

# Transforming Urban Injustice into Beauty and Empowerment

The story I'm about to share is because of a dog. An abandoned puppy that grew to be a much bigger dog than I'd anticipated. When she came into my life, we in the South Bronx were fighting against a huge waste facility planned for the East River waterfront, despite the fact that our small part of New York City already handled more than 40 percent of the entire city's commercial waste and housed a sewage treatment plant, a sewage sludge pelletizing plant, four power plants, the world's largest food distribution center, as well as other industries that bring more than 60,000 diesel trucks to the area each week.

The neighborhood at that time, not surprisingly, also had one of the lowest ratios of parks-to-people in the city. I've lived in this area all my life, and there was no river access because of all of those facilities. Then, while jogging with my dog one morning, she pulled me into what I thought was just another illegal dump. There were weeds and piles of garbage, but she kept dragging me and, lo and behold, at the end of that lot was the river. I knew that this forgotten little street end, abandoned like the dog that brought me there, was worth saving. And just like my new dog, it was an idea that grew bigger than I had imagined. The project garnered much support along the way, and Hunts Point Riverside Park became the first waterfront park in the South Bronx in more than 60 years.

• Majora Carter  
• MCG Consulting



## Burdens of the South Bronx

Those of us in communities living without environmental justice are just canaries in the coal mine. We are feeling the consequences of our out-of-balance society now, and have for some time. Environmental justice, for those who aren't familiar with the term, states: No community should be saddled with more environmental burdens and less environmental benefits than any other.

Unfortunately, race and class are extremely reliable indicators as to where one might find the good stuff, like parks and trees, and where one might find 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 of 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 his or her home to go for a brisk walk in a toxic neighborhood? Our neighborhood's 27 percent obesity rate is high compared to the rest of the country, and we know that with obesity comes diabetes.<sup>1</sup> One out of four South Bronx children has asthma. Our asthma hospitalization rate is seven times higher than the national average.

## Revitalizing the South Bronx

That small riverside park was the first stage of building a greenway movement in the South Bronx. I wrote a \$1.25 million federal transportation grant to design the plan for a waterfront esplanade with dedicated on-street bike paths. Such improvements provide opportunities to be more physically active, as well as encourage local economic development. Think bike shops, juice stands.

Shortly thereafter, I founded Sustainable South Bronx (SSBx), an organization dedicated to greening the local community while providing jobs for residents. We



Green collar workers from Sustainable South Bronx turn a rooftop into a green roof.

**Environmental Equality means:  
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secured \$20 million to build the first-phase projects—connecting the South Bronx to its waterfront and to the 400-acre Randall's Island Park. And as we nurture the natural environment, its abundance can give us back even more. SSBx created the Bronx Ecological Stewardship Training (BEST), providing job training in ecological restoration, so folks from our community can get the skills to compete for well-paying jobs. Little by little, we're seeding the area with green collar jobs and with people who have both a financial and personal stake in their environment.

This program differed from the popularized "green jobs" images of inner-city youth with solar panels: climate change mitigation jobs in alternative energy go to folks



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unemployed from other trades with comparable skills. Climate adaptation strategies to combat the urban heat island effect and storm water erosion/flooding costs are new jobs with little organized competition and are both accessible and therapeutic for individuals coming from traumatic experiences like prison and/or combat.

### **Beyond the Bronx**

**M**ore than 30 years ago environmental sociologist Robert Bullard identified systematic patterns of injustice in Houston. One hundred percent of the city's garbage dumps were located in black neighborhoods even though only 25 percent of the population was African-American. His book, *Dumping In Dixie*, is widely regarded as the first to articulate the concept of environmental justice.<sup>2</sup> Bullard went on to found the Environmental Justice Resource Center and has since published 12 books on the subject. In a 2008 interview with *Smithsonian*, Bullard said, "A study 20 years ago found that race—not income, socio-economic status or property values—is the most potent predictor of where these waste facilities are located. In a February 2007 study, we found this still holds true."<sup>3</sup>

Communities around the nation continue to experience environmental injustice, and many are engaged in democratic organizing and solution-based campaigns. In one such example, San Diego-based Environmental Health Coalition (EHC) not only successfully blocked the expansion of a fossil-fuel power plant; they also drafted a detailed energy plan that focused on alternative energy sources. A community-wide protest led to the denial of the permit for the proposed project, which would have been located 1,300 feet from an elementary school and 350 feet from the nearest home. The community provided expert testimony and analysis showing that alternative energy options such as solar and conservation were not only feasible and cost-effective, but they could provide three to four times the energy that proposed plant would provide.<sup>4</sup>

Visionaries in other cities also remind us of greater possibilities, for example Bogotá, Colombia, which is poor, Latino and surrounded by runaway gun violence and drug trafficking with a reputation not unlike that of the South Bronx. However, this city was blessed in the late 1990s with a highly influential mayor named Enrique Peñalosa. He looked at the demographics and discovered that few Bogotanos own cars, yet a huge portion of the city's resources was dedicated to serving them. As a result, his administration narrowed key municipal thoroughfares from five lanes to three,

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(above) Peñalosa transformed this previously decrepit, crime-ridden plaza in Bogotá Colombia into the bustling thriving city center it is today. (below) Enrique Peñalosa (right, green shirt) reduced vehicular traffic and expanded pedestrian walkways and bike lanes, allowing citizens to travel much more efficiently through Bogotá.



Go to [dreamofanation.org](http://dreamofanation.org) to get the book!

Photo courtesy Institute for Transportation & Development Policy

Photo courtesy Andres Jan-Morey



Photo courtesy Jim West Photography, jimwestphoto.com

Residents of Detroit, MI rally near the city's garbage incinerator to voice their concerns for the health of their community.

outlawed parking on those streets, expanded pedestrian walkways and bike lanes, created public plazas and developed one of the most efficient bus mass-transit systems in the world.

As people began to see that issues reflecting their day-to-day lives were prioritized, incredible things happened. People stopped littering. Crime rates dropped. The streets were alive with people. His administration tackled several typical urban problems at one time, and on a developing country's budget, so we have no excuse in this country. The people-first agenda was not meant to penalize those who could afford cars, but rather to provide opportunities for all Bogataños to participate in the city's resurgence.

A recent report compiled by Alternatives for Community & Environment identified three key principles required for eliminating environmental injustice in our communities (see right).

### 3 Principles for building environmental equality in our communities

- 1 Create cost-benefit analysis of environmental plans vs public health costs
- 2 Invest in locally relevant green infrastructure and economic development
- 3 Incentivize small green business development with low barriers to entry



Photo courtesy of the Ella Baker Center

Focused on the Triple Bottom Line, Oakland Green Jobs Corps participants work on solar energy panels at Laney College in Oakland, Ca.

#### Working Together

I do not expect individuals, corporations or government to make the world a better place because it is right or moral. I know that it's the bottom line—or one's perception of it—that motivates people in the end. It's the triple bottom line generated by sustainable development where community projects have the potential to create positive returns for all concerned. What's missing perhaps from the larger debate is a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis between not fixing an unhealthy, environmentally challenged community, versus incorporating structural, sustainable changes.

This is a nationwide policy agenda, and green is the new black, sustainability is sexy, and now it needs to be a part of dinner and cocktail conversations. I want you to grasp the true value of environmental equality. We need to democratize sustainability by bringing everyone to the table and insisting that comprehensive planning can be addressed everywhere. Our energy, intelligence and hard-earned experience should not be wasted. By working together, we can have the audacity and courage to believe that we can change the world. We might have come from very different stations in life, but we all share one incredibly powerful thing—we have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

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From 2001 to 2008 Majora Carter was executive director of the non-profit she founded: Sustainable South Bronx ([www.ssbx.org](http://www.ssbx.org)) where she pioneered green collar job training and placement systems in one of the most environmentally and economically challenged parts of the US. This MacArthur "genius" is now president of her own economic consulting firm, and hosts the Peabody Award winning public radio series, The Promised Land ([thepromisedland.org](http://thepromisedland.org)).



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