

Green Gentrification Case Study
Ecological Urbanism
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1. Organization

PUSH (People United for Sustainable Housing) Buffalo

2. Location and Dates of Operation

PUSH Buffalo was founded in Buffalo, NY in 2005. PUSH works mainly in West Buffalo area, centered in the 14213 zip-code.ⁱ

3. Abstract and Keywords

PUSH Buffalo is a community-based organization that works to create strong neighborhoods and sustainable affordable housing for a just transition in Buffalo, NY. Since 2005, PUSH has been actively working in the West Side to buy vacant lots and properties and redevelop them into affordable housing or community green spaces. PUSH has also expanded into eco-landscaping and green infrastructure with the goal of creating a revenue-generating social enterprise that employs community members. The West Side today is facing growing gentrification pressures; some of which may be an unintended consequence of PUSH's work. However, PUSH has made many positive changes in the neighborhood, developing substantive affordable housing, creating jobs, and establishing a strong community organizing and advocacy network that is equipped to confront the changes in the neighborhood.

Keywords: Affordable Housing, Vacant lots, Community Engagement, Job Training and Creation, Green Infrastructure, Partnerships, Green Development Zone

4. Philosophy/Mission/Values

PUSH Buffalo's mission is "to mobilize residents to create strong neighborhoods with quality, affordable housing; to expand local hiring opportunities; and to advance economic and environmental justice in Buffalo." The mission is reflected in its values of member-involvement, inclusiveness, ownership, results oriented, and relevant.ⁱⁱ PUSH's core work is community organizing to lift up the needs and concerns of the community to achieve its mission.

5. Size of Community, Scale and Geographic Focus

In 2008, PUSH created a Green Development Zone (GDZ) where it has been focusing the most of its efforts and investments. The GDZ is a 30-block area with low median household incomes and a 40% poverty rate.ⁱⁱⁱ The GDZ also has a large immigrant and refugee population and is racially diverse. There are many languages spoken in the West Side. The total population of the West Side 14213 zip code is 24,167 (in 2018).^{iv} The GDZ's boundaries are currently shifting as PUSH continues and expands its work. Figure 1 shows the GDZ.

Figure 1. Green Development Zone

PROJECT MAP



6. Timeline

PUSH was established in 2005 after the founders went door to door in the neighborhood to learn about people’s living conditions and struggles. After finding that many were struggling with unaffordable rents and high utility bills and concerned with vacant lots in bad condition, they decided to organize.^v

In response to resident concerns, PUSH looked into who owned the many vacant buildings and lots on the West Side. They discovered that an obscure state agency owned 1,499 vacant lots and buildings. Furthermore, the state was securitizing the tax liens of these properties and

selling them to investors as assets. PUSH organized a campaign against this, which eventually led to the state releasing the 1,499 vacant properties.

In 2007, PUSH started to buy vacant buildings and lots primarily and redevelop them into affordable housing and commercial spaces and community green spaces. In 2009, PUSH created the Buffalo Neighborhood Stabilization Company (BNSC), a nonprofit development company to have a separate entity that handles property development and management.^{vi}

PUSH's efforts to acquire and develop vacant parcels was originally enabled by federal funding passed through the New York state in 2009-2010.^{vii} That original funding allowed PUSH to purchase many vacant lots and properties start with basic restoration to clean and green lots. PUSH buys most properties through the city's tax foreclosure auctions. A handful of properties were given to PUSH by estates. And a few were bought on the at-large housing market.

In 2013, PUSH expanded into eco-landscaping and green infrastructure installation to promote and create green infrastructure throughout the City of Buffalo. It created a social enterprise, called PUSH Blue, which employs a crew of National Green Infrastructure Certification Program (NGICP) certified workers.

In 2018, PUSH completed \$15 million renovation of School 77, an 88,000 square foot abandoned elementary school (Fig. 2). Several years ago, private developers began showing interest redeveloping School 77 into high-end lofts. In response, PUSH worked with the community to get the City to place a one-year moratorium on the sale of the school while they developed a community-focused redevelopment plan.^{viii} The process involved input from more than 800 community members. The result is a mixed-use building providing affordable housing, community solar, community spaces, green roof, and landscaping for stormwater management. School 77 brings together PUSH's wide range of work.

As PUSH continues to expand its work both in geography and size, it is running into some challenges. Currently, PUSH is working on a 48-unit, multi-site affordable housing development outside of the GDZ.^{ix} Last year, this development faced some opposition from neighbors who felt they were consulted and were concerned about the design, project size, and safety concerns.^x PUSH worked with the neighbors to address their concerns and come to an agreement.^{xi} This is an example of the challenges of a growing organization.

Another growing challenge is the changing neighborhood. PUSH continues to work in the GDZ and West Side to develop affordable housing and commercial spaces. However, the work is getting more difficult. Most of PUSH's properties were acquired from 2008-2018. As the West Side has been gentrifying, it is making it harder for PUSH to obtain cheap vacant lots and properties.^{xii} This has brought PUSH to a crossroads as they reflect and strategize on how they can continue to scale their work.

Figure 2. School 77



7. Organization and Operation

PUSH is a big organization with 40 staff led by an Executive Director and a Board of Directors. However, it is still a bottom-up organization that is guided by its members and the community. First, PUSH asks community members about their concerns. Then, PUSH reflects on what it might be able to do to address these concerns and develops its projects and work plan. All of its work – affordable housing, green infrastructure, job training, energy efficiency – was developed in response to community needs.

PUSH staff do extensive outreach through door-knocking, meetings, social media, text, and more. In addition to meetings held throughout the year, there is a large annual Community Planning Congress with residents to understand what the community wants. There is extensive advertisement about the meeting in advance and childcare is provided. Attendees are put into small groups with a facilitator to discuss their experiences and thoughts on what changes they wish to see in the community. Attendees also help identify gentrifying pressures and where PUSH should work.^{xiii}

PUSH is a membership-based organization of both individuals and other organizations. Members can vote and/or run to be on the PUSH Board of Directors. Members also serve as active volunteers and work on PUSH campaigns.

PUSH also houses another organization, the BNSC. BNSC, however, does not act as a separate, independent organizations. It is PUSH's affordable housing developer arm and BNSC's work is directed by PUSH.

PUSH also partners with many other organizations. For example, PUSH partnered with another development company that works in low-income neighborhoods, Housing Visions. To construct projects, PUSH works with other job-training and employment assistance organizations to hire disadvantaged individuals seeking employment.^{xiv} In 2019, PUSH worked with People's Action and the Housing Justice for All coalition to advocate for strong tenant protections and preserving housing affordability.^{xv} Across all of its work, PUSH works with many partners.

PUSH as a community-based organization, does not have official ties to the local government. However, its strong presence makes it an important voice that the City listens to.

8. Programs

PUSH runs many different programs to support the community. For the scope of this case study, PUSH's affordable housing and green infrastructure efforts will be described in detail.

Affordable Housing Development

The BNSC acts as a land bank to buy vacant lots and buildings and then redevelops them into affordable housing, primarily in the GDZ. BNSC aims to own and improve at least 20% of the community's housing stock to prevent rapid gentrification in the community. PUSH and BNSC own over 100 properties. BNSC leverages federal and state funding sources like the Low-Income Housing Tax Credits and HOME Funds to finance these projects.^{xvi} All of the housing is built to be energy efficient for both environmental benefits and keeping utility bills low. Keeping utility bills low is very important because many Buffalo renters struggle with high energy bills.^{xvii} Rents are also kept at about 33% of resident income.^{xviii}

PUSH's decision of which lots to purchase is influenced by community members and gentrification considerations. Areas that are determined to be facing gentrifying forces are where PUSH tries to focus its work to ensure some high-quality affordable housing.^{xix}

BNSC holds itself to high standards and works with PUSH members to come up with workforce and community benefit standards to keep itself accountable. In the case of the big School 77 project, PUSH committed to using the Community Hiring Hall, one of their other social enterprise businesses connecting locals to jobs, to hire mostly entry-level construction laborers. For School 77, 10 full-time trade positions were hired through the Hiring Hall and the same requirements trickled down to their contractor and sub-contractors.^{xx}

PUSH Blue (Green Infrastructure)

PUSH Blue is a "community-based water management movement" that aims to train and employ Buffalo residents from disadvantaged backgrounds to install and maintain green infrastructure and landscaping projects.^{xxi} Buffalo faces a combined sewer overflow problem that directly impacts West Buffalo residents as there is a CSO outfall that discharges directly into

a canal where many residents swim and fish. PUSH saw green infrastructure as both a way to help address this public health issue and an economic and job creation opportunity.^{xxii}

The Buffalo Sewer Authority (BSA) is under a consent decree to implement a \$400 million Long-Term Control Plan to address its CSO problems, of which \$90 million is for green infrastructure.^{xxiii} In 2015, PUSH Blue became a community partner of BSA to install over 140 bioretention installations on 19 acres of vacant lots across the city.^{xxiv} For the contract with BSA, 53 jobs were created – 64% were Buffalo residents and almost half were people of color.^{xxv} The City has been slower in spending the allotted \$90 million on green infrastructure so PUSH Blue's work with BSA has slowed down.^{xxvi}

In addition to its work with BSA, PUSH Blue has also contracted with state agencies, public schools, and private companies. In total, PUSH Blue has executed more than \$2.7 million in contracts.^{xxvii} Typically, PUSH Blue employs about 4 to 5 people in a seasonal crew and employees are paid living wages.^{xxviii} PUSH Blue also maintains all of its projects, which takes up a bulk of their work.^{xxix} Many of the green infrastructure projects are located in the GDZ and the community response has been positive.^{xxx} The ultimate goal of PUSH Blue is to make it a revenue generating social enterprise that can compete in the private marketplace. PUSH is evaluating the regulations needed in to help make this a reality.^{xxxi}

PUSH Blue also provides National Green Infrastructure Certification Program (NGICP) training to provide skills to participate in the green economy. As of 2019, PUSH Blue employed the only NGICP certified professions in Western New York.^{xxxii} Through this training program PUSH hopes to increase the number of people in the community qualified for green jobs. To recruit trainees, PUSH does extensive outreach including a green job fair, door knocking, and flyering.

PUSH recognizes that its work to rehabilitate lots and buildings and create green spaces may unintentionally cause gentrification.^{xxxiii} PUSH has educated residents about this and what gentrification is in past meetings. In fact, pockets in and around the GDZ have experienced property appreciation.^{xxxiv} However, it is unclear how much the green infrastructure projects specifically contribute to gentrification in the area. PUSH Blue's projects generally tend to be smaller-scale green infrastructure like rain gardens, green roofs, community gardens, permeable pavement, etc. rather than large, iconic greening projects (see Figs. 3 & 4). Furthermore, many of PUSH Blue's green infrastructure projects are not easily distinguishable with general landscaping.^{xxxv} Within the larger context of the 15 years of work PUSH has done in building up the community and redeveloping vacant lots in the GDZ, it seems unlikely PUSH Blue's green gentrification work is the main driver of gentrification.

Figures 3 & 4. Pictures of PUSH Blue's Work



Other Programs

PUSH runs many other programs that contribute to a just transition in the West Side. They have an arm called PUSH Green that helps provide weatherization, energy efficiency services and retrofits in homes. PUSH also helps to create and sustain worker cooperatives; runs a green job employment program (separate from PUSH Blue); operates a neighborhood center; leads advocacy work; provides leadership training for residents; organizes and educates youth; and more. With a staff of 40, PUSH's programming and work is extensive. But they all work toward the mission and vision of creating "strong neighborhoods with quality, affordable housing; to expand local hiring opportunities; and to advance economic and environmental justice in Buffalo".

9. Financing and Resources

PUSH finances its operations through a number of income sources. According to PUSH's annual reports (2017-2019), grants are the biggest source of income (though the percentage fluctuates from year to year). In 2019, grants accounted for 81% of total income; in 2018, it was 61%; and in 2017, grants were 38%. The remaining income sources include property rents, management fees, passthrough income, contributions, and special events. Another source of income, though not delineated in the annual reports, is membership dues. There is a small \$5 annual fee for individuals while organizations' dues depend on their size. This income, however, does not cover BNSC's expenses. BNSC's finances, as a separate legal entity, are managed separately.

For its development projects, PUSH heavily relies on federal and state incentives and grants. For example, the \$15 million School 77 project was financed through NYS Homes & Community Renewal (HCR), State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), NYSERDA, and PUSH/BNSC's capital.^{xxxvi} PUSH's new affordable housing development in the northern part of the West Side to create 48 green affordable and supportive housing units uses tax credits.^{xxxvii}

10. Assessment

A clear way to measure some of PUSH's work is through the numbers. From 2008-2019, PUSH invested \$60 million in green affordable housing, green infrastructure, and stormwater management in the GDZ. It created over 250 green jobs (among all its programs) and trained over 450 workers. And over 1,000 homes were weatherized or retrofitted for energy efficiency.^{xxxviii} PUSH now has over 100 units of affordable rental housing and a large multi-site affordable development in the works that would add 48 more units.^{xxxix} These numbers, however, do not track or measure the impact of green gentrification or the affordable housing's role in addressing green gentrification. However, it is unclear how green gentrification could really be measured due to the wide range of activities and investments that have been made in the GDZ over the years by PUSH and others.

Overall, PUSH, as an organization seeking to create strong communities and sustainable, affordable housing seems successful. They have created significant affordable housing in a small geographic area. For its commercial spaces, PUSH has prioritized businesses that serve existing residents, helping some who otherwise would have been pushed out to continue to operate in the neighborhood.^{xl} They have created many jobs and provided training for hundreds more.

Unfortunately, all of this work to create a more vibrant community has drawn the attention of outside developers and the GDZ is gentrifying. This is always a challenge when investing in and building up neighborhoods in any capacity. Yet, at the same time, PUSH has also better prepared the neighborhood to deal with gentrification pressure. Although it cannot accommodate all residents, there is a concentration of affordable housing. There is now also an active organizing infrastructure in the West Side that is able to mobilize and actively contend with the changing dynamics of the neighborhood. School 77 is a perfect example of this – the community was able to come together and stop an upscale development that would not have served them. PUSH will not be able to stop every new speculative developer, but at least the West Side residents can work together to try to tackle these challenges.

11. Lessons for West Philadelphia

Buffalo's West Side is similar to West Philadelphia in many ways – the history of disinvestment, prevalence of vacant lots, and being a largely low-income community with a large minority population. There are many lessons to be learned from PUSH Buffalo's work for West Philadelphia.

First, extensive and sincere community engagement is critical. To get community buy-in, build trust, and develop programs that truly benefit the residents, we must listen to the community. Everything that PUSH does revolves around addressing its community's needs and concerns. This has helped PUSH successfully implement programs and initiatives that benefit the residents and engage residents to become members and volunteers that help carry their work forward.

Second, it is important to have a clear geographic area to work in. PUSH created the GDZ and has been focusing its work and investments in the GDZ. Focusing on one area has helped PUSH make a real difference in the GDZ. If PUSH started with a mission to work throughout the entire city, it is unlikely that it would have been as successful with their work more scattered. The recent conflict they had around their new large, affordable development in another part of the West Side is an example of how expanding its work in size and in a new place can lead to some difficulties. This does not mean that PUSH should not continue to expand its work. Rather, this illustrates the importance of place-based work and getting to deeply know a community in order to have successful programs.

Third, PUSH demonstrates the importance of partnerships. PUSH could not achieve everything it does alone. There are many other organizations doing work that complement PUSH's work. Together, they can leverage their resources and capacity to create a bigger impact.

Fourth, a very concrete lesson is that to try to prevent rapid gentrification, it is important to buy many vacant lots and properties early – before gentrification forces arise, when they are still affordable. This ensures that many affordable housing units can be built. PUSH was able to buy many lots early on. However, as the real estate market heats up in the GDZ, this is becoming less viable.

Lastly, all of PUSH's work is connected to creating economic opportunities for the community. For its affordable housing and green infrastructure projects, PUSH tries to hire locals and pays living wages. PUSH is intentional in trying to create a just green transition where its community can

and is prepared to participate in a green economy. Access to good-paying jobs is an essential part of ensuring that residents are able to stay in their communities as it gentrifies.

When thinking about proposals to address gentrification in West Philadelphia, it will be important to include all of these components to maximize the benefits created for the existing residents.

ⁱ Gocker, Interview.

ⁱⁱ "PUSH Buffalo."

ⁱⁱⁱ Hart and Magavern, "PUSH Buffalo's Green Development Zone: A Model for New Economy Community Development."

^{iv} PUSH Buffalo Community Energy Working Group, "West Side Community Energy Road Map."

^v Gocker, Interview; Hart and Magavern, "PUSH Buffalo's Green Development Zone: A Model for New Economy Community Development."

^{vi} Hart and Magavern, "PUSH Buffalo's Green Development Zone: A Model for New Economy Community Development."

^{vii} Gocker, Interview.

^{viii} PUSH Buffalo, "School 77."

^{ix} Gocker, Interview.

^x Epstein, "Activist Group PUSH Finds Tables Turned with West Side Development Efforts."

^{xi} Epstein, "PUSH Buffalo Gets Clearance for Most of West Side Homes Project."

^{xii} Gocker, Interview.

^{xiii} Hart and Magavern, "PUSH Buffalo's Green Development Zone: A Model for New Economy Community Development."

^{xiv} Hart and Magavern.

^{xv} PUSH Buffalo, "PUSH Buffalo Annual Report 2019."

^{xvi} Hart and Magavern, "PUSH Buffalo's Green Development Zone: A Model for New Economy Community Development."

^{xvii} Hart and Magavern.

^{xviii} Gibson, "PUSH Buffalo."

^{xix} Hart and Magavern, "PUSH Buffalo's Green Development Zone: A Model for New Economy Community Development."

^{xx} Gocker, Interview.

^{xxi} Parker, "PUSH Blue: Developing an Equitable Green Economy in Buffalo."

^{xxii} Hart and Magavern, "PUSH Buffalo's Green Development Zone: A Model for New Economy Community Development"; Ghirmatzion, "People United for Sustainable Housing: A Just Transition Story."

^{xxiii} Parker, "PUSH Blue: Developing an Equitable Green Economy in Buffalo."

^{xxiv} Parker.

^{xxv} US Water Alliance, "An Equitable Water Future: Opportunities for the Great Lakes Region."

^{xxvi} Gocker, Interview.

^{xxvii} US Water Alliance, "PUSH Buffalo."

^{xxviii} Gocker, Interview.

^{xxix} Gocker.

^{xxx} Hart and Magavern, "PUSH Buffalo's Green Development Zone: A Model for New Economy Community Development."

^{xxxi} Gocker, Interview.

^{xxxii} Parker, "PUSH Blue: Developing an Equitable Green Economy in Buffalo."

^{xxxiii} Hart and Magavern, "PUSH Buffalo's Green Development Zone: A Model for New Economy Community Development."

^{xxxiv} Gocker, Interview.

^{xxxv} Gocker.

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- ^{xxxvi} Stieglitz Snyder Architecture, “Adaptive Reuse Of BPS #77.”
- ^{xxxvii} Gocker, Interview.
- ^{xxxviii} Ghirmatzion, “People United for Sustainable Housing: A Just Transition Story.”
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