

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD IN YOUR HANDS: A MODEL FROM THE SOUTH BRONX

LAURA FLANDERS: Community development. It's a puzzle. Nowhere we can think of has done it perfectly. Choose any city and you'll find issues, but one thing's for sure, the people who live in a place are the ones most keenly aware of what's needed there, and yet, they are usually the ones with the least decision making power about how their communities develop and change, especially when they're poor or people of color. Majora Carter grew up and came of age in the 1970s in the South Bronx, in New York, one of this country's toughest places at one of its toughest times. Since then, her neighborhood's seen billions of dollars of investment from all the usual sources, but very little of that has lifted up the people who live in her neighborhood. More often, it's displaced them or cast them as a problem to be fixed. Majora Carter, long ago, waded into this fray, deciding not to leave, but to stay, and to do development differently. A self-described, quote, chick from the hood with zero experience in real estate, over the last 30 years, she's led a fight against a proposed waste management facility, spearheaded the creation of a new riverfront park, she started her own consulting firm, received a MacArthur Genius Award, and a Peabody for her podcast, and, in 2017, she and her husband launched the Boogie Down Grind Cafe, a hip hop themed cafe in Hunts Point, the Bronx, that survived and even thrived during COVID with a bit of help from Beyonce. Her book, "Reclaiming Your Community: You Don't Have To Move Out Of Your Neighborhood To Live In A Better One" is just out from Berrett-Koehler. Majora Carter, welcome to the program. I'm glad to have you.

MAJORA CARTER: Aw, thank you for having me. It's an honor.

LAURA FLANDERS: Congratulations on the book, and so much more. We're gonna get into all of it, but we have to start where I think, probably, our audience last saw the Bronx, which was in news footage of a fire, just this January. Tragic. Killed, I think, 17 people, eight kids. Years since 1977, when the Bronx was said to be burning, well, I, anyway, felt both sad and furious that this was still freakin' happening, after all this time, and all this money, and all this awareness. You wanna just share what was going through your mind?

MAJORA CARTER: Look, my heart went out to the people that were there, and just knowing the little that I knew about, you know, some of the buildings up there, wasn't the best, but the bottom line is we've got a lot of those buildings, right? And that in and of itself should tell us something about what's the kind of quality of life we expect people in communities like the South Bronx to be living in, and is the best we can do? The answer for that would be no. There is something in between, you know, gentrification that displaces us and poverty level economic maintenance, you know, as evidenced by like, the quality of some of those buildings that we still

have in this borough, and to me, it's talent retention, making sure that we've got the tools to redefine and redevelop a future that we wanna be in.

LAURA FLANDERS: Did you grow up thinking that you would stay there?

MAJORA CARTER: No. Of course not. I was planning my escape when I hit seven years old. When, at the beginning of the, of the summer, I watched both buildings at either end of my block burn down, and, at the end of the summer, my brother was killed, you know, and because of the gang violence here, and I was like, "I'm out," like, "I'ma use education to get out," and I did, but what we've been seeing, especially over the past several years, you know, are that the talent within our community, all those strivers, the ones that are told and are expected to kind of move out once they make it are staying here, opening up businesses, and being a part of the culture that is a part of our community. They are totally dismissing this idea that the nonprofit industrial complex, like, places on us, that poverty is a cultural attribute and neighborhood preservation is basically what's done in terms of development in places like this, that essentially says, well, this is what this community is. Again, inequality is assumed, so we're not gonna set up the conditions for the talented ones to stay. We're gonna make sure that they get outta here, and that's that.

LAURA FLANDERS: I mean, if you can still have buildings burning, given how many billions, you write, have been poured into the South Bronx, right? Where has that money gone?

MAJORA CARTER: Billions of philanthropic and government dollars go into certain neighborhoods, but, you know, they'll go to things like very highly subsidized affordable housing, you know, where there's homeless shelters and housing for very low income goes there, pharmacies and healthcare, you know, the lifestyle illnesses that are, you know, being also paid to treat those kind of conditions, from diabetes, and, you know, heart conditions, as opposed to really treating, you know, they sort of treat the symptoms as opposed to the causes of what's actually happening in those communities.

LAURA FLANDERS: You have a problem with pharmacies and community centers?

MAJORA CARTER: When it's the major way for folks for billions of dollars of economic activity to come into a community that's basically not there to support people's economic trajectory, yeah, I do have a problem with it when it's banking on, you know, the fact that, the case that, there are more opportunities for the people that are providing those services versus the people who are actually getting them, and we're not seeing any improvement in health outcomes or educational attainment or anything like that in those communities, 'cause we're continue to concentrate poverty there, yeah, I have an issue with that.

LAURA FLANDERS: So really, there's no trajectory in mind, there's fixing people in place in mind, and that's what you write about, and that's what you say that you felt in those times when you were thinking about coming or going from the Bronx. Talk about what got you to stay. What committed you to the place, and what you love about it.

MAJORA CARTER: Well, I wasn't trying to come back to the Bronx, but I had, you know, started my graduate program at NYU and I needed a cheap place to stay, and the cheapest place was my old bedroom at my parents' house, period, but once I got here, I got connected to this amazing young man who had actually started a community center, or excuse me, actually, an arts program in the community, and I had no idea there were that many creative and artist folks like, in the South Bronx, and I was one of them, so I was just like, "Oh my gosh," and so, that kind of made me wanna stay, and because, suddenly, I found a tribe, but then, I realized that the city was planning on building a huge waste facility on our waterfront, and we had already handled an enormous amount of waste services and other types of, you know, noxious, environmentally burdensome places. That's when I realized all the arts and creativity in the world is not gonna save us. I was struck with a really harsh realization that this happened because what's happening to our community, because we happen to be poor, people of color, and, thus, politically vulnerable. And I was like, "Oh, you know, I can pretend I don't see that and just move on, or I can be a part of the change I wanted to see in my own community."

LAURA FLANDERS: Now, it hasn't been easy, and you write about how it hasn't been easy, because you have been trying to sort of spearhead a different path, and you got in particular trouble using the word self-gentrification, which wasn't your term in the first place, but got you into trouble. Can you talk about why and how you think about that term today?

MAJORA CARTER: I think it was just the gentrification part, you know, that people, it's just a trigger word for folks, even though self-gentrification, many that got it were just like, "Oh my gosh, that makes perfect sense." You know, why do we have to like, wait for the neighborhood to have, you know, folks coming from outside the neighborhood to get better? Why can't we enjoy what's here? It's like, "Yeah, I want a better neighborhood." Yeah, like, here, and so, but then there were definitely others who were like, "oh, she's just gentrifying it," and I'm like, "No," and it was fascinating because I think some people just heard gentrification, and that was it, but we don't even use it anymore because it's just too much, and, you know, it just gets in the way.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, so, to come back to the idea of "Reclaiming Your Community: You Don't Have To Move Out Of Your Neighborhood To Live In A Better One", let's just dwell here for a little bit, 'cause it's complicated, and I've been, in the last few years, I think since we last saw each other, to a lot of places that were wrestling with this, whether it was new Orleans after Katrina, where they said, "This isn't recovery, what we're seeing here, it's removal of the people who've lived here," or Baltimore, where you saw, you know, a rebellion after a police

killing, really try to raise the issues of development in a community, and I remember somebody saying to us on the show, "It's not that we don't want development here, we just want to have a piece of it, a part in it, some say."

MAJORA CARTER: Totally.

LAURA FLANDERS: So how do you facilitate that say when your government could say, "Well, we have community boards, we have surveys, people just don't show up to the meetings"?

MAJORA CARTER: Well no, that's nothing. I mean, I would add what they want is equity, you know? Period. As in the money. Like, not the equity in the way progressives talk about it, because that doesn't create wealth for anybody. You know, the problem is that we've got this huge wealth gap, you know, based on the fact that there were entitlement programs, you know, starting from the 1600s for white folks in this country that people of color didn't get, straight up, so it's real easy, you know, to say, and I hear this a lot, like, "Oh, you know, we want to hear your input into development." It's like, no. How about you help set us the access to capital so that we can actually do it? How about, you know, I mean, I find it so crazy. Let's say that there's an opportunity here for people to think about things like why do we let, or made it so possible for folks that did have access at homes, like, through really hard times, and why is it so easy for predatory speculators to come in and pick that off of people, right? Because, many times, people don't really understand the value of their own property. That's one thing that we are actively trying to do, and so, part of it is just we often let, or no, no one's letting it happen, but I think, if you think about it, the way that predatory speculators have actually created, you know, we are just like a piece, communities like ours are literally, we're like a little line item on their spreadsheets.

LAURA FLANDERS: So, having persuaded you, people who live in the community, that they're worth nothing, their property's worth nothing, because look, this is how it gets treated, then you come in and say, "I'll give you nothing for it, and that'll seem like something," but the developers do have a plan, and they do see the value in it.

MAJORA CARTER: Oh, the developers absolutely have a plan. So, to the little old lady, you know, who lives in a neighborhood that's a low status community and who's been watching it not get any better, so when someone shows up at her door and says, "I can buy your house for cash," she's like, "In this old, crappy neighborhood? Okay, I'll take it. I'll move back to the islands or wherever," because I think that's one of the problems that we have, that we're not supporting our own communities to own, to own, and instead, we're talking about, you know, they just need another program, or maybe they'll provide some input into another developer who comes here. No, and that's why the wealth gap is as large as it is, and why it will keep growing unless we're actually addressing this.

LAURA FLANDERS: We've got a new administration coming in in the city with Mayor Eric Adams. We have a governor running for reelection, Kathy Hochul in the state. What tools do government agencies have at their disposal to do the kind of work that you are talking about?

MAJORA CARTER: You know, the same way that, if you are accused of committing a crime, if you don't have access to counsel, the government will provide you with one, six figure real estate deals go down in communities like the South Bronx every other day. When predatory speculators show up at the homes of people, you know, that don't really understand their asset or how to use it, and basically cut a deal that is often for far less than what that house is worth, and they could actually use the equity and that house to do all sorts of things, but instead, our government, all over this country, locally, everywhere, just lets those kind of deals go past the department of finance. Nobody says a word about the fact that, literally, no one says, like, "Are you sure you know what's happening here? That, literally, this asset that you are selling for far less than it's worth," because we could see some of the tax records that some of the sales that have happened around here, "do you know that this is what it's worth?" Or something like that, just so to let people know, but instead, they just pass, muster, they just go right away, and, you know, essentially what happens is that that family's asset is just lost.

LAURA FLANDERS: So a public real estate defender.

MAJORA CARTER: Yep. So, a public real estate defender. I love that. I'm totally gonna write that down, though. That's shorter and better.

LAURA FLANDERS: What about financial institutions? What exists and what do you need?

MAJORA CARTER: You know, I do think that, if there was more opportunities, you know, for banks to kind of look more, I think, deeply, at what's a good risk, then they would see that there's, the same way that like, you know, Grameen International actually looked at alternative ways of assessing someone's risk and their ability to pay back something, that, I think, is gonna be really interesting to, you know, to support people as they start thinking about asset, you know, development for their own projects, and so, that's really good.

LAURA FLANDERS: What about that question of self perception, of culture, of talent in a place? Because it doesn't feature anywhere on anybody's application form, the talent that's in their family, and their bones, in their community.

MAJORA CARTER: What we're trying to do is help people see that that talent was actually nurtured in a community like ours, and it would be amazing if we could actually take it back and work to create more opportunities for us to benefit from their talent, and also, for others to see

the future of others that look just like them, you know, doing this kind of work, so I think that's what's super important, you know, about it, as well.

LAURA FLANDERS: So that takes us to The Boogie Down Grind. Talk about it. Where'd the idea come from?

MAJORA CARTER: As a early real estate developer, we just asked folks, like, what were they leaving the community for, where do they spend their money, you know, what were their hopes and dreams and aspirations for the kind of community they wanted to live in, and what came back were things like cafes and bars and restaurants and cool places to hang out, and so, we acquired these two pretty cheap leases, you know, from a landowner in the community, and we tried to get a coffee shop to come in, and, you know, we won't say the name of the really big one who's basically said no, that a market's too emerging, and so, they didn't come, and we couldn't find anybody else to open up a cafe, so we decided to do it ourselves. And so, yeah, it was all our money that we, you know, had saved up. We decided to call it The Boogie Down Grind, and really make it an homage, you know, to the creativity and the talent that, in the community, literally birthed hip hop. Once we built this beautiful space, and, you know, when it came, until we'd like, literally plastered the walls with these, like, early hip hop albums, and it was just super fun, and really kind of cool, you know, and that's when the community, they seemed to be enticed to stay because there was some place cool that literally spoke to them and that they were allowed to be their best selves. As a matter of fact, it was insisted upon, so there were people decided to come and do open mics, and, you know, credit repair workshops, book readings, music events, I mean, it was this tiny little space, and it was really, really awesome to have something like that where folks were just sort of like, "I didn't know we could do something like this in the neighborhood."

LAURA FLANDERS: And then COVID hit.

MAJORA CARTER: And then COVID happened. We closed down, like everybody else did for a while, but we got a grant from Beyonce's foundation, and we decided to use it to make some outdoor seating. We literally like, hung, you know, artists' work, you know, from between a lamp post and a tree, and, you know, it was an outdoor exhibition, like, every other day. You know, we put a microphone on the corner, and folks would come and do all their artistic things. It was truly amazing, and it was so beautiful, because one of the things that makes me super happy about that was that, you know, people were just like coming up to us and saying things like, "You know, I haven't heard that much joy on that street corner in years," and I was like, "Yeah, y'all did that." I mean, we just made the space, but the community filled it, and their joy is what's overflowing out of it.

LAURA FLANDERS: How do you address the fact that it's inevitable that developing a place develops the interest of outsiders in coming and mining what's there?

MAJORA CARTER: There will be folks coming in, but if we can kind of set the conditions so that the talent that's already there can also participate, then we have a community. We have a much more, you know, economically diverse ecosystem that creates opportunities for people that are already there, who can then be like, "Okay, yeah, yeah, yeah. We know this, this, aforementioned, you know, chains here, but guess what? There's another one that wants to do this."

LAURA FLANDERS: So does that look like economic diversity requirements, regulations?

MAJORA CARTER: We don't need to necessarily create, you know, another like, legislative lane for that. What we really need are just opportunities for people within our own community to be a part of the ownership trajectory. Sometimes, it's as simple as keeping the family's home within the family, and, you know, I could say that because my own family didn't keep my family home, and that's still, like, it's so painful, you know, to me, but the thing is, I think we've got an opportunity to sort of like, create more of an understanding that, if we just keep what we got, that's actually a good way to start the trajectory for many folks in our communities to build generational wealth locally.

LAURA FLANDERS: So you're talking about a different model for community of development. You're also talking about a different model of community investment. Investment by community members in community facilities and enterprises and businesses, and one that you have kicked off is a project you're calling Bronxlandia, and it's in an old, beautiful, abandoned train station. What's your vision there?

MAJORA CARTER: It's gonna be a 2 million redevelopment where we're taking this historic, you know, Cass Gilbert designed rail station, it's the same architect that did the Woolworth building, one of my favorite buildings in the world, and so, he did these little rail stations, you know, yours truly actually acquired one a few years ago, and we're gonna transform into an event venue, and so, I want it to be like, the best music venue ever, and it's gonna be. That's my prayer.

LAURA FLANDERS: Who can be part of that? Who is part of that so far?

MAJORA CARTER: So, the S.E.C. did a really wonderful thing where they changed their regulations that allowed for, just not accredited investors, so that not only super wealthy rich people with lots of assets under their belt could invest in real estate and other types of business projects, but ones that were not, but who wanted the same kind of proportional rate of return for their money to be in those deals, so what we're doing is, a our capital stack is definitely going to

be, you know, for a crowdfunding investment platform where we'll give an opportunity to folks, you know, for as little as like, about \$250, you know, have a stake within the development of Bronxlandia.

LAURA FLANDERS: We often ask, on this program, you know, what is it that leads you to believe, or not just believe, but was there ever a moment in your life where you felt that the changes you believe in are not just possible, but happening?

MAJORA CARTER: Gosh, I have so many experiences that remind me that things are changing and that they've always been right there because we've took the time to recognize that our community was filled with talented people, we just needed to give it a place to see itself, because reclaiming, it involves retaining the talent that's already there to improve their own surroundings and their own economic future, because there's always been value in our communities, and we know that we could and should aspire to something that's economically and emotionally and spiritually meaningful to ourselves. We just have to give ourselves the opportunity to do that.

LAURA FLANDERS: Capital, not charity. That's what it comes down to. People under pressure need help to preserve the assets that they have, and a leg up to give them a fighting chance to make more, especially coming out of a global crisis. It's good for the people, it's good for the country. That was the thinking coming out of World War II. When the GI Bill passed with bipartisan support in 1946, it offered free education and low cost housing loans, as well as unemployment supports to millions of returning GIs, and million took advantage, opening up for them a doorway to the middle class for them and their families, but African Americans didn't benefit so much. For them, southern colleges were entirely barred, education was still beyond reach for many who had to work, and housing? Well, the market was redlined. Financial institutions were still ruled by Jim Crow. In New York and New Jersey, of the 67,000 mortgages backed by the GI Bill, only 100, went to people of color. The GI Bill, as it turns out, did more to exacerbate racial disparities than shrink them, but that doesn't mean we can't do it again, do it right this time. People often compare the pandemic to a war, so how about it? And perhaps add hazard pay and job protections for those whose communities have fought the hardest and suffered the most. It's something to think about. We'll post my entire conversation with Majora Carter and make it available as a podcast at our website. 'Til the next time, stay kind, stay curious. I'm Laura Flanders. Thanks for joining us.

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