

Global Health

Chicago's Commons, A Live, Work Building In South Shore, Aims To Give Young Black South Siders 'Autonomy'

With plans for 10 apartments — five with rents under \$500 a month — and

community center, business incubator and restaurant, organizers say the project will be a hub for education, activism and fun.



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From left: Chicago Quilombo co-founders Cosette Ayele, Jeffrey Hitchens, Inez White and Sarina Shane. Credit: Provided

SOUTH SHORE — A new nonprofit recently bought a building on 79th Street, aiming to turn it into a hub where young Black South Siders can live, engage in community organizing, establish businesses and get to know their neighbors.

Chicago Quilombo on Aug. 15 bought the building at 1732-36 E. 79th St. in South Shore, which the nonprofit intends to redevelop into 10 apartments, a community center, a small business marketplace and a spirit-free restaurant for African Black cuisine.

Chicago Quilombo's cofounders — Cosette Ayele, Sarina Shane, Inez White and Jeffrey Hitchens — have hosted monthly meetings on the project as they

"My hope for Chicago Quilombo is that it is a space that centers not just the needs of Black young adults, but also fun, learning and connecting for Black

The next meeting on the project plans is 2-4 p.m. Sept. 27 at the Quarry, 2423 E. 75th St. in South Shore. Neighbors can register for the meeting [here](#).



Chicago Quilombo is named after the quilombos of Brazil, which are

Thousands of quilombos remain active in Brazil, while more than 1.3 m

formerly enslaved people – according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics.

who have a constitutional right to their lands, though only 4 percent of quilombos are fully recognized. They also pull from the vision for Black land autonomy outlined by the activist organization BYP100, to which all four

“The fact is, in Chicago — due to systemic racism, gender-based violence and historic disinvestment in Black communities — we have been left with almost nothing,” Ayele said. “We wanted to create a quilombo as a space for people who are escaping from the racism and gender-based violence that systems

The first step in establishing Chicago Quilombo is to fix the “despicable conditions” of the building’s 10 apartments, which were neglected by its

Given the living conditions, Chicago Quilombo waived rents for the remainder of the five existing residents' leases. The nonprofit will also provide relocation assistance — including the first month's rent at their new places — when tenants move out and renovations begin, Avele said.

Once the apartments are rehabbed, five will be available at market rate, while the other five will be available for \$350-\$500 per month. Organizers intend for the apartments to house adults aged 18-35 — with a particular focus on those 20-29 — who are already living on the South Side and identify as Black, Ayala said.

Amenities planned for building residents and neighbors include a community center that will feature a conference room, co-working space and cultural

The center can also serve as “a hub for movement building,” connecting residents to organizations like BYP100 and Southside Together, which “are doing powerful work and gathering Black young adults and people of all ages

The marketplace will host up to 20 small businesses that would otherwise not have a physical location to sell their items. Space in the market will be available to entrepreneurs on a sliding fee scale.

Entrepreneurs will ideally use the market as an incubator, building their customer bases at Chicago Quilombo before moving into the community's

The restaurant will likely be one of the later aspects of the development to come to fruition, Ayele said. Diners will be able to browse items from the

Barrel, she said.

Once the various aspects of the building are open and sustainable, Chicago

The vision is for the crisis team to offer neighbors “something outside of police to call” when they experience issues like personal disputes or loud noises, Ayele said. The Chicago Quilombo co-founders are “abolitionists” who believe

"We're hoping, by all of us doing and being part of this work, that we're not only creating more economic development for this area, but also more safety," Ayele said. "We know a better economy generates more safety — more than a carceral response to poverty does."

Chicago Quilombo owns the building and has the funds needed to start the redevelopment process, while organizers will continue to raise money to finish the projects to be housed within. Acosta said.

The nonprofit will not pursue federal funding or housing subsidies, and will instead seek grants, city funding and rents from the market-rate apartments to

Ald. Michelle Harris (8th) recently rezoned several properties in the 1700 block of 79th Street in a play to control the properties' future, a move which drew

Harris has been “very supportive” of Chicago Quilombo, particularly as the

shape the development plans, Ayele said. For example, the planned restaurant will not serve alcohol, as neighbors urged them against opening another bar. To buy liquor along 79th Street, she said.

Alvin Rider, Harris' advisor for community engagement and economic development, confirmed Harris' support this week.

The city's transportation department recently arranged a meeting between the developers of various projects along the 79th Street corridor — including Chicago Quilt — and the SUBCO Connect-A-Block coalition to ensure its members could weigh in on the plans, Rider said.

Harris thinks the project is “going to be a good fit for 79th, along with the possible community restaurant and with the residential piece,” F

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