

Learning Places Fall 2019

# SITE REPORT #1

## Gowanus Canal



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### PART 1: SITE OBSERVATIONS

1. What are some general observations about the character of this neighborhood? What does it remind you of? How does it make you feel?

The Gowanus neighborhood depicts the two common classes in New York City, those with more disposable income that live in beautiful and well-kept brownstones, and the more run-down buildings for those who make significantly less money. The economic disparity could be found in any area in most places. The neighborhood is composed of old-fashioned buildings along with new and modern structures, though it has an industrial feel regardless of when it was built. Other than the newer buildings, the neighborhood looks like how one would imagine old New York City to look like, factories next to restaurants and homes (apartments), all crammed together as closely as possible. The industrial factory building that we saw could be dated back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century known as the National Packing Box Factory (1889) and another longstanding building factory building of Crusader Candle, Co. (1946). These companies as well as many other factories, have left a major stain on the natural environment, over the past century.

2. How is the natural world contained or shaped by human activity or architecture? In what ways does the natural world invade or disrupt human activity, planning or architecture?

The Gowanus Canal was known as the Gowanus stream in the early half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, connecting other salt marshes in the area into the stream. From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, through years of industrial use and other pollutants contaminating the canal, it has become known as one of the most polluted bodies of water in the United States and is now considered a Superfund Site as of 2009. As Aexiou mentioned during our tour, the amount of toxic waste in the water is incredibly high, and some of the pollutants in the water include yellow fever, fecal chloroform, gonorrhea and mercury. Through all this hazardous and dangerous water, the natural environment has sporadically returned to the area. It could be seen from the random Paulownia trees that rise near the canal and in between the sidewalk cracks. Even through the murky opaque waters, certain types of fish could be spotted swimming, and sadly enough other animals such as ducks and even dolphins and whales have been found in the polluted water resulting in death. During the tour we also learned that during heavy rainfall, the toxic scum water of the canal to rise and flood the streets. This basically does not allow anyone living in the flooded areas to leave their homes or become susceptible to the contaminated flooded streets.

3. What people did you observe in the neighborhood and what activities are they engaged in?

I obviously spotted many industrial and factory workers in the area. During the tour, I remember a group of elderly people were playing cards outside a building. There are parks with children and their parents or caregiving looking after them.

4. Reflect on a **specific** place you viewed in this neighborhood. A specific place means a single building, or an intersection, or an individual built structure, etc.

a. Insert 1 photograph and/or sketch and provide a *creative* caption for the image. The caption should be a word or short phrase that suggests a theme or conceptual association related to the photo or sketch.



Family living accommodations next to toxic canal, with caution sign of illness causing bacteria found in water.

- b. What is the *program* of the space? How are people meant to interact with one another and with the environment?

Developers created a nice and modern family living apartment complex right on the edge of the toxic Gowanus Canal. The postcard sized Caution sign located nearby states that during rainfall, rain is mixed with raw, untreated sewage and may contain illness causing bacteria. If anyone falls in the water, 911 should be immediately contacted. In the smaller print, it mentions that if the sludge is seen during dry weather, 311 should be contacted. While I understand many would never enter a canal, there are many accidents that happen which can cause anyone to fall inside. The well-manicured “park” located at the bottom encourages for people to play in the area, with others including children and pets that happen to be more prone to accidents.

- c. describe a possible creative reuse of this **specific** space for a performance:

I believe that this specific location could be used as a performance protest. The very noticeable caution sign will be what the performers message: “This outfall may discharge rainwater mixed with untreated sewage during or following rainfall and can contain bacteria that can cause illness.”

- a. Which areas are best for performers/activists and which areas are good for observers? Do these spaces overlap? Mention specific objects and structures in your answer.

Since many animals can't survive in the water, performers could top this portion of the canal with animal and human shaped balloons, depicting what would happen if they were to enter the canal or fall by accident. The actual performers would not be inside the water but simply trying to maintain the inflatables to the section of the canal, since there is no need for the canal to be filled with even further toxic materials. The observers would include those living near the section of the canal and those using the bridge to cross over the Gowanus Canal.

b. What kinds of performance would work best (intimate or grand; processional or stationary; text and/or music; interactive or passive audience; etc.)?

The performers would not enter the water, therefore limiting their performance, requiring a much more passive audience. The performers nor the audience should not move much near the canal in case of an accident. The purpose of this performance to be aware of the dangerous waters, it would be a quiet and stationary protest.

QUESTIONS for FURTHER RESEARCH. These should follow directly from your analysis section and be complex and specific enough to serve as the basis of a research project.

Questions might relate to architectural or environmental observations, socio-political problems and/or solutions, demography, history, zoning, civic processes, performance strategy, etc.

1. How many human deaths have occurred over the past decade caused by the Gowanus Canal?
2. What is the local, state and federal government doing to improve the Gowanus Canal since becoming a Superfund site in 2009?
3. What animals and other natural elements of the environment have returned to the canal?

## PART 2: RESEARCH

Choose and revise one of your research questions for further research.

Revised Research Question:

Find and cite 2 sources that address your question in MLA format. Respond to the questions below.

CITATION 1:

Reinhalter, L. lareinhalter@gmail. co. (2013). The Gowanus Canal: A Superfund Site. *DttP: A Quarterly Journal of Government Information Practice & Perspective*, 41(4), 35–40.  
Retrieved from  
<http://search.ebscohost.com.citytech.ezproxy.cuny.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lls&AN=108747364&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

Why did you select this source? How does it address all or part of your research question?

I chose this source because it is a government journal article on the Gowanus Canal. The article not only gave a brief history but went more into depth of how local and federal government have tried to rectify the problem. At the end of the report, there is an update on a future date in the year 2022 of the canal cleanup, but at the time (2013), there has yet to be any momentum in change and action. This article addresses only a part of the research question due to the date it was publicized, almost six years ago.

Is the source credible? Why or why not?

While the journal states government information, it is still written with a biased opinion in a well-researched paper.

What further information would you need to answer your question? Where would you look for additional sources?

I would need more current updates on the restoration of the canal, along with previous cleanup attempts.

CITATION 2:

ZELDOVICH, L. (2017). INTO THE MUCK: An aquatic robot helps uncover the Gowanus Canal's century-old pollution problems. *Mechanical Engineering*, 139(11), 40–45.  
<https://doi-org.citytech.ezproxy.cuny.edu/10.1115/1.2017-Nov-3>

Why did you select this source? How does it address all or part of your research question?

I selected this source, because I believe that in order to properly clean up the Gowanus Canal, one must understand what is inside it after a century and half of illegal and toxic dumping. There might be other carcinogens or illnesses released into the air when moved that might harm the local residents.

Is the source credible? Why or why not?

Yes, there are recorded observations from the robot's findings. The results are unbiased and nonjudgmental.

What further information would you need to answer your question? Where would you look for additional sources?

The robot would need to inspect the entire 1.8 miles of the canal as well as all the inlets and outlets connected to the canal.

### PART 3: Performance Reflection (after second site visit)

Write a 200 word reflection about how you felt during the second visit to the space and during the performance activities. How did this visit change your perception of the place and your relationship to the natural and built environments? Did the experience of ‘performing’ in the space (i.e., moving your body) teach you anything new about the landscape or architecture?

When I first read on our syllabus that we would be meeting an EPA agent on one of our class field trips, I had a momentary moment of excitement (I constantly preach about our climate crisis to friends when I see them). While Andrea Haenggi was not part of the Environmental Protection Agency, she was part of the Environmental Performance Agency. In the beginning of her lecture and even the introductions to certain performance exercises, it all seemed very abstract and avant-garde. When we all clustered together as something we remembered from the canal, it brought up my fears of enclosed spaces and being near so many people. As the class progressed onto the other exercises, I started to feel more comfortable and confident with my actions. Unfortunately, since I have had severe allergies the past month, the smells exercise while walking to the canal was unproductive to me. Though the last exercise, I felt that I understood and grasped the concept of becoming and thinking as one of our subjects (sky, plants, water). I never thought of myself as a great performer, but when Andrea Haenggi performed back what our “rain dance” was I could see everything that I was trying to accomplish in my dance.