



Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling

Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling (SHCMAS) is the cultural capstone of **Broadway Housing Communities (BHC)**—a community-based nonprofit serving West Harlem and Washington Heights since 1983 that has been advancing innovations for homeless and at-risk families and adults. Co-conceived 15 years ago by BHC leadership and community members—and inspired by the teachings of artist Faith Ringgold—SHCMAS's core belief *is that nurturing the arts on a local level can heal, revitalize, and transform disempowered communities*. SHCMAS is an evolving work in progress informed by its intergenerational audience, including young children, neighbors, elders, curators, and artists. Early supporters include ArtPlace America, and Oak, Kresge, and Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundations.

Context and History

In the wake of 9/11, Faith Ringgold became actively involved with Broadway Housing Communities' (BHC) art programming with resident and community children who participated in her renowned Peace Quilt project. During this collaboration, Ringgold instilled in BHC staff and leadership an understanding of the potential for intergenerational storytelling's life-long impact on children, families, and entire communities. In this spirit, SHCMAS was founded with a mission to enact narrative change methodologies to foster cognitive and creative development, empathy, and self-empowerment in young children and adults. SHCMAS is now elevating storytelling as an active practice where everyone can participate, modeling how a museum setting can be a radically inclusive space for personal healing, growth, and community transformation.



SHCMAS celebrates and reflects the rich cultural diversity of its surrounding neighborhoods, including the neighborhood of Harlem and West Harlem, Washington Heights, and the South Bronx. Externally through exhibitions and programs as well as internally through operations and administration, we center the learnings, imaginations, and leadership of people of color. Prior to its temporary closure due to Covid-19, SHCMAS welcomed nearly 24,000 visitors each year, with approximately 65% residents from the economically disadvantaged communities of Upper Manhattan and the South Bronx. During the pandemic, virtual program participants have also seen a high percentage of participants from the local community, with approximately 40% from Upper Manhattan. Additionally, on both a national and global scale, SHCMAS has advised and served as a model for other emerging organizations seeking to transform their impoverished urban communities.

Programs

SHCMAS demonstrates a critical rigor in exhibiting contemporary artwork that explores the root causes of systemic inequities, carrying entry points for all audiences. The curatorial vision practices the corrective work of engaging artists traditionally not seen in institutional settings, such as those identifying as female, queer, and BIPOC. Exhibiting artists include Faith Ringgold, Derek Fordjour, Leslie Jimenez, Chanel Abney, Chris Bogia, Max Colby, and Deborah Willis, to name only a few.

SHCMAS also intentionally supports emerging artists with opportunities to exhibit and through an artist residency

program. The Artist-in-Residence (AiR) program is uniquely intergenerational, bringing children together in a learning environment with artists actively in practice. AiRs receive studio space, a stipend, professional development, and an opportunity to exhibit when they commit to a full year of social engagement with our community. For some of our artists, Sugar Hill is their first museum show.

In-gallery and studio workshops led by teaching artists and exhibiting artists provide children with the means to both engage and express themselves through artistic creation and experimentation. Similar to the AiR program, workshops engage children by connecting them with artists, observing and exploring the artistic process directly, asking questions, discovering their own artistic ideas and potential, and experimenting with creative tools and materials. Our weekly live storytelling performances engage children in timeless oral and literary traditions through a variety of interactive methods including theater, movement, music, and film. Children's natural curiosity about the world is stimulated by what they hear, and they're encouraged to develop their courageous voices by authoring and telling their own stories.



Other programs include partnerships or residencies with nearby Title I public schools, civic engagement efforts with older youth and adults, and adult storytelling circles as an experience of empathy and community building.

Broadway Housing Communities (BHC) also oversees two community art galleries accessible to emerging artists, which welcome nearly 3,000 community members annually to BHC buildings and which enrich the lives of its residents with buildings replete with art on every wall. In-gallery exhibition design, interpretative modes, and artist-led programs are designed to be inclusive for all. In 2022, BHC was awarded an NYC Department of Cultural Affairs capital grant, to build out eight to ten affordable artist studios within an underutilized street front community facility space at the Sugar Hill development.

Fundamentally, centering the needs of children at Sugar Hill is an iterative experiment in affecting transformational change from within the local community and led by artists. We maintain an acute awareness that for many (both children and adults), Sugar Hill is where they are seeing art and interacting with artists for the first time. We present children of West Harlem and Washington Heights with a cultural space in which they can see themselves represented. Our long-term goal is for them to grow up understanding that art spaces *can* exist for them and that they possess the necessary tools to continue the remedial work of telling their own stories. Moreover, we expect more children from our neighborhoods to pursue futures in the creative industries becoming artists, poets, writers, engineers, architects, and lifelong museum visitors.

About Broadway Housing Communities

Broadway Housing Communities (BHC) is a pioneering nonprofit advancing high-impact innovations in Housing + Education + Art since 1983 in West Harlem and Washington Heights—neighborhoods where deep poverty and unequal public education continue to be enduring manifestations of contemporary racism and inequality. In October 2015, BHC opened its Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling, part of the mixed-use Sugar Hill development at St. Nicholas Avenue and West 155th Street designed by the renowned architect Sir David Adjaye. In addition to the 16,200sf Museum, Sugar Hill includes a 13-story apartment building with 124 deeply affordable units and a tuition-free preschool with a capacity to serve 120 children and their families. SHCMAS is the first cultural institution in the USA built with Federal New Market Tax Credit funding, a capital source available to any economically disadvantaged community across the nation.

The provision of permanent housing models for low-income and formerly homeless families complimented by excellent early childhood education became BHC's forte in community development; the incorporation of community

art galleries began organically in the mid-1990s enriching the residential and educational programs. The Museum's intervention is welcoming yet futurist, democratizing access to culture by providing children and families with immersive art experiences, dynamic engagement with local and international artists, and lessons in progressive civic engagement rooted in the cultural heritage of the Sugar Hill neighborhood.

BHC also maintains two early childhood centers, including the Sugar Hill Museum Preschool, with the capacity to serve up to 170 resident and neighborhood children from three to age five and their families. The children and families of both preschools proactively partner with the Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling, a grand oasis for children and families to explore, learn, and grow. The Sugar Hill Children's Museum's educational offerings nurture local children's growth into active participants in the cultural and civic life of their communities. Teaching at BHC's preschools and in the Museum is supported by Harvard University's Arts in Education program and inspired by the renowned Reggio Emilia Schools in Italy, an approach rooted in citizenship, community, and self-guided discovery.

