Midterm Report: Solutions for QueensWay

Overview: Our white paper is going to analyze if the QueensWay or Queens Highline is practical and advantageous for the future social sustainability of Queens. (see pages 3-10)

What is the QueensWay? The QueensWay is a community-led effort to transform a blighted, 3.5 mile stretch of abandoned railway in Central Queens into a family-friendly linear park and cultural greenway.

Project Goal: We will analyze how we can create legislation for the QueensWay or Queens Highline project that will make the project useful for the people that living in the surrounding areas of the project area. In reaching a conclusion we need to determine how to make the QueensWay an optimal public space that will offer benefits to the communities it is meant to serve while also protecting the neighborhoods they exist now. A key part of our project will be analyzing a similar project to the QueensWay, the Manhattan Highline. By using the Highline as a reference point for our project we will be able to identify the successes and failures of that project. We will take lessons from the Highline and build protections into our legislation to ensure that the QueensWay serves the communities that surround it as well as New York City continues to develop and grow.

We will look at the following areas in making our determination of what makes an ‘optimal’ public space: background on public spaces in urban areas, zoning of the Manhattan Highline, funding of the Manhattan Highline, current public spaces in the area of Queens that the proposed project would be in, zoning of the QueensWay, finding of the QueensWay, and is there a better usage of this space?

Responsibilities: How are group dynamics playing out? What needs tweaking or improvement?

We had a bit of a rough start, but now we are beginning to find our rhythm as a group. We had a much needed meeting and worked out any present issues. We then sought to create questions that better identify the goals of this project. We are hopeful that our group will now work well together. Below we’ve listed exact jobs the each group member is responsible for now and going forward. Beyond our current tasks we need to combine our research to develop a comprehensive resolution for the project that will either lay out its feasibility or suggest a different usage for this space. Additionally, it is important that we work together to find more diagrams and charts that will illustrate our research in a meaningful way. Lastly, we need to figure out a way for councilmen to speak to us. So far we have spoken to one councilman who said they can not comment on a project that has not begun. We acknowledge that this may add a layer of difficulty to our project, but if we rephrase our questions in a less specific way, we will be able to get general answers that can give us some sort of direction.

Responsibility breakdown:

Jules: Jules will be looking at background information on the goals of public space in urban areas. The expansion of public space areas in NYC are a major part of urban design and planning. In order to have a holistic view of the issues surrounding a massive public space project, the QueensWay, we need to ensure that we can identify what the goals of public spaces are. I will also look at the funding that went into the Manhattan highline project as it is important to see how funding was obtained on a similar project.
Austin: Austin will look at the zoning regulations concerning the construction of the Highline. He will find legislation from the City Council’s website that has contributed to the displacement in the area surrounding the highline, as well as examine the changes in neighborhood dynamic. In addition to this, he will combine use of Google Maps with trips to Queens to examine the urban layout of Queens. He will also work with Sarah to create a resolution on zoning the QueensWay.

Jessamyn: Jessamyn will analyze current public spaces and parks in Queens. This will help gauge what needs the QueensWay should address. She will work with Sarah in identifying possible better usages for the space where the QueensWay would go. Lastly, Jessamyn has been reaching out to City Council members.

Sarah: Sarah will work to propose the best way to fund the QueensWay. Presently, the estimated cost of the project is 130 million dollars. The project has only raised 1.7 million so far. Additionally, she will work with both Jessamyn and Austin to identify potential zoning issues in the creation of the project as well as possible better usages of this space.

To see sources for research and used data sets please turn to the works cited page attached at the end of the proposal. (pages 11 and 12)

Update on initial plan: Have the concrete steps been followed as planned, if not, what has changed? How are you adhering to the timeline?

Our original timeline lacked concrete steps, and instead included larger goals for the project. We have refined our original goals and progressed towards them through the research methods highlighted above. We have looked into the history behind public space usage in New York City, the legislation surrounding the Queens Highline, and drawn some of the conclusions about how we can prevent the displacement than occurred in the Manhattan project, all pieces of our original timeline. In addition to this, we have looked into issues of financing for both projects, researched zoning legislation for the Manhattan project, and examined the urban layout of Queens. Finally, we have reached out to councilmen to gain unique insights into the Queens project. (For more details see pages 3-10)

Concepts: Concepts of the project will be addressed in full detail in the individual sections of this proposal. Our project seeks to use existing policies and ideals on urban design to ensure that a large-scale public space project serves existing communities well. We will look at the past, present, and future of public space and city planning in making our determinations. (see pages 3-10)
Public Spaces and Funding:

According to the McGill University Center for urban planning, urban planning is defined as a the “technical and political process concerned with the welfare of people, control of the use of land, design of the urban environment including transportation and communication networks, and protection and enhancement of the natural environment.” An integral part of any urban planning layout are public spaces and public parks. The shift towards a focus on urban planning occurred in the last 20th century as urban decay swept through cities. Urban decay highlighted “appalling sanitary, social, and economic conditions of rapidly-growing industrial cities” and one of the remedies to make cities more appealing again was the creation of public spaces (McGill). In analyzing the purposes of creation of public spaces it is important to note, as Michael Kimmelman an expert on public space says, “The public realm is what we own and control... the streets, squares, parks, infrastructure and public buildings make up the fundamental element in any community — the framework around which everything else grows.” This idea of public growth being contingent on public spaces resonates deeply with this project as a major concern of the QueensWay Project is that developing a beautiful urban space will encourage gentrification in the areas of Queens that the project runs through.

An increasingly concerning issue in NYC is gentrification. As gentrification threatens the current social and economic landscape of the city and is integral in deciding future social sustainability in NYC. As the book Gentrification describes, gentrification is caused by the “reinvestment of capital in the urban center” (294). This definition in itself is extremely concerning as it lays out any improvement in urban life or urban beautification as a catalyst for gentrification. When discussing transforming out-of-use infrastructure into a functional public space the Highline in Chelsea immediately comes to mind. The Highline was an out of use elevated train track that was slated for demolition in 1999. Before it was transformed into a public space, the highline was overgrown and had graffiti. Two residents of Chelsea, Joshua David and Robert Hammond, came together to form Friends of the Highline, a group of community activists seeking to have the tracks turned into a park. When Mayor Bloomberg came into office he backed this plan as he believed it would increase tourism in the Chelsea area of NYC. The total cost of the Highline project was 273.5 million (NYCEDC). Out of that 273.5 million, $123.2 million came from the City, $20.3 million from the Federal Government, $400,000 from the State, and $132.6 million was raised privately by Friends of the Highline (NYCEDC). In addition the project’s funding coming mostly from private interests with the intent of making Chelsea a more appealing neighborhood, Highline legislation ensured the redevelopment of the Highline as a pseudo-public space coupled with the deregulation of Chelsea’s zoning ordinances (Loughran 56).

The Highline project, essentially used public space to create a homogenous environment, and in doing this ignored to goals that were originally set out by the creation of urban spaces. The Highline Project serves as a reminder, as written by Kelly Chan in BlouinArtInfo, of the threat urban spaces can pose to the social sustainability of existing neighborhoods:

Making something beautiful for the public does not necessarily mean it will be shared, though, especially in a city with such drastic levels of income inequality. For this to happen, the city must step in to ensure that less powerful and less affluent parties are protected, that different socioeconomic groups can still coexist when something desirable pops up on the market. The city acted contrarily by encouraging the rezoning of West Chelsea. The High Line — being such an alluring work of design — became, quite literally, a lure to attract groups powerful enough to steamroll socioeconomic diversity and reconstruct the neighborhood into a more glamorous version of New York. What Moss suggests is that if this continues, New York will soon be a ‘vanishing’ city of people who can afford to ‘only hang out with others just like themselves.’

The reason why lessons from the Highline are so crucial for the QueensWay project is that a major part of urban planning is using existing projects as a basis for new construction. As Henry Savitch points out, having
successes “in other parts of urban core, the city seeks to recreate that slick wherever there is still space” (70). Meaning that since Manhattan, NYC’s urban core, is developed at this point, the next obvious places to expand the urban core to is Brooklyn and Queens. This is something we can not prevent, but we can work to ensure that developments in the urban core promote social sustainability rather than social evolution.

The goal for the Queens Highline project should be to create a ‘loose space’. This term ‘loose space’ is used by urban planners, Karen Fran and Quentin Stevens to say that people in the communities surrounding a public space, “must recognize possibilities inherent in it and make use of possibilities for their own ends,” and it is through this that public spaces become “symbolic ways of communicating social sustainability.” The QueensWay should be built with the intent of achieving two types of public spaces: neighborhood and circulation. In his book Privately Owned Public Spaces, Jerold Kayden, describes that a neighborhood space should attract people from an immediate radius and encourage socializing within the community. He then describes that a circulation space encourages movement from point A to point B, and provides a better route of transportation in a neighborhood. Without a doubt, the QueensWay can achieve both of these goals, but it is important that the project is protected from the encouragement of tourisms and building rezoning. To make the QueensWay a reality, like the Highline it will need private funding, but it is not impossible to achieve community focused improvements when “city government and private interests make the public realm, on a grand scale, their shared interest” (Kimmelman)
**Topics:** Legislation surrounding the construction of the Manhattan Highline, neighborhood dynamic changes in Manhattan and existing dynamic / urban layout of Queens.

**Contributor:** Austin Fischer

**Questions to address:** What zoning legislation surrounded the construction of the Manhattan highline? Was the legislation conducive to displacement? How can alter the legislation to ensure that the problems that occurred in the Manhattan project are not present in Queens?

**Manhattan Highline Zoning Legislation:**

Increasingly, many have come to view public space projects as “trojan horses” for gentrification. Often, these projects are enacted under economic and environmental guises, while equality falls through the cracks. This is largely a result of how the projects are set up, and what legislation surrounds their creation. Thus, it is crucial to examine the legislation surrounding the Manhattan Highline, so that we can see what enabled the gentrification that has taken place in West Chelsea over the last decade. Through analyzing the legislation surrounding the Manhattan Highline we can see that development was promoted, instead of discouraged. The rezoning efforts that took place led to massive development which has forever changed the area.

One major flaw in the legislative efforts of the Manhattan Highline concerns zoning legislation involved in the creation of a Special West Chelsea District. The newly formed district contains provisions that allow for the easy transfer of development rights, a major contributor to development. However, the proposal for the Special West Chelsea District did include legislation that prevented the development of large buildings, as seen in section 98-423 of the proposal. The tallest possible building of all the subareas of the new district was but a short 250 ft, with the majority of areas being limited to having buildings shorter than 160 ft. Yet, as we have seen from the large scale development that has occurred in the area, this piece of legislation did nothing to limit the height of buildings. This is because the air-rights, or in the context of the legislation: development rights, are easily transferable between structures.

The ease of the transfer of development rights is what has allowed many buildings to surpass the height restrictions stipulated in the proposal. Development rights can actually be transferred from the Highline Transfer Corridor itself, a structure that is not consuming the full potential of its air rights. In addition to this, development rights can be transferred through a zoning lot merger (where two buildings are adjacent) or through a transfer of development rights (TDR - what occurs in the case of the Highline). Both of these transfers allow for a way around the height restrictions.

While the TDR from one structure to another can be seen as an overwhelming negative, there is room to capitalize on this to prevent displacement. This occurred, to a partial extent, within the Highline as 5%-20% of the development rights transferred (depending on the subarea) were required to contain low-income residents. This tactic of using TDR to further incorporate low income residents could be expanded upon in the Queens project.

Another legislative area that needs improvement is the that concerning the Floor Area Ratio or FAR within the production of the Special West Chelsea District. The FAR is the ratio of the total building floor area to the area of its zoning lot, which is the “principal bulk regulation controlling the size of buildings” (NYC Zoning - Glossary). Within the proposal for the Special West Chelsea District, there is no limitation of FAR. Instead, the various FARs of the subareas are all above 1.00, meaning that the area of the floor of the building will take up at least the full size of the lot. Manipulations of FAR could become increasingly useful in legislation surrounding the Queens project.

Despite the negative aspects of the Highline’s legislation, there were efforts to maintain diversity that should be kept, and revised, for the Queens Highline. For instance, the “Fair Rent” clause was included in the Special West Chelsea District. This ensures that low and medium income residents do not spend over 30% of their annual income on rent. Many of the pieces of the “Inclusionary Housing Program” were maintained within the new district. However, there is nothing that assures that lower income residents will have places to live within this new district. Instead, the adapted program simply guarantees that those who renew their lease will not have to pay more than 30% of their annual income on rent, as per the existing “30 Percent Standard.”
In addition to this, the clause (as found in 98-261 of the Special West Chelsea District proposal) explicitly states that, “upon expiration or termination of the requirements of the City, State or Federal program, rent increases and re-rentals shall be subject to the higher of the then-currently applicable 30 percent standard or the Rent Stabilization Standard.” The “Inclusionary Housing Program” should be further modified for the Queens Highline to ensure that there are a fixed number of permanent spots guaranteed to those of low-income backgrounds.


**Topics:** Existing public parks and spaces in Queens as well as outreach to councilmen.

**Contributor:** Jessamyn Sutton

**Questions to address:** Is there a need to more public spaces in Queens? Can the area be better served by a different usage of this space? What can we learn by speaking to Council Members?

The project of converting the Long Island Rail Road Rockaway Beach Line into a highline park called the QueensWay is a multifaceted community endeavor. This project would connect Rego Park, Forest Hills, Richmond Hill, Glendale, Woodhaven, and Ozone Park in Queens with a 3.5 mile long park including entertainment, a bike path, and a walkway bringing more business to the neighborhood, more space for locals, and a safer route for cyclists to cycle. This white paper is going to determine whether the most advantageous use for this space is creating another park or improving the transportation via queens.

Queens has about nineteen parks today including Flushing Meadows Corona, Highland, Kissena and Juniper Valley Parks (QueensWay). These parks range from having Zoos, botanical gardens, playgrounds and fields for sports to being simply vast open grounds for locals to relax and play a game of catch. Within one block from the proposed location of the QueensWay is Cedarhurst Park and Barret Park, within five blocks is majority of the other nineteen parks (Silver). The trust for Public Land which has been working on raising funds for the QueensWay has recently worked on two other parks in Queens called Hunter’s South Point Park and the Queens Waterfront Green Vision (Connected). These two parks were created with the agreement and enthusiasm of the communities that would benefit from them. In 2010 the Waterfront Green Vision held listening sessions between a few neighborhoods to accomplish the wishes of the locals. There

In addition to this endeavor the Regional Rail Working Group are working to revitalize the old 4.2 mile railroad line that has been untouched for over fifty years. This line will connect Rego park to Ozone Park just as the QueensWay would in addition to connecting Penn station to JFK Airport. After the destruction of Hurricane Sandy Far Rockaway was practically inaccessible because of damage done to the train line having additional means of transportation in the neighborhood will create less congestion and less of a likelihood for future inaccessibility. The communities that impaired damage from this superstorm focus now of projects that improves sustainability in all aspects of their lives from parks to food to transportation. The cost of this project is estimated to be about 400 million, which is more than three times the proposed budget of the QueensWay.

As a part of this project councilmen David Greenfield, Elizabeth Crowley, Eric Ulrich, and Karen Koslowitz were contacted via phone and email requesting a statement on this proposed project. Councilman Greenfield was contacted because he is the head of the committee on land use. The questions prepared for him are themed around the topic of what he feels would be a more beneficial usage of this elevated rail line a park or a new train line. Councilman Crowley was contacted because her district includes Woodhaven which is part of the proposed QueensWay. She is also a leading force “allocating and balancing the city’s $70+ billion budget” (Crowley). A statement from her detailing whether some of this budget should go towards the QueensWay would be a leading positive force for this plan. Councilmen Ulrich and Koslowitz were contacted because the QueensWay is part of their districts and determining from their perspective what they believe would benefit the locals more is important.

**Question list (for city councilmen):**

councilmen contacted: Greenfield, Crowley, Ulrich, Koslowitz.

**Greenfield:**

In your bio it says you work to make New York more affordable what are your thoughts on the queens high line project in relation to housing and affordability?

As your "tell it like it is" reputation suggests it is important to address the problems that will persist from this project. As a result of the QueensWay, displacement is inevitable. What do you believe is an alternative to such displacements?
How does this create practical improvements for communities with semi-ok transit shouldn't we be focusing on improving transportation and not transforming the abandoned rock away beach railway into a park

How is it going to be funded? The Manhattan high line had aid from friends of high line the nonprofit. Queens has the trust for public land that began this initiative has not been raising significant funds. How do u suggest obtaining the remainder of these funds?

His response

Hi Jessamyn, see his response below.

We denied her request because I don't speak publicly on projects this early in the process.

Regards,
David
Public space is important for the growth of urban communities. Queens is one of the most populated boroughs of NYC. Utilizing The Rockaway Rail Line in a positive way can be extremely beneficial for the Queens community, but has to be done in a preservative way so as not to commit the same problems as the Manhattan High Line. These projects have very influential effects, especially on real estate prices of the surrounding neighborhoods. There needs to be legislation instituted to protect these neighborhoods against the rising prices and inevitable displacement. The land of the QueensWay is owned by New York City, unlike the Manhattan High Line, which was owned by CSK Transportation. The QueensWay project comes with a forewarning based on the outcomes of the Manhattan High Line, some of which are higher property values that risk pricing moderate and low-income families out of their homes.

The president and chief executive officer of the Trust for Public Land promotes the idea of the Queens project. He claims “the High Line led to the redefinition of the neighborhoods in Manhattan, whereas the Queensway will be defined by the neighborhoods it passes through. Essentially, it will be a cultural trail” (Trust for Public Land). The borough of Queens is known for its cultural diversity. The neighborhoods surrounding the QueensWay, particularly Ozone Park, are an exception to this trend. It is one of the few places in New York City where no particular race or ethnicity holds a majority. Over 100 different nationalities are represented within a ten-minute walk of the railway (ENYA). But, how can it be ensured that this will remain true? Some of the zoning laws and regulations in Queens will help to promote and protect the current neighborhoods in Queens. There are various zoning laws regarding the area around Ozone Park in particular. These laws include the reinforcement of the neighborhood character and established building patterns by replacing existing zoning with new lower density and contextual zones. Some of the proposed laws include instituting a modest amount of new residential and “mixed-use development” opportunities to major passageways and locations near mass transit resources (of course, the QueensWay would be a major consideration of this law). Another zoning regulation prevents commercial infringement into residential areas by reducing the amount of commercial intersections (NYC Zoning). Therefore, when constructing the park these laws would need to seriously be deliberated because the park would create major commercial overlays. The Ozone Park rezoning provides a framework for orderly growth while protecting residential character, which would most definitely need to be considered for the QueensWay project. Land prices must also be considered for the building of the QueensWay. Linear parks across the US have been shown to increase property values for surrounding homes. The consultant team for the QueensWay estimates that home values adjacent to the QueensWay would increase by five to seven percent over the first six years (the length of a typical market cycle) after the park opens (QueensWay).

The funding for the proposed project has yet to be raised. As of now, the Trust for Public Land has raised $1.2 million. It is a non-for profit organization that works to create parks and protects land for people (TPL). The city itself recently made a huge investment in local parks throughout all five boroughs around $130 million so it is going to be difficult to get the government to fund this project. Governor Andrew Cuomo awarded the trust a $474,000 environmental protection grant through New York’s Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic. Unlike the Manhattan High Line, the neighborhoods surrounding the proposed QueensWay do not have the revenues to support this project. The initial study for the project included a careful structural and engineering assessment, which judged the structure to be “generally sound.” In addition, the City of New York conducted an initial Phase 1 environmental assessment that did not raise significant concerns about major reconstruction costs. The cost estimate for constructing the QueensWay, including contingencies and design costs, are approximately $120 million. This cost includes adding additional facilities in Forest Park and other QueensWay locations (QueensWay). The cost of the park seems feasible especially when compared to the Manhattan High Line.
The final question to consider is whether there is a better and more practical alternative to the proposed QueensWay. There is another option, which would be restoring the rail line so people in Queens, particularly in the Rockaways, can get to work without going through the congested boulevards in cars and buses, or taking A train to Midtown, which takes more than an hour. The QueensWay is the more realistic option as opposed to a new train system. The idea to reactivate this as a rail line has been seriously considered by the MTA and Port Authority who have so far decided that it is not feasible at this time. If, in the end the QueensWay seems like the best utilization for this space we will propose a resolution for the QueensWay.
<http://ny.curbed.com/archives/2014/10/06/high_line_decried_as_a_trojan_horse_for_the_real_estate_people.php>.


<http://queenshighline.blogspot.com/>.


<http://www.fastcodesign.com/3037135/evidence/how­parks­gentrify­neighborhoods­and­how­to­stop­it >.


<http://queens.about.com/od/parks/a/parks_in_queens.htm>.


