

DRAFT: DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHORS

**The Struggle To Belong. Dealing With Diversity In 21st Century Urban Settings  
Amsterdam, 7-9 July 2011**

**“ Safe and Clean”: Community Reactions to Neighborhood Business Improvement  
District (NBID) Marketing in a Multi-ethnic Neighborhood**

Gabriella Modan  
Department of English  
The Ohio State University  
421 Denney Hall  
164 W. 17th Ave.  
Columbus, OH 43210  
+1 518.428.0404  
[modan.1@osu.edu](mailto:modan.1@osu.edu)

Susanna Schaller  
Department of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences  
City College of New York  
Center for Worker Education  
25 Broadway  
New York, NY  
+ 646.321.0906  
[s.f.schaller@gmail.com](mailto:s.f.schaller@gmail.com)

Paper presented at the International RC21 conference 2011  
Session: nr. RT21.1, Ethnography of Urban Inequality (part of Ethnographic  
Interventions sessions)

## Abstract

In recent years Washington, DC has embraced the *Neighborhood Business Improvement District* (NBID) model. While the benefits and drawbacks of BIDs have been a longstanding topic of interest in urban studies, little of this work examines how BIDs play out on the ground once they are established. We use Lefebvre's model of social space and ethnographic and discourse analytic methods to investigate resident and merchant discourses around the NBID in Washington, DC's Adams Morgan, a densely populated central city neighborhood. The discourse of NBID marketing efforts has affected Adams Morgan's built environment and public image as well as residents' and merchants conceptions. In Lefebvrian terms, the BID's official *representations of space* have infiltrated residents' lived *spatial representations*. Through the categories *insider* and *outsider*, residents distinguished between the commodified space promoted by the NBID (that they felt was not for them) and a multi-purpose space where they lived. Whereas NBID discourse marketed Adams Morgan to visitors as safe and clean, residents portrayed the neighborhood as dangerous and dirty *because of* visitors and newcomers. While the NBID discourse promoted Adams Morgan's ethnic diversity, residents pointed to a racially disparate power structure, with White "newcomers" "intruding". Although these comments show resistance to BID endeavors, in other ways residents spontaneously incorporated marketized discourse into their descriptions of the neighborhood. Where Lefebvre's model draws a more distinct boundary between *representations of space* and *spaces of representation*, ethnographic investigation reveals that the marketization of public space can promote an imbrication of these spheres, where planners' representations of space leak into residents' and workers' lived experiences in their own neighborhood. Ethnography allows us, then, to see how, with the adoption of BID discourse into residents' lexicons, residents' own concerns about their neighborhood become framed within, and potentially limited by, the worldview of the Business Improvement District model.

## Introduction

In recent years Washington, DC has embraced the *Neighborhood Business Improvement District* (NBID) model as a means of marketing the city to attract revenue. While the benefits and drawbacks of NBIDs have been a longstanding topic of interest in urban studies in recent years (e.g. Briffault, 1999, Christopherson 1994, Justice and Goldsmith 2006, Mallet 1994, Miraftab and Faranak 2004), little of this work examines how NBIDS – and especially NBIDS – play out on the ground once they are established. In this presentation, we use Lefebvre's model of social space coupled with ethnographic and discourse analytic methods to investigate resident and local merchant discourses around the NBID in Washington's Adams Morgan, a densely populated central city neighborhood and entertainment district. The discourse of NBID marketing efforts has

DRAFT: DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHORS

had a strong effect not only on Adams Morgan's built environment and public image, but also on local residents' and merchants' conceptions of the neighborhood. In Lefebvrian terms, the NBID's official *representations of space* have infiltrated residents' lived *spatial representations*.

The research project discussed here included analysis of NBID planning and marketing documents, targeted interviews about the NBID with planners, merchants, and government representatives, and neighborhood residents, and mapping workshops with residents, merchants, and local representatives who were also residents. Our understanding of the dynamics of the NBID is also informed by our work at a local economic development corporation and extensive participant-observation in the neighborhood's public spaces at different times of day and night. In this presentation, we focus on the mapping workshops and interviews. The mapping workshops were originally part of a visioning project we designed at the local community development corporation. We met with 10 groups who represented the social and demographic diversity of two central city neighborhoods. In the workshops, we asked participants to draw maps that showed "how you see this part of town, and that show the important things that would make someone from somewhere else understand what the neighborhood is like, and what life here is like<sup>1</sup>." Participants spent about half an hour drawing maps and talking among themselves as they completed the tasks, and 1-2 hours presenting their maps to the group. Our data includes talk from both these parts of the workshop, as well as the maps themselves.

---

<sup>1</sup> For more details on this mapping project, see Schaller and Modan (2005).

DRAFT: DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHORS

In this presentation we examine the sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting constructions of place articulated in the workshops and the interviews by neighborhood residents. We use this data to think through the implications of a planning process that focuses on visitors while excluding perspectives and interests of residents and small business owners.

An ethnographically informed approach allows us to see how the penetration and the adoption of the official NBID discourse into residents' lexicons blurs the boundaries between formal, abstract representations of space and lived and experienced space. Local ideologies of place, then, are constituted through the interpenetration of the abstract and the experiential. We investigate how the residents' own concerns about their neighborhood become framed within, and potentially limited by, the worldview of the Business Improvement District model.

### **Business Improvement Districts in Washington, DC**

BIDs have been a rapidly proliferating form of urban governance. Business Improvement Districts are a type of special district developed to overcome disinvestment in particular urbanized areas. While originally developed in Canada in the late 1970s as a revitalization strategy, NBIDs were quickly adopted and implemented in the US to reinvigorate ailing urban downtown districts. New York City, for example, became an early adopter of NBIDs; by 1980 New York state passed enabling legislation, allowing municipalities to encourage NBIDs. Today, in 2011, New York City boasts sixty-four NBIDs, including fourteen multimillion-dollar NBIDs. By some estimates there were

DRAFT: DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHORS

over 800 NBIDs in 1996 and over 1,200 NBIDs in 2001 in the US (Ross and Levine 2001).

BIDs represent an innovative neoliberal strategy to harness private resources to reinvest in the restructuring of urban space to create specialized consumer-oriented spaces to attract business, workers, visitors and new residents back into the city. The underlying premises of urban revitalization policies that emerged in the 1980's are rooted in neoliberal concepts of privatization and decentralization; the aim is to leverage private resources on the local level to relieve the public sector of its spending responsibilities; a discourse rooted in self-help and grassroots organizing is used to justify this shift of responsibility (Cummings 2002). The Main Street program, a forerunner of the NBID model which was implemented in tandem with NBID programs by the DC and other municipal governments, developed the following principles to guide neighborhood revitalizations: organization, promotion, design, and economic restructuring. The focus is on demonstrating the ability of communities to organize themselves to help the city leverage their resources and to self-consciously create and market a local identity that can redirect investment and the local economy toward a consumer-driven model (Eisinger ?).

BIDs are a public/private partnership that enables local governments to encourage economic revitalization through property-based revenue collection facilitated by the government but reinvested in a geographically circumscribed space (Justin and Goldsmith 2006). NBIDs are created through local and / or state legislation, which determines their structure, geographic scope and functions.

DRAFT: DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHORS

BIDs are variably defined. The literature generally agrees that NBIDs grew out of and represent a variation of special purpose governments (Caruso and Weber 2006, Justin and Goldsmith 2006, Morcöl 2006, Foster 1997). Most NBIDs are established as non-profit organizations, although some states have written the legislation in such a way that NBIDs can be incorporated as charitable organizations, constitutionally sanctioned governmental entities, and / or municipal authorities (Morcöl 2006). Usually, their formation is subject to an affirmative or a negative petition process, that is to say a certain percentage of property owners, and in some municipalities, merchants have to either approve or voice their disapproval of the NBID. In some states, such as New Jersey, municipalities can authorize NBIDs without a petition.

While they receive both government and private funding, more importantly, NBIDs have also been granted a special power to levy a mandatory district-wide property-based assessment. The fees are variably calculated; generally, they are based on formulas taking into account the square footage and / or assessed value of the individual commercial properties within the district. In some cases—this is a recent development—multi-unit residential properties are also assessed.<sup>2</sup> The mandatory fee is potentially enforceable through the placement of a lien on the property of a delinquent member. Hence, NBIDs are assured a relatively secure budget. This is a key feature that separates especially neighborhood-level NBIDs from other nonprofit economic development organizations that are reliant on grants. Unhampered by funding conditionality, NBIDs

---

<sup>2</sup> DC currently has one such district; the Mount Vernon Triangle Improvement District, which has been termed a community improvement district or CID. The University City District in West Philadelphia is also advocating for such a district in its proposed expansion.

DRAFT: DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHORS

in this context enjoy a level of financial sustainability that may allow them a degree of autonomy not enjoyed by these other nonprofit agencies.

Finally, the membership of the board of directors of NBIDs is defined by the specific enabling legislation, which also determines whether directors are elected or appointed (Morcöl 2006). In Washington overall, the legislation that enabled NBIDs requires approval from 25% of commercial property owners, from owners of 51% of the assessed value of commercial property, and 51% of merchants. But all NBIDs in DC have received exemption from the merchant approval provision.

Originally, NBIDs were conceived to supplement services that municipal governments were not providing, like street cleaning and security. **NBIDs** also invest extensive time and energy into marketing: NBIDs are about place-making and image-making.

Washington's Comprehensive Plan, released in 2006, focuses on preserving and marketing its architecturally "significant" neighborhoods. The goal is to connect the "federal city" through the downtown business district to city neighborhoods in order to draw visitors onto neighborhood commercial corridors. Neighborhood NBIDs are an integral part of this plan. But their organizational structure and management vision tend to draw directly from NBID initiatives designed for downtown business districts that have few to no residents. Following central business district models, NBID planners work primarily with property owners, and generally devote little attention to the voices and concerns of merchants or residents.

DRAFT: DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHORS

Originally the people spearheading the Adams Morgan NBID wanted to buck the trend and to include the voices of merchants in the establishment process. The NBID proposal sought limited input from residents, limiting the participation to discussions at a local advisory neighborhood commission (ANC)<sup>3</sup> discussion. When the NBID proposal was finally discussed on the neighborhood level in public forums, however, the proposal quickly became controversial: fissures developed not only in the business community as the leadership heading up the NBID embarked on the campaign to collect petitions for the NBID. Additionally the NBID became hotly debated among community members -- residents living in the neighborhood. The fissures that emerged in community and business association meetings foreshadowed some of the tensions between “old-timers” and “newcomers” and “insiders” and “outsiders” that were to come as the NBID got underway.

Despite the controversial reception of the NBID proposal, the Adams Morgan Partnership NBID was approved in 2005 without the formal approval of merchants, seven years after the initial proposal had surfaced. Today it works in tandem with the citywide Mainstreet revitalization initiative to promote Adams Morgan as a diverse and exciting, commodified “destination location”.

### **Marketization of Adams Morgan: Conjugating Insider and Outsider Status**

“Clean, Safe, and Organized.” this is the Adams Morgan Business Improvement District slogan. It was the mantra that the NBID movers and shakers in this Washington DC

---

<sup>3</sup> ANCs constitute the local level of government in Washington, DC, representing residents of a particular district.



DRAFT: DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHORS

neighborhood used to promote their plan to the city government. Like so many urban neighborhoods across the country, the Adams Morgan NBID's stated goal is to "enhance the image of the neighborhood as a destination for visitors". Adams Morgan is a densely populated neighborhood that is part of the DC "midcity planning area." With intensive gentrification, its populace shifted between 1970 and 2000 from a predominately black to multi-ethnic and, more recently to a predominantly White (See attached table). But, it still carries the cachet of a "diverse" neighborhood, and it's one of the city's major entertainment districts.

**Table 1:** Percent of Census Tract Population by Ethnicity and Race (1970-2000)

<b>Percent of the Census Tract Population: Non-Hispanic Whites</b>				
<i>Neighborhood Census Tracts</i>	<i>1970</i>	<i>1980</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>2000</i>
East Adams Morgan 38	16	23	30	35
East Adams Morgan 39	38	34	44	54
West Adams Morgan 40.1	54	66	80	80
West Adams Morgan 40.2	54	66	65	67
<b>Percent of the Census Tract Population: Non-Hispanic Blacks</b>				
<i>Neighborhood Census Tracts</i>	<i>1970</i>	<i>1980</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>2000</i>
East Adams Morgan 38	74	63	49	32
East Adams Morgan 39	53	48	33	19
West Adams Morgan 40.1	32	21	07	05
West Adams Morgan 40.2	32	21	18	12
<b>Percent of the Census Tract Population: Hispanic</b>				

DRAFT: DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHORS

<i>Neighborhood Census Tracts</i>	<i>1970</i>	<i>1980</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>2000</i>
East Adams Morgan 38	08	12	18	27
East Adams Morgan 39	08	16	20	18
West Adams Morgan 40.1	11	12	11	08
West Adams Morgan 40.2	11	12	12	11
<b>Sources:</b> Neighborhood Change Database (NCDB) 1970 – 2000, US Census Long Form, Geolytics				

Planning discourses and revitalization programs in Washington DC are like those in many North American urban areas, in that they focus explicitly on how to restructure urban spaces to attract visitors. The overarching aim is to attract consumer spending. Data from mapping workshops and interviews that we conducted in 2006 with merchants and with neighborhood residents who were active in community issues reveal the implications of a planning process that focuses on visitors at the same as it excludes the perspectives and interests of residents as well as the majority of the neighborhood's small business owners. An ethnographically and discourse analytically informed approach to investigating NBIDS -- especially in a neighborhood where residents and many small businesses co-exist on uneasy terms with visitors -- can illuminate how a planning process built around "outsider" consumer interests may shift resources away from other priorities and carve out spaces that are inhospitable to local residents. This can exacerbate tensions between "insiders" and "outsiders", and it can create a neighborhood that may feel safe to weekend revelers, but decidedly unsafe to community members. Further, as urban studies theorist Peter Eisinger notes, an urban planning approach that's

DRAFT: DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHORS

geared towards visitors can “skew the civic agenda to the detriment of fundamental municipal services”.

### **Spatial and personal commodification**

The role of commodification in the planning process can be seen in Mainstreet’s characterization of the neighborhood, which commodifies not only culture and space, but the residents themselves:

From unusual stores to diverse ethnic cuisines, funky furnishings to one-of-a-kind finds, this urban neighborhood is an attraction in itself. Like its inhabitants, the flavor of Adams Morgan is spicy and alluring.

The terms “attraction” and “alluring” in this slogan are particularly important. These verbs implicitly call for a direct object – in order for attraction or allure to happen, there has to be a person who is attracted to or allured by the entity under discussion. In other words, Adams Morgan and its residents are presented as objects to attract others; by doing this, Main Street directs the focus of attention to visitors, and away from people already *in* the neighborhood. If residents become pieces of the commodified landscape, their own interests and concerns fade out of the picture.

If neighborhood discourse is any indication, the NBID’s focus on marketing the neighborhood to outsiders has influenced the way the residents have come to think about and experience their own neighborhood. Residents’ descriptions of Adams Morgan are a mix of *representations of space* – social space as produced by urban planning and economic development professionals –and *spaces of representation* – spaces produced through lived experience in the neighborhood. The NBID’s focus on visitors rather than

DRAFT: DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHORS

residents highlights the divide between these groups and contributes to the “insider-outsider” dynamic. As one resident put it in his description of the neighborhood, “There should be a sign on California Street: Welcome to Adams Morgan, but for God’s sake don’t move here.”

Through the categories *insider* and *outsider*, residents distinguished between the commodified space promoted by the NBID that they felt was not for them, and a holistic, multi-functional space where they lived. Whereas NBID discourse portrays Adams Morgan as safe and clean in their marketing to visitors, residents portrayed the neighborhood as less safe and less clean *because of* visitors and newcomers, and they delineated spaces for visitors as spaces residents often avoid.

In mapping workshops and interviews about the neighborhood, residents’ and business owners’ comments about their own uses and perceptions of the neighborhood were rife with references to outsiders. These comments tended to characterize outsiders as clueless, rude, drunk, or dangerous, as well as inattentive to the contours of the neighborhood’s geography. For example, one participant started the description of his map by saying,

These are my most frequent routes in and out [of the neighborhood]- someone from Virginia, they go here, then they go here, over here, then they get pulled over here, their car gets towed here.”

Similarly, when asked about the safety of the neighborhood, another participant exclaimed,

I think it’s safe. For the most part, like any city, you have to be paying attention, anywhere you go if you’re drunk and don’t know what’s going on. If you’re lost.

DRAFT: DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHORS

While these comments allude to visitors coming to Adams Morgan to consume (specifically, to consume alcohol), other remarks illustrate that the concept of a neighborhood as an *object to be marketed* has gained a firm place in the consciousness of residents.

Sometimes community members' views of the neighborhood contradicted NBID portrayals. For example, while the NBID discourse promoted Adams Morgan's ethnic diversity, when residents talked about the NBID they pointed to a racially disparate power structure, with White "newcomers" "intruding" into neighborhood goings-on. However, when simply speaking about the neighborhood and what kind of place it was, these same residents incorporated a marketized discourse into their descriptions of the neighborhood.

### **Confluence of Spheres**

Where Lefebvre's model draws a more distinct boundary between *representations of space* and *spaces of representation*, ethnographic investigation reveals that the marketization of public space can promote an imbrication of these spheres, where planners' representations of space leak into residents' and workers' lived experiences in their own neighborhood.

Comments invoking marketing were especially evident in the mapping workshops, where we posed a question that made reference to non-residents. Specifically, we asked

DRAFT: DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHORS

mapping participants, “What image would you want other people to have of the neighborhood”. We didn’t frame this question in terms of *visitors*, and the participants at this point did not know that we were interested in the NBID. Furthermore, when we asked this question to community members in the adjoining neighborhood, not a single person invoked the kind of discourse that we heard in Adams Morgan. So it’s particularly telling that a number of Adams Morgan respondents framed their answer in terms of marketing the neighborhood to consumers and business investment. The marketing comments also highlight common resident attitudes towards outsiders. Three examples:

[What image would I want], to draw them in, or keep them away?

If I were gonna open a business here, I would definitely put it, based on [these maps], right here [points to place on map]. But parking makes it a weird place to be quick, you’d have to live here.

If I were marketing this place I’d show a girl coming out of Sassy Shoes, Ama Cafe<sup>4</sup>, I’d have all the diverse shopping and eating, drinking, having a good time. I wouldn’t take that picture on Saturday night, where that same girl is throwing up into a garbage can!

This last quote is particularly interesting in its juxtaposition of representations of space and spatial representations; in the first part, about people enjoying trendy stores and hip ethnic cafes, the speaker seems to have internalized the city’s and the NBID’s

---

<sup>4</sup> All business names are pseudonyms

DRAFT: DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHORS

promotional literature. However, it sits uneasily with his day-to-day experience in the neighborhood.

The insider-outsider dichotomy is particularly interesting because it turns the NBID's *clean and safe* discourse on its head. From the residents' perspective, the very visitors who are sought after by the NBID have created among residents a culture of spatial avoidance. As one resident explains,

Lots of people coming into 18<sup>th</sup> Street affects how you walk around- changes how you live on the weekends, patterns change. I've not been willing to give up that. I actually feel pretty safe. Interestingly I feel it more as the neighborhood becomes more affluent. ... It's a different sense of community. It feels less safe now.

This contradictory statement embodies both the desire not to confront danger and at the same time the determination to lay claim to one's own neighborhood – to not want to give up a feeling of safety, even when the environment works against that feeling.

While the previous speaker *alludes* to weekend revelry – which is commonly associated with outsiders – other speakers explicitly link danger in the neighborhood to an “outside element”, particularly at night:

I think it's daytime safe, non-selling of liquor gives you a pseudo-safeness, you don't have so many people out of their element. During the nighttime liquor and drugs bring in an element of danger. Even if Adams Morgan is well marketed in the Convention Center and Tourist guides, it's hard to get busses because of the parking.

DRAFT: DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHORS

In the past five years, it has changed, kids from the outside, they don't know how to behave, they have no manners.

A few months ago right in front of our house a man was shot, but it's outside people.

Adams Morgan has among the highest crime rates in the city, and on weekend nights fights are not uncommon on the neighborhood's main entertainment corridor, as crowds jostle each other on the narrow sidewalks – sidewalks more narrow than they might otherwise be if the city had not created head-in parking spaces to squeeze more cars in. It's not clear that the violent crimes and fist fights are actually caused by outsiders, and it's debatable how relevant that is. But what *is* clear is that there is a strong perception among neighborhood residents and business owners that 'outside elements' are making the neighborhood filthy and dangerous. The drunken yelling, fistfights and stabbings, the morning streets covered with pizza crusts, trash, and vomit, make many residents question how a Neighborhood Business Improvement District is in their interests. As one resident explained when we specifically asked about the NBID,

I think it has some good things, but it looks too outerly -- well you know you have 16,000-plus people here. Yes you want to bring people in but you also need to focus on the people who *live* here.

We want to argue that the problem with the NBID is not simply that it's focused on visitors to the exclusion of residents, but also that it's focused on creating visitors as



DRAFT: DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHORS

*consumers* and residents as objects of consumption. The before and after photos in a presentation of the NBID that the director gave to the Washington Economic Partnership makes this clear: [show slide]. As in the touristic marketing of unpopulated Caribbean beaches, the NBID is promoting Adams Morgan as a playground laid out for the entertainment of visitors.

## Adams Morgan: Before



# Adams Morgan: After



## **Conclusion**

An ethnographically informed investigation of NBIDS as they affect neighborhood residents and other local stakeholders can get at some of the consequences of establishing BIDs that more traditional analyses might overlook. Our analysis has shown that a loosely structured methodology with few prompts, one that allows informants to discuss their neighborhoods in free-flowing ways, can provide insight into how urban planning processes influence the lived and embodied experiences of community members. As indicated by people's responses when explicitly talking about the NBID – where people were vocal in their resistance to the BID – what people say when they are

DRAFT: DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHORS

explicitly reflecting on an issue can differ from what they say when they are explaining a map or shooting the breeze, or from what they do in practice. This type of approach can highlight oversights in the planning process, where discourse that promotes the NBID as having turned the neighborhood from dangerous and dirty to safe and clean for visitors has not created the opposite perspective for residents, but has also limited their movement in the neighborhood, such that many residents avoid the commercial corridors at night, particularly on the weekends. The NBID's construction of the neighborhood as a landscape of leisure for visitors has infiltrated residents' discourse as well as their orientation to their own neighborhood. The landscape produced by the NBID – a landscape for visitors – has effectively alienated residents from major (temporally configured) spaces in their neighborhood. Spaces of representation have merged with representational spaces in ways detrimental to residents' lived experiences.