

# Histories of Privatization: Examining Culture, Legal Conflict, and Economic Transformation at Adams Morgan Plaza in Washington, DC

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Public spaces are disappearing at alarming rates as cities face mounting housing, economic, and social issues. Adams Morgan Plaza in Washington, DC is no different. Over the past several years, the Plaza has experienced numerous changes that have radically altered the neighborhood. It sparked community outrage and an ensuing lawsuit that wound its way, slowly, through the DC courts. This study explores the transformation of Adams Morgan Plaza in Washington, DC, through the lens of legal conflict, economic pressure, and multicultural history. It centers on two research questions: (1) what is the full story of Adams Morgan Plaza before and after its re-acquisition? and (2) what factors shaped its redevelopment? Drawing on historical archives, legal filings, and U.S. Census data, this research employs a mixed-methods approach to trace the Plaza's evolution from a theater site to a contested public space and, most recently, a proposed affordable housing complex. The historical narrative uncovers a pattern of rapid change followed by long stretches of community use, described here as a form of "punctuated equilibrium." The legal analysis chronicles a six-year battle between neighborhood groups and private developers, culminating in the site's transfer to Jubilee Housing in 2023. Economic data from 2012 to 2022 show that Hoffman & Associates' acquisition in 2017 followed declining poverty rates, while Jubilee's involvement aligned with worsening poverty and rising housing needs. Together, these findings suggest that Adams Morgan Plaza's fate was influenced not only by legal ownership and historical claims but also by measurable economic trends in the surrounding neighborhood. The Plaza underscores how public spaces in multicultural cities are shaped by competing visions of community, equity, and development. This study offers a framework for understanding similar conflicts over urban land use in other historically diverse, gentrifying neighborhoods.

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## Introduction

Adams Morgan Plaza emerged from the liminal background of my running route one rainy Thursday afternoon when I almost crashed into a police officer standing near the bus stop. Before I had a chance to process my close encounter, the crosswalk light had already switched back to red and I was trapped on my side of the street, only one and half miles away from the end of my route. Instead of browsing through my podcast library or even checking my mile splits, I glanced back at the plaza, behind the mysterious chain-link barriers, and took it in for the first time. I saw the way the entire plaza had created an atmosphere, an environment that not only intrigued me but invited me to stay. That would be the case were it not for the fences. In front of one of these tall chain-link barriers on the perimeter of the plaza, the police officer I almost hit was standing, watching a man on a ladder power wash a mural from the plaza's upper wall (Figure 1). Only one day earlier, it read "FREE OUR PLAZA PARA MIGUEL." That was over two years ago.

On that rainy day in 2022, the private development firm Hoffman & Associates closed Adams Morgan Plaza to the public. Its re-acquisition sparked controversy in the community and an ensuing, lengthy legal battle in the DC courts. Neighborhood residents, local DC residents, and other interested parties became increasingly invested in the future of the Plaza because of its history. Adams Morgan Plaza was an important theatre and cultural center of the Adams Morgan Neighborhood before becoming an open-access public square. Its new embroilment against the backdrop of DC's housing landscape was unprecedented and sparked two important questions. What is the full story of Adams Morgan Plaza both before and after its re-acquisition? What factors determined its future? This paper attempts to answer both these questions with two combined methodologies. The first methodology relies on primary and secondary sources—including scholarly articles—to detail the history of Adams Morgan, its surrounding neighborhoods, and Adams Morgan Plaza itself. The second mobilizes census data to understand why the Plaza became

involved in DC's housing economy. In this manner, this paper finds that the Adams Morgan Plaza's transformation into an affordable housing center differs profoundly from its history. The paper points to a possible economic impetus for this historic moment in the Plaza's history observed through worsening poverty rates between 2021 and 2022.

This paper begins with an overview of the methods used in this study, including a personal positionality of the subject matter by the author. Following this, the results are presented in three predominant historical categories: (1) pre-plaza history, (2) legal history, and (3) contemporary economic history. Finally, this manuscript concludes with a summary of the findings and a consideration of future scholarships.

### Research Scope and Methodology

To understand the early history of Adams Morgan, this research relied on historical records, photos, and books about the name and establishment of the neighborhood. Some Washingtonian articles were consulted to help detail the neighborhood's early history and the moment when the neighborhood was officially recognized through its name. Following, the work of other scholars was consulted, especially Celestino Zapata and Josh Gibson who wrote a book documenting the evolution of the Adams Morgan neighborhood through photographs. Robert Manning's research was also useful, particularly his discussion of DC's demographic history as a formerly majority-Black city in the 1970s. These scholarly perspectives helped provide a cultural background of the Adams Morgan area for a potential readership unfamiliar with the neighborhood and its connection to DC's broader urban history. A few news articles add to these narratives by discussing the early disasters that plagued the site of Adams Morgan Plaza, including the collapse of the Knickerbocker Theatre in 1922. Building on these foundations, this research traced the Plaza's post-1922 history and its transformation into the Ambassador Theatre, drawing on online archives, podcasts, and primary materials such as original posters. Thus, the Plaza's pre-history is narrated through 1976, before it was officially acquired and turned into a public easement for the neighborhood. Then, the historical scope of this research resumed in 2017 when SunTrust acquired the area of the Plaza and transformed it into a community fixture. The author draws on more contemporary and local news sources to uncover the 21st century history of the Plaza and its early legal history.

The legal history section of this study mostly draws from news sources, websites, and original legal documents from the case as it bounced between the DC Circuit and Superior Courts. News articles and updates about the status of the Plaza since neighborhood residents filed suit against the private development firm Hoffman & Associates who purchased the site proved critical in this next phase of study. These materials help trace the chronology of the lawsuit through news updates, a neighborhood-run website, and original legal filings. As the chronology approaches present-day, the author turns to field work to supplement the other sources used in this study. The closure of the Plaza and its chain link fences posed a challenge when accessing physical parts of the Plaza (Figure 2). Consequently, potential avenues to conduct oral histories at the site of the Plaza were also limited; photographs of documents posted near and around the fences of the Plaza as well as public records help fill potential gaps caused by these physical restrictions.

To propose a potential answer to this question, the economic element of this research pulls from census data and theories of urban geography to understand the economic history of Adams Morgan and its Plaza. The research began by identifying relevant geographic areas using Homer Hoyt's Sector Model of urban geography. Adams Morgan's proximity to the historic Kalorama Triangle neighborhood of DC made Hoyt's Sector Model the most useful geographic framework because it accounts for directional biases in urban land use and value catalyzed by factors like historical zoning (Warf 2010). This allowed the author to select geographies to use for census data analysis that aligned with traditional theories like the Concentric Zone Model while factoring in DC's historic zoning practices. Following this geographic inquiry, data provided on the US Census Bureau website was investigated (US Census Bureau, n.d.-b). Boundaries of the research area were identified using prior geographic analysis such that census tracts that encapsulated the Plaza, the surrounding Adams Morgan neighborhood, and its border community could be selected (Figure 3).

Census data was sourced from the American Community Survey's (ACS) five-year estimates of the poverty rate within the selected census tracts. The five-year estimates provide important data over many years and utilize "estimates based on data collected during the 60 months of the five most recent calendar years." These estimates are drawn from "from all statistical, legal, and administrative entities, including census tracts, block groups, and small incorporated places, such as cities and towns" (US Census Bureau 2022). This allowed a highly detailed investigation of economic trends throughout all the census tracts identified in this study.

The ACS five-year data utilizes a system of ratio estimation that applies two sets of weights: one to each sample person recorded, household person, and group quarters person, and one to each sample housing unit. The ACS's ratio estimation takes advantage of independent population estimates provided by the US Census Bureau to optimize precision and to correct "for under- or over-coverage by geography and demographic detail" (US Census Bureau 2022). In that way, ACS five-year estimates offer the most accurate data for small-population areas such as the census tracts examined in this study. While they are not always the most current because one-year estimates do not survey individual census tracts, they are an accurate data metric to assess in this study, where analyzing separate census tracts is critical (US Census Bureau, n.d.-d).

Two types of data were sourced from the ACS five-year estimates from 2012 to 2022: percent of population for whom poverty status is determined (including those in housing units) and the total number of housing units. Using a percentage rather than a total population living in poverty was chosen to account for varying population sizes between census tracts. On the other hand, the total number of housing units per census tract was selected as a way of measuring the overall fluctuation in housing units within each census tract. Comparing both poverty rates and housing units offers insight into how changes in housing stock may relate to shifting economic conditions. Although both metrics are observed together, this study does not propose that poverty percentages and total housing units are correlated datasets. Rather, these metrics are overlaid to provide a multi-focal image of how economic factors determined the Plaza's future, especially Jubilee Housing's

involvement and their proposals to build low-income housing on the Plaza itself. Both strains of data were compiled by year and analyzed using Microsoft Excel to produce simplified line graphs and data tables for this study.

### A History Before the Plaza

The name “Adams Morgan” was originally tossed around during the 1950s and formed by adjoining the names of the all-white John Quincy Adams and now-defunct all-black Thomas P. Morgan Schools. While their partnership in the community was unofficial at first, their cooperation began in earnest after the Supreme Court ruled in favor of integration in 1954 (Leaman 2008). Together with local activists and residents, the schools created the first Adams-Morgan Better Neighborhood Conference to peacefully desegregate the two schools (Figure 4). Although the hyphenated name originally distinguished the neighborhood from others nearby, it eventually fell out of use. Josh Gibson, an expert, and writer about the neighborhood argues that the use of the hyphen is designed to join two “easily identifiable” geographical areas into a single name. Since the two schools did not occupy purely distinct locations, the hyphen disappeared (Leaman 2008; Zapata and Gibson 2006).

Following the establishment of the neighborhood’s official title, the development of Adams Morgan began under the careful guidance and encouragement of Mary Foote Anderson. Anderson, the wife of a Missouri Senator, was described as a “dedicated crusader of the early neighborhood.” Sixteenth Street saw dramatic growth due to her efforts. Meridian Hill Park—also known as Malcolm X Park—now occupies the land where her home and castle once stood (Zapata and Gibson 2006). Over the years, several proposals to expand the White House and Lincoln Memorial into Adams Morgan were floated, but few materialized. Today, a host of embassies reside on the perimeter of the neighborhood along Sixteenth street. In the 1960s and 1970s, Adams Morgan became a site of much civil unrest like other parts of Washington, DC, and America as a whole. The arrival of the automobile allowed people to move freely in and out of the neighborhood; during this time, dramatic demographic change transformed the neighborhood and indeed, the city at large. The outmigration of residents from the neighborhood made Adams Morgan an increasingly affordable housing locale for many; gradually, more progressive ideas about civil rights and Black Power found substantive footholds in the area (Zapata and Gibson 2006).

During this time, DC’s background as a majority-Black city helps to position Adams Morgan in the multicultural historical fabric of the city. In 1970, the city boasted an absolute Black majority of almost 70 percent (Manning 1998). The years prior also saw an increasing amount of Black urban residents moving into the city; in 1970, 27.2 percent of African Americans resided in the suburbs of DC while around 90 percent of white residents were living there by comparison (Manning 1998). This stark contrast in urban versus suburban racial composition is what motivated many to begin calling DC “Chocolate City,” an homage to its rich cultural history rooted in Black and African American culture. However, the cultural foundation for this identity began forming well before 1970. Large scale growth of the suburbs coupled with post-World War II decline in city conditions forced an abrupt shift in urban demographics. Racist lending practices, often affording large housing subsidies to white residents moving out of the city and to

the suburbs, pushed black residents out of the DC periphery and into its urban core (Summers 2019, 28).

In the years following, the city became disproportionately populated by low-income communities of immigrants and people of color who were forced out of the suburbs due to high costs of living and economic discrimination. These shifts, compounded by historically racist lending practices, fundamentally reshaped the socioeconomic landscape of DC. They left concentrically positioned urban areas of high and low capital, shaped by these types of economic barriers that biased urban land development for decades (Warf 2010). However, civil rights groups fighting against these practices helped bring in an increasingly higher number of immigrants into the city, lured by the early success and optimism of these activists (Manning 1998). But tensions would come to a head during the Civil Rights Movement and the important role DC would play in the staging of political activism and dissent. Though the inflammatory Moynihan Report released in 1965 sparked tension in the city, it was not until Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream” speech and assassination four days later that transformed the city (Summers 2019, 35–37). The riots in DC during the late 1960s DC prompted large-scale flight of white families and landowners who began moving to the suburbs to avoid the violence (Manning 1998).

As a result, businesses, homes, and other properties in DC’s urban core were vacated, allowing a surging immigrant population to begin establishing roots in the city. The new demographic composition of the city was far more diverse as a result: by the 1990s, the city boasted a 72.6 percent minority population; however, there was a large amount of flux in between racial subgroups. Added immigrant communities in the district began to chip away at the majority maintained by Black and African American residents. By 1990, Black and African American urban residents comprised only 65.1 percent of the population compared to their 71.1 percent majority in 1970 (Manning 1998). Overall, this growing economic diversity continued; it sets the stage for the urban world in which Adams Morgan finds itself in contemporary DC.

Adams Morgan Plaza occupies the former site of the Knickerbocker Theatre. On January 28, 1922, the theatre collapsed after a bout of heavy snowfall, injuring a total of 133 people and killing 98 (Gormly 2022). Following the disaster (Figure 5), three days of rescue operations and investigations revealed faulty construction as the cause (Felix, n.d.). In the aftermath, a series of lawsuits and widespread public outcry led to the implementation of several important building codes for Washington, DC (Gormly 2022). Following the collapse of the Knickerbocker Theatre, Thomas Lamb was hired in 1923 to begin construction of the new Ambassador Theatre using the shell of the Knickerbocker as a foundation (Bryan 2012). Several years later, prominent rock performer Jimi Hendrix left tour with The Monkees and performed at the Ambassador for five days starting August 9, 1967 (Fraley 2022; Wolf Trap 2017). The Jimi Hendrix Experience was advertised throughout the neighborhood and drew numerous crowds to the Ambassador (Figure 6) during those five days of summer where anyone—regardless of age—could experience Hendrix’s performance (Namdi 2017; Krulik 2017).

The Ambassador eventually closed in January 1968 due to a shortage of funding and a series of unsuccessful musical attractions that failed to generate revenue for the establishment (Schweitzer 2017). The theatre was eventually demolished, and the site was set to

change hands in 1976 when the vacant plot became the prospective site of a new business. During that year, the bank Perpetual Federal Savings and Lending wrote a letter to Adams Morgan Residents proposing to build a branch on the grounds of the former Ambassador Theatre. They also wrote in the letter that they would build a plaza for public use as part of an agreement to dismiss federal complaints against their racist lending practices. Eventually, the land was acquired by SunTrust Bank—now Truist—to build their branch, and the public easement purpose of the Plaza was brought about informally. While Perpetual wrote about its goal to establish a Plaza in Adams Morgan for communal use in their letter, SunTrust articulated no such claims. Nonetheless, before the Plaza’s re-acquisition by development firm Hoffman & Associates in 2017, the site was used by the surrounding community for farmers markets, performances, and art festivals (Austermuhle 2017; Maxit 2021).

### A Legal History

On June 16th, 2017, the Kalorama Citizens Association (KCA) and the neighborhood group Adams Morgan for Reasonable Development (AM4RD) filed a suit against the private development firm Hoffman & Associates and SunTrust (the Defendants) to regain control of the plaza after it was slated for a new upscale housing project. In his original brief to the DC Superior Court, Paul Zuckerberg—a practicing attorney representing the KCA and AM4RD groups (the Plaintiffs)—noted that the Plaza was under the ownership of the neighborhood, who maintained and used the plaza over many years prior (Schwartzman 2020). Zuckerberg cited a letter that Perpetual Federal Savings and Lending wrote to the Adams Morgan community in 1976 to substantiate his claims (Figure 7). In it, Perpetual Federal Savings President Thomas J. Owen talked about the bank’s desire to provide a public space for neighborhood residents:

“Perpetual agreed to develop the property in such a way as to preserve its open quality, attractiveness and accessibility to the vendors that presently use it. Present calls for a bilingual branch housed in a modest three-story building placed as far back as possible in order to allow ample room for vendors and other open-air activities” (Owen 1976).

Citing *Washington Land v. Potomac Ridge* (2001), Plaintiffs further argued that the Plaza met the necessary criteria to create a public easement: (1) an intent by the grantor to create the easement and (2) acceptance by the public. On June 16, 2017—following his filing with the court—Plaintiffs filed a preliminary injunction against Hoffman & Associates to halt the potential demolition of the Plaza (Zuckerberg, n.d.). One week later, on June 23, Defendants filed documents opposing the preliminary injunction and calling for a summary judgment, arguing that “no genuine issue of material fact exists” and that “Defendants are entitled to judgment as a matter of law” (Jacobs 2017).

On August 4th, DC Superior Court Judge Todd Edelman ruled in favor of the Plaintiffs and granted their request for a preliminary injunction to cease construction at the Plaza. He argued that the burden of proof to establish “no genuine issue of material fact” was on the Defendants, and not sufficiently argued in the Defendant’s earlier brief on June 26. Edelman noted that residents of Adams Morgan had a substantial chance of having a substantial

chance of prevailing in their lawsuit. He therefore ordered Hoffman & Associates to halt further construction. The Court further denied the Defendant’s request for a summary judgement and instead ordered an expedited hearing for the case (Edelman 2017). On August 8, Edelman delivered another ruling again in favor of the Plaintiffs. He denied the Defendant’s earlier claims to require bond or compensation for potential losses incurred by the injunction granted on August 4. Edelman also established mediation sessions and a pretrial conference that would extend the timeline of the trial into 2018. However, Hoffman & Associates would continue to delegitimize the claims of the neighborhood, beginning a 30-month tirade against the Plaintiffs to delay any future trial.

On December 29, 2017, the case was officially transferred to Judge Hiram Puig-Lugo after a series of back-and-forth hearings and filings between the Plaintiffs and Defendants over the previous four months (Superior Court of the District of Columbia 2017). Puig-Lugo handed down a few important decisions, including ordering a mediation session on January 10, 2018 (largely unsuccessful) and granting a summary judgement for the Defendants on March 5, 2018. Puig-Lugo’s ruling found that because Hoffman & Associates had no “proprietary interest in the property at issue,” the development of the Plaza would be subject to an “executory contract with SunTrust Bank” (Puig-Lugo 2017). Shortly thereafter, the Defendants filed a motion on March 7 to dismiss the case and move further proceedings to the US District Court for the District of Columbia (USDC). Zuckerberg and the original Plaintiffs filed an appeal almost two weeks later, and the case was brought to the District of Columbia Court of Appeals (DCCA) (Superior Court of the District of Columbia 2017).

Although the Plaintiff’s appeal called for a jury trial, the case was denied by the DCCA on July 18, 2018. Associate Judges Thomson and Glickman and Senior Judge Steadman wrote that the motion to dismiss the appeal was granted due to “lack of jurisdiction” (Glickman, Thomson, and Steadman 2018). In their opinion, the judges refer to several prior holdings including *Reichman v. Franklin Simon Corp.* settled by the DCCA in 1978. It found that although the Appellants in the case believed that an earlier summary judgement was issued prematurely, the lack of additional discovery in the case invalidated their claims to an appeal (Yeagley 1978). Thomson, Glickman, and Steadman drew parallels to Zuckerberg’s appeal case—supplemented by citations from the District of Columbia code—and affirmed their denial of his appeal. Almost two years later, the case was pushed from the USDC back to the District of Columbia Superior Court on September 25, 2020 (Caesar 2020).

Judge Beryl A. Howell issued a memorandum opinion citing a lack of subject matter jurisdiction and refused to hear the case at all (Howell 2020). Oral arguments were heard again before Judge Puig-Lugo and an oral decision was released on January 12, 2021. Puig-Lugo ruled in favor of the Defendants, denying Plaintiff’s motion to stay the proceeding and granting the Defendant’s motion for a summary judgement. For three months, both Zuckerberg and Defendants went back and forth about bail payments before Zuckerberg appealed the case once again on March 19, 2021 (Superior Court of the District of Columbia 2017).

Following the reversal, fences went up around the Plaza almost a year later, on March 21, 2022. On a freezing day later that month, unhoused Adams Morgan community member Miguel Gonzales died of hypothermia. Miguel Gonzales grew up in Adams

Morgan and attended Oyster Adams Middle School only a short way away. In 2004, his building was converted into a co-op and while most residents took buyouts and moved, a member of Gonzales' close family stayed. But when she died without a will in 2016, Gonzales was eventually evicted because his name was not on the deed (Moyer 2022). From then on, Adams Morgan remained a central fixture of Gonzales' life, as well as many other unhoused residents struggling to find permanent accommodation. When the plaza was cleared and fences erected, Gonzales' belongings were lost. His death sparked widespread outrage in the Adams Morgan community, much of it directed at Truist, whom many blamed for his wrongful death. Later that month, a graffiti-style mural (Figure 1) was created above the Plaza to protest the seizure of Adams Morgan Plaza that led to his death (Moyer 2022). Gonzales' death was met with widespread sympathy and public outrage.

On December 22, 2022, the DCCA granted Zuckerberg's appeal and remanded the case back to DC Superior Court to be heard in front of a jury (Howell 2022, Schwartzman 2022). It further reversed the prior ruling on January 12, 2021, that granted a summary judgment to the Defendants in the case (Glickman, Thomson, and Steadman 2018). The ruling from the DCCA was released back to the DC Superior court on March 3, 2023 after which the Plaintiffs filed a continuance to postpone the case by another two months (Superior Court of the District of Columbia 2017). On June 12, 2023, the Defendants filed another motion for a summary judgement (post-remand). In response, the Plaintiffs filed a motion to hold the case in abeyance because of Zuckerberg's retirement from the law practice (Kalorama Citizens Associations et al vs. SunTrust Bank Company et al, n.d.). Puig-Lugo would deny the motion on July 6, 2023, but transferred the case to the care of Judge Donald Walker Tunnage (Superior Court of the District of Columbia 2017).

Tunnage transferred the case back to Judge Todd Edelman, who originally heard the case; he accepted Zuckerberg's motion to withdraw from the case on August 10, 2023, and heard the details of the case again from the Plaintiff's new attorney, Amanda Fox Perry. On September 14, Tunnage heard the details of the case from the Plaintiff's new counsel and denied the Defendant's motion for a post-remand summary judgement. One month later, SunTrust (now Truist) passed off the deed of Adams Morgan Plaza to Jubilee Housing, a nonprofit organization local to Adams Morgan on October 13, 2023. Both parties filed multiple motions to extend the case until September 6, 2024, while they negotiate the use of the Plaza alongside Jubilee Housing's construction plans (Superior Court of the District of Columbia 2017).

Jubilee Housing published their plans for the plaza on April 19, 2024. Their proposal included 40 low-income housing units on the Plaza as well as an open space to restore previous Plaza activities (ERC Colbert & Associates 2024). Since then, numerous postings around the fences at Adams Morgan Plaza alert the surrounding neighborhood of Jubilee Housing's plans. One notice read:

“New 7-story mixed-use building with 1 cellar level and 1 penthouse level. Parking in cellar; retail at street level; apartments on the 2nd-7th floors, and amenity space in the penthouse. A 4,095-sf public plaza is included at street level at the northern part of the site. The existing branch bank

building and public plaza will be demolished” (from Figure 8).

Based on the current postings in and around Adams Morgan, the Plaza is set to remain a feature of the neighborhood. While the “existing branch bank building and public plaza will be demolished,” the notice intends to maintain the public plaza that has remained a central part of the Adams Morgan neighborhood community for the past 50 years. The visual plans for Jubilee's project show a new, revitalized public plaza in front of its apartment complex (Figure 9). On May 2, 2024, the Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1C (ANC) voted unanimously in favor of Jubilee Housing's proposed project which was shared in a letter by ANC Chairperson Peter Wood (Wood 2024).

### A Contemporary Economic History

To complement the legal history provided about Adams Morgan Plaza after its re-acquisition, economic census data is used to provide an answer to the second central research question of this study: what factors determined its future? In short, *lowering* poverty rates within the study geography before Hoffman & Associates re-acquired the Plaza, *rising* poverty rates within the study geography before Jubilee Housing took over the Plaza, and an *increase* in housing units in all but two of the census tracts between 2017 and 2022 provides a potential resolution.

Turning first to poverty rates, it is important to note that between 2016 and 2017—the year when Hoffman & Associates re-acquired the Plaza from SunTrust—poverty rates *dropped* in all but two census tracts within the study geography (Figure 10). Census Tracts 38 and 55 each experienced an 11% increase in poverty between 2016 and 2017, while all others saw decreases ranging from 3% to 33%. The census tracts enclosing the area of the Plaza recorded the smallest decrease in poverty rates, only a 3% drop in census tract 40.01 and a 14% drop in census tract 40.02. These respective drops in poverty rates might suggest that Hoffman & Associates's desire to build upscale housing on the site of Plaza was motivated by improving economic conditions within the area. Decreasing poverty rates in the year before their acquisition of the Plaza area might provide positive reinforcement for Hoffman & Associates' decision to build luxury—as opposed to public or low-income—housing. On the other hand, most census tracts saw an increase in poverty rates between 2021 and 2022 (Figure 10). All but four census tracts—38.02, 40.01, 55.01, and 55.02—saw poverty rates increase; they rose as little as 10% and as much as 260% during that time proportionally. In fact, the census tract enclosing the plaza (40.02) saw a 35% increase in poverty rates between 2021 and 2022 and so did most census tracts that surrounded the plaza. The directly neighboring census tracts 39.02 and 42.01 saw a 260% and 173% rise in poverty rates between 2021 and 2022, respectively. Only the other directly neighboring census tracts 38.02 and 40.01 saw decreases in poverty rates that were 46% and 42% lower, respectively. The rise in poverty rates in the year before Jubilee Housing took over the Plaza might explain their choice to take over the site in October 2023. Further, these worsening economic conditions might have motivated Jubilee Housing to specifically propose low-income housing in April 2024 to address these issues.

Considering the total housing within the geography of this study provides an additional parallel avenue to analyze both Hoffman & Associates' and Jubilee Housing's specific involvement

in Adams Morgan Plaza. From 2012 to 2017—just before Hoffman & Associates re-acquired the Plaza—total housing units within the study geography remained relatively stable (Figure 11). Hoffman & Associates' involvement in the Plaza site comes before a rise in total housing units in most of the study geography between 2017 and 2022 (excluding census tracts 55 and 42.02 which saw a lower quantity of total housing units in 2022 than 2017). Acquiring the Plaza site during a time when the number of housing units was relatively stable might have been advantageous for Hoffman & Associates who sought to make high returns on their construction project. Despite the jump in total housing units from 2017 to 2022 in most of the study geography, poverty rates mostly worsened between 2021 and 2022. The simultaneous increase in housing units and poverty rates suggest that the housing units added from 2017 to 2022 did not address underlying economic issues within most of the study geography. This supports the hypothesis that Jubilee Housing's involvement was driven by worsening economic conditions and an increase in housing units that failed to address poverty. Jubilee Housing's involvement and commitment to building low-income housing would provide an intervention, giving DC residents “earning up to \$90,400, or 60 percent of the area median income” to obtain stable housing and economic growth (Schwartzman 2023). In numerous studies using predictive models, existing data analysis, and novel phenomenological analysis from the US and around the world point to the positive impacts that stable housing can have on economic wellbeing, quality of life, social cohesion, health, and job stability (Akinsulire et al. 2024; Marçal, Choi, and Showalter 2023; Tunstall et al., n.d.; Palimaru et al. 2023; Hudiburg 2022; Baumstarck, Boyer, and Auquier 2015). Affordable housing cannot single-handedly ameliorate poverty or produce widespread social benefits, but when coupled with other interventions—like housing placement experts and proactive policies—it can make a significant impact in places like Adams Morgan (“Housing Policy and Urban Inequality: Did the Transformation of Assisted Housing Reduce Poverty Concentration? | Social Forces | Oxford Academic,” n.d.; McClure 2008).

Based on the economic data evaluated in this section of the study, we can propose a possible answer to why Adams Morgan Plaza became involved in DC's housing landscape. From 2016 to 2017, a drop in poverty rates throughout most of the study geography could have motivated Hoffman & Associates to re-acquire the Plaza for their luxury housing complex. Improving economic conditions in the year prior might create a favorable outlook for their plan, which sought high returns from a higher-income client base. At the same time, a stability in total housing units between 2012 and 2017 might have inspired Hoffman & Associates to enter a stable landscape with little fluctuation in total housing metrics. Further, it is possible that Jubilee Housing's involvement was precipitated both by rising poverty rates from 2022 to 2023 and an increase in housing units from 2017 to 2022 within most of the housing geography. An increase in housing units alongside worsening poverty rates might have encouraged Jubilee Housing to propose a low-income housing solution for the Plaza to mitigate the problem. These findings are reasonable assumptions based on the data from the study geography, but they are not definitive. Ultimately, Hoffman & Associates and Jubilee Housing are both private groups: one a for-profit company, the other a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Their rationale for steering the Plaza's future into the realm of DC's housing landscape might have

been motivated by a combination of different factors. This analysis offers only a possible explanation that accords with both the chronology and proposed goals of each company.

## Discussion

The historical inquiries within this study show how the full story of Adams Morgan Plaza both before and after its re-acquisition is plagued by two themes: punctuated equilibrium and conflict. Originally a term from evolutionary biology, ‘punctuated equilibrium’ describes a pattern of rapid change followed by long periods of stability. This phenomenon describes the full story of Adams Morgan Plaza both before and after its re-acquisition. The early history of the Plaza is a story of rapid transition within the multicultural backdrop of the Adams Morgan neighborhood. It experienced the tragedy of the Knickerbocker Theatre, the vibrancy of the Ambassador Theatre, the unsuccessful efforts of Perpetual Federal Savings Bank, and the plans of SunTrust bank to open a branch there after 1976. After 1976, the Plaza experienced a period of tranquility: the Adams Morgan community embraced its role as a public easement that offered ways for people to connect, socialize, and collaborate. For almost forty years, the Plaza existed as a public easement that brought joy to many. However, it would rapidly transition again, this time into the hands of Hoffman & Associates in 2017 when SunTrust decided to close their branch on 18th Street and Columbia Road. This was the moment when it entered DC's urban housing landscape. It was also when the Plaza's history became plagued by conflict. The ensuing legal battle over the purpose of the Plaza defined the site for almost seven years as the KCA and AM4RD waged a legal battle against Hoffman & Associates to preserve the public easement. The legal battle was so prolonged and thorny that eventually Jubilee Housing became involved in October 2023, solidifying the Plaza's eventual purpose as a housing location. This final transition into Jubilee Housing's hands would bring an end to the story of the Plaza and its history of punctuated equilibrium and conflict.

The economic data mobilized in this study proposes that poverty rates and changing quantities of housing units determined the future of the Plaza as a housing location. Early stability in housing units from 2012 to 2017 along with improving poverty rates from 2016 to 2017 in most of the study geography might substantiate Hoffman & Associates's rationale to re-acquire the Plaza from SunTrust in 2017. A rise in housing units (2017–2022) alongside increasing poverty rates (2021–2022) may help explain Jubilee Housing's involvement and proposal to build low-income housing. These data suggest a possible explanation to how the Plaza became a housing site, but do not offer a definite, undisputed rationale. Instead, the economic analysis of this study offers a potential insight into the other, more contemporary social histories that influenced the future of the Plaza.

The implications of this study are several. First, this paper elucidates the early history of an under-researched portion of Washington, DC that has undergone a series of rapid transformations. Secondly, this research offers an in-depth history of the legal battle that has determined the future of Adams Morgan Plaza that surfaces important insights into the way urban space is historically disputed. These findings offer a precedent for understanding future conflicts over the use and purpose of urban public space. Thirdly, the economic analysis provided in this study proposes a hypothesis about how public spaces like Adams Morgan

Plaza are selected for housing development. This element of the study provides a unique insight for future scholars to evaluate how housing is built, operationalized, and realized in multicultural, historical urban environments. Lastly, this investigation into the multilayered history of Adams Morgan Plaza provides a detailed narrative that pulls together many threads of journalistic, scholarly, and public inquiry. It offers a resource for future readers to return to the complex history of an important neighborhood fixture within one of DC's most diverse neighborhoods.

Though these implications are important, a few limitations exist within the study methodology. Beyond the physical barriers surrounding the plaza, the various historiographic analyses within this manuscript are hard—in theory—to generalize to other sites. The highly specific circumstances and history of the Plaza allow it to become a unique case study to explore privatization and urban development in one of DC's most multicultural neighborhoods. But trying to make a similar claim, or even replicate this work to other urban areas, is challenging given the highly opportune intersection of various conditions that precipitated the rationale for this study. Future scholars wishing to find similar sites to study would run into a few challenges positioning their research where the urban phenomena of this study are replicable or even exist in parallel. Moreover, the positionality of the author—who maintains a longstanding connection to DC—poses potential areas of interpretive bias within the study of this manuscript. To overcome this potential bias, the study aimed to use oral histories to supplement some of the findings, but the Plaza's closure limited this endeavor. Thus, potential interpretive biases might still exist within the scope of this study as external testimony was severely limited.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study offer several critical implications for future scholarships, planning, and urban policy. First, by tracing the Plaza's history through the lens of punctuated equilibrium, this study reveals how periods of urban stasis often obscure deeper structural tensions that can resurface through moments of rapid spatial transformation. Urban planners and policymakers should recognize that even seemingly stable community spaces may harbor unresolved contestations around public use, property rights, and development that can quickly erupt under shifting economic or institutional pressures.

Second, the legal battle over Adams Morgan Plaza highlights the intricate governance challenges posed by contested urban public spaces. The Plaza demonstrates how ambiguous legal circumstances—formed by relationships within a community to public easements on private property—can become focal points of community resistance, litigation, and protracted negotiation. For policymakers, this case underscores the importance of clarifying legal and civic commitments attached to quasi-public spaces. Similarly, there is a need to strategies tools to mediate between private developers and long-standing community stakeholders. Third, the study's economic analysis raises important questions about how demographic and housing data are mobilized—strategically or retrospectively—to justify urban redevelopment. The correlation between shifts in poverty rates and housing stock with redevelopment decisions, while not causative, suggests that policymakers and developers alike often rely on macroeconomic indicators to substantiate their actions. Urban scholars and advocates should therefore pay close attention to how data-driven narratives,

produced at the neighborhood and even census-tract level, are used to legitimize or contest spatial change.

Finally, this study offers a methodological contribution to the historiography of urban space. By weaving together archival research, economic data, and other historical sources (where possible), this study models an interdisciplinary approach to uncovering the layers of conflict embedded within a single site. Future researchers can use this approach to explore other under-documented urban spaces, particularly those at the intersection of racial diversity, economic vulnerability, and spatial redevelopment. Adams Morgan Plaza should not be viewed as an isolated case but as a cautionary tale and a teaching tool. It demonstrates the fragility of public space, the complexities of community resistance, and the uneven ways in which urban redevelopment unfolds. Its story can inform a more just and historically grounded approach to planning in multicultural cities—especially as U.S. urban centers continue to grapple with the threefold pressures of housing crises, gentrification, and historical-cultural preservation.

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## Data Availability Statement

Census datasets, spreadsheet analyses, and generated charts are available to use at the link and at the request of the author by email: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/LR0VVH>. Original (digitized) legal documents and records used in this study are also available for viewing at the link and at the request of the author by email: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/FPKNC>.

## Declaration of Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## Appendices

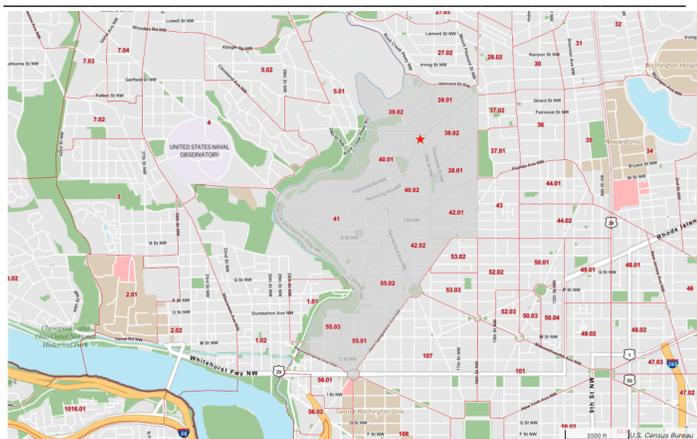
### Appendix A: Figures and Diagrams



**Figure 1:** Image of the graffiti-style mural above the closed Adams Morgan Plaza taken in March 2022; a worker can be seen power-washing the words from the wall above the Plaza (image courtesy of the author).



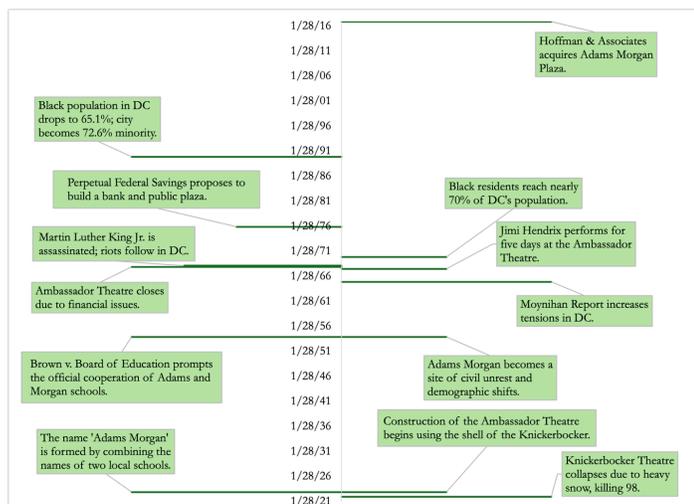
**Figure 2:** Image of Adams Morgan Plaza in May 2023, surrounded by fencing. A few blue benches can be seen in front of the fences on the sidewalk that borders the plaza (image courtesy of the author).



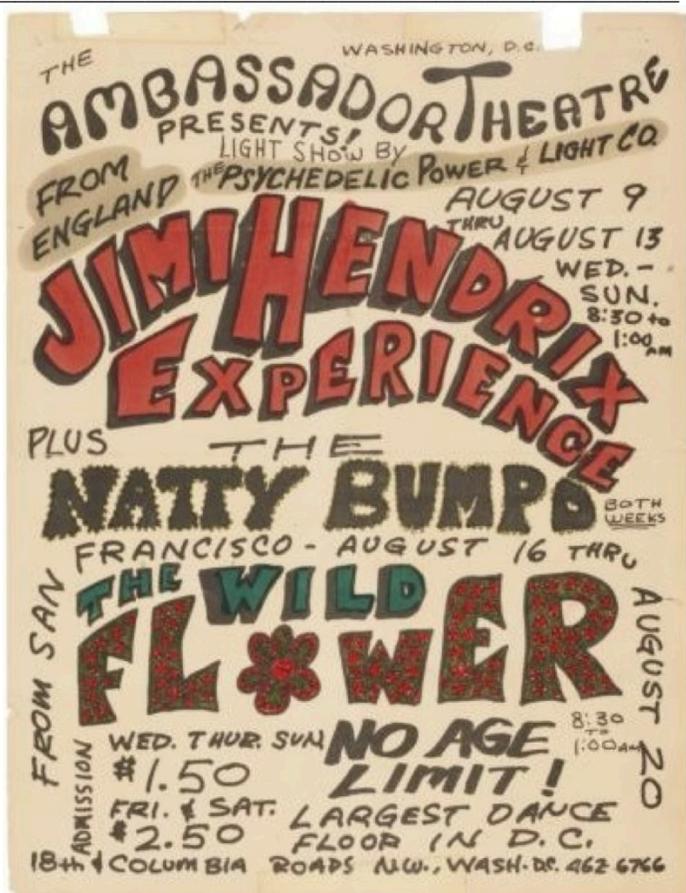
**Figure 3:** Census tracts of interest highlighted in grey with Adams Morgan Plaza marked by the red star at upper center (US Census Bureau from the Decennial Census).



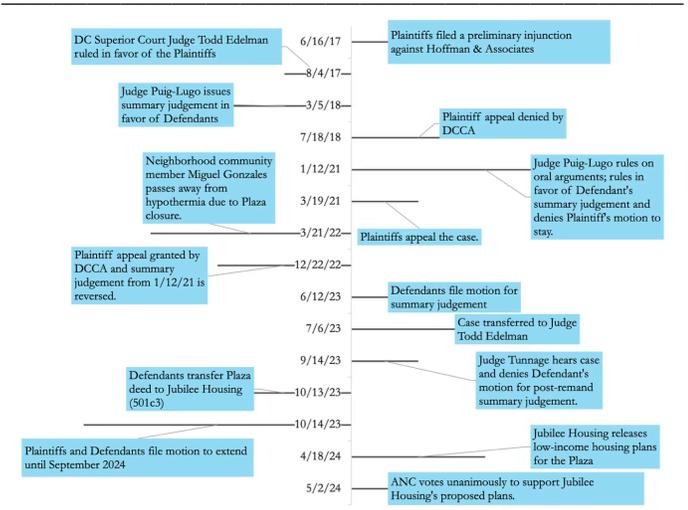
**Figure 5:** Image of the collapsed Knickerbocker Theatre—located at right—on Columbia Road and 18th Street (image from the Library of Congress). (The Library of Congress 1922)



**Figure 4:** Timeline of the early history of Washington, DC coupled with important events in Adams Morgan from 1921 through 2017 (timeline courtesy of the author; information from Manning 1998 and Summers 2019)



**Figure 6:** Poster advertising the Jimi Hendrix Experience at the Ambassador Theatre from August 9th through 13th, 1967. (Photo by Jeff Krulik). (Kruklik 2017)



**Figure 7:** Timeline of the legal history of Adams Morgan Plaza (timeline courtesy of the author and events compiled from DCSC and DCCA records).



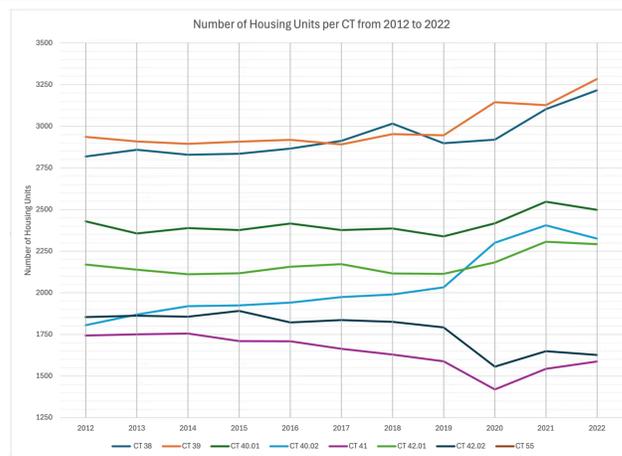
**Figure 9:** Rendering of the new Adams Morgan Plaza under Jubilee Housing's current design (image accessed through the DC Historic Preservation Office and authored by ERC Colbert & Associates). (ERC Colbert & Associates 2024)



**Figure 8:** Notice of pending application for Jubilee Housing's upcoming project on Adams Morgan Plaza (photo courtesy of the author).

Short Census Tract	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
CT 38	10	9.6	10.6	11.1	9.4	10.4	7.7	8.9			
CT 38.01									1.7	4.6	5.8
CT 38.02									5	13.3	7.2
CT 39											
CT 39.01									5	4.1	4.5
CT 39.02									0.4	0.5	1.8
CT 40.01	2.7	2.2	2.9	4.4	3.6	3.5	2.7	3.1	1.5	5.9	3.4
CT 40.02	3.9	3.9	3.4	3.8	4.3	3.7	3.6	4.8	3.4	2.6	3.5
CT 41	6.1	6.4	6	5.7	6.3	5.1	4.5	4.8	5.2	5.9	6.5
CT 42.01	9.9	5.8	5.7	4.9	4.3	3.1	2.1	1.7	1.5	2.6	7.1
CT 42.02	7.6	7.3	8.4	7.4	7.5	5	5.1	6.2	16.2	13.9	15.5
CT 55									12.1	15.9	15.9
CT 55.01									18	15.8	4.9
CT 55.02									11.7	12.4	11.3
CT 55.03									13.8	31.6	37.4

**Figure 10:** Table showing percentage of people within census tracts living below the poverty line from 2012 to 2022 (data from US Census Bureau from the American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates). (US Census Bureau, n.d.-c)



**Figure 11:** Chart showing total number of housing units within census tracts surrounding the plaza from 2012 to 2022 (data from US Census Bureau from the American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates). (US Census Bureau, n.d.-a)