

Learning Places Fall 2016

SITE REPORT #3

A Deeper Look inside the Community



This is an image of the Gowanus Canal taken from behind the Whole Foods on 3rd Street. Dredging has begun. This image sheds light upon the changes that are underway in the Gowanus community.

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INTRODUCTION

Prior to the site visit, I didn't know what to expect. I had no clue where we would visit or who we would speak to. I had no idea what questions we would ask or what answers we were looking for. Because of the past two site visits, I was familiar with the part of Gowanus that is north of Whole Foods. But I was not very familiar with the part of Gowanus that is south of Whole Foods. So, I expected that we would explore South of Whole Foods this time around. However, because we had a specific goal beyond just exploration and observation, we felt that it would be best tackle North of Whole Foods, which we already knew, with our specific topics in mind. This way we're able to target specific developments, businesses, etc. I expected to get some insight on how the older residents and business owners felt about the changes the Gowanus is undergoing. I expected to learn whether or not new residents are being made aware of the conditions of the Gowanus Canal and how were they made aware? I wanted to know how rent had been affected as a result of the changes. All this information we hoped to receive by way of the people.

SITE OBSERVATIONS

We first all met up at Whole Foods in the public space provided. The area was smelly because the dredging process had begun. It was interesting to watch because after having spoken with Christine during the second site visit, I was under the impression that the process will begin later this Fall. I thought it was cool to watch the workers scoop up huge chunks of this thick, black substance, from what is practically the surface of the water in the Canal. It allowed you to get an idea as to just how deep down the pollutants go.

After everyone had arrived we gathered in our groups and spent 10-15 minutes coming up with possible questions to ask community members, developments to visit, and we tried to focus in on a more specific topic. As stated in the previous section we decided to move North of Whole Foods because we were already familiar with the area and could use this familiarity to target specific developments and people in the small time-frame. After everyone brain stormed ideas, we dispersed with our groups.

As we exited Whole Foods and walked along 3rd Street towards Bond, we ran into some construction workers on the bridge. But when we tried to ask them questions we were told that, contractually, they cannot give any insight. A few feet further we passed an architecture company. We called the number and rang the bell, hoping to speak to someone regarding the change in development

in the area or just receive any information possible that could contribute to our topic. However, this too was a dead end as no one answered. So, we took the information and said we would set up a visit in the future.

We continued, made a right on Bond Street, and headed for the new development on 365 Bond. From Bond Street, we were able to turn on 1st Street where the leasing office was. But just as we were about to enter we saw a resident of the development, across the street, standing outside his home. His name was Matt. He told us that he and his family had just moved into this Townhouse all the way from London. We asked him if he was aware of the conditions of the Gowanus Canal prior to moving in to which he answered, “Yes.” But when we asked him how he became knowledgeable of the conditions, he told us that he did his own research. He let us know that he was not worried about the expected construction along the Canal but hopes it doesn’t last too long. We said our goodbyes and headed for the leasing office where we met Kristina.

Kristina is the real estate agent for the development and she was kind enough to give us a lot of information about it. The development has been open for residents since June 2017 and contains about 200 units, 40% of which are full. She did clarify that the development is actually TWO different developments. The one across the street has about 500 units. But both developments have the same architects which is why it is easy to think of the two as one.



Even though they share architects, the development on the left side is entirely different from the development on the right.

The prices are very costly; Town houses start at \$7000 a month for a 2 bedroom. However, on a plus side, you get the benefits of having a home and the amenities of staying in a hotel such as concierge, full service breakfast every morning, etc. We asked about marketing and client disclosure in regards to whether or not residents are being made aware of the conditions of the canal. She said people that have come in, overall, have been pretty knowledgeable of the conditions of the canal beforehand. Residents have been doing their own research but it’s not really something they advertise.

So, we were curious about the opinions of the development and its effect on the community. Will it ultimately result in the displacement of the local residents and the removal of classic elements that differentiate Gowanus for other neighborhoods? Kristina vouches for the development saying that they have tried to embrace elements of the community and weave that into their story. They have an art gallery, which we were able to see a bit of, where they'll be hosting art shows for the local Gowanus artists, resident events by pig beach, etc. They try to incorporate community elements. We then went to ask about demographics within the development, she stated that as a real estate agent she's not allowed to disclose such information but if you walk around you can get a sense of the demographics for yourself. So observing the community can shed some light on the demographic in the development. That area is predominantly Caucasian and from our previous site visits I have mostly seen Caucasian occupants in the park and residents walking in and out of the development. However, she did say the development contains an eclectic group of people that are all like-minded. We ended the conversation on a great note. She gave us her email address and stated that the developer is very welcoming to inquiry about the development so we should send her some questions to forward to him.

From there we pursued the Housing Project a few blocks down. However, it was an active crime scene on that day so we could not get inside to speak to anyone. So we decided to visit the C-Town Supermarket across the street. The goal was to talk to local residents and/or management to find out information about property value, product adjustment, change in demographics, etc. since gentrification has been underway in the Gowanus. It is here that we met Ms. Mary Glover, a local Gowanus resident since the 80s. She has raised her children here and has watched the area go through a series of changes.

According to Ms. Glover, she hasn't seen many abnormal changes in the area since the 80s. The changes that she has seen were expected because she stated that as the world has changed, the area has changed. She mentioned that the C-Town Supermarket, unlike the local delis and such, had not changed and that is because they are catering to the minorities in the housing projects across the street. She expressed an enthusiastic impression of the large development at 365 Bond Street because with the luxury developments pooping up, the area is now transitioning back to how it used to be when she first



The C Town Supermarket located directly across the street from the housing project.

came in the Gowanus. As far as displacement, she has little fear. She hasn't seen any changes in her rent and she feels secure with her role in the community. "If they come through with that wrecking ball, talking about tearing something down, I'm gonna ride that ball. Not 198 Bond Street!," she said.

ANALYSIS/DISCOVERIES

Based on the personal accounts that we've heard, the changes seem to be perceived with an overwhelming sense of positivity. Those we've asked view the development as a rebirth of the community or way to unite the community. Though we did not get to ask enough people to make a valid claim, displacement does not seem to be a major concern. It could be due to ignorance surrounding the Gowanus area being rezoned. It could be because not enough noticeable changes has occurred as of yet. Despite the changes, there has been an expressed desire to preserve the sense of community and authenticity of Gowanus.

The development produces a prominent demographic of Caucasians. When we looked at the demographics, we saw that prior to the housing projects, the area is comprised of mostly Caucasian. As you move towards the housing projects, you see a gradual increase of the African American demographic and a decline in the Caucasian demographic. But as you move past the housing project towards Downtown Brooklyn, there is a rapid increase in the Caucasian demographic again. The zoning change will produce more commercial and residential spaces and in turn will convert the Gowanus into a space of prime real estate. As the Gowanus becomes more of a desirable area to dwell, property value will go up, the type of stores will change, the products advertised will become more targeting, and those that lived in the area for its cost effectiveness will no longer be considered. If one can afford to accommodate such a lifestyle then the changes will seem beneficial but if not it will be perceived negatively.

KEYWORDS/ VOCABULARY

1. Housing Projects
2. Privately Owned Public Space
3. Gentrification
4. Displacement

QUESTIONS for FURTHER RESEARCH

1. Have the local businesses been adjusting the products they carry to target the incoming residents or keep up with the changing environment?
2. How has property value changed since the development has arrived?
3. Are local residents fearful of displacements and if not why? Is it a lack of awareness or do they feel like they are protected?