

# The Washington Post

September 8, 2017

## Is Adams Morgan DC's Last Funky Neighborhood? Or Past Its Prime?

By Lavanya Ramanathan



The seasoned know to keep their eyes trained on the ground as they walk up 18th Street in Adams Morgan on a Saturday night, because you never know what might be underfoot — a mystery stain or the remnants of a jumbo slice or a scurrying rat, or sometimes a person, just sitting on a curb, sobbing.

Here, every weekend is a different scene of street theater and somehow exactly the same: a couple arguing in the street. The soft thump of brushes grazing drumheads at Columbia Station. The skunky odor of weed that catches your nose from no place in particular. Young men clutching whiskey-Cokes crawling precariously across the tiny old balcony that fronts the saloon Madam's Organ.

Say Adams Morgan to many Washingtonians and “people may roll their eyes,” says Christopher Lynch, a restaurateur who opened the corner boîte L'Enfant Cafe on 18th Street nearly 15 years ago with his partner, Jim Ball, and now owns Red White & Basil. (Say you are writing about Adams Morgan to the hippie-ish longtime residents of Adams Morgan, and they will eye you with suspicion. Even if you also live in Adams Morgan. Such is also the character of the neighborhood.)

You cannot douse yourself in the ur-fragrance Santal 33 here the way you can in Shaw, which boasts a Le Labo. Adams Morgan is a sushi burrito desert. But 18th Street has unmistakable character, unlike the stretches of the city lined with new apartment buildings offering one month's free rent. The steady creep of gentrification has affected more and more neighborhoods, but Adams Morgan seems to be keeping the beast at arm's length.

The city's chic 14th Street and Shaw are nice, Lynch says, but Adams Morgan "is like the East Village of D.C. It is the last eclectic space, it is mom and pop, and it's a space rich in history."

If 18th Street and nearby Columbia Road make up our East Village, they are, like that bohemian New York neighborhood, experiencing upheaval. Aged institutions, unloved and barren of customers, have tired of vying with newer, shinier parts of the District. In the past few years, Pasta Mia, Bardia's New Orleans Cafe, Millie & Al's, Angles and La Fourchette have up and quit, and it's not insignificant that each of them had occupied the creaky old real estate for not years, but decades.

Meanwhile, incoming is the Line, a boutique "lifestyle hotel," now loudly and visibly wrapping up construction in a former church built in 1912 just off Columbia Road. These days, workers are milling about in sizable numbers, eating their lunches in a park the Line has paid to restore, halting the street's always-humming traffic for this truck or that, popping in for a quiet coffee at a nearby record store and coffee shop.

It promises to change everything. Maybe.

### **An activist enclave**



The Line Hotel is nearing the final stages of construction. Some in the neighborhood wonder how it will change things here. (Photo by Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

"In 1960 Adams-Morgan was supposed to die of urban renewal," wrote journalist Ken Ringle in a front-page article in this newspaper more than 30 years ago. "In 1970 it was dying of decay. In 1980 it was succumbing to gentrification, its many analysts insisted, and the salsa beat of its ethnic heart was surely doomed."

Today, as Shaw and 14th Street and Bloomingdale and Ivy City lure all the newcomers and restaurants, what may be killing it is competition. According to the city's "Vision Framework" plan for the neighborhood, retail vacancies are high. As for diners, it uses the word "fickle." Or maybe the problem is closer to home.

The residents here are activists, as if it's in their blood. They have at various times spearheaded efforts to limit the number of liquor licenses; to cover the exposed bosoms on the Madam's Organ wall, once (and perhaps still) reviled by its neighbors; and, more recently, to close 18th Street to drivers, force the Line to hire more local labor and halt the development of condos in a plaza just off 18th that they contend belongs to the public.

This is a neighborhood that embraces the arts and takes pride in its quirk and diversity, says resident Carol Miller, who is among those organizing Adams Morgan Day this weekend. "Everybody who lives here, we love the eclecticism in the makeup of our community. And in some ways, the eccentricity," she says. But "we want our community to be a place you want to live."

Into the middle of this back-and-forth strides the Line. Its 200-plus rooms, brick and glass glommed onto the back of the church, tower over Madam's Organ; and Idle Time, a bookstore that, 40 years in, has withstood Crown Books and B. Dalton and Barnes & Noble and the Internet; and Bossa, where every Tuesday night, Cheick Hamala Diabate, a musician who had his own Tiny Desk Concert on NPR, can be found jamming with his multiculti crew.



The Line, the brick and glass edifice in the background, towers over the old stalwarts and the newcomers to 18th Street NW. (Photo by Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

Very little of this, however, attracted the Sydell Group, which operates the very buzzy NoMad in New York and a Line in Los Angeles, and will soon plant the Line flag here.

"We didn't wake up one day and say, 'We really want to do a hotel in Adams Morgan,' " says Andrew Zobler, chief executive of Sydell. "We look for interesting buildings and interesting neighborhoods in general."

The coffee shops and record stores and restaurants, for their part, hope that the hotel will return more day traffic to the corridor, that it might be the thing to help the

neighborhood bolster its reputation beyond its nightlife and jumbo slice pizza.

Nothing is more Adams Morgan than fretting over the soul of the neighborhood.

### **Still funky and familial**

In the daylight hours, when the streets have been swept of trash and human misery, it's easier to see what Lynch sees, the funky and familial.

The only noticeable rats are the gym kind, scurrying to CrossFit or Solidcore. Shops unfurl dusty rugs on the sidewalks and hawk musky oils purporting to smell like Davidoff's Cool Water and feminist T-shirts and other sundries for the resistance.

The green neon signage of the District's aspiring "Green Light District" flickers on at the stores that carry glass pipes that look like Chihuly himself crafted them, and the stores that sell T-shirts and gift you pot. You can get your nipples pierced here, at Tattoo Paradise (and people do, all day and into the early-morning hours), and at Tail Up Goat you can graze upon buttery, house-made bread with pattypan squash or dotted with a crumble scented of hazelnut.

It is both the edgiest neighborhood, says Bill Duggan, owner of Madam's Organ, and it isn't.

"It's taken a hit. I call it the Tryst-ification of the neighborhood," he says, referring to Tryst, the popular yuppie coffeehouse. "You see people that come out, and they think they've come to the edge."

"But a neighborhood where the houses sell for a million dollars isn't the edge anymore."