



The City and the City: Tent Camps and Luxury Development in the NoMA Business Improvement District (BID) in Washington, D.C.

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Abstract

The NoMA Business Improvement District (BID) is one of Washington DC’s fastest developing areas and has one of the city’s largest concentrations of unhoused tent camps, many of which are located in underpasses that provide bits of protection and privacy. These underpasses were created during DC’s City Beautiful Movement and have been the site of neoliberal antihomeless strategies. In this paper I explore the production of space in the NoMA area and how property owners, business associations, and government actors sanitized public space for wealthy newcomers while excluding poor and unhoused residents.

Keywords Washington DC · Homelessness · Public space · Vacancy · Infrastructure

Introduction

“Rain,” the first of two light art installations constructed in the underpasses of the NoMA, or North of Massachusetts Avenue Business Improvement District (BID) in Washington DC, opened in October 2018. At the ribbon cutting ceremony Robin-Eve Jasper, who at the time was the president of the NoMA BID, stated that “this art light installation... is going to do what they said could not be done which is to totally erase the impacts of the railroad tracks going through the middle of the neighborhood” (pers. comm., October 25, 2018). “Rain” represents neoliberal strategies to reimagine so-called “dead space” that is “often underutilized- or utilized in ways illegal or undesirable” (Moskerintz 2018). As Greer Gillies, director of DC’s General Service Administration, noted “this once dark and dank underpass is now coming to life in a most unique way possible” (pers. comm, October 25, 2018). Months

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later, in April of 2019, “Lightweave” was finished one block south of “Rain.” Costing a combined \$2.5 million, these light art installations were constructed over some of DC’s largest unhoused camps occupied by people who found protection from the wind, snow, and rain in the underpasses.

The NoMA area is one of DC’s fastest developing areas as well as the site of the city’s largest concentration of unhoused tent camps. The NoMA area’s economic growth is internally tied to its history as a warehousing district, which is also internally related to the production of the underpasses where many of NoMA’s unhoused residents live. BIDs are private–public partnerships that attempt to “rebrand” disinvested urban areas, making them “appear as innovative, exciting, creative, and safe places to live and consume in” (Harvey 1989:9). The light art installations were meant to sanitize the dark and scary underpasses, reminding us that public space is created and maintained in ways that reproduce the social relations of capitalism (Harvey 2001; Mitchell 2003).

Public space, as Don Mitchell (2003:13) notes “engenders fear, fears that derive from the sense of public space as uncontrolled space, as a space in which civilization is exceptionally fragile.” Vacant lots, bridges, and other so-called “dead space” or “empty space” (Bowen and Pagano 2000) have long provided outlets for alternative social relations, such as illegal vending, graffiti art, or camping, which breaks from the normal state and market relations. The capitalist mode of production, while often attempting to portray itself as a perfect, complete system, is full of gaps and fissures that remind us of its incomplete form. A crack, as John Holloway (2010:84) describes “is the perfectly ordinary creation of a space or moment in which we assert a different type of doing.” The unhoused camps in NoMA’s underpasses, and the “different types of doing” that formed there, contradict the image the million-dollar light art was meant to send, deterring global flows of capital that the NoMA BID was attempting to attract. In this paper I explore the production of space in the NoMA area and how property owners, business associations, and government actors sanitized public space for wealthy newcomers while excluding poor and unhoused residents to create a “playground for the rich and powerful” and bring NoMA’s property owners into neoliberal flows of global capital.

Archaeology and the Contemporary

Contemporary and historical archaeologists have long excavated capitalism’s destruction, mapping sites of exploitation and alienation (McGuire 2008) as well as ruined spaces and sites of failed capital (Dawdy 2010). However, as Penrose (2017) argues, this focus on capital’s destruction further veils the creative potential of capital, drawing our attention away from the neoliberal strategies of urban redevelopment and capital accumulation that serve to reproduce the capitalist mode of production. While research on capital’s success stories is vital to our understanding of contemporary capitalism, we risk portraying capitalism as a complete and coherent system with no alternatives (Dézsi and Wurst, this volume). Rather, even the most successful neoliberal redevelopment projects are full of cracks, leaving room for the formation of alternative social relations. Following McGuire (2013), I understand

the physical and social landscape as a material process, highlighting the relation between human agency and the material world. Don Mitchell (2003:383) uses the term “dialectical landscape” to emphasize the political economic relations that connect capitalism’s landscape through time and space. This helps us navigate the “uneven distribution” that Harvey (1989) traces through the movements of capital that connect the mundane social and physical landscapes humans interact with daily to larger political-economic processes.

One of archaeology’s strengths is its ability to highlight often overlooked aspects of daily life and conjure new perspectives of the contemporary condition (Voss 2010). While my focus on Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) helps bring into view the creative potential of capital, my emphasis on unhoused people creates an alternative history from the one being told by the NoMA BID. When unhoused people create “clean and safe” places to sleep, they redefine that space under the watchful eyes of politicians, property owners, and developers who wish to maintain control over the “proper” meaning of that space (Wright 1997:255). As González-Ruibal (2019:183) notes “discarded people are not too different from hazardous waste, in that they are abject, dangerous matter that has to be eliminated far from public gaze.” “Sweeps,” “cleanups,” or as they are called in DC “homeless encampment engagements,” are tactics used by the state to control space in urban areas, removing unwanted people and property from public view. Focusing on these often-ignored material relations helps bring to light the people who once used them; “it can materialize the material in the sense of making it matter,” making the unseen not only visible, but placing it within the realm of history (Buchli and Lucas 2001:13). By telling the story of NoMA’s rapid development from the vantage point of displacement and enclosure, the violence of capital’s unevenness is unveiled, and its history partially rewritten. These alternative stories not only give us hope of alternative futures, but also reveal the cracks and fissures of capital’s incomplete grasp.

Cracks, Vacancy, and Unhoused Spaces

Vacant lots and other unused spaces are often referred to by developers and urban reformers as “dead space” or “empty space” (Bowman and Pagano 2000), signifying their negative relation to capital accumulation while delegitimizing the alternative social relations that form there. Surface collections conducted at vacant lots have revealed that these so-called “empty spaces” have long been used for travel, storage, refuse disposal, play, vehicle parking, and camping (Wilk and Schiffer 1979:530). Unhoused people have long occupied vacant lots and buildings, as well as other so-called “empty space” such as bridges and underpasses. As early as 1886, unhoused people lived and worked in railroad viaducts in London (Dwer 2009). In Washington DC, Heat Alley, located behind the Willard Hotel one block east of the White House, was regularly occupied by unhoused people during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (the Evening Star 1896). Sometimes called hobo jungles, these camps offered bits of privacy, protection, and community that help unhoused

people navigate punitive and hostile landscapes (Woirol 1992:80). In 1897, DC's police commissioner (Commissioner Reports 1897:152) noted:

There are many unimproved squares and lots which are overgrown with weeds and high grass in the summer, they not only become the dumping grounds for all kinds of rubbish and filth, but the hiding places of criminals and vagrants, and in many instances are not readily accessible to the police.

To avoid being raided by the police, hobo jungles were often constructed in hard-to-find places. However, once found, these camps were often sites of routine state sanctioned violence. Between 1896 and 1905 Heat Alley was reported to have been raided by the police over 15 times (Washington Post 1905).

While those caught in hobo jungles were often labeled “vagrants” or “idlers” and sent to the workhouse, institutions began to develop during the late nineteenth century to provide shelter to a select number of the “worthy poor” (Kusmer 2002). In 1893 DC opened one of the nation's first municipal lodging houses, where adult men could receive up to three nights of meals and lodging in return for a “work test,” which often entailed a few hours of chopping firewood (Commissioner Reports 1896:380). Alongside the work test was a list of strict rules, such as no drinking or swearing, forced baths, and clothing fumigation, and a curfew (Commissioner Reports 1896:382). This allowed the lodging house attendants to deny entrance to people who were drunk or refused the work test, leaving them to be captured by the police and charged with vagrancy or public drunkenness. This created a distinction between the “worthy” and “unworthy” poor, justifying state sanctioned violence and providing different ways to control the movements of unhoused people (Kusmer 2002:75–78).

Today, homeless shelters serve a similar function, controlling the movements of unhoused people in urban areas, while justifying state sanctioned violence against those who rationally choose to avoid shelters (Hennigan and Speer 2018). Like municipal lodging houses, homeless shelters are purposefully underfunded, creating dehumanizing and dangerous conditions that deter and discipline unhoused people to try to force them back into normative domestic and economic life (Lyon-Callo 2004). Some shelters require sobriety, attending religious services, or have curfews that don't fit with unhoused people's schedules and storage limits that do not meet the daily needs of unhoused people (Feldman 2004:95). Moreover, rules against pets and partners, as well as restrictions based on age, familial status, and gender, create barriers for unhoused people to access services (Wasserman and Clair 2010:61). Jay (2018), a Black unhoused man I met in NoMA, once told me about how the city threw away his tent:

Man, they threw away my tent. That was all I had man. Where do they expect us to go? The shelters? Nah those are shit man. People here want freedom ya know? Be able to come and go when they want. You can't do that at those dirty shelters.

The dangerous and dehumanizing conditions of shelters and other homeless institutions have long provided impetus for the occupation of public spaces by

unhoused people (Hopper 2003). Much like hobo jungles, today's tent camps offer bits of privacy, safety, and community within harsh anti homeless landscapes.

Unhoused camps, like hobo jungles, broke normative spatial understanding of private and public space, conditioning new state sanctioned violence to control the movements of unhoused people and deter the occupation of public space. In the US, at least one in three cities have bans on urban camping alone, while many others have no sleeping or sitting laws (NCH 2016:2). While DC does not outlaw sleeping in public, the construction of "temporary abodes," such as tents and shanties, on public or private land, is illegal without written permission from the mayor (Austermuhle 2017). Between 2015 and 2019, the number of "homeless encampment engagements," what DC officials call "cleanups," rose dramatically in DC writ large, disproportionately targeting the camps in the NoMA area. In 2015, there were 29 "engagements" conducted in DC and only five (17%) were conducted in NoMA (DMHHS 2015). Just four years later in 2019, there were 100 "engagements" conducted in DC and 42 (42%) were in NoMA (DMHHS 2019).

Private Publics: The NoMA Business Improvement District (BID)

BIDs are private–public partnerships, institutionalized as non-profits, which collect tax assessments from businesses in their boundaries to invest in public space enhancement and maintenance projects (Schaller and Modan 2008). Focusing on the most visible aspects of the physical landscapes, such as graffiti, lighting, trash, and sidewalks, BID's attempt to make neighborhoods look "clean and safe" for potential investors and residents (Lewis 2010). To form a BID, property owners send a petition to be approved by the mayor, and once formed, a board of directors is selected by the property owners who cannot be voted out, removing them from public accountability (Schaller and Modan 2008:396). The First BID started in Toronto in 1970, amid economic crisis and neoliberal restructuring, and has played a key role in making urban centers attractive to investors and developers (Schaller 2019:15).

DC, which didn't get its first BID until 1996, currently has 11 BIDs spread throughout the city (Schaller 2019:82). The NoMA BID was DC's eighth BID, formed in 2007 following the construction of the NoMA/Gallaudet Metro Station in 2004 (Schaller 2019:93). NoMA is located 1 mi (1.6 km) north of the Capitol building, overlaying the once active warehousing district that developed following the completion of Union Station in 1907 (Fig. 1). In 1998 developers noted that NoMA's "location near Congress, excellent transportation accessibility, and availability of vacant land and underutilized industrial-type buildings and warehouses make it a prime candidate for economic investment" (Monteilh and Weiss 1998:43). Yet, during my interview, Robin-Eve Jasper (2019a, 2019b), who at the time was the president of the NoMA BID, noted "we struggle a little bit in terms about perceptions about being a finished neighborhood" and that "the presences of really monumental architecture" such as Union Station, challenge development and that easy transportation access has "promoted criminal activity in the neighborhood."

One of the stated goals of the NoMA BID was to rebrand the area from its industrial past and make it "more attractive to businesses and potential residents" (NoMa BID 2018:4). In 2007 the NoMA BID reported that there was just 500,000 m² of office space and "virtually no residential buildings" (NoMa BID 2018:1). Between 2005 and

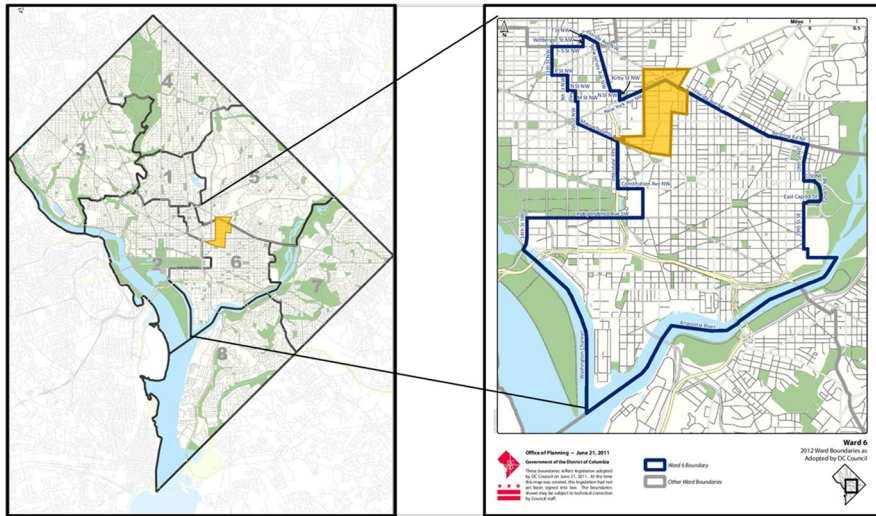


Fig. 1 Map showing the location of the NoMA BID (yellow) in Washington DC

2010, corporations chain restaurants and stores, such as Harris Teeters and Starbucks, invested over \$6 billion to fill up NoMA's main street (Cooke, 2013:28). After the formation of the BID, developers and real estate investors, many of whom sit on the NoMA BID Board of Directors, purchased cheap, abandoned buildings, and converted them into luxury apartments. Today, the NoMA BID has nearly 1.2 million square meters of office space and 4,800 residential units (NoMA BID 2018), making it one of the fastest developing areas in DC.

Rapid investment and development drastically changed the demographics of the area. In 2000 the NoMA area had a population of 3,298 of which 92% were black and only 2.7% were white (US Census Bureau 2000). By 2010, the population rose slightly to 3,933, while the percentage of black residents dropped to 52% and white residents represented 40% of the population (US Census Bureau 2010). Similarly, data from the Washington DC Economic Partnership records that the NoMA area's median household income rose from \$42,192 in 2013 (WDCEP 2013) to \$100,421 in 2020 (WDCEP 2020). Moreover, the development of the NoMA area has resulted in the displacement of longtime DC residents in nearby neighborhoods such as Shaw, Mount Vernon Triangle, and the H Street Corridor (Cooke 2013; Summers 2019). However, the NoMA BID downplays this history of displacement and the processes of disinvestment that preconditioned its political economic growth. To do this, the NoMA BID uses multiple tactics to construct alternative histories that erased the lived experiences of those who once lived and worked in the NoMA area.

NoMA's White Space: Swampoodle Park

One way the NoMA BID attempted to “rebrand” the area from its industrial past was by reimagining the area as a historically white space. In part, this was done by highlighting the area’s brief history as a white-working class Irish neighborhood, while largely downplaying the long history of predominantly black communities and the vicious displacement of black residents from the area, although the Piscataway and Nacostine had long inhabited the area before white settler colonialism spread throughout the western hemisphere (Williams 2001). Swampoodle was one of the early names given to the area now called NoMA, a name that comes from the swampy conditions created by the Tiber Creek which ran through the heart of the area (Asch and Musgrove 2017:84–85). First settled in the early 1840s by poor Irish immigrants, Swampoodle was known as a dirty and dangerous section of town, feared by middle-class onlookers, and heavily patrolled by police (Asch and Musgrove 2017:85). The Irish in Swampoodle, like many poor Irish immigrants in the United States, often had violent relationships with black neighbors, and the multiple “street riots” between white and black residents was constant news in local media (Asch and Musgrove 2017:100). In 1852, as a federal building boom swept DC and 260 white workers, many of whom were Irish, petitioned Congress to ban “the use of ‘free negroes,’ and Slaves in the public Buildings” and instead employ “worthy white men” (Asch and Musgrove 2017:100).

Following the US Civil War, the area experienced a demographic shift, as more black residents started to rent homes in Swampoodle (Asch and Musgrove 2017:100). Like many neighborhoods in DC at the time, the streets of Swampoodle were largely self-segregated, with many black residents renting interior alley lots while Irish residents rented lots on the street (Borchert 1982:107). As Swampoodle’s black population continued to grow throughout the nineteenth century, the Irish became increasingly assimilated into white US society and many left the area entirely (Borchert 1982:275). In November 2018, the NoMA BID opened Swampoodle Park in one of its many vacant lots (Russell 2018), further codifying the area’s white history while veiling the violent history of displacement black residents faced in the years to come. By imagining Swampoodle as a static white neighborhood, the NoMA BID not only was able to “rebrand” the area as a white space, but it also created a “blank slate” narrative that downplayed the NoMA BID’s role in the gentrification and displacement that preconditioned the area’s rise to a site of global capital accumulation.

Urban Visions: Birth of the Underpasses

The City Beautiful Movement, a bourgeois social movement responding to deteriorating urban conditions caused by rapid increases in industrial activity in city centers, aimed to “rehabilitate” working class people by improving and beautifying the built environment around them (Asch and Musgrove 2017:197). DC’s City Beautiful Movement was known as the McMillian Plan, named after Senator

James McMillan of Michigan, a former railroad capitalist who became chair of the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia in 1891 (Asch and Musgrove 2017:196). Union Station, which was designed by Daniel Burnham in the same Beaux-art style he used in the construction of the “White City” at Chicago’s 1893 World Columbian Exposition (Foglesong 1986). Union Station merged the B&O Railroad and the Pennsylvania Railroad depots into a single megastructure that provided a grand entrance into the nation’s capital, while also raising all railroad grades to eliminate dangerous crossings and smog from the city’s streets that had embarrassed local officials for decades (Asch and Musgrove 2017:201).

Burnham once boasted that the McMillian Plan embodied the desire “to remove and forever keep from view the ugly, unsightly, and even the commonplace” (Asch and Musgrove 2017:201). The construction of Union Station and the raising of the railroad grades required the destruction of over 1,500 homes across DC, 700 of which were in Swampoodle (Asch and Musgrove 2017:201). While paraded as a progressive social movement, the McMillian Plan was internally related to larger processes of slum clearance and the elimination of vacant lots, buildings, and other “unsightly” spaces that breed vice and crime, providing a temporary fix to the growing contradictions of industrial capitalism.

Taking five years to complete, this massive construction project would impact the entire city, drastically altering its physical landscape for decades. A newspaper article from 1906 notes that “embankments and fill” dominated DC’s landscape as railroad grades were heightened up to 3 m in some areas (*Sunday Star* 1906). The raised tracks were supported by massive stone retaining walls, called the Burnham Wall, which runs through the middle of the NoMA BID boundaries. Union Station, originally imagined as a response to the growing cracks conditioned by industrial capitalism, is one of the biggest historical survivals in the NoMA area today, sprouting new cracks as the forces of capitalism shift within the neoliberal era.

Changing Demographics: Myrtle Street

The construction of Union Station not only drastically altered the physical landscape of the area, but moreover it shifted its political economy, forever altering its social landscape as well. Access to railroad transportation created a boom in warehouse construction, as well as ice, coal, and other light industry in the area. Between 1914 and 1928, Hub Furniture, National Furniture, Woodward and Lothrop, Columbia Photograph and Lithographing, Union Storage Company, Jacobs Transfer Company, and Tophams Leather all built warehouses in a single block just west of Union Station (Sanborn Map Company 1928–60). The federal government also took advantage of the new transportation access, constructing a gigantic post office just west of Union Station in 1914 which was also designed by Burnham (Lewis 2015:258).

A drastic shift in the racial demographics accompanied the changing political economy of the area. Myrtle Street, a small alley located just west of Union Station, witnessed the massive exodus of white renters following the construction of Union Station, as trains and warehouses began to dominate the landscape. In 1910 there were 519 white residents and 0 black residents recorded living on Myrtle Street (US Census

Bureau 1910). In 1920 the black population drastically rose to 437 residents and the white population plummeted to 148 (US Census Bureau 1920). By 1930 the black population at Myrtle Street was 518 and the white population was only 13 (US Census Bureau 1930). This drastic demographic change corresponds not only to the changing physical landscape of the area, but the social mobility of white immigrants and their rising status within the US political economy (Borchert 1982).

Boundaries: The Northwest One and Northeast One Urban Renewal Projects

By 1969 the entirety of Myrtle Street was razed as part of an urban renewal project which would impact the way the NoMA BID drew their boundaries years later. Northwest One and Northeast One projects were both approved in June of 1960; however construction was delayed for years. The Northeast One project area was located just west of Union Station and included five notorious alleys, including Myrtle Street, which were all razed for redevelopment, destroying 923 homes (Eisen 1960). The Northwest One project area, located just west of Northeast One, focused on housing for those displaced from Northeast One and other urban renewal projects, creating four subsidized housing projects, Sibley Plaza, Temple Courts, Sursum Corda, and Tyler House (Paris 1998:112). However, as Paris (1998) found in her ethnography of the Northwest One and Northeast One urban renewal projects, many poor black residents fell through the cracks of this development project, losing not only their homes but their long-established communities.

Paris (1998:61) notes that many of those who lived in the alley dwellings razed by the Northeast One project had developed a strong bottom-up community based on similar needs and shared experiences within the increasingly segregated city. Once destroyed, former residents had a hard time adjusting to the fragmented, top-down housing projects that failed to meet their daily needs. Few employment opportunities and a lack of grocery stores, restaurants, and community buildings in the Northwest One project area made daily life harder for poor, black residents (Paris 1998:61). The Northeast One urban renewal project completely removed all residential units from the area, while Northwest One created a pocket of low-income housing without any other types of commercial infrastructure, reworking the physical and social landscapes of the area. When the NoMA BID formed in 2007, the gutted Northeast One project area was fully included in the NoMA BID, but the four housing projects, with primarily black residents, were completely left out.

Neoliberal Resurgence: SoHo on the Potomac

Neoliberal restructuring in the United States drastically reworked urban areas, as flows of global capital shifted, and US cities once again became central to capital accumulation (Harvey 1989). During the early to mid-twentieth century, much of the housing stock in the NoMA area was razed for warehouses, light industry, and federal building construction (Paris 1998). Many of these

warehouses were abandoned in the 1970s and 1980s following massive reductions in regional manufacturing (DCOP 2009). By the 1990s, as DC gained the title “murder capital of the world,” the NoMA area was full of vacant lots and buildings, lacking employment, grocery, and entertainment opportunities. Union Station, the once grand entrance to the nation’s capital, was in disrepair and the surrounding area had developed a negative image as a dark, dangerous section of town (Hilzenrath 1988).

In 1998 *The Economic Resurgence of Washington, DC* plan was created to “attract tourists and office workers into the city during the evenings” (Schaller 2019:75). The plan coined the name NoMA, or North of Massachusetts Avenue, imagining the area as a “multimedia technology district that includes housing, arts and entertainment, and other attractions” hoping to attract “young and energetic, high-quality workforce that is particularly drawn to a vibrant urban lifestyle” (Monteilh and Weiss 1998:41). The goal was to emulate SoHo, or South of Houston, in New York City, an oft cited success story of neoliberal urban restructuring that transformed a deindustrialized area into a profitable area for the “creative class” (Zukin 1982). While many cities have attempted to mimic New York’s SoHo, such as SoMa in San Francisco and SoHo in Hong Kong (Zukin 2010:231), a *Washington Post* article from 2000 noted:

NoMa is no SoHo yet. Piles of tires, acres of parking, homeless encampments, nude dancing and adult videos are more common than galleries and latte shops. But an extraordinary planning effort is underway to launch the neighborhood in that oh-so-hip-and-lucrative direction. (Montgomery 2000).

The 1998 Resurgence Plan jump-started development in the NoMA area; however, it was not until the construction of a metro station in 2004 that plans for redevelopment took off, escalating even further with the formation of the NoMA BID in 2007.

The Underpasses Reimagined: The NoMA BID Lights Up

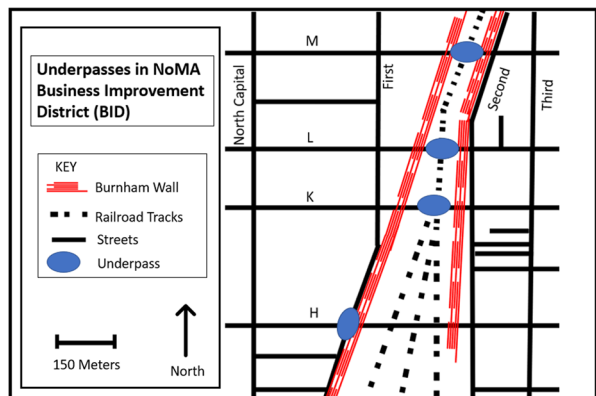
The NoMA BID formed in 2007 with the express goal of rebranding the area away from its industrial past and making it attractive to new potential investors and residents (NoMA BID 2007). Unhoused people, especially those who live in public spaces, have been a prime target for BIDs since their inception (Selbin et al. 2018). In 2009 there seemed to be no tents set up in the underpasses although a few individuals regularly “slept rough” without a tent or other type of shelter in the area (Drost 2009). In December 2015, eight unhoused people lived in NoMA’s underpasses, however they were all “moved along” and forced out of the area (StreetSense 2016). Google map images from 2016 showed 14 people living in the underpasses, while images from 2017 only reveal two tents, suggesting the “move along” process of displacement likely continued. When I began my fieldwork in July of 2018 I counted 25 tents under the four underpasses, signifying a massive increase in visible “street homelessness” around that time. By

the time my fieldwork concluded in January of 2020, I had counted 85 tents in NoMA's underpasses. Permanent enclosures of multiple camps around the city (Falquero 2015) made the NoMA underpasses some of the few remaining protected areas in DC where unhoused people could camp with some protection from the wind, rain, and sun (Fig. 2). While a few unhoused people I talked to moved directly from these evicted camps, many were attracted to the NoMA area simply because a community had developed there, making the area seem safer for unhoused people.

The underpasses and the Burnham Wall, both of which provided protection from the elements and small amounts of privacy for unhoused people, was a constant source of frustration for property owners and developers (NoMA BID 2012). One of the first projects the NoMA BID undertook was to widen the sidewalks under the M and L Street underpasses, converting the four lane roads into two lanes to provide extra pedestrian passage within the fixed infrastructure (WMATA 2010:17). K Street, however, stayed a four-lane road and the sidewalks remained narrow. In 2015, just as the tent camps in NoMA started to grow, the NoMA BID announced that light art installations would be built under the widened sidewalks of the M and L Street underpasses (Chason 2018). “Rain,” the first of the installations, in the M Street underpass, and “Lightweave,” in the L Street underpass, cost a combined \$2.5 million, paid for with a \$50 million grant from the DC government for Parks and Recreation (Giambrone 2018). The lights were designed to rebrand the NoMA area as a hip, fun place to live and work, inviting further investment and development in the area. However, when construction began in 2018 a large camp of unhoused people was displaced from the underpasses, bringing a lot of negative media attention (Giambrone 2018; Maher 2018).

In the short time between when the fences were removed following construction and the ribbon cutting ceremony for “Rain,” many unhoused people moved back into the protected underpass. The morning of the ceremony, the DC government conducted a “homeless encampment engagement,” temporarily clearing the underpass for the event. At the ceremony many politicians and property owners spoke of the power of these public-private partnerships to brighten up these “dark and scary” places. The night after

Fig. 2 Map showing the location of the four underpasses located beneath the northbound tracks of Union Station. Map made by author



the ceremony, unhoused people returned to the underpass, reestablishing their camps under the constant light pollution provided by “Rain.” In the weeks that followed, the NoMA BID attempted to host several events to promote their new million-dollar light art; a banana pancake breakfast, yoga, a silent disco, and a beer crawl, all “under the ‘Rain’” (NoMA BID 2018). Only a handful of people showed up to each event and you could almost feel how uncomfortable the wealthy newcomers were sharing space with unhoused people. The image of uneven distribution was striking and many people did not stay long, often whispering to their friends and uncomfortably laughing as they figured out how to leave. The NoMA BID hoped to transform the “dark and scary corridors” into a wonderful connection between the east and west ends of the area, however the development appeared as an attack against unhoused residents and an extravagant waste of \$2.5 million (Maher 2018).

While art was used to “lighten up” the M and L Street underpass, a different tactic was devised for the K Street underpass with its long, narrow sidewalks. In August 2019, the NoMA BID published an open letter requesting that the city enforce current anti-homeless laws and perform more “cleanups” of the camps in the underpasses (Jasper 2019a, 2019b). One suggestion the NoMA BID offered was the creation of a “pedestrian safe-passage zone” under the K Street underpass, noting that the narrow sidewalks made it hard for wheelchairs and strollers to pass by the tents (Jasper 2019a, 2019b). Many people called out the dehumanizing language used in the letter, as well as the call for more cops and criminalization (Cirruzzo 2019). However, the city responded on January 16, 2020, by establishing the K Street underpass as the city’s first “pedestrian passageway.” Bright orange signs read “This sidewalk must remain clear at all times. Blocking pedestrian passage is a public safety hazard. All property blocking this sidewalk is subject to immediate removal and disposal. Leave property at your own risk” (Fig. 3). The more than 40 people displaced from the K Street underpasses were offered no services or help from the government, and many attempted to find new spots to pitch their tents in the already overcrowded M and L Street underpasses. Others packed up and formed new camps across the city, making it hard for outreach workers to find their clients, delaying pathways to housing (Black et al. 2020). The violence of overcrowded conditions created by this enclosure intensified following the COVID-19 pandemic that would hit the DC area months later.

Utilizing the changing demographics of the area, the NoMA BID letter requested residents call, email, and write complaints to the DC mayor and council members, calling for increased criminalization and harassment of unhoused camps (Jasper 2019a, 2019b). In October 2021, as COVID-19 raged in DC, the M and L Street underpasses were also designated “pedestrian passageways,” displacing more than 60 people who lived there (Austermuhle 2021). Large concrete barriers were set up beneath the M and L Street underpasses to make sure no tents could return (Fig. 4). The similarities between the language used by the NoMA BID call for “pedestrian safe-passage zones” and the creation of the “pedestrian passageway” by the DC government reveals the complex relations within private–public partnerships and the immense power BIDs have to sanitize “revitalizing” urban spaces into playgrounds for the “rich and powerful” (Zukin 2010).

Fig. 3 Photo of the "Pedestrian Passageway" notice signs in the K Street NE underpass in the NoMA BID (Photo by author)



Fig. 4 Concrete barriers placed to prevent tents in the "Pedestrian Passageway" in the M Street NE underpass (Photo by author)



Conclusion

The historical production of space in the NoMA area created a contradictory landscape where extreme wealth sits literally overtop extreme poverty. The underpasses

in NoMA, which were created as a temporary fix to the contradictions of industrial capitalism, preconditioned the rise of unhoused camps in the late neoliberal era. The “pedestrian passageway,” much like “homeless encampment engagements” and the police raids of hobo jungles, represent tactics used by the state and property owners to regain control of cracks that develop within capitalism. Rather than a complete, coherent system, capitalism is full of contradictions, constantly creating new cracks that precondition alternative relations outside of normative market and state forces (Holloway 2010). As Marx (1967:645) noted long ago, the “accumulation of wealth, on one side, is offset by the equal accumulation of poverty, suffering, ignorance, brutality, physical and moral degradation, and slavery, on the other side.” This general tendency of capital accumulation has been a primary contradiction of the capitalist mode of production.

Public space has become a primary battleground in the neoliberal era as economic restructuring has heightened the importance of capital accumulation in urban centers. One of the primary functions of BIDs is to respond to the cracks constantly forming within neoliberal landscapes, removing accountability from the state and giving increasing power to property owners and developers. Much like the City Beautiful Movement, BIDs attempt to reimagine public space to condition the types of peoples and actions that occur there, creating sanitized spaces to attract global flows of capital. The complete removal of unhoused people from the M, L, and K Street underpasses speaks to the immense power that BIDs have and their role in maintaining the spaces required for capital accumulation. Examining the ways in which property owners, developers, and politicians respond to these historically specific contradictions gives insights into how capital reproduces itself and portrays itself as a complete and natural system with no alternatives.

Declarations

Conflicts of Interest There are no conflicts of interest to be reported by the author. Authored received verbal informed consent from all ethnographic participants which were reviewed and accepted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for human subjects at American University.

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