

HOUSING COMPLEX

It's Not Easy Getting Green

Posted by **Aaron Wiener** on Oct. 10, 2012 at 7:35 pm



Walking through the streets of NoMa these days, you get the sense you've stepped into a well-played game of SimCity. Crisp and glassy, it's a commercial zone, to be sure, and a strategically placed one: It's served by three major thoroughfares, two Metro stations, all the regional and Amtrak train lines passing through Union Station, and one of the city's best bike trails.

Yes, the Sims of NoMa are doing quite well for themselves. Everywhere you look, cranes add new layers to the shiny new office buildings that are filling in the neighborhood, loosely bounded by Union Station to the south, Q and R streets NE to the north, and North Capitol Street and Third Street NE to the west and east, respectively. There are about 1,800 residential units in NoMa, with about 1,800 more under construction. The Metro station by the intersection of New York and Florida Avenues, renamed this summer to include the NoMa moniker and help cement the neighborhood's previously shaky identity, has the fastest-growing ridership of any in the system. Only 20 percent of the area's development by square footage was complete before 2005; another 20 percent has been built since 2005, and the remaining 60 percent is under construction or planned.

But for humans, a well-oiled commercial zone isn't enough to ensure a high quality of life. So the people of NoMa got a boost last month in the form of a \$490,000 earmark by Mayor **Vince Gray** for a network of public parks in the neighborhood. Ward 6 Councilmember **Tommy Wells** praised the mayor for bringing "vision" to NoMa, saying, "Where little in the way of public space and parks existed just a few years ago, the partnership between the city, the BID and the neighborhood is turning vision into reality." Gray wrote in a letter to NoMa Business Improvement District President **Robin-Eve Jasper**, "Developing parks and open space in NoMa, a neighborhood whose growing population of residents, employees and neighbors currently lack dedicated recreational amenities, is an important step in achieving that vision."

There's just one problem: NoMa hardly has any space left for parks.

It didn't have to be this way. Back when the development of NoMa was planned in the 1990s, it was a wasteland, an opportunity to build a downtown district essentially from scratch.

Marc Weiss, who coined the name NoMa as the author of the city's 1998 strategic economic development plan, remembers how desolate the area was when he started working for the city in the fall of 1997, following several years as a housing and urban policy adviser in the Clinton administration.

"At that time, our offices were at 51 N Street NE," he says. "And it was unbelievable, because you had this one little office building, and across the street was a low-rise building. And then everything else was vacant all around."

Weiss corrects himself as he remembers another building in the area: "There was a methadone clinic where sometimes people would get shot."

Weiss takes great pride in the role he played in building NoMa, particularly his efforts to bring together developers to fund what became the NoMa Metro station. (It paid off. "Now," he says, "every one of them would say it was the best deal ever, because they all made a ton of money off of it.")

But when it came to fostering a sense of community in NoMa, the neighborhood's developers experienced a failure of imagination: Their aspirations didn't go much further than a cluster of office buildings.

"Originally people thought the neighborhood would be an office park," says Jasper. "Nobody reserved any land for parks."

One early mistake came with a major rezoning of the area in the 1990s. “I remember at the time looking at it and thinking, ‘Well this is short-sighted,’” recalls **Ellen McCarthy**, who began working at the D.C. Office of Planning in 2000 and served as its director from 2004 to 2007. “They zoned it all as C-3-C, the densest commercial use. They had no requirement for retail. They had no requirement for residential.”

Although developers were initially resistant to including housing in their plans for NoMa, McCarthy says, they came around when they realized there wasn’t enough commercial demand for the area. The result was a mix of residential and office buildings, but without much in the way of public spaces, despite the efforts of the Office of Planning.

“We tried with several developers,” McCarthy says. “Each of the developers individually was talking about some bits of open space for their buildings. So we said, ‘Can we at least plan this so you put a park on the west side of the property and you, neighboring property owner, put it on the east side? And in the end, nobody was willing to do that or to give up anything. And so we kind of punted.”

Weiss faults city leaders for not pushing the developers harder. “Because there were these large parcels of land owned by the developers, they went ahead and did their own planning for their own parcels,” he says. “And the city wasn’t involved in broader planning. And that led to what they’re facing today: There’s kind of an imbalance.”

Jasper envisions NoMa as the downtown for nearby residential neighborhoods like Eckington and Bloomingdale. NoMa could be the place those who live nearby come for food, drink, entertainment, and transit via the Red Line or Union Station. And in the past two years, the area has become much more livable, with new apartment buildings and the opening of a Harris Teeter supermarket in December 2010.

“So now,” says Jasper, “we have to go back and put the parks in.”

According to **Peter Harnik**, director of the Center for City Park Excellence at the Trust for Public Land, NoMa’s “development first, parks later” approach runs counter to the national trend.

“It is a little surprising that NoMa didn’t put in the parks first,” he says. “Most people are thinking of parks these days before they put in the commercial and retail and living space. They put the parks down first and use them as seeds to build around.”

The model has worked well in other cities. Harnik cites St. Louis’ City garden, opened in 2009 to help reinvigorate the city’s bleak downtown, and St. Paul’s Wacouta Commons, opened in 2006 in a

former industrial district, as examples of parks building neighborhoods, rather than the other way around.

Nor do parks have to come at the expense of profits for developers. Bryant Park, in Midtown Manhattan, was a hotspot of drugs and prostitution, with nearby office space available at a steep discount, until its late-1980s shutdown and restoration. Since its makeover as a safe and clean public park, swanky new office buildings have sprung up around it, and a study last week found that the office vacancy rate in the area was a third of the Midtown average, while office rents were 25 percent higher.

“By rebuilding Bryant Park, it has given a tremendous jolt to the rents that all the surrounding buildings can charge there, and do charge there,” says Harnik. “So it’s actually a win-win.”

Perhaps the best success story is Chicago’s Millennium Park, opened in 2004. Just as the NoMa BID expects to develop the land atop the soon-to-be-covered train tracks north of Union Station, Millennium Park was built partly on former rail yards. It quickly became Chicago’s second-biggest tourist draw.

The NoMa BID is struggling to incorporate these lessons into its own approach weighing parkland and development. “It’s a balance that we’re still envisioning how to strike,” says Jasper.

In the absence of a large central park, the NoMa BID is exploring creative uses of the slivers of space that are available. One proposal calls for a glittery pedestrian plaza called The Poodle (after the neighborhood’s way-back-when name, Swampoodle) on L Street NE between First and 2nd streets. Others would overhaul the L Street underpass below the train tracks to create a pseudo-gritty hangout space alongside the road, or set up a small train-watching strip that builds on the area’s rusty infrastructure.

“There’s this great **Louis Kahn** quotation: ‘A street is a room by agreement,’” says McCarthy. “And I think NoMa could really benefit from that. If you can’t have parks, make your streets rooms by agreement. Do really good retail. Do good streetscapes.”

And learn your lesson. D.C. may not have any more downtown areas to build from the ground up, but it does have several major farther-flung developments in the pipeline that advocates hope to see informed by the NoMa experience. Plans for the development of the McMillan Sand Filtration site along North Capitol Street include a sizable green area that ought to make NoMa’s denizens envious, even if it’s not as much park space as some neighbors would like. The redevelopment of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center on upper Georgia Avenue and the St. Elizabeths Hospital site in Ward 8 also offer good opportunities for park-anchored neighborhoods.

But can NoMa be salvaged? Harnik praises the efforts to build public spaces around the rail infrastructure, though he thinks NoMa's developers have "boxed themselves in by building so much concrete and glass and steel." McCarthy holds out a bit more hope for a proper park.

"If the city were able to get some money and find a developer who was willing to sell them at least a pocket-size park where you could make it the town center or heart of NoMa, at least it would give NoMa some personality," says McCarthy.

Jasper, for her part, blanches at insinuations that NoMa lacks character. "It's not searching for its identity," she says. "It is what it is."

And what it is is an immaculately planned commercial zone for androids that's falling just a bit short of what it might have been for humans.

Rendering of "The Poodle" pedestrian plaza on L Street NE courtesy of NoMa BID