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The Green Divide

by Margot Lystra

Everyone agrees—green is going mainstream. From organic produce to hybrid vehicles, sustainable products are increasingly popular with American consumers. Media coverage on the shift has been extensive, and significant statistics support all that buzz. J.D. Power & Associates recently found that more than half of new car buyers are considering purchasing a hybrid vehicle. The National Association of Home Builders reports that by the end of 2007, half its members will incorporate green materials—such as plywood alternatives and low energy use appliances—into their home building projects.

Environmental trade shows are flourishing. Now in their fourth year, Green Festivals, run by human rights organization Global Exchange and Co-op America, expanded last year from San Francisco and Washington, D.C. to add a weekend-long Chicago event. The Greenovation Home Expo at the National Building Museum was brand new in 2006. At last year's West Coast Green, a green building conference in San Francisco, builders and attendants showed a great deal of environmental enthusiasm. The trade show floor was stacked end to end with sustainable building products, from recycled flooring to naturally-derived house paints. Homeowners learned how to design environmentally sensitive backyards. Some speakers remarked that the attending venture capitalists were a sign that the green products would fuel the next dot-com boom.

This expanding green marketplace offers great hope for our environmental future. Products are being unlinked from toxic processes that have eroded air, water, and soil quality for over a century. Now, the average consumer has more opportunities to vote with their dollar and choose green.

But digging through all this positive news, important questions remain. Such as: What is the meaning of “going green” if your neighborhood is occupied by polluting industries? How can you plant an environmentally sensitive garden if you don't own a backyard? And how can you prioritize environmental purchases if you are poor and unemployed? In other words, what green opportunities does this new environmental enthusiasm offer for those Americans who have few dollars with which to “vote”?

Transforming Public Space in the Bronx

“Going green” may start at home. But in the city, home includes the front stoop, the sidewalk, and neighboring vacant lots. From Philadelphia to Los Angeles, urban natural resources have been degraded since the industrial revolution. The negative effects of industrialism are most dramatic in neighborhoods that are also critically underserved by public transportation, open

space amenities, and infrastructure investment. No neighborhood in the country serves as a better example of industry-based environmental degradation and neglect—and now, the beginnings of a grassroots green movement—than the Hunts Point neighborhood in the South Bronx.

Hunts Point sits on an industrial peninsula at the far edge of the South Bronx, far from Manhattan in almost every way. Tens of thousands of trucks each day drive through the neighborhood on their way to a regional produce distribution center. Other polluters are solid waste transfer stations, power plants, and an enormous sewage treatment plant. Fifteen South Bronx transfer stations currently handle 30 percent of New York City's waste. There is a severe lack of open space in Hunts Point—under one acre per 1,000 people. New York City averages 2.6 acres, while the national average is six. One in four children has asthma, the obesity rate is the highest in New York City, and 48 percent of Hunts Point's mostly minority inhabitants lived below the poverty line.

Most economic development and open space planning, including the siting of industrial plants, has historically been led by municipal governments and private interests, with little input from impacted neighborhoods. As a result, underserved neighborhoods learn the hard way that if they want healthy communities, they must learn to plan for themselves—before someone else does it for them. Majora Carter, a South Bronx native, had this in mind when she founded the non-profit Sustainable South Bronx in 2001. For three years before that, Carter had worked at The Point, a South Bronx Community Development Corporation, where she helped defeat a Giuliani administration plan to send 40 percent of New York City's municipal waste through the already overburdened plants at Hunts Point. Without a community plan for the Bronx, says Carter, “we were victims of the kind of piecemeal planning that produces nothing but really bad things... it became clear that [city planners] are looking at these things in isolation—and not understanding that there are cumulative impacts. If you're not planning on a much broader level that takes into account infrastructure, economics, and parks, then you're looking at a piecemeal approach that almost uniformly and disproportionately hurts low income neighborhoods.”

Carter understood when she founded her organization that fighting for change in the Bronx isn't easy. In the early 1990s, the National Resources Defense Council, a Manhattan-based environmental non-profit, attempted to build a paper recycling plant on an empty lot in the South Bronx, but their plan failed after years of complicated local political battles. The SSB knew it would have to build support from within the community. Carter's first effort was to transform a former illegal dumpsite along the Bronx River into a waterfront park. In 2000, she organized volunteer clean-ups and enlisted Con Edison's help in building a temporary park, eventually securing additional funds in 2004 to make the Hunts Point Riverside Park permanent.

The success of this project became the seed for the South Bronx Greenway, a pedestrian and bike trail that will provide safe, sustainable transportation and open space amenities along the waterfront. The Greenway plan was recently approved by the city for construction, pending a public/private maintenance plan. Current design drawings show existing roadways retrofitted with lushly planted median paths, and an access-way under a bridge paved and greened to provide pedestrian and bike routes away from heavy automobile traffic.

Another initiative is SSB's Bronx Environmental Stewardship Training (B.E.S.T.) Program, a three-month course that trains and certifies South Bronx residents in ecological restoration, hazardous waste cleanup, green roof installation, and other environmental job skills. Because the Bronx River is the outdoor classroom for much of the training, each course educates students and restores riverside habitat at the same time. A given program day might find students stabilizing a streambank along the Bronx River, pruning neighborhood trees, or learning nursery management and plant identification. SSB recently installed a 3,000-square-foot green roof on its own office, and the area serves as a demonstration roof for people interested in installing their own.

Carter explains the thinking behind B.E.S.T.: "Getting people used to the idea of having a waterfront in their own neighborhood was great, but to do restoration projects we were almost always importing people from outside the community. Folks need jobs, and [these opportunities] were being lost—literally walking in and out of our neighborhood." Now, according to Carter, graduates of the program have been hired for environmental restoration positions with organizations such as the Bronx River Alliance and the New York City Parks Department.

Growing Green Jobs

Another South Bronx organization, Green Worker Cooperatives, is working to improve the neighborhood's economy and environment through worker-owned green businesses. Omar Friella founded GWC two years ago, and now the group is incubating a materials reuse center that will divert some of the existing waste stream in the Bronx. The center will salvage, sort, and sell materials—such as building moldings, doors, windows, and fixtures—that can be re-used in building construction and other projects. The business is currently in early stages of development, with a handful of new worker-owners on board.

Friella, who has an environmental justice background, is aware that exploitation of human beings and the exploitation of natural processes often go hand in hand.

Accordingly, GWC seeks to combat both by incubating businesses that are not only green, but socially just. The goal is "to really impact people's lives," he says. "And that comes out of the fact that the South Bronx is the part of New York City that historically got dumped on, and we get the stuff that nobody else wants. So we're really out to come up with an alternative to that."