



Cooperative

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ROOTED RESILIENCY

Cultivating Resiliency
Through Community Power

2021



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INTRODUCTION

Rooted Resiliency: Responding to Intersecting Crises

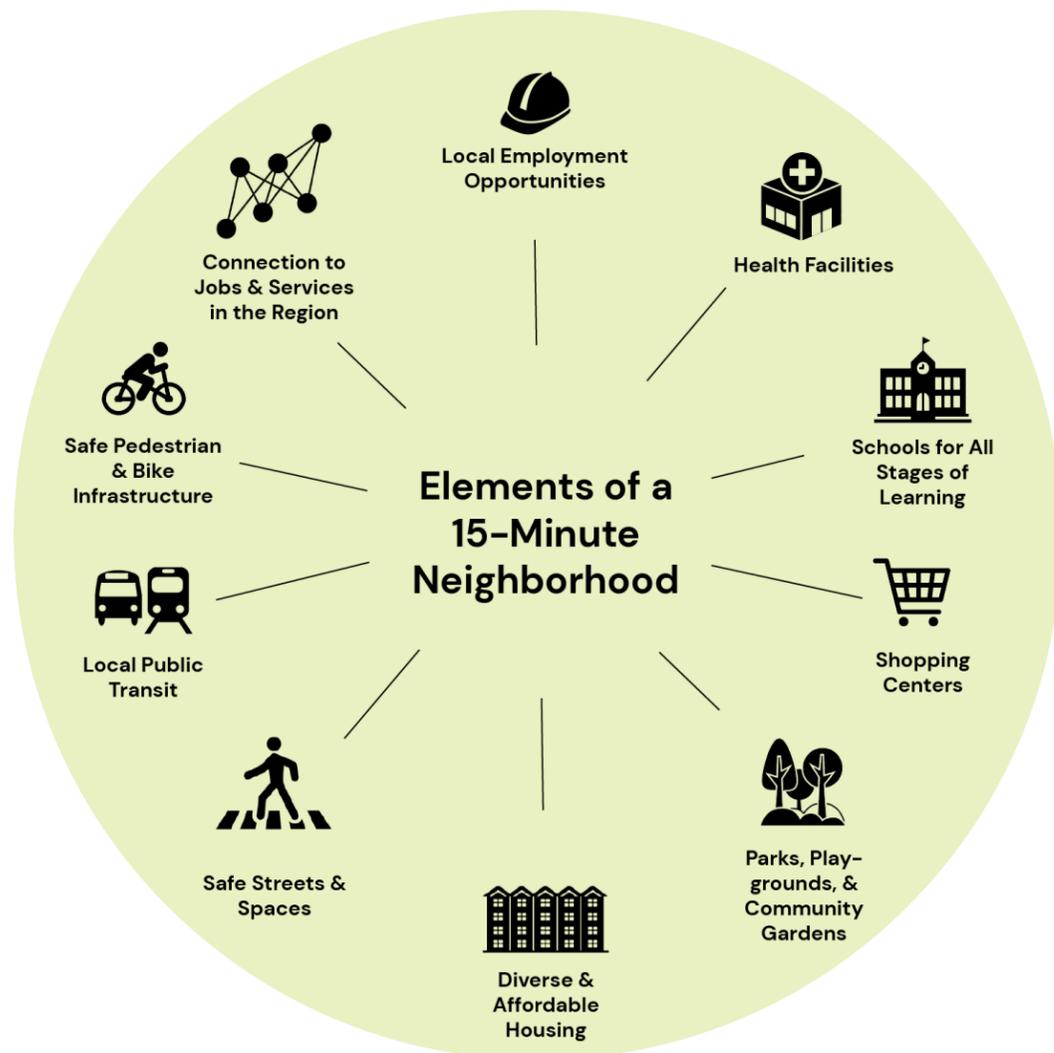
Every recent crisis— Covid-19, Hurricane Sandy, the Great Recession— has built upon one other and glaringly exposed the inequities in our society and the inadequacies of our systems to address them. The stark differences in the distribution of resources and services translate directly into the challenges neighborhoods and local communities face in addressing the green transition and climate change. Public officials and academics have touted the implementation of walkable “15-minute neighborhood” concepts as a possible solution to those challenges by providing equitable access to basic needs.

Conversations with on-the-ground organizers, however, revealed deep systemic issues. These include an overreliance on a centralized system of production and delivery of goods and services, as well as top-down funding priorities and policies that are out of sync with quotidian realities. Take for instance the staggering number of small businesses— 97,966 to be precise— that permanently shut down in 2020, despite a plethora of resources intended to directly support them.

Our project *Rooted Resiliency* explores the ways in which community power can be built by connecting hyper-local networks. It anticipates a post-capitalist vision of a shared, participatory economy that moves beyond scarcity (typical to our understanding of economics today) to a model that centers harmonious socio-spatial relationships and equitable exchange.

Reimagining the 15-Minute Neighborhood

In recent years, the 15-minute neighborhood model has gained popularity amongst policymakers and city planners, proposed as a prototype to shift the urban environment toward healthier and happier communities based on accessibility to goods and services. 15 minutes— or how long it takes to walk about 1.5 miles— is the typical extent to which people are willing to travel in order to satisfy daily needs like shopping for groceries, taking children to school, going to the pharmacy or engaging with public spaces. Following this premise, the 15-minute neighborhood model has been used as a planning tool to locate sites of services (schools, medical centers, supermarkets, groceries) and influence where resources are invested to boost economic development.



Advocates of the 15-minute neighborhood tout many benefits of the model, including:

- Reduced vehicular miles traveled, which in turn reduces emissions and improves public health
- Reduced food deserts by situating more accessible groceries
- Improved community well-being with more accessible public spaces
- Improved accessibility to jobs through increased public transportation

To create these 15-minute neighborhoods, common policies and practices have included shifting land use distribution, boosting local development, and making public realm improvements. Public agencies have made plans to increase compactness and diversity of land uses, incentivizing local commercial corridor development and investing in the public realm to improve accessibility and connectivity through open space, bike and public transit infrastructure.

Few, if any, case studies of successful 15-minute neighborhoods have highlighted a public participation process, resulting in misdirected distribution efforts where financial support, public investment, and land use changes are delivered to areas outside the reach of those who need it most.

Many gaps exist in the 15-minute neighborhood framework, including an overreliance on policy and government authorities, weak collaboration across sectors, and a lack of opportunity for community engagement.

Concerns and criticisms have arisen, precisely within these common “best” practices. In many cities, the 15-minute neighborhood model has exemplified the top-down, centralized approach to community planning. Even with traditional processes of public engagement, the implementation of this model has continued to be influenced by vested local interests not representative of the broader community across class lines. Few, if any, case studies of successful 15-minute neighborhoods have highlighted a public participation process, resulting in misdirected distribution efforts where financial support, public investment, and land use changes are delivered to areas outside the reach of those who need it most. Furthermore, the 15-minute-neighborhood has failed to empower local communities to be their own catalysts for economic progress, allowing no room for an alternative approach.

Thought Partners:
Guests from 15
Minute Neighborhood
Workshop

Jose Richard
Aviles

Urban Planner, Social
Worker, and Artist

Shaquana
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Organizer & District
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Michael Partis

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Research & Discovery: Lessons from Grassroots Leaders

As a reimagining of what a participatory, supportive 15-minute neighborhood model could look like, we worked with BK ROT to examine the idea of cultivating resiliency through local community power.

We began our engagement process by bringing together community residents and organizers, stakeholders working in economic development, a community district leader, and a food sovereignty activist. Our discussions explored the capacity for a revision of the 15-minute framework to tackle specific socioeconomic disparities in a New York City context. In exploring this model, our engagement was organized into three focus areas:

- Building community power: organizing to meet community needs
- Economic resiliency: unlocking agency and creating local ownership
- Restoring place: community healing post-covid & the path to human-centered recovery

Central to our conversation was the understanding that the 15-minute neighborhood model is fundamentally unable to accommodate the most vulnerable communities. The hierarchical distribution of resources through centralized agencies has proven inflexible and inadequate in addressing the rapid rate of crisis today, thereby reinforcing and increasing the mass inequity seen across the city. As an alternative, we explored the need to center local communities and support existing, local nodes of exchange. Our reflections and considerations zeroed in on the processes that happen at the scale of a single block, and we strategized around the ways in which local communities could gain access to funding, land, and ultimately, total autonomy— by building informal relationships of management and distribution across local groups operating in proximity to one another: networks.

We're going to see crisis after crisis after crisis. We're going to see natural disasters, power grids going out, acts of warfare from other powers — I feel hopeful because our culture is changing, people are realizing that we can't keep doing things the same way. We absolutely need people power and a shift in how we have been operating.

– Sarah Thankum Matthews

Community organizers should be the architects of the recovery.

– Michael Partis

There is a city that is localized behind chamber doors and civic centers — but there is also a city that is localized at the block, at the cookout... that understands the movement of pedestrians every morning and the latter is the city that I'm invested in.

– Jose Richard Aviles

Having structures of paying big people and thinking it will trickle down. We have to target our communities that are most vulnerable and that means being comfortable with things not being funded through agencies— there has to be leadership within people and groups and leaning on people and groups to facilitate that change and not coming saying this how we're going to change.

– Shaquana Boykin

Growing Roots: Partnership with BK ROT

At the beginning of the pandemic, when a number of NYC's large centralized infrastructure systems like the Department of Sanitation (DSNY) struggled to operate at full capacity and halted their curbside food waste collection program, BK ROT stepped up to fill the gap. Over the last few months, our Urban Design Forum team has partnered with the local local Bushwick organization to explore how locally owned and operated infrastructure networks can sustain community resiliency.

BK ROT is New York City's first community-supported, bike-powered, fossil fuel free food waste hauling and composting service. The organization is largely staffed by young people of color who haul residential and commercial organic waste and transform it into high quality compost. BK ROT's operations have provided accessible jobs and sustained professional development for emerging environmental leaders.



BK ROT staff member hauling organic waste via bike. Photo credit: BK ROT.



Drop-off engagement at Know Waste Lands.

BK ROT's work embodies many of the principles behind a just 15-minute neighborhood—localizing waste processing to minimize local environmental harms; creating good, local green jobs for youth in the community; stewarding a community green space to residents of an environmental justice community.

Through their operations, they are advancing values of environmental justice and creating space for youth leadership in communities of color, all while creating a localized green economy. Not only did BK ROT continue to provide uninterrupted local services to existing users, but it also accommodated a much wider community of users whose services were discontinued by centralized waste management system.

Upon witnessing local mutual aid groups struggle to effectively manage food waste emerging from food distribution initiatives, BK ROT also offered free composting services to several food distribution groups during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York City.

Cultivating Community: Listening, Learning and Engaging

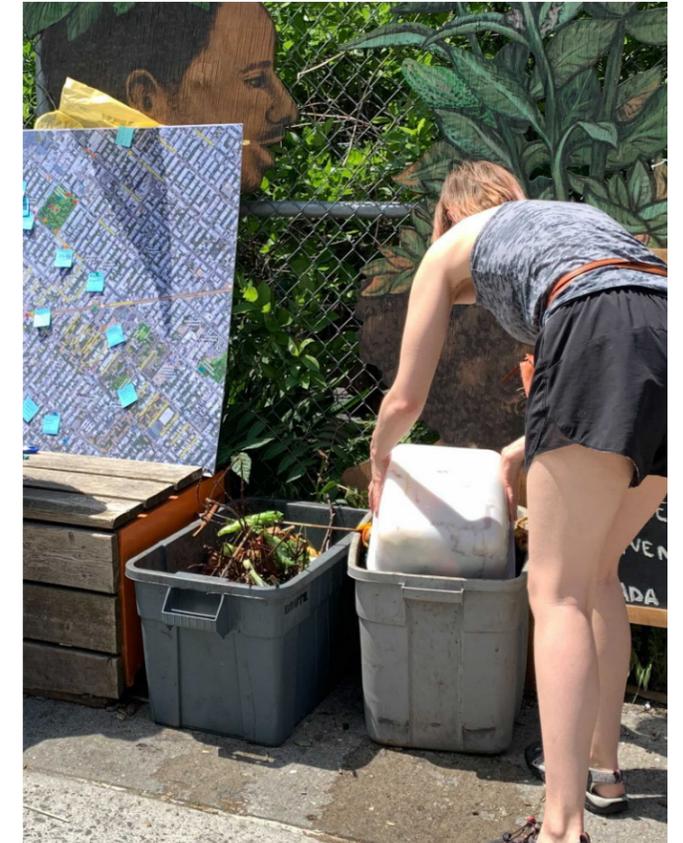
We engaged directly with workers, users, neighbors, board members, and the executive staff of BK ROT through a series of design and mapping workshops as well as thorough one-on-one conversations.

At the core of these events was the idea that strengthening local community and infrastructure networks could greatly impact the success of bottom-up initiatives and allow them staying power in the long run.

With the organization's deep roots in its surrounding cultural context as well as the acknowledgement of its inhabitation of appropriated land, it was integral to our engagement process to be keenly aware of how community needs could be better served.

We observed that organizations privileging local heritage typically offer platforms for disparate communities to participate together, rather than provide narrow services for profit. With this in mind, we co-created programmatic and site design propositions specific to BK ROT that aimed to strengthen the relationships between users and collaborators. We also explored models of co-operative ownership and governance to empower their youth leaders and staff to drive impact for the organization.

We believe our approach can help organizations like BK ROT become more resilient and act as roots for their communities to thrive by.



Organic waste drop-off at BK ROT.



Organic waste processing. Photo credit: BK ROT.

Organic Recycling Survey

In an exercise to understand the accessibility of current networks that support BK ROT goals and activities, information was gathered from a survey of over 50 people dropping off food scraps to BK ROT's composting operations. We asked the residents where they were coming from, how frequently they visited BK ROT, how they engage with the site, what challenges they had with the organization, and what they believed could be improved.

Contributors noted general interest in using the site for mutual aid efforts and food distribution, including the possibility of an integrated community kitchen, farmer's market, or community fridge for people in need. They expressed an interest in the organization scaling up to advance marketing and outreach, expand compost delivery services, extend volunteering and employment, and utilize the site for community activities and events.



A key finding from our engagement with BK ROT users dropping off food scraps was that majority of them were young, white people – a demographic seemingly disparate from the long-time Black and Latino residents.

Neighborhood Context: Bushwick, Brooklyn

Following World War II and prior settlement by waves of European immigrants, African American and Puerto Rican families began moving into Bushwick in the 1940's. Rapid advances in transportation and poor industrial management resulted in the common trajectory of white flight at the time, causing a 90% white neighborhood to decline to 40% in just a decade. By the mid 1970's, Bushwick had become a neighborhood slated for urban renewal (though never actually cleared). Its residents were greatly affected by the blackout of 1977 and throughout the 1980's, the neighborhood experienced mass poverty and neglect.

Public and private initiatives aimed to reduce drug activity and promote economic development were spearheaded in the early to mid 2000's. While these programs

claimed to improve the quality of life and living conditions for Bushwick residents, in reality, they paved the way for white professionals seeking cheaper rents to move into the formerly dilapidated neighborhood's improved housing developments. The slums of Bushwick were quickly rebranded as creative breeding grounds— and remain as such as gentrification continues to run its course.

While the last few decades have rapidly transformed the neighborhood landscape, Salsa music, Spanish cuisine, and lively bodegas remain at the core of Bushwick's culture. Bushwick holds a community proud of its largely Puerto Rican and Dominican heritage, that supports its elderly as they age and hopes to build a brighter future for their youth. As discovered through engaging with BK ROT users, workers, board members, and surrounding residents, there is a desire to merge the old guard with the new guard in a more harmonious way.

Research Questions

1. What does it take to support a local organization to grow deep roots in a community?
2. What are key considerations in scaling up grassroots initiatives, projects and engagement?
3. What successful models of community engagement and design can we employ to create a more democratic design and development process?
4. What are considerations in creating self-sufficient, community-empowered and owned organizations or services like BK ROT?
5. How do we ensure that local communities have agency to co-create and revisit outcomes?

Community Profile

130,000 total residents

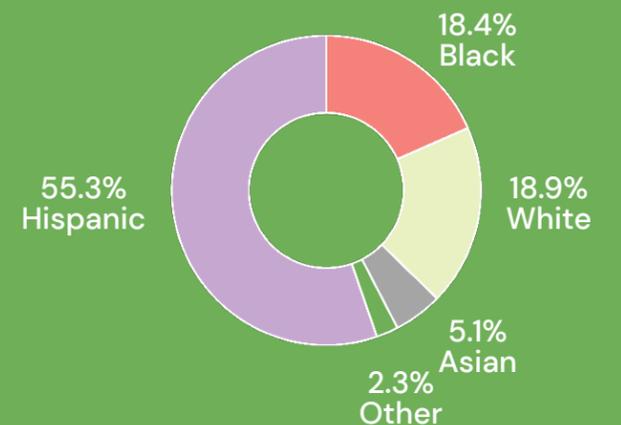
*2014-2018 estimate

30.8% of residents were born outside of the US

30.1% of residents self-identify as having limited English proficiency

Source: NYC Community District Profile, NYC Community Health Profile

	Poverty	Unemployed	Rent Burden
Bushwick	24.8%	16%	55%
Brooklyn	20.9%	11%	52%
NYC	19.8%	11%	51%





PART I: NETWORKS MAPPING

Defining Networks for Infrastructure and Community Building

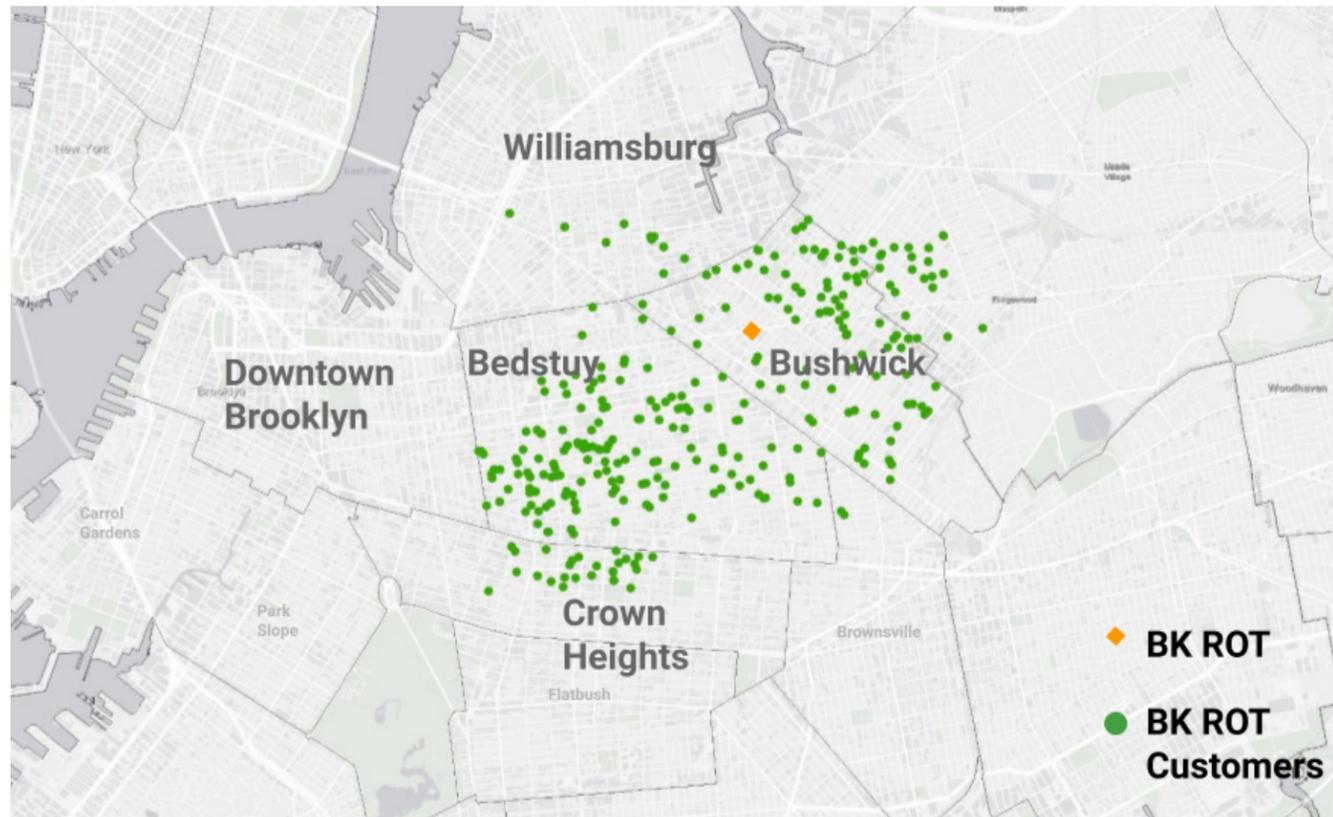
A practical way in which resiliency can be rooted in communities is by supporting the exchange of products and services at the hyper-local level. Ultimately, this provides communities with the autonomy to adapt to their needs and as a result, provide resiliency against crisis. Critical infrastructure through which this approach can materialize is by waste management—in particular, composting.

Composting can take place at many scales: in the backyard, at the block, schoolyard, neighborhood, community, and regional level. Locally based composting yields many benefits, including the generating of more local jobs, less garbage truck traffic, greener spaces, better food security, fewer food deserts, soil remediation and improved soil quality, and more composting know-how embedded into the local workforce. In community composting models, community members manage and operate the resources, production, distribution, and use of space. Communities are more resilient and better positioned to accrue economic and environmental benefits by embracing a decentralized organic recovery infrastructure.

Engagement with BK ROT customers on “drop-off” day at Know Waste Lands.



Networks Composting

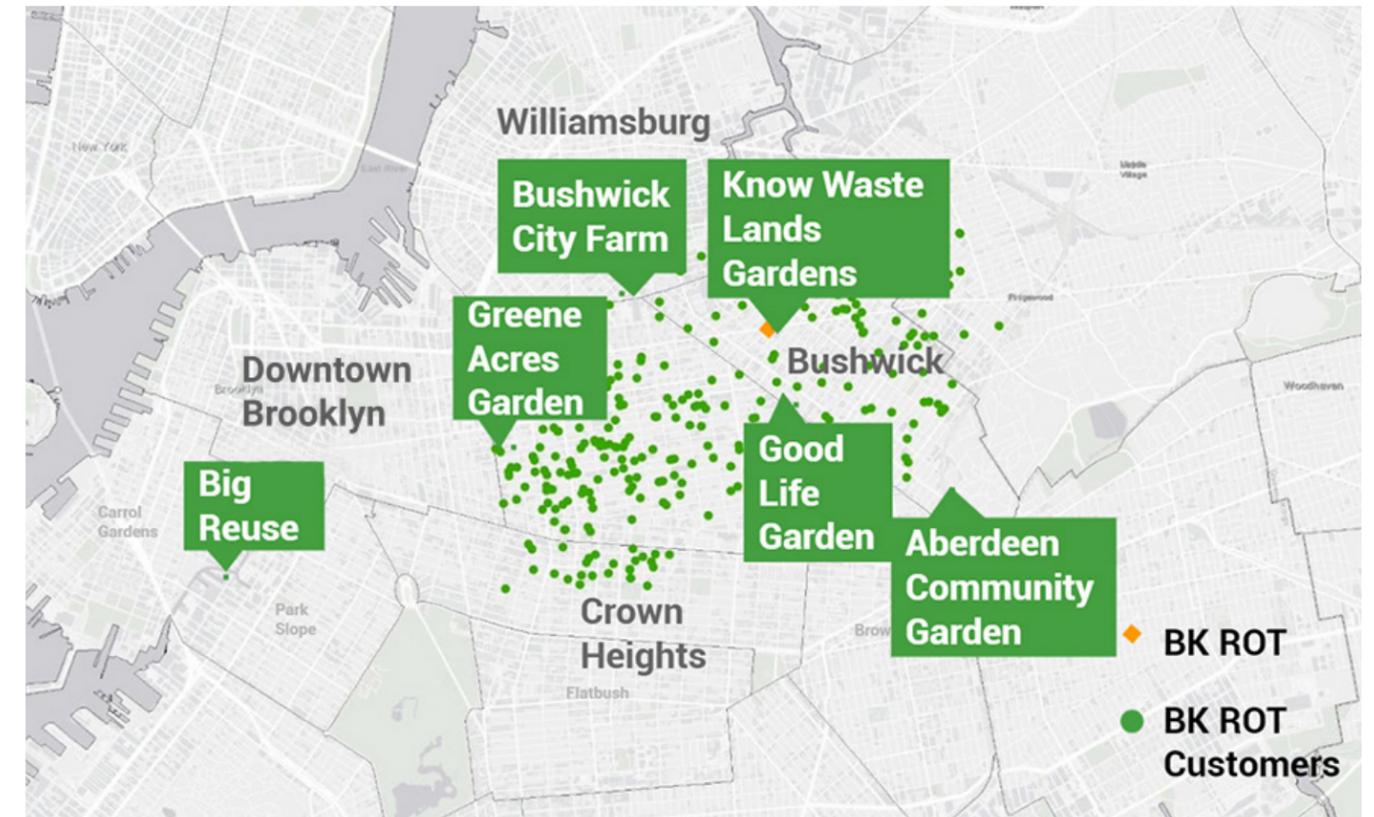


Neighborhoods and approximate locations of BK ROT's collection operations and routes.

When the onset of COVID-19 jeopardized city funding for composting sites, ecosystems that previously surrounded community composting programs quickly faltered. Jobs were lost, organic waste tripled, community space reduced, and NYC's commitment to zero waste backtracked. Decentralized, community-based composting organizations like BK ROT became a more feasible stand-in for

the precarious overreliance on centralized management. Our project *Rooted Resiliency* envisions decentralized "mini-infrastructure loops" situated locally in neighborhoods across the city in the form of community composting. In this interconnected network of community composting programs, dollars circulate within a small area to support the production of local food and the advancement of food security.

Networks Community Gardens



Network of other community gardens and composting organizations that BK ROT partners with.

Workers have access to local jobs and acquire composting skills. Organic waste remains in the neighborhoods from which they result— an advantage in maintaining quality and reducing polluting truck traffic. In this alternative system, composting sites around NYC are operated by local groups throughout the year without much reliance on government funding and land use. "Mini-infrastructure loops," would

minimize risk at times of emergency— building resiliency from the ground-up and providing organizations with the operation and fiscal autonomy needed at a local level. Our project prompts the agency of reconsidering the roles of government and other funding institutions in facilitating how these "loops" can act as self-sufficient building blocks integrated into a larger system.

PART II: ALTERNATIVE ORGANIZATION MODELS

Aligning Process with Values

BK ROT has operated as a non-profit entity since its inception in 2013 and has operated with a governance model involving a Board of Directors, an Executive Director, various operational and admin staff, and youth compost collection and processing workers.

Our team partnered with BK ROT to help think through potential ways to restructure the organization to better align with its mission and values. We provided a high level review of information about democratic workplace models, decentralized leadership, and worker cooperatives, along with key questions and considerations for BK ROT's board and staff, to inform discussions about potential alternative governance models for a more sustainable organization.

There are challenges with BK ROT's current governance model. As the impact of BK ROT's work has grown, so has the

workload of the Executive Director. The Executive Director holds disproportionate responsibility and workload over all aspects of BK ROT's operations. This is typical of a non-profit, in which the ED sits at the top of a hierarchy, and directs most, if not all, decision-making for the organization.

This hierarchy, illustrated in the figure below, often necessitates long hours of undercompensated work and can ultimately lead to burnout. Having one person tasked with holding so many moving pieces can lead to bottlenecks and instability when there is turnover.

As the leadership and skills of youth workers are cultivated through this work, the Executive Director and several board members have begun discussing the potential transition of BK ROT from a 501c(3) non-profit into a worker-owned cooperative, and/or to explore alternative non-profit governance models that are more lateral and collaborative.

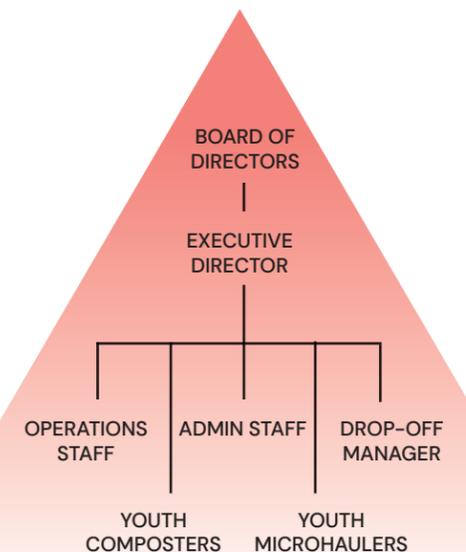


Figure: Simplified representation of BK ROT organizational structure

Worker Cooperatives

Worker cooperatives are a form of employee ownership, in which the business is both owned and governed by their workers, profits are shared based on hours worked, and strategic decision-making is democratic, meaning each worker gets one vote.

Worker cooperatives differ from even the most ethical conventional companies, because the purpose is to maximize benefits to the worker-owners, rather than to shareholders or a CEO. As the School of Democratic Management puts it, for worker coops, "growth and profit are not necessarily the primary drivers of business decisions. Instead, job security, quality of life or community benefit are at the forefront of decision-making, in balance with growth and profit."

Co-ops can be governed in 2 ways:

1. **Hierarchical:** Many mid- to large-size coops use a hierarchical management structure alongside democratic, participatory culture. This includes using representative democracy wherein worker-owners elect the Board of Directors, as well as voting on certain decisions such as selling the business, electing the majority of board seats, and amending the bylaws. Other key strategic and financial decisions are made by the board, and day-to-day business management and operational decisions are made by one or more managers.
2. **Direct democracy:** Some worker coops follow a more lateral management structure using direct democracy, in which all high-level business decisions are made by a vote of all worker-owners. This approach tends to be most successful with smaller worker coops, but there are some larger coops that have sustained this approach.

Worker Self-Directed Non-Profits

The SELC defines a Worker Self-Directed Nonprofit as, "an organization in which all workers have the power to influence the realms and programs in which they work, the conditions of their workplace, their own career paths, and the direction of the organization as a whole." These non-profits replace the traditional hierarchical model where a single person makes most of the key decisions and holds the power with a model that activates the leadership skills of all the stakeholders within the nonprofit.

This model relies on mutual empowerment and peer accountability to ensuring work is accomplished. Rather than dividing up tasks and work by job title, participants are encouraged to take on a variety of roles and responsibilities. Decision making at a worker self-directed non-profit is shared across roles, with each person being responsible for their own work with mutual support from others who can offer input and guidance. "Roles within the organization are distributed in such a way that everyone is behind a wheel, driving important decision making."

With responsibility shared more evenly, compensation can also be more equitable across workers, as opposed to having the ED make disproportionately more than staff.. Workers having more responsibility and decision-making power may lead to their being more personally invested in the work. In addition to typical job responsibilities for their role(s), the staff can help shape what their daily hours are like, and compensation to enable a better work life balance.

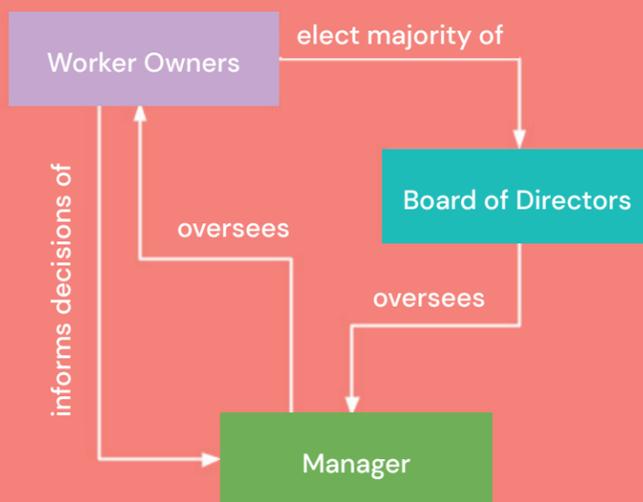
Key Takeaways

Regardless of which governance model is used, the ability for a co-op to be successful is contingent on clear structures and processes for decision-making. As the School for Democratic Management writes: "Supervision does not go away in a democratic workplace...It should be human-centered. It should help resolve conflict in an atmosphere where transparency, higher accountability and shared decision making may produce conflict."

Democratic workplaces require financial/business literacy for workers to be able to effectively weigh in on key operations decisions, as well as regularly financial reporting to the member-workers in a co-op model.

Workplace democracy may not be a solution to all organizational problems and carries a number of risks to the success of a business. These risks include slower decision making, a knowledge deficit and more difficult succession planning. Implementation can be a major challenge because workplace democracy is dramatically different from most forms of management - which may exacerbate existing problems.

Cooperative Governance Model



The workers have the power to make significant decisions about the nature of the business as well as the opportunity to elect a representative board.

The board can make extensive decisions that commit the cooperative to a long period of time or large amounts of money, as well as oversee management.

The manager oversees operational decisions, ideally by regularly engaging workers to inform management decisions

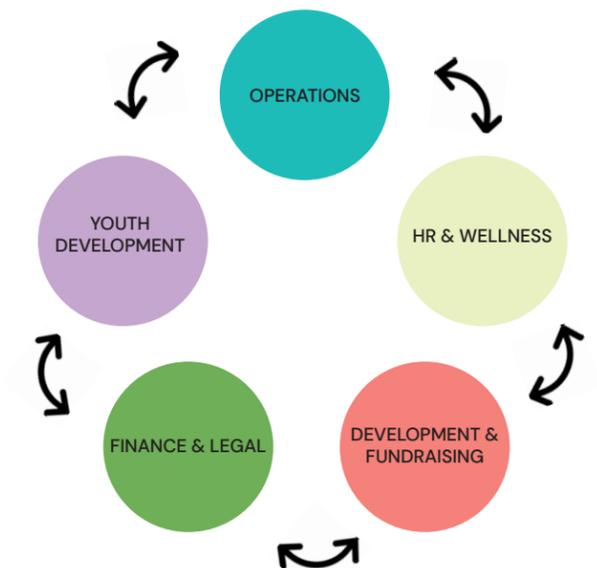


Figure: BK ROT Major Areas of Work

PROCESS TIMELINE: RESTRUCTURING BK ROT

Summer 2021:

Exploration & Discovery

- Hold discussions with current staff and board about restructuring BK ROT to identify key questions
- Dig into key questions about BK ROT's current financial and business model to see what is realistic
- Invite co-op and democratic organization experts to a roundtable discussion to socialize the concept with staff and board
- Identify funding and training resources for co-op conversion, lateral leadership models, professional development, etc.

Fall 2021:

Leadership transition & Scenario Planning

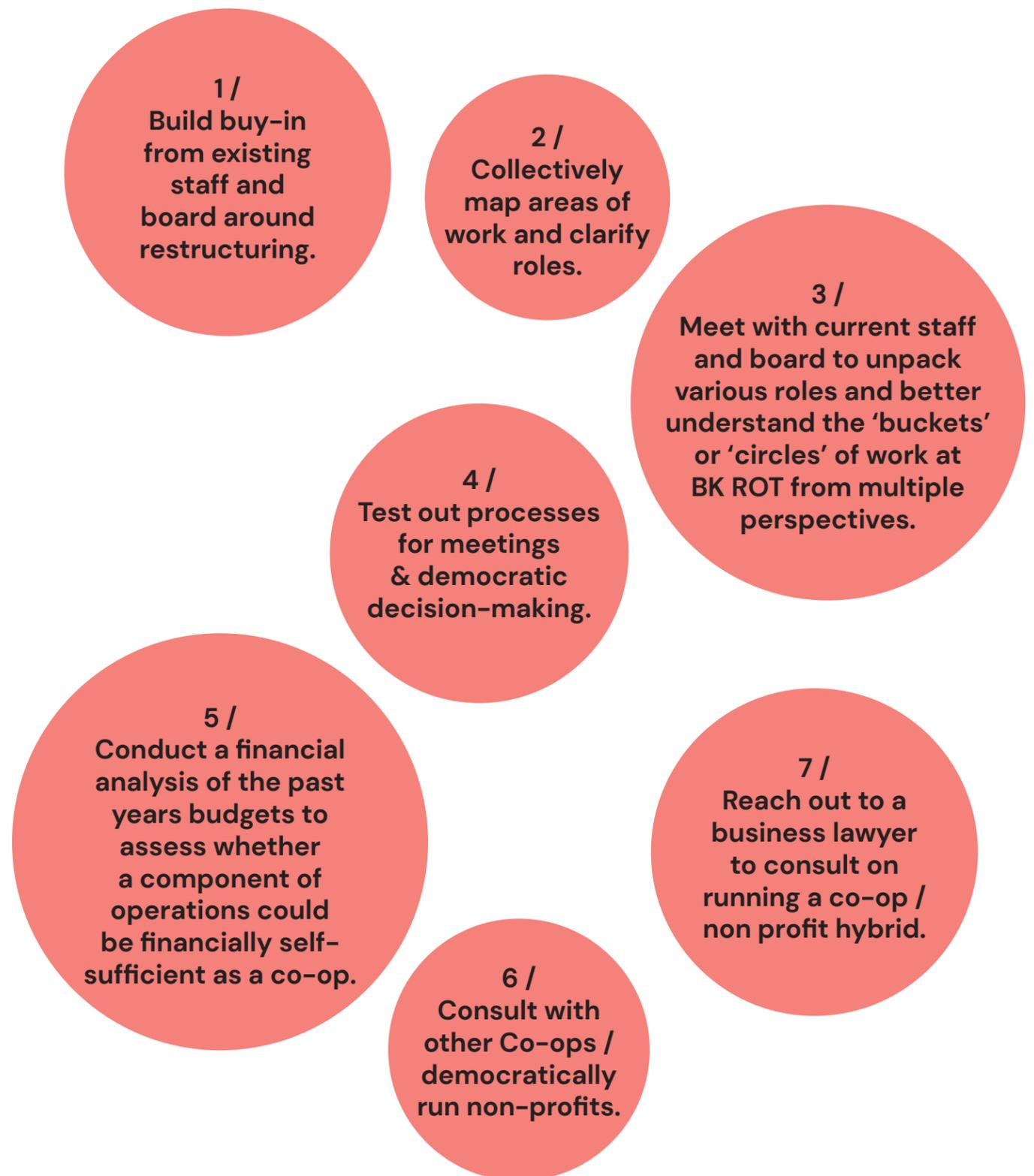
- Conversation with full staff and board to discuss and develop new structural model
- Roles and responsibilities assessed and clarified (for both staff and board)
- Trainings and resources shared for professional development and leadership training for staff
- Develop multiple scenarios for board and staff consideration
- Assess different options in terms of structure, finance, hiring, salaries

Winter 2021-2022:

New Structure Onboarded

- Current staff and/or new hires elevated to a more lateral leadership structure
- Transition director contracted [TBD]
- Continued staff development and training

RECOMMENDATIONS



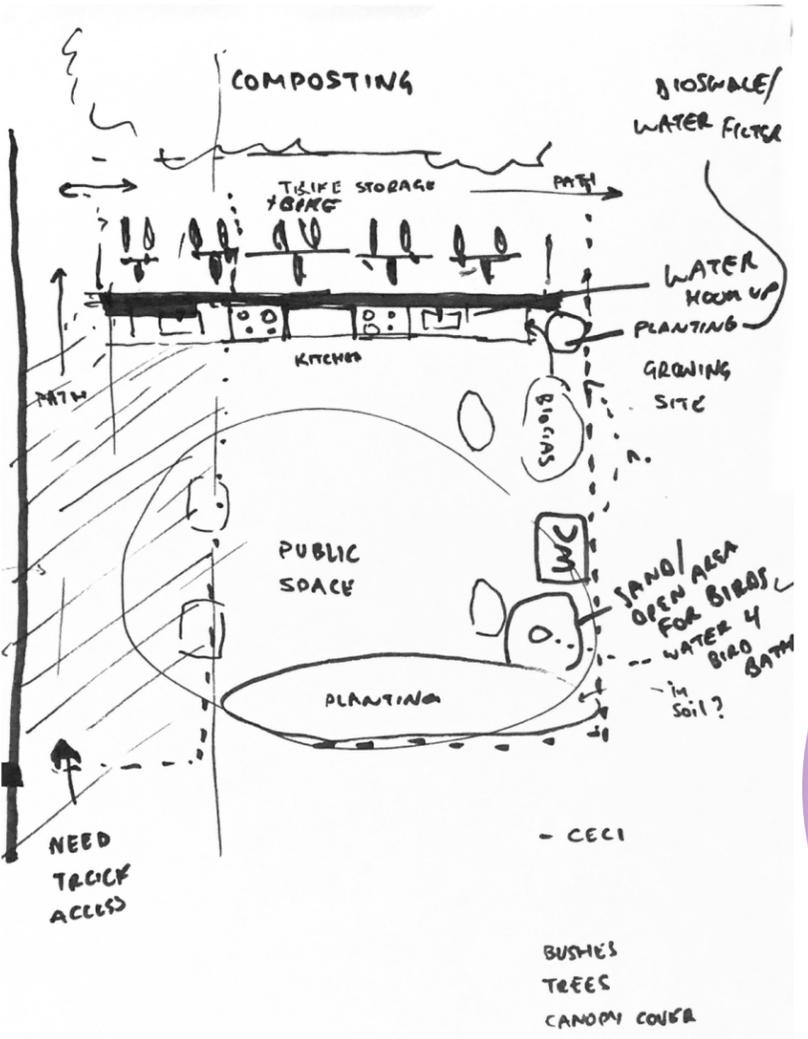


PART III: SITE DESIGN PROPOSITIONS

Co-Designing for Composting Operations and Community at New BK ROT Site

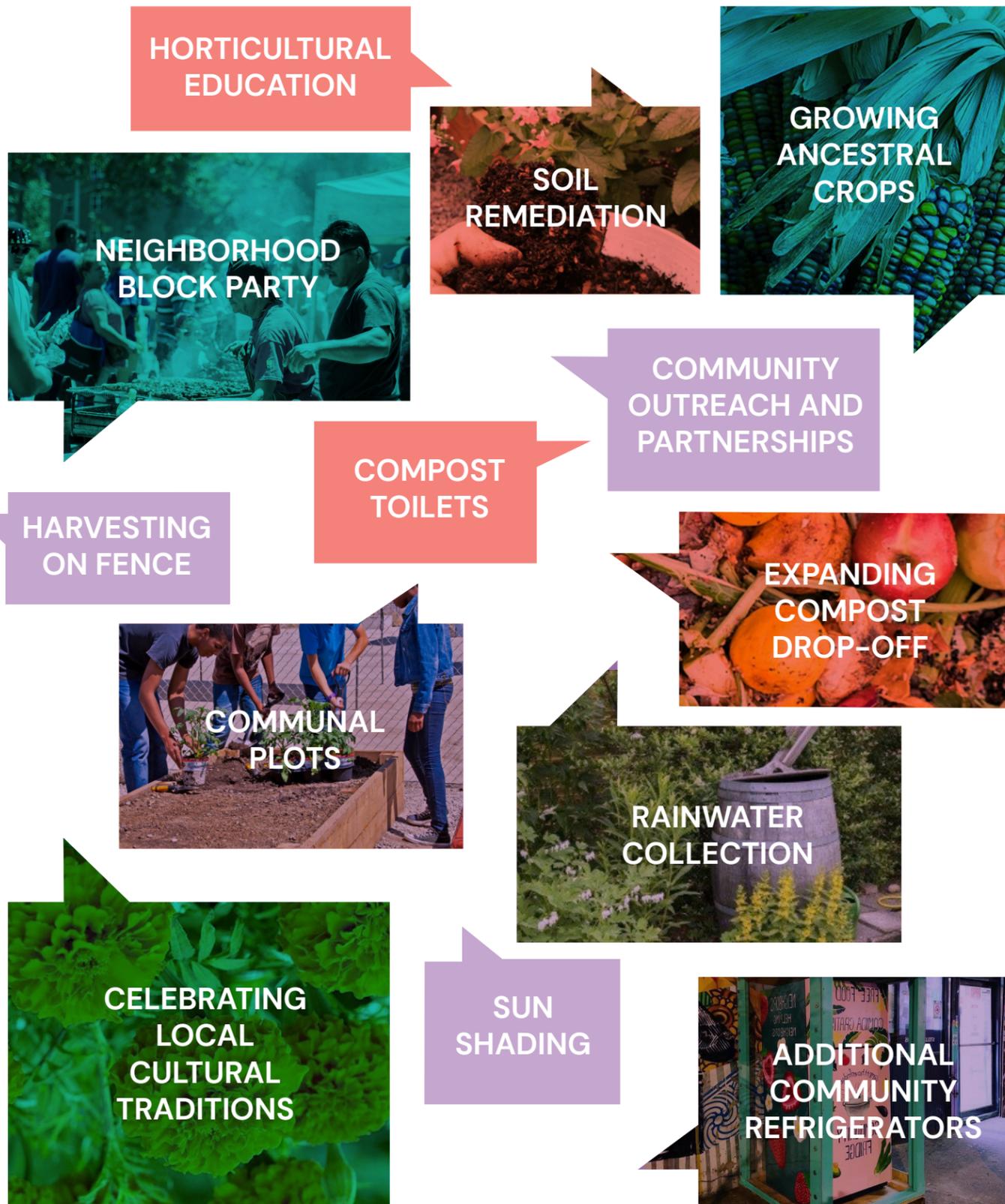
BK ROT has recently embarked on the remediation of a new undeveloped urban plot in Bushwick, Brooklyn to expand composting capacity and to create more publicly accessible green space in Brooklyn. This site— a vacant, fenced-in dirt 1,900 square foot lot, located proximate to Know Waste Lands at 1291 Dekalb Avenue, is currently within New York Police Dept.

(NYPD) jurisdiction. The NYPD has granted permission to BK ROT to lease the site for soil remediation and compost processing at no cost for three years. Along with performing these environmental services, BK ROT intends to use the lot as a learning and teaching site, where the organization will continue to empower and train its next generation of environmental leaders.



How can BK ROT center the livelihood of long-time residents to further the exchange of resources and embed composting knowledge within the community?

Desired Community Programs



Planning and Design Workshop

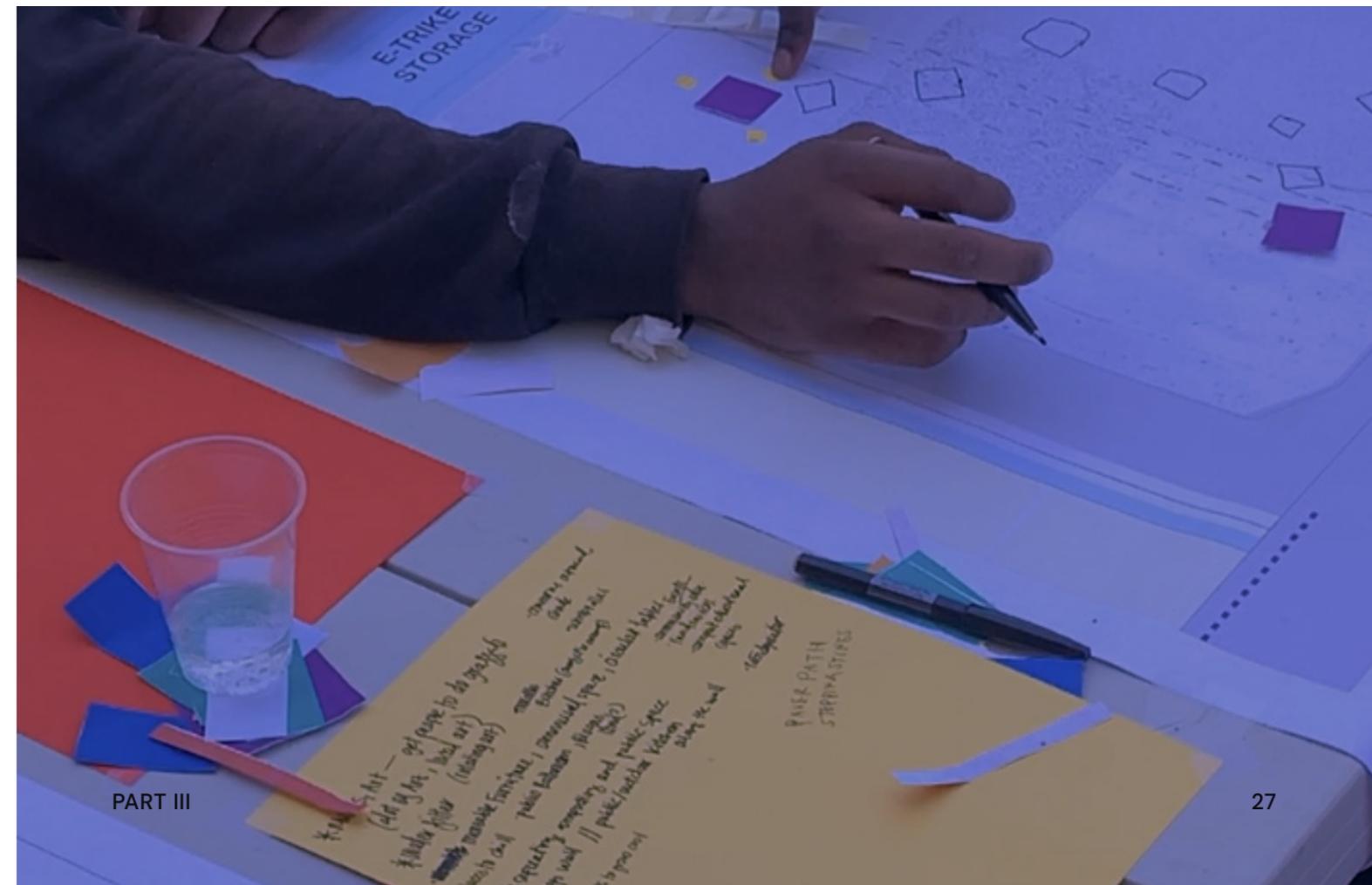
Along with the Youth Leaders and the executive staff of BK ROT and a native Bushwick resident, we convened in a collaborative design process with the intention to yield an accessible, functional space for composting operations and public use.

We proposed a base design of the existing site to maximize its current utility. This layout – consisting of an outdoor kitchen, a shade structure, and an area for compost piles – enables for flexible programming of scenarios that serve the various, interconnected communities BK ROT serves.

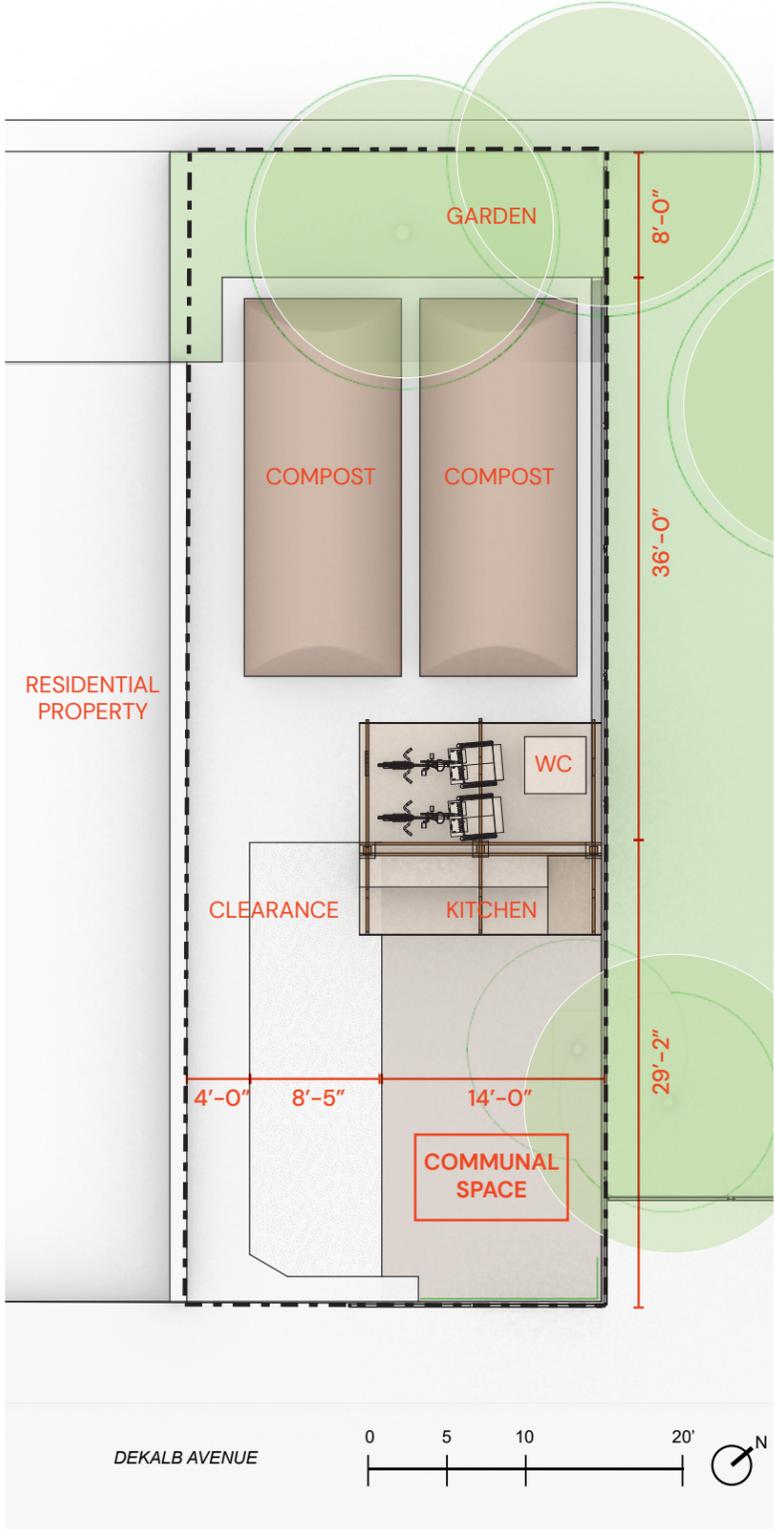
Spotlight: Jalissa (Bushwick Native)

“The new site is welcoming for people in the know, but there is a disconnect between the old and new guard and information needs to be generated differently.

Hearing about the [mostly young and white] demographic of the BK ROT community is concerning. How can education be expanded, and how can older people be involved? How can we include more people of color?”



Site Plan Layout



Existing Features

- Existing Concrete Path
- Raised Concrete Bench
- Large Compost Piles
- Planting at Back of Site
- Gravel Filled Section
- Planter Beds
- Perimeter Fencing

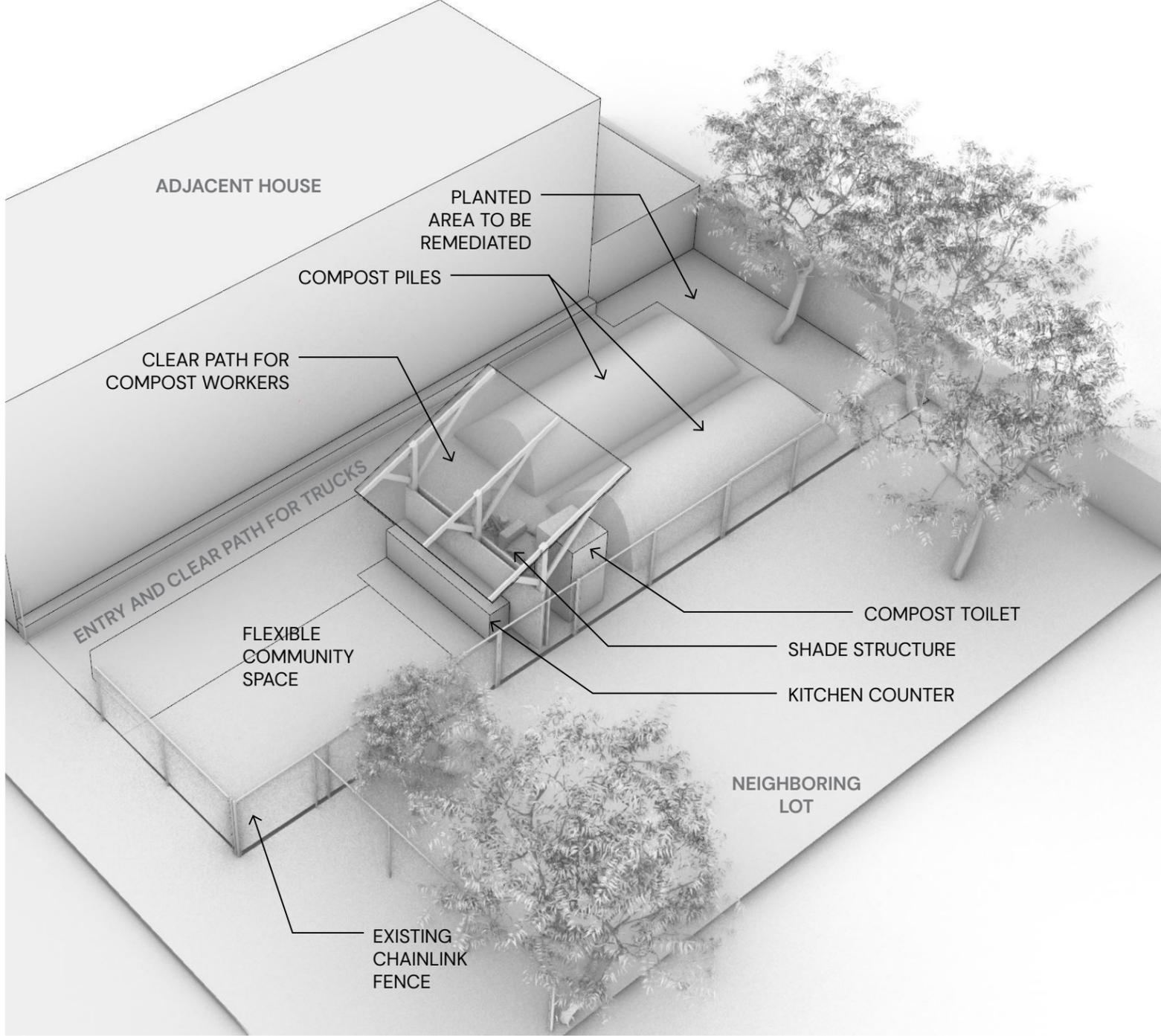
Proposed Features

- Shade Structure
- E-Trike Storage
- Clear Path for Trucks
- Compost Toilet
- Kitchen Stovetop
- Undercounter Fridge
- Rainwater Barrel
- Chair Storage
- Herbacous Plants
- Alternative Shading
- Clearance for Truck

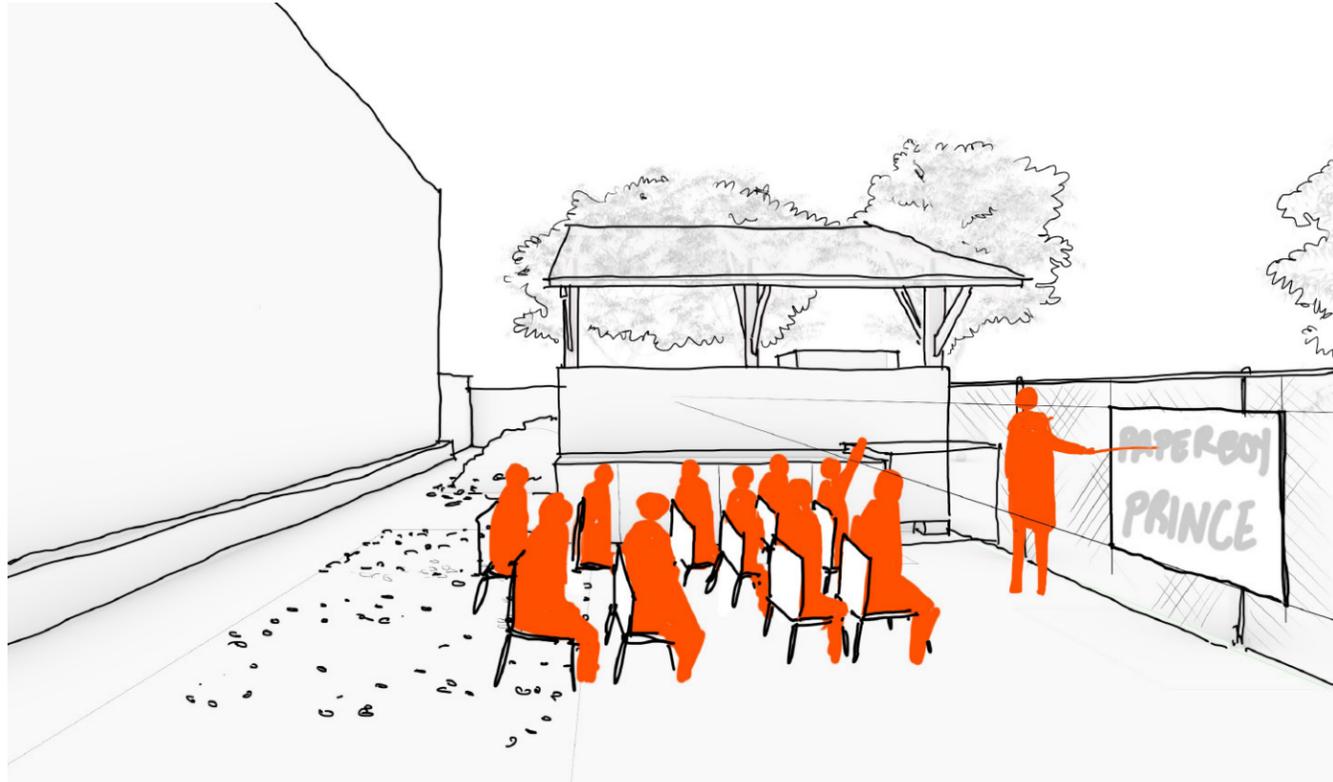
Additional Features

- Biogas Stove
- Movable Panels

Site Plan Overview



Assembly



BK ROT Community

The new site can be used as a space for BK ROT activities ranging from internal meetings, gatherings, and general events for volunteer recruitment and expanding the network of compost contributors.

Neighboring businesses, organizations, campaigns, etc. of shared values can use the assembly space to host workshops and events.

Event Space

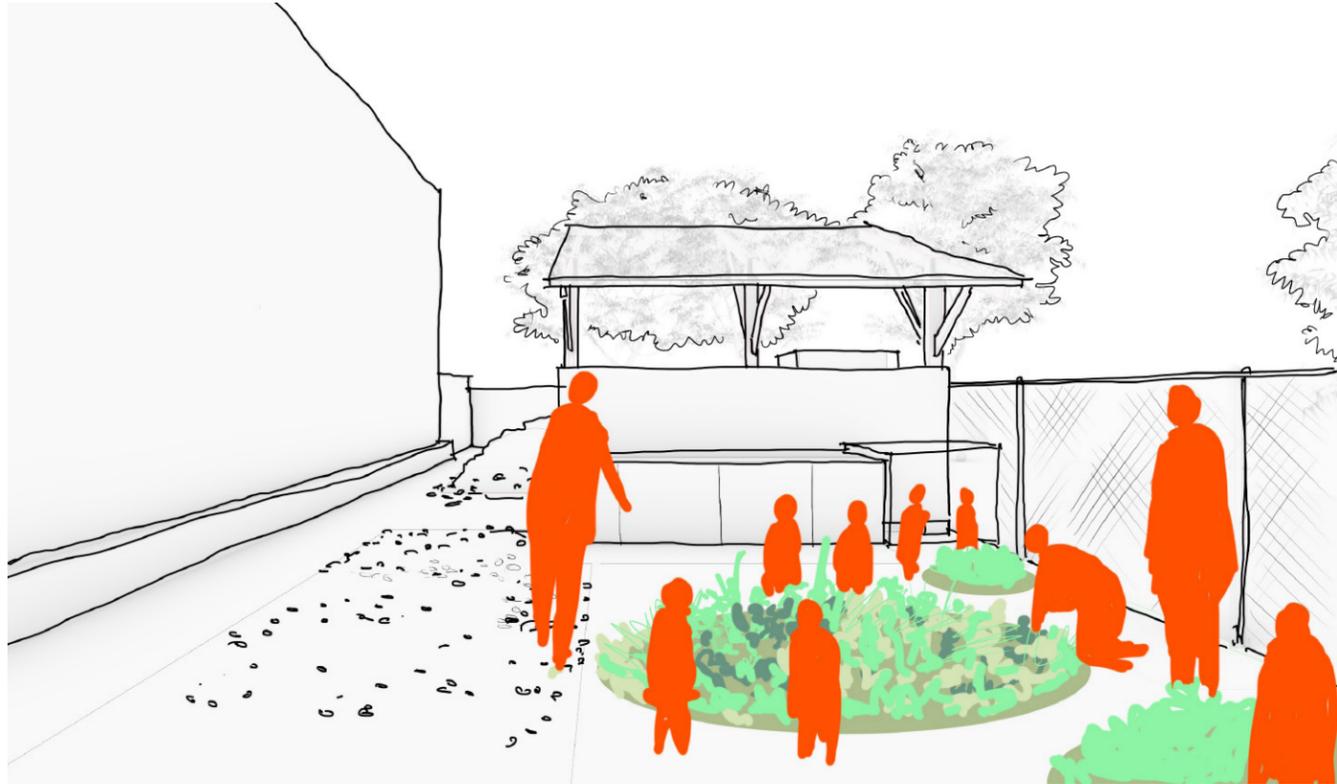


Compost Drop-Off Community

With the rapid rate of gentrification in Bushwick and Bedstuy, community gardens like BK ROT are particularly attractive to young millenials and run the risk of excluding long-time Bushwick residents.

BK ROT can benefit from this exchange by hosting recreational events that require young attendees to make mandatory donations to the organization.

Learning



Adolescent Community

With a lack of holistic pedagogy around environmental sustainability in early childhood institutions at large, many children do not have the opportunity to develop environmental consciousness at an early age.

BK ROT's new site can provide children with hands-on experiences with gardening, composting, and other horticultural practices through school tours and quarterly after-school sessions.

Exchange



Elderly Community

While adults of this generation have a better understanding of the importance for sustainable practices, there is often a disconnect between the old and new guard, particularly in Bushwick where the population is quickly changing.

BK ROT should target outreach to the neighboring rehabilitation center and nursing home, picking up food scraps from the centers directly in exchange for compost and requested crops.

Cultural Context

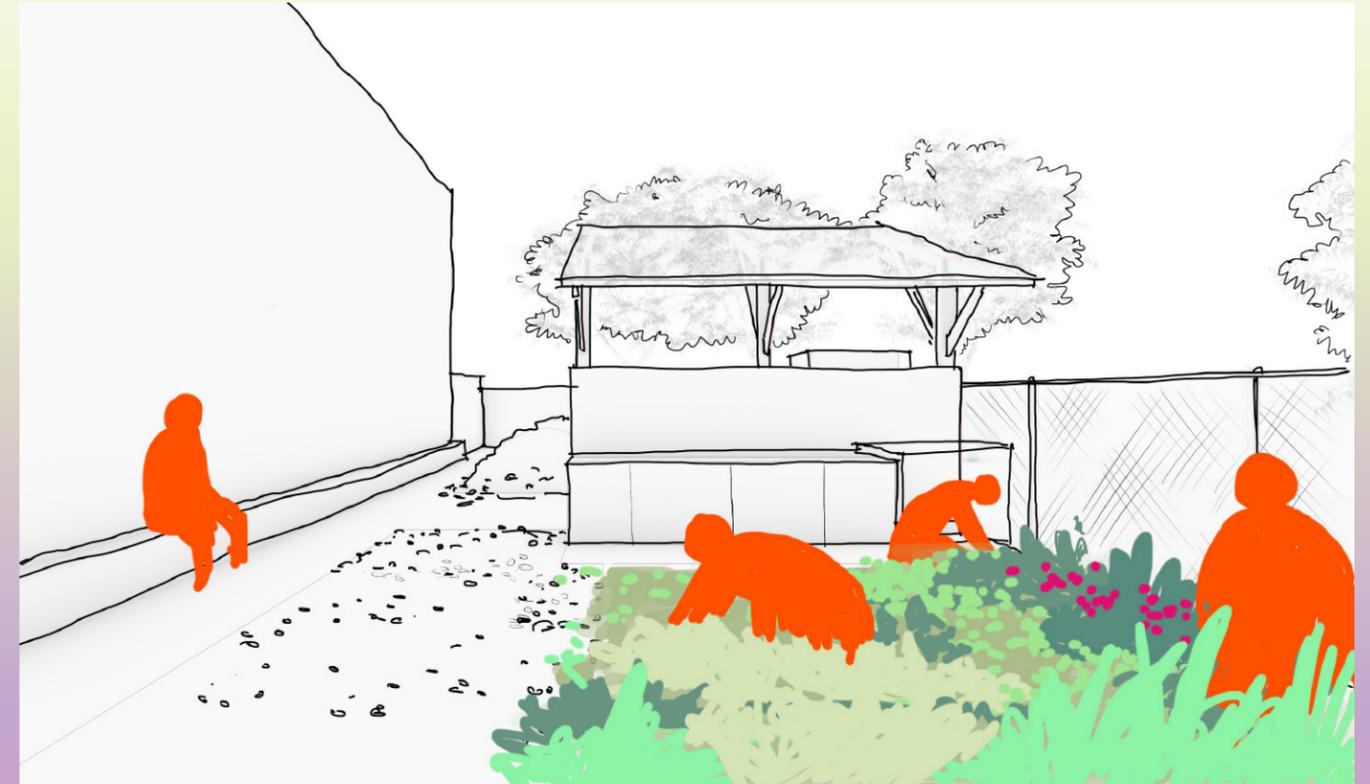


Cultural Community

BK ROT self-markets as a local site that understands composting as an ancestral practice spanning for generations through non-western cultural traditions. The organization can benefit from providing site access to the local Latino community as well as education for others.

Local restaurants and neighborhood chefs can be invited to host cooking classes and teach cultural traditions at the new site.

Local Permaculture

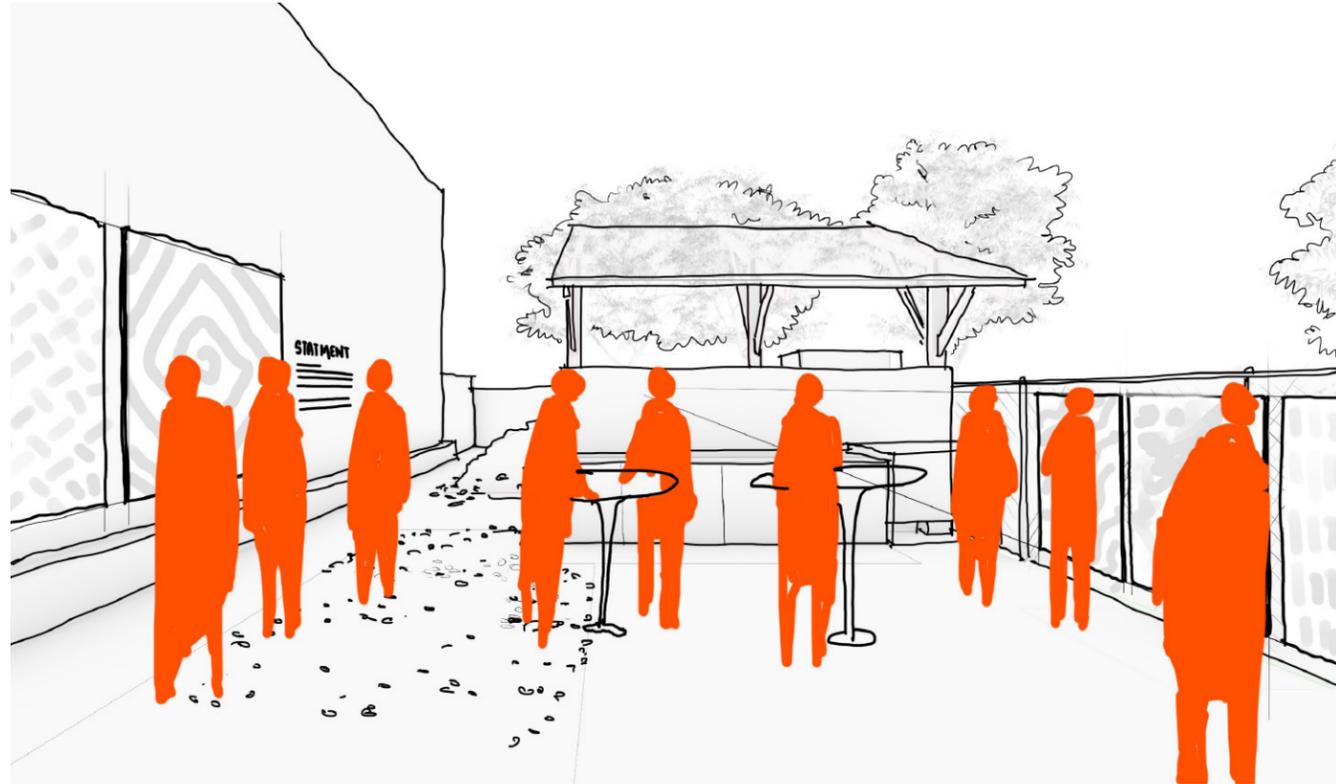


Local Agricultural Community

In keeping with ancestral traditions, local Latino and other BIPOC community members can use the garden to plant their own crops. In exchange, abundant harvests can be shared within the community.

A garden centering local community crops could act as a neighborhood cultural landmark and create the opportunity for cooperative ownership as well.

Fundraising

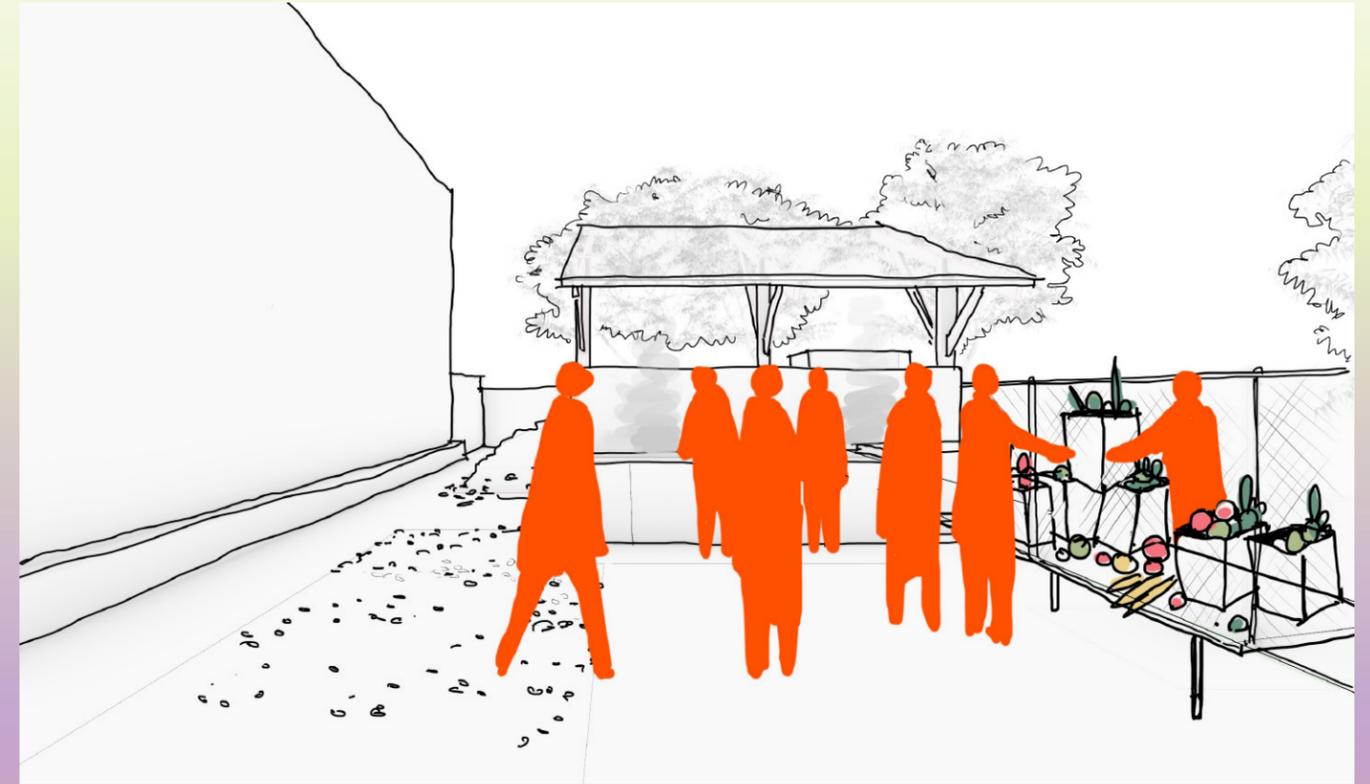


Creative Community

The pandemic has only exacerbated the precarity of local businesses and creative practices, in addition to limiting chances for in-person viewing experiences. BK ROT can allow local artists, musicians, performers, etc. to use the space to host events.

Admittance fees and potential purchases would provide an opportunity for BK ROT to empower and support local businesses.

Food Pantry



Food Recipient Community

With the official reopening of New York City, many of the mutual aid organizations and regular food distributions sustained throughout the pandemic have been rapidly shutting down, while poverty and hunger across the city's BIPOC communities are prevalent as ever.

The new site can host food distribution. Volunteers and contributors to the community fridge can prepare fresh meals for pick-up or delivery.



HOW CAN YOU BUILD ROOTED RESILIENCY WITHIN YOUR COMMUNITY?

CALL TO ACTION

Residents, leaders, community organizations, local agencies, and governments all have a role to play in this transformation towards a post-capitalist vision of a shared, participatory economy.

Government Agencies:

Engage with the community at large to facilitate an understanding of local needs. Provide clear and innovative avenues for participatory resource and budget planning in response to those needs.

Planners, Architects, and Designers:

Place yourselves on the power map and be in service to communities.

Community Based Organization and Community-Centered Groups:

Adopt collaborative organizational structures to increase staying power and prevent an overreliance on centralized systems of resource distribution.

Community Members:

Be aware of your choices and how they support or negatively impact critical local initiatives.

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Cooperative

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