

Gowanus, the last sanctuary. By Noel Caban



In the summer of 2019, I participated in a research project developed by Families United for Racial & Economic Equality (FUREE) to assess the current residential conditions of the Gowanus Housing complex located in Downtown Brooklyn. The Gowanus Projects as they are locally called, house approximately 1,700 families and take up four-square city blocks, bordering the affluent neighborhoods of Boerum Hill, Carroll Gardens, and Park Slope. The reasons why we we're there were reported 6 months later on January 27th, in the Daily News.

“We are enduring a worsening public safety, health and housing crisis. We and our neighbors in the Gowanus Houses and Warren Street Houses have been forced to endure broken and leaky pipes, peeling paint, heatless apartments, dangerous holes in walls and ceilings — which allow in mice, rats and other vermin to come into our homes - and chronically out-of-service elevators. Many of our NYCHA neighbors have been exposed to

lead paint, which can cause brain developmental problems and other serious health problems, especially for young children and pregnant women.” (1)

I was attracted to this project because of my interest in material distress as an expression of failed social and economic policy. I grew up in the Boerum Hill section of Brooklyn, before it became the gentrified neighborhood it is today, and at one point, my mother lived in the Warren Street Houses, a smaller set of public housing residences adjacent to the Gowanus Houses. But before, I discuss my role in the research project, it is necessary to frame the context of this work, the history of the outlying Gowanus community, and specifically the Gowanus Canal.

Place

Growing up in the ethnically mixed community of Boerum Hill back in the 1970's and 80's, meant you spent time on the streets. It's where you socialized, played games and made friends. On weekends a small posse of neighborhood kids would ride our bicycles along the back lots, footbridges, and dead-end streets of what became one of *“the most heavily contaminated bodies of water in the nation.”* (2) At the time, I did not know what caused the acrid sulfuric smell that emanated from the canal; the odor was never a deterrent to our frequent journeys to the canal during the summer months.

Our fascination with this place was the steady discovery of carcasses that wondered too close to the canal, or the objects residents and factory owners dumped into the still waters, which eventually found their way back to the surface coated in the lavender film that floated above the waters. The speculation and conversations on what we saw kept us coming back. Not much changed in this area over the next two decades, as surrounding businesses impacted by the global decline in demand for American manufactured goods took their businesses out of Gowanus and left behind the empty building shells and their buried or dumped waste.

As the business exodus continued the imposing and well-fortified buildings with their high ceilings, thick slabs, and steel structures became ideal workspaces for a new generation of artists and craftsmen. By dividing these large structures into smaller units, another economy quickly took shape. This move, along with the amenities that make up emerging neighborhoods, like access to public transportation, cafes, restaurants, print shops, bars, and galleries, eventually paved the way for early adopters and gentrifiers looking for cost-effective spaces to work and play, making Gowanus a hub for affordable working spaces in a city devoured by high residential and commercial rents. Adding to this move was the rumor that federal funds would be available to address environmental remediation of this body of water.

The mid 90's brought a heated market of speculative real estate investment to New York's outer boroughs, so that when the change in Gowanus zoning laws came, the investment market pounced on Gowanus. By May of 2018, the canal finally came under the scrutiny of the federal government and the long-awaited plans for clean-up began.

The impact of a project costing \$500 million in taxpayer dollars to clean and dredge a 1.8 mile long, 100-foot wide canal finally arrived, as the canal and its 150 years old black sludge of metals, PCB's, volatile organic compounds, sewage solids, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) from gas, cement, oil refineries, tanneries, and chemical plants would finally be removed from the still waters. The cleanup remediation program would entail water, soil, and the pursuit of accountable polluters.

According to the press, the first phase of the project will start in September taking 30 months to complete. Along with the change in the canals' fortunes, Gowanus and the outlying communities have undergone transformation, a direct benefit of government intervention via Superfund dollars.

Gowanus, the once moribund manufacturing zone is now poised to become something altogether different - *“a Venice in Brooklyn.”*(3)

Properties long warehoused by landlords, and leased to artists, and tradesmen were now subject of rent increases, evictions and mass displacement, as the final phase and transformation of industrial to residential zoning takes place, and the development of luxury residential continues apace. As is common in New York City when the laws that define and contain what a place and space will be; property values and rents already high in the outlying communities of Cobble Hill, Boerum Hill, and Park Slope have impacted Gowanus. Investors, speculators, and developers new to Gowanus price highs continue their feeding frenzy on the scarce resource of Gowanus land.

Another tale.

This is where our story diverges. During New York City’s re-zoning efforts, a category one hurricane struck the entire eastern coast. In 2012, Gowanus, already designated a flood zone by FEMA, felt the impact of Hurricane Sandy’s wrath as, *“Wastewater treatment plants lost power and discharged 11 billion gallons of sewage into receiving waters. The toxic Gowanus Canal - a Superfund site - flooded and overflowed into people’s homes, covering people and possessions in what one victim called a “greasy, oily slick.” Homeowners’ personal heating oil tanks broke apart and oozed fuel into the soil.”* (4)

Sandy’s impact was also felt in Brooklyn Heights, and Red Hook. Streets, roads, and properties experienced flooding waste and storm sewage backups: power shortages and blackouts. The damage to Gowanus and New York’s infrastructure was severe as train stations, beaches, roads, power stations, and tunnels experienced the havoc caused by category one hurricane.

“\$70 billion (2012 USD) in damage, making it the second-costliest hurricane on record in the United States...surpassed by Hurricanes Harvey and Maria in 2017.”(5) As a result of this devastation city administrators decided to review their emergency contingency plans for the next inevitable storm.

Amid the diluvian chaos, a longstanding residential community of 1,700 families in the Gowanus Projects were ignored. The press did not report their blackouts, flooding, rain, and storm damage. Their problems and their stories of survival, and coping became background fodder in the messy patchwork of city priorities. Eventually, their pain and shared stories of neighborly courage were forgotten, not because their lives were not impacted and changed by a climate crisis, but because of who they are, and where they lived.

A housing system plagued by mismanagement, underfunding, administrative slight of hands, and parasitic bureaucratic stasis, continues to saddle residents with the challenge of enduring and carrying on with dignity, living in an environment that is hostile and unwelcoming. Will it take another category one storm to change things?

Thirty years ago, I lived in this community with my mother, her problems then are the problems of dozens of residents I interviewed last summer, to say that our leaders care about the poor of this city is misguided, maybe they should spend a time talking to the people living in the Gowanus residences. Below are a few of the expressions of residents I met during my interviews last summer; many shared their stories of disappointment and frustration with a system that has grown callous and indifferent.

“I keep calling but unless you have multiple people calling nothing gets done.”

“What the fuck do you want - go away!”

“Ven. Ven, mira esto!” (Come, Come. Take a look at this!)

“At night? I don’t go out at night.”

“Para donde me voy yo?” (Where would I go?)
“Look this is chocking me. I don’t know how much longer I can do this.”
“It depends, what you call safe.”
“No. I don’t know if there is asbestos here.”
“They never came.”
“They came, but it’s still the same.”
“You have to file a ticket... then wait.”
“...and wait.”
“Yes, this was a nice place to live.”
“Where am I going to go.”
“Twenty-four tickets and nothing. “
“A leak is not a 24hr emergency, except when it floods your neighbor’s apartment.”
“Don’t get stuck in the elevators.”
“I live here my mom lives here too.”
“They’ve been repairing the roof forever.”
“I don’t know if it’s broken.”
“Yes, in spite of this, I recommend this place.”
“No. Not at night.”
“Yes, the lighting works. Can’t you tell?”
“I filled it, but they still keep coming through.”
“It depends how many times you call.”
“Esto si que es una jodienda!” (This is a real fuckup!)

In light of the unresolved administrative and economic questions that the people of the Gowanus Housing continue to endure, I dedicate this work to them, as they continue to weather the challenges of not being seen or heard by our cities administrators and public officials.

Bibliography

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3. <https://veniceofbrooklyn.com/about>
4. <https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2017/08/this-should-obvious-but-just-in-case-hurricanes-and-oil-country-are-a-recipe-for-disaster/>
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Sandy

Growing Up Gowanus

Gowanus Houses teens reflect on growing up in a neighborhood that's drastically changed.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zBU09KyisU>

Images

















