

Using Art to Promote a Healthy Community during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed how people use social spaces in urban neighborhoods. Things we took for granted—dropping into a store, going out to eat or drink, relaxing in a park, even walking down the street—became fraught calculations. But even though vaccine distribution is under way and conversations have turned to reopening and relaxing restrictions, questions persist: Will life revert to some semblance of “normal”? Will street-level retail and the daily life of the streets return? Will dense, urban neighborhoods continue to be desirable?

So how do we keep a sense of “community” alive when our daily patterns have been so disrupted? In the NoMa (“North of Massachusetts Avenue”) area of Washington, DC, a neighborhood transformed in recent decades by redevelopment, one recent effort used art to bring people together and promote local businesses. The Wear a Mask campaign involved a series of posters and signs that encouraged passers-by to wear face coverings. The artwork was commissioned by NoMa’s Business Improvement District (BID) and made by local artists. The BID distributed the posters to local businesses at no cost, encouraging them to display the artwork in their windows and to give customers copies for free. The BID also put up around the neighborhood signs that feature the posters.

In this essay, we use the Wear a Mask campaign to explore issues related to placemaking, community and economic development, and art. We spoke with the BID and several artists who participated in the campaign to learn more about how they think about the campaign and its relation to these broader topics. We are not presenting a systematic evaluation of the initiative, nor do we claim to present the views of other stakeholders or members of the broader community. The essay starts with a short overview of the neighborhood’s history to provide some context for how the Wear a Mask campaign has been embedded in a rapidly changing community with a complex past.

Building a NoMa Community Identity and the “Wear A Mask” Campaign

In the District of Columbia, NoMa is at the nexus of disinvestment and targeted development. Today, NoMa is generally defined as being west of a corridor of elevated Metro tracks, north of Union Station, and east of North Capitol Street. But in the 1990s, before the “NoMa” name had been developed, the area was a zone of transition. Originally a mixed-use neighborhood with residential and industrial blocks, the area by that decade had seen its rowhouses torn down and had become a mix of surface parking lots and scattered commercial and warehouse buildings, including the District’s Greyhound bus station. It, along with the immediately surrounding neighborhoods, would subsequently become prime

areas for redevelopment. Directly east of the Metro tracks were blocks of rowhouses, while to the northeast, around what is now Union Market, were warehouses and wholesale operations. The area west of North Capitol Street had already undergone a wave of mid-century urban redevelopment and was home to several assisted housing developments, including the Sursum Corda cooperative and Temple Courts housing complex.

Efforts to redevelop the neighborhood began in the 1990s and continued into the 2000s. The opening of a new in-fill Metro station along the Red Line in 2004 was followed by significant redevelopment and change to the neighborhood—all part of a broader shift in the District toward an economic development policy focused on attracting residents and new development. At the street level in NoMa, these forces have increased racial and socioeconomic inequities and tensions about the neighborhood’s direction. Much of the area’s subsidized housing has been demolished ahead of redevelopment, and people experiencing homelessness live among new housing, stores, and restaurants and revamped public spaces.

The BID, which launched in 2007, has helped guide NoMa’s recent development. BIDs are usually made up of local business and property owners who organize to encourage and channel neighborhood-level economic development. BIDs use special purpose revenue raised from local businesses and residents within their jurisdictions through the District’s property tax collection system and spend it on cleaning local green spaces; enhancing resident mobility and local transit options; and supporting small businesses, workforce development programs, homeless services, public art, and community building events.

The founders of NoMa’s BID adopted a broad mandate, one centered not only on promoting local businesses but also on building community and a sense of place. This translates into a focus on hosting community events, like a farmers’ market in the summer and an annual mural exhibition (Pow! Wow! DC Mural Festival), and paying attention to public art. The focus on the arts predates the BID: a 1998 “Citizens Plan” for Washington, DC, called for NoMa to “be a magnet for performing and visual artists, and generate recreational and cultural activities.”¹ Since its inception, the BID has been involved in multiple artist-based initiatives. In 2015, when the BID was developing its current five-year strategic plan, only about 35 percent of NoMa’s land had been built out. The BID leveraged the empty space by turning lots into venues for public art displays and in the process built relationships with local artists.

In 2020, as the US and District governments were responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, the NoMa BID would again use its art-informed approach to reinforce public health messaging and bring residents together. For its part, the District of Columbia mandated that people wear masks in public to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus. To reinforce the mandate, the BID developed the Wear a Mask campaign, with the goals of promoting a sense of community for neighborhood residents and

¹ District of Columbia Department of Housing and Community Development, *The Economic Resurgence of Washington, DC: Citizens Plan for Prosperity in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: District of Columbia Department of Housing and Community Development, 1998).

visitors; promoting public health measures that keep residents, visitors, and workers safe; and supporting the operations of local businesses.

The BID reached out to an organizer of the Pow! Wow! DC Mural Festival to find artists interested in participating in the campaign. Four people created artwork for it. They were asked to follow the campaign’s general theme and to include the BID’s logo, but otherwise they had a lot of leeway over what they created. The artists were compensated for their work.



Photo by Ananya Hariharan.

Using Arts to Promote Health and Community

What were the campaign’s goals? And what can the initiative tell us about the often-messy relationships between arts, public health, community building, and development (with its potential for displacement)? Here, we touch on three relationships, the one between the **arts and health**, between the **arts and community**, and between the **arts and equity**.

Our interviewees mentioned several ways that art can be useful for promoting public health. Two core features stand out: how experiencing the art affects the viewer’s reaction and how the art communicates its message.

The interviewees noted that the art was everywhere in the neighborhood and that passers-by would likely view it multiple times in multiple places. Because residents and visitors could also take prints home for free from local businesses, this brought the art to where people lived. Furthermore,

because the art had simple messages and striking designs, the message was easily understood, even if only semi-consciously, by passers-by. In other words, the art ingratiated itself into the daily lives of people who came across it.

One of the powerful things of art, there's that emotional piece. When you have that encounter with a piece, there's something jarring or alarming or comforting or whatever, but it evokes something in the viewer that a report or news bulletin maybe wouldn't...Encountering art in a public space versus in a gallery space is very different.

—Interviewee

Additionally, the way the art conveyed its message had benefits for what had, in some places, become a politically fraught issue. The posters were less didactic and potentially confrontational than, say, a health bulletin or press release. They promoted a positive public health message rather than focusing on the negative effects of *not* wearing masks. As one interviewee, who also brought up the comparison of art to news, put it,

Art makes everything better...It's the most organic, natural way to communicate. Even if someone doesn't end up agreeing [with the art's message], if you compare that to someone on the news telling you to do something, [art is] just such a more natural way to get a point across.

The second main theme we encountered was the campaign's role in promoting a sense of community. As an interviewee noted, "Art is a shared public experience. It's important, and its power to bind people is always impressive to me." At the most basic level, the Wear a Mask campaign built a sense of community by using public art to make the neighborhood a more pleasant experience and helping define the neighborhood as a neighborhood: the only requirement for all posters was the NoMa BID's logo. More abstractly, the campaign was part of the BID's broader effort to build a sense of commonality. Our interviewees noted several ways the campaign could help build a sense of community, including through unity, adherence to mask wearing, resilience, and love and care for fellow community members and businesses.

The final theme that came up was equity, the role of the artist within the broader context of a neighborhood experiencing rapid change, and worries about displacement and gentrification. Concerns about arts-led or arts-abetted gentrification are common in debates about neighborhood change, and because the BID promoted the Wear a Mask campaign, some interviewees voiced concerns about the use of art to promote economic development that could lead to displacement.

It's a tricky dynamic for sure. Murals are seen as a first stepping-stone in gentrification in neighborhoods...The arts community hasn't been historically great about representation. But hopefully things continue in this trend and more opportunities open up for people of color and minorities. Hopefully murals won't just live in the white privilege arena.

—Interviewee

This theme also spoke to artists' own lived experiences. Although NoMa was envisioned in the 1998 plan as a magnet for arts and artists, only one artist involved in the Wear a Mask campaign lived in the area. This meant that artists felt a responsibility to thoughtfully reflect the neighborhood's diversity while acknowledging that they were, in some ways, outsiders. The campaign was also a good professional opportunity for the artists: the BID placed few limitations on what the artists could produce and compensated them for their work. It is unfair to expect a small public art project to fully grapple with these tensions, but this was a thread that the artists were aware of in their work.

What does this all mean? NoMa's BID has printed out multiple waves of signs for the campaign, which suggests that the neighborhood's residents, visitors, and businesses received it positively. Although limited in scope and focused on a single goal ("wear a mask"), the campaign highlighted a way that the arts can help promote health and community. Because we focused on the experiences of campaign participants, a broader assessment of how the wider community perceived the campaign is outside the scope of this essay. Of course, as mask mandates are relaxed, the specific aims of this campaign are clearly linked to a particular point in time. However, we believe the broader themes discussed here must be key components of any examination of the role of the arts in equitable community-building efforts.

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