

Harlem Affordable Housing Named After Urban Planner Charles "Ibo" Balton

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The Balton is named after Charles "Ibo" Balton, director of the Manhattan planning office for the Department of Housing Preservation and Development who died in 2007. (Richman Group Development Corporation)

HARLEM—The Harlem that urban planner Charles "Ibo" Balton saw when he worked at the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development as director of the Manhattan planning office was much different from the one that exists today.

"This was a desolate landscape," said Marc Jahr, president of the Housing Development Corporation. At one time, the city-owned 1,444 buildings in Central Harlem that had been taken through tax foreclosure.

But Balton, through his work, was part of the city's effort to finance 4,600 apartments, 1,400 of them newly constructed at a cost of \$429 million.

"Ibo had the vision to see beyond that desolation," added Jahr.

Balton, a Harlem resident, died in 2007. But to honor his contributions to Harlem's development over the last decade, a new 12-story, 156 unit affordable rental building on West 127th Street between St. Nicholas Avenue and Frederick Douglass Boulevard has been named after him.

It was unveiled Wednesday along with Douglass Park, an eight-story affordable rental building named after abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

"I know Ibo would be overwhelmed," said his cousin Leo Acors. "To have him come here and impact this city in such a way that you name a building after him is overwhelming."

The two buildings cost a combined \$101 million and have 226 apartments that are located close to transportation in a walkable neighborhood, said Kristin Miller, president of The Richman Group Development Corporation.

The projects used creative financing such as recycled tax exempt bonds and gap funding from the federal Tax Credit Assistance Program to reach completion, a tribute to Balton who wanted to "foster a community where people of all income levels can live together."

Income levels of occupants at the two projects range from \$31,860 to \$47,520 for a family of four at Douglass Park's 70 units to \$47,520 to \$102,960 for a family of four at The Balton's 156 apartments.

Councilwoman Inez Dickens said she fought hard to make the apartments more affordable than some other developments.

"Harlem is under transition and change is good," she said. "Our economic base needed to be raised.

"But those who stayed in the community and made it viable need to be part of the redevelopment."

At The Balton, residents will have concierge services, an outdoor court yard and roof terrace, and use of a fitness, yoga and spin room. The building also features a residents' lounge and children's activity room. Designed with wood and ceramic floors, the apartments have designer kitchens and baths and in-unit washers and dryers.

"Ibo believed in a vision of rebirth," said HPD Commissioner Mathew Wambua. "We are 226 units closer to honoring Ibo's legacy."

Also on the way from Richman Group is another building on 128th Street that will house the permanent home for Harlem Mothers S.A.V.E. Dickens was able to negotiate the space rent free in perpetuity for the group that tackles Harlem's stubborn gun violence issues.

Jahr said the building is an example of how the work of revitalizing neighborhoods can continue even in difficult economic times. A recent trip to Washington, D.C. left him discouraged.

"All the programs that have made the revival of Harlem possible.....are slated for draconian cuts," Jahr said.

But revitalization efforts will continue.

"In the spirit of Ibo and Frederick Douglass we are going to forge ahead," Jahr added.