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Sugar Hill homes in Harlem remodeled as art galleries, welcome new visitors

by Demetria Irwin | August 10, 2014 at 12:26 PM



Shani Peters at the No Longer Empty exhibit in Sugar Hill. (Photo courtesy of Demetria Irwin)

The industrial-looking, charcoal gray building that sits in Harlem on 155th Street and St. Nicholas is reintroducing itself to its neighbors in a creative new way.

The David Adjaye-designed, mixed-use building has met [staunch criticism](#) over its aggressively modern aesthetic in the historic Sugar Hill community, which is dotted with 19th century row houses and early 20th century apartment buildings.

The [Silver LEED certified](#) building will include 124 apartments (70% to low income families and individuals), a rooftop farm and a children's museum. Now that the Sugar Hill Apartments project is basically finished (the children's museum is still under construction), the developers are looking to say hello to the community with a softer touch.

Residents are expected to be able to move into the Broadway Housing Communities project by the fall of 2014, so instead of letting the finished units sit un-utilized, a diverse group of artists and art organizations contributed to a project called [If You Build It](#). The ambitious endeavor was spearheaded by No Longer Empty, an organization that showcases socially conscious art in publicly accessible locations.

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The unique art exhibit placed art from over a dozen individual artists into the soon-to-be filled units. Photography, video, multi-media installations, textiles and even maps were featured in the showcase. A diverse array of topics was explored, such as gentrification, beauty standards, stop and frisk, community building and the role of architecture in urban spaces.

Collaborating organizations included the Sugar Hill Culture Club, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Art in Flux and the Harlem Arts Alliance. During a tour marking the last weekend of the exhibition, several of the artists and the contributing art organizations were on hand to discuss their work.

Wendell Headley is a New York legend and something of an art and design icon. His eccentric style and fashion-forward audacity make him hard to miss on the streets of Harlem. His contribution to If You Build It consisted of dresses with bold designs, textures and unexpected lines as part of an exhibit called "New York, Naturally."

"I'm a non-stop worker. I was a habitual addict. So, in order to get off of what I was doing there, people told me to find another drug less dangerous to work with. Maybe it would take to a level where I could get high, but do something more constructive," explained Headley.

Leanne Stella, founder and director of Art in FLUX, talked about her organization's mission. "I wanted to create more opportunities for artists that live and work in Harlem to show and sell their work. I wanted to help build a market for artists to help them live a sustainable life here in this community," said Stella of her organization's pop-up galleries.

The esteemed Schomburg Center was also on hand to discuss its collaboration with If You Build It.

"We get people to the Schomburg to let people know about the wealth of resources there but also engage in conversations about the history and culture of our wonderful African-American community and the entire African diaspora," said the Schomburg's director of programs.

"This project is very much in line with our mission at the Schomburg, which is to open our doors and hope that as many people come from different backgrounds and be touched by what we expose them to."

The final day for [If You Build it](#) is August 10th.

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