

WEDNESDAY OPINION



Andrea Limauro's mural "Endless Summer" in NoMa. Photos by Albert Ting.



What this 100-hour undertaking shows about public spaces

BY ANDREA LIMAURO

In May and June, I spent 100 hours painting my largest mural yet — a 2,000-square-foot wall in NoMa, in what sociologists call a “third place”: a space for socializing that is neither work nor home.

Nicknamed “the bike lobby,” this large, roofed, open space is a public amenity that District planners required the developers to provide. The planners wanted an easy connection between Florida Avenue and the Metropolitan Branch Trail, a popular regional trail that connects the Maryland suburbs to NoMa and runs right by the site. The developers delivered by punching a corridor through their apartment building. Today, the constant foot and bike traffic through the space validates that idea.

As with the spring season artwork for this series, I chose this wall for its location in relation to D.C.’s main climate risk in the summer: urban heat. The D.C. Department of Energy and Environment (where I work) projects that days in the summer with a heat index of 95 degrees Fahrenheit or above — often referred to as “heat emergencies” — will increase up to three times by 2080.

Because temperatures are not the same across the city — varying according to factors such as tree cover, proximity to water, topography and land use — some communities, often lower-income, experience even hotter summers. That’s why I focused on Northeast Washington, where neighborhoods along the rail lines can feel up to 17 degrees hotter than the

greener areas northwest of Rock Creek Park. The rail infrastructure itself contributes: Aboveground metal tracks routinely hit more than 135°F in summer (which forces trains to run slower for safety reasons) and radiate heat well into the night. The rail yards, and the industrial businesses that usually line them in cities everywhere, tend to have fewer trees and more heat-retaining surfaces such as asphalt and flat black roofs, exacerbating the urban heat island effect.

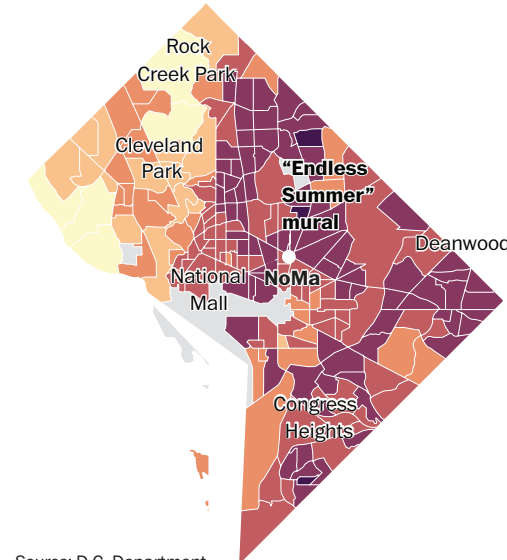
The wall’s location, directly across from the busy national, regional, cargo and Metro rails in NoMa, felt perfect for this season’s mural. Like the Georgetown artwork, this project also points to one of the few solutions we have to rising temperatures in dense urban areas: building more shaded third places for people to cool off. While tree cover is essential, it’s not always feasible in tight urban spaces with mazes of underground infrastructure. Thus, creating shade through architectural and design solutions — from shade umbrellas and sails in parks to awnings along retail streets, to balconies in buildings — can also play a major role in cooling our cities.

Third places — especially when free, accessible, and welcoming — are crucial ingredients in creating real community. In a time of ever-expanding cities and deepening social disconnection, they are more important than ever. Yet they’re disappearing. Urban design tactics intended to dissuade loitering and encampments end up creating unwelcoming and uncomfortable spaces for everyone. If you’ve struggled to find a free and comfortable place to sit

Where the most heat-vulnerable D.C. residents face high heat

Heat affects D.C. residents differently, depending on their exposure to heat and sensitivity to it. The Heat Sensitivity-Exposure Index was created to measure the heat risk they face.

Darker areas indicate a higher heat risk for residents



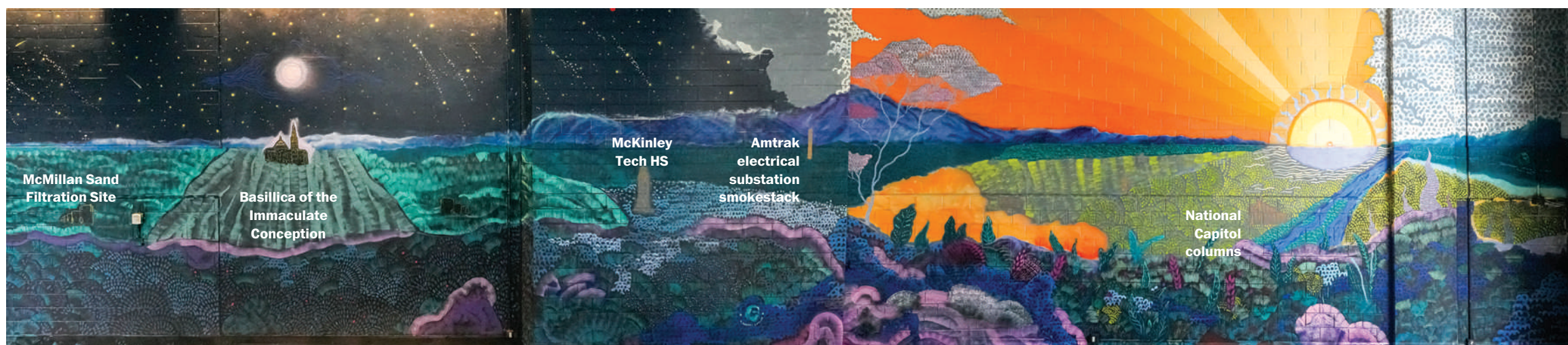
Source: D.C. Department of Energy and Environment

in a U.S. city, this is probably why.

This is not to say such concerns aren’t legitimate. There is a housing and mental health crisis in the U.S., but poor design won’t solve it. Design is not a substitute for a social program. When we make spaces uncomfortable for some, we make them uncomfortable for all. The result is often that people with means and choices avoid these uncomfortable public spaces, which, ironically, end up being used only by the very people who were meant to be kept away. With the bike lobby, I wanted to show that the opposite approach, more equitable and democratic, should be the guiding principle for urban design: Universal comfort for all is more likely to lead to higher use and diffused ownership of the space.

The mural depicts a large rising sun, along with landmarks from NoMa and communities northeast and northwest of Washington’s old Boundary Street, which formed the northern boundary of the Federal City under the 1791 L’Enfant Plan. Today it’s Florida Avenue. My goal was to make a space so beautiful that people would collectively care enough to maintain it.

Andrea Limauro is an artist, city planner and climate resilience expert based in Silver Spring and a flood resilience planner for the D.C. Department of Energy and Environment. This is the second piece of art Andrea Limauro is creating for his “Climate of Future Past” project about seasonal risks in vulnerable communities around D.C. Limauro created the project in response to The Post’s commission of four artworks in its “Four Seasons” collaboration with the artist.



ALBERT TING AND THE WASHINGTON POST STAFF

A composite image created from photos of Andrea Limauro's mural.