

South Bronx lessons

BY EMILY GREEN
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Majora Carter may not be a household name in Portland, but she is somewhat of a celebrity in South Bronx, where she was born and raised and eventually became known as the fiercest promoter of environmental justice in her borough.

She grew up in the Hunts Point neighborhood, located on a peninsula at the confluence of the Bronx and East rivers where New York City has long stored some of its dirtiest urban byproducts, including an unfair share of garbage dumps and diesel traffic.

It was, for many years, the poorest congressional district in the country. Carter's childhood home was across the street from a crack house, and her older brother survived fighting in Vietnam only to be gunned down a few blocks from where they lived.

But Carter, 50, has spent much of her career working to make Hunts Point, and the greater South Bronx area, a better place to live – all while initiating projects that served to lift some of the neighborhood's most at-risk residents out of poverty.

She founded a nonprofit in 2001 called Sustainable South Bronx, spearheaded parks and greenway projects employing neighborhood residents, and recently, she co-opened the first boutique coffee shop the neighborhood has ever seen.

While her career trajectory has beaten statistical odds, she never abandoned Hunts Point, and today she lives just two blocks from the house where she grew up.

She has dedicated her career, first in the nonprofit sector and now at the helm of her own consulting firm, to finding solutions to some of the most complex and difficult to navigate of urban issues.

When Carter moved into the private sector in 2008, she reinvented herself as an urban revitalization strategy consultant.

While she's been criticized by some for her transition from neighborhood advocate to for-hire consultant, she said she felt there were important aspects of economic recovery she couldn't accomplish in the confines of the nonprofit sector.

Today she's focused on real estate developments that are transformational for people living around them, rather than alienating.

Her accolades are too many to list here but include a Peabody Award for broadcasting and several honorary degrees from higher learning institutions. She's also a MacArthur "genius" fellow and was named one of Goldman Sachs' "100 Most Intriguing Entrepreneurs" in 2012.

While Hunts Point is gradually gentrifying according to the usual metrics – increases in

rent and in the percentage of residents with college degrees as reported by NYU's Furman Center in May – Carter believes that helping residents drive development themselves will heal the community rather than push people out.

Street Roots interviewed Carter in advance of her recent visit to Portland on Dec. 6, when she gave the keynote address at Climate Solutions' annual dinner.

We wanted to know: Can Portland learn some lessons from South Bronx?

Emily Green: *I'm going to start with the million-dollar question: In your experience, have you discovered a way to improve a neighborhood's habitability without making it unaffordable to the people who already live there, including people living on fixed incomes?*

Majora Carter: Gentrification – that is the big dreaded word. It starts to happen long before the doggie daycares and – in our case, in a low-status, black and brown community – before white people start moving in. It starts to happen when we tell the young people in those communities, early on, especially the bright ones and the smart hard-working ones, the ones that are going to grow up and quote-unquote "be somebody," we tell them that they need to measure success by how far they get away from those communities. When we tell them that, it spurs them and everyone else to not see any value in those places, so we're creating a reinvestment gap. Because we're telling them that it's worthless, which means that other interests can come in and go, "Actually it's not, and if I make particular investments here, it's going to be valuable to someone else."

The people that own property sell it early and cheap, making it easier for folks to come in and do something else with it. So that million-dollar question of how do you make sure that a neighborhood gets better, so that it's for the people that already live there, that's what we call "self-gentrification."

I've been working community development in the poorest congressional district in the country, and we did so on the infrastructure side by developing parks and greenways and things of that nature, and we did it long before there were any white people in the neighborhood.

We did it because we knew people in our community wanted to have the same kind of wonderful communities that anybody else had. And that is one way to instill pride of place in a community. You tell folks, early on, that you deserve to have a great space to live as well.

That's how we help them see value in it – by ensuring that people are involved in it. Whether it's a park or it's developing local businesses that are created for and by the people that live in those communities, and



Majora Carter, an urban revitalization strategy consultant, helped open the first specialty coffee shop in Hunts Point, a high-poverty neighborhood in the Bronx, N.Y.

Majora Carter pushes for 'self-gentrification' – development from within the community

by doing developments like that, what we are saying is, "Your involvement here, both investment-wise and also just in terms of how you use these communities, is important, and is valuable."

E.G.: *Do you think that's something that's working in South Bronx?*

M.C.: Yes, because those are the types of things that we are actively working on. I spearheaded, literally, the first waterfront park my neighborhood had in 60 years. Prior to that, it was a dump. And we did that as the neighborhood was still considered one of the poorest parts of the country, and now it is a national, award-winning park, and you see people in our community going to it. They are used to quality in terms of open space now.

We asked and surveyed hundreds of people in our communities about what kind of things they leave their neighborhood for in order to experience that would make them want to stay. It was cafes, or coffee shops or restaurants. Nobody mentioned anything about a community center or a health center. People were talking about market-based places that made people feel like they actually had something to look forward to. And so we opened up a coffee shop; it's literally the first coffee shop we've had in our community since I was in high school in the 1980s, and it's a beautiful little jewel of a place. People say, "Wow, it's so

beautiful. I don't feel like I'm in the South Bronx." Which makes me sad, because when did our communities become synonymous with things that aren't beautiful? And what we're doing is instilling that idea that beauty lives here, and always has, by starting with the people that are here.

E.G.: *You've used green-collar jobs as a way of lifting people up out of poverty. I was hoping you could give me some examples of what that process looks like.*

M.C.: When we first started doing park development, believe me, people were very excited about the opportunity to have any kind of open space within the neighborhood and didn't even know there was a waterfront because industry was literally lining most of the shores of our neighborhood, but it became really clear, as much as folks appreciated that, that there are other serious needs in the neighborhood. They were like, "Majora, this stuff is great, but is there any work coming out of it?" And it was clear, that as we worked to create these green spaces, that the city was literally importing people to do that green infrastructure work, and we were like, "This is crazy!" We could be training people to do some of this work in their own communities, and so we realized that if we could train people in the fields of ecological restoration, that we would then be able to provide opportunities for folks in our own neighborhood.

The barrier to entry was fairly low, and especially for many folks that we worked with, because the barriers for them were really high to enter the workforce, mostly because a lot of them had criminal records, so they were shut out of a lot of different jobs, whereas this was something they could do, and they could get in on the ground floor. Whether it was riverfront restoration or learning how to do brownfield remediation or even landscaping, those were the kind of skills they could learn and pick up really well, which was awesome. We also gave them soft skills, and that was a tremendous way to make sure that once they got a job, they were able to keep the job – in terms of job readiness and life skills, and things like knowing how to be a team player and being supportive, or being a leader and stepping up your game, especially since you knew you were last hired and would be first fired, so we had a tremendous success rate. About 85 percent of the folks that we worked with that went through our 10- to 12-week training program were gainfully employed three years later. And that was pretty impressive; most folks that go to jail are back in jail between one to three years later, and so we cut that down to 5 (percent), which was really amazing.

It was called the Bronx Environmental Stewardship Training Program, and that was specifically in the South Bronx; most all the folks we worked with came from the general

South Bronx area.

E.G.: *I was hoping you could touch on solutions that we could use here in Portland. For example, could you give me any instances of newer and innovative approaches to urban sustainability that you think cities such as Portland would benefit from adopting?*

M.C.: Portland has been a great inspiration to me in our work! But I think that, now that we have a new president – he talks a lot about infrastructure, and we should hold him to that, and make sure that as we move into the Trump era, that we expect him to look at green infrastructure as strategically as important as any other kind of infrastructure, and not let it be this kind of cute add-on to what infrastructure can be. And I think in terms of job creation and workforce development in our country, that could be a huge support in terms of helping to make our cities and our regions much more sustainable going forward.

E.G.: *There might be some challenges with that.*

M.C.: There may be, but you know what? Maybe not. One of the things that always sort of bothered me about the way that green infrastructure – and this was under the Obama administration, so you would think that there would be the more enlightened minds there – but I never got the feeling that they felt that green

for Portland

infrastructure was as deeply important as many European cities do. Never. And you could see it in terms of the amount of funding that it got.

In Germany, back when we were doing our research, they had just passed this legislation that every new building had to have a green roof on it for fire prevention services – it made it more difficult for a place to burn down and for fire to jump from building to building. But we never went that far, but the way they were looking at it was just so deeply ingrained, in things like building codes, that you needed this, in addition to everything else. I thought that was really interesting, and we haven't gone that far. Maybe we can go that far. It doesn't mean we aren't using other types of infrastructure as well, but I think we need to be very mindful of pushing them all as different ways of making America great again.

E.G.: *Here in Multnomah County, we have the fourth-worst diesel pollution in the country, which is kind of surprising because we are definitely not the fourth-biggest city, but as an urban planner, and as an activist who has sought to limit diesel pollution in South Bronx, what kind of advice would you give to community activists we have here, who are already interested in combatting diesel pollution?*

M.C.: One of the things that I'm really sorry activists here have not really stepped up on, is if we had more infrastructure for PNG (piped natural gas) fueling stations, within areas where there is a lot of diesel particulate matter. And also a concerted effort to support that.

I know I'm stepping into a really bad place because people are always flipping out about fracking, as well they should be, but I think that there are still some opportunities out there, not as dangerous as fracking, where you can still get to natural gas, that could support the ability to use PNG versus diesel, which does reduce emissions a lot, by 95 percent or some crazy figure, which, from a health perspective, is incredibly helpful.

I recognize that natural gas is still a fossil fuel. I get that. And I get that fracking is an awful thing, but I really do think there are brilliant minds out there that have not been tapped as much as they could have, in order to come up with the kinds of abilities that could use what we have now, and to create better opportunities and for it to be used to reduce the diesel particulate matter, because that is a health crisis, and we can't deny that.

Whether it's renewables, whether it's PNG, we need to come up with different strategies and really be pushing them so that it's economically feasible, to help people breathe easier.

E.G.: *You've worked in nonprofits. What influenced your decision to move into the private sector?*

M.C.: I felt that the nonprofit industrial complex wasn't the place that actually valued innovation as much as it says it does. And I also watched over the past many decades, that all the social issues that it said it was working to deal with actually had gotten worse over all those years, certainly not much better, and then we even created some new ones over the course of that. I really felt being in more of a social-enterprise model was going to give me a bit more freedom to try to innovate in ways that I was not being supported to do under a nonprofit umbrella.

E.G.: *Have you seen that materialize?*

M.C.: Yes, I've been able to build a tech-social enterprise, as well as create these models for talent retention in low-status communities so that people that were born and raised in those communities can feel a need to reinvest in them, and also do local economic development that actually creates jobs and opportunities for folks there. And I never would have been able to do that under the guise of a nonprofit.

E.G.: *What do you think was making it a challenge, in the nonprofit realm, to do that?*

M.C.: It just seemed way too risky, and it was risky. From a nonprofit standpoint, because we were making an assumption, based on market research, that if we created these market-based solutions to some social issues, whether it was lack of community cohesion, lack of diversity and inclusion in the tech economy, talent retention in low-status communities, if we created more enterprise-driven approaches to direction those things, then it wasn't your typical social-justice-industrial-complex way of advocating our way out of it.

It made the assumption that people in low-status communities actually wanted the same thing that people in higher-status communities wanted. They wanted a community they felt they wouldn't have to leave in order to live in a better one. They wanted a nice community that actually made them feel as though it was a great space. They didn't want Band-Aids on their social problems; they wanted to heal. And they wanted beautiful, powerful things, and that's what I feel like my work actually does, as a project-based developer.

When I worked in the nonprofit side, I definitely got the feeling that it was a little too much to ask for, for those communities. I genuinely did feel like often – I was this odd chick out – and that our work was great, but it made people feel a little uncomfortable because we weren't typical advocates.

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