



Transforming the Southern Bronx River Watershed

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Pratt

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Abstract: Transforming the Southern Bronx River Watershed

Along the southern banks of the Bronx River, indigenous organizations are collaborating with allies in the civic and environmental movements in a project to remove the Sheridan Expressway, a 1.25-mile segment of the interstate highway system. Simultaneously, and with both government and civic support, the same local groups are working to reclaim the river itself as an environmental, social, and economic asset, and to develop a continuous greenway along its banks.

This project places the effort to improve the quality of the public realm in the context of a far-reaching environmental justice agenda. The creation of streets, waterfronts, and other public spaces that are healthful and safe for walking and cycling by children and adults is particularly urgent in low-income communities who are resisting the imposition of environmentally burdensome land uses and infrastructure that are being relocated from more prosperous parts of the city.

The presentation will show how low-income communities of color are finding new ways to work with (and when necessary, against) government, and how proactive and visionary projects initiated from the grassroots can complement confrontational tactics in the effort to create city spaces for all people.

Topics:

- Context – the decline and resurgence of US cities, and the emergence of an environmental justice movement
- The renewal of the Bronx River:
 - On the river, the community organizations and government agencies (even the Department of Transportation!) share many goals and work collaboratively, under the umbrella of the Bronx River Alliance, a unique public-private partnership dedicated to creating the Bronx River Greenway.
 - Assembly of land to create a continuous route for the Greenway will result in the creation of a new linear park in an area which now has less than ½ acre of open space per thousand residents.
 - Complementary development on sites on and near the Greenway will bring economic benefits to local residents:
 - centers for culture, environmental work and education
 - a combined hostel for Greenway travelers, and long-term, affordable housing for local young adults.
 - New “green-collar” jobs in environmental stewardship will create living-wage careers for local residents.
- The community proposal to remove the Sheridan Expressway:
 - pragmatic response to the transportation problem at issue
 - repudiation of the paradigm that sacrificed inner-city communities to promote car-dependent suburban sprawl
 - vision for new uses for the 28 acres of land now occupied by the Sheridan right-of-way, to include:

- affordable housing,
 - a new “green infrastructure” for the production of energy and the management of water and waste,
 - pedestrian-, bike-, and child-friendly approaches to the design of streets, services, and open space;
- The impending transformation of the Bronx River corridor also carries the threat of gentrification; it is urgent to formulate strategies to prevent displacement.
 - Creating land trusts or other mechanisms to acquire and preserve existing housing units;
 - Establishing requirements for inclusionary development of reclaimed or rezoned land;
 - Short-term achievements help to sustain energy for a long-term struggle, and provide amenities that can be enjoyed now;
 - Events celebrating the rebirth of the Bronx River
 - Establishment of interim park uses at on several riverfront sites

Conclusion – If the livability of affluent neighborhoods is made possible by the exportation of their environmental burdens to poorer ones, we risk building “Cities for (some) People” on a foundation of environmental apartheid. But the communities targeted as hosts for power plants, highways expansions, etc. are putting up a spirited resistance. Their success will not only lead to cities which offer opportunity and amenity to all – it will force decisionmakers to accelerate the movement toward sustainability.

Presenter bio:

Joan Byron is a Senior Fellow leading the Sustainability and Environmental Justice project at the Pratt Institute Center for Community & Environmental Development, where she has served as Architectural Director since 1989. PICCED makes the skills of architects, planners and development professionals available to community-based organizations struggling to address issues of economic and social justice.

Ms. Byron is a registered architect, and has taught in Pratt Institute’s undergraduate architecture program, and in its Graduate Center for Planning and the Environment. Ms. Byron also a board member of Sustainable South Bronx, and of the Bronx River Alliance.

Transforming the Southern Bronx River Watershed

Context – Post World War II US Urban Policy and Environmental Racism

Decline & disinvestment, 1950s – 1980s

The grassroots movement to reclaim the Bronx River, and to replace the Sheridan Expressway with 28 acres of parkland and affordable housing, is a response to conditions arising from the postwar cycle of decline and abandonment, followed by New York City's "rebirth" in the 1990s.

Demographic and economic changes in older US cities following the Second World War included the in-migration of black and latino people from the rural south and the Caribbean, the decline of manufacturing, the ascendancy of the automobile, and the coordination of public policies and public investments that promoted suburbanization and "white flight."

The construction of the highway system enabled suburban sprawl; it also physically devastated the inner-city neighborhoods left behind. Highway engineers became the principal shapers of urban form. Urban renewal programs were themselves shaped by the thinly disguised racism, and overt anti-urbanism, that characterized American culture throughout the 1950s and 60s. The financial collapse of New York City during the 1970s was precipitated by short-term events, including recession and the oil embargo, but it was also the culmination of the long-term patterns that affected all large cities in the US.



Illustration 1 – Longwood Avenue in the South Bronx, 1977

“Rebirth” of cities, 1980s – present

Beginning in the 1960s, the work of Jane Jacobs gave voice to the urbanistic values that were denied by postwar policies, particularly as they were actualized in New York City by the uber-commissioner Robert Moses. Educated, middle-class (white) people reacted against suburban blandness and ever-lengthening commutes by “returning” to select urban neighborhoods.

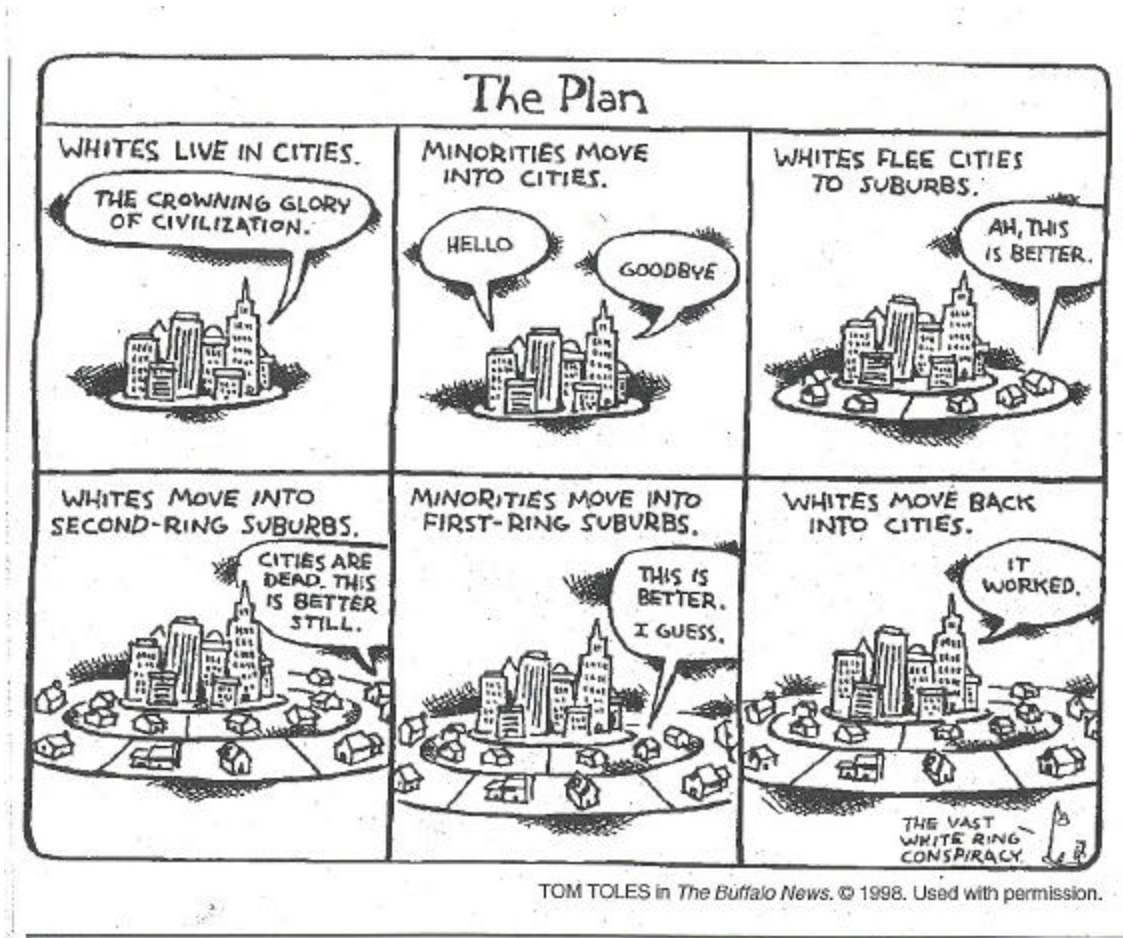


Illustration 2 – Fifty years of demographic and geospatial change in US cities

The return of the middle class has been celebrated in the professional and popular press, and embraced by city and regional political leaders throughout Europe and North America, who now hang their hopes for post-industrial salvation in the cultivation of “the creative class.”

This highly-educated workforce can live where it wishes, and is believed to value natural beauty, architectural and urban design quality, culture, and amenities. So urban economic development policy is now based on enhancing quality of life, as an essential strategy in the competition for status among World Cities.



Illustration 3 – From the Strategic Plan, New York City Department of City Planning, Fall 2003

In New York, we suffer from a certain arrogance about our place in the world, and have admittedly been slow to recognize that this competition demands our focused attention. But our leaders are now rising to the challenge, particularly along our waterfronts.



Illustration 4 – Hudson Yards proposal - from the Strategic Plan, New York City Department of City Planning, Fall 2003

The construction of a waterfront greenway along the entire west side of Manhattan, and its extension around most of the Manhattan waterfront, is an achievement to be celebrated. The City Planning Department is now advancing proposals for major new developments, as well as for rezoning of waterfront neighborhoods, with the stated goal of opening up new space for the construction of market-rate (i.e. luxury) housing.



Illustration 5 – The new Hudson River Park

To be sure, the strategy of creating public amenities to attract the most affluent and mobile classes has made New York a more beautiful and livable city – at least in parts. But public investments made toward this end are unlikely to be distributed equitably. Less advantaged New Yorkers, who earn their living in a growing service sector, have few housing choices (the vacancy rate for apartments renting at \$600 or less per month is approximately 1%.) Poor and working-class people endure bad housing and environmental conditions, long and difficult commutes to work, inadequate local services including schools, and especially, a lack of green open space.



Illustration 6 – Bronx River Avenue, The Bronx

A polarized economy, along with continued population growth, has meant that New Yorkers, especially children, experience spatial segregation and gross disparities in environmental quality. Disproportionate levels of air pollution, lead paint exposure, noise, and the lack of opportunities for outdoor recreation and exercise, collectively impose an “urban health penalty,” manifested in high rates of asthma, heart disease, diabetes, obesity, low birthweights, and many stress-related conditions in low-income communities of color.

While some of the environmental burdens borne by poor people can be viewed as “natural” workings of the marketplace (of course apartments next to the park cost more than those downwind from the sewage treatment plant!), a significant share of these burdens have been shifted by public actions during the past decade. The ongoing reconfiguration of New York City’s infrastructure has been spurred by:

- Major programs of capital investment, especially in transportation, in part to address needs accumulated over several decades of deferred maintenance;
- Ongoing increases in energy consumption, along with the deregulation of the electric power industry;
- Privatization of the collection and disposal of commercial garbage, and the transport and disposal of residential garbage;

- The upgrading of federal water quality standards (per a timetable established by 1970s legislation), mandating increasing levels of sewage treatment;
- Rapid growth in long-distance transport of all types of goods, which is now accommodated almost entirely by truck, rather than rail (domestic freight ton-miles moved into and through the New York region are expected to increase by approximately 70% through 2020).

In addition to the above factors, changes in land use have led to the relocation of a variety of facilities and infrastructure, particularly their removal from Manhattan's waterfront. Examples include:

- The very large Consolidated Edison power plant at East 40th Street and the East River (decommissioned so that the site could be sold for development of luxury housing);
- The Department of Sanitation's Gansevoort Transfer Station, formerly located on the Hudson River in Greenwich Village (closed to make way for the Hudson River Park);
- The Fulton Fish Market, to be moved in 2005 to Hunts Point, in the South Bronx, from its current location on the East Side of Lower Manhattan;

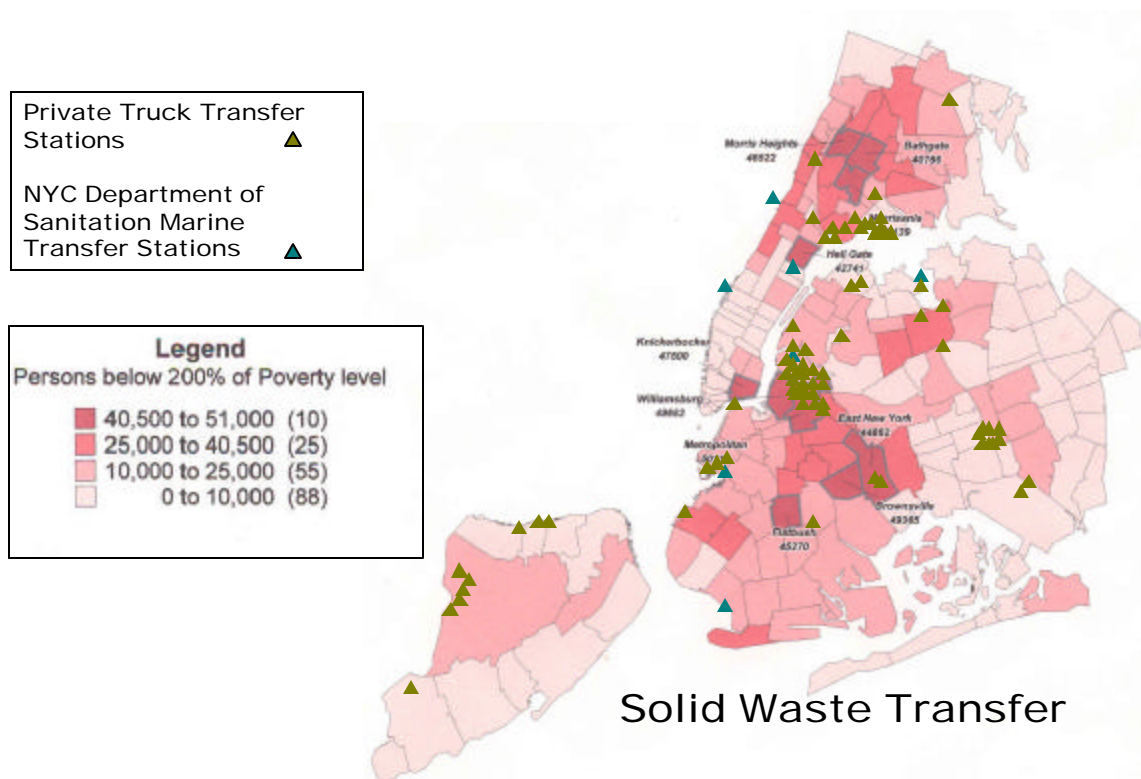


Illustration 7 – Locations of Solid Waste Transfer Stations, mapped over prevalence of poverty by zip code

Illustration 8 – Concentration of environmental burdens in Hunts Point, in the South Bronx. Existing, occupied housing is mapped in yellow.

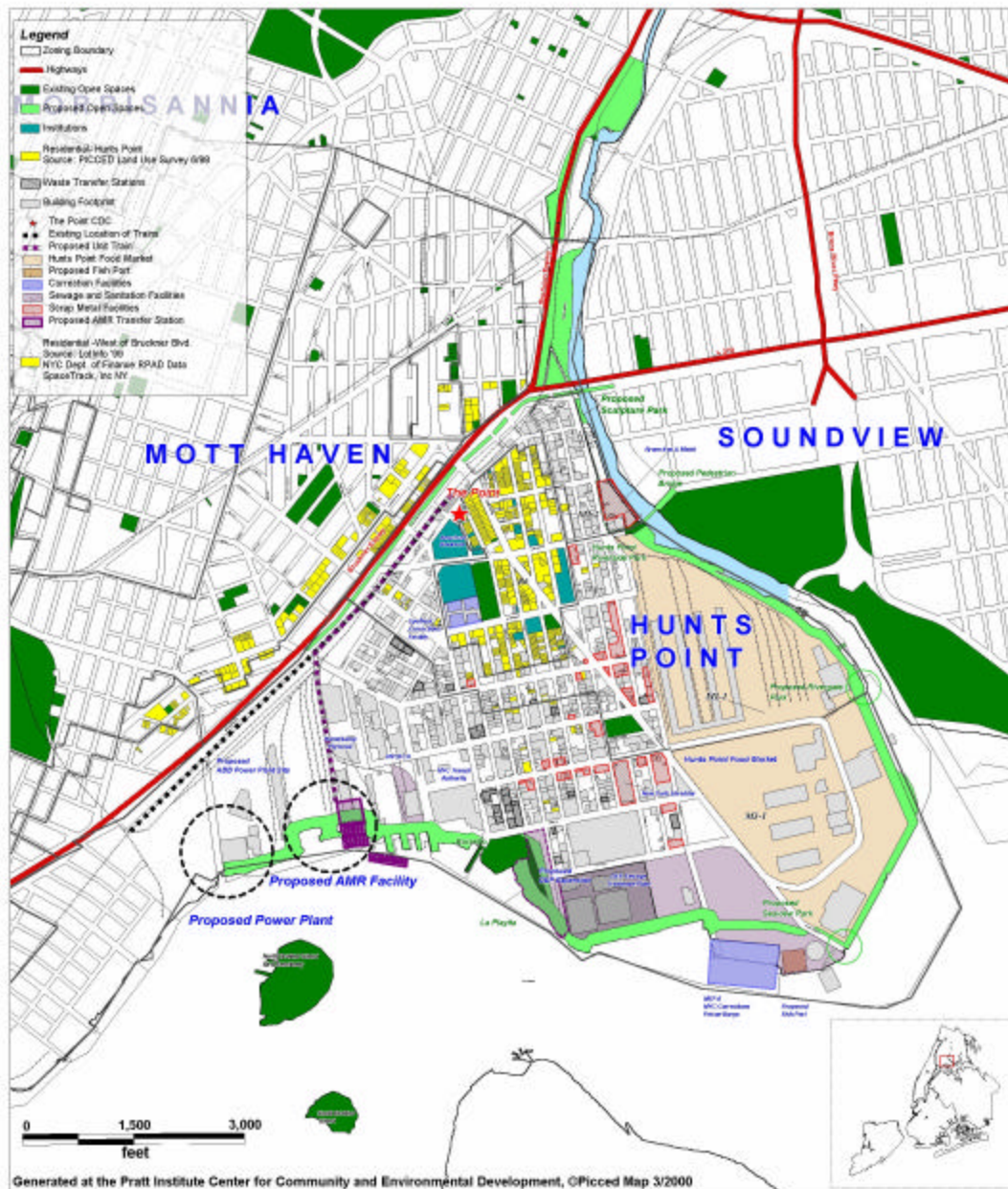


Illustration 8 shows the close-grained mix of land uses that is typical of many New York City industrial neighborhoods. Much of the housing stock in these areas pre-dates the 1961 Zoning Resolution. When such areas were zoned for industry, noxious uses, often accompanied by high volumes of truck traffic, were allowed to locate in close proximity to housing. While some residents did in fact leave the area during the years of population decline, the number of residents began growing again after 1990.

The high cost of housing throughout the city leaves the lowest-income residents with very few options (the waiting list for public housing in New York City is seven years.) And the uneven expansion of the City's economy has intensified competition for housing. Housing prices are driven by the buying power of the highest income groups (as of Spring 2004, the average sale price of an apartment in Manhattan below 96th Street is over \$1 million.) Wealthy buyers displace those who are merely affluent; middle-class households move into former working-class neighborhoods; working-class people displace poor people, who, particularly if they are new immigrants, are often forced to live in overcrowded and unsafe conditions in illegally created apartments.

All of this means that demand for any type of housing, even in a place like Hunts Point, remains strong, despite the concentration of such noxious neighbors as:

Over thirty scrap metal and garbage transfer facilities, many operating in the open air;

- A sewage treatment plant, with a major expansion planned for 2005-2010;
- A plant that processes 80% of New York City's sewage sludge into fertilizer;
- Four 79 Mw electric generating plants, constructed in 2000-2001
- The largest wholesale food distribution terminal in the US, generating 11,000 truck trips each day. The relocation of the Fulton Fish Market in 2005 will bring an additional 700 trucks.

Despite this, about 10,000 people live on this 600-acre peninsula (about 15% of whose land is residential). In 1998, they confronted a proposal to locate yet another burdensome facility – a transfer station that would have consolidated some 4,000 tons of putrescible waste per day on the Hunts Point waterfront.

Emergence of an Urban Environmental Justice Movement

The 1985 construction of the massive North River Sewage Treatment Plant on the Harlem waterfront sparked the formative struggle in what became the urban environmental justice movement. The location of the plant in a black community, (and against engineering logic, several miles from the center of the sewershed it was to serve) was accurately named environmental racism by the community directly downwind. When New York's garbage handling system was privatized in the 1990s, the leaders of the emerging movement recognized the importance of acting in coalition against a new, decentralized threat. If individual communities had resisted only the truck transfer stations slated for their own neighborhoods, the

issue would have been framed as a “NIMBY” battle, and disadvantaged groups pitted against each other. But by acting in concert (as NYCEJA, the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance, and OWN, the Organization of Waterfront Neighborhoods) the affected communities were able to confront the problem at a systemic level. They prevailed, and forced the City to scrap not only the proposal for the Hunts Point transfer station, but the entire the truck-based export plan, and to develop a solution that equitably distributes the burden of our solid waste.

Ultimately, such victories have the effect of forcing New York City to move more quickly toward more progressive solutions – waste prevention, recycling, and eventually a target of Zero Waste. This is accomplished in part by raising the political and economic cost of the unsustainable practice of long-haul shipping and burial of garbage.



Illustration 9 – Dancers at a rally against garbage in Hunts Point, 1999

Environmental Justice groups had little time to celebrate the important victory they won in the solid waste struggle. A proposal by the New York (State) Power Authority to build eight new electric power generating plants in the same neighborhoods affected by the waste transfer stations was unveiled in 2000. The plants were designed with a capacity of 79.9 Mw each – just below the threshold that would have triggered an environmental impact study. No study was conducted, even though as many as four plants were clustered within a few thousand feet of each other at some sites.

Another citywide coalition was launched, but the limitations of the reactive mode of organizing were becoming clear. Residents of many Environmental Justice communities had already begun drafting plans for their own neighborhoods. These plans would identify assets and possibilities unrecognized by decisionmakers in City Hall and in Albany, who view poor communities as the

“someplace else” to which undesirable land uses can be consigned. The local articulation of powerful alternative visions for the future has become a new and potent weapon.

The Bronx River

The Bronx River is the only true river within New York City. It is 20 miles long, and flows south from affluent Westchester County, where its headwaters are impounded as the Kensico Reservoir. The River’s lowest 8 miles are in the Bronx, including the tidal section where it enters the East River and the Long Island Sound.



Illustration 10 - As elsewhere in the world, the rich people live upstream, the poor people live downstream

Beginning with the purchase, in 1639, of 500 acres of land along the river by Jonas Bronck, a Swedish settler, the river’s banks were farmed, and then industrialized. A railway was constructed in the 1840s, and development of the watershed intensified. Residential and industrial sewers discharged into the river (and some remain to the present day.)



Illustration 11 – Map of the Bronx; the Bronx River flows from north to south near the center of the map

In 1888, 688 acres of land in the north Bronx were consolidated to create Bronx Park, most of which is occupied by the Bronx Botanical Garden, and the Bronx Zoo. The River serves as a thematic element in each, though the admission prices mean that it is not readily accessible to local residents. The Bronx River Parkway was constructed in 1925, mainly for suburban pleasure driving. The River's channel was altered to create a decorative landscaped border for the road; subsequent roadway expansions led to the straightening of the channel.



*Illustration 12 – The Bronx River flows through romantic landscape parks in the north
(photo by Benjamin Swett / New York City Department of Parks & Recreation)*

The River's character is very different south of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, where it is bordered by highways, brownfields, and post-industrial land uses like auto salvage operations. The banks are largely armored or bulkheaded, and in many places the river is barely visible from the surrounding streets.



Illustration 13 – The Bronx River in the South Bronx



Illustration 14 – a floating boom prevents garbage from entering the Long Island Sound (and captures kayakers)

Work to reclaim the southern Bronx River began during 1970s, when a north Bronx resident, Ruth Anderberg, organized the first large-scale cleanup. Some new gardens were created on the river during the 1980s, but momentum then lagged, until a new generation of community groups, headed by young black and latino environmental justice activists, joined forces with mainstream park and environmental organizations.

The same indigenous organizations who were struggling against the construction of new power plants, garbage facilities, and highways, found in the River a source of inspiration and a focus for action. Small grants from the New York City Partnership for Parks enabled one group, Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, to purchase a small fleet of canoes and to organize river cleanups. Another group, The Point CDC, coordinated the conversion of a disused street-end into the first waterfront park to be established in Hunts Point since the 1920s. In 1997 Jenny Hoffner, then an outreach coordinator at the Partnership for Parks, convened an informal Bronx River Working Group that united 60 community groups, public agencies, and businesses, and undertook the planning of a continuous Greenway from the New York City line, to the confluence of the East River.



Illustration 15 – Abandoned concrete batching plant, to be developed as a park and greenway link in 2004-6.

The eight-mile Greenway will provide a pathway for walking and cycling along the Bronx River, but it will also do much more. The assembly of land to connect a continuous right-of-way will also result in the creation of a new linear park, in an area that now has less than ½ acre of open space per thousand residents. This project is remarkable in that it was conceived and launched almost “under the radar,” having been initiated by an ad hoc coalition with no formal standing. In fact, it would have been almost impossible to go about the project in any other way. While the effort had the patronage of then- Parks Commissioner Henry Stern (who designated 1999 The Year of the Bronx River), his commitment to the city’s poorest borough was an anomaly within an otherwise quite hostile mayoral administration. During the Giuliani years, the Bronx River working group managed to attract important support from many quarters, (notably Congressman Jose Serrano) without ever achieving a high enough profile to draw powerful opposition.



Illustration 16 – Alexie Torres-Fleming, founder and director of Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, speaks at a rally held to protest a City plan to use the concrete plant site (shown above) as a “temporary truck route,” November 2000

The meaning of the phrase “public-private partnership” depends greatly upon context; when the “private” partners are young environmental justice activists representing impoverished communities, their clout derives from their ability to mobilize people, and to put pressure on elected officials to take necessary actions, and to allocate funding. On the Bronx River, community organizations have been strategic and vocal in confronting government when confrontation has been needed, even as they have used the ability of their public agency partners to work from the inside. A relationship of cooperation and mutual respect has grown, and has thus far survived the inevitable tensions which have tested it.



Illustration 17 – Jenny Hoffner, founder of the Bronx River Working Group / Bronx River Alliance, and Majora Carter, founder and director of Sustainable South Bronx. Partnership is not always easy.

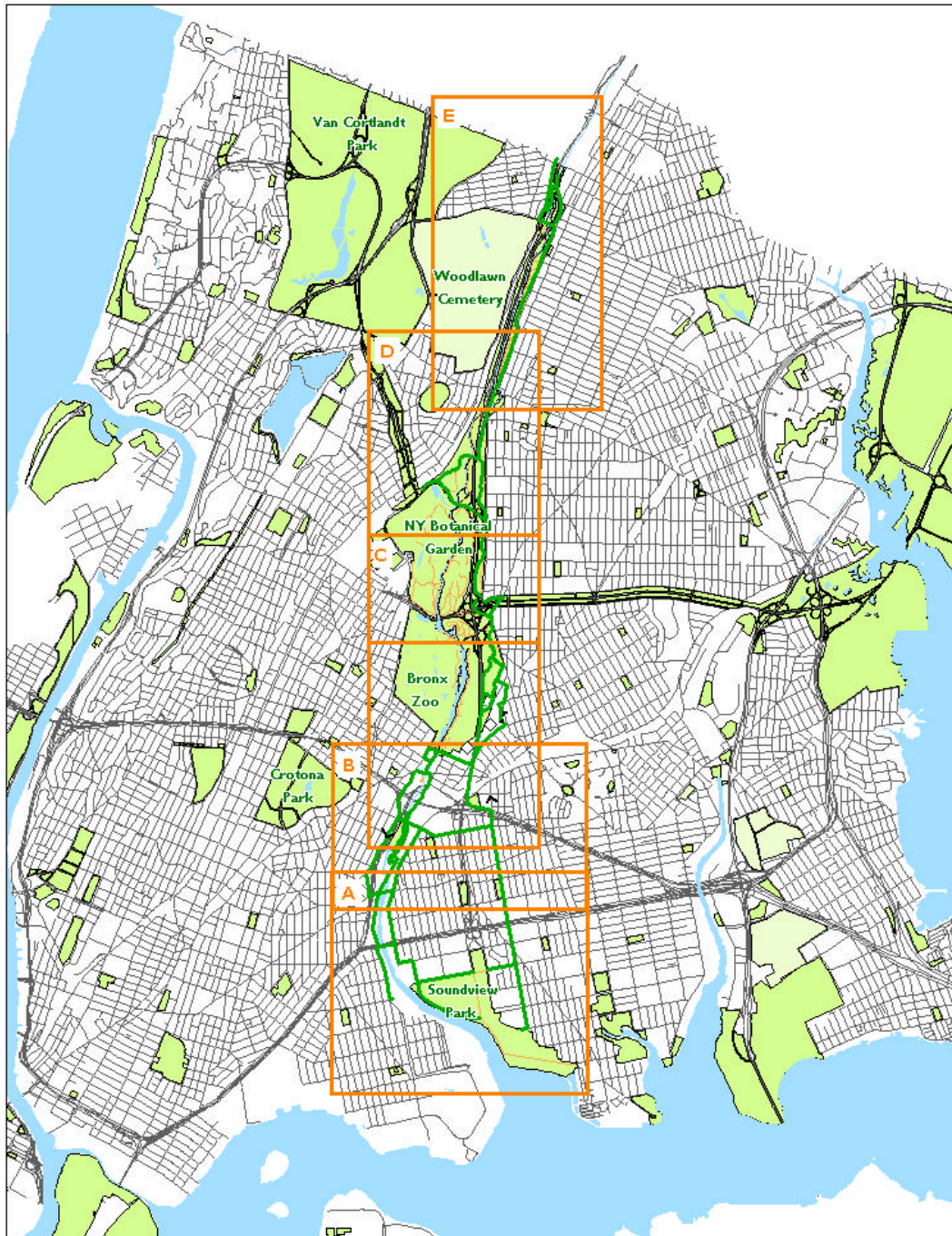


Illustration 18 – Permanent and interim routes of the Bronx River Greenway

The Greenway Plan

The map of the Greenway route illustrates how pathways through existing parkland, vacant land owned by New York City (these are sites abandoned by private owners and foreclosed by the City for delinquent taxes), on-street routes, and strategic acquisitions of private property, are

being pieced together to create the Bronx River Greenway. Funding has been secured from multiple sources, with timelines and priorities often painfully negotiated among groups representing different communities along the River. The political work of securing the support of elected officials has been a vital contribution of the community-based organizations. To date, over \$50 million in federal, state, and city funds have been secured for the development of the Greenway, as well as for major environmental projects. The funding is appropriated to the public agencies that will carry out the construction of the various Greenway segments. The New York City Parks Department will construct certain segments, and New York State Department of Transportation will construct others. NYSDOT is now preparing to acquire two key private parcels by eminent domain – possibly the first time this power has been used in New York to allow construction of a bicycle path.



Illustration 18 – Two sites being condemned by the New York State Department of Transportation for the Greenway. A new bicycle & pedestrian bridge, next to the existing railroad bridge, will connect the two sites.

The successor organization to the Working Group, the Bronx River Alliance, incorporated in 2001, and now has a staff of ten. The Alliance is governed by a board of directors which includes representatives of the community-based organizations, and receives a portion of its funding through the Parks Department. It is responsible for planning the Greenway, including facilitating the participation of stakeholders; raising funds; and coordinating the work of the public agencies who are actually constructing the different Greenway segments. Construction will be largely completed by 2009. The Alliance will also be responsible for the Greenway's management and maintenance. Four of the staff, the Bronx River Crew, are community members who have been trained for the full-time work of maintaining the River and Greenway. They clear debris from the

river, respond to spills, and carry out ecological restoration and planting. Initially, this work had been done by non-community members working through Americorps and other volunteer service programs. Establishing permanent, living-wage jobs in which local people can acquire the skills needed for the long-term ecological management of the River was an important decision made by the Alliance, and reflects a different set of values from those that govern many other public-private park ventures.

The community shapes the Greenway

Collaboration between grassroots organizations and public agencies is shaping the vision for the Greenway. In its planning and design, the community groups are pressing for the inclusion of development projects they have conceived as ways to ensure that local people share in the economic benefits that the pathway and park will bring.

Projects include: an educational and environmental center with a boat storage building; 400 units of affordable housing on a large brownfield site; and a combination travelers' hostel and residence for young people. Housing is already an urgent need, and local activists are keenly aware of the two-edged nature of the changes they are working to bring about. As neighborhoods that are now among New York City's most environmentally degraded are transformed by the reclamation of the Bronx River, the low-income people now living there are threatened with displacement, as property values and housing costs rise. A number of strategies are being developed to address this pressing issue, notably the formation of community land trusts, and the implementation of inclusionary zoning.

The Sheridan Expressway

Ironically, even as plans for the Greenway began to take shape with its help, more conventional actors within the New York State Department of Transportation were advancing a proposal to expand the little-used highway that runs for 1.25 miles along the Bronx River's bank. Late in his career, the master highway builder Robert Moses was thwarted in his desire to add an alternative connection to New England, by constructing an interstate highway through the Bronx Zoo. South Bronx residents were unable to stop him from building the southern leg of the highway, however, and it remains, though it serves only a very small proportion of the hundreds of thousands of vehicles that pass through the area each day.

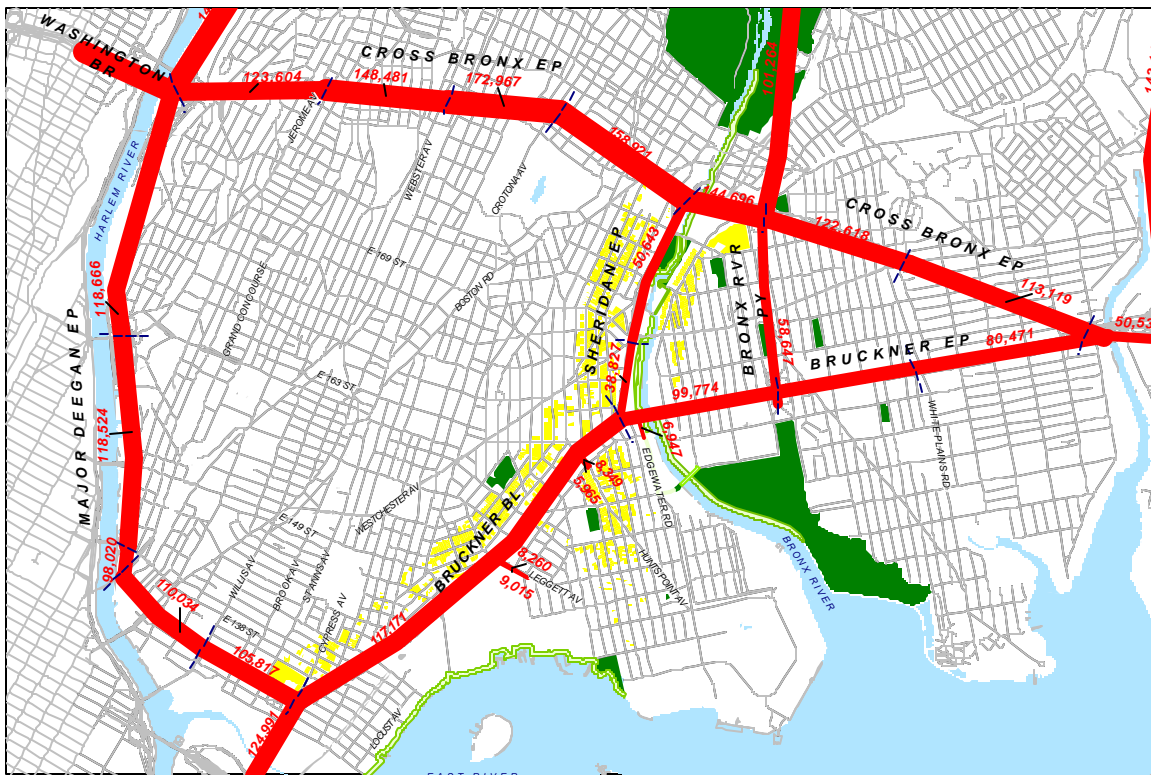


Illustration 20 – Highways and traffic volumes in the South Bronx

The construction and expansion of the gigantic wholesale food distribution complex in Hunts Point has brought thousands of trucks onto local streets. While the peninsula's proximity to major highways is inevitably cited in the environmental studies justifying the expansion of industry there, the lack of any reasonable access to those highways is just as inevitably overlooked. Responding to mounting pressure from the wholesalers, NYSDOT revived a proposal to expand the Bruckner-Sheridan interchange at the southern end of the highway – precisely above the site of the proposed Concrete Plant park.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign, a nonprofit policy and watchdog group, was the first to bring the proposal to the attention of the local residents. Three community-based organizations (Mothers on the Move, Sustainable South Bronx, and Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice), joined with Tri-State, the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance, and the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development (the author's organization, which had been providing architectural and planning assistance to the Bronx River community organizations.) Working as the Southern Bronx River Watershed Alliance, the six organizations developed a counter-proposal to NYSDOT's expansion plan.

The Community Plan, rather than trying to fix the Sheridan, would remove it. Access to Hunts Point would instead be provided from the more heavily-used Bruckner Expressway, with the interchange placed above a rail yard, rather than over the new waterfront park. The proposal addresses the same mobility and safety issues NYSDOT intends to resolve, but enables the 28 acres now occupied by the Sheridan to be reclaimed for productive use.

As NYSDOT has moved forward with the Environmental Impact Study it must conduct before undertaking its project, the SBRWA has developed its own proposal from a rhetorical flight of fancy (who wouldn't like to imagine demolishing a highway that epitomizes the worst excesses of an automobile-fixated age?) to a serious alternative being given full consideration in the EIS process.

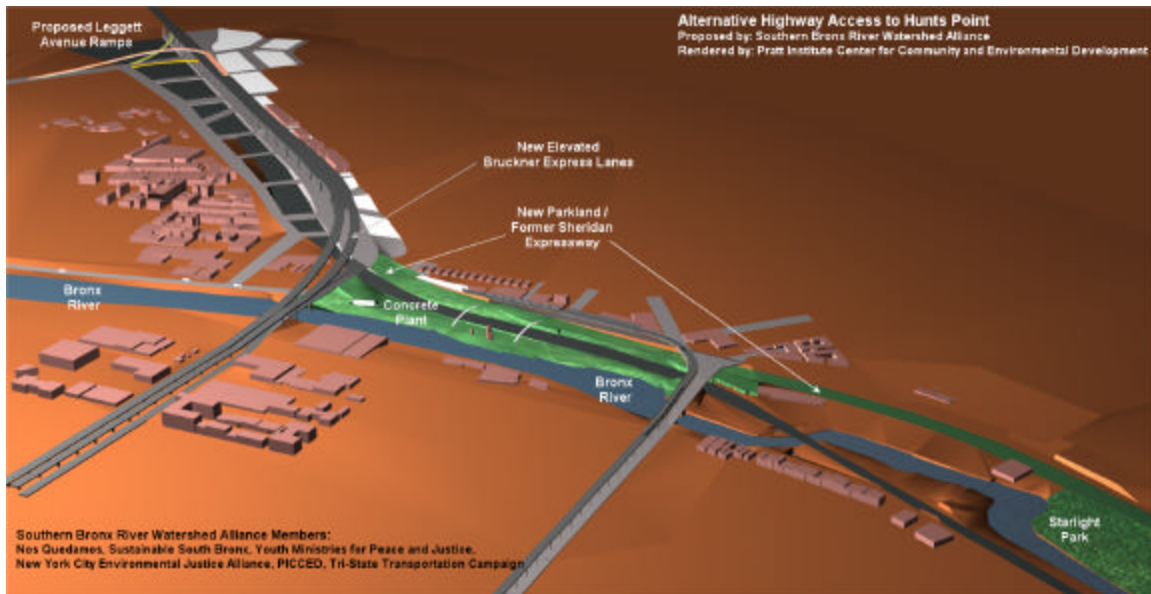


Illustration 21 – The Community Plan for the Sheridan

The SBRWA fully expects to prevail, by being technically astute and politically savvy. Members are now reaching out to find allies in the business community, which (like government, or indeed, like “community,” is far from monolithic in defining its needs and concerns.) As NYSDOT proceeds with the development of computer traffic models for the alternatives, the SBRWA will be facilitating a participatory planning process, on how the 28 acres can best be re-used. This will help the SBRWA to mobilize additional community and political support, as well as enabling a fair analysis of the social, economic, and environmental benefits achieved by removing the Sheridan, within the EIS process.

The land presents an exciting opportunity for sustainable development. The existing highway is a barrier between the Bronx River and the dense residential communities to the west, so its removal will make it possible to reconnect those communities through a network of pedestrian- and child-friendly open spaces. Impervious surfaces can be minimized, allowing for natural management of stormwater. The absence of a conventional utility grid means that the economic benefits of a green infrastructure will be immediate, rather than hypothetical. And forms of land ownership and governance will be proposed to ensure that new housing remains affordable to the people who are now struggling to repudiate the highway-driven paradigm that devastated the Bronx.

Relevance in the context of “Cities for People” – confronting environmental apartheid, from the bottom up

The movement to create livable cities, and especially a humane and beautiful public realm, cannot proceed in isolation from considerations of social and economic justice. If our goal is to create cities that are playgrounds for the economic elite, we will replicate at the local scale the dynamic that now exists globally between the North and the South. That is, we cannot achieve livability by exporting the environmental costs of sustaining a First World lifestyle to Third World communities, whether these are in the South Bronx or in the Southern Hemisphere.

Appropriately, leadership in redefining the relationship between cities and nature is coming from those people who would otherwise bear the impacts of pollution, traffic, and the degradation of public space. By raising the economic and political cost of doing business as usual, the Environmental Justice movement does mainstream urban policymakers the great service of accelerating the movement toward sustainability.



Illustration 22 – Young members of “Rocking the Boat” on the Bronx River

“Transforming the Southern Bronx River Watershed” – note on the illustrations:

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