

Learning Places Fall 2016

SITE REPORT #1

First visit to Gowanus Canal



Image of buildings converted into a mixed-use. The contrast between the old apartment and new ingrowth encapsulates the feeling of change and renewal in the Gowanus Canal.

STUDENT NAME

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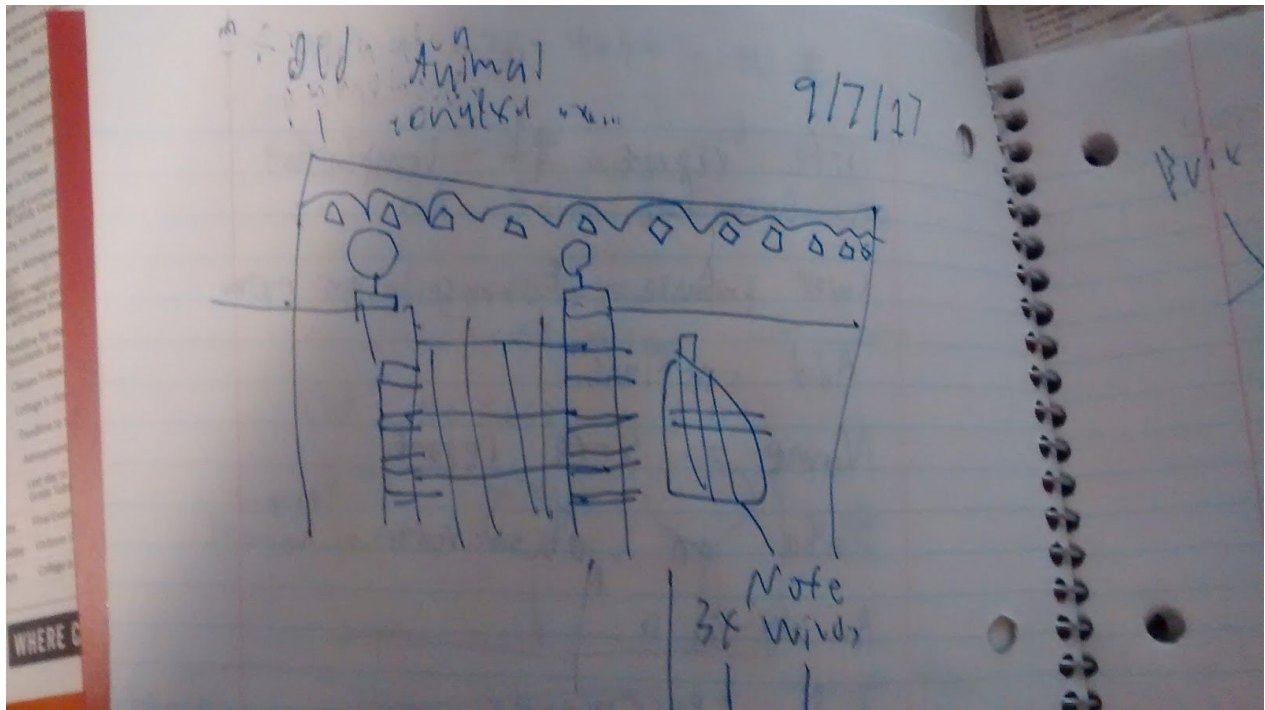
INTRODUCTION

For our first visit to the Gowanus Canal, we spent our time exploring the various sites around the area. Exploring both sides of the Canal, we saw both what could be considered the “old” and “new” parts, over how the canal has changed. While I expected the Canal to be rather dirty, at least for the less developed areas, it was not as bad as it seemed.

SITE OBSERVATIONS:

Many buildings seem to have a sense of uniformity; most buildings, regardless of when they were constructed, made a uniform wall with no extensions or indentations. The majority of buildings did not go above two or three stories high.

Most of the buildings tended to be in the reds, browns, and similar dull colors made of rough brick. In most cases, this made the land dull and lifeless with a sense of heavy industrialization. However, some of them could be quite beautiful. The oldest buildings, from where Douglas St. meet the canal left the biggest impression on me. Of the architecture, the old building for the Animal Cruelty center, with its highly detailed arches, steps for the gate, and other features, impressed me the most.



Sketch of the impressive architecture of the old animal cruelty center's base. Roughly drawn sketches of some of the more ornate details helps give a sense of how intricate and beautiful the architecture was.

Some such as the Gowanus Housing Project, despite being newer buildings, still try to hold to the aesthetic, even if they have different architecture.

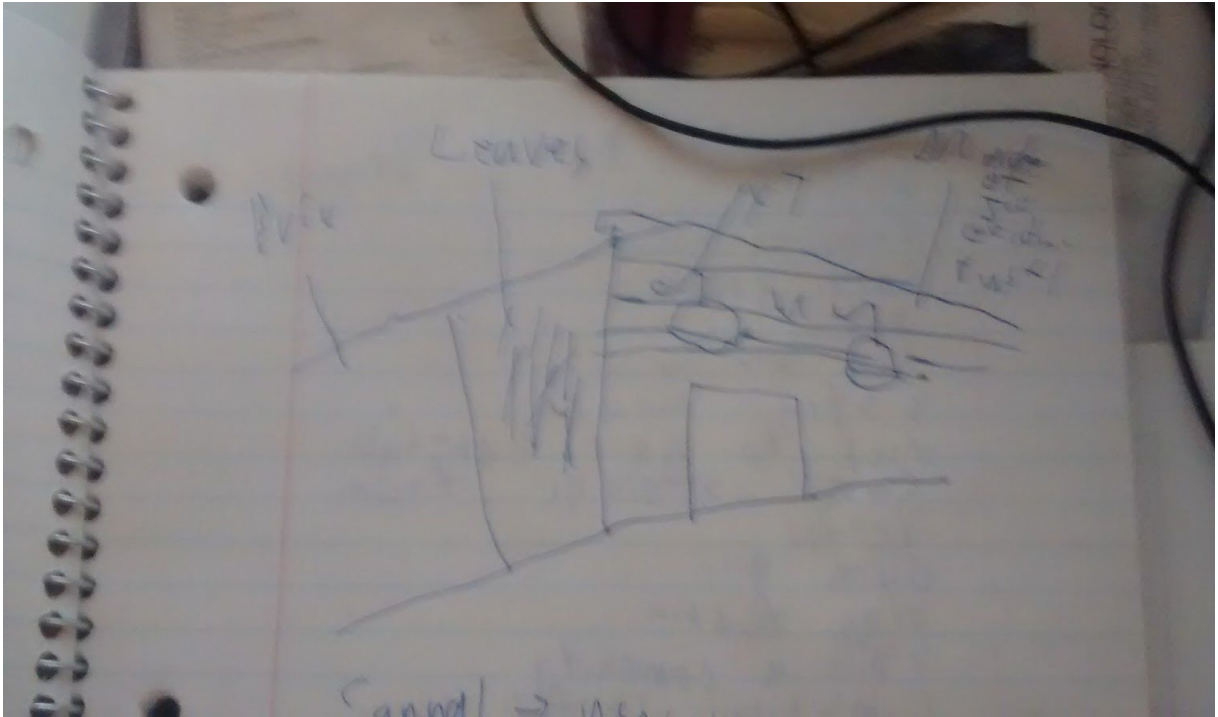


Picture of Gowanus Housing Project Building. Note how despite the fact that it was designed to allow more light compared to a wall typical of Gowanus buildings, it still is brick housing.

However, newer or renovated buildings tended to have colours more leaning towards white, and tended to be more reflective surfaces such as marble or metal.

Vegetation would best be described as areas of high concentration in between areas of pure artificialness. Typically, they are dedicated parks or other recreational areas where people can gather. These were mostly grass patches with trees strategically placed for art and balance reasons.

At least one area was instead an unplanned overgrowth due to neglect. At least one building was also majorly covered in vines on one side.



Sketch of building with vine growth on one side, found by canal on Douglas St. This is an example of the overgrowth in more neglected parts of the area.

Also of note was a “sponge park” designed to clean up the canal. While it has metal grating, it clearly is meant to be a natural spot that has plentiful greenery in an almost unorganized fashion. Perhaps the metal grating is meant to help act as a separation between the more developed sections by overemphasizing, in order to make the plants feel more natural.



Image of the sponge garden, with sign. The contrast between the sponge park's plants and the metallic pathway make the difference obvious

The area covered had a wide array of uses, including a mixed residential/business area nearby. The areas closer to the canal were more business oriented, with either factories, stores, and at least one restaurant, with more residential areas the further away you went.

There are places where people can get together, such as parks, recreational buildings, and so on. These can vary dramatically with location. Parks tended to be found closer to the canal, but varied from a highly developed and artistically rendered park sandwiched between the canal and a highly developed apartment to a simple overlook over the canal in a more industrialized section, mostly brick with only a few trees. One was more sparse, Most parks had plenty of seating, and at least one had movable chairs for a more personalized experience.

The development of the canal mostly seems to be a sense of organically growing out of a

planned space. While the area mostly seems to be a planned and industrialized effort, it has been “hollowed out” and decayed through neglect. People have taken advantage of this by trying to make areas their own, and are now trying to add their own touch in the area.

Nature has been hit hard, but there is an effort to clean up. Aside from the aforementioned parks, there is at least one plant dedicated to try and clean the canal, which has otherwise proven inhospitable to life.

What is noticeable is that areas across the canal can vary drastically from one side to another. One side can be a relaxing park, the other a graffitied abandoned building.



View from outlook of a park. The contrast of the vegetation and park contrasts heavily with the more abandoned look on the other side of the canal.

The place holds people who lived here their whole lives, or at least a good portion of it. An interview with Pat Bruno states that “the land may change, but the people don’t change.” While there is some activity in more business oriented areas, in general the area was mostly not busy and people not encountered often. The land mostly suitable for walking, and landmarks are frequent enough for navigation.

Overall, the place gave me a sense of a regrowth. While not everything is back to being a pristine, clear, and nice place, there is an effort being made. You can see the area being remade, with a clear contrast between what is new and what is old. The contrast gives a sense of hope that the area can be rebuilt.

While the more developed areas were relatively okay, the most stand out part about it was definitely the location near the pumphouse. The air reminded me of the bad smell I would find in the ocean, being fishy and oily. Fortunately, I did not experience this smell elsewhere, suggesting the area is healing.

ANALYSIS/DISCOVERIES

From what I can tell, the people here are a community who is willing to continue living despite the worse conditions, and are willing to improve them. They have adapted to the industrialized and potentially polluted zone, and some are even okay continuing to live their. Regardless, conditions will inevitably improve, and the area of the canal already shows signs of development. The place shows that even the most polluted area can be reclaimed, and people can live in even harsh conditions. Of course, this applies much less today, because today we have many methods for cleaning up the once polluted zone. The spirit of the place is, I think, in a period of rejuvenation and change. While you can still see the old zone, the new areas and life it has been given is evident. In time, while it may have some old shades of its industrialized past, the Gowanus Canal will eventually not be as recognizable as it once was.

KEYWORDS/ VOCABULARY (these might include specialized vocabulary, city agencies, names of businesses or people
*5 keywords minimum required per site visit)

1. Belgium Blocks - A type of street used in certain areas of the canal. Used to be popular because

it was good for horses, now less commonly used.

2. Pat Bruno - An old man who has lived in the canal area for his whole life. Claims that “the people don’t change, but the area changes.” Remembers how several sites have been converted into different zones.
3. Housing Project - An attempt to make affordable housing for people who would normally live in slums. An example of this is the Gowanus Housing. The idea is fresh air and light for those without it; this gives way to unique architecture.
4. Sponge Park - A garden made to hold water and filter out chemicals. The Gowanus is home to one in its experimental stages.
5. Carroll Street Bridge - One of the few examples of a retractable bridge in the US. It is a bridge that makes way for boats by being moved on tracks over to the ground.

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; do not include questions you can answer with a quick google search)

1. How much do the inhabitants of the Gowanus Canal care for and involve themselves in cleaning the canal?
2. Do the artists that once lived close to the canal still wish they were close?
3. In the present day, does the canal have any impact on health and lifespan?