

The New York Times

Neighbors Fight Affordable Housing, but Need Libraries. Can't We Make a Deal?

An uplifting new library in Manhattan comes with 12 floors of subsidized apartments. It's a clever way to find community support for housing

By [Michael Kimmelman](#)
June 21, 2024



Through a skylight and huge front windows, light fills the new branch library in the Inwood neighborhood of Manhattan. Credit...Amir Hamja for The New York Times

Giurgola Architects, it opened late last year in Sunset Park beneath 49 affordable units on six upper floors. Inwood is bigger: 174 new subsidized apartments.

But that's only half the Inwood project. In addition to the library and apartment tower, which has its own entrance and name, [The Eliza](#), the development also includes a pre-K, a STEM study center, a teaching kitchen and community spaces.

Andrew Berman, a gifted veteran of New York public architecture and its crazy bureaucracy, is the library architect. Chris Fogarty of Fogarty/Finger is the lead architect for the whole development. Fogarty clads [The Eliza](#) in beige bricks and fluted terra-cotta panels, and manages a number of other civic-minded upgrades, like adding a terrace to the pre-K and bringing light into some of the big underground community rooms, which are still under construction.

He and Berman also synced the layouts so that the upstairs apartments accommodate the concrete columns and beams that support the library's open plan reading room, guaranteeing that the library's architecture, which serves the widest public, remained a priority.

Alas, both Inwood and Sunset Park took longer than they should have because they had to run the usual gantlets of public reviews and community protests.



The Inwood library, left, occupies the bottom floors of a 14-story affordable housing development. Credit...Amir Hamja for The New York Times

on public sites, "expanding Inwood's affordable housing stock for the first time in decades," according to a study released by the New York City Economic Development Corporation.

Inwood certainly could use more affordable apartments. A 2023 study by the Furman Center at New York University counted fewer than 160 affordable apartments built in Inwood and neighboring Washington Heights during the previous decade. It is home to a smaller share of public housing than most city neighborhoods.

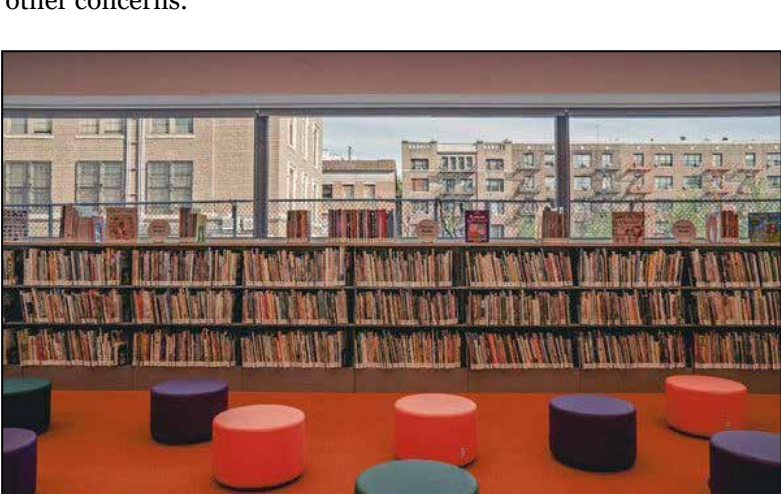
I leave it to residents to decide whether 14 stories along a commercial stretch of upper Broadway, in the middle of the island, is egregious. Broadway is a wide street. The Eliza isn't a tall building by Manhattan standards.

Of course it was really fear of market-rate development and displacement that energized much of the opposition to the rezoning. Even a single new market-rate apartment posed "an existential threat to our homes and our community," protesters argued back in 2015 when one developer proposed a 15-story building just a few blocks south of the new library on the site of a long-derelict garage. It would have included 355 rental apartments, half of them subsidized.

Aside from a satellite swath of Columbia University's campus, Inwood remains largely a middle- and working-class enclave with a significant Dominican population. One-fifth of children in the district live below the poverty line. So fears of displacement are real.

But does every development these days have to turn into the Battle of the Somme?

In the middle of the last century, New Yorkers had had enough of politicians and power brokers tearing down Penn Station and bulldozing the South Bronx. Community groups began demanding more seats at the decision-making table. They opened top-down government to bottom-up perspectives around environmental, social justice and other concerns.



The children's section toward the back of the Inwood library is a colorful space with natural light. Credit...Amir Hamja for The New York Times

When such projects work out, there is little accounting for the public costs of this process, notwithstanding that accountability was the original, driving argument behind expanding the regulatory system and participatory rules.

Maybe it's wishful thinking, but I detect a growing public frustration, across the political spectrum, with regulations and processes that thwart efforts to keep pace with "existential" emergencies like climate change and the housing crisis.

Something has to give.

I suggest looking at the modest but uplifting 20,000-square-foot Inwood library, if only to be reminded of what we can accomplish with excellent architecture at a neighborhood scale.

Berman is a refined modernist with a discreet feel for simple materials, an understanding of classic forms and a deep love of the city. He knows that good design, attuned to place, conveys respect and becomes a source of pride and distinction in a neighborhood. He has designed branch libraries in Staten Island, the Bronx and elsewhere. They are all different and wonderful.

With Inwood, there is a monumentality to the reading room that can remind you of an earlier era in New York's civic architecture. You might not register at first some of the architectural decisions that make the library uplifting, but you feel it: a low entrance to the oak side that sets up the turn into the tall reading room as a drama of compression and release; a ceiling of striated, white oak strips that warm cold surfaces and unify a snaking layout.



The Inwood library is part of a controversial rezoning that allowed taller buildings along a busy stretch of Broadway in Inwood. Credit...Amir Hamja for The New York Times

Why can't we do more of this more easily?

A handsome new library branch in Inwood, at the northern tip of Manhattan, had its soft opening Thursday. It's the second library in town during the past year or so to try something clever and innovative: partnering with a 100 percent affordable housing development. New subsidized apartments occupy a 12-floor tower above the library.

These days, NIMBYs are always fighting affordable housing projects. Communities are increasingly desperate for libraries. One obvious solution is the twofor — building housing and a library together — because there's strength in numbers.

A few years ago I wrote about [several of these library/housing combos](#) in Chicago ("co-location" is the lingo developers use), some of them designed by top-flight architects there like John Ronan and Brian Lee. Boston is trying this out. New York is just the latest to road-test what seems like a no-brainer.

The financial logic is simple. Libraries pairing with housing developers can trim construction costs. Developers can leverage city-owned property to finesse both the not-in-my-backyard types and the byzantine economics of affordable development.

That earlier [branch](#) I mentioned belongs to the Brooklyn Public Library. With a fine, sunny, three-story design by Carol Loewenson, a partner at Mitchell



The Inwood library, left, occupies the bottom floors of a 14-story affordable housing development. Credit...Amir Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times

Hamja for The New York Times