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Finding the “local green voice”? Waterfront development, environmental justice, and participatory planning in Gowanus, NY

Abstract

The Gowanus neighbourhood, like many other New York City waterfronts, is facing a crossroads: how to promote development in a polluted landscape vulnerable to climate-induced sea-level rise that is inhabited by low-income populations and coveted by wealthy new arrivals for its waterfront property? For many years, toxic contamination and a combined sewer overflow problem inhibited new development in the neighbourhood. But in recent years, particularly beginning in 2010, after the Environmental Protection Agency designated the Canal and surrounding areas a Superfund site targeted for clean-up, developers have sought to shed Gowanus’s industrial identity and recast it as a prime up-and-coming residential locale. Although the community celebrates environmental restoration and protection, there is also a sense of foreboding that clean-up is paving the way for high-end development projects. This article charts the progress of neoliberal urban development in Gowanus through the lens of critical urban theory, identifying stakeholders and power dynamics. It looks at rezoning/revitalization as a tool of the municipality to transform an industrial business zone and low-income neighbourhood, ostensibly to foster development and cope with climate change and sea-level rise, but, in fact, cultivates socio-political exclusion and gentrification while ignoring concerns over the long-term environmental viability of new development.

Keywords: participatory planning, waterfronts, critical urban theory, rezoning, gentrification

1 Introduction

As premium areas for neoliberal urban development, debates habitually unfold over the re-development plans for city waterfronts. These sites are valuable for commercial, industrial, residential and recreational uses, even if they become significantly polluted. Contestation hinges on the nature of development and decision-making; the question is often portrayed as “what to build?” but given the socio-economic consequences, implicitly it is “who to build for?” Traditionally business interests and government have negotiated, often in secret, to determine waterfront development, but the public has increasingly demanded a role in making decisions. Local communities have been especially active in this regard as they usually have the most at stake: development will affect everything from housing to employment, from access to services to traffic, from the character of the neighbourhood to the quality of life. Moreover, the central concern is whether re-development will benefit the public, including preventing the displacement of locals. Furthermore, the presence of significant pollution in the areas targeted for redevelopment complicates the calculus as the costs of cleanup require sufficient political will to find the requisite financial resources, and this usually entails a discussion of who benefits from such efforts. This contentious situation has also been exacerbated by the growing impacts of climate change which necessitates adapting to sea level rise. To address the ecological afflictions as well as the political-economic challenges, the “local green voice” must be heard. It is, therefore, crucial to develop a method for distilling the views of communities on issues of development in the context of environmental clean-up, to promote ecological and social-political sustainability.

This article provides a model for participatory planning as a vehicle for reconciling environmental protection with the views of local communities. The first section defines the key concepts through a lens of critical urban theory and problematizes spatial transformation propelled by profit-driven urbanization. The second section unpacks the case study of Gowanus, a neighbourhood in Brooklyn featuring a waterway that had infamously been subject to voluminous dumping and is undergoing intensive re-development. The third section examines the engagement of locals in re-development decision-making. It is based on the author's ongoing involvement in the participatory planning process of rezoning Gowanus organized by New York City's Department of City Planning as a member of the public and, also, a member of one of the smaller workshops which ran from October 2016 to June 2017. The active participation in this process provided the author with firsthand information into the actors and stakeholders, the relationship between them, their interests and values, and local knowledge systems. The fourth section analyzes the merits and limits of participatory planning in development. The final section postulates ideas for bolstering local participation and promoting sustainability.

2 Waterfront development, critical urban theory, and the local green voice: Premise and perspective

Waterfronts are vital spaces for development, they have unique features that make them desirable for a variety of uses, and this makes them the subject of disputes between different interests. The modern history of waterfront development showcases the evolution of forces that drive decision-making. Early on these areas were primarily governed and developed for economic and security reasons as places that might serve as ports or defensible positions against naval assault. However, as fears over invasion receded and other security concerns abated, commercial interests gained ascendance. This is most prominently seen with the spread and deepening of neoliberalism starting in the late 1970s. Neoliberalism argues that the market is the most efficient means for allocating resources, and promotes and normalizes a "growth-first" approach to urban development. Concerns about social welfare or distribution of services are only secondary to wealth creation and to be addressed subsequently (Peck & Tickell, 2012: 394). In brief, the neoliberal perspective looks upon waterfronts as prime real estate and pushes for the privatization of these public assets.

Critical urban theory is a useful approach for apprehending the meaning and ramifications of waterfront development by situating it within a specific social, economic, political, and cultural context. This framework parses the values and relationships embedded in the transformation of neighbourhoods along the shore. Thus, urbanization is not a process that is politically neutral or inevitable; indeed, an urban form is shaped by politics and power (Whitehead, 2013: 1348). As Neil Brenner (2009: 198) explains: "Rather than affirming the current condition of cities as the expression of transhistorical laws of social organization, bureaucratic rationality or economic efficiency, critical urban theory emphasizes the politically and ideologically mediated, socially contested and therefore malleable character of urban space – that is, its continual (re)construction as a site, medium and outcome of historically specific relations of social power." He further argues that socially and environmentally just, sustainable, participatory forms of urbanization are possible but overpowered by the current dominant institutional arrangements, practices and ideologies. The critical urban theory tradition informs this analysis of Gowanus, in order to expose the power dynamics, inequality, and injustice intrinsic to and nurtured by the neoliberalization of the city.

A related conceptual and historical backdrop to this study can be found in Henri Lefebvre's (1996) idea of the "right to the city". Originally coined in the late 1960s as a response to pressures eroding urban social life (from a lack of transportation networks to connect poor neighborhoods to the slashing of social services, from underfunding the maintenance of parks to middle class flight to the suburbs, from closing hospitals to structuring school districts that effectively segregate by economic class), it crystalized the demand of neglected urban populations to partake in city governance. The "right to the city" is not just about access to resources, services, and spaces, but a demand to participate in decisions regarding resources, services, and spaces. The snowballing of neoliberalism in the 1980s would reinvigorate calls to establish and defend the "right to the city", as taken up by the writings of David Harvey (2008) and Peter Marcuse (2012).

Neoliberal urban space is shaped and reshaped by a continuous interplay of "implosion and explosion" and "creative destruction". As such, capital transforms the urban fabric to maximize profitability and at the same time it further exacerbates socio-spatial exclusion and inequity (Brenner et al, 2012). Gentrifying neighbourhoods exemplify "urban implosion and explosion" because they engender unpredictable spatial temporal growth in neoliberal cities that no longer follow the logic or theory traditionally used to explain the morphology of cities, such as the Chicago School's concentric circles. As David Harvey (2004, 2007) observes, neoliberalism operates with increasing volatility: periods of growth, followed by recession and collapse. In this cycle, economic blight undermines previous development that was predicated on continued economic expansion and demands a new round of investment and re-development, i.e., a process that political economist Joseph Schumpeter (1942) famously termed "creative destruction". This pattern is evident in gentrification waves in New York City that destroyed older, impoverished neighbourhoods to make way for new developments that cater to the wealthy as typified by what has happened in Harlem (in Upper Manhattan) and Williamsburg (northern Brooklyn). In this way, redevelopment means, in effect, a reallocation of properties from the poor to the rich.

The first wave of waterfront "revitalization" projects in North America started in the 1960s in cities such as Baltimore, Boston, and San Francisco (Schubert, 2008). These were projects mostly to transform old and derelict port areas that had been previously abandoned or closed off. Enhancement through commercialization of the waterfront prompted a range of new developments, such as convention centers, hotels, sports facilities, marketplaces, etc., to produce wealth for the private sector and tax revenues to fund the public sector.

This, however, was just the beginning as both business and government sectors reaped benefits, and in the 1990s and 2000s private-public partnerships for waterfront development became prevalent. This model represented a strategic alliance of local interests that recognized that cities were in a worldwide competition to attract tourists and multinational capital. The resulting waterfront projects were used to brand cities, thereby increasing their respective competitiveness in the global marketplace. Waterfronts became places of spectacle on two levels, as both platforms for attention, cultural production and recognition, but also to create paths for national/local/metropolitan narrative construction in such a way that a developing country could use a manicured, sleek waterfront development to present a different facade to the world, investors, and consumers. However, in contrast to the previous types of developments and projects built, the new constructions featured in this wave were foremost luxury housing and mixed-use development. In New York City, neighbourhood redevelopment plans are designed to establish the metropolis's place as a global financial capital and service

centre in a contemporary division of labour. Margit Mayer (2012) rightfully argues that this approach triggered a spatial transformation that intensified “social fragmentation, erosion of public space, and exclusion of disadvantages places, milieus, and social groups.” As will be seen, the case of Gowanus is a microcosm of this phenomenon: capital is transforming an area that exhibits economic and racial diversity, but is contaminated due to bearing the burden of the industrial wastes generated while producing profits, and that now routinely faces the risk of climate change-fuelled flooding, which is also attributable to both past and current industrial economic activity.

Whereas the context of 1990s and early 2000s neoliberalism suggests that waterfront development and redevelopment can be understood solely through the pursuit of profit, the circumstances have become far more complex in recent years. Economic actors still maintain a premier role, but other influences, both material and social, are looming. First, it has become apparent at the material level that waterfront areas are increasingly vulnerable to climate change and the consequent rising sea levels pose perils. These threats include “inundation, enhanced storm surges, infrastructure damage, erosion, destruction of wetlands and beaches, and increased risks for public health and safety” (Grannis, 2011).

Secondly, the human factor is of growing prominence through political processes and practices that have turned their attention to coastal land use planning and invoke issues of environmental justice and local participation. The environmental justice cause demands not only a clean environment and infrastructure, but stresses that access to these resources should not be dictated by race, class, or discrimination of any kind. Indeed, much grassroots environmental justice activism points to how environmental threats disproportionately affect low-income neighbourhoods and people of color (Agyeman, 2005). Additionally, there is the angle of local self-determination: those who live in the community that is to be redeveloped seek to participate in decision-making on development. This is where the “justice” component to “environmental justice” is most meaningful because a clean-up that results in soaring property values and prices locals out of the area ultimately means that environmental rehabilitation and protection only benefits affluent new arrivals.

Local participation is crucial to averting redevelopment with an ostensible ecological rationale from becoming a form of population management or instigating displacement. To that end, abiding the “local green voice,” that is expressing the environmental justice perspective of a community on development projects, is imperative for promoting environmental sustainability (the long-term viability of ecosystems) as well as cultivating social-political sustainability (routine civic engagement and belief in the legitimacy of governance institutions). However, upon closer examination, the extent to which the environmental agenda is served is questionable. Moreover, there are structural impediments to participatory planning processes and methods. There is a growing mistrust and resentment of government at all levels (from municipal to national) given it has traditionally favored private interests and not been accountable to the public. The following sections take up the dynamics of participatory planning in the case of Gowanus to help understand what works and what does not. This sets up a focus on tools for public participation that considers issues of diversity, equality, and justice: it presents means for refining, enhancing, and amplifying the local green voice.



Figure 1: Map of New York City (source: ArcGIS Online, 2018).

Starting in the 1800s, Gowanus, a neighbourhood in south Brooklyn, New York, was developed around a canal to serve burgeoning industrial and commercial enterprises that benefited from access to water resources and passage to New York harbor. This 1.8-mile long waterway was created by dredging and connecting a network of creeks and marshlands into a 100-foot wide channel that terminates inland (Internet 1). In the mid-1900s, the canal was heavily contaminated with “PCBs, heavy metals, pesticides, volatile organic compounds, sewage solids from combined sewer overflows, and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs)”, turning it into one of the most polluted waterways in the United States (Riverkeeper, 2018). Furthermore, the engineering of the infrastructure produces massive combined sewer overflows (CSOs) in Gowanus: waste-water run-off into the canal worsens environmental conditions.

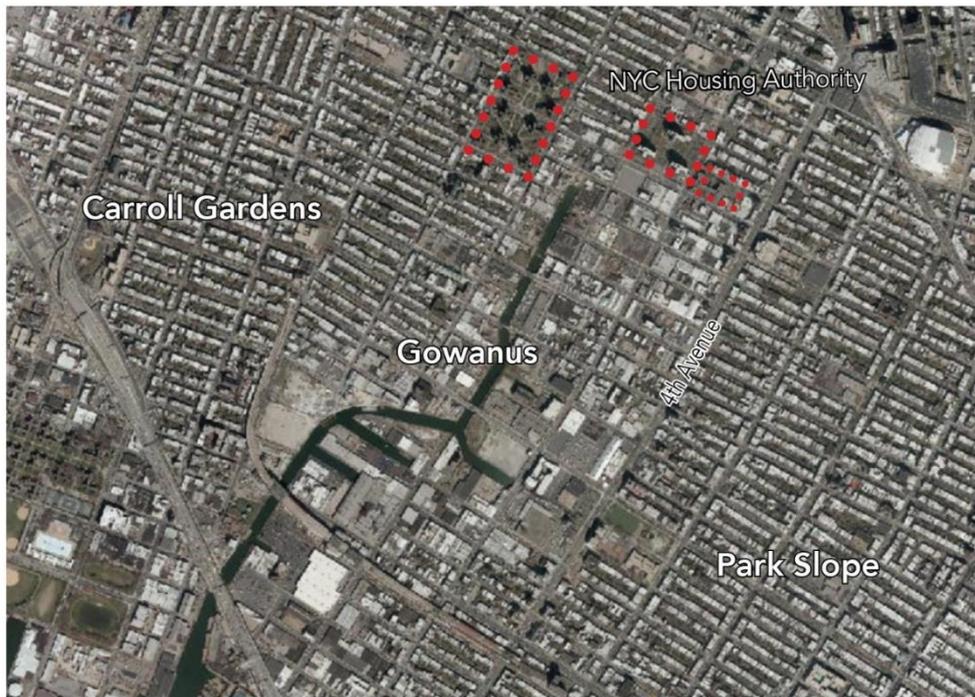


Figure 2: Map of Gowanus Canal and New York City Housing Authority housing (source: NYS Ortho, 2012; ArcGIS Online, 2018).

In the late 1990s, economic growth and gentrification throughout New York City sparked renewed interest in Gowanus: its relatively inexpensive property prices coupled with a location offering easy access to other areas of the city made the area desirable. The prospect of economic renewal caused the neighbourhood's real estate prices to climb during the 2000s, and despite the housing bubble associated with the 2008 financial crisis, developers continued to show interest. This was given an additional boost in 2010 when the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced that the Canal was to be a Superfund site resulting in sizable economic resources directed to cleaning up the pollution.¹ Although recognition of the significance of the environmental problem led some development to stall, it also sent a message that the hazard would be addressed. Thus, within a few years after the EPA's designation and the initiation of clean-up activities, a wave of redevelopment hit Gowanus. The neighbourhood is currently being reconceived as a new residential quarter; however, the consequent development projects take away public space (including open space) from the low-income residents in the area (there are three large housing projects on the north side of the canal: Gowanus Houses, Wyckoff Gardens, and Warren Houses) and jeopardizes the affordability of rents. Beyond its residential impact, commercially, it is attracting higher-end boutique stores, but undermining the "mom-and-pop" stores that traditionally populated the area.

¹ This \$500 million clean-up project is in the design phase and dredging is expected to start. Trump administration budget cuts might impact the process of the Gowanus Superfund project; however, city officials claim that the city is prepared to underwrite the clean-up.



Figure 3: View of Gowanus Canal, looking north (photo: author).

Gowanus is currently a socio-economically and racially diverse neighbourhood but is on the cusp of change. “Today it is also home to incubators, offices, small commercial businesses, an artist enclave, and a growing nightlife and indoor recreation destination. The neighbourhood is also home to a vibrant residential community dominated by three New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) public housing campuses north and west of the canal, and residents living in rent-stabilized housing concentrated between Union and Carroll Streets, between Nevins Street and 4th Avenue” (Gowanus Neighbourhood Coalition for Justice, 2017). There are four census tracts immediately surrounding the Canal above the Gowanus Expressway (which is the area of rezoning). Median household annual income ranges in this part of the neighbourhood vary from \$38,000 to \$135,000, which signals considerable disparity.² The lowest median income tracts are primarily populated with people of color.

² Median household income for Census tracts 71, 75, 77, 119 vary respectively: \$36.890, \$135.697, \$123.592, \$82.969 (American Fact Finder, 2018).



Figure 4: View of Fourth Avenue looking south. On the left the new high-end residential buildings, on the right, older mixed-use buildings can be seen (small businesses on the ground level and apartments on the upper floors) (photo: author).

In the past decade, gentrification has become far more pronounced in Gowanus. A study conducted by the Gowanus Neighborhood Coalition for Justice, a not-for-profit community development corporation, states that the median rent in the neighbourhood increased from \$1,900 in 2010 to \$2,900 in 2015. From 2015 to 2016 alone, the median home sales prices increased by 68%. The process of gentrification replaced affordable stores low-income residents rely on (fast food restaurants, pharmacies, 99-cent stores, locksmiths, etc.) with upscale stores that serve higher-income customers. The closing of family-operated stores, steep home prices and skyrocketing rents inevitably impacted the economic class as well as the racial breakdown of the community. In 2000, 16% of the population was Black and 35% Hispanic/Latino, but by 2015, only 12% were Black and 25% Hispanic/Latino. The southern part of Gowanus is an Industrial Business Zone and rezoning it into a residential mixed-use area also will translate into a loss of manufacturing jobs in the community, while many of these businesses employ those with limited education or have other barriers to employment (Gowanus Neighbourhood Coalition for Justice, 2017: 29).

According to the report, the rezoning also threatens the existing character of neighbourhood and prioritizes corporate interests. It states, “An aggressive real estate market threatens to displace longtime residents and businesses alike while further segregating the predominately low- and moderate-income NYCHA residents from their neighbors.” The Coalition acknowledges the planning efforts as an opportunity to improve the already existing mixed-use community but urges stopping “destructive real estate forces” from further displacing middle and low-income residents and eliminating manufacturing and small business jobs. Hence, this coalition insists the city must stop gentrification of the neighbourhood and halt the dislocation of low income communities. They have put forward a five-part agenda:

1. Advance racial and economic justice;
2. Create real affordable housing and protect tenants from displacement;
3. Promote environmental justice;
4. Protect local businesses where we work and shop;
5. Uplift the culture and community of long-time residents.

However, this is clearly not a stand against skewed redevelopment, but rather settles for “flanking mechanisms such as local economic development policies and community-based programs to alleviate the problems.” In other words, it addresses the symptoms of neoliberal

governance, such as gentrification, loss of jobs, segregation, dispossession, but does not challenge its premise, goals, or methods (Mayer, 2012: 67).

In short, the pressures of development that will potentially transform Gowanus into an exclusive neighbourhood have also given rise to a local green voice. But, this voice does not unequivocally oppose rezoning, it accepts it as a given. This is exemplified by the Gowanus Neighborhood Coalition, which in the end works within the framework of rezoning.

3 The Local green voice speaks: Public participation in the Gowanus planning process

In the face of contaminated environs and gentrification schemes, it is critical for local communities to assert and actualize agency. Citizen participation in urban planning emerged as a widespread practice starting in the 1960s (mostly in Western countries) as part of a larger groundswell in social activism and a push towards more transparent forms of governance (McGovern, 2013). The current version of this in New York City is an initiative of Mayor Bill de Blasio, who was elected in 2014 after a campaign based on uplifting the disenfranchised and making the city more livable for all New Yorkers. This approach to rezoning is called *PLACES* (Planning for Livability, Affordability, Community, Economic Opportunity, and Sustainability) and is “a collaborative approach to planning for diverse, livable neighbourhoods”.³ *PLACES* examines land use and zoning issues in neighbourhoods as well as identifies community needs.

Although Gowanus has been the focal point for waterfront development by business, it has also been associated with the de Blasio's administration's “affordable housing strategy”. In 2016, the New York City Department of City Planning launched a study of the neighbourhood with the intention of rezoning it into residential and mixed-use areas. The result was *Bridging Gowanus*, a community planning process to shape “a sustainable, livable, and inclusive future for the Gowanus neighbourhood” with the following principles:

- A sustainable, resilient, environmentally healthy community;
- Invest in parks, schools, transit, and waterfront;
- Strengthen the manufacturing sector and create good jobs;
- Keep Gowanus creative and mixed-use;
- Preserve and create affordable housing for an inclusive community;
- Secure a pathway for responsible growth.

In summer 2016, a survey was distributed to which over five hundred people responded, and four public events to gather input were held in the neighbourhood. The survey questions used a ranking system to build support for the City's paramount goal to rezone the area, asking respondents to prioritize interests such as “invest in our parks,” “keep Gowanus mixed”, and “secure a pathway for responsible growth”; and each goal was measured with a “satisfaction index”, which refers to the percentage of voters who voted for the overall winning option. In addition, the Department of City Planning (DCP) held two public meetings in October and December 2016, and also organized a workshop in March 2017 (see NYC Department of City Planning, 2017). In these meetings, different city agencies (such as Parks and Recreation, the Department of Environmental Conservation, and the Department of Environmental Protection) set up tables with promotional materials. The DCP made formal presentations and officials were present. Members of the public were given the opportunity to ask questions and to provide

³ For a current list of participatory planning projects, see NYC Department of City Planning's website (Internet 5).

feedback with regards to what they needed from rezoning. However, there was no room (figuratively or literally) in the hearings to decry the rudimentary premise, to oppose the proposition of rezoning: it only allowed tinkering at the edges of a preconceived plan.

In January 2017, DCP announced the Gowanus Neighborhood Planning Study, a focus study with five groups: Housing, Arts and Culture, Public Realm, Industry and Economic Development, Resiliency and Sustainability.⁴ The study is set to

Examine ways to balance a range of issues and needs in Gowanus by seeking to support existing and future resiliency and sustainability efforts; encourage and expand neighbourhood services and amenities, like supermarkets; improve streetscapes and pedestrian safety, and access along the Canal for all people; explore ways to support and develop space for job-generating uses, including industrial, arts and cultural uses; promote opportunities for new housing with affordable housing and protect residential tenants against harassment and displacement; and coordinate necessary infrastructure improvements throughout the area to support the continued cleanup of the Gowanus Canal and to accommodate existing and future needs.⁵

This five-month long process started in February 2017 and lasted through June. The outcome of these focus groups was that each group will make recommendations to help planners decide the parameters of rezoning, which is to be completed by Fall 2017 or Winter 2018. The sub-committees met in July 2017 to share, discuss, and prioritize each group's outcomes and draft recommendations.

In March 2017, DCP also initiated Plan Gowanus, a digital platform to engage the community (Internet 2). This website basically solicits residents' ideas and suggestions about the built environment on a map of the neighbourhood. The range of comments left on the map runs a broad gamut: safety issues (like street lights), adaptive reuse of historic landmarks, the creation of bike lanes, turning a closed street into a dog run, greenscaping, addressing the foul odor of the Canal, daylighting one arm of the creek, etc. The suggestions left on this platform will complement DCP's other outreach efforts as part of the neighbourhood study with input from public events and workshops in drafting a land use framework. The feedback from Plan Gowanus in conjunction with the Gowanus Neighborhood Planning Study along with the results from the public events and workshops will inform the development of a neighbourhood plan. However, the note on Plan Gowanus states that "the input collected through this site is not considered official public comment on a city proposal. It is separate from the public scoping, public review and comment that occurs in the context of the Uniform Land Use Review Process (ULURP)." Therefore, the city is under no obligation to limit redevelopment by the outcome of the public recommendations through this channel. The local green voice is speaking, but whether it will be listened to is another matter.

4 Evaluating the local green voice: Contributions and critiques of participatory planning

How has participatory planning performed in Gowanus? Given it has been simultaneously beneficial and detrimental, it is impossible to generalize. Nevertheless, this case study spotlights

⁴ The author was invited to work on the Resiliency and Sustainability group after attending the public meeting in Dec. 2016.

⁵ New housing with affordable housing, also known as "Mandatory Inclusionary Housing" refers to this recent "solution" to deal with affordable housing crisis in NYC in which Department of Housing Preservation & Development makes a deal with real estate developers. The city provides the land, which is public property. The developer builds market rate apartments of which 20% of the total units are affordable. For more information, see NYC Department City Planning (2016).

the specific experience in Gowanus to illuminate key outcomes that speak to the nature of participatory planning. To begin with the positive side of the ledger, the process has facilitated a greater exchange of information between those who make decisions about development and those who are most affected by development. The studies produced by the Gowanus focus groups work as a bridge connecting the way planners see the place versus the way residents do. As far as residents are concerned, especially those who may not possess technical knowledge regarding public administration, civil engineering and hydrology, they gain a window into the factors that shape planning decisions. For planners, these sessions are chances to understand how residents live in and value a neighbourhood, and how rezoning decisions impact their lives; they glean invaluable knowledge about the streetscape, character of the neighbourhood, social life, as well as practical knowledge on locations of street flooding and what happens during an emergency as was the case for Superstorm Sandy in October 2012. Simple infrastructural, aesthetic interpretations of the neighbourhood tend to leave out the people who live in it, their experiences, and the significance of the area in their everyday lives. A second advantage is seen in increasing engagement. The process of public input and deliberation tends to generate greater political buy-in by local communities who seek a say in the future of their neighbourhood.

However, in moving beyond the theory of participatory planning, there are two overarching structural realities that subvert the model: power and position. First, in terms of power, it is invariably skewed: not all locals participate equally, and, in fact, some of those who do participate may be doing so at the behest of outside actors, including business interests. An important motivation behind the participation of locals in public consultations is becoming part of decision-making processes governing their neighbourhoods. However, it is often the case that community outreach practices do not fundamentally change anything in terms of spatial planning. Indeed, town hall meetings and the use of social media are, in fact, only “fashionable participatory techniques that are considered politically palatable forms of community engagement by the political elite” (Legacy, 2016: 3-4). In this regard, it is not apparent that these government-led participatory planning processes serve communities, but instead are often merely masking “pro-growth” logic. Furthermore, as one participant in a Gowanus workshop observed, it would be difficult for some people to take the requisite hours off from their job on a weekday because it would mean a loss of desperately needed income. In other words, the timing and time commitment necessary to participate prevents low-income residents from joining in the process.

While the underprivileged are less likely to participate, the wealthy are more likely to do so and in more substantial roles—not directly through participatory planning but instead by means of influencing the structures and institutions that constrain participatory planning. For example, the chairman and CEO of Lightstone, the developer of “365 Bond”, a 430-unit market rate apartment complex that was built in 2016 right on the Canal at 1st Street, has been appointed by Mayor de Blasio to the NYC Economic Development Corporation’s Board of Directors, a body charged with promoting growth and jobs (Internet 3).⁶ The placing of elites in such roles is redolent of a neoliberal urbanism that protects the privilege and reiterates inequity (Kratke, 2012).

⁶ According to Internet 3, Lightstone’s \$2 billion portfolio includes over 6 million square feet of office, retail and industrial commercial properties, 11,000 residential units and 3,200 hotel keys. The company owns over 12,000 land lots across the United States with a headquarters in New York City. It has over \$2.5 billion worth of projects currently under development in the residential, hospitality, and retail sectors.



Figure 5: Privatised public space, Gowanus Waterfront Park, in front of the developments 363-365 Bond Street, looking north (photo: author).

In fact, in assessing the relative power of different sectors and actors in these so-called participatory frameworks, there are important qualifications in terms of the degree of participation: it is often only about providing input, it is not about decision-making. As Seitz (2001: 9) notes: “Current approaches for development and growth management tend to be one dimensional. They address only one step of the decision process, such as visioning or provide tools for information gathering but not for decision-making, such as indicators. These approaches also tend to minimize the differences among community stakeholders in access to and control of resources for effective decision-making, as well as the place-based and social variables that affect decision-making.” These drawbacks corrupt the participatory planning process and reduce it to essentially theater. It may make locals feel better and create an air of engagement and contribution, but the reality is that the community’s avenues of engagement are appropriated and their views effectively marginalized.

To return to critical urban theory, neoliberal power co-opts community activism into settling for mitigation of redevelopment impacts rather than contesting the nature and agenda of structural transformation. The “right to the city” is surrendered to the market that purchases assent for a pittance. Furthermore, in the name of freedom, the neoliberal city may seemingly devolve authority to more local levels, such as neighbourhoods, but this has the effect of pushing them to compete for resources. Consequently, respective neighbourhood initiatives render piecemeal participatory planning and ultimately hinder the possibility of a larger mobilization opposing neoliberalism.

The second structural hindrance to a local green voice relates to position. Most of the Gowanus neighbourhood lies in the “hundred-year flood plain” as deemed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), i.e., the area is likely to experience a flood that statistically has a one-percent chance of occurring in any given year. However, according to the NYC Planning, this definition is misleading and “in the 1% annual chance floodplain, there is a 26% chance of flooding over the life of a 30-year mortgage” (Internet 4). Furthermore, the probability is almost

certainly higher with sea-level rise, which according to NY State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) could increase as high as 75 inches (183 cm) by 2100.⁷



Figure 6: Sea level rise projections for 2100. NYC Flood Risk 2100-NPCC2 SLR Scenarios (source: ArcGIS Online, 2018; NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, 2018).

Additionally, Gowanus is an already polluted environment, and the Canal has become the receiving body for a six-square mile watershed area, which includes the adjacent neighbourhoods of Carroll Gardens and Park Slope. As a result, the Gowanus sewer-shed is the point where all the neighbourhood sewers combine and either flow to the Red Hook Wastewater Treatment Plant or overflow into the Canal (Spector, 2014). New development will even further distress the existing infrastructure and exacerbate the CSO problem. Therefore, the geography of Gowanus places it at risk for flooding. Although rezoning is presented as the only way to bring the economic revitalization required to pay for indispensable improvements in infrastructure, this logic presumes that Gowanus is fundamentally suitable for more development.

The problem, however, is that no amount of development and infrastructure can change the physical (topographical, geological, hydrological) properties of the area. The fight over what to build obscures that whatever is built will frequently be at risk of being, or actually be, under water. Gowanus is part of a larger ecological/urban system and subject to political decisions made at levels beyond community. At the state level, New York responds to a wider aggregate constituency. Moreover, governments at the municipal, state, and federal level tend to plan in limited increments as leaders eye the next election in a few years more than speculate about a problem that may not manifest itself as problematic for decades. The local green voice wants

⁷ Sea level rise projections reflect a range of possibility starting from 18 inches (46cm) (NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, 2018)

to protect itself from the afflictions of development, but the problem is far greater and complicated than fending off real estate speculators and gentrification: climate change is making Gowanus itself untenable as a residential, let alone commercial or industrial area. Political and economic factors do not compel addressing these problems, and in truth often contribute to compounding them.

The need for more housing, especially for low-income households, is acute and obvious, but building in Gowanus will not address that problem. In fact, it will create other problems. It will displace existing local populations and absorb investment and resources that could be dedicated to development in more environmentally sustainable locales. Moreover, participatory planning is being used as a smokescreen to justify rezoning that benefits the wealthy and businesses. In the case of Gowanus, the local green voice has become a tragic paradox: its heart is in the right place but its head is misguided. The call for environmental cleansing of a polluted area has become a proxy for class cleansing of a neighbourhood coveted by elite interests, and participatory planning obscures this dynamic.

5 Conclusion: Saving the local green voice: An informed dialogue on self-determination and sustainability

While harmonizing the environmental justice agenda with the circumstances of participatory planning in Gowanus is challenging, there is nonetheless something tremendously valuable in the concept and practice of the local green voice. The issue is how to reclaim this agenda, to ensure it embodies the local as well as reconciles with ecological necessities. I conclude with ideas to facilitate self-determination and sustainability through greater knowledge of areas being considered for rezoning and to improve participatory processes.

At the outset, a structural revolution in orientation is required: the motives behind the driving force of development should be exposed and the right to the city should be acknowledged. As Peter Marcuse states, profit should be eliminated as the primary means and motivation in the political sector and planning, and the role of the elite should not overshadow the public decision making (Marcuse, 2012: 39). In terms of the nuts-and-bolts of deliberating and determining development, the first step is to gather more information on a neighbourhood. Beyond data collection, this involves an approach that understands that a neighbourhood is not merely the sum of housing, water, sewer infrastructure, and power grid, but also a different kind of infrastructures that are critical to residents (especially those on low incomes), namely affordable shopping, as well as parks, recreational space, and other places for socializing and building community. In this way, measures of priorities of rezoning must include community well-being by setting “indicators as barometers of community well-being” (English et al., 2004: 194).

One important method for gleaning this knowledge are “sitewalks,” guided tours organized to bring together designers/planners and locals before the actual design process starts, which was employed in Waterfront Toronto project’s participatory strategies. Locals can highlight significant places and attachments. Other interactive methods include “neighbourhood use maps, transect walk maps, timelines, resource flow charts, daily routine graphs, and role playing” and photographic documentation done by residents (Seitz, 2001: 10). Participatory mapping such as on OpenStreetMap (an open source model) can be used to map essential community resources by the users themselves. NYC Planning’s tool Plan Gowanus is an important asset and should weigh heavily on the rezoning plans. Additionally, it is important to develop channels for participation that are not so constrained by time-specific, time-intensive,

cost-inducing conditions. One possibility are surveys. Online questionnaires can be developed to collect data on users, their behaviors, preferences, and problems with the existing community resources, open spaces, public spaces, and to also evaluate the potential of these places. A second option is to enable the participation of low-income families at public consultations by providing childcare, other social services, or compensation. These alternatives advance equity; the local green voice will then not only be sensitive to neighbourhood concerns and sustainability but also contribute to equality. These learning practices play a social-political role in cementing the utility and popularity of development projects. As Seitz (2001: 10) points out, interactive “methods are best learned by doing; the greatest benefit comes from their practice and analysis within the group. The sharing of knowledge and discussion that takes place is of greater value than the finished product.”

To validate the process of civic participation, planning must produce development that reflects neighbourhood knowledge, experience, and engagement. Neighbourhoods are not objects around which development is built, but subjects to be involved in determining development. The hand of public participation must be seen in planning and development; the process must drive the outcome. It is only when the local green voice is discernibly heard that any development has a chance to be environmentally and social-politically sustainable.

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