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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

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

bigger: 174 new subsidized apartments.

strength in numbers.

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 twofer — building housing and a library together — because there's

A few years ago I wrote about <u>several of these library/housing combos</u> 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 <u>branch</u> I mentioned belongs to the Brooklyn Public Library. With a fine, sunny, three-story design by Carol Loewenson, a partner at Mitchell Giurgola Architects, it opened late last year in Sunset Park beneath 49 affordable units on six upper floors. Inwood is

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

But that's only half the Inwood project. In addition to the library and apartment tower, which has its own entrance and name, <u>The Eliza</u>, the development

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 The Inwood library, left, occupies the bottom floors of a 14-story affordable

housing development. Credit... Amir Hamja for The New York Times

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

What was there to complain about?

In Inwood's case, community outreach efforts by library officials and the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development began seven years ago. Local objections weren't to features of the project like the pre-K or STEM center, which responded to community asks. They resulted from a larger issue.

neighborhood that was first proposed more than a decade ago by the de Blasio Administration. Upzoning meant that taller buildings could be built than Inwood had previously permitted, to encourage the addition of more, and in particular affordable, housing. As part of the rezoning, City Hall committed to adding some 1,600 subsidized homes on public sites, "expanding Inwood's affordable housing stock for the first time in decades," according to a study released

The development relied on an <u>upzoning</u> of the

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 decisionmaking table. They opened top-down government to bottom-up perspectives around environmental, social justice and other concerns.

Custom furniture and a refined approach to materials elevates the Inwood library above most civic buildings. Credit...Amir Hamja for The

New York Times

accountability was the original, driving argument behind expanding the regulatory system and participatory rules.

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

increasingly been weaponized by NIMBYs of all stripes. An alliance has emerged between wellconnected, well-to-do NIMBYs and tenant advocates in neighborhoods like Inwood, both of whom, for very different reasons, see nearly every change as a threat. They are now frequently the loudest voices, if not a majority. Even projects like Brooklyn Bridge Park, one of the most transformative public-private urban

Since then, however, more laws and regulations passed to enshrine community feedback, preserve landmarks and compel environmental review have

renewal efforts in generations, salvaging a declining swath of industrial waterfront, faced decades of reviews, cutbacks and protests, with opponents predicting financial calamity. When such projects work out, there is little accounting for the public costs of this process, notwithstanding that

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.

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.

Something has to give.

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 warm cold surfaces and unify a snaking layout.

Andrew Berman, the architect of the Inwood library, turns the main reading room into a monumental space with classical overtones. Credit...Amir Hamja for The New York Times first some of the architectural decisions that make the library uplifting, but you feel it: a low entrance to the 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

And loads of light. A lighted screen at one end of the reading room contains a staircase to a mezzanine where sun filters through a skylight that is the architecture's signature feature. Light pours, as well, through IMAX-sized windows along Broadway.

reminder. The city can be impossible sometimes. But it can still do great things, when we let it.

The view out those windows from the mezzanine takes in a slice of Fort Tryon Park, a storefront orthodontist and several midcentury apartment blocks. It's classic, neighborhood New York, and a

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Broadway in Inwood. Credit...Amir Hamja for The New York Times