

Learning Places Summer 2017

SITE REPORT #1

Gowanus



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INTRODUCTION

Introduction to Gowanus Canal and public housing were very thorough and complex. During first site visit we explored Gowanus Canal. Originally Gowanus Canal was a creek. As Brooklyn started to grow, develop and compete with Manhattan, local officials have decided to transform the creek into canal in order to create a transportation system that assists in stimulating commerce and industry (EPA, n.d.). Gowanus Canal is very contaminated due to prolonged pollution from industry in the past and currently due to CSO combined sewer overflow. In 2010 Gowanus Canal has joined CERCLA National Priority List (NPL). CERCLA is well known as Superfund, a federal organization that has been created with a purpose of cleaning sites that are hazardously polluted (EPA, n.d.).

During second site visit we learned or/and enhanced our knowledge pertaining public housing. It has been created for low-income families by famous urban planner Robert Moses in 20th century. Currently public housing is managed by NYCHA New York City Housing Authority. A goal of public housing is to provide an affordable and safe housing for the families with low and moderate income and give them an opportunity to live in five boroughs of NY with an easy access to community service. (Authority, n.d.) Public Housing is commonly known as “projects”. During class site visit we could observe how “projects” had a street life absent. From Jane Jacobs, a New York City resident and a savvy observer, point of view a street life was essential part in public housing. That is why she tried to preserve it and to deliver a strong message about its importance to city planners by writing a book “The Death and Life of Great American Cities”.

SITE DOCUMENTATION (photos*)



It was important to take this photograph in order to illustrate bioswales. An eco-sponge that absorbs or removes pollution from surface runoff water, on the surface it has vegetation (trees, bushes and grass) and underneath there is a swaled drainage. It can hold up to 2 Gal of water. Thus, it helps to keep sewer water out of sewer system. Bioswales has an inlet and outlet so water can come in of the street and will percolate out. It is very efficient and convenient accommodation to clean our environment.



I took this picture because it astonished me that a price to rent an apartment in this new building on Bond Street goes as high as \$3000 per month and to buy the apartment, it would approximately start from \$1000,000. A public area next to the building is super small and on the right hand side (outside of a photograph) there is polluted Gowanus Canal. If people do not do thorough investigation, research of the area where they invest money into the apartment, which is usually the case, they would be super disappointed with that purchase.



This photograph illustrates advertising campaign that promotes apartments and how beautiful life will be for people to live in this area. However, it is complete lie. Because Gowanus neighborhood has multiple issues, especially polluted canal and it is absolutely dangerous to swim in the water.



During 2nd on site visit we were in Boerum Hill, observed and compared two projects and discussed public housing development, rules and regulations. . While we were heading there, I have learned new terminology, visually observing, such as cornice, lintel, and parapet. Therefore, now I look at the buildings from new perspective and evaluate them from architectural point of view. Additionally, I can see significant difference between very old buildings and newer ones. As for cornice, it is the part of the building that is located on the very top of it, it was built to demonstrate a particular design and an existence of the cornice states that the building was built in 19th century. Unfortunately, some landlords could not renovate cornices properly and it was hard to maintain them, plus if some parts of cornices fall down, it can kill or injure people. That is why some landlords just got rid of them. Cornices are illustrated on a photograph on the left hand side. As for lintel, it is a thing above the window and it also creates a special style for the building.



This photograph demonstrates a project that has been built by famous urban planner Robert Moses. The area around was quite clean and maintained well. Also, there was no loitering around, however, street did not feel alive, there was no interaction between people and even children did not play on the ground that was build for the residents of this building. The only good thing about the area was that it felt very green with plenty of trees and bushes. The location is Boerum Hill.

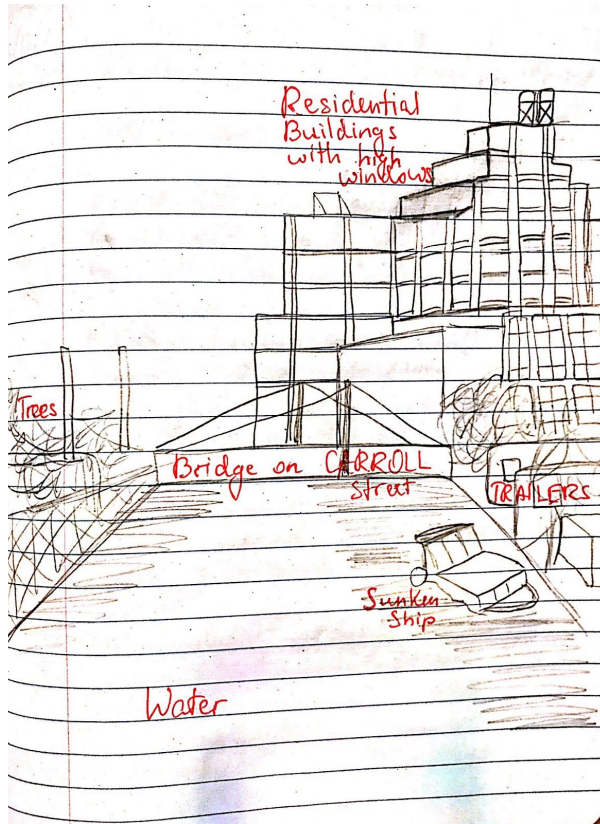


The photograph shows another kind of projects, high-rise building. The positive part is that apartments get a lot of sun light and there are plenty of space around the building. But the negative part is that is secluded and again there street life is absent. This building is located in Boerum Hill neighborhood.



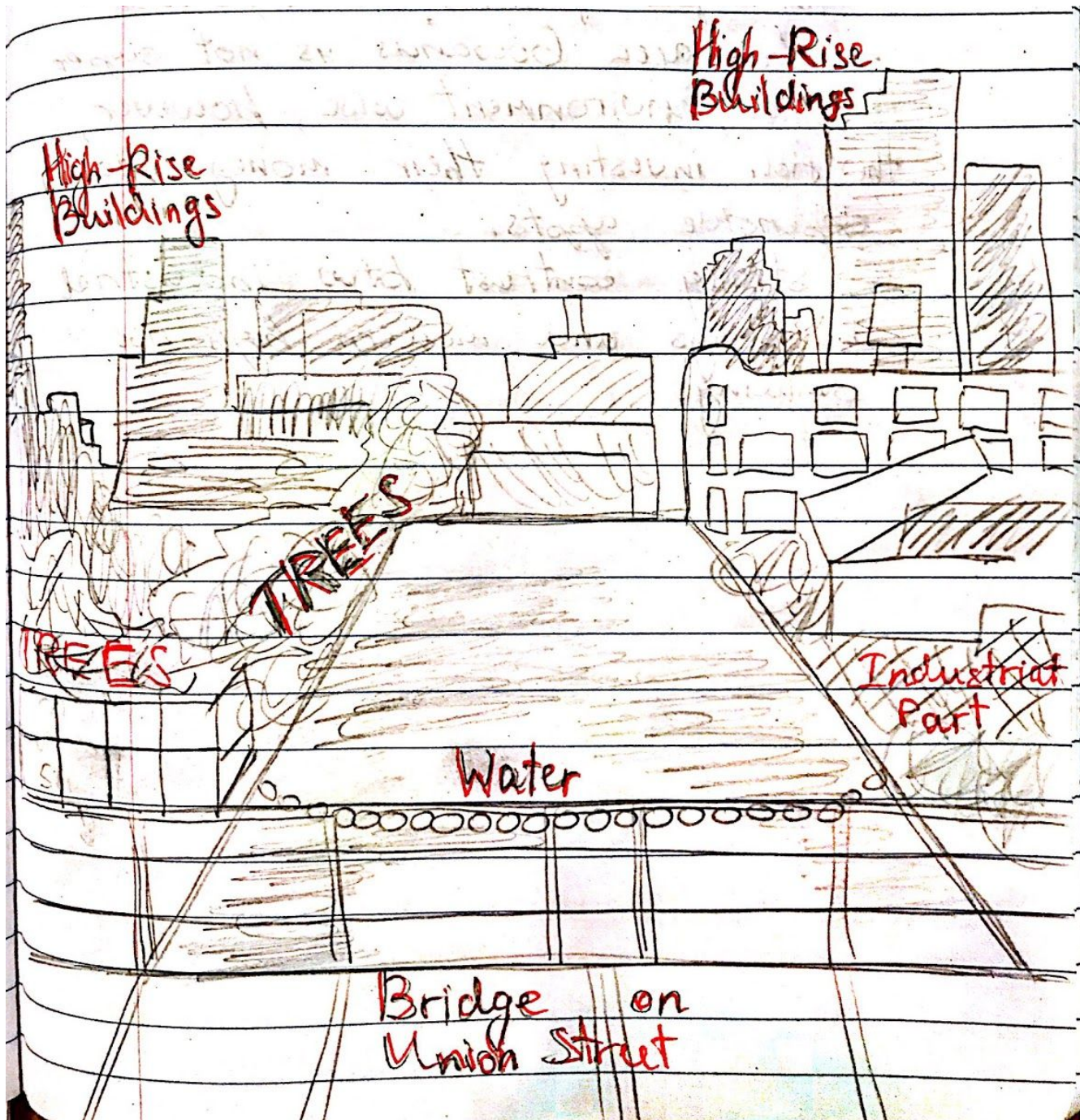
The photograph highlights the difference between two playgrounds for the kids. A first one on the right side is quite shabby, poorly maintained and it is completely empty, it belongs to the project. Both of them are separated with two fences. A playground on the left side that belongs to public park was well maintained and full with kids playing there. That solid contrast was noticeable right away. No one wanted to spend time on project's playground, which is a totally different from how Robert Moses saw it will function. I strongly felt that it is important to document this aspect and describe it.

SITE DOCUMENTATION (sketches*)

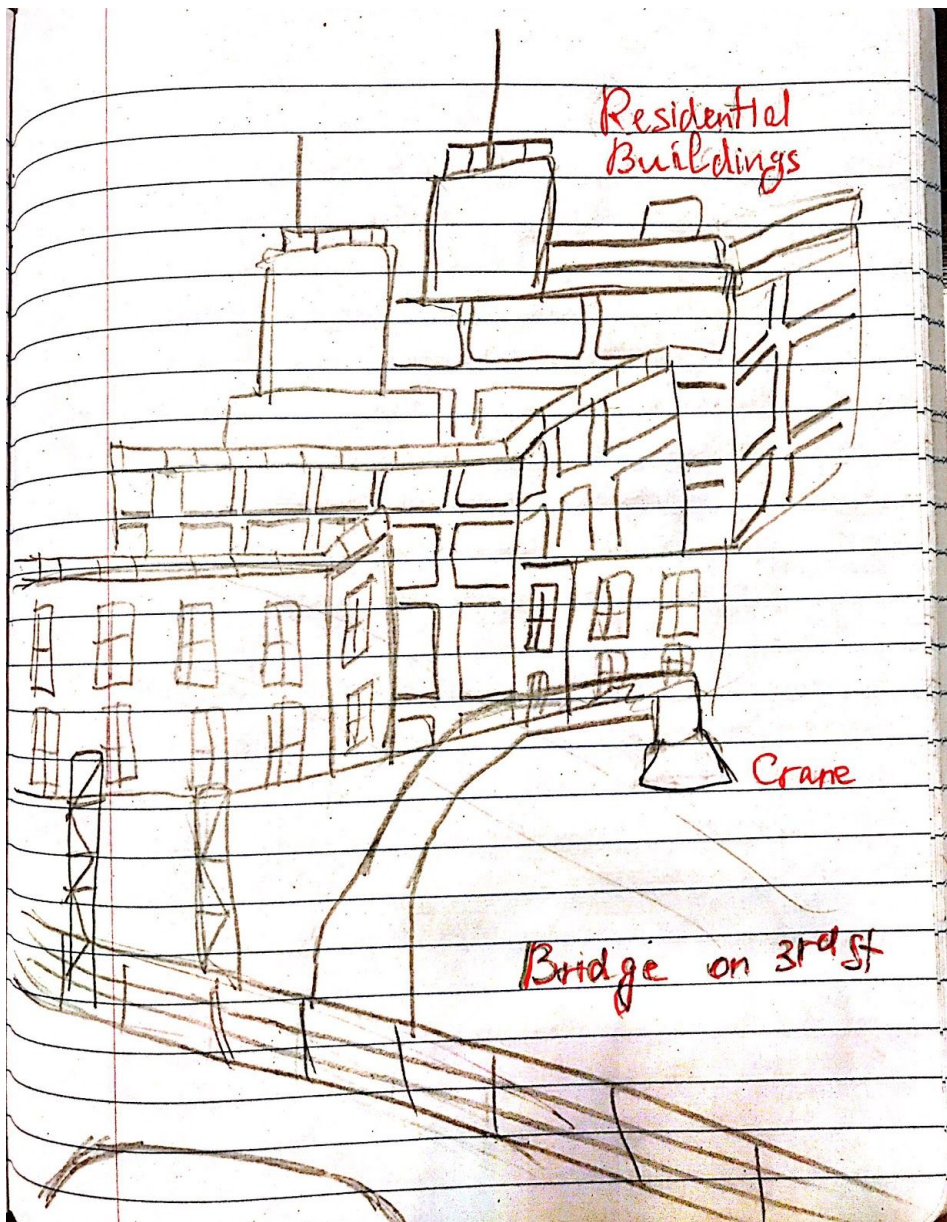


I have drawn residential buildings, bridge on Carroll Street, Gowanus Canal and sunken ship in the water because it caught my interest right away and that is how I picture Gowanus neighborhood now. The neighborhood has strong contrast such as modern residential buildings recently build on one side and on the other side of the canal an old, slummy industrial part of neighborhood and in the middle Gowanus Canal with polluted water and abandoned ship in it. Overall, it is very striking and hard to forget. When I look on this sketch now, it screams to me that Gowanus neighborhood has to be properly taken care of.

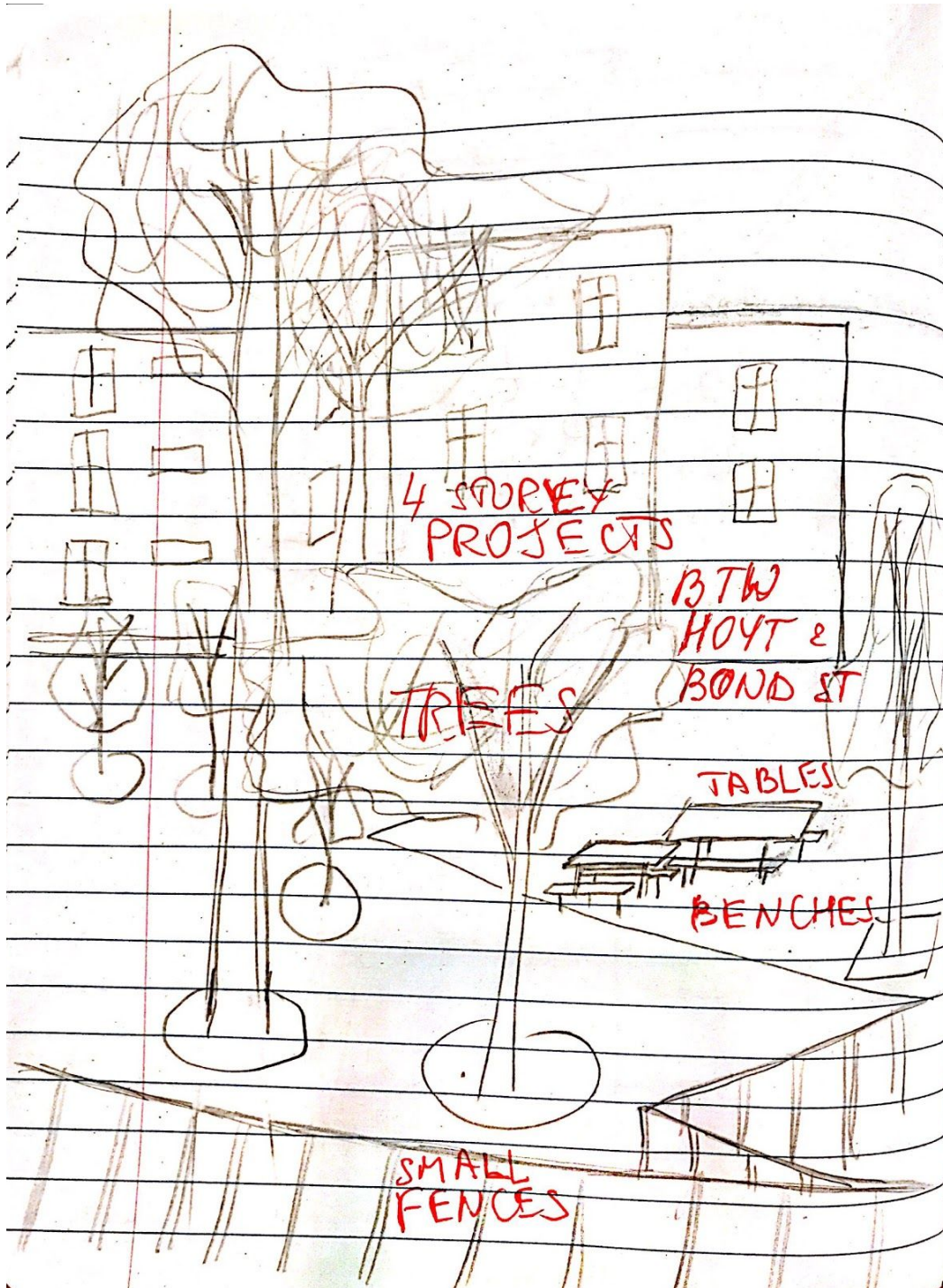
This sketch states that on the very far background a new era of high-rise buildings is gradually developing and it looks very alluring, however, on the front of the drawing there are battered and worn down industrial plants and overall poor area that is badly maintained, and lastly polluted water. It makes me sad to watch this unhealthy environment, that developers are interested in money only and ignore that fact that surrounding areas are in huge need of improvement. That is the view from the bridge on Union Street.



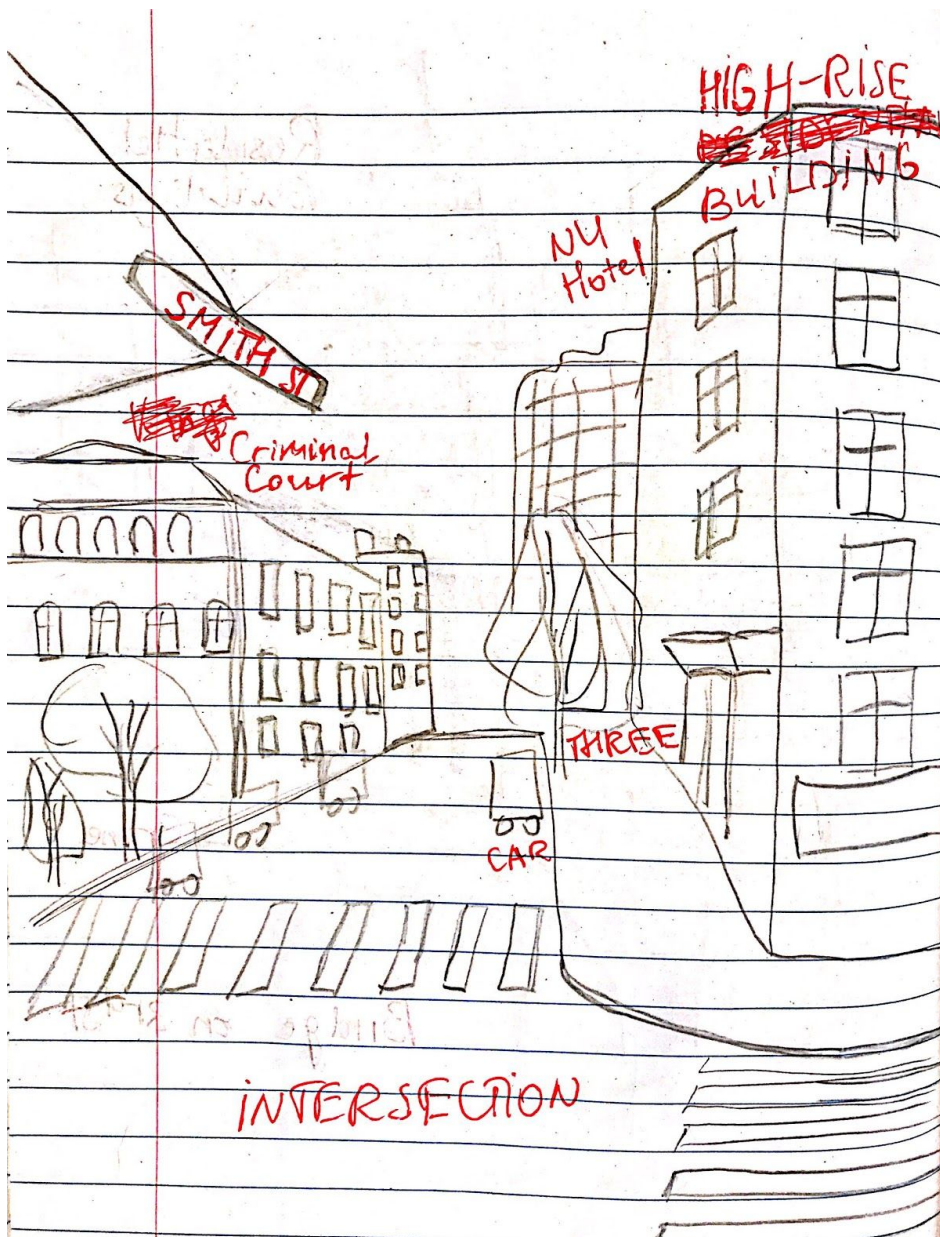
Another sketch illustrates that extremely expansive condos have been built right next to 3rd Street. There is a crane in front of the building and then a the bridge. On the left hand side a heavy construction (outside of the sketch) was going on. I wanted to draw it because gentrification process that is going on now it Gowanus neighborhood started concern me. Behind this beautiful and luxurious buildings some old buildings in poor conditions are located and people with low-income used to live in old buildings. Sadly long time Gowanus residents can not afford to move to new expensive apartments in these high-rise buildings. Therefore, the residents would have to move to totally new areas simply because they have no choice.



In this sketch I wanted to illustrate 4 storey project and highlight how green it is with many trees and benches, which creates cosy and convenient environment. But again, it was completely empty, meaning without people. While we had a tour with class there or were walking by on our way back to school still there was no single person and atmosphere in this area felt very lonely. There was no street life that Jane Jacobs was fighting for.



In this sketch I wanted to demonstrate a new era of modern high-rise buildings. The location is an intersection of Smith Street and Atlantic Avenue. On the right hand side, there is super high NU Hotel and right across the street (left side) Kings County Criminal Court. That area above Atlantic Avenue looks very astonishing and successful. Whereas, the area right below Atlantic Avenue is completely different (not on the sketch). There are old 5 storey buildings and Middle Eastern restaurants, in comparison to the area with the hotel and the court, very poorly maintained. A savvy observer can notice this contrast right away.



GENERAL NOTES:

- New York City resident Jane Jacobs (Lived from 1916 to 2006) was a brave journalist that strongly opposed city planning by an urban planner Robert Moses (1888-1981) and successfully protected area where she lived, West Village.
- Gentrification is a process of renovation degraded neighbourhoods in metropolitan cities.
- Gowanus Canal contamination.
- CSO Combined Sewer Overflow.
- Superfund.
- EPA Environmental Protection Agency.
- Public Housing, projects.
- Zonning.

INSIGHTS/DISCOVERIES

Gowanus Canal has been and is contaminated “By decades of industrial and sewage discharge” (Besonen, 2017), to be exact Gowanus canal is polluted with “polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, polychlorinated biphenyls and heavy metals, including mercury, lead and copper, are found at high levels in the sediment in the Canal” (EPA). In fact, Gowanus Canal is a home to sewage treatment plant. Sewer system in New York City is combined so in the event of heavy rainfall the system is overflowing and eventually all human waste goes to Gowanus canal. Therefore, the canal has to be cleaned. A responsible organization for the cleanup is EPA Environmental Protection Agency. The purpose of the EPA is to environment and people’s health.

Superfund was appointed as a guardian to Gowanus Canal in 2010. Superfund has approximately 25 potentially responsible parties that have promised to clean up the canal.

Unfortunately, planning of cleaning Gowanus Canal has been going on for years and still the canal remains very polluted due to unorganized planning and inefficient implementing different ways of cleaning it.

A project of public housing for low and moderate income families was offered by an urban planner Robert Moses to New York City planners and after its confirmation was implemented in 20th century. However, Robert Moses didn't take into consideration that in order to build a successful public housing residents needed a street life, to be able to build communities. Whereas, he tried to cut of street life and he was trying to build highways and to enhance opportunities of city residents to travel by cars, which seemed as a great plan in theory but physically it was not the case. For these reasons Robert Moses encountered multiple protests from New Yorkers and eventually his idea of planning an urban city was a big failure. The very strong opposition was created by Jane Jacobs, a journalist and a NY resident. Based on her experience living in West Village she wanted to bring awareness to NYC residents and its government of the most efficient way of building and developing the city. She was a brave woman because she was not scared to oppose city planners and a smart woman too since she could find a way and right people to create that strong and effective opposition.

QUESTIONS for Further RESEARCH

1. Are future residents of luxurious and expansive apartments in Gowanus neighborhood aware about contamination of the canal ?
2. What is the most efficient way to clean up Gowanus Canal, in fact, to get it done without bureaucracy?
3. Is it really worth to invest huge amounts of money in Gowanus neighbourhood? Will it have a promising future for its residents?

KEYWORDS/VOCABULARY & DEFINITIONS

1. Bioswales – A long, channeled depression or trench that receives rainwater runoff and has vegetation (such as grasses, flowering herbs, and shrubs) and organic matter (such as mulch) to slow water infiltration and filter out pollutants. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)
2. Pervious – Penetrable (M-WD)
3. Impervious - Not allowing entrance or passage (M-WD)
4. Indigenous – Originating naturally in a region. (Oxford American Dictionary)
5. Percolate – (1) Filter or ooze gradually. (2) Prepare (coffee) by repeatedly passing boiling water through ground beans. (OAD)
6. Brownfield – A tract of land that has been developed for industrial purposes, polluted, and then abandoned. (M-WD)
7. Boulevard – (1). A broad tree-lined Avenue. (2). A broad main road. (OAD)
8. Superblocks – A very large commercial or residential block barred to through traffic, crossed by pedestrian walks and sometimes access roads, and often spotted with grassed malls.(M-W D)
9. Tributary – A river or stream flowing into a larger river or lake. (OAD)
10. Cornice – (1) An ornamental molding around the wall of a room just below the ceiling. (2) A horizontal molded projection crowning a building or structure. (OAD)
11. Parapet – A low wall at the edge of a roof, balcony, etc., or along the sides of a bridge. (OAD)
12. Lintel – A horizontal supporting piece of wood, stone, etc., across the top of a door or window. (OAD)
13. Zoning – Dividing into zones (Oxford English Dictionary)
14. Gentrification – The process by which an (urban) area is rendered middle-class. (OED)

15. Modernism – (1) A usage, mode of expression, peculiarity of style, etc., characteristic of modern style. (2) Modern character or quality of thought, expression, technique etc. (OED)

16. Speculation – An act of speculating, or the result of this; a conclusion, opinion, view, or series of these reached by abstract or hypothetical reasoning. (OED)

17. CSO Combined Sewer Overflow – combined sewer systems are sewers that are designed to collect rainwater runoff, domestic sewage, and industrial wastewater in the same pipe. (EPA)

18. Projects – A usually public housing development consisting of houses or apartments built and arranged according to a single plan (M-WD)

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