

Greening the Ghetto

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In case you have not noticed, we are at a very interesting point in our history. We have a new and very different kind of national leadership; and not just because our president is black or bi-racial, or a former community organizer; but because above all else, Barack Obama expects us to rise to a higher expectation – of ourselves as individuals and as a nation.

And we had better step up our game, because as we enter the Obama Era, there is more difficulty ahead than ever before.

According to experts at all levels, we have global climate crisis. Other experts tell us our economy is in the ditch and that we have no money to boot.

Doom and gloom in equal measures. Biggest problem in human history, and no resources to solve it. Well, it's been said before, but I have to repeat it here: "A crisis is a terrible thing to waste!"

Because while fear is tightening its dark grip on our society, I see little glimmers of light escaping through its fingers, and this light is beautiful.

Maybe it's because I come from the South Bronx that I can be so optimistic about the huge problems we are facing. You see, I was born and raised in economic and environmental crisis since I can remember.

The South Bronx is only a couple miles from here, but it is the single poorest congressional district in the entire country with over 20% unemployment, and over 1/3 living in poverty. We have four power plants and handle most of New York City's solid waste and sewage, which contributes to childhood asthma hospitalization rates 7 times the national average. We have less trees and parks per person, despite my best efforts over the past decade, than any other part of New York City.

These factors lead to very high public health costs because poor people often use emergency rooms as primary care. And it goes deeper than that. If we have an asthma epidemic, we should remember that a child's lungs are connected to a child's brain. Columbia University released a report in 2006 that documented learning disabilities in children living nearest to fossil fuel emissions sources.

Statistically, poor children who do poorly in school, go to jail – which is expensive all by itself, but a person in jail is often connected to a family that can't support itself and children who require more attention in school and after school because role models are shattered before their eyes.

There are South Bronxes in cities across the country. And it's in these same areas where you find the poor environmental conditions, the asthma, the prison recidivism, no jobs, plenty of poverty, and a deficit of hope.

As far as I am concerned, people need three things to be whole – someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to. If any one of these things is missing, the other two suffer – and in communities like mine, at least two out of the three are hard to come by.

Now, I don't have to convince you all of the moral argument against continuing to let these problems go unsolved while we devote precious municipal resources to things like baseball stadiums for the world's richest teams.

But the financial costs are indisputable. You may remember the "Broken Windows" theory from the Giuliani era: buildings left in a vandalized condition breed more crime and lawlessness than those kept up – even if it's only the outward appearance.

I have a new idea called the "Broken Branches Theory" that brings to bear countless studies that document the value of the social benefits and environmental services provided by a healthy, robust horticultural infrastructure.

I am not talking about community gardens or a tree here and there. When we integrate horticultural infrastructure into every corner of our built environment, the cost savings are incredible.

Not only can we put an end to the slow death sentences we have been issuing for decades to those unfortunate enough to live near the pollution sources that make life easier for others, but we can also produce jobs.

This is the light I see through the cracks in fear's grip. When people say we have no money for "sustainability," I say we are already wasting more money than we need to implement green design right now. Let's get our act together and take a look at what we get for the money before we make another move.

Let me explain with some examples:

Climate change – it's coming. Even if we all do exactly as Al Gore says – even if we started eight years ago when he was elected president, there is still a good deal of climate change coming down the pipe.

For our cities, that means 3 major issues:

- Higher temperatures
- Increased rain event intensity
- Increased storm surges from sea level rise

Well-designed and maintained horticultural infrastructure to the rescue!

About 20% of any urban area is covered in petroleum based roofing products. These surfaces heat up dramatically in the summer months when we always break records for peak electricity demand. On a 90-degree day, a conventional roof can heat up to over 170 degrees. That's more heat radiating out, causing air-conditioners to work harder and exhaust more heat locally; and we burn more coal and oil to produce electricity in a runaway cycle that gives us Urban Heat Island effect.

As average temperatures rise over the coming years, this problem will only get worse. Well, a practice that is relatively new to our part of the world, but well tested in Europe, called green roofing, can play a major role in adapting to changing climate conditions. A green roof is simply a layer of soil and plants that sits on top of a regular roof. This technique keeps roof temperatures at just a couple degrees above the ambient air temp. Stable roof temperatures greatly extend the life of a roof because there is no expansion and contraction between day and night temperatures, nor is there any sun hitting and drying out the waterproof layer of the rooftop.

Urban forestry with a healthy canopy does the same on the street level for paved surfaces.

Green roof plants and street trees also clean the air and sequester CO₂. But what about increased rain intensity?

Storm water runoff is already a dirty little secret that doesn't get talked about all that often, but is a huge problem – and a huge expense. Most cities have what is called a Combined Sewerage System, which means that all the water from your shower and your toilet and your kitchen sink COMBINE with all the water running off rooftops, streets, and parking lots. All of those hard surfaces act like a gigantic funnel and channel rain water into the same system meant to handle our everyday uses.

This would wreck our expensive water treatment systems, so there are release mechanisms built in called Combined Sewerage Outfalls or CSOs that release untreated sewerage and runoff into our rivers. This is killing marine ecosystems we all depend on.

The typical method of solving this problem is to expand the concrete based system so that it can handle larger volumes. Almost without fail, these facilities are located in poor parts of town so that for those who have gotten it together to own their own home, we devalue their real-estate by placing or expanding a stinky, unsightly sewerage treatment plant nearby. Are they compensated financially? Do we not agree that home ownership is one of the surest stepping stones to wealth building in our country? And yet we deduct value from those who have so little because we refuse to be creative about how we solve this problem.

Well, the same green roofs and street trees that keep the city cool, and clean the air also retain storm water! A gallon of water diverted from entering the sewerage system is much more cost effective than trying to deal with it at the end of the pipe – and that is according to an EPA report issued in 2007 under the Bush administration if you can believe it.

But what about sea level rise and storm surges? People like to cite Hurricane Katrina and the flooding of NOLA as an example of climate change – but I disagree with that. The victims in the 9th Ward were poor, and as is often the case with any industrial design located near poor people, it was done cheaper and dirtier than it would be if more affluent people were nearby. The levees near the poor people broke, the levees near the richer folks held.

But the reason these inferior levees were put to the test was not because Katrina was the worst storm the Gulf Coast had ever seen – Hurricane Betsy in 1964 was more powerful by all accounts; BUT in the forty years between the two great disasters something had changed locally. The region's wetlands had been destroyed – corralled to make for more consistent barge channels to support the oil industry there.

Healthy wetlands act as horizontal levees during a big storm. They absorb and slow down the water before the man-made vertical levees are ever tested. By hobbling nature's ability to dampen the blows from increasingly intense storms, we place greater burdens on the rigid systems down stream.

New York City is surrounded by water, and we need to restore our wetlands, estuaries, and river banks to withstand erosion and protect us from what we know is coming – and this is something we can do now.

I know because way back in 2003, I started one of the nation's first green-collar job training and placement systems. The Bronx Environmental Stewardship Training program or BEST, took in some of the most difficult to employ citizens among us. Nearly all had been on some form of welfare, many had become young single moms before they ever had a chance to enter the workforce, and over 1/3 had done some time in jail.

We identified climate trends and current environmental justice impacts and trained people to restore and maintain wetlands, estuaries, and river banks; we trained them to install and maintain green roofs, and safely clean up contaminated lands left in our neighborhoods by negligent industry.

These people came to us looking for a job, but we pointed them toward green jobs. These people entered our offices feeling worthless, powerless, and thought of themselves the way many others perceived them: as burdens on society. But this is where it gets really good. Throughout the ten-week course, I got to watch people transform. People who were so powerless, were now living the opportunity, privilege, and power of generosity.

Their hard-earned training and labor not only paid the rent at home, but it improved their local and global environment, and they knew it!

Now working with plants and soil has been proven to be therapeutic to anyone who has suffered through the trauma of poverty, prison, or war; so these activities are going to benefit a nation that not only burns through 25% of the world's resources, but also produces 25% of the world's incarcerated population.

That's right – in a world in which the USA is only 5% of the total population, 25% of all the people locked up in the world are right here in the land of the free.

Now, it's not easy for the students to complete the training and do the work, but that struggle produces a greater satisfaction. What looks like a sacrifice on the surface, reveals itself to be generosity in day-to-day practice.

President Obama has called on us to rise to higher expectations of ourselves across the board, and I do so now in this sacred place today.

We have the power to make better decisions, and we certainly have the need. When we use our gifts to solve the more complex problems of poverty and environment, we unlock the keys to more powerful solutions.

It is the time as never before to stop building tributes to our collective failures and start creating living monuments to hope and possibility around every corner and above every rooftop; and I am so happy and honored to be building them with you.

When Dr. King stands on the mountain top, he is not alone. I am there, and so are all of you. We are there right now whether you want to be or not. And the promised land is not a black one or a white one or a brown, yellow, or red one. The promised land is green.

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