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PROFILE: DAWANNA WILLIAMS



YOKO INOUE

Dawanna Williams Founder and Principal Dabar Development Properties

From the perspective of an airship or an urban planner's PowerPoint, the city may look like swathes of unified development along major avenues and big-acre sites like Rockefeller Center, Stuy Town, and Battery Park City. But on the street, urban dwellers experience the city block by block, building to building. It's that smaller scale that appealed to Dawanna Williams, so much so that she left off lawyering to become a developer in what she calls "signature neighborhoods," including Harlem, Fort Greene, and Bushwick.

In a field dominated by extensive family clans and an apprentice-eat-apprentice ethos, Williams, 38, comes from an atypical background. Raised in Atlanta by a single working mother, she went on to study economics and government at Smith College. She came to New York in 1997 and started working for law firms with a hand in corporate real estate. That led her to get involved in deals like the sale of the 1921 skyscraper 30 Wall Street and financing the rehabilitation of the Starrett-Lehigh in Chelsea. "I liked the idea of putting together projects that people would later enjoy," said Williams and so, while still working as a lawyer, she started buying up townhouses in her own Clinton Hill neighborhood, renovating them into rental apartments and using the assets to make more purchases. "One of her strong qualities is Dawanna's ability to address and resolve gracefully unforeseen issues," said Hilary Weinstein, a vice president at the Community Preservation Corporation that financed Williams' first Harlem project. "She has a great temperament for dealing with things, and that's rare in developers."

In 2003, Williams founded Dabar Development Partners and set out to work on small and medium-scale developments in emerging communities. The name Dabar comes from the Hebrew for "words from God," which Williams came across while reading Deuteronomy in the Torah. "In the late 90s, I had seen how the big developers went for older buildings and vacant sites, and I thought I could apply that same approach in signature communities with undervalued assets." Williams started scouting properties marked by what she calls "tangible and intangible hallmarks," including historic resonance, architectural distinction, thriving churches, intellectuals, and artists. She found those qualities in Fort Greene and Bedford Stuyvesant where, while still a lawyer, she started working on townhouse deals with four to six units. It grew quickly into something she hadn't really expected: a niche in high-quality housing in historic but undervalued communities.

The first significant project on her own was the \$6.2 million Marshall building in Harlem. Taking two 1920s townhouses that had been vacant for some 40 years, Williams gutted them, added 34 feet to the back, and transformed them into ten one-, two- and three-bedroom condos with 11-foot ceilings, granite kitchens, and fireplaces. With the most expensive unit going for \$872,600, the project sold out quickly.

Up until then, Williams worked for the most part with contractors, but then she met Paola Antonelli, a senior design curator at the Museum of Modern Art, and Thelma Goldin, director of the Studio Museum Harlem. Both encouraged her to take it up a notch and engage with more adventuresome architecture and emerging architects. Antonelli wrote in an email that Williams has "a deep understanding of the context where she is operating and on pushing herself always a bit beyond her own comfort zone in order to deliver not simply buildings, but meaningful additions to the urban and social landscape."

She started working with Galia Solomonoff, an architect who designed, as part of OpenOffice, the Dia:Beacon museum and has also done time in such prestigious firms as OMA in The Netherlands and Bernard Tschumi and Rafael Viñoly in New York. For Dabar Development, Solomonoff is currently designing an unusual \$26.5 million project on an enviable site smack in the middle of Central Park North. It's a joint venture with the New York United Sabbath Day Adventists to rebuild a church on the site with a 15-story setback condominium tower. "Dawanna's dual talent is her patience in bringing together seemingly opposite stakeholders—bankers, community, church—and her ability to seize on rewarding yet underestimated urban situations," said Solomonoff. "She's a dealmaker extraordinaire."

Williams has also tapped Danois Architects, a firm with a background in sustainable design, including the completion of Melrose Commons in the South Bronx that won a top award for affordable green housing from the Northeast Sustainable Energy Association in 2003. Williams turned to David Danois in 2006 when Dabar was selected as one of 25 teams to participate in Mayor Bloomberg's New Foundations Initiative for developing 236 city-owned abandoned or vacant lots. Dabar will build 22 town- and multifamily buildings on 17 sites in Bushwick and East New York, one-third of which will be affordable and all LEED-certified.

Casting an eye beyond the city, Williams discovered the Northern Liberties section of Philadelphia, a kind of sixth-borough Dumbo that has drawn artists to its warehouse conversions and new construction. With rapper/producer Jay-Z as an investor, she is well underway constructing a 24-loft, eight-story condominium designed by the Philadelphia firm EM Architecture on a site with views of Ben Franklin Bridge and a block over from the 11-story American Lofts building designed by Winka Dubbeldam.

So far, Williams said that the biggest challenge she has had to face as a developer of projects over 15,000 but under 60,000 square feet is financing. "New York is loaded with tenement developers and visionary project developers," she said, "but there's not a whole lot in between. The banks are better set up for those extremes, while midsized developers tend to be undefined and have to structure deals case by case."

One by one suits Williams just fine, and she is even sanguine about the current economic downturn. "I believe in, I am even thankful for, corrections because I believe that in the end, the most qualified will remain in play."

Julie V. Iovine