

# The Washington Post

## Visions of NoMa Renaissance Concern Area's Artistic Denizens, Who Fear Urban Planners May Paint Them Out of the Picture

By David Montgomery  
Sunday, March 12, 2000; C1

From the roof of his scruffy warehouse a dozen blocks north of the Capitol, artist Randy Jewart can see the past and the future of Washington--the historic row houses of struggling Shaw to the west, the construction cranes of rising high-tech headquarters to the east.

Jewart carves his art in stone, a medium of permanence. But it is the fleeting that preoccupies him now, living and working in a neighborhood that city planners say is poised for dramatic change. Those cranes make him wonder: Are they building a future for his neighbors and him--or for someone else with more money?

"We have a 20-year history and a great track record with the neighborhood, and tomorrow it could be gone," he says of the dozen artists who have built studios in the 110-year-old former equipment storehouse on N Street NW.

The artists don't own the haven they call 57 N Fine Art. They rent at rock-bottom prices from a sympathetic landlord who, they nevertheless understand, might be open to a developer with a moneymaking plan. That's what happened a few years ago to the painters and sculptors around Seventh and F streets NW. When the east end of downtown became safe and profitable, the suits arrived and the artists were unceremoniously drop-kicked to edgier places, such as north of Massachusetts Avenue.

### **To NoMa.**

That's the chic new name for north of Massachusetts Avenue, with apologies to SoHo, south of Houston Street in New York, the original hot spot for living, creating and paying too much for restaurant food. SoHo blossomed all by itself. Then other cities tried to manufacture their own SoHos--and now so is Washington.

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. For years Washington's planning department withered--from 187 to 16 employees--and the city seemed to lurch from project to project without a plan. Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D) has vowed to reverse those trends, but the NoMa effort is not relying on the city. Leading urban thinkers have been enlisted to map a coherent future for the neighborhood.

Unlike the office and arena developers south of Massachusetts, the NoMa planners hope to preserve the artists and residents--even attract more. They argue that this is also an opportunity to achieve a broader goal: Attract the Internet entrepreneurs who are flocking to the suburbs. It's a high-tech twist on the SoHo model. As arts, media and technology increasingly blend and feed off each other, the consultants envision NoMa as a place to encourage that ferment.

"If we pull it off, this will be the most successful, consciously designed, full-blown economic development initiative that this city has ever done," says Marc Weiss, who coined the term NoMa two years ago when he was a consultant to the city.

The question is, can the neighborhood survive all that progress? Residents, the artists among them, are meeting with the consultants to help shape the plan and protect their stake in the neighborhood.

Massachusetts Avenue is the Maginot Line separating the breathlessly rebuilding downtown from quirky NoMa, which is part musty commercial, part residential. With Massachusetts on the south, NoMa is roughly defined by 14th Street NW on the west, Florida Avenue NW on the north and the railroad tracks on the east.

The planners fret that increasing development pressure will overrun NoMa with the outsize attractions and soulless offices that dominate south of Massachusetts. They are aware that the convention center under construction at Mount Vernon Square was the first big project to thrust over the line into NoMa. And they know that some business leaders have proposed a baseball stadium and a transportation center--though Williams has been cool to the center and has not endorsed the stadium site.

The planners see NoMa as a 24-hour neighborhood where people would continue to live and work. "We don't want the city to turn into a suburban office park," says Peter Calthorpe, a Berkeley, Calif.-based sage of the "new urbanism" philosophy that favors eclectic, pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods.

The planners fret that increasing development pressure will overrun NoMa with the outsize attractions and soulless offices that dominate south of Massachusetts. They are aware that the convention center under construction at Mount Vernon Square was the first big project to thrust over the line into NoMa. And they know that some business leaders have proposed a baseball stadium and a transportation center--though Williams has been cool to the center and has not endorsed the stadium site.

The planners see NoMa as a 24-hour neighborhood where people would continue to live and work. "We don't want the city to turn into a suburban office park," says Peter Calthorpe, a Berkeley, Calif.-based sage of the "new urbanism" philosophy that favors eclectic, pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods.

Using a \$200,000 city grant, a civic group called the Cultural Development Corp. hired Calthorpe, Patrick Phillips of Economics Research Associates in Washington and Donald Carter and Ray Gindroz of Urban Design Associates in Pittsburgh. A final report is due next month.

Besides lower Manhattan, their models include SoMa--south of Market Street in San Francisco--and LoDo--Lower Downtown in Denver. Much of NoMa is anchored by Shaw, a mixed-income neighborhood increasingly popular with young home buyers looking for bargains. The consultants' most dramatic proposals are for two sections with vacant and city-owned land. First is the 18-block Mount Vernon Triangle just east of Mount Vernon Square. Second is a proposed 10-block "technology district" north of Union Station.

Underscoring the consensus that these tiny areas loom large for the city's future, the Committee of 100 on the Federal City, a planning advocacy group, issued a draft plan for the triangle, generally agreeing with the consultants. "This will be a growth area," says Joseph Bender, vice chairman of the committee. "We ought to do it right."

Mount Vernon Triangle is dominated by auto repair shops and vast parking lots. A few big structures stand in isolation--the Museum Apartments, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, National Public Radio.

For entertainment, there's Louis the Rogue. One February afternoon, a scantily clad woman dances playfully toward a few customers who press near the edge of the stage.

Club owner Louis Sigalas is sipping a Michelob. Nope, he's never heard of NoMa, Peter Calthorpe or the new urbanism. In the go-go gloom, he squints at the color picture the consultants sketched, suggesting his joint should be razed for apartments, with a cute boutique downstairs. He rolls his eyes.

Sigalas's son Tony says the family owns three small buildings, and they're not budging. They turned down an offer of \$2.5 million.

The consultants, however, have faith that every landowner has his price. In their post-Louis the Rogue vision of the triangle, offices and stores would line Massachusetts and New York, with apartments filling other blocks. The buildings housing NPR, INS, existing apartments and churches would remain. The city would add trees and traffic circles and relieve the gridlock at New York and Interstate 395.

The consultants say the plan is realistic because the triangle is zoned for this mix of commercial and residential use. The Committee of 100 estimates that the area could support 3,240 new housing units and 3 million square feet in hotels, offices and stores. Annual tax revenues, the committee figures, would be \$46 million.

"A well-executed mixed-use neighborhood would in fact produce financial benefits to the city that would outweigh those of a ballpark," consultant Phillips says.

Technology is scarce in the technology corridor. An empty Woodward & Lothrop warehouse stands in pale brick art deco splendor. Nearby are shuttered buildings, parking lots, city offices and vacant land, including future sites of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms and a proposed Red Line Metro station. Close to the jammed intersection of Florida and New York are the yellow construction cranes Jewart sees from his roof.

The plan: The Woodies building would be converted to apartments. Lots would be divided for smaller high-tech offices. As many as 800 artsy, techy people would live and work in loft housing. Traditional big offices and stores would be limited to New York and North Capitol. Trees and traffic circles would be added.

But in contrast with the triangle, zoning here defies the consultants' vision. It permits large downtown-style offices and does not require developers to build housing. Given the choice, the landowners stand to make more money on offices.

An executive for one of the landowners, Frank Spingler, says he thinks the idea is ill-conceived. And, he says, the timing is awful because landowners are being asked to kick in money for the new Metro station and many will balk if they think they'll have to put housing on their land.

The planners argue that incentives from the city could coax developers to build something besides the usual big offices. "They would have to be awfully attractive incentives," Spingler replies.

Reaction to the consultants' plans has been generally positive, with some reservations.

Lydia Goring, advisory neighborhood commissioner for the triangle, says more residents would invigorate the area.

But Mary Ann Luby, an advocate for homeless people who live here now, complains that the plans leave out two shelters housing more than 130 women.

Lon Levin, senior vice president of XM Satellite Radio, who is planning a 24-hour digital studio complex for 300 employees in NoMa, says a hip urban zone is appealing. "There's an energy there you don't find out in the suburbs," he says.

But Elliott Frutkin says the plans, while admirable, may be too late. His growing Internet strategy firm, Doceus Inc., can't wait the years it would take for NoMa to develop.

As for Jewart, sculpting in the old warehouse, he and other artists started the NoMa Arts Coalition and are telling the consultants how to make artists happy. They are painfully aware of their customary role in the rebirth of neighborhoods. First come the artists, for cheap space. Then urban pioneers, then mainstream developers, and, finally, Starbucks. And the artists are priced out.

"It's like we're the carrot for development," says Mike Abrams, who manages artists' studios near Louis the Rogue. In NoMa, he says, "We're trying not to get eaten too badly. We're trying to find a substitute for the eating part."

Some wariness seems warranted. An early consultants' sketch depicts Abrams' rented studios razed for a commercial building. They could move to the proposed lofts, but whether the rent will be affordable is anybody's guess.

So the artists are hedging their bets and hunting for real estate. For once, they'd like to own their buildings--if they can raise the money through grants and savings. Then they'd be developer-proof.

They are shopping on the other side of the railroad tracks. If the artists do get evicted from NoMa, their D.C. SoHo would take shape north of Massachusetts, all right, but in Northeast Washington. NeMa, anyone?