

South Bronx Unite

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South Bronx Unite (SBU) is a coalition of South Bronx residents, organizations and other allies working together to improve and protect the social, environmental and economic future of the South Bronx. It was formed in 2012 in response to the proposed relocation of the grocery delivery organization Fresh Direct from Long Island City in Queens to the Harlem River Yard. This was a 96-acre waterfront parcel of public land leased by the New York State Department of Transportation to Harlem River Yard Ventures in 1991 for 99 years.

The Fresh Direct controversy was its galvanizing issue, but the coalition has focused on numerous other activities overtime. These include revitalizing the waterfront, developing a bike share program with Bike the Bronx, and organizing climate coalition activities for the Climate March. They have also lead efforts to turn an old health clinic into a community-owned space that will house local community nonprofits.

SBU has a long-term vision that aims to involve the community in planning and development of the waterfront. The goal is to develop access to a blue-green area and foster a green development that would provide living wage jobs for neighbourhood residents. In a similar way to Nos Quedamos, SBU is in the planning stages of extending its work into the area of human development.

We initially formed this coalition around the stopping of the relocation of Fresh Direct because of the potential environmental harm to an area that's already dealing with incredibly poor air quality, really heavily trafficked area with vehicular traffic... Almost 17,000 diesel trucks per day coming from Hunts Point through Mott Haven, Port Morris through either the highways into the city or upstate... We're now trying to propose projects that would increase quality of life (...) We're trying to create space for that [human development] by asking and looking for space that we can do, like, after school programs around creative writing or creative thinking. We have the library right here -the Mott Haven Library- but a lot of the times it doesn't have the programming that it needs. Most often that place is just used as a computer lab (South Bronx Unite, Co-founder).

SBU could be understood as a simple coalition contesting a public-private development proposal in the South Bronx. However, we think they are socially innovative because they go beyond contestation: they self-produced an alternative proposal for the area and they are carrying out several community activities according to their socio-environmental view. Thus, despite the fact that the coalition was created and mobilized against having Fresh Direct in the South Bronx, they went beyond that protest, by developing an alternative urban plan to make the waterfront 'green'. This community initiative appears to have been successful in that it was able to get plans incorporated into the NY State plan, presumably putting pressure on city planners to take these ideas seriously.

We've seen waterfront development in every borough -Long Island City, Queens, Gantry State Park, Battery Park City, Brooklyn Bridge Park-. All over the city there's development going on around waterfront development to increase quality of life, but it's not happening in this community. The southside Bronx is not getting that waterfront access. And so the community had to be 'the change it's looking for' by proposing and getting this plan nominated and then voted for overwhelmingly to become a priority project (South Bronx Unite, Co-founder).

They are also socially innovative because they are attempting to meet unmet social needs in the area from below. As will become apparent, they are transforming neighbourhood social relations through a new form of networked organization and they try to empower South Bronx residents through their activities.

The organization builds upon past community mobilization efforts. Despite the coalition being founded in 2012, it already existed 'in spirit' prior to that date. For instance, the same people fought the Major Deegan Expressway in 2009, started to lead the contestation to the waterfront plan and also worked around the Stericycle modification actions. Thus, SBU was created as a coalition when major players in previous efforts decided to come together to coordinate their efforts in a somewhat more formalized manner. As we will see, the influence of the Occupy Wall Street movement was significant at this milestone.

On paper, SBU is more than fifty organizations coming together to advocate for remedies to environmental and social injustices in Mott Haven, Port Morris and Melrose. In practice, the coalition works around several community-based organizations and a team of activists. Thus, the coalition has a core nucleus of actors, supplemented by others who are involved to varying degrees. Money spent by the coalition comes from individuals' and organizations' own personal dollars.

Friends of Brook Park (FBP) is one of SBU's key organizational partners and also acts as the coalition's financial sponsor. Located on a 'million dollar block'¹, since 1999 FBP has functioned as an open-air community centre in the form of gardens and event-space, empowering projects that, according to its members, respond to the 'economic violence' of the unemployment and poverty that afflict the area. FBP is characterized by strong links to environmental and indigenous movements and they are known for sponsoring a great deal of education in their garden space, particularly working with youth and after-school programs. Over the course of its fifteen-year history, FBP has evolved into an eclectic and creative community space.

Friends of Brook Park is partially a community garden and a park. We have chicken coops, sustainable agriculture, raised beds. We have community gardens going on. We do classes there. There's sweat lodges happening there (Friends of Brook Park, Program Director).

As we might expect, the objectives of FBP very much overlap with SBU. They respond to the lack of environmental analysis for projects in the Mott Haven area, the lack of community input in those projects and their lack of transparency. They are aligned with the larger environmental justice movement and respond to the problem of access to green spaces, but overall they also have a clear community approach.

I have a tomato garden. What am I growing and harvesting? Obviously, tomatoes. If I have a flower garden, what am I growing? Flowers. If I say I have a community garden, what am I growing? Community. In addition to the horticultural, agricultural activity that's going on here, very much the cultivation of community social capital. And that's probably as significant as the strict ecological work that goes on here in terms of the trees, the vegetables, the fruits, and the flowers and that sort of thing. It's as important (Friends of Brook Park, Program Director).

FBP has a pragmatic approach. They provide environmental justice eco-tours. By taking the youth to the waterfront via kayaking and biking tours around the neighbourhood, they help young people to envision what the Bronx could look like. They lend out their park to other community organizations, such as Green Worker Cooperatives, and they also gained funding from the NYCHA² for a greenhouse project. Some of these initiatives were launched in the post-recession setting and they could be labelled as socially innovative. For instance, FBP runs a youth farm as an alternative to incarceration since 2009. The farm was created as a result of a community survey that engaged youth in the diagnosis and they even recruited Columbia University to help analyse the data through a Geographical Information System. At that point, FBP began serving as a program site with Community Connections for Youth. As a subcontractor for this organization organization, FBP gets city and state funding. Beyond their pragmatic approach delivering services for the community, FBP also conducts advocacy campaigns, for instance participating actively in SBU's struggle to stop the Fresh Direct relocation.

FBP has connections with many social organizations in the area, such as Community Connections for Youth, Mothers on the Move and Banana Kelly, among others. FBP's program director is also President of NYC Community Gardens Coalitions. Several of our interviewees in fact claimed that a lot of 'organizational threads' weaving through the system of South Bronx community organizations run through Friends of Brook Park.

Neither SBU nor FBP have highly positive relations with the Community Board or the Police Precinct. However, they do work directly with the Department of Probation and Courts and with NYCHA. They also have good relations with the City Council, especially with the Speaker, who is developing Participatory Budgeting in Mott Haven as the Council member for this District.

We participated in that [participatory budgeting] and we joined together with residents out of NYCHA and were able to leverage that community driven process, able to leverage \$300,000 for a solar energy powered food production greenhouse on NYCHA land – the Millbrook Houses just down this way (Friends of Brook Park, Program Director).

Neither FBP nor SBU employ paid staff. However, while FBP is recognized as a formal nonprofit organization (501c3³), SBU is not – it is rather an informal coalition. SBU has decided not to be legalized as a 501c3 because they do not want the constraints that would come with it. They have a very small budget coming from speaking honorariums, a few small grants to participate in activities such as the Climate March, and participants and organizations donating their own time and money.

Everyone contributes with their time, and energy, and their dollars. Personal funds have created posters and signs and websites. We believe in this community, we believe in our people and so we pay for it with everything we have. Including our children. My son was protesting at four weeks down by the proposed Fresh Direct site (South Bronx Unite, Activist).

SBU was created after the emergence of the Occupy Wall Street movement in NYC, which inspired its model of organization. SBU has a horizontal model whereby residents and community-based organizations are networked around different projects and those who are most engaged are those who have the most time. They also rely heavily on social media and fluid modes of communication. For example, one day Mayor Bill De Blasio came to a local restaurant in the neighbourhood and SBU quickly gathered a group of people to engage with him (with placards, pressing for a conversation), having mobilized on-line. Another day there was a public hearing where Fresh Direct mobilized their people, and South Bronx Unite immediately mobilized out their people too in a theatre at Hostos; each side had about 100 people.

SBU is currently leading a process for the community to acquire a building – the Lincoln Recovery Center (formerly an alcohol and drug treatment centre) – to house community organizations, drawing inspiration not only from Occupy Wall Street but also from the Black Panthers.

This building has been sitting vacant and this hospital first tried to sell the building for a profit but found that they would not be able to get a profit from the sale of that building. So now they're in the process of turning the building back over to the city and we have a progressive city council person who happens to be the speaker of the city council. We are calling on her to lend her support in the community acquiring the building... The community today likewise wants to work together to brainstorm that and other needs that the community has (South Bronx Unite, Co-founder).

As this quote suggests, SBU draws heavily from the community for its work. South Bronx Unite lacks a professionalized and hierarchical structure, advocates flexible, open and horizontal forms of organizing, and is based on grassroots movements and community networking. Hence they demonstrate to some degree what we can term a 'collective' form of leadership. At the same time, though, there is a small group of charismatic individuals in SBU that shape its discourse and push for things to be done. Some people think this is less democratic than it could be.

For example, once-a-month SBU has a formal meeting that is open to everyone. However, the date is not posted on its website. Their organizers maintain that SBU is highly collaborative and works as a consensus-driven organization, aiming to draw heavily on community inputs. Its openness and transparency is assumed, again inspired by Occupy Wall Street.

The way we started off is the way we exist still. We've taken on and adopted some of the Occupy Wall Street type structural example of there not being one head or there being a core that make on the ground decisions about press releases, events, how we mobilized - that's the nucleus. And then we have a larger coalition that the core disseminates the information to (South Bronx Unite, Organizer).

We all listen to what each has to say and again we have a consensus approach to solving problems and also coming to conclusions... We have a consensus based approach to coming up

with solutions. We meet periodically. We communicate a lot via e-mail or via text. So we're talking to each other pretty frequently throughout the week depending on need and issues that are arising (South Bronx Unite, Co-founder).

On the other hand, though, several of their members claim that SBU has no strong organizational structure and it is more a network of individuals than a network of organizations. In fact, there is a small group of four people leading and coordinating its action. They also argue that SBU actually sits in the middle of the leadership spectrum; it is not a 'command and control' organization, but neither is it a big tent in which to form strategy. These members perceive that decisions seem to be made internal to a small group of individuals and they argue, therefore, that it could not be considered an organization characterized by fully collective leadership.

With respect to FBP, we also observed some charismatic individuals in that organization. Nevertheless, everybody we interviewed stressed that FBP has a very horizontal leadership style, with a great deal of involvement from volunteers. It exhibits a character that several interviewees described as 'anarchist'.

We also observed different leadership practices both in SBU and in FBP. Firstly, even though they have not produced a new discourse (the same discourse was used in previous struggles in the area, such as the fight against the waste transfer station in Hunts Point), they clearly frame the South Bronx in general and the waterfront in particular according to an alternative, community development model. Likewise, the 'anarchist' model of organizing itself, more networked and fluid than a traditional nonprofit represents a 'reframing' of sorts, in practice. It is making the statement that traditional nonprofit status is not the only or perhaps even the best way to achieve collective work. In this sense, it offers a counter-hegemonic perspective, which may be interpreted by some as 'too loose' or leaderless, but seems to work. Indeed, when the need comes, SBU is able to mobilize sufficient people around the problem and thus make things happen.

Secondly, they bridge differences through a networked form of organizing which horizontally engages residents, organizations and other allies working together to improve and protect the social, environmental and economic future of the South Bronx. The 'weaving' of organizations through this informal one represents a very original way of bridging differences to address specific problems at the right moment. Mobilization would not be possible without sustained, invisible work done from the core. Calling upon many organizations when these are needed, rather than burdening them with daily tasks of organizing that would distract them from their mission represents, like in Occupy Wall Street, a contemporary implementation of collective leadership. Rather than leaderless, the network could be said to be leaderful.

Finally, SBU understands that its success depends on their ability to mobilize and engage people, supporting their claims. To do this, they must listen and work directly with the community in a very decentralized model, but one where learning by doing happens constantly:

Everyone [leads], it's open access and a pure contribution-based effort. You talk about community and trust, there aren't any private accounts. Everyone has access and everyone jumps in (South Bronx Unite, Activist).

SBU uses a number of strategies (information, activities, service delivery, etc.) in order to unleash this human energy.

Notes

1 A 'million dollar block' is a block of housing on which the public sector spends at least one million dollars per year on the incarceration of residents.

2 New York City Housing Authority.

3 A 501(c) organization is a tax-exempt nonprofit organization in the United States. The most common type of tax-exempt nonprofit organization falls under category 501(c)(3), whereby a nonprofit organization is exempt from federal income tax if its activities have the following purposes: charitable, religious, educational, scientific, literary, testing for public safety, fostering amateur sports competition, or preventing cruelty to children or animals.