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# When building housing, put your ear to the ground before breaking it

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Courtesy of WHEDco

Today marks a milestone for Bronx Commons, a 426,000-square-foot, mixed-use development under construction in the Melrose section of the South Bronx: The building will be “topped off” at 12 floors. When completed, it will feature 305 apartments. But more than that, the project will demonstrate how to balance the urgent need for housing with the needs of low-income residents at risk of displacement, while spurring economic development.

The planning process for new housing—particularly in lower- and middle-income areas—must be rooted in a simple but often overlooked concept: listening to the people who live there.

That’s exactly what the Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corp. (WHEDco) and the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and

Development did throughout the planning process for Bronx Commons. In addition to apartments, it will feature retail, dining, a music performance venue and arts-based community center called Bronx Music Hall, a landscaped public plaza and a green roof.

After WHEDco was awarded the project through a competitive process, it began uncovering a picture of the area's housing needs—which were affected by the housing crisis, wage stagnation and increasing costs of living. The organization's data, from in-depth community surveys and assessments, showed a great need for broad affordability.

WHEDco collaborated with HPD to shape an innovative financing structure tailored to the community's needs, with apartments for residents in seven income bands, ranging from 30% to 110% of area median income. Sixty percent of units will house individuals and families making 60% or less of AMI, including apartments for the formerly homeless. The studio, one-, two- and three-bedroom units will rent from \$215 to \$1,289, making Bronx Commons one of the most deeply and broadly affordable new housing developments in the city.

And, with the Bronx Music Hall at its core, Bronx Commons will also be a hub of commerce and culture, developed based on needs identified in WHEDco's Cultural Survey, Community Needs Assessment, and other extensive evaluations of Melrose, Morrisania, and the broader South Bronx.

The world-class music performance venue will provide economic opportunities to working artists and educational and training opportunities to students and emerging artists. It will attract tens of thousands of audience members and visitors each year, bringing critical dollars to the local economy. And, synergistic commercial and retail space in the development will ensure that locals and visitors alike have a place to eat, shop and spend time.

As a whole, Bronx Commons will serve as an example of how smart and inclusive development can uplift a community—and show that for this to remain an affordable and desirable city for low- and moderate-income New Yorkers, we must listen to them.

*Davon Russell is president of WHEDco. Michael Blake represents the Bronx in the state Assembly.*

Link: <https://www.crainsnewyork.com/op-ed/when-building-housing-put-your-ear-ground-breaking-it>