



Interview: WHEDco's Nancy Biberman on Creating 'Civic Anchors' In the Bronx

The founder of WHEDco shares her thoughts on the state of the Bronx

BY [AMY PLITT](#) [@PLITTER](#) APR 11, 2016, 11:29A



A tenant watering crops on the Urban Rooftop Farm at Intervale Green, photo by Jared Gruenwald

In 1992, Nancy Biberman [helped found](#) the [Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation](#) (WHEDco), a community organization that works on developing housing in the Bronx. But WHEDco's approach to development is holistic: instead of merely creating apartments, Biberman sees the group as responsible for creating livable neighborhoods, with safety, health (particularly for women), commercial revitalization, and affordable housing all

part of the equation. Here, she discusses the organization's work, and how it's helped shape Bronx neighborhoods.

Can you explain what WHEDco does, exactly?

We are a community development organization. Our buildings are all conceived and actually function as civic anchors in some way, shape, or form. For example, our first development was the rehabilitation of an abandoned city hospital in the Bronx. In addition to 132 apartments, that building is home to WHEDco's Head Start center, an after-school program, a primary health facility, and a commercial kitchen. It's an incubator for small businesses. We see our buildings not as apartments, but as hubs, as community hubs, as cultural hubs.



We like to do our work, which is obviously service-oriented, and then give people the sort of we're-there-for-the-long-haul sense about our buildings. You want to feel safe when you walk out at night, feel comfortable when you take walks with your kids. We see our jobs as significantly improving neighborhoods for low-income families and the folks who live there, by improving schools, improving the quality of the streetscapes, and improving the retail.

How did the organization get started?

In the mid-1980's, the city and the Mayor Koch began a really aggressive and awesome effort to rehabilitate buildings that had been in abandoned [because of] arson. I was in charge of developing one of these mammoth sites. It included 23 vacant buildings which had over 700 apartments in a cheaper neighborhood of the Bronx. When I finished my development, my reaction was actually kind of like, Oh my god, what have we done? It's not so easy to build a neighborhood and at the end of this we have to be building neighborhoods, because when you buy a house, you're not *just* buying a house—you're buying the neighborhood. You're buying the schools, you're buying the places to shop, you're buying the transportation that's convenient.

That was sort of what turned my head around about what we were doing and really focused me on building neighborhoods and building communities.

The organization is also really committed to sustainable development; why is that so important, especially in the Bronx?

The Bronx has historically, in terms of health, of New York state's 52 counties, been dead last. I think that creating spaces and buildings that emit less toxins into the air, [using] green building materials...I think it's our obligation to do that, it would be irresponsible not to do that.

Especially in a place that still is dealing with serious health issues. It would be very wrong to be doing anything else. The city should, and I believe does, disincentivize any development that doesn't pay attention.



Bronx Commons, via Marvel Architects/Local Projects

So in the 25 years since WHEDco was founded, how have you seen the borough change?

Our first development, which opened in 1997, is right around 167th Street, just a few blocks north of Yankee Stadium. When we started our building there wasn't an occupied storefront in the entire three or four block area. Now they're not only all occupied, but more are being built. There are people out on the streets. It's little things like this that take a long long time, and then you start seeing evidence of people feeling safe and retailers saying, I think I can make it here. It doesn't happen overnight, it's very very slow, but it's thrilling to see. I think the Bronx is at that point right now. I would say it's really at a turning point.

There's a new wave of development and interest in the Bronx happening right now; how do you think it's going to impact the borough?

I think that there are going to be upsides and downsides. I think that what it says to us [is that] our mission, doing what we're doing, is more important than ever because when we see this growing interest in development, you understand that those things are going to displace people who have been there for a long time. It's happened all over the city. What we need to do is work to counteract the market forces by creating more affordable housing. Our goal is to make sure that there are thriving neighborhoods and affordable places to live for people who live in the Bronx and it's not just this endless cycle of real estate booms and the winners and the losers.

What do you think is the most important issue facing Bronx residents right now?

There's obviously a lot of anxiety about displacement. What's happening in the Bronx has happened in other neighborhoods throughout the city for a very long time. It's not new in markets like New York, but it is new for the Bronx. That's pretty frightening, and people are definitely worried about that, but they're also concerned that schools aren't good enough, the number of the graduates aren't high enough, the quality of teaching isn't as good as it is in other places. There's still this pull and tug between wanting the things that make all of our neighborhoods and lives terrific, beautiful welcome spaces, stores, and other resources, but not having that happen at the expense of folks' ability to remain in their neighborhoods. I think people feel that, the pull and the tug of that very acutely.

It's a really difficult balance.

I think that's why there was this lengthy struggle about the zoning changes and the effort that went in for many months to try to make sure the affordability of rent, for that to be a meaning, or to really have to be affordable for the folks who live there in the neighborhood now. I think that that was a very important policy debate. I'm glad it's resolved, I think it was resolved in the best way that is possible, and I think organizations like WHEDco are building in precisely that way so that it is affordable for a range of incomes, from the very low to moderate.

What are some of the big development projects that WHEDco is keeping an eye on in the borough?

Well the Kingsbridge Armory, I think that's an incredibly exciting development and god knows something should have happened there years ago! That's great that it's finally happening. The [Bronx] Post Office, I think we'll see. I think a lot of people kind of look at a place like that and say, "Hmm, it's really meant something to me." And what does it mean to repurpose a building? It's one thing if the building is abandoned, like the armory—but the Post Office? It's closed, so I think there's a feeling too about that, some are more ambivalent.

What are some of your favorite places in the Bronx?

I walk at Orchard Beach every week I'm allowed. It is my favorite place. I've been walking that beach for 25 years and it's beautiful in all seasons. In summer it gets wonderfully loud and crazy. But I walk there all year long and it's absolutely my favorite place. My next favorite place is the Botanic Garden, absolutely gorgeous and if you haven't been there you should go. Woodlawn Cemetery, where all the jazz greats are buried and these incredible monuments to them. The Bronx has some pretty interesting places that are kind of underneath the radar, but I would say Orchard Beach and the Botanic Gardens are my top two.

What do you think is next for the Bronx? What's the future of the borough?

I think the Bronx is moving in a great direction. It's so vastly different then the place I was working 25 years ago, where you really walked block after block after block where you'd see one abandoned home next to another and there was hardly any evidence of people on the street. You

cannot say that today. The population has increased dramatically. There's so many other measures we looked at to see improvements. There is improvement in the schools. It's not there yet, but it's improving and there's schools opening and more small schools are opening. There are more after-school programs. The parks are continually being improved and people are using them, they're safe, which is not something you could say even ten years ago.

That's the difference. People feel safer, they are safer. It's prettier. I think there is a palpable feel and look to the place which is a community definitely moving in a positive direction.

And what's next for WHEDco?

Our next development, Bronx Commons, is going to break ground in June. It's going to be over three hundred apartments with 15,000-square-foot music and dance hall, 25,000 square feet of retail, and a large public plaza, sort of concealed as an amphitheater. Healthy neighborhoods are healthy because people come and they live there to do things that are fun. They come to the restaurants, they come to exhibits and that's how we see Bronx Commons. Not as a place where people will live comfortably, but a place where other people will come to for events and for dinners. We want it to be an anchor, a real sort of crossroads of culture and commerce, and a destination.

[Original story published on ny.curbed.com](https://www.ny.curbed.com)