



A Philadelphia Perspective

From Ghettos to Gardens in Bronx

A personal story of neighborhood revitalization

BY JANE EISNER

BRONX, N.Y. – My father was worried when he heard that I was going back to this, his old neighborhood, a corner of the South Bronx that had become synonymous with urban decay and despair.

He knew what it was in his childhood: A safe, stable home to working people, what we'd call now a "walkable community." The family grocery store was a block from their apartment. Herman Ritter Junior High School was around the corner, a stately Art Deco building beckoning the eager children of immigrants.

He knew what the neighborhood had become: A wasteland stripped of population, jobs, order, hope. Arson and neglect emptied buildings, leaving rubble two stories high. The police station was famously named Fort Apache until everything around it was destroyed and it gained a new moniker – Little House on the Prairie.

But my father didn't know what his old 'hood is now: An inspiration.

There are single-family homes with lawns and fences and outdoor decorations that would do South Philadelphia proud. Tenements have been converted to senior-citizen housing, and red brick rowhomes charm the once-desolate streets. A rat-infested empty lot is now a rock garden with a waterfall in summer. Under construction is a shopping center with 19 stores; a movie theater is in the works.

This resurrection from the ashes has taken 25 years, billions of public and private dollars, and extraordinary community leadership. As Philadelphia's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative is launched, the South Bronx shines as both a model for what can be done and a daunting challenge.

It may be a first, necessary step for Philadelphia to spend nearly \$300 million to tear down abandoned properties and clear vacant land. But that's where the South Bronx was in the early 1980s. It took another decade to rehabilitate and build affordable housing, and still another decade to create the civic and economic infrastructure that ensures a livable community.

"The leadership of the city has to make a commitment not only in words but in resources. The private sector has to buy into this, too," says Ralph Porter, head of MBD Community Housing Corp. "And then you have to realize that community development is self-development. You can build the most beautiful houses, but if people don't take care of them, they're gonna come down."

Porter knows. He's been there. MBD stands for Mid-

Bronx Desperados – a brash advocacy group that started in a one-bedroom apartment and has evolved into a powerhouse community development corporation (CDC). Porter has been president since 1990; he cut his teeth in the neighborhood working with gang violence and can talk to folks in sneakers and in suits with equal aplomb.

CDCs are the cornerstone to the South Bronx's revitalization. MBD, for instance, has purchased property, renovated buildings, funded new construction, partnered with developers, and now manages 38 buildings. It is overseeing the new \$32 million shopping center and negotiating to bring a movie theater and family restaurant to a burnt-out eyesore on Boston Road.

But building isn't enough. "There was \$200 million worth of new housing in the South Bronx, but no doctors," says Anita Miller, who was the program director of the Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program (CCRP). "People didn't have a decent place to shop; they didn't have jobs."

From 1992 to 1998, CCRP operated as sort of a venture capitalist group, leveraging private sector money for public dollars and providing the technical assistance needed for the next step – addressing the quality of life in neighborhoods where none had existed. Funded through foundations, CCRP did everything from create a job resource center to host barbecues where residents developed their own strategic plans.

It was grassroots, inclusive and effective because it didn't try to remake the South Bronx into someone else's image.

"There's a pernicious myth that the only way to make inner-city neighborhoods better is to gentrify them," says Paul S. Grogan, author of *Comeback Cities*. "There's a world of difference between a poor community in utter chaos and a community that is still very low-income but is clearly functional."

The South Bronx is still very poor – poorer, probably, than when my father lived there – but it functions. "We have a saying: From ghettos to gardens," Porter says, as he drives down a tree-lined street built on ash and rubble. "If you give folks an opportunity, they will tell you who they are by what they do."

Philadelphians now have the opportunity to tell us who they are by what they do. As the South Bronx shows, clearing the land may be the easy part. ■

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