

Creating Environmental Equality

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 handles more than 40 percent of the entire city's commercial waste and houses a sewage treatment pelletizing plant, a sewage sludge 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.

by Majora Carter

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.

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 fewer 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 diabetes comes with obesity. 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 Sustainable South Bronx (SSBx), an



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

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organization dedicated to greening the local community while providing jobs for residents, became a reality and we secured \$20 million to build the first-phase projects. Once this planned path is constructed, it'll connect the South Bronx with more than 400 acres of Randall's Island Park. And as we nurture the natural environment, its abundance will give us back even more. SSBx runs a project called the Bronx Ecological Stewardship Training, which provides job training in the field of 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.

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Trucks unload garbage into a dump in Houston, Texas. Over 30 years ago, 100% of the city's garbage dumps were located in black neighborhoods even though only 25% of the population was African-American.

The Sheridan Expressway is an underutilized relic of the Robert Moses era, built with no regard for the neighborhoods that were divided by it. Today, even during rush hour, it goes virtually unused. The community created an alternative transportation plan that allows for the removal of the highway. We have the opportunity to bring together all the stakeholders to re-envision how the 28-acre property can be better utilized for parkland, affordable housing and local economic development.

Beyond the Bronx

More 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% of the population was African-American. His book, *Dumping in Dixie* is widely regarded as the first to articulate the concept of environmental justice. 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, socioeconomic 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."

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.

Visionaries in other cities also remind us 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

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Peñalosa transformed this previously decrepit, crime-ridden plaza in Bogotá Colombia into the bustling, thriving city center it is today.

Enrique Peñalosa (center, green jacket) reduced vehicular traffic and expanded pedestrian walkways and bike lanes, allowing citizens to travel much more efficiently through Bogotá





Families in Red Bluff CA protest a second incinerator that is proposed to be built in their neighborhood.

of the city's resources was dedicated to serving them. As a result, his administration narrowed key municipal thoroughfares from five lanes to three, 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 Bogatanos to participate in the city's resurgence.

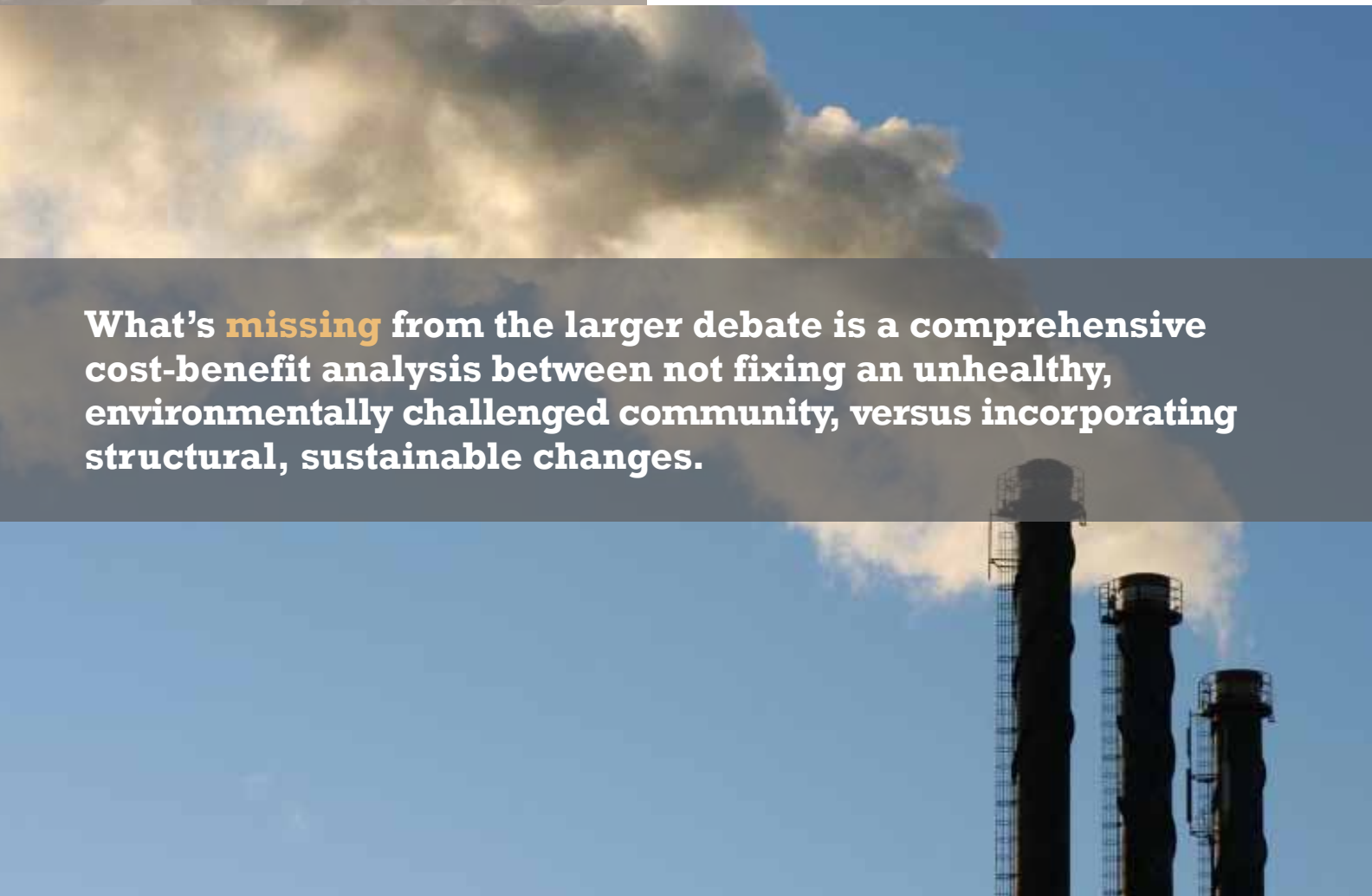
A recent report compiled by Alternatives for Community & Environment identified three key principles required for eliminating environmental injustice in our communities. (See chart next page)

3 Principles for eliminating environmental injustice in our communities

- 1 Enable full, meaningful participation of all communities in spending decisions.
- 2 Invest only in truly sustainable infrastructure and economic development.
- 3 Create shared green wealth by developing opportunities and assets within our communities.



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



What's **missing** from the larger debate is a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis between not fixing an unhealthy, environmentally challenged community, versus incorporating structural, sustainable changes.

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.

part of dinner and cocktail conversations. We all need to fight for environmental and economic justice. 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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This is a nationwide policy agenda and green is the new black, sustainability is sexy, and now it needs to be it a

From 2001 to 2008 Majora Carter was Executive Director of the non-profit she founded: Sustainable South Bronx – 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, a co-host on Sundance Channel's The Green, and host of a new special public radio series called, The Promised Land (thepromisedland.org).

