

Learning Places Summer 2017

SITE REPORT #1

Neighborhood of the Gowanus



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06.10.2017

INTRODUCTION

During the time of this course we have been studying all aspects of the Gowanus Canal. Those aspects consist of things such as history, gentrification, urban renewal, public housing and the environment in the neighborhood of Gowanus. Pollution in the Canal has also been a main focus due to

the lack of maintenance that has caused the oil and garbage build up at the bottom of the canal. Public housing has also been a focus due to zoning and the type of community that has formed near and around the Gowanus. A person that we are following that supported all aspects of community is Jane Jacobs. Jacobs was an activist who lived in her community and knew her community well enough to drive a movement to keep neighborhoods together and not destroy them by creating potential highways through the community. Her work has made a great impact on the downtown Manhattan area and it has helped give us a foundation of what a community should be while studying the neighborhood of Gowanus.

SITE DOCUMENTATION PHOTOS

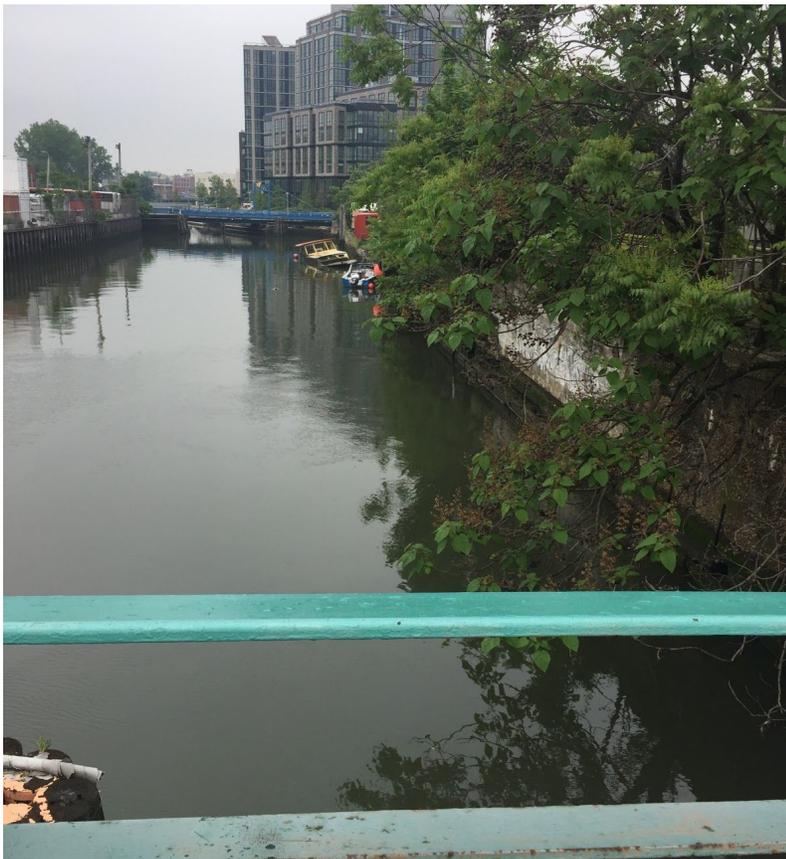


The NYCHA housing projects is located on a superblock near the Gowanus Canal. In this housing complex there is a small playground that is accessible to only the residents of NYCHA. Directly next to this NYCHA playground, there is an NYC public playground. Both of these playgrounds are directly next to each other. However, they isolate themselves with two different forms of separations. Between the two playgrounds there is a fence and a gate that keep the people out on the

public from trespassing into the NYCHA housing property. The isolation of the NYC public playground separates the public community from the NYCHA community.



As we toured NYCHA housing we came across what seemed to have once been a fountain that has now been restored. This area is a nice induction into the neighborhood because it brings a sense of community. It gives the residents of NYCHA a space for them to step out of their individual apartments and come together to socialize. The former fountain now has steps that play the role of seats for people to sit on. This area is also surrounded by actual benches, garbage bins to maintain the cleanliness of the area and trees that provide shade and a cool breeze.

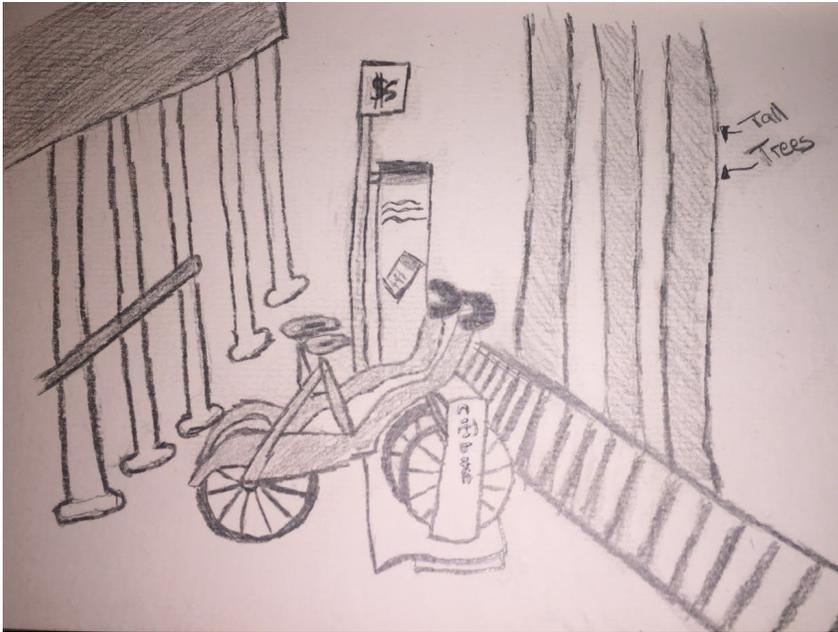


The Gowanus Canal is a very important part of the Gowanus neighborhood. This canal is filled with tons of garbage, oil, sewage and coal tar. To the further end of the canal, there are buildings that are going up that will be residential apartments. One problem that many people face in the Gowanus neighborhood is not being able to afford the cost of living. Many people have gotten evicted and many small business have foreclosed due to the high demand in rent.

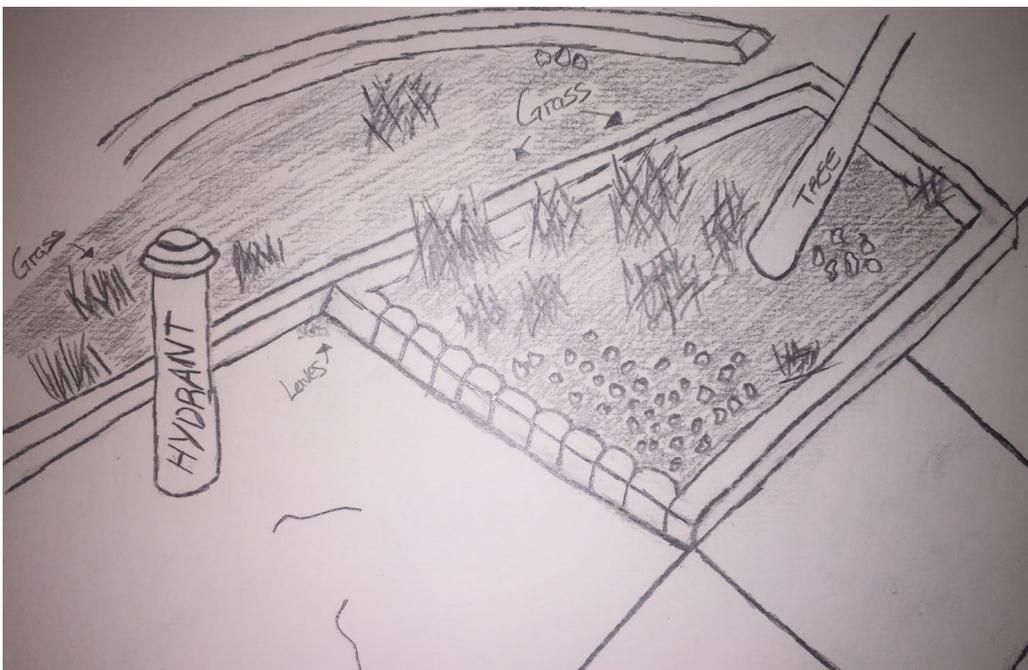


The neighborhood of the Gowanus has definitely been gentrified. Many of the areas near the canal have been renovated and modernised to fulfill the comfort of upper class families. Landowners have a tendency to sometimes exclude mentioning the state of the canal to avoid buyers from turning away from purchasing homes in the area. One home that stood out to me was an artistic home on Wyckoff Street, which is up the block from NYCHA housing. This home makes a political statement that the environment is not at it's best and global warming is destroying our ecosystem. It is to my surprise that this building still remains standing because it completely stands out in the community. It brings about a sense of appreciation to the environment surrounding us, and hope that the community would join together in order to create a movement to create a cleaner earth. The statement that this home is making is something that I believe Jane Jacobs would support. However, the reason I am surprised this home remains standing is because some may think it does not "fit" the type of community that is being built in the area.

SITE DOCUMENTATION SKETCHES



While touring the NYCHA housing property, we came across CitiBikes. These bikes were on the actual property that the NYCHA housing buildings were on. CitiBikes are located in various areas throughout the NYC boroughs. Their purpose is to create a form of transportation for people to get to their destination for a small fee other than MTA, driving or taking a cab. After borrowing a bike, it can be returned to any other CitiBike station as long as there's a spot to lock the bike back in. Having these bikes on the property gives a sense of community.



On the route around the Gowanus canal you will find a bioswale. The purpose is to collect any pollution that there could possibly be in water. This serves as a filter for any runoff water that may be on the bioswale. A bioswale is also known to prevent erosion.

GENERAL NOTES:

- The Gowanus Canal was a man made canal and was originally a creek.
- After simply 8 years of the man made Gowanus Canal, the Board of health declared it a nuisance.
- There were only 6 staff members that helped volunteer in Gowanus
- Rent can start from \$3,000 and up
- There is a Whole Foods walking distance from the canal
- Little public spaces in Gowanus
- Soil for bioswales is about 5 feet deep
- Canal has coal tar
- 2022- they plan on cleaning canal
- Not too many people can afford rent
- A lot of new buildings
- 700 new units
- New waterfront piers

INSIGHTS/DISCOVERIES

Citizen Jane is a film that portrays the impact that Jane Jacobs had in the 1960s on lower Manhattan when Robert Moses attempted to pull away from the community aspect of what is now known to be Soho. Robert Moses's plan was to accommodate the vehicles that drove through soho. He felt that it would create less traffic to have a highway running through lower manhattan that would allow for a quicker commute to all those who had to drive through the city. However, Jane Jacobs, along

with many others in her community, felt that this would not be a good plan for the people that lived in the area. Building a highway would have consisted of removing people from their homes, knocking down neighborhood stores and taking away the streets and sidewalks that connect the people together. This is exactly what Moses's job resulted in whenever he decided to build tall buildings or highways in a certain neighborhood. Jacobs felt that Moses viewed motor vehicles as more valuable than the actual people of the community, therefore she fought against the highway idea and won. I feel that what Jacobs did was very powerful and brave, considering that in the 60s the opinion of a woman was worth nothing specially against a man with money.

KEYWORDS/VOCABULARY & DEFINITIONS

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

Superfund: Very large or otherwise exceptional fund (in various senses); *spec. (U.S.)* (frequently with capital initial) a federal government fund established in 1980 to finance the Environmental Protection Agency's clean-up of sites contaminated with hazardous waste; (also) the associated clean-up programme.

Cornice: A horizontal moulded projection which crowns or finishes a building or some part of a building; *spec.* the uppermost member of the entablature of an order surmounting the frieze.

Modernism: A usage, mode of expression, peculiarity of style, etc., characteristic of modern times. Later more generally: an innovative or distinctively modern feature. Frequently in *pl.*

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

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

Indigenous: Born or produced naturally in a land or region; native or belonging naturally to (the soil, region, etc.). (Used primarily of aboriginal inhabitants or natural products.)

Lintel: A horizontal piece of timber, stone, etc. placed over a door, window, or other opening to discharge the superincumbent weight.

Boulevard: 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 frequently (esp. in *U.S.*), a wide or well laid-out street or avenue.

QUESTIONS for Further RESEARCH

1. Why were so many public housing buildings built along coastlines ?
2. Is there a reason other than isolation for placing certain groups of people in housing ?
3. What could have been done better to improve the maintenance of the public housing buildings ?
4. What strategies can be put in place to create a better sense of community between people in isolated housing areas and people in the remainder of the community ?

REFERENCE

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

2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyFGB225A1w&t=28s>
3. <http://www.oed.com.citytech.ezproxy.cuny.edu:2048/>