

Once the Gowanus Canal Is Rid of 'Black Mayonnaise,' Who Will Benefit?: Big City

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FULL TEXT

The city may approve a plan in Brooklyn that is one of the biggest rezoning projects in memory. But the debate is not playing out in predictable ways.

Earlier this week, as if an omen sent from the gods of city planning, a barge carrying toxic sediment nearly sank in Gowanus Bay. It was loaded with the "black mayonnaise" dredged up from the Gowanus Canal, sludge that appeared to be in the midst of a dangerous round trip —potentially recontaminating the water that was so slowly being cleaned up after so long. Designated a Superfund site by the federal government in 2010, the canal is a graveyard to industrial sins committed for more than a century.

The filth has not deterred the real estate industry, which sees in every natural asset the potential for leverage. Where a chemist might see poison, the investor so often conjures a room with a view. For decades now, developers have sketched their fantasies onto the waterway's immediate surrounding area, 20 or so blocks in the middle of brownstone Brooklyn at the nexus of warehouse chic and rowhouse cozy. The will to overlook the downsides has been fierce. Five years ago, a single empty lot near the canal sold for just under \$3 million, or roughly \$340 per buildable square foot.

At that point, a grand development agenda had already been set in motion to update a neighborhood of metal fabricators, wood shops, a tour-bus parking lot, artists' studios, a manufacturer of coffins and, in more recent years, the encroachment of luxury apartments. Mayor Bill de Blasio and other officials joined developers in imagining high-rises with thousands of new residents —some well-off, others not. Eventually, a proposal emerged that put the neighborhood on the path to one of the biggest rezoning projects in the modern history of New York. As ever, the future hangs on whose vision will prevail.

In recent days, as city officials move closer toward approving the plan, activists opposing it have sued, hoping to slow things down long enough so that the next mayor might re-evaluate it or perhaps abandon it all together. Alignments and conflicts in the community are not playing out in predictable ways. A prominent local arts group, for example, supports the rezoning, believing it will help rebalance a neighborhood with a 22 percent net decrease in rent stabilized housing stock between 2007 and 2014. Gowanus is already a place with a rock-climbing gym, a Whole Foods and a place to buy \$42 salted caramel apple pie.

If the real-estate class finds itself with unlikely allies, it is because of a broadening recognition of how just central mixed communities are to racial and social equality. Fair housing is the starting point.

On one side of the debate are those who see the housing crisis, which has been made only worse by the pandemic, as the city's paramount challenge. They believe that any effort to bring modestly priced apartments to the area is worth whatever other sacrifices might come. On the other are leftists of an old guard —teachers, public-interest lawyers, artists —who, in many cases, have lived in the neighborhood for decades and largely been mischaracterized as NIMBYs. They are the early readers of "Silent Spring," those who look around at a landscape subject to so much environmental abuse and wonder why so many other people are being encouraged to live amid so many unknowns.

In many ways, the plan is much more sensitive to progressive social goals than similar efforts have been. Often during the past 20 years, politicians have alienated the communities they hope to refashion by minimally engaging

them in the planning process and then capitulating to the demands of developers, extracting far too little value in return.

These disputes are as common in New York as traffic, and they typically reach the point of heated collision when a developer is permitted to build luxury towers in a neighborhood with rapidly changing demographics simply if it commits to making 20 percent of them “affordable.” Increasingly, these affordable units don’t even have to be on the site in question. Very often they end up somewhere else in the city, where land is cheaper, foregoing any potential benefit of economically integrated communities. Generally, “affordable” has meant unaffordable to the working poor. The Gowanus plan relies on more favorable ratios. Of the 8,000 units to be built over the next decade, more than a third will be reserved for lower-income individuals and families. Some two-bedroom apartments would cost as little as \$850 a month. There will be apartments designated for those currently living in shelters or on the street or those who require supportive housing. According to Brad Lander, the city councilman for Gowanus and a chief proponent of the plan, more will be required of developers in exchange for the tax breaks that come to them.

Mr. Lander has also insisted that the city contribute tens of millions of dollars toward repairs necessary in the projects belonging to the New York City Housing Authority situated in and around Gowanus. This is something the community has asked for all along during the many years that rezoning has been discussed.

The real issue here is that 950 units of low-income housing would be built on an enormous city-owned lot —known alternately as Public Place or Gowanus Green —where coal-gas had been manufactured from the mid-19th century through the middle of the 20th. Of the three coal-gas plants that were in Gowanus, two of them, according to Maureen Koetz, a longtime environmental lawyer who has been consulting for those opposing development, were categorized as Class 2 in the early 2000s, meaning that they had been deemed to present a significant threat to public and environmental health. (Class 1 is the most dangerous.)

Currently, the proposed housing site is undergoing cleanup of various hazardous byproducts of manufactured gas, paid for by the public utility company that inherited the problem long ago. “The general practice is not to put housing, or schools for that matter, on these remediated sites,” Ms. Koetz told me. “If you are in a warehouse or shopping or in a park, you are there for a limited amount of time so you’re not getting that much exposure.”

In the mid-1940s, when we knew less about environmental toxins, Stuyvesant Town, the sprawling middle-class housing complex on the East River, was built on a defunct coal-gas site. If anyone has ever studied cancer rates over the long term there, this would be the time for the city to reflect on the data and make it known.

At a neighborhood meeting in December, Christos Tsiamis, a chemical engineer managing the cleanup of the canal for the Environmental Protection Agency, warned that compounds even 15 feet below the surface of the gas site will volatilize as a result of construction and could, within a decade, find a pathway into buildings and accumulate, potentially endangering the people who will live in them.

“Nobody who had the resources to live somewhere else would choose to be there,” said Penn Rhodeen, a former children’s aid lawyer involved with the activist group Voice of Gowanus. “So it becomes an issue of environmental morality.”

The fight against the Gowanus plan is unfolding at a moment when anti-development activists in New York have been able to claim major victories. Two years ago, they repelled plans for Amazon’s headquarters in Queens. More recently, in Brooklyn’s Industry City, they prevented the kind of rezoning that would have delivered far greater benefits to big business than to the working class.

There is no way to downplay the city’s housing emergency. But it is a dubious proposition to continually market “sustainability” and “resilience” as civic virtues if you cannot assure the most economically vulnerable that the places where you invite them to live won’t eventually make them sick. The current mayoral administration disgraced itself with its deceptions around lead paint in public housing. Why would it proceed now with anything but the greatest vigilance?

The barge accident this week provides a symbolic reminder of history’s relentless talent for payback. By the late 19th century, the Gowanus Canal had become the receptacle for waste from the coal-gas plants, paper factories, masonries, farms and other entities nearby. In 1889, a special commission was dispatched to study the effects of the

dumping. It recommended that the canal close because it was such an obvious threat to public health —“a disgrace to Brooklyn.”

The cost of doing so was going to come in at about \$75,000. Everyone decided it was too much.

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