

Majora Carter in Concrete Plant Park

PHOTO: MAJORA CARTER GROUP



Urban Greening with Majora Carter

Profile and Interview

COMPILED AND EDITED BY MARC BEYELER

GREEN ECONOMIC INNOVATOR, Majora Carter, came to Los Angeles in January to speak at the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission's State of the Bay Conference. Carter spoke to a packed luncheon audience about the challenges and potential of "urban greening," forcefully and passionately articulating its power to transform our cities and create sustainable, livable communities. Her story and message inspired and challenged the audience to broaden its environmental consciousness to encompass urban issues and costly environmental equality gaps.

Through her work, Carter, a MacArthur Foundation "genius" fellow, has become a national spokesperson for green solutions to our urban environmental and public health problems. She has been described as "the green power broker" by the *New York Times*, and as a visionary in sustainable urban renewal, based on her work in the South Bronx, and across the United States.

From 2001 to 2008, Carter was the executive director of Sustainable South Bronx (SSBx), a non-profit project incubator, dedicated to environmental justice solutions in an economically depressed neighborhood of New York City.

After moving back to her South Bronx neighborhood, Carter happened upon an abandoned public street end at the edge of the Bronx River. Decades of illegal dumping and other activities had kept families away. Against the odds,

Carter, and a diverse coalition of corporate neighbors and community members, reclaimed the 2.5-acre riverfront site for events and programs. From that spark, the South Bronx Greenway Master Plan was developed, envisioning the eleven miles of shoreline paths, parks, and green spaces that are now being built. Within five years, a \$3.2 million public park with an award-winning landscape design, a floating dock and boat launch, kiddie fountains, and an amphitheatre were completed on the former illegal dump. New parks along the river have also been completed or are underway.

Carter also spearheaded South Bronx community interest into transforming plans for another noxious waste facility into an equitable solid waste management plan for the entire city. For the past decade, she has led other efforts to remake private and public spaces with green infrastructure, while pioneering green-collar job training. A big part of her success has been her ability to link environmental improvement to economic renewal, and to help communities develop sustainable new businesses that employ local people and make the world a better place.

Carter recently formed an economic consulting firm to develop new, green economic and infrastructure projects in cities across the nation, including New Orleans and Detroit. After telling her story to a lunchtime audience at the State of the Bay Conference, Carter took the time to talk more with *Urban Coast*.

Urban Greening

Majora Carter

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Q. Why come all the way to Los Angeles to talk about your work in the South Bronx?

A. Many of the same urban problems, and many of the same green solutions, exist and can be realized in Los Angeles and other U.S. cities. While every community is different and unique, many elements of the new green economy can be important foundations of future urban and community sustainability. I work across the nation, and on a range of targeted projects such as our American City Farms. This is a national brand of locally grown, clean food that we are launching in 2010.

Q. A great deal of your attention is directed to community empowerment through “ownership,” as well as community employment and economic development. Why are these important?

A. Without community ownership, management, and stewardship there will be fewer community benefits and little buy-in. In the South Bronx, we created green job training and placement systems to promote local economic and environmental development efforts that included riverbank and estuary stabilization, urban forestry, brownfield remediation, and green roof installation. We are very serious about the need to address living-wage, community employment. Without support for the valuable environmental services these projects provide, these efforts can't provide long-lasting community economic turn-around.

Q. What are the goals of the B.E.S.T. program and the SmartRoofs business?

A. The Bronx Environmental Stewardship Training (B.E.S.T.) program is focused on adult employment, in climate change-driven sectors as one of the nation's first urban green-collar training and placement systems. A major focus involved managing urban forestry systems, and maintaining the South Bronx Greenway improvements. Similarly, SSBx's SmartRoofs installation business provides new green infrastructure, as well as community

employment. Since B.E.S.T. began in 2003, 80% of its graduates have been placed in permanent jobs and 10% have gone on to enroll in college. When we engage our communities based on their needs, linking green employment and environmental inequality is a logical and fulfilling path.

Q. Can you tell us more about your American City Farms project?

A. We are exploring a pilot launch of this new business venture in Detroit, Flint, and/or New York City. It's a new model for urban micro-agribusiness that disrupts the conventional food distribution system with healthy small businesses throughout cities across America. It's pesticide- and herbicide-free, and meant to form a trusted, dependable name in local produce everywhere.

Q. In 2008, you formed a consulting firm. What are your goals for this effort?

A. I wanted to take the skills and experiences from the South Bronx and apply the best lessons learned in other communities to drive urban sustainability innovations. In areas like cities across America, I hope to show that the emerging green economy has legs, that is has public support, and that we can transform abandoned communities into sustainable communities.

Installation of a Green Roof

PHOTO: MAJORA CARTER GROUP



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