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In Harlem, a Playful New Youth Center Is an Instant Landmark

Filled with light, the cozy headquarters of the Brotherhood Sister Sol is designed to tell children “they matter.”



The new home of the [Brotherhood Sister Sol](#) is an architectural showpiece on a quiet street of old tenements in West Harlem.

In [1995](#), two childhood friends, freshly minted college grads, founded the social justice and youth development organization to help underserved Black and Latino boys. Three years later its work expanded to include girls. BroSis, as it's also known, has now provided generations of 8- to 22-year-olds with a wide variety of classes, job training, college prep, mental health support, arts instruction and daily meals.

Until 2018, the nonprofit operated out of an overstuffed century-old brownstone along West 143rd Street, sandwiched between a derelict lot, which BroSis acquired back in 2007, and a popular community garden, where the organization instructs young people in sustainability and other environmental issues. With money raised mostly from the city (\$7 million of it from the City Council) as well as from the state and private donors, BroSis began construction on a [new, expanded headquarters](#). Tony Shitemi, Dwayne Smith-Malcolm and Asia Black from [Urban Architectural Initiatives](#), a New York-based, minority-owned architecture firm, oversaw the design.



The 19,000-square-foot, \$22 million project squeezes the equivalent of a gallon of juice into a pint-size container. I toured it this summer before it opened and wondered how it would work. When I returned recently, it was a beehive, crowded but cozy, functional and clearly beloved by the kids. The architecture is bold and out there, like BroSis; at the same time it does its job, which is no small feat. For good reason, the building has become an instant landmark in the neighborhood.

BroSis asked Shitemi and his team to provide space for a dance and martial arts studio and a lecture hall (both doubling as calming places for mindfulness and meditation). The organization also wanted a basement kitchen that could feed up to 250 children a day and offer culinary instruction; a teen lounge; a computer room; a library; an art studio; a rooftop basketball court; offices for two dozen employees; a community space that can open onto a backyard terrace with a trellis and a conservatory — and it wanted each of these features to be like the young people who would use them: distinctive and flexible.



Clockwise from top left: the Light Room, the dance studio, people preparing for a lecture and the library.
Ike Edeani for The New York Times

We're talking about a building no larger than some private luxury homes in New York, and only five stories tall, in keeping with the height of its architectural neighbors. BroSis also needed room to display works donated by artists like Derek Fordjour and Allison Janae Hamilton. [Carrie Mae Weems](#) contributed a work titled "Remember to Dream." And BroSis asked that masonry and other artifacts from the demolished brownstone be incorporated as tokens of institutional memory — that the exterior, as well, reference the palette of some of the old limestone detailing along the block.

But above all, BroSis wanted a symbolic headquarters, one that, inside and out, expressed its mission.

As Khary Lazarre-White, the organization's executive director and one of its co-founders (along with Jason Warwin), explained it to me, the architectural goal was to create a "bold building in which nothing felt standard or institutional," and that was "warm and homey and a place of enlightenment, a source of light, filled with light. Our people deserve something beautiful and special, like them — that tells them they matter."



Dwayne Smith-Malcolm and Asia Black of Urban Architectural Initiatives. Ike Edeani for The New York Times



Khary Lazarre-White, who co-founded BroSis. Ike Edeani for The New York Times

BroSis didn't want another tasteful, off-the-shelf glass box, in other words. The city has become infested with them. They mostly blur together, standing for nothing really, except the cautious calculations of a certain slice of corporate and civic culture. BroSis doesn't service that community. Its architecture was conceived to speak to, and for, a different population, taste and vision of the city.

What did that entail? At first, Shitemi told me, the architects imagined the building telescoping upward on three sides — “uplifting” was the metaphor, he said — but the concept proved too costly and multiplied the awkward angles inside.

In the end, just the building's sculptured facade, its public face, bulges outward above a glassed-in lobby. Set back from the street wall, the facade leans over a narrow, gated forecourt with benches where elderly neighbors sometimes stop to take a breather and keep an eye on the block.

The kids at BroSis have taken to calling the building Wakanda because the facade's jagged mash-up of glass and limestone reminds them of a shield. I've come around to the facade's design. The syncopation of transparent and opaque windows, alternating with ashlar panels, can suggest the patterns of kente cloth. According to Shitemi, the idea derived from the notion of a “half-closed hand,” as if the building were “holding the kids safe.”



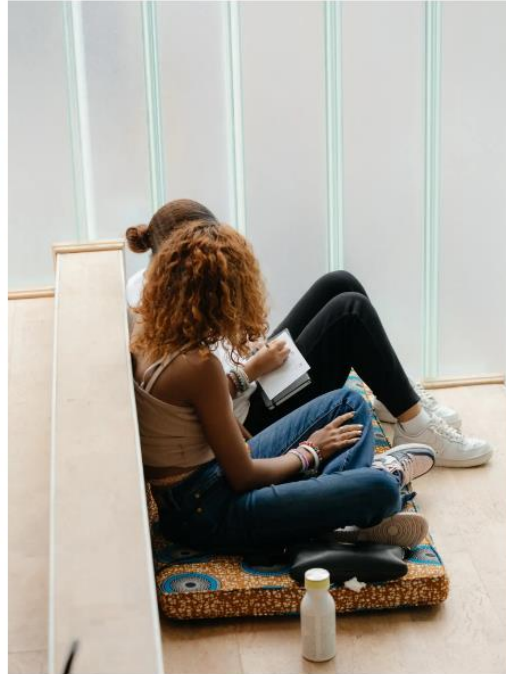
The rear facade alludes to North African adobe construction. It's screened by sun shades covered in flowering vines. Inside, light fills the rooms, which like the halls and stairwells are painted in vivid colors meant to “resonate with Africa, the Caribbean and South America,” Shitemi added. Tiles by artists from Zimbabwe decorate columns, backsplashes and the dining room. African fabrics (sourced in the Bronx) cover cushions in the library, teen room and lecture hall, a sky-blue oasis with bleacher seats and cork floors — named the Light Room because a wall of big mullioned windows overlooks the community garden.

“I worried about the building becoming too eclectic,” Shitemi said. “But the idea was to be playful and surprising.” When I visited, middle schoolers squirmed in the narrow, wedge-shaped teen room, high schoolers practiced karate kicks in the dance studio and tutors instructed students doing homework in the library. Children arrive after school, chill, eat, take classes. The Brotherhood Sister Sol is a safe haven and surrogate home into the evening.





Kids playing dodgeball on the basketball court on the rooftop. Ike Edeani for The New York Times



Relaxing on the Light Room's bleacher seats. Ike Edeani for The New York Times

Lazarre-White said a few people warned him beforehand that “it would be impossible to construct a complicated building like this and also focus on Black and brown architects and developers.” BroSis enlisted the Harlem-based [Apex Building Group](#) to collaborate with Racanelli Construction as the general contractors. The contractors hired laborers from the neighborhood. Twelve people who live on 143rd Street ended up working on the project. “The guy who did the sheetrocking was so proud of what he accomplished that he brought his family over to see,” Lazarre-White said.

Now BroSis confronts the usual Catch-22 of expanding nonprofits: Happy to sign checks for a signature building, patrons are not as excited to pony up for the heat, salaries and other less glamorous costs of maintaining it. Without an endowment, and needing to raise its operating budget each year, the organization slips between the cracks of traditional philanthropic targets like museums, charter schools and anti-poverty initiatives, even though its work overlaps with those. It serves 700 children a year, has trained thousands of young educators and runs a small international study program. During the height of the pandemic, the Brotherhood Sister Sol morphed into a major food relief organization, providing meals to thousands of families in Harlem.

“We didn’t build a skyscraper in Midtown,” is how Lazarre-White puts it. “We grew to meet the demands of our communities and we see ourselves as a justice and anti-poverty organization serving those communities, which need our help more than ever.”

It was early evening when we parted in front of the building. The street was mostly dark except for rows of soft lights trimming the facade. Through the windows in the Light Room I could see children sitting in the bleachers and laughing.