

The National Urban League Comes Home

The civil rights organization will anchor a sprawling mixed-use development in Harlem that will include a new museum focused on the American civil rights struggle in the North.



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The National Urban League is moving its headquarters to Harlem, the neighborhood where it was founded in 1910, and will open New York City's first museum devoted to the American civil rights movement and one of few in the nation to focus on the struggles in the North.

The organization was founded in 1910 in the Upper Manhattan neighborhood, but its headquarters are currently in Lower Manhattan. With the return to its roots, the National Urban League will put a spotlight on the influence of the Harlem Renaissance on the civil rights movement in its museum, among other exhibitions.

To its president, Marc H. Morial, the move is more than a financial decision; it's an opportunity for the civil rights organization, dedicated to the economic empowerment of urban communities, to practice what it preaches.

"When we began to think about where we wanted to locate and whether we wanted to buy or build, Harlem was always my first choice because it was where we were born," Mr. Morial said. "But also because for an organization that's mission-driven, office space is more than a place to work. It's about being part of a community. It's about having impact. It's about working with partners and others who you are symbiotic with."



A glimpse of the new center's outdoor space. Katherine Marks for The New York Times



The tenants of the new building are scheduled to move in by the end of 2024. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

The new headquarters will anchor a 17-story mixed-use development called the Urban Empowerment Center, on the 125th Street block flanked by Malcolm X and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevards. The organization will use 81,000 square feet of space in the center for its offices and the new Urban Civil Rights Museum on the fourth floor. The museum will have a cafe, a 300-seat auditorium and 12,000 feet of exhibition space. In addition to the Harlem Renaissance, the museum will explore the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the Great Migration.

“The National Urban League is unique among civil rights organizations in that it was founded in the North to assist African American migrants who were transitioning from the South to the North to find jobs, housing, dignity and civil and economic power,” Mr. Morial said.

The rest of the development's 414,000 square feet is for offices, retail and 171 affordable residential units. The Studio Museum in Harlem, the United Negro College Fund and One Hundred Black Men will have offices in the building, and Virginia Union University will have an administrative center for recruitment, alumni engagement and instructional support services. The retail space is already 95 percent leased, with Target, Sephora and Trader Joe's among the tenants.

Leading the project are Taconic Partners, the Prusik Group, L+M Development Partners and BRP Companies, all experienced developers known for tailoring projects to local communities. Dawanna Williams, founder and managing principal at Dabar Development Partners, who serves as the National Urban League's owner's representative and overall project manager, has also been key to the development's success, Mr. Morial said.

These interviews have been edited for clarity.

Marc H. Morial, president of the National Urban League



“Harlem was always my first choice” for the relocation, said Marc H. Morial, the National Urban League’s president. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

We took on a project that many said could not be done and did it on a site where multiple concepts had risen and failed over the last 30 to 40 years. We are investing in the community. This is a \$250 million project that will create jobs and have impact. There's multiple layers here. We wanted to make a powerful statement, and we wanted to make it by action. And I wanted to demonstrate that you can build in a community like Harlem a first-class building; attract first-class retail; use a combination of minority developers, contractors and others; partner with first-class retailers and investors; bring together the city and the state as partners; combine retail with affordable housing; and do it with a cultural component as well.

Michael J. Garner, director at One Hundred Black Men



Michael J. Garner of One Hundred Black Men, a community mentoring organization. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

Our mission is education, mentoring, economic development, and health and wellness. Those are our four pillars. The One Hundred Black Men are 175 of the most powerful Black men in this region, including former mayors, sitting U.S. congressmen, city councilmen, business leaders, government officials and educators. We view ourselves as being the solution to the issues that are impacting the Black community here in the city of New York.

Being in a state-of-the-art building on the historic 125th Street corridor gives us the ability to create an innovative corporate chapter for the One Hundred Black Men. But it also gives us the ability to jointly partner with the National Urban League and build off our synergies.

Chris Losco, senior vice president at Taconic Partners



Chris Losco of Taconic Partners, one of the project's developers. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

The commitment of the National Urban League really helped this project come to fruition. It wouldn't be possible without them. We are super excited for them to be the anchor and an amazing co-tenant to build around.

125th Street is one of the country's historic cultural and retail corridors. To be a part in hopefully adding to that and enhancing that, not just through these retail and commercial uses, but also through the cultural uses including the civil rights museum and the Studio Museum and the work they're doing to help educate and celebrate the past, present and future of the Black experience in America, is just really cool.

Meredith Marshall, co-founder and managing partner of BRP Companies



Meredith Marshall said the mixed-use development “meets the definition of a 15-minute city,” referring to the urban planning concept that emphasizes walkability and sustainability. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

It’s fortunately a 100 percent low-income building by HUD’s own definition. We’ve partnered with a group called the New York Foundling, focused on helping people who have aged out of foster care find housing. Fifty-one units are leased here for them. This is a group of people who are underserved. They need services and support.

Lisa Gomez, chief executive of L+M Development Partners



“We were involved in curating the way the residential, the commercial and the office all work together so hopefully the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts,” said Lisa Gomez, of L+M. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

We love complicated public-private partnerships. I personally feel like these are the most interesting places to be able to work. This project was like a Jenga puzzle. It's a complicated building because you have to put a lot of different uses together, like leaving stairways and open floor plates for the museum and creating units for housing.

Our company's goal was to activate 125th Street, which, particularly during the pandemic, has lost lots of ground-floor retail. We hope that this project can replace some of the vibrance that was lost or muted during the pandemic.

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