

Learning Places Summer 2017

# SITE REPORT #1

## Gowanus Canal and the Gowanas neighborhood



Starky M. Acevedo

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## INTRODUCTION

We started the semester by trying to get a sense of what figures like Jane Jacobs as well as Robert Moses stood for and what type of impacts they had on communities in the city. We then used some of the thinking and ideas of these people as well as our own experience to analyse the Gowanus neighborhood and the Gowanus canal first hand. The Gowanus canal is a 1.8 mile long and 100 foot wide canal in Brooklyn New York that empties into New York Harbor. It's surrounding neighborhoods are Park slope, Cobble Hill, Carroll Gardens and Red Hook. The canal was originally a creek turned into a canal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was heavily used as an industrial transportation route by companies like paper mills, gas plants and concrete manufactures. After nearly 150 years of having industrial waste dumped into the canal as well as becoming a sewage dump for the surrounding neighborhood it has becomes one of America's most polluted sites, even becoming a superfund site. The first Despite the conditions of the canal the neighborhood is still attracting a lot of attention and becoming a target for big time developers bringing with the a new wave of gentrification.

## SITE IMAGE 1



This image of the Gowanus Canal shows the present conditions of the canal. We can see how polluted the canal is in this image. The top of the water has grece like spots as a results of all the chemicals and pollutants in the water. The water itself is green and murky. On the edges of the canal we see trash that looks like it has been piling for a

very long time. The border conditions of the canal seem to be in all different type of conditions in some areas it has been reinforced either by siding of sheet piling but other sections of the border seem to not have any border at all.

## SITE IMAGE 2



This image in my opinion captures the canal with a some of it surrounding context. We can see of the key features that make up the surrounding neighborhoods and communities. On the left of the image we see on of the separating wall of an existing concrete supplier. Across from the concrete there is a very large bus lot and beyond that, cutting across the sky we can see the Smith and 9th train station, the city's highest train station. Most of the buildings around are not residential leaning more towards the manufacturing side. The water itself is again dark and murky but we can still see vegetation along the side. There is plenty of trash and the smell was pretty bad on this day

## SITE IMAGE 3



In the image above we can see some of the results of developers doing what they do. To the left of the

image is relatively new Whole Foods. The entire yard of the whole foods is designed to be permeable to account for possible flooding, whether it works well or not is yet to be tested. The Whole foods seems to be somewhat eco friendly as we can see the solar panels as well as wind towers. On their parking lot they also have chargers for electric cars. However along with a whole foods comes along unaffordable prices for the residents in the area, this being a sign of the gentrification to come. We can also see one of the canals tributary branches. One of the canals most interesting features is it bends and turns.

## SITE IMAGE 4



One of the ways some in the community are trying to reduce the amount of pollutants reaching the canal is by using bioswales. Bioswales reduce the amount of stormwater reaching the canal by absorbing some of it like a sponge and removing some of the toxins and pollutants found on runoff storm water. Bioswales are designed with an inlet and an outlet allowing for water to enter and leave. It is important to note the difference between a tree pit and a bioswale. This bioswale is 6 foot deep and can absorb up to 2 million gallons of water. The vegetation found in bioswales needs to be very resilient and ideally native in order to resist the pollutants. One of the drawbacks to bioswales is that to in fact require a bit of maintenance.

## SITE IMAGE 5



In this image we can see the brand new luxury condominiums in the background and in the front there is ongoing construction and the covering of old siding with new shoring and sheet piling. It is also important to note how the scale of the condominiums is broken down to appear to be in smaller proportions. The architect did this by using different types of materials and brick colors.

## SITE IMAGE 6



As per NYC zoning any new construction going on on waterfront residential property a 40 foot esplanade is required. This particular esplanade is besides the new condominiums and although it is a public space it is a bit hidden from the public. This esplanade also serves similar functions with the bioswales as it is also a bio sponge filtering some of the run off making its way to the canal.

## SITE IMAGE 7



This image shows the difference between how the facade and sidewalk of a new condominium looks and the sidewalk of an old industrial building. The right side the sidewalk is clean and new and on the left side we see graffiti on the wall we see cracks on the sidewalk as well as a bit of greenery from lack of maintenance and usage. It is also important to note is is one of the paths taken to get to the required public space by the canal.

## Types of building in Gowanus neighborhood



These three images show some of the types of buildings in the neighborhood. The first image shows a five story residential building on the corner of Smith and 4th street. The building has small shops on the ground floor and residential next to it ranging from 4 three stories to five stories, most with colored cornices. The second image shows an old industrial building that is now under construction. There is a large number of buildings along the canal in this same type of old industrial style. The last image shows newer residential apartments. We can see how modernism might have inspired this style as it is a lot simpler than what was previously done. There are no cornice or lintels and the red and brown panels used for siding seem modern when compared to brick.

## SITE IMAGE 8

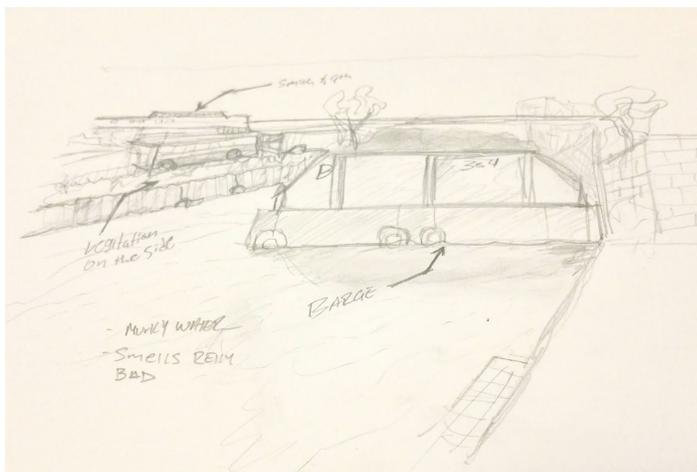


This image shows the parks of a project playground and the playground of the NYC park in the Gowanus community. Both playgrounds have their own fence and although the city playground can be used by all and the project playground by residents only the public playground had a lot more kids. This particular project took up an entire superblock. It was designed with Robert Moses in mind but it does not feel too detached from the community like other Moses projects. This is in part because the perimeter buildings are not too tall and still have a relationship between the street and the apartment buildings.



These are two different projects in the Gowanus neighborhood. On the left is the Gowanus projects and on the right is Wyckoff Gardens. Both create a disconnect between the street level and the people living on the higher floors. Their scales are also a lot larger than the smaller homes in the neighborhood. There is also a lack of commercial places in these areas.

## SKETCHES



On this sketch I stood on the border of the Gowanus canal and found it super interesting to see a very large Barge parked in the canal. The barge was stocked with gravel. It was interesting to see the canal still being used the same way as it was 150 years ago. Although the water is polluted to nearly dangerous levels there is still greenery on its edges.



This is a sketch under the Gowanus expressway. I found this interesting because the expressway separates Red Hook from Carroll Gardens and neighborhood along the edge of the canal. The change from one side of the expressway to another was great. On the Red Hook side everything felt more like a community and on the side of the canal things seemed more industrial. Under the expressway it seemed abandoned

and dark. There was cracks all over the ground and one could get the sense that it might be a dangerous place at night.

## GENERAL NOTES:

- The Gowanus receives about 2 million gallons of raw sewage annually
- The Gowanus is a man made canal, it was first a creek.
- Although highly contaminated there is some life in the canal. Some of the species in the canal include jellyfish, crabs and small types of fish
- In 2009 the U.S Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) proposed the cal become a superfund site. This would make all involved parties in the pollution of the site partly responsible.
- Bioswales can hold up to 2,000 gallons of water, making them a very effective way to filter toxins out of runoff storm water

## INSIGHTS/DISCOVERIES

In about two weeks of class the way I think of neighborhoods and communities has changed, in my opinion for the better. Our first class we were introduced to Jane Jacobs and she would remind the city of New York specifically developers what it meant to be a community. On chapter 6 of her book The death and life of great American cities Jane Jacobs starts us off by defining what she thinks a successful city is as opposed to an unsuccessful one. She believes that a good city is one that won't let itself be overwhelmed by its problems as well as being a city that is self-governed. A bad city is one that allows its

problems to push it to the edge. It was also interesting to see Jacobs explore the relationship between new housing developed by developers like Robert Moses and crime. According to Jacobs, studies suggest that delinquency was in fact higher in the new shelters. Jacobs also explains to the reader what type of city neighborhoods she believes are successful. (1) the city as a whole (Moses, 153) which she defines as the parent community. This is the system that is in charge of overseeing the other smaller parts of neighborhoods. Second (2) Street neighborhoods (Moses, 153) Moses says is where small scale everyday public life happens. Street neighborhoods are on the opposite side of the city as a whole. Street neighborhoods deal with its citizens on a more personal level. Areas like the safety of the citizens of that city depend on the success of street neighborhoods. Lastly Moses discusses a (3) districts and what its responsibilities are. Moses feels that this is the most sensitive of the three and is often where people tend to fail. Moses says that districts have to help bring the resources from the city down to the neighborhoods. According to Moses the districts should help translate the experiences of the street neighborhoods into policies of their city as a whole. I believe it is this disconnection of everyday life and experiences on street neighborhoods and the city as a whole the reason why developers can't seem to get it right when trying to improve a neighborhood. As a result of developers rushing the creation of a community we have failed projects as well as the never ending battle of gentrification. I had an idea of how the process worked but it was not until reading about Jane Jacobs and all those being pushed out that it hit me how ruthless developers can be. They used the Zoning codes to their advantage to change districts to whatever benefits their pocket usually residential. The film My Brooklyn helped me understand what people go through as a result of gentrification. It also helped me begin to recognize some of the forces behind gentrification, some of those being class, race and above all money. I have also gained a new appreciation for the Gowanus canal and not because of the over priced condominiums going up but for the history of the canal. It deserves to be restored and preserved. Perhaps we need to reevaluate how we utilize the canal.

## KEYWORDS/VOCABULARY & DEFINITIONS

**Combined Sewage Overflow:** Combined sewer systems are sewers that are designed to collect rainwater runoff, domestic sewage, and industrial wastewater in the same pipe. Most of the time, combined sewer systems transport all of their wastewater to a sewage treatment plant, where it is treated and then discharged to a water body.

**Coal Tar:** Coal-tar is formed when coal is coked, a process to prepare coal for use as a fuel.

**Wastewater treatment:** process used to convert wastewater- which is water no longer needed or suitable for its most recent use - into an effluent that can be either returned to the water cycle with

minimal environmental issues or reused.

**Saltmarsh:** A saltmarsh, also known as a coastal salt marsh or a tidal marsh, is a coastal ecosystem in the upper coastal intertidal zone between land and open saltwater or brackish water that is regularly flooded by the tides..

**Flushing tunnel:** Pulls water from harbor to head of the canal. This result in water that contains low amounts of oxygen.

**Bioswale:** Bioswales are landscape elements designed to concentrate or remove silt and pollution from surface runoff water.

**Brownfield site:** The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines abrownfield as "real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant".

**Superfund Site:** Superfund sites are polluted locations requiring a long-term response to clean up hazardous material contaminations. The party or parties involved are usually responsible of the clean up.

**Esplanade:** Superfund sites are polluted locations requiring a long-term response to clean up hazardous material contaminations. The party or parties involved are usually responsible of the clean up.

**Boulevard:** A broad street, promenade, or walk, planted with rows of trees. Chiefly applied to streets of this kind in Paris, or to others which it is intended to compare to them. Now freq. (esp. in *U.S.*), a wide or well laid-out street or avenue.

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

**Impervious:** Through which there is no way; not affording passage (*to*); not to be passed through or penetrated; impenetrable, impermeable, impassable. Surface that does not allow any water through.

**Pervious:** Allowing the passage of water, air, etc., through its substance; permeable

**Sheet piling:** sheet piles are long structural sections with a vertical interlocking system that creates a continuous wall. The walls are most often used to retain either soil or water.

**Cornice:** A horizontal ornamental molding along the edge of the building. Most commonly found at the top of the front of the building.

**Superblocks:** An above average block usually formed as a result of a large development project where smaller blocks are combined forming a super block.

**Projects:** A government-subsidized housing development with relatively low rents.

**Modernism:** A style or movement in the arts that aims to break with classical and traditional forms.

**Zoning:** the process of dividing land in a municipality into zones (e.g. residential, industrial) in which certain land uses are permitted or prohibited.

## QUESTIONS for Further RESEARCH

1. Is enough attention being placed on replacing the outdated infrastructure of the sewage system in the Gowanus neighborhood?
2. Is the city of New York not a major contributor to the pollution of the canal making it partially responsible for its rehabilitation as per its status as a superfund site?
3. Are the new residents moving into the Gowanus neighborhood aware of how dirty the canal actually is?
4. Is the gentrification of the Gowanus what it takes to get the canal cleaned up?

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