



# The New York Times

## The Greening of a Landmark of Urban Blight

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**In the South Bronx, vacant lots achieve a kind of fame, if not infamy.**



*Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times  
Nancy Biberman and Sam Marks at the site where  
their group is building housing for low-income families.*

President Jimmy Carter's visit in October 1977 to an abandoned lot at Charlotte Street and Boston Road transformed an anonymous stretch of New York City into a national symbol of urban blight.

A couple of blocks away, a small patch of land became notorious as both Hollywood backdrop and neighborhood dumping ground. The five-story buildings that sat on the triangular lot at Louis Nine Boulevard and Intervale Avenue were torn down around 1980. The remaining mound of debris was used to set the mood for a bleak scene - the one where a prostitute kills two police officers - in the 1981 movie "Fort Apache, the Bronx." The lot has been vacant ever since, home to burned-out cars, trash, broken television sets and blackened soil from a 40-square-foot diesel spill.

It is here, of all places, that Nancy Biberman is planning to build big - and green. The empty lot will be the site of a \$45 million, 174-unit housing complex for low-income families. A groundbreaking ceremony is to take place today.

Amid the concrete and grit of a neighborhood near the rattling elevated trains on Southern Boulevard, the red brick building will be surrounded and shaded by nearly 100 trees. By using high-efficiency

boilers, it will use 85 percent less natural gas to generate heat and hot water than typical low-cost housing in the city, according to a project consultant. The paints, glues and other materials used in construction will be low in the pollutants known as volatile organic compounds. Four to 18 inches of soil will cover most of the roof, part of a green roof system of shrubs and small trees to reduce air pollution and absorb storm water runoff.

Ms. Biberman is president of the Bronx nonprofit group building the complex, the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation, known as Whedco, which is hoping to create an intricately designed, energy-efficient home for families earning \$28,000 to \$39,000 a year, with one-bedroom apartments renting for \$660 a month. The building will offer a touch of elegance and sophistication - each unit will have a computer and be wired for high-speed Internet access - in one of the nation's poorest Congressional districts.

On Monday afternoon, Ms. Biberman took a walk around the lot, once owned by the city, to see the transformation firsthand. For now, it remains a rocky, weed-covered area. But workers have been digging out what remained of the demolished buildings left to rot for more than two decades. The oil spill at the front of the nearly one-acre lot was cleaned up, but at the back of the site, a machine was busy scooping up contaminated soil and dumping it onto trucks for removal.

Debris that was buried in the ground or dumped on the surface was scattered. There were clumps of bathroom tile, a rusty oil tank, a flattened Rheingold can. The machine clawed the earth along Louis Nine Boulevard, working in the same spot where the scene in "Fort Apache, the Bronx" was filmed. "This lot has been vacant and rubble-strewn, and just a reminder of bad times," Ms. Biberman said. The new building, she added, is "symbolic in a way of the rebuilding of the Bronx."

Whedco plans to start renting out the building, which will also include commercial storefront space, in the fall of 2007. It will be one of the few low-cost housing developments in New York to have a major environmentally friendly focus, and it will be built with a combination of city, state, federal and private funds in a section of the city where asthma and air pollution have long been a problem.

There will be a sculpture garden designed by the Bronx Museum of the Arts, interior motion-sensor lights and 42 trees planted in sidewalk plots about four times bigger than most such pits, to give the roots more oxygen and water.

Ms. Biberman said the choice to build green was about more than the environment. The building's tenants, she said, "do not have the money to take a break from city life and be in a place that's green and quiet and beautiful. If people can't afford to go there, then we're going to bring it to them."