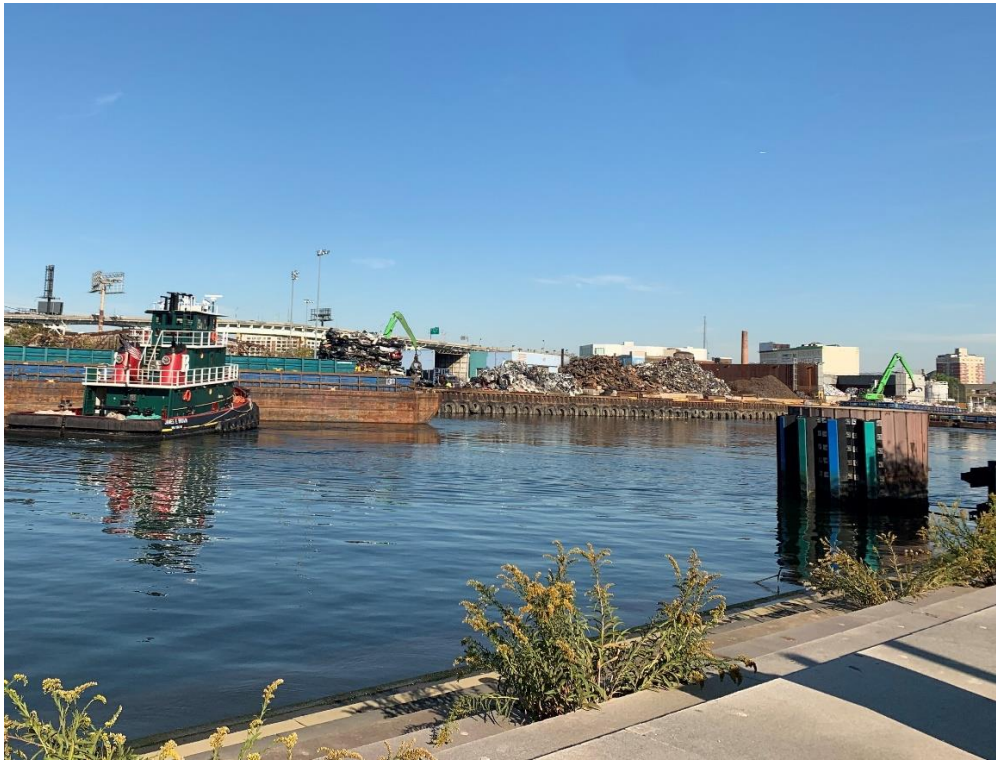


Learning Places Fall 2019

# SITE REPORT #2

## Newtown Creek



Perfect spot to take in the Industrial stench and get sprayed with metal and plastic dust particles on a windy day.

Danielle Sheridan

### SITE OBSERVATIONS

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

Upon starting our tour of the Newtown's Creek Nature Walk, all my predictions of how the fieldtrip was going to be were wrong. Starting with the name of the excursion: Nature Walk. While there

were some beautiful trees and other interesting foliage, and some animal life including mussels and crabs in the creek, I couldn't detect much "nature" from the tour. I felt that the odor was stronger than the Gowanus Canal, though the water looked cleaner. I didn't feel too comfortable being so close to the metal and plastic barges, due to particles being blown towards the Nature Walk's visitors. The digester eggs while interesting looking did not seem very appealing after learning their purpose and what was in it. Starting from the entry, including the vessel and the path beyond, the walk felt cold and unwelcoming. It is not a park I would like to visit again with the exception if I was trying to educate someone else about industrial hazards and/or provide information about Superfund sites. At the start of the tour, included a reference to the shipping industry that occurred in the area, which was an interesting way to cover up the wastewater treatment pipes. Our tour guide also mentioned that the Lenape tribe were the original inhabitants of the area and influenced some of the artifacts found on the walk, such as stones that had names of what the tribe would call the different creeks in the area. Knowing how many of the native tribes were "forced out" of their homelands (putting it mildly) made me feel even more gloomy on the tour.

2. Historically, what are some of the important developments that have created the current environmental situation at Newtown Creek area. Refer not only to the reading and Prof. Spellane's lecture, but also what you learned on the Newtown Creek Alliance tour (hint... estuaries, for instance)?

According to the Newtown Creek: Restoration Ecology report written by John McLaughlin in February of 2014, 85% of all tidal wetlands in New York City has been lost (originally 16,000 acres and now we only have 1,200 acres). McLaughlin further states that 100% of the tidal wetlands in Newtown Creek was destroyed. In order to improve the ecological landscapes, living shorelines were put in place to minimize the impact of storm surges, which was originally reduced by the wetlands.

The toxicity that can be found in the Newtown Creek, can be traced back to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. The creek served as a perfect boating dock for the shipping industries that were in the area. Consistent with our readings and lectures from Professor Spellane and the Nature Walk tour, industrial and chemical manufacturing plants were located right next to the creek and would dump all their toxic waste back into the water that would later be washed onto the East river, further expanding the radius of the pollution. These manufacturing plants included heavy metal and oil refineries, which the oil would spill onto the creek. The sewer runoff overflow when it rains is about 1.4 billion gallons (Del Signore) and with 150 years of oil spills the creek was designated a Superfund site in 2010. In 2014, the ginormous digester eggs were added to the wastewater treatment plant to reduce the amount of sewage into the creek, transforming the methane found into carbon dioxide, that is less harmful but still not a great thing to have. It is estimated that in 2030 the creek will be cleaned up and restored, but it also depends on the world's climate change and U.S. politics.

3. In what ways is the natural environment contained or shaped by the architecture of the Newtown Creek Nature Walk? In what ways is the natural world repossessing, interacting with, or invading spaces that have been over-polluted or industrialized?

The bulkheads along the creek (a canal by definition) creates straight edges that do not occur naturally, controlling and directing the creek's waters. Bulkheads are seawalls that prevent the area from being overflowed. Even though the area floods during any type of rain, which overflows the sewage treatment. The built environment has absolutely taken over the natural environment. While the city is making slow strides in improving the area, they are bringing in foliage that not only was once local, but

could survive in the harshest of conditions, such as Goldenrods (high marsh grasses). During the tour we spotted crabs and mussels along the border of the walk and creek and surviving, which probably means other animals are in the area. In our readings, particularly referencing to John Del Signore's journey to the creek, explained that he saw various animals returning to the habitat, including ducks, fish and even an egret.

4. Discuss the program of the nature walk. How are people meant to interact with one another and with the environment?

The purpose of the Newtown Creek Nature Walk felt like a reminder of the damage we (our ancestors) made in the past, from the pollution and industrial ruins to the "eviction" of the first New York's residents, the Lenape native people. The walk and its resting spots/lookouts seemed to be a place of reflection of not only the past (shipping industry and the Lenape people) but current (scrap metal and recycling yards) and future endeavors (digester eggs and Nature Walk expansion). The walk itself isn't made for large groups of people without feeling too enclosed or cramped, but easily manageable with smaller groups, due to the width of the park, as well as the trees and artifacts placements.

5. If you were to stage a performative intervention in a *specific* site (i.e., a single structural aspect of the walk or industrial remains) where would you stage it and why (how does the environment add meaning to the performance)?

I would probably stage something from the top of the Digester eggs in the safest way possible. The dust particles that gets blown over by the winds from the metal and plastic scrapyards particularly bothered me, so I thought of maybe having something to cover the barges to minimize the inhalation of toxic dust particles. Perhaps heavy soapy bubbles blown from the top of the eggs could carry over to the barges disrupting the workers' view or maybe even weighing down the metal dust particles due to excess soap scum caused by the popping of soap bubbles?

6. What message would your performance convey and who needs to hear this message?

The Nature Walk is supposed to convey beauty and art amongst the industrial wreckage of the Newtown Creek. While it does relay a deeper and purposeful meaning of the history that has occurred in the area, the idea of having a public space near the metal and plastic barges seems unsafe and visitors should be aware of what they might be inhaling. The idea of the bubbles blown from the top of the Digester eggs would represent how quick and easy it is to have those particles reach the visible distances of the area.

**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. What happened to the Lenape people that occupied the region before the Dutch settlers claimed their land?
2. What are the dangers of inhaling metal scrapyards dust particles?
3. What is the current status of the Newtown Creek Superfund site cleanup under Trump's presidency?

## FURTHER RESEARCH

Choose and **revise** one of your research questions for further research. Refine your question following from examples that we've discussed in class.

Revised Research Question:

What happened to the natives that occupied the land before the European settlers? What has happened to the native people since?

Find and cite 2 sources that address your question in [MLA format](#). Respond to the questions below.

### CITATION 1:

Connolly, C. (2018, October 5). The True Native New Yorkers Can Never Truly Reclaim Their Homeland. Retrieved from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/true-native-new-yorkers-can-never-truly-reclaim-their-homeland-180970472/>.

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

I recognized the source having visited the Smithsonian museums in Washington D.C. before. The article gave a brief history of the Lenape people and their forced migration out of their homelands, including parts of New York City.

Is the source credible? Why or why not?

I believe the Smithsonian magazine and all related publications are credible due to their known research and science based information.

## CITATION 2:

Haake, C. (2002). Identity, Sovereignty, and Power: The Cherokee-Delaware Agreement of 1867, Past and Present. *American Indian Quarterly*, 26(3), 418–435. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aiq.2003.0040>

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

I thought the article gave a detailed description of every forced movement of the Lenape/Delaware people. The article had background information of all the treaties that they were dealt with and the problems of involuntary cohabitation of other native tribes.

Is the source credible? Why or why not?

I believe the American Indian quarterly is a credible source since it is a peer reviewed academic journal.

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

While researching this topic I came across few direct ancestry of the Lenape tribe, I would probably like to investigate the Lenape/Delaware lineage and results from the migration.