

NOS QUEDAMOS/ WE STAY

*Melrose Commons,
South Bronx, New York*

All people have ideas worth hearing and saying.... differences in age, race, gender, religious affiliation, language, and cultural background should motivate people to work toward true, long-lasting change.

— Yolanda Garcia

Nos Quedamos is not only the name, but the mission of this nonprofit organization located in the heart of the South Bronx. It represents a broadbased, grassroots coalition of residents and groups who have a longstanding commitment to their community, Melrose Commons.

In a few short months this organization created a sustainable plan for their community and developed an effective and productive collaboration with public agencies to implement it. The process they employed was responsive to social, economic and environmental issues and brought the community together in this successful effort to shape its future. For their work they have been recognized by the New York City Landmarks Commission, the New York chapter of the Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility, and the metropolitan chapter of the American Planning Association.

History

Melrose Commons, a 35-contiguous-block area east of Yankee Stadium, had largely been neglected by the city for roughly 30 years and suffered from the traditional housing, infrastructure and unemployment problems associated with urban decay. In 1990 it had 6,000 residents, primarily Latinos and African Americans, whose median annual household income was less than \$12,000. The city owned 65 percent of the land and 30 percent of total housing stock. Of that 10 percent was abandoned during the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1992 community residents came together to respond to the city's proposed Urban Renewal Plan. This plan would have resulted in major changes to the whole neighborhood. Estimates were that it could have displaced as many as 6,000 local residents and 520 local businesses. Citizens

who had lived there for years and wanted to stay decided to undertake a planning process to put forward some of their own recommendations for the design of their neighborhood.

Building a collaborative planning process

The proposed Urban Renewal Plan was based on traditional planning designs and did not represent the desires or ideas of the residents who would be affected. Those that attended the meeting stated that as long-term residents who had stayed in the



The South Bronx community of Melrose Commons, where Nos Quedamos, in partnership with other organizations, is leading revitalization efforts.

community they knew best what transportation routes worked, what type of buildings were needed, the kind of employment they desired, and where parks were best located in the area. They wanted a community that would reflect their values and needs.

Following the meeting, home owners, tenants and business owners came together to share ideas and information and called themselves Nos Quedamos or the We Stay Committee. They worked with the Bronx Center project initiated by the Bronx Borough president and co-chaired by Richard Kahan of the Urban Assembly and Harry DeRienzo of the Parodneck Foundation. The Bronx Center, a community-based planning effort in a 300-block area in the Bronx, would help direct the investment of two billion dollars of anticipated public and private funds. Hundreds of volunteers — citizens, public officials, educators and professionals — formed a number of working groups to address such issues as job training, technical assistance, housing and transportation.

By 1994 Nos Quedamos had succeeded in postponing the certification of the proposed city urban renewal plan and had obtained a six-month extension granted by the Borough president to continue to develop an alternative proposal, the new Melrose Commons Urban Renewal Plan. Since that time the community initiative set up Studio 811, the Nos Quedamos office where city officials came to work with the residents on the initiative.

Residents conducted block-by-block surveys and held meetings at a local church to update those who could not attend the planning meetings. Ms. Garcia estimates that they held as many as 168 meetings during that year. In anticipation of the forthcoming election, they also conducted a voter registration drive at every meeting, increasing the voting rolls by 65 percent.

The participation of public officials in the community planning sessions was key. It gave government representatives a better understanding of local needs and resources and gave the community members the respect and consideration they deserved. According to Petr Stand, one of the architects who has worked very closely on this project, it demonstrated that “a positive democratic process was possible.” Government was responsive to the needs of the citizens and the citizens assumed their civic responsibility.

This community effort attracted the assistance of many professionals — planners, architects, lawyers, and others — who have contributed their expertise during the developmental stage. Two architects, Petr Stand of Magnusson Architects and Lee Weintraub of Weintraub & diDomenico, and urban planners worked with residents to help translate their ideas into a new urban design. Members of the community established a set of planning principles for the new Melrose Commons Urban Renewal Plan which became further refined as planning continued. They addressed social, environmental, housing, design, infrastructure, and many other community issues.

Elements of sustainable planning

One of the initial issues to be resolved was the location of a proposed two-acre park. The city plan had placed it in the geographical center of the community, but the real center of activity was in the northeast section. Community members were interested in open spaces but they feared this park would attract criminal activity.

They developed alternative plans for

various discrete block parks designed for different types of activities. The plan now includes a one-acre public park, small mid-block parks, and community gardens which are very important to residents. There will also be an area in the northern section of the neighborhood which will be developed for active recreation. Another area, now containing old railroad tracks, will serve as a tree-filled buffer zone to set it off from a manufacturing area.

Residents were also very interested in public transportation. They explored possibilities of increasing transportation links, mass transit and 'friendly' sidewalks and created a plan to reduce the amount of private parking as required by the city.

Other attention centered on water use. As water is expensive in New York, ways to capture and recycle it through rainwater systems were explored. Planning for community gardens included consideration of water retention.

Initially the plan included a number of middle-income housing units and blocks of attached houses. What the residents preferred was a mix of buildings — some with six- to eight-story buildings with businesses on the ground floor and other smaller ones, such as town houses and single family houses, that were affordable and built with environmentally-sound materials. These housing prototypes, while unusual, could be possible models for other urban areas.

Nos Quedamos worked with local developers to help in the project. They received a grant from the NY State Council on the Arts to host a series of community design workshops. These attracted developers and contractors and prompted conversations about what housing could be and what guidelines would be needed.

Currently 1700 new units of housing are planned, some for seniors, occupants of shelters, those 60 percent below the median income level, and potential homeowners. As over 70 percent of the families in the neighborhood are female heads-of-household, they are exploring possibilities for adapting co-housing models, which would include day care facilities, to the urban environment.

A number of potential funding sources have been identified at the federal, state and local government levels. Two projects have been funded: one, a US Housing and Urban Development grant for loans for senior citizens; and the other, a city grant for the homeless and those under the 60% income level.

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Scope: Neighborhood - 35 contiguous blocks

Inception Date: 1993

Participants: Residents, planners, architects, lawyers, public officials, civic organizations, businesses

Project type: Coalition building, comprehensive community development, economic development

Methods used: Community organizing, public education, citizen-led planning

Lessons learned: Importance of strong collaborations between government officials and residents as equal partners. Early involvement of residents/stakeholders in planning.

Throughout the process Nos Quedamos has emphasized the importance of using local contractors to implement the plan and have met with local labor coalitions. A job completed by the middle of 1995 as a joint venture of a local contracting company with one of the largest construction companies in the city employed 80 percent of the workers locally.

All of these efforts have increased the visibility of and knowledge about Melrose Commons locally and nationally. This process has brought in students from local colleges and universities such as City College and Columbia, other members of civic organizations, and representatives from many downtown areas to attend hearings and to demonstrate support for the effort. In this way, others are connecting with Melrose Commons and the neighborhood residents are feeling less isolated.

Challenges ahead

Access to technical assistance and funding are continuing challenges. City funding is being cut back at a time when the neighborhood needs it to acquire some

of the properties residents would like to sell. They also need to attract developers to construct and renovate the housing. Institutionally, the strength of the organization and its efforts have been in organizing the community. In order to continue to implement this ambitious plan, ongoing momentum and support will be needed.

—CONCERN, Inc



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Construction and renovation continue in Melrose Commons. Local efforts are bolstered by the decision of the Bronx-Lebanon Hospital to locate a 10,000 square-foot medical satellite that will offer local care to the neighborhood on the first floor of a new \$11 million building. The seven-story building will also contain sixty units of housing for low-income and formerly homeless families. This project will be constructed by Bronx contractors, employing local residents, and is a co-venture of Nos Quedamos and an older organization, Phipps Houses.

The New York City Housing Partnership has identified four sites in Melrose Commons for 81 housing units in 27 three-family homes. LISC/Enterprise Round VII will rehabilitate 75 housing units in six buildings. Thanks to the efforts of Nos Quedamos and two other organizations, the New York City Parks Department will rehabilitate Melrose Park and the comfort station at Courtlandt Avenue and East 161st Street. Nos Quedamos is also working with Neighborhood Housing Services to provide secure low interest loans for low income families and senior citizens to assist them in renovating their homes. In addition, the Bronx Borough President has pledged one million dollars for facade improvement within the Melrose Commons area.

Nos Quedamos has gained wide recognition both nationally and internationally for negotiating the Urban Renewal Plan. Los Angeles and Chicago city planners have visited them to discuss strategy. Groups from around the world have come to talk about empowerment and community development.

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