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No Longer Empty's 'If You Build It' Opens at Harlem's Sugar Hill

Group Holds Exhibits In Places That Rarely See Contemporary Art

By

JESSICA DAWSON

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Manon Slome, right, the president of No Longer Empty, oversees the installation of 'If You Build It' at Sugar Hill Apartments. *Andrew Lamberson for The Wall Street Journal*

Over the past week, Harlem's David Adjaye-designed Sugar Hill Apartments teemed with workers readying the building for August occupancy, as well as artists carting in piano keys, sheets of stainless steel and golden inner tubes.

"And they're all competing for the same elevator," said Ellen Baxter, executive director of Broadway Housing Communities, the nonprofit behind the Sugar Hill Project, a complex that will include more than 100 residences for low-income and homeless families.



'New York Sugar Metropolis' by Irish sculptors Brendan Jamison and Mark Revel *Andrew Lamberson for The Wall Street Journal*

The artists were there for "If You Build It," an ambitious group exhibition opening Thursday. Ahead of the complex's opening, Broadway Housing Communities invited No Longer Empty, an arts organization that specializes in staging exhibitions in places that rarely see contemporary art, to install a show linked to the neighborhood. At Sugar Hill, it has taken over several floors with site-specific installations and other works.

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- [How Sweet it is at Harlem's 'Sugar Metropolis'](#)

Late last week, its president and chief curator, Manon Slome, took a reporter on a tour through the gray-walled rooms of the building's ninth floor, where No Longer Empty has full access to soon-to-be offices, apartments, public areas and a balcony.

She gestured to a plywood-covered radiator.

"It's a Judd," she joked. Though the box did resemble a minimalist sculpture by Donald Judd, it would be painted over in time for the show's opening.



Scherezade Garcia's pile of gold inner tubes. *Andrew Lamberson for The Wall Street Journal*

"Usually we come into older buildings that we have to finish," Ms. Slome said. "When you're working in a pre-existing structure, you know exactly what you're dealing with. In this case, there have been delays in construction, which is challenging."

In its five-year history, the organization has produced group shows at fallow or soon-to-be renovated buildings around the city, including a [former bank in Queens](#) and a [former home for the indigent](#) in the Bronx. At Sugar Hill, Ms. Slome selected and commissioned work relevant to the neighborhood and, on the building's third floor, invited community groups to exhibit.



Malik Davis and artist Nari Ward *Andrew Lamberson for The Wall Street Journal*

Because of Sugar Hill's significance to the Harlem Renaissance, some of the show's biggest names are contemporary African-American artists, including Radcliffe Bailey and Hank Willis Thomas. Mr. Bailey's almost-life-size bronze statue of W.E.B. Du Bois depicts the author and civil-rights activist posed, chin in hand, like Rodin's "The Thinker." The statue presides spookily over a hallway of glass-walled offices.

The show includes politically driven conceptual work, including Dread Scott's "Wanted," a project critiquing stop-and-frisk policing. Working with young black male volunteers, Mr. Scott commissioned a forensic sketch artist to create wanted posters like the ones police issue.

"They're not helpful in tracking down that person," Mr. Scott, 49, said, referring to police-speak like "UNK," for "unknown," a common descriptor. "All they say is, there's this danger in the community. Be afraid. Watch out for some black man."



No Longer Empty Curator Manon Slome, left, and artist Bayete Ross Smith, look at Smith's installation at Sugar Hill Apartments. *Andrew Lamberson for The Wall Street Journal*

In addition to the Sugar Hill exhibit, the "Wanted" posters will hang in neighborhood barbershops and delis.

Though Harlem is historically African-American, "If You Build It" also nods to its changing demographics, particularly the influx of Puerto Rican and Dominican communities in recent decades.

Scherezade Garcia, 46, who came to New York from the Dominican Republic as an 18-year-old, attached oversize versions of baggage locator tags—complete with faux bar codes and the destination-airport initials "JFK"—to a pile of gold-painted inner tubes that she arranged inside an office and on the building's balcony. The sculptures mimicked sleek contemporary art, yet their materials spoke to the desperate measures some immigrants take to get to the U.S.



Sonia Louise Davis with 'new renaissance sessions,' the installation she created for the show. *Andrew Lamberson for The Wall Street Journal*

Although most of the artists ignored the domestic setting of the project, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, 28, assigned a two-bedroom apartment, used it to recreate the place she lived until her family became homeless when she was 12. Her thrift-store furniture and curtains, alongside countless photographs (some hers, some found) were a marked contrast with the building's sleek new kitchens and still-wrapped Friedrich air conditioners.

"It was amazing to hear that people who were formerly homeless could move into the space," Ms. Rasheed said. "A lot of times, with low-income housing, you have to have a history of having lived somewhere else, so people who are homeless never get a chance."