

Learning Places Fall 2017

SITE REPORT #3

Gentrification and Community Relations in the Gowanus



Image of a luxury condominium taken from the Union Street Bridge

Rumana Hassin Syed

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INTRODUCTION AND PRE-VISIT REFLECTIONS

To be honest I was not too excited about this trip. We have been to this same place more than once, we have had the opportunity of a guided tour by the Gowanus Canal Conservancy representative, Mr. Joseph Alexiou gave a presentation on the history of the area, Ms. Abby Subak talked to us about the same area, in fact even in our first library visit we mostly discussed the same place. I felt like I was done with place. I was more worried because I thought this time although we will be divided in groups

and will be exploring our areas of interest, I was unsure if I will have enough to write about in the site report, if I will have any new pictures to include, let alone the sketches. However, I tried keeping in mind what Professor Almeida said in the class that this class is not about the Gowanus, it is about learning and observing the places, we might overlook otherwise; Gowanus is just our case study. I forced myself believing the same, and to my absolute surprise I found this visit to the Gowanus to be the most fun and eventful.

SITE DOCUMENTATION:

MAP OF AREA OF INVESTIGATION



The image above shows the map of investigation.

KEY

Red (→): The path taken for the trip

The numbers in blue indicate the starting point, ending point and the major stops during the visit.

1. Whole Foods: This is the place the class met and our group started the adventure for the day
2. 365 Bond Street: This was first major stop during our investigation on community relations in the new condominiums
3. Affordable Housing by NYCHA where a murder had taken place
4. C-Town Supermarket: This is the place we met Ms. Mary Glover and the end point of our tour



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

Image1 and Image 2 were taken on my way to the whole foods where the class met.

Image 3 was taken while we went around the area in the group to look for information that we could use for our project.

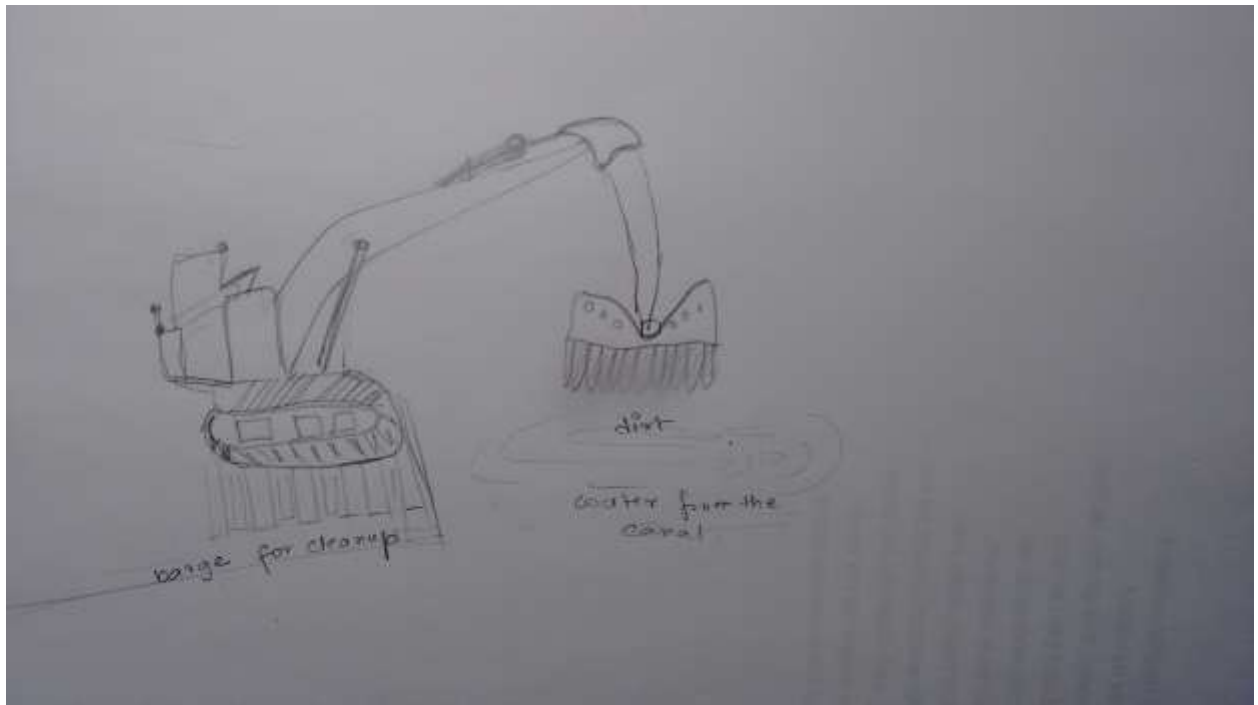
In the analysis section of the report I will use these images to compare and contrast between the existing and planned neighborhood in the area.



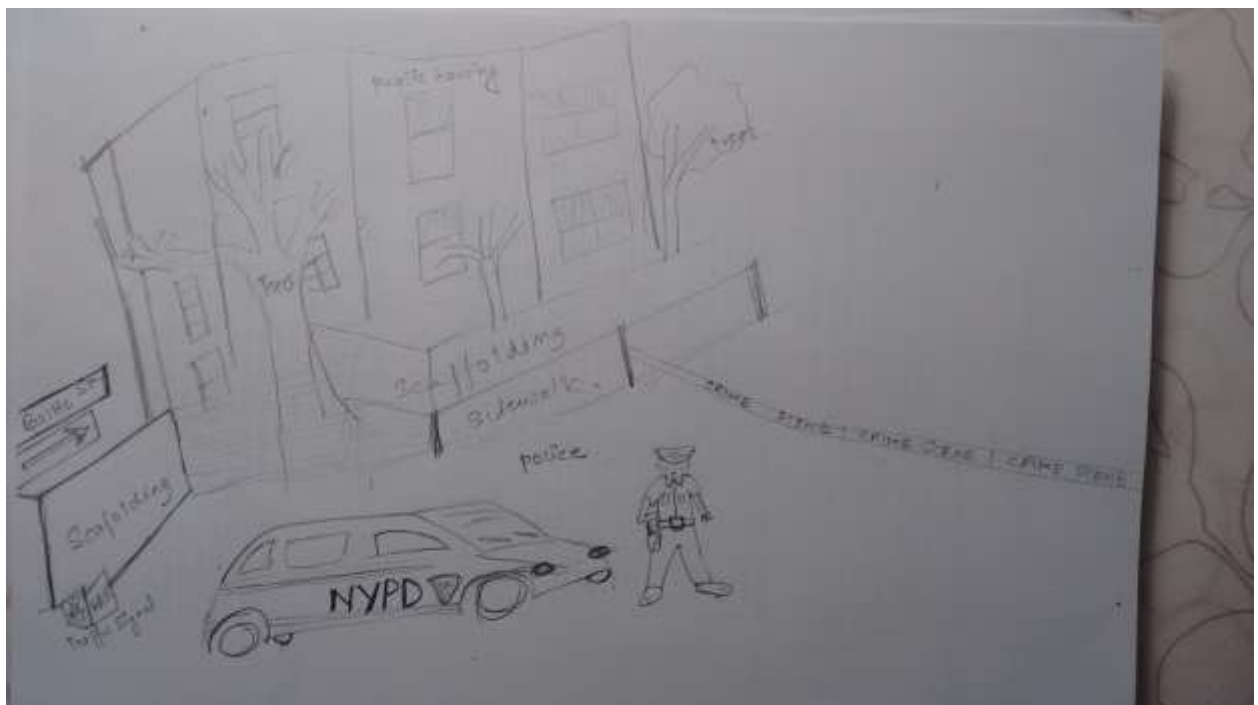
Although raining (drizzling), I found it exciting enough to do a pre tour and capture pictures of “Gowanus: Under Construction”



We were very lucky to be able to see the Union Street Bridge being drawn up. I just couldn't miss capturing it!



I tried to make a sketch of what I saw when I reached the Whole Foods to meet the class: The Gowanus Canal being dredged as part of the cleanup process



Sketch to show the crime scene we came across while trying to look for people to interview

This sketch will be useful in a rhetorical analysis of the area.

ANALYSIS:

The class met at 10:45 am near the Whole Foods. However, the delayed the class a little. While waiting for the other students we decided to sketch what we were seeing: the dredging of the canal. It was a unique experience not that it was a great one, because it was noxious and I thought I might throw up! Yes, it was that bad. And I think the rain made it even worse.

Initially our “Community Relations” group comprised of Ms. Ashley, Ms. Lisa, Ms. Sanaya and I. During the field trip, due to lesser number of students the “Gentrification/Marketing” group students Mr. Gerald and Mr. Kristopher were assigned to our group as well. Now that our group was large we brainstormed together, to incorporate the two themes and proposed our methods to conduct the trip for the day. We decided on interviewing the residents and the business owners for the most part, we also came up with some generic questions and decided to go with the flow as we meet new people. Once everything seemed more or less we decided we starting walking along the 3rd Street heading towards the 365 Bond, our first destination. Just after we came out of the Whole Foods promenade we met a handful of workers. We tried to interview them to get their perspective mostly on job market/temporary job creation. One of the workers signaled us to talk to another worker and when Ms. Sanaya an astute member of the group asked if we could we could audio record it, they absolutely denied to answer any of our question. This left me with a question if something suspicious was going on that the workers are so scared to talk about. Although one might say we got no information from these workers, I would still think we got an indirect impression of things not being totally transparent.

Not too far from that we saw a sign board that said it was a construction/architecture company. We thought talking to a representative from this place might give us some insight about the marketing or promotional activities of the place. We tried to go in but no one ever opened the door. Ms. Lisa, another astute member of the group tried calling on the phone number given on the sign boards, but no luck!

A little disheartened we decided on going straight to 365 Bond without stopping any further as we had already lost quite a bit of our class time. On reaching the nearby area, we kept following the leasing gallery sign board hoping to meet someone we could talk about the newly made condos. When we were just about to enter the leasing gallery, we spotted Mr. Matt. Not too hopeful, yet we approached to talk to him. He didn't seem too willing to talk as he seemed fairly busy. But he did spare a few minutes to talk to us. And this we didn't dare to ask him for the audio recording lest he denied giving an interview. Nevertheless, he said that he recently moved in to the Gowanus Condominium with his wife from London. He said he was aware of the pollution of the canal and also knew that it will be eventually cleaned. But when we informed him that the canal will not be totally cleaned until 2030, he seemed a little surprised. He was under the impression that the canal cleanup will be done much sooner. Just in a while he gave a sigh of relief and told us that he was there only at a temporary lease. I was very curious to know if he had known the conditions of the canal why did he come to this place at all. On my response he said that the amenities they offered were alluring. He also said that the cost at which such amenities were available were certainly very affordable. How affordable, my group and I didn't know until we met Kristina from the leasing gallery. Kristina Teiro is a real estate sales agent for the developments at the 365 and 363 Bond Street. After a long search we met a person who was very friendly and very willing to give a lot of information. She seemed more excited about the interview than we all were. She also let us audio record the interview. She said the construction of the condominiums has taken quite a long and people have been residing there only over four months now. I was surprised to know that within such a short span of time 40% of the 200 units were already filled. I was more surprised because the rent for a 2-bedroom apartment here was as high as \$7000 a month and Mr. Matt had previously told us it was very "affordable"! We came to know that the condo right across it was actually a different development although built by the same architect. Also, both these developments were results of spot zoning as the entirety of Gowanus area is yet to be rezoned. After these kinds of

marketing questions we focused on discussing the community building with her. In this regard she proudly said their development is an advocate of community building and to enhance that they provide a joint breakfast every morning for all the residents of the building. I am sure this is a great endeavor to community building, but is this enough? And also, this will only help build a feeling of community within the development what about the area in a broader sense? Although Ms. Kristina (who previously lived in Manhattan and now has the vision that Downtown Brooklyn is the new Manhattan) gave out an immense amount of information, these questions still remain unanswered.

When I was at this place, listening to Ms. Kristina, I remembered the images I had taken while on my way to the Whole Foods. The images (image 1 and image 2 from the site documentation section) showed row of similar looking multifamily houses. For some reason those low height different colored attached houses gave me a feeling of home as opposed to these huge condominiums that only gave me a feeling of a corporate office. I have the experience of both living in a condo and living in a two family house. And from my experience I can tell the latter gives the sense of community in a wider spectrum.

This interview was indeed fruitful. After interviewing the her and getting a “rich man’s” perspective, we decided to stop by the NYCHA housing projects to talk to people who I guess weren’t lucky enough to spend \$7000 a month a still call it “pretty affordable”! As we approached a young lady she was hurrying down the street as she was late for work due to the MURDER that had happened earlier that morning. We were certainly moved on hearing that. We then spotted the detectives, the cops and their cars and we were pretty alarmed as well and decided to move on instead of lingering around the crime scene. Although we didn’t get a chance to interview anyone here, but I do think the occurrence of a murder few blocks from such a posh condo does the raise the question of safety in the community. On the other hand, these days with the easy accessibility of guns raise a question on the issue of safety all over the country let alone Gowanus.

Now our group moved forward to interview some locals (not the newbies) in the area. We went to the C-Town Supermarket. There we met the most exciting interviewee, Ms. Mary Glover. She moved into the Gowanus in the 1980's and has happily lived there ever since. She acknowledges the changes that the area is going through, but she also appreciates it because she believes "change is the only static". She acknowledges the fact that no matter how good you think the place was in the past you cannot keep it the same way, without a change there is no chance of improvement. She also seemed to be a strong advocate of diversity. Instead of looking down upon 365 Bond condos as the evil which might cause gentrification and lead to an eventual eviction of her from her beloved Gowanus, she seemed to be really proud of it. She said with such developments, more diversity will come. As for the eviction she has full confidence in herself and in the unity of the community. And watching the love and respect that the other passerby showed to Ms. Mary by hugging her, kissing her or just by greeting her with a short and sweet, "hi, how are you doing?" , I can trust on this community on being together even during the hard times if it may come. The ever cheerful personality of this eighty years young abstract artist came out more brightly when she finished the interview with "If they come through with that wrecking ball, talking about tearing something down, I'm gonna ride that ball. Not 198 Bond Street!"(Ms. Mary Glover).

After talking to all these people I do get an idea that change is inevitable and not necessarily everybody takes it as an antagonist. The fear of displacement seemed negligible. And I conclude the reason behind it, is the belief in the strength of a united community. And I can thus infer that the community, the people and their unity is the genius loci of the place.

KEYWORDS/ VOCABULARY

1. 365 Bond
2. Abstract Artist
3. Redlining

4. Modern Amenities
5. Condominiums
6. Diversity

QUESTIONS for FURTHER RESEARCH:

1. Will community relations be given enough importance at the time of rezoning the Gowanus? If not, how can it be done so?
2. How has gentrification affected the community at the Gowanus in recent times?
3. How can you plan urban renewal but still keep the spirit of the previous community?
4. Has gentrification played the role of the villain even in the case of the Gowanus just like other parts of Brooklyn?