



# Grassroots infrastructures for food waste

Guy Schaffer ([schafe2@rpi.edu](mailto:schafe2@rpi.edu))  
Department of Science and Technology Studies  
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute  
August 5, 2019

# My plan

1. The politics of recycling.
2. Grassroots infrastructure.
3. BK ROT's vision of community compost.
4. Social science to support grassroots infrastructure.
5. Challenges.

# The politics of recycling systems



# Waste regimes



# Grassroots infrastructures



# Grassroots infrastructures

- Ideas generally come from local community groups.
- Under-funded and rely on volunteer labor.
- Typically occupy a quasi-legal status.
- Implemented in an improvisational fashion.

# Municipal and community compost in NYC



**BK ROT** is a bike-based, youth-powered composting service in Bushwick, Brooklyn.



The project was founded in 2013 by Sandy Nurse, and she has co-facilitated it with Renée Peperone since then.



Permaculture is about balance. We're part of a larger system, a race and class system, that's out of balance. And we're expected to create balance in this system.

Renée, 2016

*BK ROT offers creative solutions to problems that Sandy and Renee recognized in their community.*

- Good jobs for youth of color.
- Making ecological citizenship into a job, not a hobby.
- Local green space.
- Healthy waste infrastructure.

# THE PROBLEM OF WORK

- Meaningful work for youth is scarce, particularly for youth of color, particularly in the green economy.
- This represents a crisis of opportunities for youth of color, and contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline.

# DESIGNING FOR WORK

BK ROT is designed with the values of *good work* in mind:

- Meaningful work
- Safe work
- Educational work
- Respected work
- Positive, healthy work environments



BK ROT uses a diversity of composting methods:

- Tumblers
- Bins
- Windrows
- Worm bin
- Bokashi



Less expert work is mostly done by volunteers or by machine.





Youth are in charge of this composting space; they regularly have to direct and educate volunteers and customers.

# THE PROBLEM OF TIME

While New York City is open to hundreds of community composting projects, the vast majority of this composting work is done by volunteers.

*‘It’s very reinforcing of like **who has the time to do that?** I mean, a lot of people do and that’s great and not all those people are super privileged. But there are a lot of people who would, if there was just a little bit of support for them to do it...’*

*-Sandy, 2015*

# DESIGNING FOR TIME

BK ROT works to make sure that composting can be treated as a job, not just a hobby.



This includes charging by the hour, rather than by the pound.



But it also involves constantly explaining to people that composting is worth paying for.

# THE PROBLEM OF SPACE

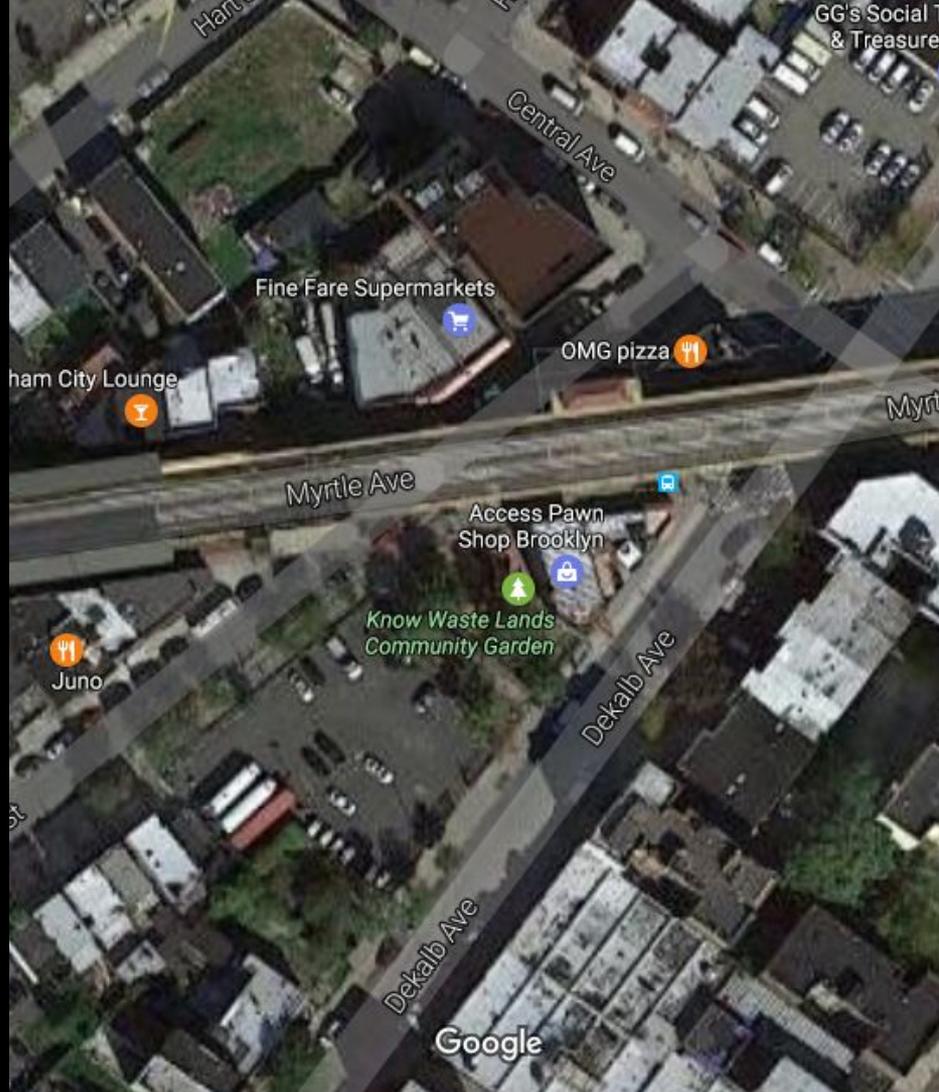
Bushwick is lacking in green space, and many of the green spaces that are present there are in “community” gardens that feel exclusive.

# DESIGNING FOR SPACE

Know Waste Lands creates community-oriented green space.

- Open location.
- Public art.
- Attractive garden with central compost.
- Youth and coordinators keeping space active.

KWL is located at the corner of two busy streets, under a subway station, between two bus stops.



It is open on two sides, and is inviting as a shortcut.



It is surrounded by commercial spaces: a grocery store, pawn shop, pizza shop, café, bodega, and bar are all within view of the space.



Public art in the space was designed by artists of color based on ideas generated by long-term residents of Bushwick.



In addition, by creating a livable waste system, BK ROT meets the local need for soil.



# THE PROBLEM OF WASTE

Bushwick has been historically plagued by waste infrastructure.

Transfer stations have been a social stigma, an olfactory nuisance, and a public health threat in Bushwick for decades.

*“We need to learn how to live with waste.”*  
-Sandy Nurse



Know Waste Lands puts waste management on display, in a way that uplifts the social and physical atmosphere of Bushwick.

# DESIGNING LIVABLE WASTE



*‘...the prettiest dump in town.’*  
-Brooklyn Paper

The compost at KWL occupies a raised central space, and the bins are both functional and handsome.



Expert workers keep a watchful eye on the compost piles, to keep odors down and pests out.



# Social science and grassroots infrastructure



# Challenges

- Creating space for local infrastructural imagination.
- Supporting grassroots infrastructure projects that often have minimal support.
- Understanding how grassroots infrastructures create larger structural changes.