The Commodification of Community in Residential Real Estate: 
The Developer as Community-Builder for Generation Y

By

April Ognibene

B. A. Urban Studies
University of Pennsylvania, 
Philadelphia, PA (2011)

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master in City Planning

at the

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

June 2016

© 2016 April Ognibene. All Rights Reserved

The author hereby grants to MIT the permission to reproduce and to distribute publicly paper and electronic copies of the thesis document in whole or in part in any medium now known or hereafter created.

Author ____________________________________________

Department of Urban Studies and Planning

May 16, 2016

Certified by ____________________________

Ezra Glenn

Department of Urban Studies and Planning
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by ____________________________

Associate Professor P. Christopher Zegras
Chair, MCP Committee
The Commodification of Community in Residential Real Estate: The Developer as Community-Builder for Generation Y

By

April Ognibene

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning on May 16, 2016 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master in City Planning

ABSTRACT

As the Millennial generation flocks to urban neighborhoods, large apartment developers are offering new residential models that offer "community-oriented" living, externalizing some of the features traditionally limited to private homes (e.g., communal kitchens, group party spaces, even shared pets) while simultaneously internalizing functions traditionally provided by the surrounding neighborhood (e.g., work, fitness, and entertainment). As a result, beyond merely offering another line of housing products for urban residents, these new approaches may be reshaping the social fabric of urban neighborhoods.

To explore the emergence of this phenomenon and the effects it may have on urban planning and community development efforts, I studied a sample of eleven apartment developments built in the last five years in the NoMA and H Street neighborhoods of Washington, DC. Data was collected from interviews with developers, property managers, architects, and brokers, as well as property tours and property websites.

Situating this analysis within a framework of common tensions described in the fields of urban sociology and community studies, as well as John Freie’s critique of gated suburban communities, the study finds that developers frequently establish collective identity through strong branding; pursue social interaction through spaces modeled after retailers (e.g., Starbucks); and cater community to prospective rather than current residents. Externally, developers build limited connection to surrounding neighborhoods through sponsored events, and surrounding areas are often mentioned -- yet misrepresented – in marketing.

While these new residential models may represent an evolution in the role of private developers as community-builders in urban neighborhoods, the analysis notes that many of these same tactics are already commonplace in suburban-gated communities, where they do not necessarily deliver the benefits associated with strong communities from a sociological perspective.

Thesis Supervisor: Ezra Glenn
Lecturer in Planning, DUSP HCED

Thesis Reader: Lawrence Vale
Ford Professor of Urban Design and Planning, CDD
# Table of Contents

**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

- **CHANGING COMMUNITY: SOCIAL ORGANIZATION**  
  9
- **CHANGING COMMUNITY: THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY AND THE INTERNET**  
  12
- **MEETING THE NEED: A NEW RESIDENTIAL PRODUCT**  
  13

**CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY & FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS**

- **SAMPLING PROCEDURE**  
  15
- **THE STUDY AREA**  
  19
- **SAMPLE PROPERTIES**  
  25
- **DATA COLLECTION**  
  26
- **LIMITATIONS**  
  27
- **ANALYTICAL TOOLS: TRIANGULATION**  
  27
- **THEORETICAL TOOLS: COMMUNITY TENSIONS**  
  29
- **DIVERSITY VS. COLLECTIVE IDENTITY**  
  30
- **DEEP VS. BROAD TIES**  
  31
- **PLACE-ROOTED VS. PLACELESS COMMUNITY**  
  31
- **INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY VS. GROUP ALLEGIANCE**  
  36
- **SENSE OF PLACE AT BUILDING VS. NEIGHBORHOOD LEVEL**  
  37
- **THEORETICAL TOOLS: FREIE’S CRITIQUE**  
  38

**CHAPTER 3: THE SHAPE OF MODERN DEVELOPER COMMUNITY-BUILDING**

- **DIVERSITY VS. COLLECTIVE IDENTITY**  
  39
- **DEEP TIES VS. BROAD TIES**  
  40
- **PLACE-ROOTED VS. PLACELESS COMMUNITY**  
  42
- **INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY VS. GROUP ALLEGIANCE**  
  47
- **SENSE OF PLACE AT BUILDING VS. NEIGHBORHOOD LEVEL**  
  49

**CHAPTER 4: THE EVOLUTION OF COMMUNITY AS A COMMODITY**

- **COMMUNITY BUILDING FOR A NEW GENERATION**  
  57
- **“COUNTERFEIT” COMMUNITY**  
  62

**CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS FOR RESIDENTS, PLANNERS, AND THE REAL ESTATE INDUSTRY, AND BEYOND**

- **IMPLICATIONS FOR RESIDENTS**  
  74
- **IMPLICATIONS FOR PLANNERS**  
  75
- **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REAL ESTATE INDUSTRY**  
  77
- **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY AREA**  
  80
- **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY**  
  82

**APPENDIX: OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY-BUILDING EFFORTS**  
  83
Graphics

Map 1: Apartments Delivered 2010-2015, by Extent of Community Marketing ..................................................19
Map 2: The Study Area ................................................................................................................................. 20
Map 3: NoMa BID & H Street Corridor Boundaries ...................................................................................... 22
Map 4: Sample Properties ........................................................................................................................ 25

Figure 1: 2M homepage with basic branding scheme (L), Station House’s identity building (R) .......... 41
Figure 2: Actual residents featured in AVA H Street’s homepage ............................................................... 45
Figure 3: Emmy, 2M apartment mascot, looks on from the leasing office. .................................................... 47
Figure 4: Flats at Atlas homepage .............................................................................................................. 54
Figure 5: Flats at Atlas posts outdoor signs that discourage loitering, while 1st and M shows clear brand identity in its lobby space. ................................................................................................................. 63
Figure 6: AVA H Street’s Twitter Wall ........................................................................................................... 65
Figure 7: Station House’s lengthy common space rules ................................................................................ 70
Figure 8: Sample Interiors. Clockwise from left: Elevation, AVA H Street, Flats at Atlas, 1st and M . . . . . . 86

Table 1: Summary of Social Changes ............................................................................................................ 13
Table 2: Sample Properties .......................................................................................................................... 25
Table 3: Research interviews ........................................................................................................................ 27
Table 4: Summarized findings ........................................................................................................................ 40
Table 5: Key Trends in the Data .................................................................................................................... 75
Acknowledgements

From the friends and family who helped me move from a vague observation to a research question (especially Sarah and Andrew), to my DUSP thesis support group, my sister's edits on a cross-country flight, and the many others who kept me sane and encouraged, this thesis was a community process unto itself.

I am especially grateful to my committee, Ezra and Larry, who were a constant source of ideas and feedback throughout the year, and whose influence greatly improved this work.
“As planners we somehow took a fork in the road where we allowed people who were in the private development business to call themselves community developers. And they have decided the nature of community and are presenting it to us like any other commodity. These walls and gates are almost a symbol of our own failure to do what we have been employed to do, and that is to build not places, but communities, social structures. Social structures have embedded institutions in them, which require mutual aid. We became fascinated with regulation and fascinated with place and maybe design, but we lost our fascination with people. “ – Edward Blakely, 1997
Chapter 1: Introduction

It’s a Thursday in January, and residents of 2M – a new high-rise apartment development in Washington, DC’s NoMA neighborhood – are gathered around a table discussing All the Light We Cannot See. Book club is one of many options residents have to develop their social life on site: there’s also Saturday morning running club or Zumba, Monday night yoga, Tuesday night boot camp, and Thursday night game night. On the same week, down the street, Station House’s 700 residents have the opportunity to participate in a “Taste of H Street” event, a Super Bowl party, or volunteer at the Retiring of the Wreaths at Arlington National Cemetery, all arranged by the building’s community manager.¹ The websites for these apartment developments all declare a commitment to bringing people together: 2M describes itself as, “less of an apartment building—and more of an urban community” (2M, 2016), while Station House prefers, “…a sociable and socially conscious community.” (Station House, 2016).

“Community” has become a prominent marketing phrase among businesses that cater to the Millennial generation: within workspaces, where WeWork leads a host of coworking spaces in promising “a community of creators” (WeWork, 2016); in private gyms, where companies like Brooklyn Boulders promise “climbing and community” (Brooklyn Boulders, 2016); and in living spaces – especially those targeting Millennials – where companies like Pure House charge a premium to be part of a “community of distinct people and their passions” (PureHouse, 2016). In the tech industry, pitches are even more

¹ The number of residents was calculated by multiplying the number of units by 2. Station House offers studios, 1 bedrooms, junior 2 bedrooms, and 2 bedroom floor plans. Doubling the unit count accounts for some couples and roommate households.
direct. New apps like Ameego, which enables users to pay for companionship, promises, “We’re the first ones to commodify friendship” (Dewey, 2016).

As a student of city planning, I was intrigued by this apparent increase in the marketing of community in private spaces. The research presented here explores why and how the commodification of community might manifest itself in the real estate industry, especially in new urban apartment buildings catering to the perceived needs of the Millennial population. How are developers responding to new patterns of social organization in urban residential property development? How might these responses impact neighborhoods?

In the following section, I investigate modern social patterns that shape potential consumer “demand” for community. I outline major shifts in household, work, and community life that frequently result in greater independence for the individual, despite the narrative of community-seeking Millennials. In Chapter 2, I explore the extent to which developers in a single city are integrating community terms into their apartment marketing, and find that this is an existing, yet niche trend clustered in a certain neighborhood area. In this section, I also outline the structure of my case study and the theory guiding my data analysis. In Chapter 3, I investigate how and why developers are responding to these social changes in their properties, discovering that they are expanding the realm of social interaction that occurs in the home sphere through community-building work that emphasizes the individual and broad ties.

With that groundwork laid, I explore potential connections between on-site community building trends and neighborhoods. In Chapter 4, I link modern developer practices to historic trends in residential buildings that emphasize community. I apply a
framework of critique for gated communities to urban apartment buildings to show that, though there has been evolution, developers are still applying old tools to address a new problem. Many of the critiques of gated communities still apply in this context. In the final chapter, I suggest that these privatized community spaces might limit the ways that residents engage in the broader neighborhood, impeding planning efforts to facilitate encounter and the overall diversity of the urban experience.

**Changing Community: Social Organization**

The nature of community at work has changed for many Americans: according to a 2015 survey by Kelly Services, nearly one-third of workers across the country identify themselves as free agents\(^2\) (Sahadi, 2015), and a Gallup poll suggests 37% of Americans have ever worked remotely (up from the 9% found in 1995) (Jones, 2015). Researchers from the University of Michigan found that these independent workers often report health and psychological problems that result from feelings of isolation, which has resulted in renewed attention to the ways people find community in places outside of work or household (Garrett et al., 2014). These trends in work patterns are coupled by the rise of coworking spaces, of which 781 have been documented since the first in San Francisco in 2005 (Vaccaro, 2014)\(^3\). These places generally promise an inspirational workspace and some camaraderie with others in exchange for a paid membership.

---

\(^2\) Free agents are defined as temps, freelancers, small businesses, or others gaining income from more than one employer.

\(^3\) Coworking is characterized by shared working space for independent workers, who may not share the same organizational affiliation.
Residential life is also becoming increasingly isolated. The marriage age is rising, and the frequency of marriages is decreasing (Cohn et al., 2011). 4 Average household size has declined since 1960, from 3.33 people per household to the current figure of 2.54 people per household (US Census Bureau, n.d.). In Washington, DC, where this thesis will focus, 45.2% of all households are single individuals (Been et al., 2014). Though the economic downturn in 2008 led to a slight increase in households “doubling up” for economic reasons, the overall long-term trend since the 1960s has been towards more single-person households (see graph 1). Eric Klinenberg postulates in his book Going Solo that the modern city provided a social landscape that enabled experimentation and new ways of connecting, fueling this trend. Nationally, more than a quarter of households are single-person, according to the American Housing Survey (Current Population Survey, 2015). In an analysis of over a century of Census data, Frances Kobrin finds that this initial increase is due to an increasing headship rate in young people beginning in the 1950s, when more adult children moved out from their parents’ house before starting a family of their own (1976).

---

4 The average age of marriage was 27 for women and 29 for men in 2010, as opposed to 23 for women and 26 for men in 1990. The percentage of the population that has ever been married was 72% in 2010, vs. 85% in 1960.
These shifts toward independence in home and work space are mirrored by shifts in general community relations. Ray Oldenburg’s book, *The Great Good Place*, defines the importance of third places, or public gathering places outside of work and home spaces. He also points out that these places are increasingly difficult to find, as a result of suburban land use patterns that do not account for space for community life. His book argues that these spaces are critical for human contact with diverse others, and essential to vibrant public life, sense of place, and feelings of home. He claims that, “both the joys of relaxing with people and the social solidarity that results from it are disappearing for want of settings that make them possible” (1989, p. xixx). He expands his critique of the loss of bars, taverns, and other central gathering points to the spatial layout of the suburbs; he claims that subdivisions are designed for fragmented lifestyles. They discourage roots as they are rarely designed to meet a person’s needs through every life stage (1989). At the same time as these third places decline, Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* argues for the loss of organizations that promote association between individuals. Putnam charts the national
decline of formal civic organizations, where people historically went to meet their neighbors (2001).

**Changing Community: the Role of Technology and the Internet**

These shifts in how people gather and organize in the physical world are further influenced by technology. Craig Calhoun points out that computer-mediated communication increases the ability of people to avoid public interaction with those who may share different choices in taste and culture, through increasing access to a larger pool of people and providing digital spaces that facilitate interaction (1998). Researchers have not reached consensus about whether the Internet increases a person’s spectrum of interactions or allows them to limit themselves to self-reinforcing enclaves, though James Katz and Ronald Rice found in 2002 that regardless, Internet usage does not seem to affect offline political and community involvement. In their study, which relied on national telephone surveys administered between 1995 and 2000 (the early years of the Internet), they found that Internet users were more likely to belong to leisure and/or community organizations than non-users.  

Sherry Turkle’s more current study suggests that technology tends to flatten people into profiles and complex conversations into abbreviated, simple dialogue. She argues, “We are increasingly connected to each other but oddly more alone: in intimacy, new solitudes” (2011, p. 19).

---

5 However, they also found that the digital divide in Internet access is predominantly one of income, so these results may be reflecting differences in income rather than Internet use.
**Table 1: Summary of Social Changes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recent Social/Cultural Changes Affecting Community Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Increase in independent workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Smaller household size, delayed marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Decrease in local community ‘hubs’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Decline in civic organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increased influence of technology on social life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Meeting the Need: A New Residential Product

Residential developers attempt to read and respond to these social changes by predicting and delivering a product that is relevant to the physical and complex social needs of residents. Though the above listed trends may have a negative effect on an individual’s sense of community, they align well with an equally sought after quest for independence and privacy. The NYU Furman Center suggests that more people are living together who would like to live alone, and that many who are living alone are paying for space they can’t afford (Been et al., 2014). Even within supposedly community-loving Millennials, the Urban Land Institute (ULI) finds that 58% of those with roommates would prefer to live alone (Lachman and Brett, 2015). Developers are responding to this shift with the delivery of micro-units (exceedingly efficient units normally ranging from 250 SF to 375 SF), which typically offer great locations and ample shared amenity space as a trade-off. Frequently, developers seek ways to provide additional social benefits to residents through the inclusion of amenity spaces such as lounges, pools, gyms, and “chill spaces.”

---

6 The Center, however, merely uses a proxy of single (unmarried) status to estimate this figure.
Several news outlets covering the multifamily industry note that, “Gathering spaces have acquired a new importance today as a response to Generation Y’s preference for interaction, sociability, and even ‘people-watching’” (Foong, 2013). Another website urges developers to “take cues from the hospitality industry” if they are targeting the Millennial generation, in order to create friendly and sophisticated gathering areas within the property (Wolkowicz, 2012). UrbanLand cites a town planner that proclaimed, “Community is this generation’s golf course—of that I’m sure” (Donnally, 2015). These articles suggest that the desire to meet consumer preferences fuels efforts like 2M’s book club and Station House’s volunteer and event programming.

In this research, I will explore these efforts and show that, while these properties are enabling greater socialization for more independent households and providing extended work space to residents, they are not acting as community hubs and stepping into the gap left by waning civic organizations and third places.
Chapter 2: Methodology & Framework for Analysis

This research is structured as a case study for hypothesis generation, because it investigates a largely unstudied phenomenon. There seems to be no academic study that surveys and defines trends in increased programming, smaller units, and larger common spaces as they relate to the social experience of apartment residents. This exploratory study of community-building aspirations and trends in new apartment developments is rooted within a single bounded area, as I am ultimately interested in the repercussions for neighborhoods. In this chapter, I will outline my sampling procedure, sample, and study area; data collection methodology; and limitations. I will close with an overview of the academic theory informing the framework for analysis applied in the subsequent chapters.

Sampling Procedure

I chose to situate my research in Washington, DC, because it experienced an apartment boom during my study time period (2010-2015). Between 2013 and 2015, the city added over 20,000 units, increasing the housing inventory by 3.8% (Caulfeld, 2013). Like many urban centers, Washington, DC suffered population loss beginning in the 1950s, but the city began growing again in 2000 (Gibson, 1998 and Census Bureau, 2015). Though the city has been majority black since 1950, that majority has been shrinking as educated whites drive this new population growth, and the black population declines (See Graph 2, Census Bureau, 2015). This new population is also notable for its youthfulness. In 2015, young professionals between the ages of 18 and 34 made up 35% of the population in DC, as opposed to 23.5% nationally. The population between 18-34 has represented between 69-71% of DC’s incoming population between 2011-2014 (Ruggles et al., 2015).

---

7 The city added 29,664 people between 2000 and 2010.
Though that migration has slowed from its annual peak of 10,430 new DC residents between the ages of 25-34 in 2011, the influx signaled to real estate developers a gap in the supply of homes targeted to this demographic ("Our Changing City", 2013). Allowing several years for design, financing, and construction, I believe my study time period (2010-2015) is inclusive of apartments constructed in immediate response to this population trend.

Graph 2: Washington, DC Population by Ethnicity, US Census Bureau

DC’s population growth was buoyed by job growth from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and public sector investment in response to the recession, as well as political change at the national and local level. From 2009-2012, the metro area had the lowest unemployment rate in the country, generally hovering around 5.1% (Delta Associates, 2013). This relatively healthy economy was especially attractive to young professionals with the ability and willingness to move for jobs.

8 Barack Obama took office in 2009, ushering in a party change from a campaign notable for its youth engagement. Vincent Gray became the 7th mayor of DC in 2011.
DC experienced a surge in multifamily production during this time period in response to the above-mentioned economic and demographic changes, as well as an overall shift in consumer preference nationwide from homeownership to renting. (See post-recession spike in graph 3, DC Area Housing Permits.) As a result, though Class A apartment vacancy in DC had compressed to around 3% from 2010-2013, vacancy spiked to around 5% in 2015 after the product had delivered (Delta Associates, 2015).

![DC Metro Area Housing Permits (5+ Units)](image)

**Graph 3: DC Area Housing Permits, US Census Bureau**

I narrowed my sample to a single area in order to understand community-building approaches within overall neighborhood dynamics. To select the area, I used a list of 45 apartment buildings delivered in DC between 2010 – 2015 as reported by Delta Associates. I then analyzed the websites of the properties listed over the below four categories to narrow my sample to an area where the commodification of community was most apparent (see map 1). The categories were:

---

9 The Joint Center for Housing’s 2015 study noted ten consecutive years of growth in the share of US renter households.
- Use of the word “community” as a descriptor of the apartment property (“socially conscious community”; “close-knit community comfort”)

- Use of the word “sociable” or some other promise of resident interaction (“active social spaces”; “socialize your space”)

- Number of shared common spaces (properties with less than the average of 4.8 were assigned a value of “0,” and properties with more than the average were assigned a value of “1”)

- Offering of resident activities

Unless otherwise noted, if properties matched a criterion they were given a value of “1” within that category. Of all the properties, only two met every criterion, and three met all but one. Four out of these five of properties were concentrated in the NoMa/H Street neighborhoods, two neighborhoods immediately adjacent to Union Station. These four properties represent one-third of new development in the neighborhoods during this time period. Within these neighborhoods, developers’ emphasis on community appears to be substantial yet not all-encompassing. There was no clear pattern in the geographic location of apartments that scored a “2” or below or their target marketing, suggesting that in DC, this is still a spatially niche trend.
The Study Area

To capture the properties that most heavily commodified community, I focused my study on the NoMA/H Street corridor area, bounded by New York Avenue to the north, H Street to the south, North Capitol Street to the west, and Florida Avenue to the east (see map 2). The area is anchored by Union Station.
Although the area is dominated by single-family attached homes (51.54%), large apartment buildings make up 27.5% of the housing units. The population within the study area has undergone huge changes that suggest gentrification, including losing 1,319 African Americans and gaining 1,836 Caucasians between 2000 – 2010 (PolicyMap, 2016). While the black population represented 60.4% of the study area (census tracts 106 and 84.10) in 2010, they represented only 38.7% in 2014. The share of households making $30,000 or less declined from 25.2% of the population in 2010 to 19.9% in 2014. This gentrification seems to be driven by young adults (those 18-34), which represented 38.5% of the study area in 2010 and 54% in 2014 (Ruggles et al., 2015).

Though the study area represents a 20-minute walkshed, NoMA and the H Street Corridor are considered two different neighborhoods guided by different community development entities. The NoMA Business Improvement District (BID) coordinates
development in NoMA, while H Street Main Streets leads development in the H Street corridor. Both areas report to the same Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC), and both neighborhoods are part of Ward 6, which gained more than 8,500 residents between 2000 – 2010, the most recent data available (Urban Institute).10

Though steered by different organizations, both neighborhoods are experiencing similar population growth among the same demographic (white young adults). They are also facing somewhat similar fears and perceptions related to crime, as both were hotspot areas during DC’s crack cocaine epidemic in the 1990s (Lengel, 2000). Crime data specific to the study area were not available, though there is a sense among those interviewed that the crime rate per capita decreased after major nightclubs in the area closed (the last of which, Ibiza, closed in 2015) (Noble, 2015). There have been a few exceptions, including a murder at the NoMa metro on the Fourth of July and a shooting inside the Flats 130 in 2015 (Hedgpeth and Hermann, 2015). In general, these areas share similar civic institutions, transit access and perceptions of safety, though zoning codes and development incentives are different. In addition, H Street and NoMa have divergent histories and development catalysts, which are outlined below.

---

10 ANCs are groups of elected residents that guide local policies and procedures. They are typically very influential in the development process. Ward 6 is one of eight wards in Washington in the central portion of the city; its boundaries encompass Capitol Hill, Southwest Waterfront, Navy Yard, and Judiciary Square in addition to the study area.
Map 3: NoMa BID & H Street Corridor Boundaries

H Street

H Street was a vibrant commercial corridor in the early 1900s and a designated commercial district since the city’s first zoning laws in 1920. According to H Street Main Street (as cited in Dunn, 2010) between 1930 and 1950, the area generated some of the highest revenue of any retail corridor in the DC area. The development of Union Station in 1939 displaced many homes in what was then called Swampoodle (now NoMA), triggering urban development along H Street over what had formerly been a brickyard, brewery, and ballpark. For several decades, the corridor was one of the few places in DC where most stores served all customers, regardless of race (Cultural Tourism DC, 2011).

The neighborhood suffered damage during the 1968 race riots in response to the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Over 100 businesses along H Street were completely destroyed, and others moved away soon after. For nearly 30 years, the neighborhood suffered disinvestment and high vacancy (Cultural Tourism DC, 2011).
In the early 2000s, the H Street Community Development Corporation and the Linden Neighborhood Association began renovation work on the Atlas Theater, one of the area’s flagship buildings. This would ultimately signal the beginning of the corridor’s revitalization. The planning office coordinated community discussions and dedicated funding for a visioning process for the H Street Development Plan. In 2002, DC established H Street as one of the first seven corridors of the DC Main Streets program. That same year, they involved 500 stakeholders in a year-long planning process under the tagline “It’s All About Us!”

The development plan for H Street that was produced divided the corridor into three segments for specialized activities. Today, there is a commercial overlay district in the zoning code that affects the blocks between 2nd and 15th Street on H Street NE. The district bisects the street into three areas, with housing to the west, retail shopping between 7th and 12th Streets, and arts and entertainment to the east (Woody).

NoMa

After the development of Union Station, the area now called NoMa was largely dominated by industrial use and few residents, despite its central location in DC near Capitol Hill. In the 1990s, developers led an effort to catalyze the neighborhood’s growth through the addition of a new Metro stop on the Red Line, a transit line that connected some of the metro area’s wealthiest neighborhoods to the center of the city. The Bristol Group, led by ULI trustee James Curtis, initiated the project. The company acquired the former distribution center for the Woodward and Lothrop department store (which they

11 DC Main Streets targets revitalization of commercial corridors through branding and promotion, improvements in physical environment, and economic restructuring.

12 When the area was marketed as a technology hub in the 1990s, it was dubbed NoMA, referencing its location “North of Massachusetts Avenue.” (Flock, 2011)
would renovate to office use), and eight acres of adjacent land. Leveraging that investment, the Bristol Group led a public private partnership that eventually produced a new Metro stop in 2004. The funding package for the project totaled $120 million, representing $54 million from the local government, $31 million from Congress, and $25 million (as well as $10 million in land) from private developers (MacCleery and Tarr, 2012).

The BID was founded in 2007 in response to this investment, in order to steer the NoMa vision plan. The plan, which acted as a small area plan, emphasized public infrastructure improvements and recommended incentives such as tax increment financing, tax abatement for preferred development, and special assessment on area property owners to create a Community Improvement District (which would ultimately inspire the BID). NoMa was also designated as a “Transferable Development Rights Receiving Zone” where developers could use rights purchased from other locations in the city. As a result of these incentives and a zoning code that allows for maximum DC density by-right, the public sector has had very little opportunity to steer development. In addition, there was little public ownership of land that could be used for the creation of new parks and open spaces, and developers frequently met with the ANC only as a courtesy (DC Office of Planning, 2006).

As neighborhoods sharing a border, both NoMa and H Street benefited from each other’s redevelopment and became magnets for the surge of young professionals coming into DC after decades of public and private sector disinvestment. Between 2010-2015, the two neighborhoods absorbed more than 2,749 new units, described in the section below.
Sample Properties

### Table 2: Sample Properties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Apartment Name</th>
<th>Developer</th>
<th>Management Company</th>
<th>Unit Count</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Year Delivered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flats at Atlas</td>
<td>Clark Realty Capital</td>
<td>Bozzuto</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>1600 Maryland Ave NE</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVA H Street</td>
<td>AvalonBay</td>
<td>AvalonBay</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>318 I Street, NE</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>360 H Street</td>
<td>Albermarle Group</td>
<td>Paradigm</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>360 H St NE</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Station House</td>
<td>Fisher Brothers</td>
<td>Roseland Property Bozzuto</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>701 Second St, NE</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flats 130</td>
<td>Stonebridge Associates</td>
<td>Bozzuto</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>130 M Street, NE</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avalon 1st + M</td>
<td>Archstrone</td>
<td>AvalonBay</td>
<td>469</td>
<td>1160 First St NE</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Gale</td>
<td>Mill Creek</td>
<td>JBG</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>151 Q St NE</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aria on L</td>
<td>Ellisdale Construction</td>
<td>Vantage</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>300 L St NE</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camden NoMa - Phase I</td>
<td>Camden</td>
<td>Camden</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>60 L Street NE</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2M Street NE</td>
<td>WC. Smith &amp; Co.</td>
<td>WC Smith</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>2M St NE</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sample spans 11 buildings built between 2010-2015 in the study area (see map 3). The Loree Grand apartment project would otherwise qualify, but was excluded from the sample as I was unable to reach both the developer and property manager. The
projects were all initiated by different developers, though two have since transferred ownership (The Gale to JBG and Archstone 1st and M to AvalonBay). Developers include large national players like Camden, AvalonBay, and Archstone, as well as regional players of varying size, like JBG and Stonebridge Associates. There is more overlap in management company, where Bozzuto and AvalonBay both manage two sites. Unit size ranges from 54 to 555 units.

**Data Collection**

I concentrated my interviews on the developers and property managers within each building, as I wanted to focus on top-down attitudes and efforts related to community at the property. These interviews were supplemented by property tours and interviews with architects and a broker from Rappaport Companies, responsible for retail leasing at 2M. Though I reached out to several neighborhood experts spanning H Street Main Street, H Street Community Development Corporation, and the local ANC, I was only granted an interview with an executive staff member of the NoMA BID; thus, public sector and nonprofit perspectives on these trends are largely absent in this study.

A table of interviews informing the project is below.
Table 3: Research interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developer</th>
<th>Property Manager</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Tour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Station House</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flats at Atlas</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVA H Street</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>360 H Street</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avalon 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; and M</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Gale</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aria on L</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>Operations Manager</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flats 130</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2M Street NE</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>Marketing Manager</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camden NOMA</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevation</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Limitations

Due to the sample size, I will be unable to generalize my conclusions across the national real estate market. My analysis will focus on trends in the data that merit further exploration. I will outline future research projects that may result from the study in the final chapter. Many deeper questions of the value and substance of community in these buildings can only be answered through an ethnographic approach, or at minimum, through resident interviews. Because I did not have access to residents or the ability to live within a building, this study is unable to suggest the community that actually exists on site. Instead, I can only piece together a suggestion of what it could look like through an analysis of goals, actions, and written materials from those who influence the buildings.

Analytical Tools: Triangulation

To evaluate developer and property manager attitudes and approaches to community, I triangulate a community-building stance from developer and property
manager’s speech, marketing materials, and actions. I classify these into community imagined, community promised, and community encouraged, respectively. I compare and contrast between these postures toward community within each dimension of community that I study (outlined in the following section).

To gather data on marketing, I focused on websites, which are generally the first point of entry for potential residents and the advertising outlet developers had the most influence to freely shape. I studied the websites to answer the following questions:

- Who is pictured?
- What phrases suggest community?
  - Where are these phrases placed?
- How does the neighborhood appear graphically?
  - Where are these graphics?
- How does the neighborhood appear textually?
  - Where is this text?
- What are the most prominent words on the homepage?
- What is the most prominent image on the homepage?
- What kind of programming does the apartment promise to residents?

To build an understanding of developer and property manager visions for community, I primarily relied on interviews (which were supplemented by tours, where available). I developed an interview protocol for developers with questions in five clusters, focusing on target market, neighborhood appeal, amenities and design, community-related goals, and safety. The questions address both developer vision and external factors that may have shaped the final product. I asked developers to define community and comment
on some of the most obvious tensions from the literature (such as level of place attachment, and allowing privacy vs. encouraging social interaction). Developers were told in initial outreach that the research would explore community-building efforts in apartments, so they were aware of the theme throughout the interview. Community, however, wasn’t explicitly discussed until the end.

I asked property managers many of the same questions as developers, in addition to questions about programming. Property managers also gave their observations about resident interactions on site.

My questions were screened for clarity and compliance with the Fair Housing Act by a DC-based development vice president and property management company president who were not affiliated with companies in the study area. Both developer and property manager interviews generally lasted about an hour.

**Theoretical Tools: Community Tensions**

The data from interviews, tours, and websites is presented in a framework that recognizes the ambiguity of defining community. In 1955, George Hillery identified 94 different definitions of community in a literature review, all of which could be paired with some conflicting definition in the pool; roughly 20 years later, Cecil Willis identified 60 more (1977). While somewhat varied and amorphous (and often conflicting), these definitions emphasized social interaction, common ties, and geographic area. As I will show, scholars disagree about these themes and what they imply about community. In the midst of this debate, there is no widely used operational definition of community that suggests clear boundaries for what qualifies and what does not; invariably, any working
definition of community includes value judgments about ideal and appropriate social interaction.

Several modern theorists are critical of the mere possibility of community, postulating that it is at odds with a fluid, mobile, and highly unequal world (Brent, 2004). Zizek (1992) points out that the ideal of community seems to be perpetually elusive, and suggests that the idea itself is bound up in fantasy, never to be realized. Brent (2004) suggests that this role of fantasy and desire explains why a community developed from generative grassroots campaigns is so much more compelling than planned, officially sponsored top-down schemes. This conflict of opinion exemplifies the importance of individual perspective in defining community.

Rather than choose a value-laden definition, I will root my analysis within key tensions of community outlined here: diversity vs. collective identity, deep vs. broad ties in social interaction, place-rooted vs. placeless community, individual autonomy vs. group allegiance, and sense of place at the building vs. the neighborhood level.

**Diversity vs. Collective Identity**

Although diversity may be a cultural value outside of community and a defining feature of the Millennial generation, Hunter (2008) notes that cultural identity has become an increasingly important hallmark of community, especially as emphasis on place and history declines. McMillan (1986) defines a feeling of belonging as one of four key elements in his definition of sense of community. Francis (2012) points out that affiliation is the hallmark of sense of community, as opposed to other place constructs (such as place attachment). As exclusivity has been a primary critique of developer-manufactured communities, I am
interested in how, specifically, developers are working to either accommodate diversity or reinforce a shared identity.

**Deep vs. Broad Ties**

The literature defining community also varies in its characterization of the ideal links between its members. John Freie emphasizes the importance of deep connections in his critique of gated and master-planned communities, condemning these communities as counterfeit, an exploitative illusion that offers only superficial and symbolic links to others, and impedes the growth of deeper relational connections. He claims, "It is more spectacle than substance. Counterfeit community projects images of community but keeps us at arm's length by never asking that we act responsibly to maintain the kinds of relationships necessary for genuine community" (p. 4).13 While Freie implies that only deep connections qualify as true community, Putnam (2001) acknowledges the value of broad social connection in addition. Putnam's framework includes both bonding and bridging social capital; the former describing close connections and the latter describing more distant, but also more cross-cutting ties. While deep and broad ties aren't necessarily mutually-exclusive, generally, one over the other is emphasized in the conception of community. My research will attempt to discover whether modern developers seek to create meaningful or more superficial connections between their own residents and their neighbors.

**Place-Rooted vs. Placeless Community**

In his classic study, "The Community Question" Barry Wellman categorizes the dominant narratives of the relationship between community and place into what he classified as “Community Lost, Saved, and Liberated” (1979). The Community Lost

---

13 This will be explained more fully in Chapter 4
narrative is best defined by Louis Wirth’s sociological theories, wherein cities were presented as the antithesis of deep community (1938). Wirth explains, “[The] multiplication of persons in a state of interaction under conditions which make their contact as full personalities impossible produces that segmentalization of human relationships which has sometimes been seized upon by students of the mental life of the cities as an explanation for the ‘schizoid’ character of urban personality” (12). According to Wirth, the size, density, and diversity within cities were socially disintegrative, and disruptive to deep social connection. Wirth’s theory to some extent echoes Ferdinand Toennies 1887 work on Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, which was a more Euro-centric comparison of rural and urban communities. In Toennies’ gemeinschaft communities, social relationships are based on simple and informal social agreements, whereas these become more complex and formal in gesellschaft communities. Though Toennies did not claim to prefer one over the other, later scholars have criticized him for idealizing the simpler, rural social organization. Scholars uncritically accepted similar theories for decades, and they buttressed the logic behind urban renewal by ascribing little value to urban communities. Later, around the same time that urban policy began to tear down urban neighborhoods to create room for transit infrastructure, a new movement emerged. Jane Jacobs is one of several ethnographers whose work informed an era of “Community Saved” where urban neighborhoods were reframed as spaces of true social interaction and informal neighboring was the backbone of urban community. Wellman ends his history with the introduction of an era of “Community Liberated,” in which urbanites are found to increasingly have non-spatial ties, maintaining relationships unbound to place.
Though Wellman’s typology follows a historical path, the era of “Community Saved” did not completely replace “Community Lost” and each philosophy on community coexists with others. For example, while Wellman would hold that the dominant narrative today is “Community Liberated” one of the most influential books on community life in the modern era, *Bowling Alone*, seems to promulgate “Community Lost” (though it does apply its lament about the loss of social capital across all American places, whether urban or suburban) (Putnam, 2001). In general, there may be no majority consensus on the presence or health of urban community today.

The understanding of local communities in particular becomes further muddled by shifting understandings of place. In a literature review, Maria Lewicka (2011) defines the classic understanding of place as “a bounded entity with unique identity and historical continuity, a cozy place of rest and defense against the dangerous and alien ‘outside’.” She contrasts this with a new liberal view of place as “a crossroads, a meeting place rather than an enclave of rest, and a location with interactive potential.” This dichotomy is echoed by Manuel Castells, who describes place moving from ‘coherent, bounded, and settled’ to a ‘diluted, diffused space of flows’ (1998). Developers attempting to engage in placemaking might favor one definition over the other. The former is clear in the story of the suburbs and intentional enclaves, while the influence of the latter definition is still unclear.

Robert Fishman describes how urban experience might illustrate the former definition: he explains that people occupy their own personal ‘cities’ out of places they go to regularly by automobile. This means of travel transforms the concept of distance in the city into travel time, and makes the experience of the city more personal—if a person travels to a great diversity of places, their ‘city’ will be more diverse as well; if a person
travels to only a few places, their ‘city’ will be equally small. Fishman claims, “The new city has no center or boundary because it does not need them” (51).

As places are conceived as more flexible and less bounded, the role of place in communities must also change—but academics have not reached consensus as to how. There is an opposing camp, represented by John Freie, arguing for the continued importance of place in community. Freie (1998) argues that place provides location and focus for social interaction, so undermining its role in community would have damaging effects.

Whether or not community depends on place, place may depend on the community. Mahyar Arefi (2004) describes a non-place as “generally devoid of personal memory, emphasizing solitude and transition.” In her study, she found that her graduate students described non-place as sites of transition, a “means to an end” or connection between places. Non-places were distinguished from places, which allowed for a multiplicity of interactions and had cultural, social, or historical context. Edward Relph (1976) hypothesizes that this placelessness (which he distinguishes by its authenticity) results from an uncritical acceptance of mass culture and obsession with efficiency as an end goal. Edward Casey (2013) argued that though globalization may have led to sameness of place on a global scale, this homogenization only increases personal longing for “sense of place” that may have been lost in monoculture. He claims that this longing is enhanced by disruptive events at the city and neighborhood level, which revitalize individual’s sensitivity to place. Jacinta Francis (2012) reasons that, regardless of importance, the built environment still plays a major role in the construction of sense of community, where safe and interesting neighborhoods, less surface parking, higher levels of commercial floor
space to land area ratios, and lower levels of land use mix are all associated with a stronger sense of community. Francis argues that place may still play a role in community, but it is transitory—the same group of friends may meet at any café, associating the same meaning to each of these places. Marcus Foth and Paul Sanders explain, “The agora of the group’s interaction can be quite mobile but remains essentially place-based either within the neighborhood, suburb, or city” (2005, p. 4). Castells argues that while social networks in general are place-independent, proximity (and therefore place) still plays a role in our frequency of contact (1998).

On the opposite side, several scholars argue that place and community have only become more detached. Ted Bradshow argues that a workable definition of community, distinguishable from things that are not community, includes only networks of people bonded by solidarity and norms—and this definition does not necessarily require shared space. In this way, cities and neighborhoods may be declining in community in the modern era, but individuals themselves may simultaneously experience deep community. Data that Bradshow gathered from the General Social Survey supports this claim, illustrating that social interaction within the neighborhood is declining, while social interaction between people outside the neighborhood is increasing dramatically (2008). Sean Moores explains that people are likely to experience more discomfort at the lack of familiarity with surroundings, given increasing physical and virtual mobility.

While developers are clearly working to build community within a defined space, the role of that space in community may or may not be important, especially due to the tech-savvy and mobility of modern apartment residents.
Individual Autonomy vs. Group Allegiance

Developers must navigate deep-seated cultural tension between ideals of community and individualism. According to Marc Weiss, author of Rise of the Community-Builders, developers were able to step into a community-building role due to economic changes and the legal acceptance of planning tools that allowed for zoning and the spatial separation of land in the early 1900s.\(^1\) It is clear to historians that the growth of these suburban subdivision communities was fueled in large part by race-based deed restrictions, and the promise that the person next door wouldn’t sell to just any highest bidder. Even in town plans that heralded communitarian principles, design codes mandated setbacks and trees between properties. In Olmsted’s 1869 plan for Riverside, he acknowledged that lot owners would likely build architecturally unsuitable homes, but—advocating for setbacks—said, “they should not be allowed to force them disagreeably upon our attention” (Hayden, 2009, p. 62). Fogelson collected a variety of subdivision advertisements from the early 1900s that blatantly promoted exclusivity, such as Lawrence Park in New York, where prospective homeowners were told their neighbors would be “of the very best material” as all others were “rigidly excluded” (72-73). While racially restrictive covenants were eventually overturned by the Supreme Court in 1948, developers continued the trend of building private, exclusive communities that threaded the needle between promising stability and privacy as well as community. Marketing materials and home and garden columnists from the 1940s and 50s recommended strategies to enhance privacy in addition to zoning (setbacks, orientation of houses away from the street, gardens to serve as buffers between nosy neighbors) when many in the

\(^1\) This includes the landmark Euclid v. Ambler case in 1926, which ruled the new practice of zoning constitutional under a city’s police power.
country retreated to the suburbs (Andrzejewski, 2009). Richard Sennet described the suburban community as “an emotional withdrawal from society and a territorial barricade”; it was, in essence, an ironic community for people who shared values of privacy (1978). As Kenneth Jackson described in his seminal suburban history Crabgrass Frontier, “No longer forced outside by the heat and humidity, no longer attracted by the corner drugstore, and no longer within walking distance of relatives, suburbanites often choose to remain in the family room” (p. 281). Though the idea of idealized communities of “like” neighbors has been present in residential advertising for decades, so too has an emphasis on individualism.

**Sense of Place at Building vs. Neighborhood Level**

Research has shown that if residents can find strong community in small settings, they will not be as invested in large settings. For example, a strong building community would decrease the importance of a block or neighborhood community, while a strong neighborhood community would decrease the importance of a city community, and so on (Kusenbach, 2008). Where community may be maintained locally or non-locally (long distance), Guest and Wierzbicki (1999) found that people will tend to specialize in one type, but not both. For those who focus on non-local communities, their feelings of belonging will also be detached from place. Mobility and potential detachment presents an interesting challenge for developers in the community-builder role. There may be trade-offs made between how and where people find community; if community is encouraged at the building level only, connections with the neighborhood as a whole may suffer.
Theoretical tools: Freie’s critique

For the final portion of my analysis, I relate the community-building stance defined in the third chapter to a history of developers in this role. Ultimately, I identify what is new about the approach toward community for the modern era. In his book *Counterfeit Community: The Exploitation of our Longings for Connectedness*, John Freie theorizes that community has been commodified across housing, public spaces, the workplace, politics, religion, and cyberspace. The pervasive nature of these commodified communities undermines the individual’s ability to find or identify true community, contributing to a continued and consistent longing that can be exploited. Freie defines true community as a living organism that develops naturally with the capacity to respond to the environment. Its hallmark is trust, respect, and common purpose. In his discussion of the exploited nature of community in housing, he highlights marketing, diversity, management, public space, citizenship, and justice. Freie believes common interest developments “represent a new form of residential organization that protects residents from the deterioration of urban America not by addressing the fundamental problems causing that deterioration, but by avoiding those difficulties and exploiting our longings for community” (p. 40). Freie frames gated communities as directly counter to urban America, and thus it is an interesting framework to reveal if any tensions still hold in urban apartment buildings.

Each of these frameworks—of community promised, imagined, and encouraged, the five community tensions, and Freie’s critique—guide an analysis that will explore both the shape of community-building efforts and their potential impact on the neighborhood.
Chapter 3: The Shape of Modern Developer Community-Building

When developers shape the social element of their properties, they are reconfiguring the home sphere for their residents. Ideally, developer influence is responsive to consumer demand stemming from modern social changes (such as the changes in household and work organization described in Chapter 1). As my analysis will show, developers are consistently emphasizing the individual within the community as well as broad social interaction, although there are discrepancies as to the role of place in community and issues of identity and diversity. In general, developer efforts expand the realm of social interaction that occurs in the home sphere by absorbing some of the functions of office and retail space; however, the emphasis on collective identity and private nature of the spaces suggests restricted participation.

To provide a scaffolding for what community-building might look like, I study community imagined (stated in developer goals), promised (presented in marketing materials), and encouraged (demonstrated through action either on the part of developer or property manager), within key theoretical tensions discussed in Chapter 2. The table below summarizes my findings across each of these postures toward community.
Table 4: Summarized findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Imagined</th>
<th>Promised</th>
<th>Encouraged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diversity vs. Collective Identity</td>
<td>Collective Identity</td>
<td>Collective Identity</td>
<td>Diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Interaction: Deep Ties vs. Broad Ties</td>
<td>Broad Ties</td>
<td>Broad Ties</td>
<td>Broad Ties, with some exceptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place-Rooted vs. Placeless Community</td>
<td>No consensus</td>
<td>Place-rooted</td>
<td>No consensus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Autonomy vs. Group Allegiance</td>
<td>Individual Autonomy</td>
<td>Individual Autonomy</td>
<td>Individual Autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Place at Building vs. Neighborhood Level</td>
<td>No consensus</td>
<td>Neighborhood</td>
<td>Building</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Diversity vs. Collective Identity

Diversity  →  Collective Identity

In general, a collective identity through a strong brand seems to serve as the basis for on-site communities, though there are examples of specific community-building efforts that acknowledge diversity to a limited extent.

Brand identity is a central theme in developer interpretations of community. In fact, of the developers and property managers asked to define community, five of twelve chose only to describe it with adjectives linked to their specific brand, using words like trendy, unique, and fun-filled. All of those who described community exclusively with adjectives were property managers, while developers were more likely to specifically mention how residents feel and relate to one another in the building. An architect interviewed took the emphasis on a belonging a step further when he evoked the idea of “FOMO” (an acronym for “fear of missing out” used on social media) in the definition of community. Identity and boundaries of belonging seem to be the defining feature of envisioned communities.

The marketing websites further extend this emphasis on collective identity, though it varies in importance. As mentioned, five of the twelve properties delivered in the study
area in the last five years use vocabulary that prominently describe the apartment buildings as communities. These descriptions include 2M’s promise that, “We’re less of an apartment building—and more of an apartment community”; The Gale’s reference to “close-knit community comfort”; and Station House’s self-definition as a “sociable and socially conscious community.” Each of these descriptions are nested in an overall brand that furthers the suggestion of this community. While 2M and The Gale’s messaging seems to work to imply a home-like, familiar space, Station House uses the idea of community to imply status and identity, in the same way that shopping at socially-conscious Whole Foods might.

Station House’s projection of community does take strides to establish a clear collective social identity that could be the basis for real common ties. This is less true at The Gale, which was formerly named the Trilogy for its three defined buildings and styles, and 2M, which has a fairly basic branding scheme on its website (relying mostly on blue, white, and gray colors, straightforward font, and renderings) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: 2M homepage with basic branding scheme (L), Station House’s identity building (R)
Most of the properties still do suggest points of cohesion, but this seems to be solely through a shared style or brand. They appeal to aspirational lifestyles to build a sense of belonging or not belonging. Station House builds an entire brand reflecting “your station in life” (despite its “altruistic spirit”), while Flats at Atlas references a predominantly young and affluent neighborhood in the Northwest quadrant of the city, asking, “Can your Dupont Circle friends shoot hoops at home?” 2M explicitly states, “Prepare to give your friends apartment envy;” and “Don’t be afraid to stare. Everyone else will.”

Although attention to diversity was often not explicit in marketing, visioning, or efforts, there are several instances in the sample where developers or property managers either encourage or pay attention to diverse communities. One developer more actively executed on a commitment to diversity by designing the property as a series of buildings reflecting different architectural styles. To this developer, segmenting and differentiating within the product was key to the property’s authentic neighborhood appeal. Apart from this instance, most of the thinking about diversity seems to happen at the level of the property manager in relation to event planning. Three property managers who planned events underlined the importance of hosting different events to appeal to a variety of people, as different groups of residents will consistently come to different events. When diversity is considered, then, it seems to be in the building of sub-communities. Developers and property managers are not specifically tackling the challenge of building ties across difference on site.

Deep Ties vs. Broad Ties

---

42
Across the board, developers and property managers seem to favor broad social interaction over deep social connection, and this is best reflected through developer ideas about a ‘third place’ that emphasizes work space rather than social interaction. However, there are outliers. One building in particular offers a unique amenity—a community dog—that would seemingly foster deeper connections (of person-to-apartment if not person-to-person).

To many developers, retail-like spaces form the inspiration for amenity spaces, suggesting a preference for broadly based social interaction, as opposed to deep personal connection. Four developers interviewed independently evoked Starbucks as the gold standard in community spaces; three more described active community spaces in terms that could apply to Starbucks. These perceptions of what a community-building space should look like are perhaps responsive to Starbucks’ own brand building work. As Starbucks became nearly omnipresent on urban streets, Howard Schultz, Starbucks Chairman and CEO, began positioning it as a community hub, using the term “Third Place.” In reality, Ray Oldenburg first coined “Third Place” in 1989 to mean neutral ground where people from the neighborhood could gather and enjoy each other’s company, but it later came to define the Starbucks brand. This was an identity deconstructed by Bryant Simon in his book Everything but the Coffee (2009). Through Simon’s ethnographic study, he found that Starbucks functioned primarily as a second place (a space to do work) and as a meeting space for people bound by typically weak ties, such as for business meetings. Starbucks also functioned as an “in between” space for many people, a safe place to kill

15 These descriptions included: “People want the third place...people are working on their laptops, in public spaces...,” “People want to be socially unsocial, they want to be in a space around people and not necessarily interact,” and “I think we have the best amenity package. It’s thoughtful, it works really well with professionals who want to use their laptops and iPods, stay connected.”
time between meetings and use the bathroom. While responsive to changes in patterns of work organization, this use of Starbucks functions in direct opposition to Oldenburg’s construction of third places as sites to build meaningful deep ties, which harkens back to cafes that functioned as rooted neighborhood institutions for long conversations between neighbors.

Though the idea of a third place elicits a sense of community, in reality this construction of an active community space emphasizes copresence, rather than community. Most developers, when pushed, describe barely any social interaction at all in their ideal amenity spaces. To them, the most successful amenities merely replace spaces that are less accessible to young professionals—gyms (when private and cost prohibitive), and office spaces (for students or those who telework).\(^{16}\) Even in describing their intention for design, developers are striving to simply put people next to each other. Their goal is not the groundwork for meaningful ties, but rather to provide spaces where people can be in each other’s presence without having to converse, as at a Starbucks.

It is interesting that this idea of the third place (and especially the developers’ explicit connection to retail) is the inspiration for a first place (home). Though these shared spaces could be seen as extensions of the home sphere and a more private life, instead developers hope to evoke a more neutral territory associated with broader community connections. The inspiration for this territory is, however, a private space with a clearly developed brand identity that requires people to pay for access, and does not attempt to build healthy bridges between customers who don’t already know each other. Thus, developers are pursuing an ideal that does not encourage broad ties.

\(^{16}\) Work spaces or gyms were all but once identified by property managers as the “most used” amenity on site.
This ideal for connection is consistent within marketing, where some buildings claim only to offer a component of community: social interaction. While AVA H Street makes three mentions of “social spaces” on its website, it seems to avoid the mention of the word community anywhere, except as a synonym for “building” or “property” in the listing of amenities, which are also referred to as social features. This language is reinforced by a large, header photo of a party in the apartment’s courtyard (see Figure 3). It is the only photo in the entire sample of websites that shows residents (though with blurred faces) instead of stock photos, excluding gallery images. The Flats at Atlas website implies a similar party-like atmosphere but more subtly. Their website features portraits of people rather than any part of the building on the main landing page, with captions that suggest an “impromptu barbecue at the bar.” While no website seemed to promise deep ties between residents, these properties seem to promise the prospective resident the ability to meet and interact with a broad spectrum of residents.

Figure 2: Actual residents featured in AVA H Street’s homepage
In general, most on-site efforts echo the emphasis on broad ties. The rare developer is, however, thinking beyond traditional amenity spaces to introduce new amenities that build deeper attachment, at least to place. One of the most startling examples of this is Emmy (see Figure 3). Emmy is advertised as 2M’s “apartment mascot.” She is an English bulldog about as old as the building who shows off the gym on the apartment’s website, greets prospective residents when they come in for tours, and is available for walks when residents sign up to take her out. Responsibility for Emmy’s regular exercise is shared by the leasing team, and the property manager takes care of her on a day-to-day basis. To the corporate office, Emmy’s primary role on site is to draw more marketing attention to the property—the staff mentioned that they likely wouldn’t incorporate a dog into another property because it wouldn’t generate as much press. Emmy’s role in the lease up process is indeed a clever one, but her role on site becomes more powerful and perhaps more ethically suspect at renewal for market-rate residents. 2M is part of DC’s New Communities initiative, so 29% of residents receive rent restricted units. However, the other 71% are subject to market rent increases when their lease is up for renewal. People are clearly able to form deep attachments to dogs, and this attachment might be suspect when it is introduced by the corporation that is also asking for a higher rent level at renewal. Apart from this, the reality of Emmy’s existence raises complicated questions for the apartment: how will the apartment building handle issues that are challenging for dog-owners and families, such as injury, sickness, and death?
Figure 3: Emmy, 2M apartment mascot, looks on from the leasing office.

**Place-rooted vs. Placeless Community**

Developers and property managers echo academic disagreement about the importance of place in community—there is no standard conceptualization evident within or between community imagined, promised, or encouraged.

Five developers specifically mentioned some aspect of place (either building or neighborhood) in their descriptions of community. As the developers are split nearly half and half in their inclusion of place in community ideals, there seems to be no overall consensus on the importance of place in community. Of those developers who do consider place important, the apartment community was described as “life inside the building,” “a group of young professionals engaged with the neighborhood,” the “persona of the building,” that the building “is a friendly, safe, congenial environment,” and simply, “the neighborhood.” Whether these descriptions are actually describing community or not is a value judgment, but interview responses do show that physical space is a contested element of community.
In contrast, the suggestion of place in the description of community on marketing websites is strong. With the Flats at Atlas as a key exception, the apartment space generally and unsurprisingly takes precedence over people on these websites. Thus, when community (or social interaction) is evoked, it is more connected to the space rather than people. Among the buildings that push community the most, The Gale promises “cultural, connected apartment homes”; Station House mentions “active social spaces”; and AVA H Street prominently encourages prospective residents to “socialize [their] space.” Each of these phrases is somewhat suspect (as it is difficult to imagine how apartments independently can be cultural or connected), though it seems that the design of amenity spaces is one of the key means that developers encourage socializing.\(^{17}\) For developers, the realization of community, then, seems to be that there are people with whom to engage the shared spaces. Only 2M promised a community “spirit” on top of spaces, implying a feeling that might be tied to people rather than place.

In the design of interior spaces, developers were cognizant of how place could shape community, though it was at times an afterthought. For example, Flats 130 was one of the first new developments in NoMA in the past 15 years, and it illustrates a design process consistent with this community building trend in an emerging neighborhood context. The project introduced NoMa’s only full size grocery store to catalyze the neighborhood, as well as nearly 50,000 SF of office space leased to the Department of Justice, 53,000 SF of retail (including grocery), and 643 residential units. The project involved a number of design tweaks including a shared internal loading dock that allowed the developer to maximize the retail space offered. This was a major priority for the developer, who regarded the

\(^{17}\) See the appendix for an inventory of community encouraged on site through design, programming, and amenities.
presence of retail as crucial for neighborhood appeal.\textsuperscript{18} This priority extended into the design of the interior space, where the developer stacked the traditional lobby space vertically in order to allow more room for ground floor retail. A key byproduct of this plan was that the spaces were centralized and showed well in a quick walking tour. While not a driver of any of the developer’s main decisions, that same path used in the walking tour provides a daily path for the residents, activating the corridor spaces. The visibility between amenity spaces that helps prospective residents quickly get a feel for the space also provides visual connections for the residents to see and become familiar with others in the shared spaces. While retail was the developer’s primary driver in space allocation, this functioned to maximize the indirect value of unrentable SF.\textsuperscript{19}

**Individual Autonomy vs. Group Allegiance**

Developers and property managers are unified in their commitment to the individual over the group throughout all angles of community-building; in many cases, this reflects a commitment to the marketability of community rather than its function as a tool for retention.

With the exception of two developers who described community-building efforts as important for retention, all other developers presented the idea of community as important at lease signing. This emphasis on leasing suggests that developers are most concerned with how community is presented to the individual (as the prospective resident must be an

\textsuperscript{18} Flats 130 did include the first retail component of any property developed since 2000.

\textsuperscript{19} Other developers describe, “The space allocation is easy—everything that can be rented at a decent rent as retail is retail, amenity space is everything left over…the shared amenities end up being further from the street. It’s whatever we think we can get away with…if I can get away with it I’ll get rent for it.” The same idea was repeated in another interview when a developer said, “We had constraints on site...all this space without windows...What does it become? Bigger amenity space.”
individual outside the community). The idea of community was described as a tool for
differentiation from other buildings, for sale and capture, and for remaining competitive in
an “amenities arms race.” The two developers who were focused on retention emphasized
the value of having ties to neighbors to provide a resident with a sense of ownership and
relationships that make it harder to move out. While those two developers named a reason
to focus on group dynamics, all other developers seemed most concerned with how
individuals react and respond to the idea of community as it is marketed.

In general, the communities advertised do not promise strong social ties, and avoid
using the phrase “sense of community.” Most merely imply that there will be places to
socialize in and people to socialize with. Despite language promoting community, the
building’s messaging puts its greatest emphasis on the needs and wants of the individual.
AVA H Street’s tag line is “Live like you want,” and this emphasis on want is repeated
throughout. Through this pursuit of wants, they promise prospective residents that they
will come alive. The Flats at Atlas promise “urban living, your way,” and Station House
claims to be “designed for the way you want to live, now.” Avalon 1st and M’s tagline
similarly entreats prospective residents to “live your way,” while Elevation encourages
residents to “indulge ambitions.” These buildings might allude to or evoke community
elsewhere, but target their service delivery at the individual level. The self is the center of
these statements, not the group.

Programming fully ignores collective input and participation, suggesting that group
allegiance is weak. Even here, there is an emphasis on lease-up. Station House deviates
from the programming norm (making or eating food, game nights) by lifting a traditional
community building approach and providing residents the opportunity to work together to
invest in a shared space through a community garden. However, while community gardens suggest shared harvesting and planting work and visual improvement of space for the broader public, Station House’s garden offers neither. The garden is tucked away in a corner of the rooftop, where only pool users can see it. Though it looks active, the property manager noted that most of the boxes had been planted and harvested by the management staff so that the garden wasn’t empty during lease-up. This is a concept that might cultivate place attachment but in practice defers to marketability to outsiders.

**Sense of Place at Building vs. Neighborhood Level**

Although apartment marketing alludes to a sense of place at the neighborhood level, the neighborhood is often misrepresented. In general, developers especially lacked a consciousness about neighborhood-level sense of place and frequently chose to differentiate the apartment building from the surrounding area.

Most developers seemed to consider the study area as “placeless” before their arrival, implying that the sense of place was most important at the building level. The neighborhood assets that developers consistently highlighted focused on transportation, or the ability of the neighborhood to connect people to other places. The lack of retail was a frequent complaint, and one developer described the neighborhood as “soulless,” another that it was “just starting to get its feet,” and yet another that the neighborhood, “wasn’t there when we put the property under contract.” While one developer mentions the neighborhood’s “naturally occurring authenticity,” otherwise within this sample, developers do not describe an existing sense of place at the neighborhood level—and they chose to develop there anyway.
Properties within the NoMa BID district were developed generally by right, so developers had wide bandwidth to pursue their design visions.\textsuperscript{20} In interviews, five out of seven developers mentioned that they pursued intentional differentiation from the surroundings as a placemaking strategy, especially in exterior design. This strategy was at least partially influenced by the sense that there was nothing there before, or that their project was “an island” (a sentiment directly expressed by three developers), and that developers were building the neighborhood feel from scratch.\textsuperscript{21}

Within marketing, there is a tension between the properties as sites of social spaces and the surrounding neighborhood, and whether or not one holds preference. In general, the neighborhood featured more prominently on websites that also advertised community or social interaction on site; perhaps because young professionals have a reputation for being both highly social and location-sensitive. However, those making the marketing decisions seem to be incredibly detached from the neighborhood; this is consistent across all websites. For example, AVA H Street mentions twice at the top of their webpage that they are blocks away from TruOrleans Restaurant & Gallery, Jae Suk Ko, Puck Foundation, and the Union Station plaza. TruOrleans opened in July of 2011 and closed two years later after being plagued by crime issues and complaints from neighbors.\textsuperscript{22} Jae Suk Ko has no remaining online presence apart from a Facebook page describing it as a fast food restaurant with no interactions, Puck Fountain is a fountain in front of the Folger

\textsuperscript{20} Designs were generally discussed with the local ANC as a courtesy. Four of the eleven properties in the sample pursued development through a planned unit development (PUD); the rest pursued by-right development.

\textsuperscript{21} Different developers said their building was “on an island by [itself],” that they had to “take a leap of faith,” and explicitly stated that “there was nothing there.”

\textsuperscript{22} AVA H Street isn’t the only one to specifically reference TruOrleans—the Flats at Atlas also includes an image in their gallery.
Shakespeare Library (a twenty minute walk from the apartment building), and the Union Station plaza is nothing more than car pick up from the train station. This might be evidence that the website hasn’t been updated since lease-up. However, other neighborhood “mistakes” were less time sensitive. Both AVA H Street and 360H Street use images of clearly bounded Chinatown instead of the H Street corridor to suggest neighborhood feel in videos and galleries. Avalon 1st and M’s website only briefly mentions that the property is located in the NoMA neighborhood, and goes on to describe the full city of Washington DC, naming monuments, museums, and emphasizing “the surrounding city of Washington, DC,” rather than any singular detail about NoMA. Elevation doesn’t root its apartment building in a neighborhood at all, choosing instead to put several on the same playing field and mention that NoMa, Capitol Hill, Penn Quarter, and U Street are within reach. These properties are likely marketing to DC newcomers, but the avoidance of neighborhood references does suggest a disconnect between building and immediate surrounding area.

Of those properties that do advertise their neighborhood on their site, this is at times in tension with the vibrancy of the property itself. The Flats at Atlas best illustrates this tension (see figure 4). Through their slogan, “Live where it’s at,” the Flats are able to market both their property and their location simultaneously. They also dedicate a full separate gallery to neighborhood photos, and were the only property in the sample to include photos of real people in the neighborhood (though these were always staff at local businesses or young professionals). Again, some of the businesses featured have now closed, but there is a relatively large space on the site dedicated to H Street. However, this emphasis conflicts with much of the wording on the site, which implies the apartment
building takes precedence to the neighborhood context. On multiple pages, the website claims, “Happy hour just might fall second to hanging out at home”; “We understand if you never want to leave your apartment. We wouldn’t either”; and “Be careful who you bring home. They may never want to leave.” At the same time, much of the language ignores the historical neighborhood context or gentrification issues, claiming that the area is “DC’s most intriguing new neighborhood,” and referring to apartment residents as urban pioneers.

The website projects extremely mixed signals about the property and the surrounding neighborhood, and it makes it difficult to judge whether the social amenities in the building supplements or replaces a neighborhood-based social life.

Figure 4: Flats at Atlas homepage

Where the neighborhood does appear in these websites, it is one that is generally defined purely by consumerism. Perhaps due to the lack of public gathering spaces in the study area, the sole way the neighborhood is illustrated on these sites is through photos of

---

23 Some properties were more sensitive to gentrification. Given the racial changes in the study area, it is helpful that most websites do depict mixed race couples if people are included (Station House did include exclusively white models, and the figures featured in figure 2 on AVA H Street’s website appear to be all white).
storefront signs (with the exception of the Flats at Atlas). Retail is the only representation of the neighborhood; again, these cafes and bars generally promise more privatized and controlled community spaces.

Echoing the emphasis on the individual in relation to the property, several apartment websites also imply control over the neighborhood. Elevation suggests, “Everything is coming together, piece by piece, and you’re in control of it all. It’s your time to rise up in the city by claiming your piece of NoMa.” The property is unclear on just how the residents control their neighborhood, and in what way they can lay “claim” to a piece of it (especially because the residents are renting instead of buying). AVA H Street suggests that residents can, “Be the life of the neighborhood,” and both of the AvalonBay properties in the sample use the title “Run it” over a neighborhood map. This is evidence that properties may be self-selecting those who relate to the neighborhood in a particular way.

Developers and property managers are generally consistent across the dimensions of community building that I identified (imagined, promised, encouraged). Developer and property managers’ language, advertisements, and actions support a focus on placemaking at the building level that emphasizes broad ties between people. However, across the three categories there are some contradictions. In my interviews (perhaps because of the topic), developers talked more about the collective aspects of community than they advertised or acted on. While developers envision and market a community with a strong brand and boundaried identity, in practice some property managers are at least starting to cater to the diverse interests of residents through varied programming. Finally, though marketing
materials emphasize community through spaces, developer actions and descriptions of ideal community do not seem to require a community bound to a place.
Chapter 4: The Evolution of Community as a Commodity

Though not always viewed as the responsibility of the developer, for decades, developers have consciously considered community-building efforts within their designs. Federal workforce housing programs during the Great Depression and model communities pursuing the “neighborhood unit” in the 1920s linked thinking about sociology and urban design, which would ultimately inspire the nation’s public housing strategy (Vale, 2007). The promise of community fueled the rise of the suburbs, as illustrated in Herbert Gans’ study of Levittown. An increasing emphasis is evident in the construction of dorms, where in the 1960s and 1970s developers moved away from institutional-based design models in order to create environments that fostered social connectivity (Holahan, 1978). Building steam throughout the 20th century, the concept of developer as community-builder gained prominence with the rise of master-planned developments; here, “community” became a dominant feature of marketing and developers made active attempts to facilitate community-building on site.

It is important to contextualize the understanding of modern community-building efforts described in the previous chapter within this history. While academics have questioned the effect of gated and master planned communities on the surrounding neighborhood for decades, to date this same critique has not been applied to urban apartments, despite the same growth of privatized common space.

I acknowledge that there is also a long history of academics studying community-building on site at affordable, public, and mixed-income housing developments (See Chaskin & Joseph, 2015; de Souza Briggs et al., 2010; Graves, 2008; and Kleit, 2005). While developers in market rate buildings face some of the same challenges, I am focusing only on
the body of literature that describes market-rate gated communities, because I am interested in the nature of community building as a market value add, where community is built with the ultimate goal of increasing profit.24

In this chapter, I will briefly define gated communities and survey typical community-building activities. I will then outline how urban apartments have or have not adjusted these activities to a widely accepted reputation of Millennial young professionals as being mobile, urban, and valuing diversity (See Noble et al., 2009; Lachman, 2010; Kirk, 2011; J. Turner Research, 2013; and Logan, 2014). Finally, I will compare aspects of the urban apartments in my sample with Freie’s construction of gated communities as “counterfeit communities.”

**Community in Gated Estates**

While gated estates vary in whom they house and why, Sonia Roitman puts forth a working definition:

>[Gated estates are] closed urban residential settlements...where public space has been privatized by restricting access through the implementation of security devices. Gated communities are conceived as closed settlements from their inception...They have a private governing body that enforces internal rules concerning behavior and construction (2008).

Roitman’s definition consistently emphasizes the closed and private nature of these development projects. Other academics have added to this definition by explaining the motivation for closed, private spaces. Setha Low (2004) states that the growth of gated

---

24 There is a property in the sample (2M) that is mixed-income. However, this property still uses community as a tool on its website to sell market rate properties, and the property manager mentioned that on-site events and programming were a key retention strategy.
residential developments has been fueled by a discourse of urban fear and rapid changes in social values that affect how people envision neighborhood space. Blakely and Snyder (1997) present a typology where gated communities are attractive due to a fear of crime, desire for better lifestyle, desire for community, aspiration for social distinction, and/or social homogeneity. All of these motivations still exist in the modern residential multifamily market, though the perceived preferences of Millennials eliminates social homogeneity.

Developers of gated communities actively work to encourage or imply community through marketing, programming, design, and governance—of course, in addition to the boundaries that give them their name. Walters and Rosenblatt (2008) suggest that developers promote social connection and belonging in marketing materials in order to address the feeling of lost social community. They find that the advertised ideal community is more important to consumers than reality. Yet, developers act to encourage social connection and build collective community memory through programming. Lynda Cheshire’s (2009) study of a developer in Queensland, Australia found that the developer organized a full social calendar of events for residents, including monthly “meet your neighbors” nights, holiday celebrations, movie nights, and an annual fun run. Cheshire found that these events functioned to govern community ethics of consumption. For example, the annual gardening competition celebrated community while encouraging a well-maintained yard. Developers will also frequently try to adjust the built environment to illicit a sense of place, through “placemaking” work, which often emphasizes distinction.25

In gated communities, placemaking frequently emphasizes distinction. Both gated

25 The term as used by developers often does not include a community process.
communities and New Urbanism emphasize territorial control with clear distinctions of private space, often reinforced by signs. This distinction might be made in New Urbanism through transitions such as parks, or changes in elevation between street and house, while gated communities rely on fences and walls. The intention of both is to make strangers feel noticed, and potentially unwelcome (Grant, 2007). Matthew Rofe (2006) observes in a gated community in Australia that the display of wealth, more than security measures, guides a natural process of self-othering and territory distinction. He notes that gated communities will create distinction or opposition to surroundings through observation towers and strategically placed trees.

As Roitman mentions in her definition, most gated communities are governed by a Homeowner’s Association (HOAs), which are generally established by the developer and passed on to residents to enforce community rules (Kirby et al., 2006).26 HOAs have been criticized for lacking consensual community and civic values, and for structuring community relations around the ability to purchase a home (Low, 2003).

These community-building efforts are largely treated as unsuccessful in the academic literature. However, Ted Rosenblatt (2009) found that those who elect to consume community in this way are generally appreciative of the result (though the result may not be “community” by some definitions). In a study of Springfield Lakes in Australia, Rosenblatt found that participants expressed their community in terms of friendly and smiling neighbors and the feeling of belonging around them, as well as in the community’s central lake and the walking path. Thus, community was associated not just with social

26 However, rental gated communities also exist. Gated settlements are a common typology for public housing. Taking these public units into account, renters are 2.5 times more likely than owners to live in walled settlements, according to a 2005 analysis of AHS data (Sanchez, Lang & Dhavale).
interaction, but with elements of the physical landscape. In a study of multi-owned properties in Brisbane, Sacha Reid (2015) found that residents did know one another, but these relationships tended to be surface-level rather than deep; this superficiality was at odds with the community promised in marketing materials. In her ethnography of gated communities, Setha Low (2003) found that there were increased community activities inside the gate, but these could exist at the expense of community identity with the larger region. Low suggests that gated communities foster an “inward-focused” culture, where tradeoffs between individual and society tilt especially toward self-interest.

Some research exists in defiance of this claim. For example, in a study that draws from the American Housing Survey and Phoenix Area Social Survey, Kirby (2006) found that HOA residents do not favor their neighborhood over their city, and that they didn’t diverge significantly in their views from traditional neighborhoods. Wilson-Doenges (2000) further found that differences in place attachment and sense of security in gated neighborhoods versus traditional neighborhoods are mitigated when the researcher controls for social status. Goodman and Douglas (2010) found that political community life wasn’t so harmonious inside the walls either—conflicts over shared assets and facilities put more pressure on community harmony.

While these same studies don’t exist for modern urban apartments, there are apparent similarities between these buildings and gated communities: community-building efforts that emphasize programming for shared community-building, design elements that emphasize identity through distinction, and the provision of belonging through surface-level relationships.
Community Building for a New Generation

Though community-building efforts in urban apartment buildings draw heavily from a history of developer practice, developers are also serving a new consumer in a different social context. By studying urban apartment developments in the NoMa/H Street area neighborhoods where 54% of the population is between the ages of 18-34, I am implicitly studying apartments targeting Millennials. Market research reports identify to the typical elements of the Millennial reputation: smaller households, delayed marriage and childbearing, preference for diversity, an emphasis on lifestyle, heavy social media use, and urban- or urban-like preferences. Millennials are also typically described as more liberal, more impatient, and more mobile. Reports by ULI and RCLCO describe Gen Y as “the generation of fusion,” with appreciation for ethnic and cultural identity, as well as for environments that facilitate personal connections (Lachman and Brett, 2010 and Logan, 2014).

I am particularly interested in how developers have adapted their community-building activities in the midst of a new generational context to accommodate diversity, mobility (renter vs. owner), and urban-like settings.

In my interviews, developers did not frequently consider the role of diversity in on-site communities. Only two developers mentioned diversity as a key element of a desired on-site community. One developer of a market-rate property mentioned this desire in a discussion about the impact of inclusionary zoning requirements, although he eventually negated his statement by saying, “The more mixed the better. I don’t know the demographics of the people in the affordable units. I can’t tell if they’re different than people in market.” Though the developer states that diversity is important in his building,
the ability of the affordable housing population to blend in with others was also important to him. As highlighted in the Diversity vs. Collective Identity section of Chapter 3, other developers have paid attention to diversity in the design of the property and in event programming, however this work is largely to build diverse sub-groups within a property, rather than build personal connection across difference.

In the urban context, developers obviously have less control over space to plan community amenities and encourage social interaction. The apartments in my study sample do, however, all feature controlled access and an around-the-clock concierge or front lobby staff, with the exception of one property. The signaling of belonging or not belonging remains important through a clearly stated brand identity and these security measures (see figure 5). Developers are also, as in the case of Flats 130, still clearly thinking about pedestrian flows in urban design, and how to encourage visual recognition and comfort around other residents in a small, shared space.

Figure 5: Flats at Atlas posts outdoor signs that discourage loitering, while 1st and M shows clear brand identity in its lobby space.

Though the apartment building acts as an independent locus of belonging, developers are working to build connections between buildings and neighborhoods. Generally, this bridging is through mutually-beneficial business partnerships within programming. The most typical tie to the neighborhood is through local business sponsorship of property events—local businesses provide food and drinks in exchange for
a marketing opportunity. Some apartment buildings do provide a slightly more thoughtful twist on this neighborhood relationship. The focal point of AVA H Street’s lobby is a Twitter wall with a word cloud that shows the most trending topics in the nearby area (see figure 6). (When I visited, “manslaughter” was the most prominently tweeted about topic.) Still, this effort is consumer-focused. The algorithm for the word cloud heavily weights the tweets from retailers in the area such that it also provides a marketing space. AVA H also looks to restaurants to set up small events in “months where [they] don’t think [they] can get a big turnout.” Other buildings provided residents with discount cards to neighborhood shops, or included local hotel discounts as part of their amenity package. Only the Flats at Atlas seemed to engage the neighborhood in a way that was not directly related to consumerism. In 2013, the building served as a pop-up location for FLEX, a traveling temporary art show organized in DC.

In my interviews, developers and property managers seemed to lack an understanding of community institutions in the neighborhood, or any places where residents might find community outside the property. When asked this question, all respondents first listed bars and restaurants, if anything, though those in NoMA also mentioned that they promote the BID’s events and these act as community-building opportunities. Developers are thus acknowledging the neighborhood and providing some points of connection; however, these connections are highly consumer-oriented and unlikely to encourage interaction across income in a diverse neighborhood (an issue that will be explored more in the following chapter).
The transition to building a community of renters versus owners is largely a non-issue, perhaps because the ideal community in gated communities does not rely on deep social ties. In both scenarios, the developer’s goal is to build spaces where people can recognize each other and be friendly. Building a community of renters may even be easier than building a community of owners. Though renters in urban apartments do not have a long-term stake in the success of the community as they can more easily leave at any time, in some ways, the lack of private property ownership might allow people to defer their individual wishes to the overall success of the group. While developers have stepped away from the governance structures in gated communities, they have retained an emphasis on third party negotiation of tenant-to-tenant issues and regulation, which will be discussed within Freie’s framework in the next section.

Across these characteristics, it seems that the largest adaptation from previous efforts is the move to situate communities in urban areas and grapple with the role of the neighborhood in that community.
“Counterfeit” Community

Though the structure of my study limits my ability to make claims about the direct effect of these real estate trends on the broader neighborhood, I use John Freie’s critique of gated developments to evaluate what, if any, part of these trends might be similar—“superficial in feeling and non-participatory in nature,” and potentially concerning for the surrounding neighborhood (pp. 41). Freie’s framework of critique reveals that these apartments and gated communities share an emphasis on the promotion of convenience and predictability, highly managed public space, and third party negotiation of tenant issues. There are new ways of thinking about diversity and tenant input in the urban apartments under study, but the crux of Freie’s original argument still applies.

*Marketing* - Research has shown that many people choose to live in gated communities due to risk aversion; gated communities promise the avoidance of unwanted social exchange as well as relatively predictable property values (Lang, 1997). Grant (2007) adds that sense of place is also important. He claims that the “placelessness” of suburbia provokes consumers to care more about community character and identity. Freie identifies the major themes of planned community marketing as security, predictability, convenience, and scenic open space. Obviously, open space is impossible to market in an urban area, but the remainder of the themes on Freie’s list are identified in urban apartment marketing. In the last chapter, I found that urban apartments do address security and predictability to some extent by advertising a “scrubbed” version of the neighborhood that is one of store fronts, not streets, and that is consumer-oriented. Convenience is one of the most heavily emphasized components on marketing websites, as photos and language seem to most prominently address the needs of individuals over the group.
Diversity – Though there is research that suggests that gated communities do not increase social distance between race and class (Danielsen-Lang, 2008), these communities are widely considered to be homogeneous, and Freie holds this view. As discussed earlier, diversity does not seem to be a key focus of developers in urban apartments. However, it is interesting that the largest concentration of buildings explicitly marketing community occurred in what was considered an “emerging” neighborhood in Washington. With the exception of 2M, no building in the sample had more than 10% affordable units. In large part, the buildings cannot offer income diversity. Studio bedroom prices range from $1477 to $2030 implying household incomes of $53,000 to $73,080. The apartments are in some ways offering an experience of diversity to residents by locating in areas with very different income profiles, though due to gentrification and displacement this income diversity will not always be the case. Currently, the average income in the study area is quite high (over $100,000), though the immediately surrounding census tracts have median incomes ranging from $26,000 to $79,000 (American Communities Survey 5-year estimates, 2014).

Management rather than politics – Freie points out that, though homeowners in common interest developments have the ability to self-govern over some aspects of community life, they do not have true power to shape the rules and regulations they must obey through natural discussion. Urban apartments do not promise or structure resident-based governing bodies, but developers do give thought to resident input and participation. Among the properties in my sample, this commitment was largely illustrated through
developer focus on customization. Developers frequently found that the most active shared spaces were multi-purpose and responsive to resident needs. AvalonBay’s AVA brand emphasizes this prominently with various in-unit customization options, and this extends to the common spaces as well. Residents are able to plug in an iPod into the shared courtyard speakers to replace AVA’s branded soundtrack, control common room TVs, and influence the Twitter wall “art” through their tweets. In other properties, resident input is more subtle, though they are still able to have some influence over the environment. One developer shared that they first offered regimented, segmented common space divided clearly between gaming and lounging, but then they let the residents move the furniture around to scramble the uses. The emphasis on flexible space provides an element of resident input, and it also serves to protect the developer against future risk by allowing the developer to adapt the space in response to changing trends.27

Through these mechanisms, residents might see more of themselves reflected in the space around them, however this input is obviously limited to interactions between person and space, within the bounds of developer approval. Though this may be a small step forward from Freie’s critique of common interest developments, there are no structures in place that facilitate input person to person.

*Dead Public Space* – Freie claims that public space in common interest developments exists only in the symbolic sense. Freie’s primary critique rests upon the lack of spontaneity in gathering places. As he describes it, common spaces are for members only and for

---

27 This was another driving factor behind flexible amenity space. For example, two developers noted that they specifically avoided including screening rooms because it was too cost-prohibitive to redo them if they fell out of style.
designated types of activities only, with planned and scheduled events.\textsuperscript{28} By not requiring car access, and often demanding that residents walk through amenity space before leaving the building, urban apartments do encourage more spontaneous interaction. However, underutilized amenity space is a problem for developers, and there is a sense, highlighted in the previous chapter, that amenity space is primarily useful for the leasing tour. To encourage use of the space, property managers frequently introduce structured events and programming. In some respects, though spontaneity is a possibility, encouraging use of the common space still requires purpose and structure.

This spontaneity is further tempered by the rules and regulations that govern common spaces. All apartments featured clearly posted rules in all amenity spaces that presented rules on noise, the number of guests allowed per resident, and use of equipment; frequently, they also transfer any liability from apartment owner to guests (see an example in figure 7). Some apartments go further to prohibit unaccompanied minors, or food or drink. The resident agrees to these rules in their lease signing, and they are not offered outlets to shape or influence the regulations.

\textsuperscript{28} However, others do not find this to be a differentiator. David Prosperi commented, “open space in gated communities are just as underutilized as open space anywhere else” (Lang & Danielsen, 1997).
Figure 7: Station House’s lengthy common space rules

*Citizenship* – Freie critiques the model of a governing board in a planned community as authoritarian, and explains that behavioral checks on community (such as fines) are often a third party affair. Other academics agree. In a study of a New Jersey suburb, Baumgartner (1989) discovered that third parties were frequently used to resolve neighborhood disputes; this third party is streamlined as the community association in gated communities. These associations both serve to increase community building, give purpose to social interaction, and enforce management of the neighborhood. Grant (2007) points out that the social norms and controls extend to the design environment, where standards
are enforced through codes, covenants, or guidelines that accommodate little variability and resist change.

Again, urban apartments do not include these structures specifically, but elements of third party dispute resolution exist in apartment staffing policies. Most buildings encourage residents with disputes or noise complaints to alert the property manager, who will then handle the situation. One property manager described complaint resolution thus: “It’s a direct phone call to the person and just reminding them, 'I’m sure you didn’t realize what’s going on...’ You obviously never want to say who’s upset, just, “Unfortunately, one of your neighbors was disrupted by X and if you could possibly just keep in mind we are living in such close proximity....” There are, however, apartment buildings that encourage residents to be more directly involved. One developer specifically mentioned the need to educate and involve residents in safety and security measures, and another building actively encourages residents to manage their own internal disputes, unless it relates to a lease policy issue. The property manager of that building said, “I have residents who come to me all the time, and I really want to say, ‘Hey, be an adult, this is something you can handle on your own,’ but I know a lot of people don’t work that way....It’s not that they’re not encouraged [to come talk to me], it’s just that we have a group of people here that are very comfortable talking a situation out. But, everybody knows that my door’s always open, they can always ask me anything.”

Justice – Freie looks to the planned community’s impact on the surrounding area specifically in relation to taxes and education to evaluate issues of social justice. Gated communities are almost always defined by their hostile stance to the wider neighborhood,
rejecting public services for those that are privately regulated. Grant (2007) describes gated and new urbanist communities as responses to the “crisis of contemporary living,” encompassing a lack of civility, community, identity, and character. Blakely and Snyder (1997) argue that the privatization of space fuels its homogeneity, and that private community spaces add to spatial stratification where non-residents are excluded and repelled by private space.

In urban apartments, this influence is perhaps more indirect. There are no special traditionally public services or financing tied to the property. However, we should consider how apartments with large amounts of shared private spaces influence future development in the neighborhood. In general, these efforts replicate not typical community centers, but retail functions, which can make retail leasing complicated. For example, Station House offered a variety of fitness classes, but stopped hosting yoga classes in their gym after they signed their ground floor retail space to a yoga studio. The property’s fitness studio was used by the company during the retail space build out as a marketing promotion, but afterwards the property had to cease offering these classes, and that space became underutilized. Often, developers described the difficulty of retail lease-up as at least part of the reason why they dedicated so much space to amenities.29 These spaces may also replicate traditional “third place” functions in a privatized space, decreasing resident use and interaction within truly open spaces and increasing social segregation.

29 See page 49, footnote 19.
The urban apartments in my sample seem to have made some progress from critiques of gated communities. Though there are elements of similarity in marketing, these are less explicit (for example, the surrounding neighborhood is presented, if misrepresented). Developers are actively trying to encourage use of common spaces, offer diversity of some kind, and provide some outlet for resident influence over the space. However, some of the hallmarks of gated communities remain in place: namely, a controlled community shaped by the developer that promises convenience over difficulty and predictability over surprise. Because urban apartments share many of the same community-building tactics (marketing the suggestion of community, offering programing, propagating a clear identity through design), research should be equally wary of the effect of these efforts on the overall neighborhood.
Chapter 5: Implications for Residents, Planners, and the Real Estate Industry, and Beyond

Developers are responding to a perceived demand for community among the Millennial generation, who inhabit a different social landscape from the generation prior. This study suggests that, regardless of the strength of community that exists in these apartments, developers and property managers are taking active steps to enhance the social experience of their residents. This effort is manifest in the resident experience promised in marketing, but also in high net to gross floor area ratios, expense on events and event planning staff, and creative amenities. Common spaces often function to provide a workspace for a population that increasingly teleworks or freelances (see pp. 43-45), while programming expands the realm of interaction for otherwise small independent households. In these ways, developers are reacting to a segment of the social changes outlined in Chapter 1. However, these apartments are not replicating the supposed leveling function of community organizations that connect diverse individuals, like the civic associations Putnam studied or Oldenburg’s third places. Most concerning, they may potentially detract from deeper community engagement. Because of this, the trends listed in table 5 have implications for the urban experience of residents, the work of planners, and the shape of the real estate industry.
Table 5: Key Trends in the Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Trends in Study Apartments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Sense of community is rooted in a shared sense of style or brand (pp 40-42).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Developer visions idealize social interaction over social connection (pp 43-46).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Developers are more likely to include amenity or community space when they don’t believe the space is marketable for retail (pp 48-49).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Though industry literature celebrates community building as a component of retention efforts for current tenants, the developers and property managers in this study used it as an advertising pitch to recruit new tenants (pp 49-51).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Marketing that appeals to a sense of community simultaneously appeals to individual wants and needs (p 50).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sense of place in the apartments is frequently pursued apart from the neighborhood; most developers sought differentiation from the neighborhood in exterior design and while the neighborhood is included in marketing, it is frequently misrepresented (pp 51-55).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Implications for Residents
The trends above represent a response to the perceived desires of a new generation that is fueling a population boom in cities.

On this new pattern on migration and an anticipated growth of infill development, Karen Chapple (2014) says, “It is an even more volatile urbanism than before: new forms of gentrification will emerge, but also more people means more diversity, more integration in the core, and more exposure to difference.” Chapple’s expectation reinforces other
authors’ celebrations of the modern city. As quoted in Valentine (2008), Young (1990) describes the urban experience as “a being together of strangers”; Sennett (2001) explains, “a city is a place where people can...enter into the experiences and interests of unfamiliar lives...to develop a richer, more complex sense of themselves.”

Though urban newcomers increasingly cite diversity as an attractive aspect of cities, these apartment trends call the reality of this experience of diversity into question.

From this study, it is clear that the amenities arms race leaves residents with less reason to leave their apartment for more public community spaces. As daily activities (drinking coffee, doing work, exercising, socializing with friends), become internalized to the building, so too might resident interactions. Anecdotally, an executive staff member at the NoMa BID mentioned that residents have commented that their building is a community for them in the BID's surveys. Though developers are facilitating some connection to the surrounding neighborhood, where they exist, these connections are limited to the role of the resident as a consumer of local businesses (see pp 54-55). By requiring income to engage, these spaces also do not promote contact across income diversity.

This study also suggests that these apartments are duplicating features of other planned communities or gated enclaves, such as enforced feelings of belonging for residents (but not visitors) through design and marketing, privatized common space, and the building of community memory through programming. Though these new apartments do not go as far as to use formal gates or formal community governance structures, the community pursued is distinct from the neighborhood community, based on developer and marketing disconnect with the surrounding area (see pp 51-55). If effective, the
developer’s efforts could create hyper local place attachment, bonding the resident to the apartment rather than the neighborhood. Studies are mixed on whether this level of place attachment discourages civic engagement and feelings of responsibility at higher levels. Though several academics have postulated that HOA residents in particular might be disengaged from the surrounding city as a result of their commitment to neighborhood, Kirby (2006) found that HOA residents did not privilege their neighborhood above their municipality.\textsuperscript{30} Research that incorporates the resident perspective is necessary to know whether these interventions in place attachment at the apartment level affect place attachment at the neighborhood level.

**Implications for Planners**

This work to encourage community within private buildings works both in tension and in tandem with planner community-building efforts. As discussed above, these apartments might be at odds with the planning principle of encounter, or planning spaces for interaction between diverse groups. The logic behind encounter, though not entirely proven, is that increased interaction and contact should reduce prejudice and build empathy among majority and minority groups. These apartment trends, to the extent that they shape resident experiences, raise large questions about neighborhood-level diversity and homogeneity and the likelihood of majority and minority groups encountering each other.

Though developers did not release demographics of the individual buildings due to Fair Housing concerns, given that the NoMa BID claims 4,803 new apartments for a

\textsuperscript{30} In a survey-based study of place attachment, Kirby finds, “The HOA respondents viewed city and neighborhood similarly (74% positively, 25% negatively for both), while non-HOA residents showed slightly higher positive response rates (82% for the city, and 85% for the neighborhood). This indicates that HOA residents do not privilege their neighborhood above their municipality, and do not diverge significantly from their counterparts in traditional neighborhoods.”
population of 6,300, it is clear that the demographics of the apartment buildings are likely to reflect the demographics of NoMa as a whole, which are extremely homogenous. Within the BID, 77% of residents are between 18-34, and 92% of residents have a college degree or higher (NoMa BID, 2015). However, in the census tracts immediately surrounding the BID and in H Street, educational attainment is never higher than 84%. The study area’s apartments could function as micro settings for local community, similar to enclaves. The planning stance toward enclaves is mixed, as it will likely be toward these apartments: enclaves act as pockets of homogeneity within wider heterogeneous neighborhoods. Given the mixed track record of planners in building diverse spaces,31 some scholars have suggested that planners target diversity goals at a higher scale to avoid, “the restrictiveness that can lead to unintended results,” and still achieve, “equity and sustainability goals of redistribution [and] encounter” (Chapple, 2014).

While Chapple implies that planners can achieve goals of encounter by thinking at a broad scale, these apartments may be circumventing encounter at a micro-level by detracting from the use of social seams. Social seams are “points in the neighborhood where interaction between different ethnic and racial groups is ‘sewn’ together in some way.” They have historically been either public or private, and frequently include grocery stores, schools, parks, or a strip of popular neighborhood stores. These social seams are often a hallmark of stable diverse neighborhoods (Chapple, 2014). If common spaces and programming in these new apartment buildings detract from use of these social seams by decreasing street life or replicating the function of public spaces (such as offering dog

---

31 Chapple (2014) mentions, “fostering diversity at a local or micro scale may actually result in segregation, or simply outcomes that are unintended.”
parks), planners must be cognizant; they can’t assume that interaction in an otherwise diverse neighborhood will occur.

This impact on social seams is more meaningful if, as the study suggests, community space is an afterthought to retail space, with total amenity space dependent on space that can’t act as a unit but also can’t be leased to a retailer. A tough retail leasing environment generally implies low incomes, population, or foot traffic, and a neighborhood population that likely doesn’t resemble the population of luxury apartments. If these apartments with community space are often located in transitional neighborhoods, social seams are ever more important.

However, there is also potential for these developer efforts to buttress the work of planners. Though this study suggests that community is a more valuable tool for lease-up rather than lease renewal, to the extent that these communities are encouraging populations to stay more rooted in a place, the developers may be encouraging stable neighborhoods.\(^{32}\) Essentially, these actions could shift the behavior of renters to resemble homeowners, in terms of neighborhood engagement and investment.\(^{33}\)

These developer initiatives also present an opportunity for shared learning. Explicit community-building efforts in these apartments prove that both planners and developers recognize that proximity alone is not enough to promote community, and now both are experimenting with ways to provoke social interaction and connection. Though planners and developers may be targeting slightly different community outcomes, both

\(^{32}\) The impact of this change in behavior on the neighborhood depends on the aforementioned question about level of place attachment and its effect on civic engagement.

\(^{33}\) However, as this place attachment will likely affect the elasticity of a current tenant’s demand for housing, enabling the developer to capture a greater profit and increasing the average price of housing, it is questionable whether planners should encourage it.
groups seem to work to incite continuous casual interaction, rather than deep relationships. Planners may take note of developer adoption of flexible space and targeted programming, and should stay abreast of developer innovations.

**Implications for the Real Estate Industry**

Developer-initiated community-building efforts stem from a history of developer appeals to the social longings of prospective residents. Many of the examples of these intentional communities exist in the suburbs—in Levittown, Greenbelt, Reston, and numerous planned and gated communities across the country and world. However, cities are not exempt from this housing phenomenon either: cohousing, co-ops, and senior housing are all just as likely to exist in suburbs as cities. Gated communities are common in international cities, however they are less prevalent in the US urban context. In the US, as developers move to respond to social changes in a population that prefers urban spaces, these new apartments become one of few examples of communities in urban residential spaces that connect independent households. They represent new thinking about the value of the space taken off rent rolls and dedicated as shared, and increased operation expenses on social activities.

As is clear from the study, though the marketing and pursuit of community is a trend, there are disagreements between developers about the value of these efforts and when and how that value should be measured. While my interviews show that community is primarily emphasized during lease-up and marketing to prospective residents, the narrative around community efforts in industry reports emphasizes its importance for retention. Because objectives vary, the economic value of the space taken off the rent rolls
and dedicated as shared and the increased operational expenses associated with social activities is still to be determined.

This increased role of the developer in the social lives of its residents, though experimental, could lead to shifting consumer expectations regardless of economic value-add. Many developers in the study already described planning amenity packages based on expectations consumers had developed from other properties. Several property managers described getting ideas about programming from residents who had friends in competing properties. Whether or not this experiment in community building produces value for the developer’s balance sheet, the existence of these buildings might trigger a new baseline expectation for Class A living situations with social support.

By largely reusing community-building initiatives from planned developments in the suburbs, it is up for debate whether or not developers are meeting current consumer expectations, particularly for the Millennial generation. To the extent that Millennials prefer social connection, urban experience, and diversity, developers may be missing the mark. If this is the preference of Millennials, developers are providing them with a sanitized, standard urban experience that reflects more homogeneity than diversity—as explored, developers and property managers are largely ignoring the role of diversity in community, instead encouraging communities based on shared identity as established by a style or brand. However, these apartment products have also been very successful—leasing at an average of $2.96 per square foot, at average for Class A apartments in DC despite the area’s emergent nature—and the problem may instead be misinterpretation of consumer preference (NoMa BID, 2015). Millennials may be seeking a dependable, controlled urban experience. If this is the case, (which must be explored though research
that includes the resident perspective) we must question any assumptions that the Back to the City movement represents a step forward in tolerance and appreciating urbanity on behalf of the affluent.

**Implications for the study area**

The dynamics outlined should affect development at the study area level. While H Street has developed in “zones” (of residential, retail, and entertainment), NoMa has developed in phases—a first wave of commercial office development, followed by a wave of residential development. Public space is limited in both areas. While the pipeline for H Street is predominantly residential, plans are underway to introduce community hubs in NoMa, including both private retail and public space. The pipeline as of spring 2016 includes an REI flagship store and a Landmark Theater. Plans are also in progress for an underpass art park, and NoMa Parks, a subsidiary of NoMa BID, is actively negotiating with a developer to build a dog park on land acquired through grant funding (NoMA BID, 2016, *Just Around the Corner*).

The NoMa BID is directing these projects, which will provide opportunities for neighbors to meet one another and interact. However, these public spaces will be competing with privatized community space. Given the risk of neighborhood level segregation in social interaction, planners and community members should be especially cognizant about not replicating these privatized spaces, and using limited public space to encourage interaction and engagement between people across the neighborhood—with special attention to income diversity. Dedicating the park space to a dog park, while catering to the neighborhood’s largest demographic, might provide further disengagement from the neighborhood’s less affluent residents—who in 2010 represented 25% of the
neighborhood, and in four years represented 19% ("Households, less than $30,000, 2010 & 2014").

All parts of the study area may not be equally affected by this real estate trend as community groups are still active in neighborhood programming. While traditional neighborhood hubs such as places of worship and schools seemed disconnected from new residents, both the NoMa BID and H Street Main Street provide social programming at a neighborhood scale, to different extents. H Street Main Street organizes the major H Street Festival once annually, and relies on community volunteers to pull it off. The organization also manages a program connecting neighborhood youth to local businesses for summer jobs (though this work would likely not include apartment residents) (H Street Main Street, 2016). In comparison, the NoMa BID provides more regular event programming, including “Nerds in NoMa” monthly evening speaker series, the Lunch Box pop-up garden, and Summer Screen outdoor movies (NoMa BID, 2016, NoMa Events). Thus, the H Street area may be more susceptible to limited neighborhood-level social interaction. While the diversity of the population these events would appeal to is suspect, the work of these neighborhood organizations can serve to facilitate neighborhood ties vs. apartment ties.

Recommendations for Future Study
This study points to clear developer and property-manager concern for on-site community in urban apartments, manifest in design, programming, and branding. Based on the approaches to community outlined, these apartment buildings provide weak social connection in spaces that can mimic traditional neighborhood function. However, the data

---

34 The ASPCA estimates that dog ownership costs at least $1,580 in the first year, and a minimum of $695 in every year following. The expense of dog ownership may make it unavailable to low-income families (Micheli, 2014).
collected in this study is unable to measure the output of developer and property manager efforts. Though there is little research to date on this trend, additional research that explores the resident perspective through surveys, focus groups, or ethnographic studies is necessary to explore how these buildings affect the daily routines of local residents and their use of the neighborhood. These studies should provide helpful information about any changes in neighborhood use or civic engagement that might affect future development (which businesses and public spaces would thrive in that neighborhood) and/or neighbor-to-neighbor relations in diverse communities. In addition, once more of the buildings promoting community move into the retention phase, research should analyze the profitability of these efforts for developers in order to better predict how and where these efforts might grow. This might supplement a more national survey of the extent of community-building work and community marketing in new apartment buildings.

Though actively working to shape the social lives of residents is nothing new for residential developers in the last century, the current trends in real estate suggest new and unexplored implications for urban neighborhoods. Though apartment common spaces are meeting space and social interaction demands fueled by a changing landscape of home and work, they are also potentially internalizing the resident urban experience and decreasing use of social seams, while providing little leveling benefit themselves. While the trends are recognizable in the real estate industry in other housing products and types, their entrée into the urban fabric demands a closer study. Though developers are in a “trial” mode with community efforts in the study area and are merely trying to differentiate their products in a saturated market, it is clear even within the study area that developers borrow from one
another and that these ideas are likely to spread. (In addition, in the sample, two
apartment products are part of a national brand.) As these ideas travel, planners must be
aware both of the root of the social longing that developers are catering to, as well as the
influence of these privatized communities on more accessible community hubs.
Appendix: Overview of Community-Building Efforts

Developers strive to meet the perceived Millennial expectation for community from a variety of angles across design, amenity space, and programming.

Design - In general, interior design in the sample emphasized large, open spaces that are segmented to provide an optional sense of privacy. An architect interviewed mentioned that the hospitality industry and active hotel lobbies informed many of the design principles used in these apartment developments. As one developer described, these spaces are built with the idea that people want to socialize in small groups, not groups of fifteen people.

Figure 8: Sample Interiors. Clockwise from left: Elevation, AVA H Street, Flats at Atlas, 1st and M

Amenities – Amenity space in the properties represents as much as 14.6% of gross square footage, with every property maintaining at minimum a lobby and fitness center. Even among those properties with the largest number of shared spaces, the properties
converge on what they offer: three properties have expansive fitness centers over 8,000 SF, eight have pools, ten have courtyards, six have media rooms, and five have pet spas and/or a dog park. Some properties do veer from the norm—the Flats at Atlas and 2M both have an indoor basketball court, and 2M has the only dedicated children’s playroom. Avalon 1st and M initially took a risk and included “music jam rooms,” but has since converted the spaces to retail. The number of spaces and size of the spaces relative to the overall property seems to bear no relation to the extent that the property pushes socialization.

When I visited seven of the properties (unfortunately all during business hours, not during peak times), many were not at all utilized, apart from the gym. Four out of six property managers mentioned that the amenity people were most excited about during the tour was different than that which was most used. This might suggest a gap between the usability and marketability of the space, something heavily emphasized by the property managers of less amenitized buildings.

**Programming** - Programming, or events and services, is seen as key to activating amenity spaces; however, emphasis on it varies. While Camden NoMA hosts double the number of events during lease-up, 2M only transitioned the leasing team’s focus on events when lease-up was over. Planning and hosting events is a responsibility generally shared by the leasing team, though Station House does have a dedicated community manager in addition to the property manager. Across the board, property managers note that

---

35 There was no consistency in which amenity was viewed as the most popular. At AVA H the most popular by use and leasing tour excitement was the courtyard; at Elevation it was the clubroom or pool. At Station House and 2M, the fitness center and basketball court (respectively) was the most popular on tours, while the pool was most popular by use. At the Flats at Atlas, the sports court was the most appealing on tours but the business center most used. At 1st and M the pool showed well, but the gym was the most frequently used.
successful events involve food and alcohol, indicating that these cater to a particular demographic by necessity, at least based on age. Buildings under the same management company offered the exact same events, like Bozzuto’s “Wine Down Wednesday” and “Yappy Hour,” although a few properties did look to their residents for event ideas, which were generally sourced from the apartment properties of their friends. Generally, programming occurs once or twice per month, with apartment budgets allowing for larger quarterly events. However, 2M and Avalon First and M were the only properties to commit to having consistent events repeated weekly.
References


Logan, G. (2014). The Millennial Generation’s Influence on Real Estate Demand. *RCLCO.*


Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The great good place: Café, coffee shops, community centers, beauty parlors, general stores, bars, hangouts, and how they get you through the day.* Paragon House Publishers.


Turkle, S. (2012). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other.* Basic books.


WeWork. (n.d.). Retrieved March 1, 2016, from https://ww2.wework.com/page/1


