

Local

# NoMa: The neighborhood now has a name, but it's still searching for its identity

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By Elizabeth Flock

October 8, 2011

It's the end of happy hour on a Friday night, and 20-to-40-somethings are finishing the last of their Yuenglings and Peronis in a packed new bar north of Massachusetts Avenue.

The Hilton Garden Inn is a mid-level brand, but its [Watershed](#) restaurant aspires to be much more.

The waiters are attentive, and the orchids don't droop. The menus brag of paprika-spiced chips to accompany the Kusshis, Chincoteagues and Wellfleets.

"I'm impressed with your knowledge of oysters," one woman tells another.

The two are part of a group that regularly drinks at the Watershed.

"Too often," says Bryant Sewell, the seeming ringleader of the group. "But this is the only place to drink."

Excluding the restaurants at Union Station, the Watershed is the lone white-tablecloth restaurant in NoMa, which [roughly runs from Massachusetts Avenue north to R Street, and from First Street NW to Fourth Street NE](#), with an extra block here, one less there.

But NoMa only came into being this decade. For more than a century, this neighborhood was a no-man's land, populated mostly by warehouses. It was nameless, too, with most people referring to it as "that weird part of Near Northeast."

Then the neighborhood metamorphosed, almost overnight.

In the past six years, private companies pumped in \$3 billion in investment. Existing development is estimated to be almost 16 million square feet. In the past year, 1,400 residents have made NoMa home.

Much of this can be credited to [the NoMa Business Improvement District \(BID\)](#), a group created by the D.C. Council in 2007 to coordinate public and private investment, provide cleaning and safety services, and promote the area.

It's also because of the trains, which rolled into NoMa in 2004 after a public-private partnership spent \$103 million to develop [the New York Avenue Metro station](#).

The name NoMa, a play on “North of Massachusetts Avenue,” was first thrown around in the 1990s, when the neighborhood was considered as a possible technology hub.

It’s taken years for the name to stick, and some people, of course, still tell stories about what NoMa used to be.

[Tony Goodman](#), the ANC commissioner representing parts of Near Northeast and NoMa, talks about how the Irish and Italian immigrant population living in a swampy area of NoMa called [Swampoodle](#) saw their homes razed in the early 1900s because Union Station was to be built there.

“It was truly an entire neighborhood suspended,” Goodman says.

Nat Stevens, 69, who sells rims at Mac’s Tire Service at Fifth and Florida, a half-block outside NoMa’s boundary line, has been around the neighborhood for decades.

In that time Stevens has worked a lot of jobs — cotton picker, dishwasher and, at one point, security guard at the circus in the old Uline Arena, a major entertainment venue in NoMa that closed in 1986 and is now a giant parking garage.

In its prime, the Uline hosted the Beatles’ first North American concert, a historic address by Malcolm X and dozens of other events.

“I watched Bobo Brazil on TV when he fought there, and Jake the Snake,” Stevens recalls, naming wrestling legends. “Has this place changed? Oh, yeah, it’s changed.”

#### **East vs. west**

With the arrival of more people, NoMa developed an east side and a west side of the tracks, connected by several dark underpasses.

On the west side stands the gleaming development of Constitution Square — the Hilton, which was a gravel lot just three years before; grocer Harris Teeter; luxury apartments; and a coffee shop that serves quiche Lorraine.

“What is emerging [on the west side] is polished, shiny and perfectly new,” says Alia Dastagir, who founded the [DCNoMa](#) blog. “Which on the one hand can be very nice and on

the other hand can feel contrived.”

Now workers from D.C. Public Schools, the District Department of the Environment and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives grab lunch at a 50,000-square-foot [Harris Teeter](#), and residents at Flats 130, a luxury apartment building that occupies the floors above it, call it their refrigerator.

“The Harris Teeter was such a huge turning point for the neighborhood,” Goodman says.

The BID says an outdoor [summer movie festival](#), a [Wednesday Farmers Market](#) and a just-concluded [arts and music festival](#) have also knitted the tiny community together.

Rachel Davis, director of marketing and events for NoMa BID, describes 2010 as “the year of the people.” Last year, eight retailers and three giant residential projects opened in NoMa — Flats 130, the luxury and artist housing of the Loree Grand, and the Washington Center student dorms.

Several media companies also call the neighborhood home: SiriusXM Radio, Roll Call and CNN’s Washington bureau. [NPR plans to opens its new headquarters](#) on the west side in 2013.

“NoMa is becoming a communications hub,” says Bruce Baschuk, BID chairman and president of J Street Development, which has sold several hefty properties in the area. “So what do you do with that? How do you cultivate that into a sense of place? Well, I’m not sure yet.”

Over on the east side, odd zoning rules have led to a slower pace of development. Most of the old warehouses remain. The D.C. Farmer’s Market, also called the Florida Market, lies just outside NoMa’s eastern boundaries. Housed in a giant building covered in peeling white paint, it seems a world away from the Wednesday Farmers Market popularized by the BID; sellers hawk smoked hog jowl, kung fu movies, whole fresh goat and lottery tickets.

Davis says the BID hopes to soften the east-west divide by working with Amtrak to repair, repaint and light the “very physical barrier” of the underpasses.

How developers, residents and businesses create a sense of place for NoMa has become the most persistent question for the neighborhood.

To help define that, the BID has started a marketing campaign around the word “connected” so that the public knows NoMa is easily accessible via roads, two Red Line Metro stops, the eight-mile [Metro Branch Trail](#) and [Capital Bikeshare](#).

“We want to create an active place for the 30-somethings and below who equate not having a car with greater independence,” Baschuk says. “It’s a place for people who are more likely to use Zipcar, Next Bus or ‘CaBi’ bikes.”

But most cab drivers still know NoMa only for the rowdy groups of people they pick up in the early-morning hours. Two nightclubs, [Fur](#) and [Ibiza](#), sprawl across the block of First and M streets, pumping out hip-hop, rap, electronica and salsa. That’s not the image the BID wants NoMa to project.

“We’d really like to have a vibrant night life in NoMa,” Baschuk says. “But not necessarily one that lasts until 3 in the morning when people aren’t in shape to leave the facility.”

What’s eluded NoMa so far, Dastagir says, is its own “vibe.”

“It doesn’t really have an identity,” she says. “The neighborhood right now is defined by its artificiality.”

The name, which mimics neighborhoods such SoHo in New York City, doesn’t help. It’s difficult to find any resident enamored of it. But they have started to accept it, and [Advisory Neighborhood Committee 6C](#) even dreams of changing the name of the New York Avenue station to NoMa.

“NoMa is not a name for the few people who have lived here for years,” Goodman says, “but it will be the name that the thousands moving into the neighborhood are going to know.”

The BID is trying to lure a gym, a child-care facility and a neighborhood watering hole. Council member Tommy Wells (D-Ward 6) is petitioning for a [park](#). And there are rumblings about returning performances to the Uline Arena or [resurrecting it as a movie theater](#).

Most mornings, residents now witness cranes lifting their necks outside their windows. Five new steel, brick and modern glass buildings are expected to rise in the next year or two. Fifteen hundred residential units will go under construction this year, meaning 2,000 more people could soon call NoMa home.

“We are in a critical stage of placemaking of NoMa right now,” Baschuk says. “I think that will evolve over the next couple of years. I can’t tell you where that’s going to end up.”

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