

# Nos Quedamos

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In the 1970s Melrose Commons (a 35-block area in the heart of the South Bronx) had a population of 21 000 inhabitants. By the 1990s the area's population had dropped to 6000, with services gradually removed. Urban planning methods at the time were essentially focused on attempting to turn depressed areas into suburban developments. A redevelopment plan was projected for the area, which would have completely displaced its residents. The plan was to drive out the remaining residents and then carry out a 'suburban expansion' in the South Bronx.

In the early 1990s, residents of Melrose Commons fought against this plan through community organizing and socially innovative responses. A grassroots community group, Nos Quedamos [We Stay], generated a new redevelopment plan that included area residents instead of displacing them. With the establishment of the Melrose Commons Urban Renewal area, Nos Quedamos set a new precedent for urban community planning and design, forcing cities to include their residents in planning processes instead of neglecting them. They argued that Melrose was not a community that needed to be erased, but rather, they could build on the community's strengths. They successfully fought against the 'deficient population' model of development as well as articulating an early vision for community sustainability, which has been a 'guiding star' that continues to be followed today. Nos Quedamos was also among the first organizations to promote 'mixed use housing'; in other words, shops on the ground level, and housing above. While urban landscapes are often marked by such arrangements (businesses opening onto the street, with residences above), the innovative element here was Nos Quedamos's vision for bringing businesses back into the Bronx, even while authorities at the city level planned on total redevelopment rather than neighbourhood renewal.

*Pushing this idea of mixed use housing, which the city was pretty opposed to, even though in the intervening 20 years has become absolutely the norm... I would be surprised if you could do a new development without something like that... That's social innovation if you think about it (Nos Quedamos, Executive Director).*

Nos Quedamos is a Community Development Corporation (CDC) comprised of residents, homeowners and business-owners from the South Bronx. They are committed to promoting, supporting, and advancing healthy and sustainable growth, both for local communities and the larger society. Their members are mostly Spanish-speaking.

Nos Quedamos uses a typical community development approach. It is a community-based organization aiming to develop a specific community, using a comprehensive approach and based on creating housing, business and social programs for that community. Its main activity has been promoting housing projects through a specific mixed-use vision and listening to what the community has to say about its needs. For example, Nos Quedamos changed the way they build kitchens based on an understanding of community lifestyles. From 1998 to 2009, sixteen housing projects were constructed based on Nos Quedamos's vision, and two more projects are currently under construction. All of these projects have been carried out through public funding (at Federal, State and/or City level), which clearly shows that Nos

Quedamos's success can only be explained through a continuous collaboration between governmental and non-governmental stakeholders in the area.

During the last twenty-five years, the organization's core activities have been advocacy and campaigning for affordable housing, providing support and services to residents in the area, fostering sustainable community development and also furthering work force development. As we have said, their founding goal was to stabilize the population of the neighbourhood and create a critical mass to support business, thereby bringing business back to the Bronx. They clearly succeeded. The Melrose Commons population stabilized by late 1990s and the first new supermarket in thirty years opened its doors in the neighbourhood.

Nos Quedamos has remained in the neighbourhood, engaging in community organizing for a long time, but its goals have evolved. Currently, Nos Quedamos is focused on providing housing for the 'working-middle class' (those who make too much for public housing but cannot afford market rates). They provide the following services on-site for the community and the residents of its buildings: financial literacy (tenant and community member financial education), property management, youth promotion and job development. At the same time, sustainability has increasingly become one of their main targets and they are fairly innovative in this field.

In the early days Nos Quedamos was highly innovative, combining contestation with alternative pragmatic solutions, advocating a new way of community urban planning and enjoying success with their proposal for mixed-use housing. They have continued to propose novel solutions to community problems up to and including the current post-recession scenario, clearly demonstrating that to be innovative you don't have to be new. A good example is their trend toward greener jobs, linking saving energy with poverty reduction. Nos Quedamos has a specific Green Buildings program, promoting green and LEED<sup>1</sup> certified developments, encompassing materials, systems and high efficiency Energy Star appliances and fixtures that help reduce energy and water usage in its projects.

Urban agriculture and roof gardens, including green spaces with native plants, as well as capturing and reusing rain and greywater are some of the measures they apply in their buildings to create a positive impact, both for the environment and the community. They also have an environmental program aimed at redeveloping brownfield sites, whose former activities involved the use of potentially hazardous materials. Nos Quedamos has participated in the creation of standards and regulations concerning brownfields redevelopment at local, citywide, state-wide, and federal levels. It is important to highlight that they have done this through their constant work with local leaders.

Although the South Bronx is not as gentrified as Bushwick, gentrification is nonetheless a hot issue in the area. Some see it as a threat and others as an opportunity. Nos Quedamos wants to preserve the community and keep it from becoming another Brooklyn or over-priced Manhattan. Thus, they are planning to respond to gentrification:

*We have had a chance to really look at what happened in Brooklyn and it's in our minds to be a little more thoughtful. And to figure out how can we pursue this mixed use, mixed income development without jumping to the 900 square foot condo. We don't want people to be priced out because all the housing is targeted to lower income tiers but on the other hand we also*

*don't want them to be priced out because Manhattan rates are astronomical (Nos Quedamos, Executive Director).*

Nos Quedamos has developed an innovative philosophy of home ownership as a way to pre-empt gentrification, which they predict will eventually come to the South Bronx:

*Really seeing to it that the housing stock is accessible to the local community is super important. But not just rental. An important key plan to the community members was that we needed affordable home ownership. And another way to anchor a community against gentrification and these other ailments is home ownership. And having multi-family home ownership that actually was able to give rental income to the homeowners was something else that was a social innovation itself (Nos Quedamos, Director of Housing and Development).*

The argument continued:

*Especially, when you think about it, what are the household types in this community? A lot of them are large with extended family members. So knowing that you're able to have a household where you could have another kind of dedicated unit just for relatives that you could rent it out to or to another community member. You think about how that also generates community sustainability (Nos Quedamos, Director of Housing and Development).*

Over the past several years Nos Quedamos has been following a new mission, although within the same overall vision. They are now focusing on the newer economic class, community members who are making too much for low income affordable housing but not enough for market rate housing. At the same time, a lot of people fall through the cracks because affordable housing is too expensive and their incomes are too low for it. The idea is to prevent these people from falling between the cracks. This could be a clue for how the South Bronx may emerge as a different kind of NYC neighbourhood, a neighbourhood that is not polarized between the long-term residents and the gentrifiers. In advance of gentrification, Nos Quedamos is building infrastructure precisely to avoid low income residents' displacement and to keep them in place.

On the other hand, we also observed Nos Quedamos in the midst of a strategic shift in its organizational goals. While continuing its mission with respect to housing and development, the organization is also now increasingly articulating concerns about education, adult training, and starting to translate these into programmatic form. The organization is pivoting toward 'training youth leaders', in other words, as they say, to recover the lost generation. We detected this shift in thinking when listening to how Nos Quedamos leaders framed the purpose of their next era of engagement in the neighbourhood: to address poverty by connecting economic approaches to the topic of education attainment.

*Youth from age 17 to 21 or 22 are disconnected from school; they're not completing school, they're not going to college, and they're not going into the workforce (...) That means that our future is in crisis (...) Although you have families in Melrose that have managed to benefit from this development (for instance the newer 'mixed developments' that have brought population*

*back into the Bronx through a lottery process, managed by HPD, and that has stimulated entrepreneurship in the South Bronx), you still have a larger population that is still in poverty... (Nos Quedamos, Executive Director).*

This individual concluded,

*So now, what are the other issues that are at play to be able to address really changing the conversation around not just income and economic attainment, but there's everything else from education attainment and there's all these other social justice issues that are at play here (Nos Quedamos, Executive Director).*

5

While the organization supports itself through funds from their housing developments, Nos Quedamos also gets funding from public institutions to carry out its programs and services. Undoubtedly its success in the 1990s has to do with its capacity to struggle and challenge the initial urban plan. But it is also linked to its ability to work together with public institutions and other stakeholders to get the Melrose Commons Urban Renewal area implemented. Currently they have good relations with just about all public sector actors: working relations with the Bronx's Council member, with the State Assemblyman and with the Bronx Borough President. They also have good relations with their Congressman and with the Community Board. They also have a close relationship with other nonprofits, such as Bronx Defenders, Sustainable South Bronx or Mothers on the Move, and informal but positive relations in general with the whole universe of South Bronx nonprofits.

Nos Quedamos remains actively engaged with advocacy efforts. This way they connect Bronx based organizations to leverage capacity and influence matters of public policy. These advocacy campaigns and initiatives include, but are not limited to: South Bronx River Watershed Alliance, NYC Environmental Justice Alliance, Our City Our Homes and Bronx Climate Justice Initiative. Despite this tradition of collaboration with other Bronx nonprofits, Nos Quedamos tends to carry out its own projects in a fairly autonomous way, without coalitions or other forms of networking.

Nos Quedamos emerges from an organizing ethos, with voter registration drives, hired organizers, and so on. However, nowadays it doesn't fit in what Guimond (2013) calls a 'radical and democratic model' of organizing. It has a traditional nonprofit organizational structure (including a board, COO, CEO, program manager, etc.), but it functions much like a small team. The organization consists of seven professionals and twenty-five volunteers, who help with events and campaigns, several also providing daily office support. They have a programs Department (for organizing events) and a Community and Social Services Department (providing services such as help in applying for affordable housing).

Considering the social change model, we found that Nos Quedamos is building collective capacity for change by way of doing leadership work to produce unleashing, reframing, and bridging practices. Nos Quedamos endeavours to embody a team-based and collective form of leadership, valuing the collective network of residents, churches and other organizations as sources of leadership. It wants to be an enterprise that distributes leadership equally across staff and volunteers. However, Nos Quedamos exhibits many features of a conventionally structured organization, albeit suffused with collective practices.

While Nos Quedamos has evolved into the organizational form of an established nonprofit service provider, its members have not lost their community organizing practices. The Nos Quedamos leadership recognizes such practices (gathering signatures, running campaigns, going to town hall meetings, etc.) as key to their past successes.

*We invite community leaders to speak to elected representatives. Giving them that voice, we are empowering them (Nos Quedamos, Executive Director).*

Their organizing practices have been evident in recent events, for example when a neighbourhood resident came to Nos Quedamos to organize a campaign against a proposal for a new homeless shelter in the area. At the same time, Nos Quedamos takes opportunities to coach residents in community organizing practices. As one active participant reported:

*People come here for affordable housing and they realize they don't qualify, and that's an opportunity to get them engaged, using their experience as a person affected by one of the problems we try to tackle (Nos Quedamos, Administrative Assistant).*

Using a conventional community-organizing rationale, Nos Quedamos tries to unleash the human energy of community members. They offer information to the whole community and usually organize workshops, especially for their volunteers. They try to foster and give voice to new community leaders from below. In some cases, moreover, they have also brought community residents into the organization staff. The following quote shows the example of a resident who was engaged as a volunteer in Nos Quedamos and has recently been hired as administrative assistant:

*I feel that I've learned how to do community outreach and community organizing, how to get people engaged... I've learned the skill set needed to work with community and help them understand this is our stake... Put them at the forefront and say these are our issues (Nos Quedamos, Administrative Assistant).*

Like with the other social initiatives in this project, we found 'reframing discourse' to be an evident leadership practice. Nos Quedamos successfully fought against the 'deficient population' model of development and successfully asserted that the remaining residents were not a community that needed to be erased. Instead, they argued that development could build on the strengths of the community. They intentionally went about the task of changing the stereotype of community development in the Bronx from the 'deficient community' model to the belief that the remaining residents were valuable stakeholders in whatever development plans took shape. This reframing practice continues:

*We want to change the stereotype that... 'oh, in the Bronx they don't do much...' That's not true, we have a lot and people who live here they wanna do something about what's going on... We don't like to be in poverty and we wanna change that (Nos Quedamos, Administrative Assistant).*

The organization's work is focused within the community, and thus bridging difference practices take place within the community and especially within the 'we stay' community. Members work for and from the community, aiming to organize it in order to realize its common goals. Bridging difference is also evident in the descriptions above about the excellent relations with public officials and with the whole universe of South Bronx nonprofits.

We also found a dramatic example of Nos Quedamos creatively bridging differences as part of its housing work: bringing property managers into the planning process for new developments. Because property managers have a stake in the environments in which housing developments are embedded, they became valuable participants in the planning of new affordable housing even after an initial hesitancy to become involved. In this creative way, Nos Quedamos spans different professional domains and stages in community development.

7

### **References**

Guimond, C.C., 2013. *Battle For The Bronx: Neighborhood Revitalization In a Gentrifying City*. University of California, Berkeley.

## Notes

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1 The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Green Building Rating System