



How One Bronx Development Firm Is Putting Women First

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Bronx Commons, via Marvel Architects/Local Projects

It's hard to deny the momentum that's been building in the Bronx in recent years, with [more and more development](#) heading to the borough and attention from big-name developers like [Chetrit Group](#) and [Greystone](#). But one organization—the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation, commonly known as WHEDco—has been thinking of how best to develop there since 1992. The group has also been doing it with female leadership and a focus on women's housing needs, a pairing that's truly rare for a New York real estate developer.

"When we work with women, we ask how they'd envision the neighborhood," says WHEDco founder and president Nancy Biberman. "The priorities of women have defined our name, our organization, and how we develop buildings."

Today, WHEDco is working on its most ambitious project yet: Bronx Commons, a 361,600-square-foot mixed-use development with affordable housing, a rooftop farm, retail space, and cultural programming from the Bronx Music Heritage Center. Although the organization has come a long way since its formation, the mission is more or less the same: livable, affordable housing that builds up the neighborhood too.

Biberman starting working in the Bronx in the 1980s, rehabilitating rundown buildings in Highbridge for affordable housing. Upon finishing the project and filling the apartments, "I panicked," she explains. "This once-abandoned neighborhood was repopulated, but it didn't have stores, health care, or services of any kind. Not even a bodega." It was this realization that led her to consider how the creation of affordable housing could be paired with greater neighborhood development. "We started WHEDco to look at development in a different way," she said.

WHEDco is notable not just because it's run by women, but because the amenities, services, and living spaces of its developments are informed primarily by the needs of women. "When we were redeveloping buildings in Highbridge, we found that 85 percent of the units had women as head of household," Biberman says. "And we found that it was similar in developments elsewhere. So we started to work with women, asking them what they wanted in their neighborhood." WHEDco was able to come up with a list of priorities: apartments that had spaces that were kid-friendly and cooking-friendly, schools, childcare and healthcare options nearby, and safe streets. "It was all informed by women," said Biberman.

In the early 1990s, female leadership in housing and community development was not at all a rarity. "I didn't feel as if I were a pioneer," said Biberman, who looked up to Bronx community activists like [Yolanda Garcia](#) and [Genevieve Brooks](#), among others. "At this moment, the industry is heavily dominated by men," she continues. "Women have a story that's often forgotten." Today, 12 out of 14 members of WHEDco's board are women; nine out of ten of the group's directors are also female.



Urban Horizons/former Morrisania Hospital, photo by Samir Abady

In 1996, WHEDco pulled together what they had learned and took on the rehab of Morrisania Hospital, which had shuttered in 1976. The 132-unit project, which was renamed Urban Horizons, opened in 2001 with a healthcare facility, a commercial kitchen and a Head Start childcare facility. The organization worked with the city to build a school next door. More than 30 apartments were set aside for families coming out of New York City's homeless shelter system. The building was constructed to green standards, with onsite cogeneration of electricity and heat. When it opened, "it was awesome and breathtaking," says Biberman. "We thought, 'My goodness, we can do this, it's possible.' "



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

WHEDco's second project, Intervale Green, opened in 2009 in the Crotona Park East neighborhood. Here, green development was even more of a priority: The building has a rooftop urban farm, green roofs, energy-efficient appliances and windows and 40 new street trees outside. Of the 128 affordable apartments, 39 were set aside for families coming out of New York City's homeless shelter system.



Bronx Commons, via Marvel Architects/Local Projects

The organization's latest project, in partnership with Blue Sea Development Company, is Bronx Commons, expected to break ground in the South Bronx within the next year. Biberman says the organization built upon what worked in WHEDco's previous two projects, while also incorporating the present needs of the community. "At this point, we know precisely how many women we have reached, their income levels, their jobs, [and] what they're looking for in housing," said Biberman. The development will have 300 affordable apartments, a rooftop farm, retail space, and a public plaza. The Bronx Music Heritage Center, located inside, will include community archives, a performance venue and ongoing exhibits. "For this development, we

want to demonstrate that these things are possible and essential in this neighborhood," said Biberman.

Bronx Commons comes at a time when the neighborhood is changing and new developers are entering the Bronx, but also as Mayor de Blasio continues to push an [ambitious affordable housing policy](#) throughout the city. And the South Bronx is a key player in his policy: this summer, when the mayor announced 8,500 affordable housing units built or under construction during 2015, he did it on Summit Avenue in the Bronx, at the site of a \$17 million affordable housing project. Biberman also noted that a rendering of Bronx Commons was included in literature by the city about revitalizing the [Hunts Point](#) food market, a \$150 million initiative that also promises to transform the South Bronx.



Bronx Commons, via Marvel Architects/Local Projects

"We want developers to know that development on its own does not build strong communities," said Biberman of the incoming wave of housing development to the borough. "Developers should pay attention to adequate lighting on the streets, better transportation options, if a school is nearby." She also feels that all incoming development in the Bronx should include mixed income, affordable housing. (It's unclear whether Chetrit Group's high-profile waterfront development in the South Bronx, with two 25-story towers, will include affordable housing.)

WHEDco has taken that all-inclusive approach to development seriously, through the creation of early childhood and youth development programs, small business assistance and job training, mental health counseling, and a weekly food pantry. Many of the programs are run by WHEDco at nearby schools or at WHEDco's office, but the organization utilizes its housing developments, too. Bronx CookSpace—a commercial kitchen offered to entrepreneurs to test products for a modest price—is located inside Urban Horizons, WHEDco's first affordable housing project.

In the midst of all of these changes coming to the borough, Biberman says, "It's a good moment for the Bronx." She continues, "There are vibrant communities here and people care deeply about their neighborhoods. Growth—not just buildings—is driven by the people who live here."

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