sustainable solutions

By Majora Carter

Hunts Point Riverside Park progress to 2004. This is the site after three community clean-ups; by 2004, it looked like the bottom frame.

Majora Carter, a 2005 MacArthur Fellow, is founder and executive director of Sustainable South Bronx, a community organization dedicated to implementing sustainable economic development projects for the South Bronx that are informed by the needs of the community and the values of Environmental Justice.

So, why would a poor black girl from the ghetto grow up to believe in the virtues of sustainable development and comprehensive urban planning? The reason – a dog. An abandoned puppy I found in the rain back in 1998 turned out to be much bigger than I had anticipated.

When she came into my life, my community, a low-income Latino and black community called the South Bronx in New York City, was fighting against a huge waste facility planned for our East River waterfront. This despite the fact that our small part of NYC already handled 40 percent of the entire city's commercial waste, a sewage treatment plant, a sewage sludge pelletizing plant, the world's largest food distribution center, and other industries which brought more than 55,000 diesel trucks to the area each week. At the same time, the area had one of the lowest ratios of parks to people in the city.

So, when I was contacted by the NYC Parks Department about a $10,000 seed grant to develop waterfront projects, I thought it was 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 lovely facilities that I mentioned earlier. 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 other stuff that I won't mention here, 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 and would grow to become the proud beginnings of the community-led revitalization of THE NEW SOUTH BRONX. And just like my new dog, it was an idea that got bigger than I had imagined.

We garnered some support along the way, and the Hunts Point Riverside Park became the first waterfront park we've had in the South Bronx in 60 years. That $10,000 seed grant was leveraged more than 300 times, culminating into a $3M project through a mayoral appropriation. I am going to get married there in the fall! But I digress!!

Since you are reading this article, you have probably heard about how "sustainable" development will save us from ourselves. High-performance building techniques, land and water use policies, and systems that take advantage of and/or mimic natural systems instead of contradicting them, reuse and recycling techniques, and reducing our dependence on non-renewable energy resources are all frequently lauded in principle. However, we are told that a comprehensive sustainability policy agenda is just not feasible to implement in large

THE PURSUIT OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN THE SOUTH BRONX

The author explains the concept of Environmental Justice through an autobiographical account of her experience in and the history of the South Bronx. Too often, she contends, poor neighborhoods house a disproportionate share of the city's waste and polluting industries. Her aim is to change this, by bringing local advocates together with city government to articulate a vision for community development that includes everything from green roofs and improved storm water management to the rehabilitation of the industrial waterfront into a new greenway, which will provide much needed open space, waterfront access, and opportunities for mixed used economic development.

urban areas like New York City because its prohibitively expensive costs would put everyone – even those with the best intentions – out of business. I attribute that attitude to the fact that most people with decision-making powers, both public and private, believe they can afford to wait. They don't really *feel* as though they are in danger in their day-to-day lives.

Those of us living in Environmental Justice communities are like the canaries in the coal mine. We feel the problems right now and have for some time. 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 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 created the hostile conditions that lead to problems like obesity, diabetes, and asthma. Why would someone want to 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. And one out of four South Bronx children is diagnosed with asthma symptoms, seven times higher than the national average.

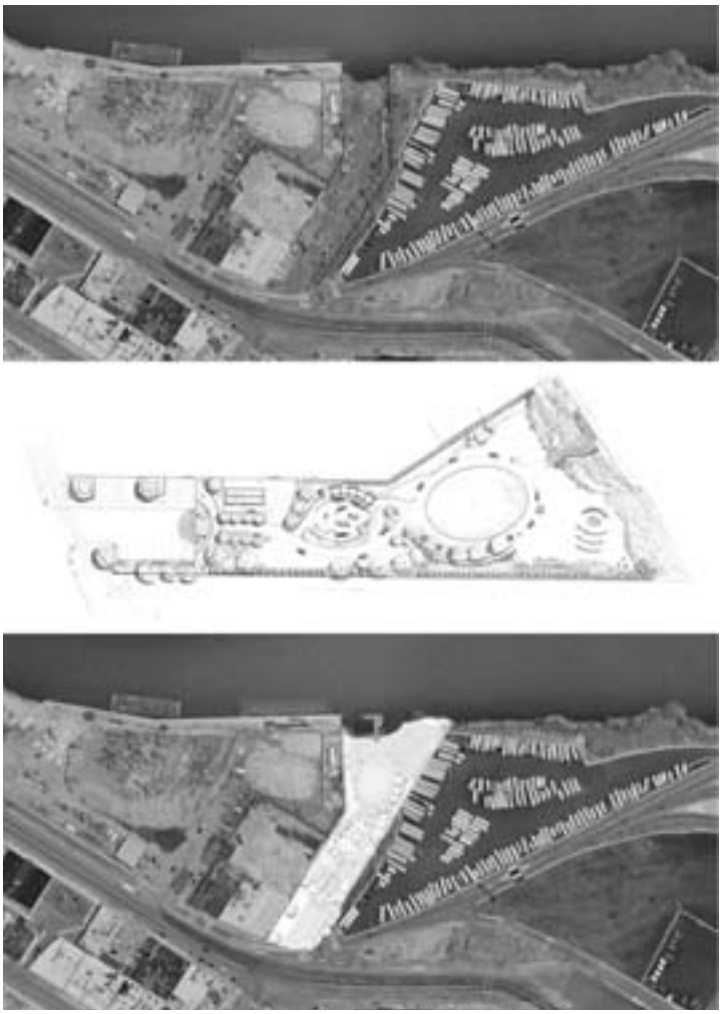
Approximately 50 percent of South Bronx residents live at or below the poverty line and 25 percent are unemployed. Low-income citizens often use emergency room visits as primary care. This comes at a high cost to taxpayers and produces no proportional benefits: poor people are not only still poor, they remain less healthy.

Fortunately, there are many people like me who are striving for solutions that won't compromise the lives of low-income communities of color in the short term and won't destroy us all in the long term. But besides being a black woman, I am different from most in some other ways. I watched nearly half of the housing in my neighborhood burn while I grew up; my big brother Lenny fought in Viet Nam – coming back only to be gunned down several blocks from our home. I grew up with a "crack-house" across the street. Now do you believe that I was born a poor black child in the ghetto?

How did things get so different for us? In the late 1940's, my dad, 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, as others like him pursued this American Dream; by the late 1960's the area could easily be described as a black and Puerto Rican part of town. "White flight" became common in the South Bronx and in many cities across the country. A new term was created in the banking industry called "redlining;" it was used by banks wherein certain sections of the city, including ours, were deemed 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 spearheaded an aggressive highway expansion campaign unparalleled in the history of the US. Many people thought it was a great idea at the time. One of its primary goals was to make it easier for residents of wealthier communities to travel by car



Hunts Point Riverside Park: Hugo-Neu Scrap yard to the left, Hunts Point Market Truck parking to the right (top). This $3.2 million dollar park along the Bronx River is scheduled to be completed by July 2006 (middle and bottom). Both Hugo-Neu and the Hunts Point Market have been very helpful and cooperative in engaging corporate community partners with Sustainable South Bronx and providing a model for other business interests which do business in Environmental Justice Communities.

between their city jobs and their suburban homes. Unfortunately, many poor, working class communities stood in the way. Residents in these areas were often given less than a month's notice before their buildings were razed. The South Bronx, which lies between the wealthy areas of Westchester and Manhattan, didn't stand a chance. Some 600,000 people were displaced.

The common perception was that only pimps, pushers or prostitutes were from the South Bronx. If you are told from your earliest days that your community is ugly and bad, how could it *not* reflect on you?

So now my family's property was worthless, but it was our home and all we had. Luckily for me, that home and the love inside it, along with help from teachers, friends, and mentors along the way, was enough.

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.

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.

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While we knew we had to be ready to constantly react to the environmental injustices that were being thrust upon us, we also began to create proactive strategies that would allow us to develop our communities in a healthier way. That small park mentioned earlier was the first stage of building a greenway movement in the South Bronx.

I wrote a one and a quarter million dollar federal transportation grant to design the plan for a waterfront esplanade with dedicated on-street bike paths. Physical improvements help inform public policy regarding traffic safety and the placement of waste and other industrial facilities, which if done properly, don't compromise the community's quality of life. They provide opportunities for people to be more physically active as well as for local economic development – think bike shops or juice stands. We secured $20M to build first phase projects. We worked with the NYC Economic Development Corporation and other partners to prove that industry and pedestrian friendly infrastructure are not mutually exclusive. These were inconceivable community achievements only a few years ago. As exciting as these projects are, they will need to be maintained. We are working on how poor communities like the South Bronx can effectively address maintenance issues that are much less of a challenge in wealthier communities.

Truck dependent industries operating in close proximity to residential areas.

The challenge is great. This is because public-private partnerships that support parks and greenways in wealthier areas around the city simply cannot be applied to neighborhoods like the South Bronx. In those communities, many organizations are funded by businesses that prosper because of their proximity to a park or greenway. They have a vested interest in contributing. Many of the businesses in the South Bronx are disconnected from the community – usually that is only a geographical disconnect, and sometimes it is a philosophical one. Thus, despite the success we have had in funding planning and identifying funds for capital improvements, we are not yet in the position to create a greenway maintenance entity through corporate support. We believe an effective alternative should include a three- to five-year commitment to fund a maintenance program which would create entry level and advanced "green collar" jobs for the local community at the same time. This funding could be stepped down every year. That would give us time to nurture other partners for a sustainable public-private partnership model, one that could be replicable in other communities of limited resources.

As we nurture the natural environment, its abundance will give us back even more. At Sustainable South Bronx, the community organization I founded in 2001, we run a project called B.E.S.T., Bronx Ecological Stewardship Training, 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 its environment.

We built New York City's first green and cool roof demonstration project on top of our offices. Cool roofs are highly reflective surfaces that don't absorb solar heat and pass it on to the building or the atmosphere. Green roof materials are soil and living plants. Both can be used instead of petroleum-based roofing that absorbs heat and contributes to the urban heat island effect, and degrades under the sun, which we in turn breathe. 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. And they provide habitats for our winged friends. This demonstration project is a springboard for our own green roof installation business, bringing jobs and sustainable economic activity to the South Bronx.

Waste transfer and other truck dependent industries combined with NY Organic Fertilizer Corp. In the background all contribute to the elevated levels of health problems found in Environmental Justice Communities

But the need for jobs in the South Bronx is large, and facilities that nobody wants in their backyard keep coming our way. Add to this mix a 20-acre piece of vacant land on the river called Oak Point, plus growing electrical demands by the city, and a conflict quickly arises. This city produces vast quantities of recyclable plastics and metals. Looking at these factors in a limited way, it is easy for a private developer to conclude that the best use for this rare piece of undeveloped real estate is yet another electrical power plant for this already overtaxed area. A development of this nature would add very few jobs (and even fewer low-skilled positions), and add to the pollution levels that are already too high. However, when I look at all these pieces of the puzzle, I see a jobs creating Bronx Recycling Industrial Park: where the waste of one company can be used as the raw materials for another. It is a development that has the potential to use the city's plastic and metal resources and other "waste" materials to manufacture products and employ 300 to 500 people.

This project itself is a product of local groups and large business leaders who have come together at the start of the development process. All sides have learned a great deal about what the others need in order to truly benefit over the long term. This is in contradistinction to the more typical scenario wherein a large development, planned in a vacuum, lands on a community like a ton of bricks, forcing the locals to mobilize quickly and in opposition – generating a result that is more costly for the developers and unsatisfactory for community members.

If these kinds of grassroots initiatives had been supported in New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina might not have exposed this nation's *Environmental Justice* problem in such stark detail. We saw on our televisions and newspapers in dramatic fashion how the poor can be written off in the name of economic and political expediency. Prior to Katrina, the South Bronx and New Orleans's 9th Ward had a lot in common. Both were largely populated by poor people of color. They are both hotbeds of cultural innovation – think hip-hop and jazz. Both are waterfront communities that host both industry and residents in close proximity to one another.

In the post Katrina era, we have still more in common: our communities were at best ignored and at worst maligned and abused by negligent regulatory agencies, pernicious zoning, and lax governmental accountability.

Neither the destruction of the 9th Ward nor the South Bronx was inevitable. But we have emerged with valuable lessons about how to dig ourselves out. We are more than simply national symbols of urban blight or problems to be solved by empty campaign promises of presidents come and gone. Will we let the Gulf Coast languish for a decade or two like the South Bronx did? Or will we take proactive steps and learn from the homegrown resource of grass roots activists that have been born of desperation in communities like ours?

These problems might appear to be distanced from affluent neighborhoods, but the impacts are coming *everyone's* way, and we all pay for them in the meantime. Combine the costs of healthcare for chronic conditions exacerbated by environmental pollution and the high cost of maintaining current

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city infrastructure, and you've got yourself an expensive, unsustainable and toxic brew. The NY Building Congress recently published a report stating that NYC would need 6-7,000 megawatts of new energy sources by 2010 to add to the city's current 11,000 MW. That figure is significantly higher than the city's 2003 Energy Task Force's, which came in at 2,600 megawatts by 2008. Regardless of the number, the city should take steps to ensure that Environmental Justice communities and poor neighborhoods do not bear the brunt of the power plant development required to meet this need. We are confident that officials will take aggressive measures to identify cost-effective and efficient conservation techniques that won't compromise already overburdened communities.

What about storm water and sewage management costs? NYC has a combined sewage system, which means that it treats its storm water the same way as does its sewage, even though they clearly don't need to be. Major downpours produce large amounts of water that overwhelm the system, causing releases of untreated sewage into our rivers via ducts known as Combined Sewage Outfalls – which are not surprisingly often located in low income neighborhoods. The lower Bronx River in the South Bronx has five of them. Water system usage is not currently treated as the valuable commodity that it is as reflected by the low taxes assessed for it. There are no real incentives to reduce water consumption or building runoff, even though these are highly manageable factors, not unlike electricity.

For example, approximately $700M in public funds – which in public works projects can easily mean over a billion dollars before it's all over - will be spent on expanding the sewage treatment plant in Hunts Point to increase capacity and to bring the plant up to federal standards. Sewage plant expansions are known as "end of pipe solutions," which are more expensive than reducing demand on the current system. This is akin to treating a symptom and not the disease. If a small portion of this money was invested in storm water management measures, such as greenroofs which retain up to 75 percent of storm water that falls on them, it is very possible that we could spend less money on the facility and create more long term employment opportunities in a relatively low skilled industry that cannot be off-shored.

I don't expect individuals, corporations, or government to make our world better because it is right or moral. It's the bottom line, or one's perception of it, that motivates people. I am interested in what I like to call the triple bottom line that sustainable development can produce: developments which have the potential to create positive returns for all concerned – the developers, government, and the community where these projects go up.

The past decline of the South Bronx and areas like it seems to have given our entire city an economic inferiority complex that persists to this day – even in the face of widespread demand for housing and other types of development in all boroughs. We are constantly confronting the notion that if we don't bend over backwards, developers and their money will go somewhere else. New York City is attractive for many reasons but chiefly because people want to live and do business here. Although there were many questionable aspects to former Mayor Rudy Giuliani's "quality of life" campaign, its central idea was on target: improve the quality of life, and people will be attracted to the city. If there are people here, market forces will bring services and facilities to these people.

One of the things New York City can do is learn from visionaries in other cities. The South Bronx may seem like an odd place to compare to the Rhur Valley in Germany; Bogotá, Colombia; or Belfast, Northern Ireland. However, all of these places have suffered from the effects of severe environmental degradation, high unemployment, and lack of community pride, yet their approaches to recovery contain valuable lessons for us. This is my kind of "globalization."

Let's take Bogotá: Poor, Latino, surrounded by runaway gun violence and drug trafficking. It has a reputation not unlike that of the South Bronx.

This city was blessed in the late 90's with a highly influential mayor named Enrique Peñalosa. He looked at the demographics: Very few of Bogotaños owned cars, yet a huge portion of the city's resources went into serving cars.

If you are the mayor, you can do something about that. His administration narrowed some key municipal thoroughfares from five lanes to three and outlawed parking on those streets. He expanded the pedestrian walkways and bike lanes, created public plazas, and set up one of the most efficient bus mass transit systems in the world.

For his efforts, he was nearly impeached. But as the people began to see that they were being put first on issues reflecting their day-to-day lives, incredible things happened. People stopped littering. Crime rates dropped because the streets were alive with people.

His administration attacked several typical urban problems at once and on a third world budget and a short period of time. America has no excuse.

Their "people first" agenda was not meant to penalize those who could afford cars, but rather to provide opportunities for ALL Bogotáños to participate in the city's resurgence. That development should NOT come at the expense of the majority of the population is still considered a radical idea here in the US, but Bogotá's example has the power to change that.

You are blessed with the gift of influence over matters discussed here. Use your influence in support of comprehensive sustainable change everywhere. This is a nationwide policy agenda I am trying to build, and as you all know, politics are personal. Help me make "green" the new black. Help me make sustainability sexy: make it a part of your dinner or cocktail conversations. Help me fight for environmental and economic justice: support investments with a triple bottom line return. Help me democratize sustainability by bringing everyone to the table. Grassroots voices are needed at the table during decision making processes around land use.

In light of the city's projected growth, it is in the city's best interest to fund and implement a comprehensive citywide planning process with a one-year timeframe for completion and five-year tracking. This process should evaluate the real costs of doing "business as usual," provide significant financial and personnel support toward building a comprehensive sustainability agenda, and establish a timeline for implementation within all city operations. We need a social marketing campaign for sustainability on the scale of the marketing plan for the Olympic Games, NYC2012. If we could marshal a similar campaign towards encouraging green technologies and conservation, the positive repercussions would be felt for decades. The city should explore developing a way to impose tariffs on any goods and packaging that can't be recycled or reused, require any major development that receives city subsidies to do it entirely green, and expect developers to *pay* for the privilege of doing business anywhere in NY — especially if their projects run even the slightest risk of reducing the quality of life in overburdened neighborhoods. The alternative is the status quo: paying heavily for our solid waste costs, the health problems associated with urban heat island effects, pollution from power generation and diesel truck traffic, and the costs of treating excessive storm water runoff.

Make no mistake about it. This kind of initiative will only happen by partnering the city's own great natural resource of local grassroots leadership with an extraordinary level of political will. For many reasons, our very popular mayor is in an excellent position to make very bold initiatives on all these fronts. For example, one of the most forward-thinking ideas behind Mayor Bloomberg's borough self-sufficiency concept on solid waste management is the notion that pressure for overall efficiency will increase if its effects are felt by all. Borough self sufficiency on electricity production would bring about the same pressure to decrease consumption and look for cleaner modes of production. Shifting the burdens to poor neighborhoods only prolongs the problems that we all know will eventually have to be addressed and does so in a scandalously un-egalitarian way.

Railway underpass now (above) and future (left). This connection under the Hell Gate Bridge will give South Bronx residents easy access to the 480-acre Randall's Island Park.

Like the canaries in the coal mines that warned miners of impending danger, environmental justice activists recognize that shifting the burdens to poor neighborhoods simply prolongs the problems that we all know will eventually have to be addressed. Mayor Bloomberg and I come at the issues from very different stations in life, but we share one very powerful thing in common: By working together we can become one of those small, rapidly growing groups of individuals that Margaret Mead spoke of as having the audacity and the courage to believe that we CAN change the world; we have nothing to lose and everything to gain.