News

A civil rights museum is opening in Harlem this year

New York's first museum dedicated to the civil rights movement will focus on the North's often-overlooked history.

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Photograph: Courtesy of Urban Civil Rights Museum

ADVERTISING

New York is about to get a long-overdue addition to its cultural landscape: the Urban Civil Rights Museum, set to open in Harlem later this year. When it does, it will become the city's first museum dedicated entirely to the American civil rights movement—and one that deliberately shifts the spotlight north.

For decades, civil rights history has largely been framed through a Southern lens. This museum argues that the story is incomplete. As National Urban League president and CEO Marc Morial pointed out to Gothamist, slavery existed in the North, too, and cities like New York played a critical role in shaping struggles around housing, labor, policing, education and political power.

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The museum will occupy roughly 20,000 square feet inside the National Urban League's new headquarters at 117 West 125th Street, directly across from the newly expanded Studio Museum in Harlem. That building—the 17-story Urban League Empowerment Center—is a major project in its own right: a $242 million, mixed-use development that includes office and retail space for nonprofits and minority-owned businesses, a 10,000-square-foot civic conference center and 170 units of affordable housing.

Inside the museum, visitors can expect a permanent interactive installation alongside rotating exhibitions exploring the Harlem Renaissance, the Great Migration, Northern slavery and contemporary social justice movements. The approach is intentionally expansive, tracing civil rights from the roots of urban Black life in the North through to the present day, rather than confining it to the mid-20th-century narrative that most are familiar with.

The timing is also deliberate. The opening is aligned with the run-up to America's 250th anniversary, landing in a political moment when debates over history, education, and equity are especially charged. At the building's ribbon-cutting, attended by Governor Kathy Hochul, civic leaders framed the project as a cultural anchor, a civic statement and a reminder that civil rights history is deeply embedded in New York's streets and institutions.

An official opening date has not yet been announced, but the museum is expected to debut this fall. And when it does, Harlem will also get a new lens on American history, right where that history was made.

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