

Learning Places Summer 2017

# **SITE REPORT #1**

## Gowanus Canal



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06.12.2017

## INTRODUCTION

The Gowanus Canal is a 100-foot-wide canal, located in Brooklyn, that was built during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was home to the upcoming industrial era. Although, it started as a creek, it is where cement factories, gas plants, and coal factories called home and made the location of the canal industrial. ([www.riverkeeper.org](http://www.riverkeeper.org)) It is also known as a bracket, which is the mixture of fresh water and salt water because it runs into the New York Harbor. Today, the canal is comprised of sewage waste and rainwater. Living there you see the canal, but when it rains you smell the canal. Gowanus Canal is now the most contaminated body of water in New York. ([www.cumulis.epa.gov](http://www.cumulis.epa.gov)) It has three bridges built upon it located on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, Union Street, and Carroll Street.

The Gowanus Canal is heavily polluted due to two reasons: coal tar and combined sewage overflow. One is a historical pollutant, while the other is currently happening today, respectfully. There are species of jellyfish and blue crabs that live in this oxygen deprived body of water. The flushing tunnel, connected to the head of the canal, is what brings oxygen to the water from the harbor. It is recommended to not eat whatever is fished out of there because it has been living in human feces. In 2010, the Gowanus Canal became a Superfund site. Superfund, also known as CERCLA, is a liability statute that holds any parties who contaminated a site responsible even if no laws were broken. ([www.nyc.gov](http://www.nyc.gov)) they cleanup sites that contain hazardous substances such as the Gowanus Canal.



This photo was taken at the Gowanus Canal from the Carroll Street bridge. It was a nice day where the weather was mild and the skies were gray due to rain from the night before. It is a up close photograph of the canal. As you can see, the pollution in the canal has caused the water to change to a brown color. The historical pollutant is coal from the factories that used the coal to operate the factories. The by-product of coal is coal tar which is like a “black mayo.” It stuck to the bottom of the canal and has been there for many years. To replace it is combined sewer overflow (CSO) which is when too much sewage is released into the canal when waste management plants stop the flow due to excessive rain water. The algae on the wooden posts show the height of the water during tidal times.





This is the recent project that was completed known as 365 Bond. It is a new luxury residential building with a spectacular view of the Manhattan skyline and views of the Gowanus waterfront. It is the first residential building built on the Gowanus Canal. ([www.365bond.com](http://www.365bond.com)) Walking through the area, one can feel like they are on an island. Especially, with the new 40-foot-long public esplanade, gentrification is being seen firsthand in this neighborhood. Not only that, the ads that are placed in the window of the building are very misleading. They show people running on a track by the canal and hanging out by the canal. The truth about the canal is hidden in the advertisements and I believe that can cause problems in the future. This building is a symbol

of gentrification being introduced into a neighborhood that was once commercial based and now will be residential based.



Bio swales are the new things on the block. The newest invention in the city to reduce the amount of rainwater in storm drains is by letting it run off into bio swales where it can help plants grow. The water infiltrates the soil allowing vegetation to grow adding a hint of beauty to city



blocks. It works best for pervious grounds. It is also known as an eco-sponge because of the function it has, to absorb two thousand gallons of water. It keeps the storm water from going into the canal in return making CSO levels go down. These bio swales are put in by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) but can be cared for by the residents of the area. It was surprising to know that many residents were against the placement of bio swales in their communities. I believed a good way to get community support will be to include residents in the clean-up and care taking of the bio swales. It is limited what can grow on these swales such as rose bushes and fruit trees which provide protection against erosion. ([www.grownyc.org](http://www.grownyc.org))



These three photographs show the subtle division of what is and what use to be. Surely, this is not the only example out there, but it is one of many that shows clear understanding of what class is and how much care is being given to each side. Here a fence is clearly keeping two worlds apart, but why is that? Are we all not New Yorkers? Sure, we are, but the division of a playground is illustrating the class division we see every day and to be honest children shouldn't wonder why the other kids on the other side of the fence have a separate playground from them. The first photograph is taken at the project houses located in the Boerum Hill area. It is like a

gated community, without the protective gates, where amenities like playgrounds and park benches are usually sought for outside of a living area are based right in the middle. It is well taken care of with its nice trimmed lawns and fountain steps, but I cannot help but feel like it's a city developer's way of isolating people due to this idea of an ideal city.

The second photograph were taken on a strip around the corner from Smith Street and the third was on Smith Street, the residential side. Both photographs grasp the idea of what use to be Brooklyn and its clearly seen through the building architecture. One can easily tell if the building was recently built, like the light-colored brick townhouse with its metal stoop. However, it kept the tone of the strip by being brick instead of using what architectures today use for new buildings. The cornice on the older buildings don't tell an age but they tell an era and show strong foundation, which isn't seen in many of the recent buildings standing today.



I named this sketch *Sad Truth of Gowanus Canal*. This is a perspective view of the canal from the bridge looking out. If it was colored, the skies would be gray and the water would be brown. Due to contamination of the canal, vegetation around the canal also gets a sad hue to it. Looking afar, you see tall high rises in the distance. Looking closer, you see filth, industrial by product, and a body of water not fit for any living thing. This is important because the high rises in the distance are kind of foreshadowing what the Gowanus neighborhood will soon look like with its luxury condos.



This one is called *The New Gowanus*. It is a sketch of one of the new residential built by the canal. This building was very interesting to me because the architects did something I never seen before. The windows of the building were like a mosaic piece in the sense that they were different sizes, lengths, and were not parallel to each other. Even, the building themselves had



many geometric trends going along. It is important because this is one of many residential that are built or are being built by the canal and they are not cheap. Just a studio alone can start from \$3,000.

### **GENERAL NOTES:**

- ☐ Although it started off industrial, the area around the Gowanus canal is rapidly being built into a residential neighborhood.
- ☐ On many occasions, aquatic life from the New York Harbor has washed up to the canal such as whales. Sadly, they have not survived.
- ☐ The depth of the canal varies between 5 feet and 6 feet deep because it depends on the tide of the day.
- ☐ It is the most contaminated body of water in New York and dates to the mid-1800s.
- ☐ Bio swales are being built by the canal as an initiative called a Sponge Park to help with storm drain rainfall and the CSO.
- ☐ Gowanus Canal was an asset during its time because not only did it provide water to power the mills, it was used as road for transportation.

### **INSIGHTS/DISCOVERIES**

Jane Jacobs discusses in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, some of the uses of a neighborhood in a city. As I was reading I noticed some of the points she made in a way foreshadowed what we are currently experiencing with gentrification. For example: city officials try to make an “ideal” neighborhood by making it a place that contains no mix uses.

Today, many of the places such as Gowanus have structures going up but now include public esplanades that cater to those in the neighborhood. Jacobs also talks about how a neighborhood should have a strong local support to fight the city when it comes to unwanted renovations in their areas. Being in contact with your local assemblyman and attending board/community meetings is a way to make your voice heard. I agree with this because I have seen firsthand what can happen if a neighborhood doesn't have a strong local government supporting it. For a neighborhood to survive, it's streets need to survive since the streets make up the neighborhood and in a way, give it its identity.

Jonathan Mahler wrote an eye-opening article called, "How the Coastline Became a Place to put the Poor", which described the trend of building large scale projects by the shorelines of the Rockaways, Long Island, and Coney Island. In the 50's, urban developers believed that building project buildings by the shoreline was more cost effective, but soon found out that it caused more harm than good. The project buildings became a haven for crime, poverty, and destruction. Urban developers such as Robert Moses only built these high-rise projects to relocate the "slums"-as he likes to call them. I believe this was his way of trying to get rid of street neighborhoods and cater to middle class citizens with money. By pushing needy families to a distant area that can be harmful and dangerous didn't matter to him if they could fix up the city to cater to those with money. Hurricane Sandy is an example of how not much thought was put into the placement of these high-rise projects. Giving those who needed public assistance a roof over their heads was the wool they put over people's eyes from seeing what they were trying to do and that was to get rid of the ghettos of New York. I strongly believe that some of these ghettos or "slums" are what made New York such an enticing place to be.

## **KEYWORDS/VOCABULARY & DEFINITIONS**

**Superblocks:** Area containing residential accommodation, shops, schools, offices, etc., with public open space, surrounded by roads and penetrated by *cul-de-sac* service-roads

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

**Zoning :** (zone, v.) the regulation of land use by particular planning restrictions in designated areas.

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

**Combine Sewer Overflow(CSO):** Sewers that are designed to collect rainwater runoff, domestic sewage, and industrial wastewater in the same pipe.

**Cornice: (n.)** A horizontal mounded projection which crowns or finishes a building or some part of a building

**Bioswales :** a linear, sloped retention area designed to capture and convey water, while allowing it to infiltrate the ground slowly over a 24 to 48-hour period.

**Brownfield: (n.)** to designate an (urban) area, which is or has formerly been the site of commercial or industrial activity, *esp.* one now cleared and available for redevelopment

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



**Superfund: (n.)** a federal government fund established in 1980 to finance the Environmental Protection Agency's clean-up of sites contaminated with hazardous waste

« **Projects** » : (n.) An urban block of apartments built and administered by the government for low-income tenants, typically perceived as dangerously crime-ridden

**Parapet : (n.)** A low wall or barrier, often ornamental, placed at the edge of a platform, balcony, roof, etc., or along the sides of a bridge, pier, quay, etc., to prevent people from falling.

**Robert Moses :** Controversial figure in urban planning and is best known for shaping development in and around New York City.

**Jane Jacobs :** Author and activist who wrote about preserving urban neighborhoods, in books like “The Death and Life of Great American Cities”

**Le Corbusier :** Swiss-born French architect who belonged to the first generation of the so-called International school of architecture.

## **QUESTIONS for Further RESEARCH**

1. Is there any plans in motion to clean out the canal? Monthly? Annually?
2. What is being done about the potential responsible parties and how will they pay their dues?
3. Has the canal ever gotten too toxic to the point where it made the area unliveable?

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