

La Casa Del Mundo – Morrisania, Bronx



La Casa Del Mundo, an attractive, ready-to-open 12-story apartment building of alternating red and yellow bricks, stands amidst eight new buildings on Third Avenue between 167th and 168th Streets in the Morrisania neighborhood in the Bronx. A mythological figure holding up the world graces the La Casa Del Mundo's façade.

The developer, Kiumarz Geula, brought his plans for a mixed use, 100% affordable building to the Office of Environmental Remediation (OER) in March 2015. The 18,000-square foot site had a history of manufacturing uses, one or more of which generated hazardous waste. The discussion at OER turned to the advantages of enrolling the project in the state Brownfield Cleanup Program (BCP) so the developer and the city, which would finance the project, could benefit from the large state tax credits the state cleanup program offers. Geula, who had intended to enroll his project in the city Voluntary Cleanup Program, said he was willing to give the state program a try. La Casa Del Mundo would become OER's first Jumpstart project.

Less than four months after meeting OER, the project enrolled in the state brownfield program. During this time, Geula and his consultant, Paul Ciminello, worked under OER's direction to investigate the site. OER shared the results with DEC officials, who determined the site was eligible for the state program. The project team next produced an investigation plan and proposed remedy, which OER revised, and then were submitted and accepted by, DEC. La Casa Del Mundo entered the state program.

The rapid enrollment through OER's Jumpstart Program paid off. La Casa Del Mundo was the last development in New York State to qualify for the BCP's more generous and second generation of tax credits. A week later, the 2015 reforms of the program took effect, and the tax credits were cut back.

"We made it," Geula recalled. "I don't think we'd would have (qualified for the larger, expiring tax credits) if we had applied (directly) to DEC."

Site excavation began in March 2016. Nine months later, Geula had earned a Certificate of Completion, DEC's determination that the remedy had been accomplished. Unexpectedly, the cleanup achieved Track 1, the state's strictest cleanup standard which allows a property to be put to any use. The remedy attained Track 1 because Geula opted to dig a half foot deeper across the 18,000-square foot site than the DEC approved remedy called for. Next year, after the state Taxation and Finance Department processes the project's tax return, Geula expects about \$3 million in credits against the project's \$1 million and \$37 million in cleanup and construction costs, respectively. Geula will share the credits with the city Department of Housing Preservation and Development, which financed the site's cleanup.



La Casa Del Mundo is one of eight new buildings to recently open on this block of Third Avenue. Geula bought the land in 2003 from a family once in the apparel business. The property was formerly registered as a large quantity generator of hazardous wastes in 1996, and as a small quantity generator in 1998 and 2002 (manifest records indicate that wastes generated included non-listed corrosive wastes, non-listed ignitable wastes, non-listed reactive wastes, toluene isocyanate, and phenol). Thus the necessity to remediate the site before constructing a residential building.

Today it is a vibrant community of 2,200 people. Besides La Casa Del Mundo, Geula has developed and built an early childhood center, a charter school, a supermarket in the Fresh Program (providing financial and zoning incentives for grocery stores in underserved communities), seven incubator kitchens, a laundromat and three other affordable apartment buildings. Between the childhood center, charter school, supermarket, laundromat and residential buildings, 200 people are employed on the block.

Building a community from scratch takes more than housing, Geula explains. "Education can change a neighborhood. You need employment and education to provide wealth and knowledge and make [residents] diverse and take them out of poverty. "