



Frida Escobedo and Handel Architects design 27,000 s/f building for National Black Theatre, Ray and LMXD

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Manhattan, NY National Black Theatre (NBT), Ray and LMXD celebrated the topping out of National Black Theatre and Ray Harlem, a 21-story arts and culture hub located at 2031 Fifth Ave. that will house a permanent home for the longest-running Black theatre in New York City, founded in 1968 by the late visionary artist Dr. Barbara Ann Teer.

The project, designed by collaborating architects Frida Escobedo Architects and Handel Architects, features a 27,000 s/f home for NBT, including offices, classrooms, a 250-seat immersive technology performance space, a 99-seat flexible studio theater and a set-building shop to support workforce development in theatrical trades. In addition to NBT's multi-floor space, there will be 222-units of mixed-income apartments, substantial commercial space along 125th St., as well as a multi-purpose communal living room open to the community. This project will ensure that NBT continues to serve as a cultural anchor for East Harlem, a vital resource for artists and entrepreneurs, and for the production of work that is rooted in the imagination of contemporary Black voices.

To celebrate the topping out, NBT, Ray and LMXD were joined by first deputy mayor Sheena Wright, commissioner of cultural affairs Laurie Cumbo, borough president Mark Levine, MOME commissioner Patricia Kaufman, assembly member Inez Dickens and state senator Cordell Cleare, among others.

The new project is notable for being the first to utilize the City's Visual and Performing Arts (VPA) bonus, specifically designed by former New York city council member Inez Dickens. First of its kind, this VPA empowers the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) and the Department of

City Planning to work with a local arts advisory council as part of a 2008 comprehensive rezoning, to spur revitalization and sustain the cultural growth of Harlem-based organizations in concert with mixed-income development along the historic 125th St. corridor.

Construction began on Ray Harlem and the National Black Theatre in July 2022, and the building is scheduled to open in late 2024, with the theater coming online in early 2026.

NBT CEO Sade Lythcott said: “As the first revenue generating Black arts complex in the country and the oldest, continually run Black Theater in New York City, this project represents a dream come true and a vision realized. To create a permanent home for Theater makers of the global majority! Dr. Barbara Ann Teer’s foresight – to buy this block all those years ago – cemented the future of NBT at the symbolic intersection of Black Culture and opulence in New York City, providing a Home Away From Home for generations of Black storytellers and designers, an economic engine for East Harlem and a cultural beacon of empowerment and revitalization for our great City. We are so grateful to our partners in the project, but in particular to governor Hochul, mayor Adams, speaker Adams, DCLA commissioner Cumbo, ESD commissioner Knight and NYSCA. Their faith and investment in our project helps to cement not only a bright future for NBT, but a vibrant and equitable future for us all.

“We are thrilled to celebrate the topping out of Ray Harlem with our partners at NBT and LMXD,” said Dasha Zhukova Niarchos, founder of Ray. “NBT has long been a cherished anchor of the Harlem community and we are proud to work with them to bring the next evolution of this space to the neighborhood. Together we are hopeful this building will enhance the cultural fabric of the area while providing a living environment where residents can access arts in their daily life.”

“It has been a great honor for LMXD and the entire L+M family to be a part of this historic project. At the heart of all vibrant communities are amazing cultural gathering places and National Black Theatre is one of this City’s most important representations of that idea,” said David Dishy, CEO of LMXD. “Not only will NBT have a beautiful new, multi-floor home to stage its visionary performances and welcome the broadest possible community, but the 222 mixed-income homes will deliver housing at a time when it’s critically needed in this city. From this topping out to what I know will be an incredible opening night, we celebrate this major milestone for Ray Harlem and NBT and are especially grateful to the unparalleled construction team working tirelessly to help make NBT’s long-held dream an incomparable reality.”

Guests at the topping out ceremony began and ended their evening with the arts, including a drum cadence upon arrival and dispersal; poetry composed by first-ever Lincoln Center poet-in-residence Mahogany Browne, and a live music performance by singer, songwriter, artist and activist Mykal Kilgore.

Cumbo said: “Congratulations to Sade Lythcott and the whole National Black Theater family on this incredible milestone,” said NYC Cultural Affairs commissioner Laurie Cumbo. “The future home of

NBT will build on the beautiful legacy of Dr. Barbara Ann Teer, who knew the power of the performing arts to express, to unite, to interrogate, and to bring joy to us all. With more than \$28 million committed by the city, we're proud to make a major investment in this visionary project, which will create an asset in the heart of Harlem that serves this community holistically - bringing not just first rate arts programming but affordable housing, entrepreneurial training, and so much more. When we invest in culture, we invest in our communities - nowhere is that connection clearer than here at the future home of the National Black Theater."

"This mixed-use marvel stands as a testament to the National Black Theatre's visionary dream of an artistic ecosystem that uplifts the community. Today's topping-off ceremony marks the beginning of a new era embracing the vibrancy and possibility of Harlem's artistic, residential, and business communities," said Levine.

Adrienne Adams, speaker of the NYC Council said: "The National Black Theatre is a treasured cultural institution that provides vital spaces to share Black stories and experiences through theater arts. The Council is proud to be a strong and ardent supporter of this indispensable organization, and I'm thrilled it will have a new permanent home in Harlem. Today's topping out ceremony represents a significant milestone, and I cannot wait for New Yorkers to visit the permanent home of the National Black Theatre when the project is completed."

Katherine Nicholls, chair of the New York State council on the Arts said: "This inspired project will amplify the reach, the artistry, the programming, and the impact of this essential community anchor for generations to come. The New York State Council on the Arts, with the support of Governor Hochul and our State Legislators, is proud to support this historic expansion with a \$10 million large capital grant. We applaud the National Black Theater on this momentous occasion and look forward to its exciting future!"

Félix Matos Rodríguez, NYC Regional Economic Development council co-chair and City University of New York Chancellor, said: "As we place the final beam on this remarkable theater, we celebrate the creation of a one-of-a-kind home for Black artistry, culture and community. Bringing world-class performing arts, job training and business incubation under one roof, the National Black Theatre will empower, enrich and inspire Harlem for generations to come."