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You Think You Know The Bronx – But You Don't!

23 Years After Approval of Melrose Commons, Bronx Commons & Bronx Music Hall Break Ground in Last Vacant Parcel

By [Ed García Conde](#) on January 13, 2017



If founder of Nos Quedamos/We Stay Yolanda Garcia were alive today, she'd probably be smiling that the final piece of the puzzle of a massive urban renewal plan in the Melrose neighborhood of The Bronx broke ground today.

After years of delays, WHEDco's Bronx Commons and Bronx Music Hall affordable housing development is officially under construction.



The 426,000 square foot, 305 unit development will include The Bronx Music Hall, a 14,000 square foot, 300 seat concert hall dedicated to not only preserving The Bronx's vast and rich music and cultural history but to foster a new generation of music artists as well.

According to a quote in [The Wall Street Journal](#):

“The memories are still vivid,” said Nancy Biberman, founder and president of WHEDco, a nonprofit housing organization that has developed other residential projects in the borough. Ms. Biberman said that the goal of the venue will be to celebrate that past—she plans to feature an exhibit about Bronx musicians within the hall—but also to encourage a new generation of artists who call the borough home.

Musicians from outside the Bronx will appear at the hall as well, Ms. Biberman said: “It will be run like a world-class performance venue.”



Mark Naison, PhD, Fordham Professor and founder of the [Bronx African American History Project](#), told Welcome2TheBronx that, “The creation of the Bronx Music Hall is the culmination of years of research, conducted by many people, documenting the Bronx’s history as the site of more varieties of popular music than any place in the world.”

“In the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, the Bronx not was a place where mambo, doo wop, be bop, salsa and funk were performed and created, it had as many music venues as Manhattan and great music programs in Bronx schools. What the Bronx Music Heritage Center has been doing, and what the Bronx Music Hall will take to new heights is highlight not only music once created in the Bronx, but all the great music being created today, much of it the product of new immigrants from West Africa, the Dominican Republic, Mexico and South Asia.” added Naison



Bronx Commons will offer deeply affordable units for residents making 30% of the area median income mixed together with middle income residents. Income for eligible tenants will range as low as \$4,000 and as high as \$115,600 for middle income tenants as well as units set aside for formerly homeless individuals and families.

Included in the square footage is 22,000 of retail space that will line the 163rd street side leading into 161st street which will close the retail and commercial gap between 3rd and 163rd all the way to Yankee Stadium and 161st creating one long contiguous corridor for the first time in decades since the fires of the 70s and 80s.

The development will also include an open plaza and amphitheater for programming live events, a green market and the ability to utilize the exterior of the building for “large and small scale artwork”.

Resisting Gentrification Before It Was A Buzzword

Located at Brook Avenue and 163rd Street at the northern boundaries of Melrose, once complete, it will be the last development in the 30 block Melrose Commons urban renewal plan culminating 24 years of visioning thanks to Yolanda Garcia and the community’s resistance.

Long before many of us understood what gentrification was and let alone even heard the word, the New York City administration had set its eyes on what was left of the South Bronx and came up with an ambitious plan that would have displaced those who remained.

An original plan called The Bronx Center Project and spanned a massive 300 block area, left residents out of the planning process and in the dark and also at risk of being displaced. The Bronx Center Project spanned Third Avenue in Melrose all the way to the Harlem River, encompassing Yankee Stadium and Melrose's Civic Heart on 161st Street where the borough's court system is located, and The Grand Concourse.

Thanks to Yolanda Garcia and the founding of Nos Quedamos, residents resisted this original plan declaring that they will not sit and wait to be displaced as what was left of the area was to be demolished to make way for new middle class homes and family—displacing the few thousands that stayed behind during and after the fires and had begun the process of rebuilding the area.

Melrose almost fell to gentrification before Harlem and Williamsburg had it not been for Yolanda Garcia's tenacious spirit and will to hold on to the neighborhood along with other activists in the area.

Since 1993, Melrose has added over 3,500 units of new construction affordable housing rental units, 2-3 family townhouses, and condos representing over **\$650 million in development costs alone** and most of this activity was concentrated within the 30 block Melrose Commons area with the exception of Via Verde and St Ann's Terrace, both developments directly outside on the boundaries of the zone.

By 2010, Melrose added thousands of new residents boosting the population from 3,000 in 1980 (after dropping from

These numbers do not include the upcoming massive La Central in Melrose directly south of Via Verde down to Westchester Avenue which will have almost 1,000 units of low to middle income "affordable" units of housing, a YMCA, BronxNet Studios and other amenities.

Once La Central is completed sometime in the early 2020s, Melrose will have added close to 5,000 units representing \$1 billion in development. This does not take into account Triangle Plaza at 149th Street and two luxury boutique hotels in Melrose—The Opera House Hotel and The Umbrella Hotel.

Over 90% of all development in the area have met or exceeded sustainability guidelines earning top LEED certifications for green construction. This resulted in Melrose Commons being selected in 2010 as **the first and so far ONLY LEED certified neighborhood in New York State**.

Besides sustainable building practices, the criteria to achieve this status also takes into account transportation and walkability. With the 2 and 5 train station at 3rd Avenue and 149th Street taking residents to midtown within 15-20 minutes and a Metro North station and highway access, the area benefits from the best access to public transportation and access to employment centers than any area in The Bronx and far superior to the much hyped accessibility of Mott Haven.

Also under construction is the long promised and delayed Melrose Commons Park on Melrose Avenue between 159th and 160th Streets. The modest 1.07 acre park is scheduled to be completed by 2019.

Once La Central is completed, Melrose will be whole once again but what will the future hold for us once the many thousands of “affordable” housing apartments lose their protections and can potentially turn into market rate?

Perhaps all we did with Nos Quedamos is delay gentrification of Melrose by 30 or so years.

<http://www.welcome2thebronx.com/wordpress/2017/01/13/23-years-after-approval-of-melrose-commons-bronx-commons-bronx-music-hall-break-ground-in-last-vacant-parcel/>