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At Harlem's Urban Civil Rights Museum, Cities Take Center Stage

Located in the Urban League's new headquarters, the museum focuses on how the civil rights movement unfolded in urban centers outside the US South.



The rise of Black media is depicted in an exhibit at the Urban Civil Rights Museum. *Source: Urban Civil Rights Museum*

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Takeaways by Bloomberg AI

- The Urban Civil Rights Museum in Harlem tells the story of the struggle for civil rights in urban centers outside the US South, an angle that other institutions have neglected.

- The museum features exhibits on the transatlantic slave trade, the Great Migration, and the postwar civil rights movement, including interactive displays and oral histories from those who relocated during the Great Migration.
- The museum sets itself apart by beginning its survey of civil rights in the 16th century and by focusing on the urban North, with a goal of empowering visitors to engage in their communities and understand that civil rights is an ongoing story.

One of the most unusual exhibits at New York City's newest museum is a plain wooden box, three feet long, two-and a-half feet deep, and two feet wide. It's a replica of the crate that Henry "Box" Brown used to escape enslavement in 1849 by shipping himself from Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia – a journey that took 26 hours.

He is one of many figures featured in the Urban Civil Rights Museum, which opened Nov. 14 on the fourth floor of the Urban League Empowerment Center on 145th Street in Harlem. What began in 2010 as a traveling exhibit is now a mix of permanent and rotating galleries that tell the story of the struggle for civil rights in urban centers outside the US South – an angle that other institutions devoted to chronicling African American history and the civil rights movement have neglected. It's billed as "the first museum dedicated to the Northern Civil Rights Movement."

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"We wanted to tell a story about the Northern civil rights experience and the Northern Black experience," says Marc Morial, the former New Orleans mayor who since 2003 has led the National Urban League. The civil rights organization was founded in Harlem in 1910 to provide refuge, support and advocacy for Black newcomers who fled the Jim Crow South. The desperate passage that freedom seekers like Henry Brown undertook in the years

before the Civil War gave way to waves of migration in the 20th century as millions sought jobs and new lives in the industrializing North.

The UCRM joins a large field of museums with similar missions. There's the DuSable Black History Museum in Chicago, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, and the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of African American History and Culture in Baltimore. A brace of civil-rights-themed institutions have opened in Southern cities in recent years: the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in Alabama; the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum in Jackson; the International Civil Rights Center & Museum in Greensboro, North Carolina; Atlanta's National Center for Civil and Human Rights; and the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis. In Washington, DC, the Smithsonian Institution's acclaimed National Museum of African American History and Culture arrived on the National Mall in 2016.



The UCRM bills itself as the first civil rights museum to focus on the urban US North. *Source: Urban Civil Rights Museum*

The UCRM sets itself apart by not only focusing on the urban North, but by beginning its survey of civil rights in the 16th century. Entering the first

gallery, visitors are met with a multimedia installation about the transatlantic slave trade. “Black people were always resisting and fighting for civil rights through the slave rebellions and revolts, through creating their own communities, and fighting to keep those communities thriving,” says Araya Henry, the museum’s director of learning and engagement. “That’s a story that’s not really told. It’s seen as separate, but we’re connecting that throughout.”

Much of the museum is devoted to following the two waves of the Great Migration – 1910-1940 and 1940-1970 – when roughly 6 million Black Americans moved from the rural South to the North, Midwest and West, transforming cities like New York, Detroit, Chicago, and Philadelphia and reshaping American culture and politics.

It’s a story that puts the museum’s neighborhood at its center, when nearby streets fostered the intellectual, artistic and social movement known as the Harlem Renaissance after World War I. “Visitors will encounter the Harlem Renaissance not just as an artistic movement, but also as a political movement and a powerful expression of Black creativity, leadership and self-determination,” says UCRM executive director and chief curator Jennifer Scott.

Galleries that spotlight the postwar civil rights movement track the rise of Black media (there’s a wall of covers of *Ebony*, *Essence*, *Jet*, and other lifestyle publications) and feature audio recordings of speeches by figures like W.E.B. DuBois, Dorothy Height, and Malcolm X. Interactive displays encourage visitors to contemplate modern civil rights issues like policing, housing, public health, education and employment.

The New York-based experience design studio Local Projects – which also contributed to the 9/11 Memorial Museum, the Greenwood Rising Black Wall St. History Center in Tulsa and the Public Housing Museum in Chicago – worked on creating the museum’s exhibits. Among the most engaging are the mini-sets designed to look like bus, train and car interiors, in which visitors can pick up a receiver and hear oral histories from those who relocated during the Great Migration. Nearby, an expansive audiovisual display projects the sights, sounds and figures of the Harlem Renaissance,

including Josephine Baker and Paul Robeson, along with scenes from the neighborhood.



Selections from speeches by civil rights leaders are featured in an audio exhibit. *Photographer: Elizabeth Yuko/Bloomberg*



A Great Migration exhibit at the UCRM. *Photographer: Elizabeth Yuko/Bloomberg*

In addition to the exhibitions, the museum will offer school programs, student tours, and daily programming for local families. “From the beginning, we wanted the museum to be more than a traditional museum,” Scott says. “We wanted to be a place where people could explore history, connect to the present and leave fully empowered to engage in their communities.”

Mixed Uses

The UCRM also distinguishes itself with its setting. It’s located in the Urban League Empowerment Center, a 17-story, 400,000-square-foot mixed-use building that opened in 2025. Along with the museum, it contains the Urban League’s headquarters and conference center, office space for several nonprofits (including the United Negro College Fund), and Virginia Union University’s W. Franklyn Richardson Graduate Center. On street level, retail tenants reflect the changing face of Harlem. (There’s a Target and a Trader Joe’s.)

Right across 125th Street – Harlem's main commercial drag – sits the new Studio Museum of Harlem, an art museum dedicated to the work of artists of African descent, members of the African diaspora, and artists from the African continent.



The Urban League Empowerment Center, designed by Beyer Blinder Belle, also includes a residential tower, office and retail space. *Photographer: Alexander Severin/Beyer Blinder Belle*

Also sharing space with the museum: 170 units of affordable housing, whose residents include families earning between 30% and 80% of the area median income, and young adults supported by the New York Foundling's program for foster youth who have aged out of the system. Morial says that the center "represents an indication of how you can greenline Harlem versus redline Harlem."

Morial also acknowledges the challenging environment that museums focusing on the African American experience are facing. In March 2025, President Donald Trump delivered an executive order accusing the Smithsonian Institution of "distorting" history by including exhibits and narratives that portray racism. A 2025 survey from the American Alliance of

Museums found that a third of US museums had lost government funding since Trump took office. The UCRM, Morial stressed, would be independent. “There is going to be no censorship, no government suppression,” he says. “We will tell the story fully and completely. This museum represents a rejection of attacks on the First Amendment, attacks on African American history, attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion, attacks on civil rights.”

Urban Spotlight

In the popular imagination, the pivotal events in the civil rights movement tend to be dominated by dramatic protests and actions staged in the segregated Deep South, like the Birmingham bus boycott and the march to Selma. But focusing on the South isn’t the whole story.

“A lot of people fled the South because of the lack of jobs, the discrimination, the terror, with the hope of finding a better place,” Scott says. “They were very idealistic, very optimistic. And when they arrived, what they found was not exactly as ideal or utopian as they thought.”

The discrimination that unfolded across Northern cities was distinct from that of the Jim Crow-era South. “Black people didn’t have to cross the street like in the South to avoid a white woman, but they also couldn’t sit in the same section indoors, or perform in the same parlors, or go through the same doors,” says Araya Henry, UCRM’s director of learning and engagement. “So while integration was happening, it looked a little bit different.”



New York City's school boycott in February 1964 brought out more demonstrators than the March on Washington in August 1963. *Photographer: Bettmann Archive/Getty Images*

One example is highlighted in the museum's permanent exhibition, "Moving History Forward," which tells the story of Carl Hansberry, who bought a house on Chicago's South Side in 1937, violating a restrictive covenant barring Black occupancy. The Hansberrys were sued over the covenant, and the case went all the way to the Supreme Court; visitors to the museum can see a first edition of Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun*, based on her father's experience with housing discrimination.

Americas

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"We do not associate these struggles as being similar or connected to the issues that Black people in the South experienced," says Allison Mashell Mitchell, an assistant professor of civil rights studies at the University of Notre Dame who is not involved in the museum directly. "Since we do not

see them as experiencing the same form of inequality, we do not associate Northern efforts as a part of the civil rights movement." She also point to events like the New York City school boycott in 1964, when more than 450,000 students participated in one of the largest civil rights demonstrations in US history: "These are the types of stories we lose when we don't pay attention to the movement outside of the South."

The predominant civil rights narrative also tends to omit just how geographically connected the movement was, as Southern leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. often traveled to New York and Chicago to organize – and often faced similar levels of discrimination and hostility. "The systemic structure of education, housing, job discrimination, police brutality and so on could not be resolved by the same tactics they used down South," Mitchell says. "Examining how civil rights organizers dealt with the structural racism within Northern cities is essential to understanding the movement itself."

Northern cities featured their own moments of drama in the larger civil rights struggle. Scott points to the battles over school segregation and busing in Boston in the 1970s, as seen in an exhibit in the gallery featuring Morgan v. Hennigan, the federal case that led to court-ordered school desegregation in the city. Detroit's history of labor organizing is explored in an exhibit on the League of Revolutionary Black Workers – autoworkers who organized against racial discrimination on the job and pushed for greater representation within organized labor in the late 1960s and early '70s.

Many of those issues remain relevant today. "We want visitors to understand that civil rights is not a closed chapter – it's an ongoing story," Scott says. "The people whose stories are told in our galleries face tremendous challenges, but they also built institutions, organized communities, created culture, and expanded democracy. Their experiences still have much to teach us."

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