baltimore's present-day woes may be laid bare for all to see on television dramas like "The Wire," but the city's real-life, four-decade-old wound has never properly healed.

Mr. Birt's memory tile, and the process of creating it, is part of that mending. His tile is part of the Baltimore '68 Mosaic Monument, an artistic collaboration that will be installed in the center of the city, honoring the many private stories that combine to form a complex public narrative. And the mosaic monument is part of a broader effort to get Baltimoreans to wrestle with the racial, political, and economic issues that fomented the unrest and still haunt the city today. "The conditions that provoked the rebellion of '68 are ones that, sadly, largely remain," says Birt, a soft-spoken educator who was 15 at the time of the riots.

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Baltimore was hardly alone in suffering from racial unrest in that fateful month in 1968 – more than 140 cities and towns erupted in flames. But the divisions and destruction here have lingered longer than most, and now the city is one of the only to engage in a frank, if belated, introspection about the price it has paid for neglect. Other cities are certainly watching Baltimore's experiment with truth and reconciliation.

Jessica Elfenbein knew the city needed to come to terms with this searing episode now. The people who lived through the riots were growing old, their memories fading. Believing in the adage that those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it, Professor Elfenbein, who is director of the University of Baltimore's Community Studies and Civic Engagement program, was determined to get people talking – and listening. "If you ignore the circumstances, it won't heal, it doesn't get better," she says.

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urned. But to be frank, after King was killed, I didn't give a damn. That was my attitude. But when you hear the story of Christina's mother getting burned out of her home – somebody's family – come on. And she was my neighbor, too, I realized."

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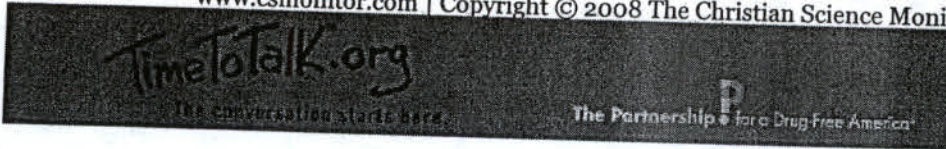
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