

Green is the New Black

Excerpted from a speech to the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights' Solutions Salon, May 19, 2006, Oakland California.

By Majora Carter

In 1999, our small part of New York city handled 40 percent of the entire city's commercial waste, a sewage treatment plant, a sewage sludge pelletizing plant, four power plants, the world's largest food distribution center and other industries which bring in more than 55,000 diesel trucks to the area each week. Four power plants and another 5,000 diesel truck trips were on the way.

Not surprisingly, the area also has one of the lowest ratios of parks to people in the city. So, when I was contacted by the parks department about a \$10,000 seed grant to develop waterfront projects, I thought they were well meaning but a bit naïve. I had lived in this area all my life and knew that you could not get to the river because of all the facilities there.

Then, while jogging with my dog one morning, she pulled me into what I thought was just another illegal garbage dump. There were weeds, piles of garbage, tires, and all kinds of waste, but she kept dragging me. And lo and behold, at the end of this lot, was the river. I knew that this forgotten little street end, abandoned like the dog that brought me there, was worth saving. This was the humble beginning of the community-led revitalization of the new South Bronx. The Hunts Point Riverside Park became the first waterfront park we've had in the South Bronx in sixty years, and the \$10,000 seed grant has leveraged more than 300 times into a \$3 million project.

Linking Environmental and Racial Justice

Environmental Justice, for those who may be unfamiliar with the term, goes something like this: no community should be saddled with more environmental burdens and less environmental benefits than any other. Unfortunately, race and class are reliable indicators as to where one might find the good stuff, like parks and trees, and the bad stuff, like power plants and waste facilities.

As a black person in America, I am twice as likely as a white person to live in an area where air pollution poses the greatest risk to my health; I am five times more likely to live within walking distance from a power plant or chemical facility, which I do.

These land-use decisions create the hostile conditions that lead to problems like obesity, diabetes and asthma. Why would someone leave their home to go for a brisk walk in a toxic neighborhood? Our 27 percent obesity rate is high even for this country, and diabetes comes with it. One out of four south Bronx children is diagnosed with asthma symptoms, seven times higher than the national average. These impacts come in everyone's way, and we all pay for solid waste costs, health problems associated with pollution, including high rates of incarceration of Black people and Latinos.

Fifty percent of South Bronx residents live at or below the poverty line. 25 percent are unemployed. Low-income citizens often use emergency room visits as primary health care. This comes at a high cost and produces no proportional benefits: poor people are not only still poor, they remain less healthy.

Growing Up in the Bronx

To understand how things got the way they did for the South Bronx, it is important to know its history. I can use my family as an example. In the late 1940s, my father, a Pullman porter, son of a slave, bought a house in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx, and married my mom. At the time, the



community was a mostly white, working class neighborhood. My dad was not alone and even as others like him pursued this American Dream, “White Flight” became common in the South Bronx and in many cities across the country.

Banks “redlined,” certain sections of the city, including ours, deeming them off limits to any sort of investment. Many landlords believed that it was more profitable to torch their buildings and collect insurance, than to sell under these conditions. Hunts Point was formerly a walk-to-work community; but now many residents had neither work nor home to walk to.

A national highway construction boom added to our problems. In New York state, Robert Moses, one of the key builders of New York City, spearheaded an aggressive highway expansion campaign. One of its primary goals was to make it easier for residents of wealthy communities to travel by car between Westchester Co. and Manhattan. The South Bronx, which lies between the two, didn’t stand a chance. Residents were often given less than a month’s notice before their buildings were razed - about 600,000 people were displaced by this project.

Antiquated zoning and land use regulations are still used to justify putting polluting facilities in my politically vulnerable community. Are these factors taken into consideration when land use policy is decided? What costs are associated with these decisions, and who pays? Who profits? Does anything justify what the local community goes through? This was “planning” that did not have our best interests in mind. Once we realized that, we decided to do our own planning.

Why is this story important? Because from a planning perspective, economic degradation begets environmental degradation and then social degradation. The disinvestment that began in the 60’s set the stage for the environmental injustices to come.

Sustainable Solutions from the South Bronx

In order to address the economic and environmental degradation that has historically affected the South Bronx, we initiated the Bronx Ecological Stewardship Training (BEST), which provides job training in the fields of ecological restoration and Brownfield remediation so that folks from our community have the skills to compete for well paying jobs. Little by little, we are seeding the area with a skilled “green collar” workforce that has both a financial and personal stake in their environment.

Another project we are working on is the Bronx Recycling industrial park (BRIP), a proposal for an industrial park, where one industry’s waste becomes the raw material for another. The proposed site is a 20-plus acre Brownfield and the project could provide between 300-500 jobs. The city currently has plans to build a prison on the site.

We also built New York City’s first green and cool roof demonstration project on the tops of our offices. Cool roofs are highly reflective surfaces that don’t absorb solar heat and pass it on to the bldg or the atmosphere. Green roof materials are soil and living plants. Both can be used instead of petroleum based roofing that absorb and radiate considerable heat, and degrade under the sun, adding to urban air pollution.

Green roofs also retain up to 75 percent of rainfall so they reduce a city’s need to fund costly “end of



pipe” solutions, which usually consist of expanded and/or new sewage treatment facilities, the majority of which are then located in communities like the South Bronx. This demonstration project is a springboard for our own green roof installation business, bringing jobs and sustainable economic activity to the South Bronx. Green is the new black!

Neither the destruction of New Orleans’ ninth ward nor the Bronx was inevitable. But we have emerged with valuable lessons about how to lift ourselves up. We are not national symbols of urban blight or problems to be solved by empty presidential campaign promises.

Prior to Katrina, the South Bronx and New Orleans’s ninth ward had a lot in common. Both were largely populated by poor people of color. They are both hotbeds of cultural innovation. In the post Katrina era, we have still more in common: our communities were at best ignored — and maligned and abused, by negligent regulatory agencies, pernicious zoning, and lax governmental accountability.

The Bronx Now

Sustainable development can produce projects which have the potential to create positive returns for all concerned: the developers, the government, and the community. At present, that is not happening and New York City is operating with a comprehensive urban planning deficit. For example: A parade of government subsidies is going to proposed big-box and stadium developments in the South Bronx, but there

is scant coordination between city agencies on how to handle the cumulative effects of the increased traffic, pollution, solid waste, and the impacts on open space. Never mind local economic and job development that these projects could adversely affect.

What is missing from the larger debate is a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis between not fixing an unhealthy, environmentally challenged community, versus incorporating sustainable structural changes. I am not “anti-development.” We do live in a city, not a wilderness preserve. Sustainable, community friendly development can still be profitable for developers. I do have a problem with developments that hyper-exploit politically vulnerable communities for profit.

What We Can Do

We are all blessed with the gift of influence, if we choose to use it to collectively influence decision-makers and not fight amongst ourselves. Use your influence in support of comprehensive sustainable change everywhere. Don’t just talk about it amongst yourselves. We are trying to build a nationwide policy agenda. As you all know, politics are personal.

Help me fight for environmental and economic justice: support investments/developments with a triple bottom line return. Help democratize sustainability by bringing everyone to the table, and insisting that comprehensive planning be addressed everywhere.

Peace.

Majora Carter is a MacArthur Award recipient and director of Sustainable South Bronx.

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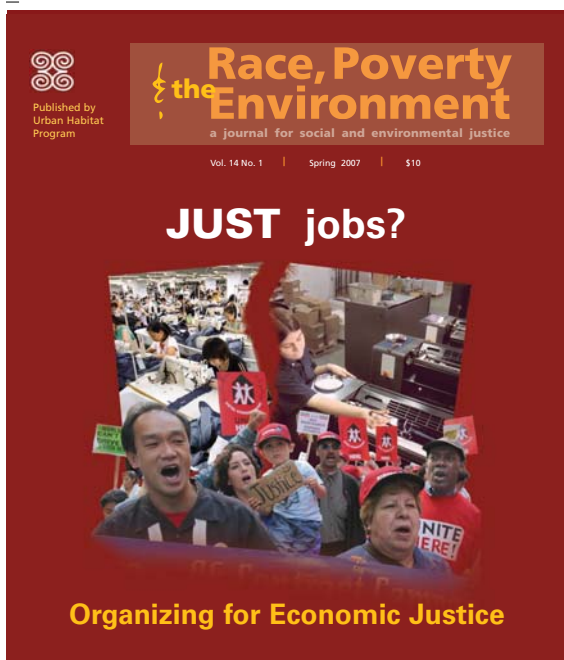
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