

Library as Incubator
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Field Report: Unbinding the Library August 3 & September 6, 2013 Reanimation Library, Brooklyn, NY

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On two different occasions over the last six weeks I gathered with small groups of people at the Reanimation Library to conduct an experiment in collective dislocation. Both of these events were held under the auspices of Elastic City—a Brooklyn-based art organization created by Todd Shalom that invites artists to lead conceptual walks and ‘ways’. I was invited to create a way, though truth-be-told, I’m pretty sure that I ended up creating a walkway—a likely result of my inclination to mash things together.

Of ‘ways’ Elastic City’s website states that “[w]hereas a walk provides the opportunity to participate in a narrative series of poetic moments, a way explicitly engages participants in *how* to generate these moments through exercises, tools and techniques.”

Given this framework, I found myself thinking about the relationship of the library to its immediate surroundings. Gowanus—the neighborhood in which the library is situated—is in many ways an ideal location for the library; like the library’s holdings, which have largely been discarded because they contain ‘obsolete’ information, Gowanus can be thought of as ‘discarded’ space because its principle role as a site of manufacturing has largely vanished. Additionally, a number of decidedly low-profile but engaging projects have been in the process of ‘reanimating’ the neighborhood through the adaptation and reuse of formerly derelict spaces, an undertaking that even encompassed its namesake canal—one of the nation’s most polluted waterways and a recently designated Superfund site.

These thoughts led me to consider more generally the relationship between libraries and urban planning—of how they both aim to establish order and create meaning through processes of top-down organization. With these loose parameters in mind, I walked through Gowanus with my senses alive. By the end of my walk I had identified the following general themes:

- Control / Classification / Surveillance
- Post-industrial land use / Gentrification

- Nature resurgent / emergent

Control / Classification / Surveillance

In regard to the first theme, I've been thinking for some time about the reductionist nature of classification—about how its process necessitates simplification. For instance, in the analog world, a book is ultimately situated on a shelf next to other books. The way that this is decided—i.e. the classification of the book—necessarily requires a cataloger to assign a primary subject to each book. What this means in practical terms is that the physical ordering of every library is subjective and its specific arrangement tends to mask the possibility of any number of alternative arrangements.

I also began thinking about Edward Snowden and the NSA, of the etymological relationship between the words 'classification' and 'classified', about how 'metadata'—itself a co-conspirator of classification—has recently entered the broader cultural lexicon. A flash flood of paranoia cascaded over me in which the parallel projects of classification suddenly began to reveal a fascist heart, pounding its drumbeat into the violence of phrenology, police states, and death camps.

Post-industrial Land Use / Gentrification

These paranoid thoughts came to me in the specific context of Gowanus—a neighborhood that is in the beginning stages of what will likely turn out to be a significant transformation. Largely an industrial space situated between two gentrified residential neighborhoods—Park Slope to the east and Carroll Gardens to the west—it has all of the predictable ingredients to become Brooklyn's next overhyped district. The developers are salivating over this irresistible swatch of connective tissue. As Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz put it, "Someday, I see the Gowanus as the Venice of Brooklyn. I really do!"

Until recently, two significant events appeared to alter this forgone conclusion: the economic crash of 2008, which temporarily scrambled New York's development calculus, and the designation of the Gowanus Canal—the heart of darkness running through the neighborhood—as a Superfund site. One wonders how many Wall Street investment bankers would actually be lured to the disintegrating banks of this former tidal creek, which now, as the EPA states on its website, contains "[c]ontaminants [that] include PCBs, coal tar wastes, heavy metals and volatile organics." But the gears of development never stay dormant for long, and in the last year the neighborhood has seen the expansion of The Green Building, the arrival of The Pines, and the soon-to-be-opening Royal Palms Shuffleboard Club. Despite its federally assigned scarlet letter, Gowanus appears to be on the verge of a makeover.

Nature Resurgent / Emergent

Finally, it's hard not to think of the imminent redevelopment of Gowanus in terms of Irene and Sandy—the two superstorms that plowed into New York in 2011 and 2012. Almost all of Gowanus lies in Hurricane Zone 1—the lowest lying and most flood-prone area of the city. Spurred on by ominous satellite images and memories of Katrina, I packed up my canal-neighboring ground floor library and moved it to higher ground prior to each storm's landfall. Luckily the library's space didn't suffer any damage itself, though Sandy flooded the building's basement with 6 feet of toxic gunk and left us without heat or power for a month. Given this, you can imagine how strange it seems that Whole Foods is setting up shop quite literally on the bank of the canal. I can only imagine that there must have been a miscommunication in the boardroom regarding the meaning of volatile organics.

But the natural world emerges throughout the neighborhood in many other ways too. In late January of this year, I came across a group of people gathered on the Union Street Bridge watching the sad spectacle of a sick and disoriented dolphin living out its last hours in the canal. While the cultivated spaces of community gardens—somewhat sketchy in my book given the contaminated soil near the canal—can certainly be found, the wild gardens sprouting through cracked pavement on dead-end streets strike me as far more hopeful. The more I looked, the more I found: the gnarled stems of wild plants enveloping chain link fences, vines overtaking razor wire, and perhaps my new favorite denizen of Gowanus—a small tree growing out of the second storey window of an abandoned warehouse on 3rd Street.

Unbinding the Library

Which brings me to the events themselves. I titled the way Unbinding the Library because I wanted to actively release control over some of the library's contents by spilling them out into the neighborhood. I wanted both borders—the library's and the neighborhoods—to become more porous. On both occasions, a group of six people gathered at the library where they were given a brief overview of its history and activities, and then randomly assigned one of the three themes. After pairing up with a partner, each person was responsible for finding one image and one passage of text that related to their given theme.

In the interest of expediency, I had preselected some books that I thought were relevant and would provide good material. For Control / Classification / Surveillance these included *Antarctic Sea Ice, 1973-1976: Satellite Passive-Microwave Observations, Abridged Decimal Classification*, and *Home Security*. Post-industrial Land Use / Gentrification included *Suburbia: The Good Life in our Exploding Utopia*, *New Movement in Cities*, and *How Do They Get Rid of It?* Nature Resurgent / Emergent included *The Battle of the Floods: Holland in February 1953*, *Wild Flowers Worth Knowing*, and *Danger! Icebergs Ahead!*

After choosing texts and images and making photocopies of them, we ventured out into Gowanus. Our goal was relatively straightforward: observe the neighborhood with the assigned themes in mind, and collectively decide where to post our fragments. As we walked, we came across the detritus and signs of a neighborhood in transition—a broken television, a traffic sign on a dead end street proclaiming END, a cross made of compact discs, high-end luxury condos under construction. At the unremarkable intersection of 4th Street and Bond—a deserted landscape blanketed with security cameras—we considered the scene that was silently recorded via closed-circuit television on October 29th, 2012: eight different angles of water slowly rising to overtake the warehouses. The poetics of the space washed over us in waves as we ingested the hallucinogenic, pre-apocalyptic terrain of Gowanus in the late summer dusk. Little by little, with too many ideas and not enough time, we lost ourselves dispersing the library through the darkening night.

[<http://www.libraryasincubatorproject.org/?p=12060>]