

Learning Places summer 2017

# SITE REPORT #1



Gowanus

Rosannel Cartagena

06.12.2017

## INTRODUCTION

The Gowanus neighborhood, a once beautiful and lively area known for its enriched history and clean ponds took a turn for the worse during its period of industrialization. Over the past centuries the Gowanus neighborhood has changed from the site of the first dutch settlement, to the scene of the battle of long island, to the area's transition into an industrial and manufacturing center. After the creation of the Gowanus canal everything seemed to have accelerated because of its use as a shipping dock and presence of industrial plants. Our class had the opportunity to go visit the Gowanus neighborhood and have a tour by the education coordinator named Shelby. We saw interesting things and learned so much about the Gowanus history. We were able to take notes and even sketch some of the famous Gowanus spots.

## SITE DOCUMENTATION (photos\*)

This picture is very interesting to me because of how surprisingly peaceful this looks. The first thing i noticed about the view was the water and how dirty it looked. I have never been to the Gowanus neighborhood so I really didn't know about the canal and the history behind it. I was surprised on how peaceful it was although the water was extremely dirty. When i was standing there i felt relaxed and stress free. I was amazed on how i can find that place to be peaceful and weirdly pretty. I think that's why i was so surprised. The view made me think of life and how although it was physically unattractive, i was able to appreciate how beautiful it really was like the Chinese philosophy of the yin and the yang.



This area is called a bioswales. A bioswale is a eco-sponge that consumes water and is also filled with plants, grass and vegetables. The bioswale in Gowanus has a team of six volunteers that help maintain it and also the canal. One thing that the volunteers should improve is to make a sign to let people from outside the neighborhood know what and where is the bioswales. Bioswales have been “growth in New York city for thousands of years”( Shelby, 2017). This particular bioswale is about 5 feet down, which is deeper than regular ones. Bioswales have inlets and outlets where the water can travel to water the plants, grass and vegetables. Bioswales are great for the environment and can be very helpful.



One of the main changes in Gowanus was due to gentrification. As you can see in the picture this is an area built because of the new condos. When they build new buildings they have to have a 44 foot public space because of the water front. This area is for open for the public to come and enjoy the canal view but since people from the neighborhood can not afford the rent in these new fancy buildings, they think the sitting area is private. The rent from an apartment in the new fancy buildings can start off at \$3,000 and up. Not only is the rent not being affordable

for people but it's creating new problems like adding "700 new units, which means more water added to the sewer and the canal" (Shelby, 2017).

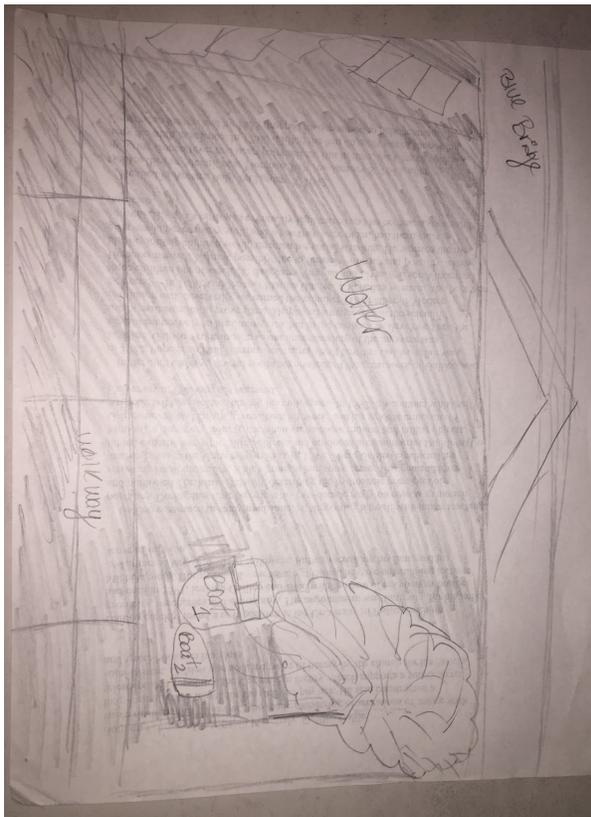


When the professor told us we were going to visit the Gowanus housing, my first thought was maybe i can relate since i live in the projects myself. It was interesting to see how the builds look. I remember first noticing the "Welcome to Gowanus Housing" sign on the front gate. It looked similar to the

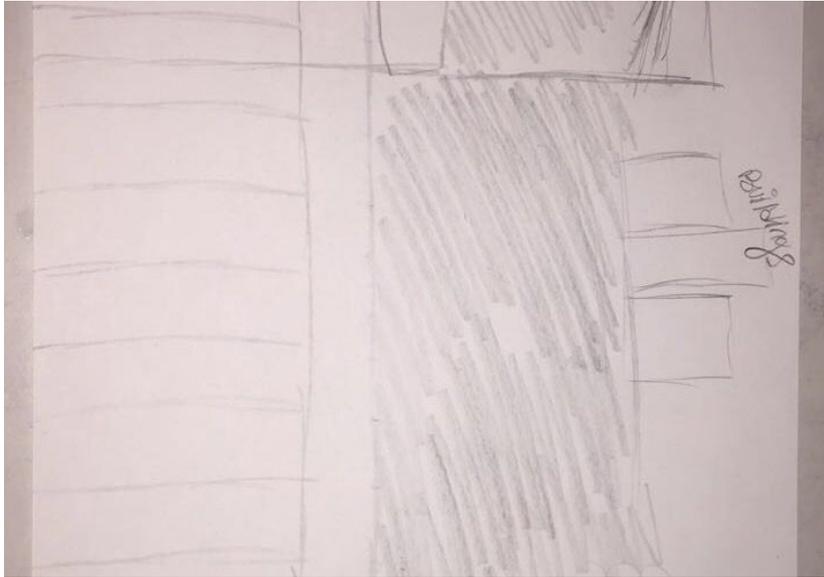
buildings where i live. As the class continue to walk into the projects we noticed a park. We noticed two parks by each others side with not one but two gates keeping them separated. One park that belong to the Gowanus housing and the other one for the public. The Gowanus private park looked old, sad and dark. The Gowanus park did not have much for the kids to play with just one slide and a couple of other things. Meanwhile the public park had swings, more slides, open space, and looked very modern and well taken care of. It was sad to see the Gowanus park next to the public park. I saw children running in the public park and no children in the private park. The term projects original came from the builders who named it “ the new project”(Montgomery, 2017) and later remained as a negative word. Today the projects are seen as poor buildings, bad maintenance and many other negative things. The first projects we visited had a park, more sitting area and even citi bikes. Unlike the last projects we visited ( the last picture on the right), it looked very low in maintenance, sad and higher than the other buildings around it. It was interesting to see the other side of the Gowanus and not the new gentrified area.

## SITE DOCUMENTATION (sketches\*)

\*2 sketches minimum required per site visit



This sketch was represents the view over the bridge. I really like this view because it made me feel at peace. This is by the Union Street Bridge. When i was standing looking over the bridge i saw two boats, green-blue water, and a blue bridge on the opposite side. The boats looked very old and abandoned. One of the boats was sinking.



This sketch is near the whole foods where the superfun area. The area is another waterfront view that looks out into Gowanus. You can see some buildings from far. The superfun area is another peaceful place for the public to come and enjoy the view and also join some of Gowanus free art class.

## GENERAL NOTES:

- Flushing tunnel
- Little public spaces in Gowanus
- Whole foods brand new
- Green roof
- Art lab- artists come and have art for the community
- Superfun-site of environmental polluted places
- 2010 superfun
- Clean up the canal
- 2022- when it will be done

- Two tanks for the sewer
- Water will be held in the tank
- About 400 million of gallons of raw sewer
- Canal- two types of main pollution- coal and combined sewage overflow
- Canal has oxygen
- Canal has a combination of fresh water, salt water and water

## INSIGHTS/DISCOVERIES

Gowanus has a lot of historical areas. I learned many different things about the neighborhood during the site visit. When i first saw the film Citizen Jane i learned about the city back then. Jane Jacobs was a very brave woman for fighting for what she believed even if she suffered. The film allowed me to understand why Jane Jacobs for fighting for her neighborhood. When i visited Gowanus you can see all the new changes happening and the community slowing separating. Jane Jacobs would of not like Gowanus. It was interesting to have also read one chapter of Jane Jacobs book before visiting the site. In the book “The Death and life of Great American Cities” Jacobs talks about the importances of a city. She explains the differences between a successful neighborhood and an unsuccessful neighborhood. She also talks about the good things in a neighborhood like clean parks, clean environments, clean housing and etc. She explains the problems that can occur in a neighborhood and how to solve them. A neighborhood needs a large amount of support in order for it to be successful. She goes into details explaining that you can’t recreate the memories a neighborhood has created; it just won’t be the same. After reading Jacobs chapter of her book, and seeing the film i understand on why it’s important to care about your neighborhood. A neighborhood is more than a community it’s a place where everyone can relate and help each other out. Not fighting for your community can lead to new changes like gentrification.

## KEYWORDS/VOCABULARY & DEFINITIONS

\*5 keywords minimum required per site visit

Neighborhood- The people living near to a certain place or within a certain range; neighbours collectively.

Bioswales- landscape elements designed to concentrate or remove silt and pollution from surface runoff water.

Environment- The action of circumnavigating, encompassing, or surrounding something; the state of being encompassed or surrounded.

Gentrification- The process by which an (urban) area is rendered middle-class.

Projects- a government-subsidized housing development with relatively low rents.

Superfund- A site of environmentally polluted area that the government funds to clean up the toxic wastes.

Community- A body of people who live in the same place, usually sharing a common cultural or ethnic identity.

Combined sewage overflow- The discharge from a combined sewer system triggered by water runoff such as snowmelt or storms.

## QUESTIONS for Further RESEARCH

1. What can the community do to help with the pollution of the canal?
2. How can people help those who are not aware of the conditions of the Gowanus?
3. Will gentrification help change the Gowanus positively?

### Refeneces

Jacobs, J. (1961). The Death and Life of Great American Cities. *The Use of American Cities* (Chapter 6).

<https://library.citytech.cuny.edu/research/articles/oxford-english-dictionary>

Montgomery, J. 2017. Class Lecture

Shelby, 2017. Education Coordinator