“Green the Ghetto”
A New Generation of Movements for Environmental Justice in Urban America

http://ssbx.org/greenway.html

Tia Hicks
Zachary Murray
In the United States, urban areas tend to carry the burden of the impact of our negligible environmental activity. Urban areas, particularly impoverished areas are usually the locations for factories, plants, highways, rail lines, and other entities that have a negative impact on the environment. It is often much easier and acceptable to locate the above mentioned entities in poor communities rather than affluent ones because there is usually no political clout or organization to oppose these patterns. However, with the rise of attention to sustainability and environmentalism, poor people are beginning to reclaim their communities and fight against these unfair practices, while promoting healthy redevelopment patterns. For the final project, we decided to research sustainability movements in poor urban areas that are a result of environmental injustice that routinely occurs in these neighborhoods. The poor tend to live sustainably; nevertheless, there are many aspects of the movement toward sustainability that the poor could benefit from. We want to explore ways of making sustainability a relatable movement for poor people. In doing so, our case study will present the history of environmental injustice in the South Bronx, NY and Oakland, CA and then examine the Sustainable South Bronx and Oakland’s Ella Baker Center for Human Rights’ Green-Collar Jobs Campaign as movements in response to environmental injustice.

The “Green Wave” has made an enormous impact on this country, and so it is inspiring to learn that this movement is also making waves in poor communities and communities of color as well. Issues of environmental justice are really important to analyze and be educated about. But instead of solely analyzing the issues of injustice that occur on a daily basis, we wanted to examine what communities of color have done to combat the problems. Often times, in situations of injustice, minorities are only talked about in the context of being “victims,” instead of them actively working to solve their problems. During our research, we found that poor communities and communities of color are indeed fighting the issues head on. They are using this green wave to combat injustice, to make their communities more sustainable and “green”, to develop a new form of economy that includes everyone, and ultimately transforming their communities.

The first generation of the environmental justice movement exposed the existence of environmental protection disparities—a poor community or community of color is much more likely to live in areas of high pollution or toxic waste than an affluent or white community. But this new generation is moving away from being “reactive” about environmental injustice to being “proactive” about using the environmental and sustainability movement to transform their communities. They are tailoring this green movement to meet the specific needs of their respective communities. These organizations are linking many different aspects of justice and equality into one movement, whether they are creating “green spaces” in the Bronx or “green jobs” in Oakland, they are making sustainability a relatable movement for poor people and communities of color. Sustainable South Bronx (SSBx) and the Ella Baker Center reflect the new generation in the movement for environmental justice in urban areas. They are using the momentum of the national green wave to address a wide range of issues within their communities. These groups are centered on using the environment as a tool for and
source of community empowerment. This is an important and effective framework that can be adopted in communities with similar issues.

**Impacts of Systemic Injustice**

The existence of environmental injustice is largely the result of systemic injustice in urban areas promoted in institutions like banks, real estate, and urban planning. Following WWII, Blacks and Latinos migrated in large numbers into urban areas of the north and the west. As Blacks and Latinos moved into the cities, working and middle class whites aided by subsidized loans, interstate construction, and racially restrictive covenants moved into the suburbs in large numbers. Taking with them jobs, industry, and the tax base necessary to sustain services offered in cities. Policies like urban renewal replaced once unified and lively neighborhoods with highways and high-rise public housing projects. Banks engaged in redlining, writing off development and investment in entire neighborhoods, while towns, real estate developers, and agents used racially restrictive covenants to stop the integration of neighborhoods. Therefore, Blacks, Latinos, and the poor were largely confined to resource-less, blighted, and congested urban areas, which naturally became the dumping grounds for power plants, waste handling, chemical plants and transport systems.

**Impacts of Environmental Injustice**

The poor and people of color largely confined to the inner city without any economic resources due to oppressive urban planning practices and lacking social and political capital, are forced to endure injustice in environmental protection. The first generation of the environmental justice movement has made it undeniably clear that if a community is poor or inhabited largely by poor people of color, there is a good chance that it receives less environmental protection than a community that is affluent or white. This generation made its mark by exposing the vast injustice in environmental protection. This injustice includes, but is not limited to: the greater risk minorities have to exposure to environmental toxins. Research has shown that 3 of every 5 individuals of African-American or Latino background live in communities with 1 or more toxic waste sites; locations for proposed incinerators tend to have minority populations that are 60 percent higher and property values 35 percent lower than other communities; Asthma occurs disproportionately in low-income and urban communities, especially in inner-city African American and Hispanic populations; African Americans are more likely than Whites to live in areas with higher toxic air pollutants in every large metropolitan area in the country. There are countless more statistics that reflect inequity in environmental protection and the health risks associated with it. This inequality is a result of the country’s environmental policies, most of which distribute the costs and benefits in a disproportionate manner. Our current environmental protection paradigm requires low-income and minority communities to bear greater health and environmental burdens, while the more affluent and white communities receive the benefit from clean air and green space.

*The South Bronx*
The South Bronx is the epitomic example of the impact of environmental, racial, and urban injustice. When New York City engaged in Robert Moses’ plan for urban renewal, the Bronx was effectively torn apart. The Cross-Bronx Expressway and other highways cut through the heart of the South Bronx separating communities, decreasing their desirability, and displacing thousands. High-rise public housing projects replaced the abandoned and demolished housing. Essentially, policy-makers confined the impoverished mostly Black and Puerto Rican residents into areas clogged with unemployment, high crime, inferior schools, drugs, and many other pressures which were the result of Moses renewal. In the view of planners the South Bronx was the ideal location for a heavily congested highway system, industrial waterfront, and various polluting plants and waste facilities. Moreover, municipal and private polluting facilities are disproportionately clustered throughout the South Bronx. In fact, the South Bronx is home to facilities that handle 40% of New York City's commercial waste and features 15 waste transfer stations all within a one-mile radius. The South Bronx is home to polluting power generating plants, and is also a primary location as the site for new plants. Today the South Bronx has a twenty-seven percent obesity rate, high rates of diabetes that comes with it, one in four children in the South Bronx have asthma, the asthma hospitalization rate is seven times higher than the national average, fifty percent of South Bronx residents live at or below the poverty line, and twenty-five percent are unemployed. This was the context in which Majora Carter set out to make change.

Majora Carter, a recent graduate of Wesleyan University, and graduate student at NYU returned to her childhood home in the Hunts Point in the South Bronx, New York because she had no other option. Carter recalled, “I returned because there was nowhere else to go, but I stayed because I got involved in arts-related community development.” Upon hearing about the mayor’s intended plan to privatize waste collection—a plan that would have the Bronx handle 40% of the city’s municipal waste in addition to the 40% of commercial waste already handled—Carter engaged in a vigorous fight to challenge the mayor’s plan, staging protests, “toxic tours”, and engaging the community. Carter’s efforts were successful, the mayor’s plan was foiled; however, Carter realized the communities needs still were unmet. Like many community organizers Carter realized “mobilizing the community wasn’t easy…we’d been so demoralized and dejected—people knew that this was a forgotten place—it was hard at first to inspire interest and hope.” But instead of stopping there she became more interested in the community’s future “not just reacting to environmental blight.”

Carter realized that in order to make improvements to the environment in the South Bronx, it was time to do more than protest against the garbage facilities and power plants. It was time to envision and create a community that provided benefits for the community and its residents. The South Bronx “needed projects that improved...[the] quality of life, that make community members active and connected to each other—like a park.” In 2001 Majora Carter founded Sustainable South Bronx (SSBx) for just that reason, as an economic development group, which aims at planning for the South Bronx’s future. Carter “wanted to play offense, not defense... wanted to give... [the] community permission to dream, to plan for healthy air, healthy jobs, healthy children, and safe streets.” In a now famous story Carter, chasing after her dog one day, stumbled upon an abandoned lot that opened up to the Bronx river—the only waterfront property in
her neighborhood unobstructed by highways, warehouses, or factories. Five years, several grant proposals and $3.2 million later the once debris-filled abandoned lot is now a riverfront park and part of SSBx’s 11 mile long South Bronx greenway, which will provide recreation, alternative transportation, green space, and jobs. SSBx has already secured $30 million in funding for greenway improvements.

Driven by the goal that “no community should have more environmental burdens and less environmental benefits than any other,” SSBx has created a wide-range of programs that demonstrate that environmental improvements go beyond the aesthetic and health benefits. Below are examples of how SSBx lives true to its mission of obtaining “environmental justice solutions through innovative, economically sustainable projects informed by community needs.”

- **No Sheridan**- Seeks to promote a community based response to “The Sheridan,” an “underused and redundant” stretch of highway that runs along the waterfront in the South Bronx. SSBx is organizing to remove the 1.25 mile stretch of highway to reunify the neighborhood, create park land, allow for affordable development, and positive economic development.

  No Sheridan is an effort aimed at enhancing, rather than degrading the community. In community development, SSBx promotes what they call a “triple bottom line” in which the developer as well as the government and community benefit from developments. The idea behind this is to give the poor and powerless a stake in change and to avoid perpetuating gentrification. Development and jobs are thus made accessible to current residents of the community.

- **Solid Waste and Energy**- SSBX is creating and advocating for solutions to the problems associated with the cluster of polluting facilities and waste including rotting garbage, construction and demolition debris, fill material, waste water, and sewage sludge. It also works to address wasteful energy consumption and dirty energy generation in the South Bronx. The efforts include:

  The Zero Waste campaign not only seeks garbage equity but is advocating for the city to invest in methods to eliminate waste. Bronx Recycling Industrial Park (BRIP) is partnership with various groups working to develop a center for recycling; recycling-based manufacturing; and reuse industries. New York Organic Fertilizer Company (NYOFCo) SSB works to hold NYOFCo accountable for the offensive odors it emits into the community over a 2-mile radius and to secure protections to limit the release of toxic chemicals and pathogens that its stacks emit.

- **Green Roofs**- SSBx provides green roof education and resources to members of the community and is leading the “Green is the new black” Smart Roof campaign in the Bronx. The campaign led to successful spin off of Smart Roofs LLC a green roof installation company led by the community, which installed the first green roof on a brownstone in NYC.

- **Bronx Environmental Stewardship Training (B.E.S.T.)**-BEST provides members of the community with Green Collar Job Training and Placement. Specifically students are trained and earn certification in various fields related to
the environment including green-roof installation and maintenance, Brownfield remediation, urban forestry design and maintenance, wetland/estuary restoration, and stream bank stabilization training. Students also receive job readiness preparation along with education into environmental justice education that their skills enable them to challenge. According the SSBx “Now in its 5th year of operation, 85% are still employed and 10% have gone on to higher education. The model is currently being expanded to include energy audits & efficiency retrofits, and alternative energy solutions training as well.”

Oakland

Oakland, like many other urban areas, suffers from a disproportionate amount of pollution, poor air quality, and the burden of the resulting health risks associated with this pollution. Highways cut across poor neighborhoods where emissions from automobiles lead to an increase in asthma and other health problems for poor residents. One of the biggest contributors to diesel emissions in Oakland is the Port of Oakland\(^\text{14}\). Children living in West Oakland can expect to be robbed of 10 years of life due in part to the pollution generated by the port and companies that use the port, according to the director of the Alameda County Public Health Department\(^\text{15}\). In addition, decades of disinvestment has led to high unemployment, despair, and hopelessness in this city. For the poor and people of color in Oakland it’s even worse because of excessive, racist policing and over-incarceration that has left people even further behind. This city now faces a cycle of violence that makes everyone less safe\(^\text{16}\). But there is hope.

Founded by Van Jones, the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights is a non-profit strategy and action center based in Oakland, California. The stated aim of the center is to work for justice, opportunity and peace in urban America. It works primarily through four initiatives to break the cycle of urban violence and to reinvest in urban centers. The organization calls for an end to recent decades of disinvestment in cities, excessive and sometimes racist policing, and over-incarceration in order to stop the cycles of violence and hopelessness in poor urban communities and communities of color. Instead of communities with more prisons and more police, the Ella Baker Center calls for better schools, a cleaner environment, and more opportunities for young and working people. Its efforts and initiatives include: Books Not Bars, which campaigns to reform California’s “abusive and costly” youth prison system; Bay Area Police Watch, which campaigns to protect the community from police misconduct; Silence the Violence, which campaigns to uplift young people and addresses Bay Area violence; and the Green-Collar Jobs Campaign, which campaigns to create opportunities in the “green” economy for poor communities and communities of color. We chose to focus our research on the Center’s Green Jobs Campaign since it directly addresses issues of sustainability.

According to the Ella Baker Center and many environmental activists, a new, multi-billion dollar economic sector is emerging; bringing new opportunities in green construction, clean technology, urban agriculture and energy. The Green-Collar Jobs Campaign’s goal is to ensure that this green economy is strong enough to lift people out
of poverty. The Green-Collar Jobs Campaign creates opportunities in the green economy for poor people and people of color through the “3 P’s”: policy advocacy, public outreach, and pilot projects. The campaign believes that “the path to peaceful streets and true community safety is not more prisons, but ecologically sound economic development.” They envision reversing the grim trends of urban America (i.e. young inner city residents overpopulating prisons) by training young urban workers in new technologies. They want these young people to create zero-pollution products, heal the land, and harvest the sun. The campaign believes that America's blue-collar cities — like Oakland, Watts, Detroit and Newark — can bloom into vibrant green-collar economic centers. They want to move urban America from jail cells to solar cells.

The Green Jobs Campaign features two ideas that create a powerful framework:

- **“Restorative Justice”:** a cost-effective criminal justice approach that is based on reconciliation, restoration, healing and rehabilitation.
- **“Restorative Economics”:** an ecologically responsible approach to economic development, promoting practices that heal the natural environment rather than despoiling it.

This framework fuses social justice and environmental sustainability into one movement that uplifts people from poverty while simultaneously solving our environmental problems.

The campaign has created an “employment pipeline” through the Oakland Green Jobs Corps. This pilot project works to:

- Recruit participants and provide them with ongoing support.
- Teach participants “soft” skills: general life skills necessary to be successful in any work environment.
- Teach participants "hard" skills: specific skills required to work on new energy projects as a member of the Oakland Green Corps.
- Provide participants with employment experience for a limited time on City-funded renewable energy and efficiency projects.
- Support participants in transitioning from the Oakland Green Jobs Corps into independent employment.

In 2008, the Oakland City Council voted to financially support the Oakland Green Jobs Corps in the amount of $250,000. This money will provide "a vital pool of seed funding" to attract matching donations over the long-term. A portion of these funds will create special paid internships for Green Jobs Corps graduates in renewable energy and energy efficiency.

The Ella Baker Center’s Green Jobs Campaign is a perfect example of how organizations are tailoring the environmental and sustainability movement to meet the needs of their communities. Because Oakland’s poor residents are suffering from the loss of jobs due to disinvestment and globalization, the Green Jobs Campaign is using the “green wave” to meet those concerns. They are fighting environmental degradation and injustice, and also economic disparity, by developing a new local economy that intends to improve the environment, create jobs, and uplift people from poverty. By developing this campaign, green jobs are now an alternative to prison. If this campaign meets its goals, then poor people can obtain jobs that allow them to live comfortably and not worry about “making ends meet.” This campaign moves beyond just reacting to urban decay and the
negative state of our environment to actually being proactive about the situation. The “victims” are no longer reading from the script. They are improvising their own way out of unequal and desperate circumstances, and ultimately they are transforming their community.

Conclusion

From our research of Sustainable South Bronx and the Ella Baker Center’s Green-Collar Jobs Campaign, it is evident that poor communities and communities of color are meeting the challenges of solving environmental injustice and economic disparity head on. These organizations can serve as a framework of how to uplift people and transform communities. Majora Carter and Sustainable South Bronx demonstrate the ability of community groups in affecting change to “take proactive steps and learn from the home grown resources of grass roots activists that have been born of desperation.” Sustainable South Bronx is now on the national stage. In fact in 2006 Majora Carter speaking at a national conference challenged the national sustainability and environmental movements stating: “the top down approach is still around grassroots groups are needed at the table when the decisions are made. Of the 90% of energy that Mr. Gore reminded us that we waste everyday, don’t add wasting our energy, intelligence, and hard work earned experience to that count.” Al Gore who was in the audience took note, placed Carter on his organization’s board, and made commitments to include the grassroots and poor communities in promoting sustainability. The Ella Baker Center is also making headlines. It is creating a framework that fuses sustainability with social justice and people are taking note. Van Jones’s vision of a green-collar economy has gained a lot of momentum in the recent year. His book, The Green Collar Economy, has had a huge impact on politics in the United States. Everyone is now talking about the “green economy” and how to fix our environmental problems while simultaneously strengthening our economy. Van Jones and the Ella Baker Center’s Green Jobs Campaign have played a visionary and inspiring role in this new movement. Majora Carter and Van Jones have now created a spin-off organization, Green For All, which is solely focused on building this new green economy and ensuring that poor people benefit.

Realizing that “economic degradation begets environmental degradation which begets social degradation” SSBx and the Ella Baker Center are using environmental stewardship as a means of economic and social uplift. Carter and Jones are perfect examples of how to make sustainability relatable to the poor and communities of color because both Carter and Jones developed organizations which use meeting the needs of the environment to benefit ignored and dispossessed people. Their approach can be replicated by everyone—poor, rich, white, black—in order to improve our environment uplift our communities, and save the Earth.

---

3 Ibid.
4 Environmental Injustice. 2007. American Lung Association. 2 December 2008
   <http://www.lungusa.org/site/c.dvLUK9O0E/b.316297/k.8081/Environmental_Injustice.htm>
5 Ibid.
6 Bullard.
9 Ibid
10 TED, Talks: Majora Carter: Greening the Ghetto, June 2006,
11 Griscom, Amanda Little and Carter, Majora. Major League: An Interview with Majora Carter, Founder
12 Ibid, 2008
13 CNN, 2008
14 Gordon, Margaret. Goods movement, environmental injustice, and public health issues in West Oakland:
   <http://apha.confex.com/apha/136am/webprogram/Paper189521.html>
15 Fernandez, Elizabeth. “Oakland kids see how port pollution hits home.” San Francisco Chronicle. 3
   March 2008: B-1
   <http://ellabakercenter.org/page.php?pageid=32>
19 TED, 2006.