

Learning Places Fall 2016

SITE REPORT #1

The Gowanus Canal: A Cesspool of Promise and Opportunity.



This is an image of the Gowanus Canal taken from the Union Street draw bridge next to Pig Beach. The skyline in the background eludes to what this undeveloped land can one day become.

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INTRODUCTION

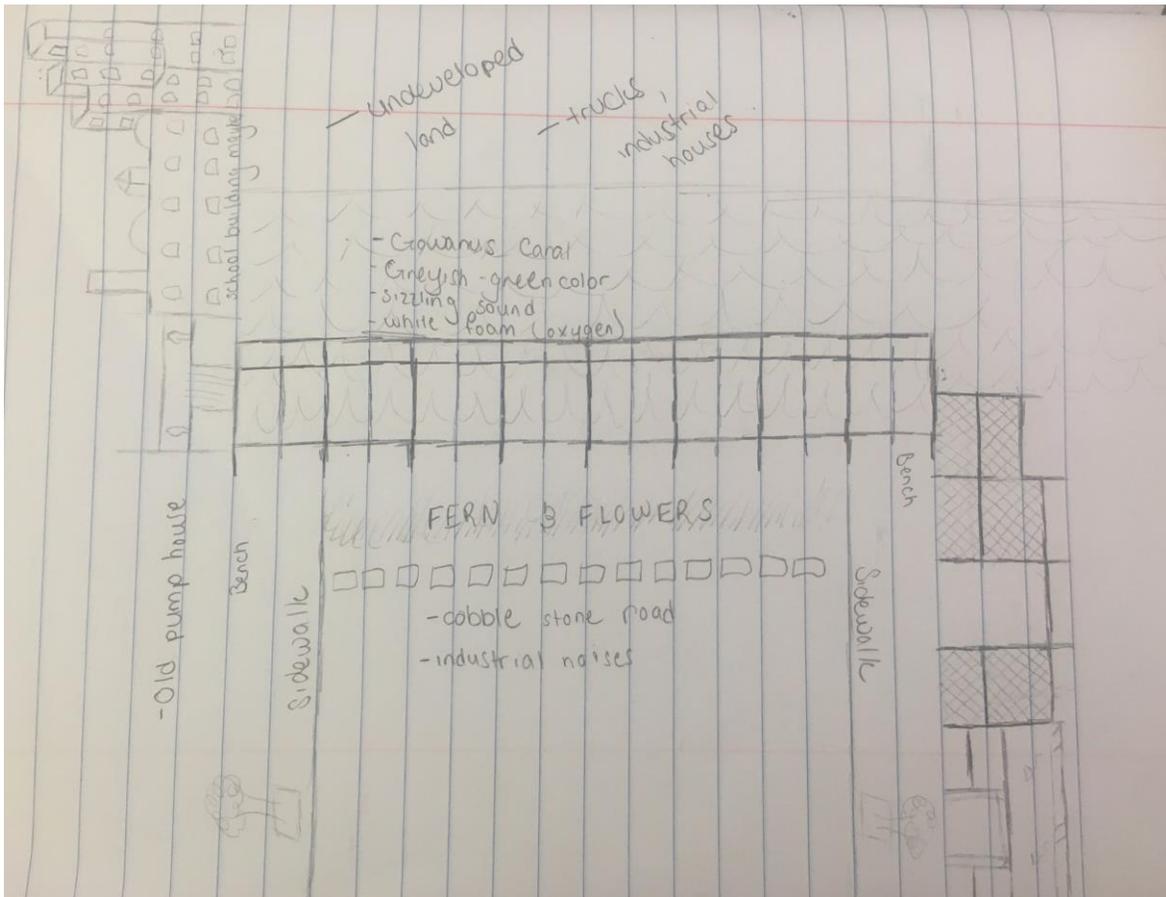
Our first site visit was focused around the existence of the Gowanus Canal and how said existence has or has not affected the Gowanus community. I did not know what to expect, especially seeing as how this was our first site visit. However, I did live in the Park Slope area, close to the third street bridge, for some time. So, I did expect to see a lot more industrial sites in comparison to residential or commercial. We met at the pump house on Douglass Street between Bond Street and Nevins Street where the canal begins. From there we travelled a distance exploring blocks surrounding the canal area and discussing history and observations. Despite my somewhat familiarity with the area, I never knew the Gowanus Canal extended for such a great distance. It was interesting to see and consider how many miles worth of businesses and residents could be affected by this body of water.



This is a photo of our meeting point at one end of the Gowanus Canal. You can see the foam/bubbles which form at the top as well as, the undeveloped land in the background.

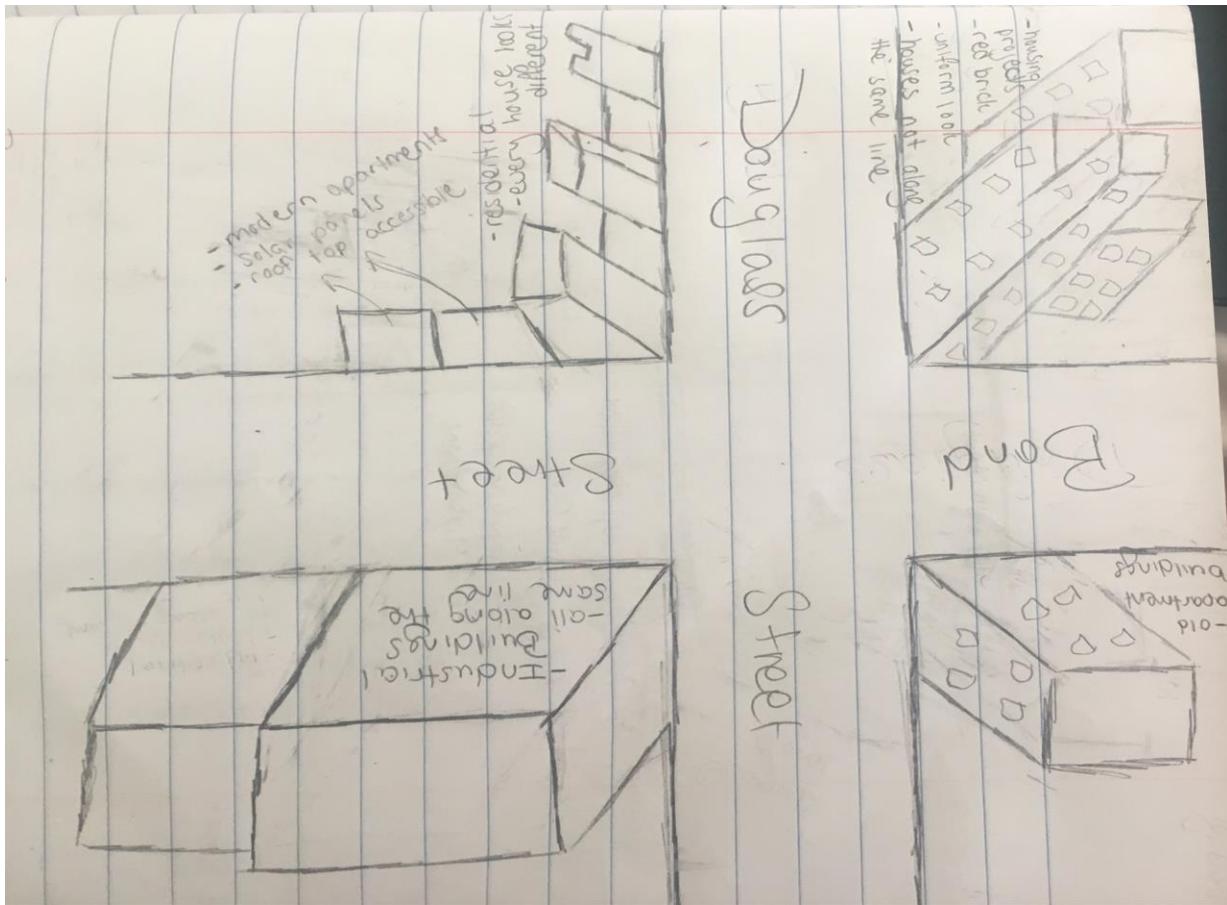
SITE OBSERVATIONS

Initially, when approaching the meeting point, I noticed that the entire street was comprised primarily of industrial businesses. However, the road leading up to the pump house was not made of asphalt as is most roads; Instead, it was made of cobblestone. The cobblestone path led to an area of ferns and flowers accompanied by benches on either side. The canal itself was “sizzling,” so to speak. The water was a greenish color and a layer of, what looked like, foam or bubbles laid on top of it. The backdrop of the canal at this point was a lot that exudes neglect; it was full of tractors, trucks, forklifts, and unfinished construction. To your right, there were a few buildings, one which looked to be a school building not being used. We also saw what used to be the old pump house which is enclosed by a tall black gate. The building reminded me of those you see in the parks



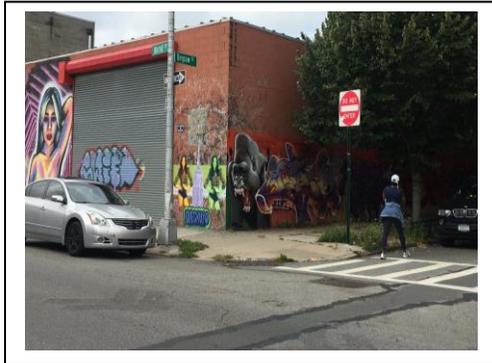
This is a sketch of our meeting point from a larger scale. It accounts for things that are not drawn with descriptions such as the undeveloped land in the background, the bubbles on top of the water, the old pump house, the benches, etc.

Once everyone had arrived, we walked to the intersection of Douglass Street and Bond Street, noting the contrast on each corner. On one corner (right-hand side of Douglass), you have the Gowanus Housing Projects. Each building was uniform in appearance but not in position. Contrary to the buildings on the right-hand side, no one building on the left-hand side looks the same but each building is positioned along the same line. If you focus on Bond Street, across from the Gowanus Housing Projects, there are a few older looking apartment buildings. Also on Bond Street, but diagonal to the Gowanus Housing Projects are some industrial buildings. However, across from these industrial buildings are more modern looking apartment buildings with floor to ceiling windows, roof top patios, and solar panels. So, this one intersection really embodies several elements that we come to see throughout our visit.

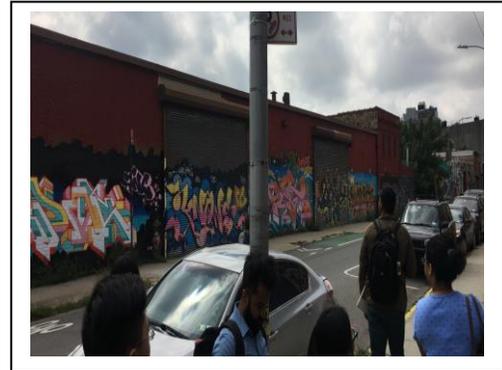


This is a sketch of the intersection at Bond Street and Douglass street. It is accompanied with descriptions to provide a clearer understanding of what was said in the previous paragraph.

As we continued along Bond towards Union Street, every building on the left-hand side had an industrial purpose. The intersecting roads on the left-hand side seemed more like back-roads for cyclists and roads in need of development. The right-hand side however, had a few commercial spaces like a salon and a restaurant. The intersecting roads on the right-hand side housed residential buildings. The roads were filled with trees and modern looking apartment buildings and brownstones. Despite the drastic difference in scenery on each side of Bond Street, one thing that remained common was the presence of art and graffiti; there were several, beautiful graffiti pieces.



In one of the images you see more art work: the naked woman, the gorilla, etc. In the other two



you see more graffiti writing. The colors and patterns add life to an already desolate looking street.



Once we made that right turn on to Union Street, we began to see a lot more commercial spaces including event spaces, Pig Beach, Claireware Pottery, Ample Hills Creamery, a shuffle board space, Gowanus Souvenir Shop, etc. The businesses were more so pop-up shop type businesses, than the franchise businesses we are used to. On Union Street, next to Pig Beach there was also a draw bridge in which boats carrying cargo and scrap metal still travel through.

While continuing on our journey, we spotted a condominium just over the 3rd street bridge. The condominium was very modern having floor to ceiling windows, a gym and café inside, etc. The building was similar to those you may see in the Dumbo area. It was definitely a silver lining in the midst of such an underdeveloped area. However, what was interesting about this building was that it had a pathway with benches and grass for walking and relaxing surrounding the building that was also on the edge of the Gowanus Canal. Once again, to me, very contradicting scenery. You have this beautiful condominium with gorgeous greenery, right next to this dirty looking water.

Our last stop of the visit was Whole Foods. Whole Foods is always associated with the gentrification of an area. But in this case, I would associate Whole Foods with the development of the Gowanus area. There were many type of people shopping and working in the Whole Foods Market: young, old, all races. So, the Whole Foods provided a bit more insight as to what to expect from the Gowanus area as development continues.

One thing that remains unsaid is the efforts we witnessed being made to clean up the Gowanus Canal. From the beginning our journey to the very end we saw different ways in which the city aims to clean up the Gowanus. By the pump house, at the start of the canal, we learned that the bubbles we had been seeing resulted from the effort of pumping oxygen into the Gowanus Canal to increase the survival rate of organisms in the water. Next to the condominium, we saw, what is called, The Gowanus Canal Pilot Sponge Park. The pilot project was set in motion to absorb the polluted water like a sponge. It is filtered and then released back into the canal. Finally, at Whole Foods we saw a feature of the Oyster Restoration Research Project. Oysters were being used to filter toxins out of the canal. It was interesting to witness all these projects banding together for one single goal.

ANALYSIS/DISCOVERIES

After having scoped out the area, I can already tell that Gowanus has a promising future. There's industry and construction on every corner indicating that the necessary accommodations and adjustments are being made to make the area more habitable. This can be told from the efforts to clean the canal as well. To appeal to potential residents, something must be done about the pollution that'll give residents some form of hope. I don't see the area having many franchise or well-known establishments in the future. But I do believe that it'll serve as the home to many small business owners. Despite all the new additions, so much of history remains like the 3rd Street bridge which is made out of wood; tracks still remain underneath it. However, they have gotten rid of few things so it makes you wonder if the goal is to modernize the area or just to make it more livable? Brooklyn, entirely, is changing; Brooklyn is the new Manhattan. The cost of a studio apartment in the condominium I mentioned is \$2300 a month. Residents will be paying \$2300 a month to live next to a polluted body of water and be surrounded by construction and waste land for years. Could you imagine how expensive rent will be once development is in its final stages? I don't suspect many black families to be living in the area once that happens. I can infer that it'll be a Caucasian dominated area. Even the local businesses I mentioned other than the Whole Foods, don't seem to cater to the African American community or their interests. However, I will say that the area seems very cozy and lonely. Businesses are spread far apart between one another. Residential buildings are few. It's not a place where I would feel safe walking by myself at night. It seems like the perfect area to commit a crime. But I do believe there is promise and all the projects set in motion will help to facilitate that.

KEYWORDS/ VOCABULARY

1. Gowanus Housing Projects
2. The Gowanus Canal Pilot Sponge Park
3. Gowanus Canal Conservancy
4. Industrial
5. Commercial
6. Residential
7. Modern
8. Undeveloped

QUESTIONS for FURTHER RESEARCH

1. How will these future developments affect the demographics already living in the area and those to come?
2. What is the purpose(s) behind reducing the toxins in the Gowanus Canal? Is it to make people feel comfortable living in the area? Are officials hoping to be able to use the water supply some day?
3. What impact does the existence of the canal have on the businesses and residents already living there? How do the people of the community feel about it?