



## Restoring Pride of Place: A Conversation with Nancy Biberman

April 3, 2013

**Nancy Biberman** is the founder and president of [WHEDco](#), the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation. Founded in 1992, WHEDco strives to "make the Bronx a more beautiful, equitable and economically vibrant place to live and raise a family." The scope of the organization's work is as broad as that mission statement is simple. For Biberman, the development and support of healthy communities and individuals must be rooted in a careful understanding of the multifaceted needs and goals of local residents — housing, education, family support, healthcare, economic vitality, youth development, and culture — and must be informed by an appreciation of the importance of the physical environment on personal identity and pride of place.

WHEDco's first project, which opened in 1997, is the Urban Horizons Economic Development Center. Urban Horizons, which is housed in a renovated Morrisania hospital complex, includes 132 apartments, 39 of which are for families coming out of the homeless shelter system, as well as a Head Start program, a training center for childcare providers, a healthcare center, and a commercial kitchen incubator for small food businesses. Intervale Green in Crotona Park East, which opened in 2009, is the nation's largest multi-family, Energy Star-certified affordable complex, and includes 128 apartments, a rooftop garden, and is home to a series of programs and workshops that teach tenants about strategies for improving environmental and physical health. Bronx Commons, which will break ground in June of 2014 in Melrose, will be a LEED-certified mixed-use development that will include 293 affordable apartments, a rooftop farm, and the Bronx Music Heritage Center, a performance and event space that will also serve as the home of an ongoing oral history project celebrating the rich musical history of the borough.

Biberman sat down with us in the WHEDco offices, in the old hospital complex that is now Urban Horizons, to talk about the difference between building structures and building communities, the musical legacy of the Bronx, and how the persistence of memory affects neighborhood growth.



### **What is WHEDco and how did it come to be?**

The Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDco) is an organization that, broadly speaking, works on community development in the South Bronx. The best way to explain what we do is to look back to the context of 1992, the year we were founded. The landscape of the South Bronx in the late 1980s was more or less the same as the well-known, burned-out Bronx of the ‘70s: demolished and cinder-blocked buildings, vacant lots strewn with debris. Streets had little to no traffic, either vehicular or pedestrian. Firehouses had been closed. All manner of human infrastructure — retail, schools, after-school centers, the things you typically look for when you walk down a neighborhood street — was gone. I was working in the Bronx on an HPD-financed initiative called the Vacant Cluster program, as in clusters of buildings. The City owned a huge number of buildings and vacant lots that were taken over in tax foreclosure proceedings after the arson fires. In the early to mid-1980s, as the city’s financial condition improved, people in the housing policy world began to think about these sites as assets rather than liabilities. And once that little lightbulb went on in the right person’s head, everything changed, and a massive program of rehabbing huge swaths of land and buildings began.

The City asked a number of community-based organizations — for example, Banana Kelly, Mid-Bronx Desperados — and then city-wide organizations — such as Settlement Housing Fund, Phipps Houses, and Catholic Charities — to take on the rehabilitation of some of these clusters of buildings and land. At the time, in 1987, I was the development director for Catholic Charities. So I became responsible for overseeing the rehabilitation of 23 abandoned buildings, with 722 apartments total, and six rubble-strewn lots that eventually became parks. This was only one development of probably eight of comparable size that were taking place at the same time throughout the South Bronx. I remember an editorial in *The New York Times* that likened what was happening in the Bronx to the building of the pyramids. It was a phenomenal effort that all unfolded in a very short period of time — four years, from

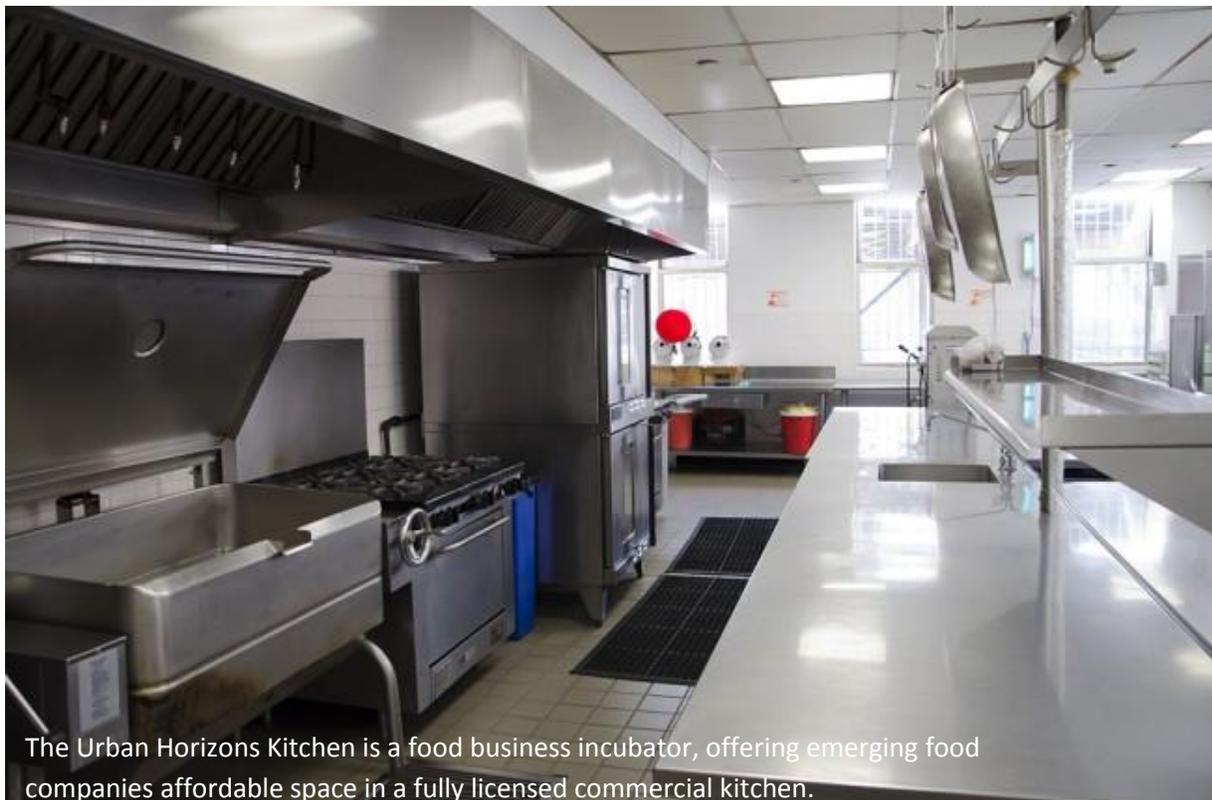
1988 to 1993. At my particular development, the shovel went in the proverbial ground in 1988 and by the end of 1991, we were done and renting out to tenants.

So, we reached the end of the project, and I looked around at what we had done, and said, “What *have* we done?” Once all these families move in to these buildings, there’s nothing there for them: the streets are unsafe; the schools are a joke. We didn’t build neighborhoods. We rebuilt buildings, in the narrowest sense of that word. A lot of good came out of it — people did get sheltered, you can’t quarrel with that — but I think that it was a failure of imagination and utter lack of coordination with other city agencies that has hurt two to three generations of children and their parents in the Bronx.

From my development site in Highbridge, I could see the building that we’re sitting in now, which at the time was an abandoned city hospital, completely scaffolded and razor-wired. It is a gorgeous Italian Renaissance-style building that was erected in 1926 and then closed in 1976 because there was no community left for it to serve. The complex took up a full city block, and included the hospital building, a backup generator plant, and two buildings that were dormitories for employees and nurses. The structures were not only eyesores, but were dangerous for the community. People were squatting and dealing drugs there; dead animals — and dead bodies — were found there; and the buildings were filled with asbestos. It was not a pretty picture. But I started to think I could really do something there. And what that something was fell into place pretty quickly.

**How did it come together? How did you identify the community needs you wanted to provide?**

First we looked at what we felt were the failings of the Highbridge project. Then we worked with a local community organization and some pastors from area churches to hold a series of conversations with neighborhood women that the groups identified as leaders of the community in some form or fashion.



The Urban Horizons Kitchen is a food business incubator, offering emerging food companies affordable space in a fully licensed commercial kitchen.

### **Why did you choose to focus on women?**

We learned quickly through the families who were renting the 23 buildings we developed in Highbridge that more than 80% of the heads of households were women, many of them playing the dual role of both breadwinner and primary caregiver of their children. Often they were making ends meet by taking care of other people's kids in their homes, and by selling food they cooked to church suppers and things like that. So, since women were the ones repopulating this neighborhood as heads of households, we wanted to focus on their needs. In our conversations with these women, we learned that they wanted more childcare, a school, and healthcare. So we created in this building a primary healthcare facility, a childcare center, and a commercial kitchen that was set up to be an incubator for small food businesses.

We also worked with a core group of these women to advocate for a new K-8 public school on the site. They were very smart, incredibly articulate, and fearless. We got the City to realize that demolishing the remaining three abandoned buildings on the hospital site and building a new school would present a whole different picture to the neighborhood.

### **Does WHEDco operate those programs, or have you partnered with other organizations?**

We operate the Early Childhood Development Center, which has been in operation since 1999, and the commercial kitchen incubator. WHEDco staff members are guidance counselors and social workers in the school and provide afterschool services to the kids as well. The only program that we don't operate ourselves is the healthcare clinic, which is operated by the Institute for Family Health.

We also have 132 families who live in the building, about a third of whom come from shelters; the rest of them are very low income, earning no more than 60% of area median income.



The abandoned Morrisania Hospital, before being renovated into Urban Horizons

### **Converting a hospital into a residential building is a challenging task. How did you approach the design process?**

Yes, this was an incredibly complicated adaptive reuse project. The building is a solidly built concrete and steel building that our contractors called "the Battleship." The only elements of the building that were still usable were the stairwells, floor plates, the façade, and elevator shafts. Everything else had to be built anew.

The layouts were another issue. The typical residential building is more or less a rectangular box, in which you have lines A, B, C, and D, and every apartment in each of those lines on each floor has basically the same layout. But in this building, the floor plates are different every three floors, so you have a set of units on floors two through five, then the floor plates start to get narrower, then another

set of floors and then they get narrower still. So of our 132 apartments, we have 52 different layouts, from studios to three bedrooms, which, depending on your architect, is either a nightmare or a lot of fun. Fortunately, our architect, Bruce Becker, really embraced the challenge.

### **How did you identify the sites of your subsequent projects?**

Our view is that affordable housing has to be beautiful and good design is important. We want the buildings we create to look out, not in. These buildings belong to the neighborhood; they confer pride and dignity. Rehabilitating the hospital building gave us the opportunity to see that. Everybody in the neighborhood had a story about this building — they were born here, they had their tonsils taken out — and so everybody felt as though they were involved in rebuilding it. People owned it, in a way. They were proud of it, cared for it, protected it.

But to make that happen again in an economically viable way, one of the key ingredients — which is becoming less and less possible today — is finding free land. So when we looked for a site for our next project, we looked for vacant, City-owned pieces of land. When we started the search, in 2004, you almost couldn't find an abandoned building anymore. So much had happened in the 15 years since I first set foot in the borough. But there was still a fair amount of vacant land and, as luck would have it, we identified a piece of land that HPD also had on their radar for development. We submitted a proposal to them for what we ultimately built: 128 apartments, all affordable to low-income families, and a separate building of 46 studio apartments for young people aging out of foster care.



The Intervale Green site before construction



Intervale Green

The building, which we now call Intervale Green, is in a section of the Bronx that had been leveled. It is located right smack on the site of the shoot-out scene from *Fort Apache, The Bronx*. It was the epicenter of bad. It's where Jimmy Carter came to try to understand what happened here. Fast-forward to 2005, and the area, Charlotte Gardens, was quite redeveloped. There were several dozen single-family homes, which are interesting but odd in an urban context, and they weren't really planned, just haphazardly built up.

We wanted to build something in the context of those sturdy residential buildings in the Bronx that never fell to demolition or abandonment, the five or six story, art deco buildings you see all up and down the Grand Concourse. These are buildings that face the street, and have nice decorative touches and interior courtyards where people sit and kids play. So we took those as inspiration for Intervale Green.

Also, when we began construction in 2006, more strategies for green building in affordable housing were emerging — they were much less advanced than green building for single-family homes, but the basic technology was there, and we were able to implement a lot of that into the project. Today it is still the largest multi-family Energy Star-certified building in the country. That’s something we’re proud of, and that we want to convey to the neighborhood and the tenants. We did a lot of street-level planting, we commissioned the sculptor Linda Cunningham to create three sculptures out of construction debris, and we built a green roof, which we recently converted into a large garden where building residents as well as neighbors grow produce. It’s another way for people to feel connected to the building.



Southern Boulevard | Image via [Southern Boulevard Merchants Association](#)

**The notion of stewardship — on all different scales: stewardship of the earth, stewardship of the community, stewardship of your spaces — is something that permeates a lot of your organizational philosophy. Do you see that as a priority from a societal perspective, or a practical, site-maintenance one?**

It all overlaps. The neighborhood, the residents and the buildings have separate but very connected interests. For example, our residents wanted to be able to shop closer to home, but they didn’t feel safe, and they couldn’t find what they were looking for nearby. Southern Boulevard had too many vacancies, and the merchants weren’t doing well enough and were faced with a lot of crime. We spent, and are still spending, lots of very purposeful time — much of it under contract with the City’s Department of Small Business Services — attracting retailers to the neighborhood. We did a study about what they call “retail leakage,” which is how much money and purchasing power is being spent outside of the neighborhood.

And then we worked with the business improvement district and local merchants to improve the streetscape, we worked with the police to figure out what needed to be done to give people a sense of safety, and we worked with the Department of Transportation to get better lighting under the elevated train, where there are still many vacant storefronts. Everybody knows that we are all in this together, and people who move into the neighborhood come to see us in a different way. We are not just the people who own a building. We are also the people who sponsor the Merchants' Association and who provide afterschool programs and cultural events in those spaces.

**What kinds of cultural programming do you organize?**

We just opened up the Bronx Music Heritage Center Lab in an underutilized retail space that we fixed up. There, we have afterschool music programs for kids. On Thursday nights we have live music, on Friday nights we show films, and then on Saturday nights we do spoken word. We have become a cultural center, a little club, and the programming, curated with City Lore, is called "Bronx Rising!". The Center will be permanently housed in a building that is in pre-development now, called Bronx Commons, on a City-owned urban renewal site in the Melrose section of the Bronx. This entire tract of land has been the subject of two decades of City plans, community opposition to those plans, and finally the Bloomberg administration's 2008 South Bronx Initiative which included City Planning, the Departments of Education and Health, and HPD, in collaboration with the community board and neighborhood residents. From this comprehensive planning initiative, HPD issued a request for proposals that called on prospective developers to address the needs identified by the neighborhood and the South Bronx Initiative in any proposals. WHEDco, with Blue Sea Development, was awarded one of the Melrose sites in 2009.

For many years we've worked with Mark Naison, a professor of urban studies, political science, and African-American history at Fordham University. Nearly a decade ago, Mark started the [Bronx African-American History Project](#). He conceived of the project after he had a number of conversations with students whose parents and grandparents came from the Bronx and would tell stories of a very different place than the one people think of today. So he started to conduct interviews with hundreds of people, some of whom still live here, many of whom do not, about what housing was like, where people would hang out, what happened here or there. Block by block, he began to remap what life was like in the Bronx.

One of the things Mark noticed from the interviews was the community's focus on its youth, and how the many eyes on the street provided a feeling of safety. Youth centers were running programs 24/7; the Police Athletic League had a strong presence all the NYCHA buildings had community centers that were operational. Kids were busy all the time. The people who grew up in the Bronx in the '40s, '50s, and '60s felt it was just a really warm, tight-knit community.



The Ghetto Brothers, performing at the Bronx Music Heritage Center

### **What kinds of cultural programming do you organize?**

We just opened up the Bronx Music Heritage Center Lab in an underutilized retail space that we fixed up. There, we have afterschool music programs for kids. On Thursday nights we have live music, on Friday nights we show films, and then on Saturday nights we do spoken word. We have become a cultural center, a little club, and the programming, curated with City Lore, is called “Bronx Rising!”. The Center will be permanently housed in a building that is in pre-development now, called Bronx Commons, on a City-owned urban renewal site in the Melrose section of the Bronx. This entire tract of land has been the subject of two decades of City plans, community opposition to those plans, and finally the Bloomberg administration’s 2008 South Bronx Initiative which included City Planning, the Departments of Education and Health, and HPD, in collaboration with the community board and neighborhood residents. From this comprehensive planning initiative, HPD issued a request for proposals that called on prospective developers to address the needs identified by the neighborhood and the South Bronx Initiative in any proposals. WHEDco, with Blue Sea Development, was awarded one of the Melrose sites in 2009.

For many years we’ve worked with Mark Naison, a professor of urban studies, political science, and African-American history at Fordham University. Nearly a decade ago, Mark started the [Bronx African-American History Project](#). He conceived of the project after he had a number of conversations with students whose parents and grandparents came from the Bronx and would tell stories of a very different place than the one people think of today. So he started to conduct interviews with hundreds of people, some of whom still live here, many of whom do not, about what housing was like, where people would hang out, what happened here or there. Block by block, he began to remap what life was like in the Bronx.

One of the things Mark noticed from the interviews was the community’s focus on its youth, and how the many eyes on the street provided a feeling of safety. Youth centers were running programs 24/7; the Police Athletic League had a strong presence all the NYCHA buildings had community centers that

were operational. Kids were busy all the time. The people who grew up in the Bronx in the '40s, '50s, and '60s felt it was just a really warm, tight-knit community.



The other thing that came up over and over again in these interviews was music. There were so many music venues in the Bronx — Thelonious Monk played here, and Mongo Santamaria played there. So, Mark started putting together a timeline and recreating this musical memory of the Bronx. He has found that there were once about 20,000 seats in a couple of hundred clubs and larger venues where you could hear live music playing in the Bronx. It's unbelievable. Many of the venues still stand, but have been turned into something else. He also found that there had been more creative fusions of different musical genres happening here than anywhere in the country other than maybe New Orleans. Some of that exists to this day. So, now we are working not only to create a physical space where that kind of collaboration can happen more easily, but also to revive that memory and history so that when people — kids, especially — think about the borough, think about their neighborhoods, they don't feel any sense of shame or stigma.

Kids living in the Bronx today still carry around with them this feeling that "I live in a bad place." People talk about the new rebirth of Brooklyn pride — the Bronx has it too, it just hasn't fully surfaced yet. To help make that happen, it is important to touch the lives of kids and let them know that really cool stuff is happening here, and has happened here for a long time. We want to celebrate it in the classroom, and create a place to visit where people can learn about that history and hear the music. The Bronx is so

diverse today, more diverse than it ever has been, and with each immigrant population comes a culture and, always, music and food. These are important traditions; we are trying to shine a light on them and say: Why are they in the Bronx? Because this is what the Bronx is known for. Its history does not start and end with the '70s.



Bronx Commons | Rendering courtesy of Rogers Marvel Architects

**What were you doing before WHEDco and the work you mentioned at Catholic Charities? How did you get interested in issues of affordable housing and community development?**

I grew up in a very socially progressive household, and I was always interested in issues that affected people who were more disadvantaged than I was. But my relationship to buildings really happened when I was 18 and a student at Barnard. I participated in the 1968 occupation of the buildings at Columbia University to protest the Vietnam War, which was very intense, very public, very high profile, and, for me, became a very exciting demonstration of the power of buildings. The experience of occupying a building, and the power and majesty of those buildings, left an indelible imprint on me. I came to love buildings. I became interested in architecture, but I don't think that I really appreciated at the time the impact of the buildings on the way I thought. I went to law school and I worked as a legal services lawyer for 12 years in the Lower East Side. A lot of the work I wound up doing was in landlord-

tenant court. Basically I was trying to keep people housed in some of the most horrific buildings in New York, in utter squalor. I finally felt that I had come to the end of the line in legal services, because there are only so many times you can put your thumb in the dike. I wanted to increase the availability of much more beautiful housing for people who need it on a much broader scale. I was fortunate enough to get a fellowship to the School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation at Columbia, where I was able to develop some ideas and historical basis for thinking about the different roles home can play in people's lives. I took feminist architectural history courses, and learned about some fascinating housing experiments that were going on in this city in the early 20th century with the Feminist Apartment Hotel (which was never built but much discussed), which addressed the importance of space and beauty and services to healthy family life in a very theoretical way. That helped me bring together the landlord-tenant side of my work with the power of buildings side of my consciousness, so that when I had the opportunity to work with abandoned buildings in the Bronx, I could say, "Just think of what we can do here."

*Nancy Biberman is the founder and president of WHEDco. Biberman is an expert on green, affordable housing and community development with over thirty years of experience in advocating for greater equity and justice in New York City. She began her career as a Legal Services lawyer and went on to help create the SRO Law Project. While studying at Columbia University's School of Architecture and Planning with a Revson Fellowship, she conceived and developed the West End Intergenerational Residence. Subsequently, she developed over 700 units of affordable housing in the Highbridge section of the Bronx. Nancy founded WHEDco in 1991 and has served as its President since. Nancy has received the Paul Davidoff Award for Leadership in Housing and Equal Opportunity from the American Planning Association, the Fannie Baer Besser Award for Public Service from Rutgers Law School, and a James A. Johnson Fellowship from the Fannie Mae Foundation. Nancy received her BA from Barnard College of Columbia University and her JD from Rutgers University School of Law. Nancy serves on the Board of Directors of Hostos Community College Foundation and the Freelancers Union Insurance Company.*

*Unless otherwise noted, all images courtesy of WHEDco.*