The Lower East Side (LES) of Manhattan is known for its rich, cultural fabric and beautiful, historic streetscapes. It includes distinctive enclaves, such as the East Village, Alphabet City, Chinatown, the Bowery, and Little Italy. But this vibrant community, which is home to many immigrants and lower-income households, has become a target of real estate developers. The stressors of gentrification are so strong that the National Trust for Historic Preservation designated the LES one of America’s Most Endangered Places in 2008. Despite the development interests pressing upon it, the LES waterfront continues to lag behind most of Manhattan in terms of public amenities. In Battery Park, a wealthy enclave across Manhattan to the west, you’ll find beautiful flower gardens, countless sculptures, and an aquatic-themed carousel. Across the East River from the LES, Brooklyn Bridge Park boasts a roller-skating rink, an educational center, a swimming pool, and a barge-music venue, among other amenities. These beautiful parks serve as physical reminders of the lack of services throughout the LES. Near Pier 42 on the LES—which also happens to be where the largest percentage of public housing abuts a waterfront in all five boroughs—the waterfront remains marked by warehouses and brownfields (figure 2). There is a bike and pedestrian path along the waterfront, but LES residents must brave notoriously dangerous underpasses beneath FDR Drive to reach it.

Based on a robust community visioning process and an independent financial review of both plans by Pratt Institute, the People’s Plan would offer amenities such as open-space parks, greenways, public restrooms, a community center, an inlet and river pool, and space for environmental education and community gardens. The City was receptive to the People’s Plan but noted that it would take years to raise the money and political support necessary to fully implement it.

In the interim, a network of community organizations joined with arts and design-focused groups to create the Paths to Pier 42 (P2P42) project—a temporary park with art and design installations created by commissioned artists, in collaboration with community residents. The project was developed to keep residents engaged while building resources and momentum during the multiyear campaign for the People’s Plan.

The story of the P2P42 project illustrates an innovative approach to community-driven urban change in a very strong market economy, where the speed of development is often too fast for residents to contribute. It also sheds light on the challenges and opportunities of implementing biophilic urbanism in lower-income communities.

Mapping the Lower East Side

As with many neighborhoods, the boundaries of the LES can be fluid and overlapping. For the purposes of the P2P42 project, the LES includes the East Village, Chinatown, Little Italy, and the Bowery (figure 3). The LES is home to more than 75,000 people, 18 percent of whom are under the age of 20. Almost 40 percent of residents are Latino, 25 percent Asian, 22 percent white, and 9 percent black, according to census data. Roughly a third of families live below the poverty line and pay less than $500 per month in rent. Almost a third are foreign born. Within walking distance of the Pier, the population is approximately 40 percent Asian and more than 40 percent foreign born.

These residents live in an environment shaped by a legacy of displacement. Originally occupied by the Lenape tribe, by the seventeenth century, the LES was home to several farms, later subdivided to form the neighborhood’s major street...
As federal, state, and private funding flowed into Manhattan after Sandy, many alternative redevelopment agendas for the area emerged. LES Ready! community organizers worked in collaboration, and with renewed momentum, to maintain the community’s vision of the waterfront. But the People’s Plan for the park still required significant fundraising before it could be built, and the influx of new, outside interests hoping to contribute to the future vision for Manhattan’s waterfront put the community-driven plan at risk of appropriation.

The relationships that drove the creation of the People’s Plan for the East River waterfront became the foundation for the P2P42 project network (figure 4). After the People’s Plan was released, the coalition successfully advocated to transfer control of Pier 42 to the NYC Parks Department, and the project was awarded $14 million from the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation to jumpstart reconstruction. But, as Hester Street Collaborative’s former design director Dylan House explained: “$14 million is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the overall budget of what a capital project for the waterfront would be. It’s more like a $90 million project. So how do we keep people involved, raise awareness about this site and build community ownership of it?”

With these questions in mind, the P2P42 project was launched, but just weeks before Superstorm Sandy hit the New York region. The brownfield site was flooded and became even less welcoming than before. LES residents suffered great hardship: In the high-rise public housing across the street from the Pier, power was off for weeks after a flooded substation exploded. Residents, many with limited mobility, lived without air conditioning or functional elevators. And local small businesses, including community grocers, also closed—some never to return—resulting in a long-term amenity loss, as well as profound short-term difficulty.

The P2P42 network responded by using project events as a platform for local groups to share information and produce community-based art that helped residents to process their emotions at each stage of the recovery process. The community organizing legacy of the LES provided a civic infrastructure on which it could rely during the Sandy recovery process. These social networks helped LES residents increase their adaptive capacity to post-storm stressors, and the community demonstrated a greater ability to mobilize broadly and collectively around resilience needs in Sandy’s aftermath. For instance, the neighborhood quickly formed the Lower East Side Long Term Recovery Group (LES Ready!) after Sandy; an open coalition meant to “cooperatively coordinate response, resources, preparedness planning and training in response to Superstorm Sandy and in the event of future disasters.” This group of organizations used P2P42 as a venue to educate the neighborhood on available services, as well as to gather data about local recovery needs.

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The temporary park project spanned three years and included a series of temporary, creative installations. Year one focused on turning the patches of uneven concrete into a usable park. These early installations tended to be large-scale efforts, including signage, shading, plant life, and reclaimed water sources. They included the Rest Stop project, designed and built by Interboro Partners, which created custom planter/benches from recycled lumber to temporarily hold saplings that replaced those lost during Superstorm Sandy (figure 1). The trees were later replanted at nearby public housing properties.
As the temporary park made the space more hospitable, there were additional opportunities to engage the community in artistic projects. One of the most beloved projects was the People’s Poster Project, facilitated by Harlem-based artist Sonia Louise Davis. The project gave residents the opportunity to express themselves individually and collectively through a series of black and white posters featuring portraits of residents with artifacts that held significance for them. More experimental art, like the inked Garden—where plants were brought in and dipped in Chinese ink to show the flora’s sprouts—were not always popular with residents, but they provoked rich conversations (figure 5).

Residents engaged with the art in a variety of ways, depending on the piece’s medium and approach, but all that “Black Lives Matter” progressed through a robust community discourse during P2P42 public events.

**Placemaking or Placekeeping?**

Placemaking, community-engaged design, and tactical urbanism are all tools meant to assert alternative visions for what an urban space could be. These ideas, which share an emphasis on manifesting the unique spirit of the community, are increasingly popular across the United States. New York City has seen many efforts that reflect these trends, resulting in an urban environment where a variety of both sanctioned and informal interventions often meld in the constant remaking of the cityscape.

Placemaking is not new to New York City. Under Mayor Bloomberg, the City of New York hosted a variety of projects that pushed placemaking in new directions that redefined public space, using methods also known as tactical urbanism. Projects ranged from the High Line, a prominent example of adaptive reuse of seemingly uninfringable infrastructure, to the experimental closure of portions of Times Square’s vehicular areas for pedestrian plazas. But these examples are all driven by top-down and often white, upper-income design-friendly conceptions of a place. Designers of such spaces, among them creative placemaking advocates, are eager to showcase how their lofty designs can strengthen grassroots efforts.

But few placemaking creatives understand how urban revitalization projects that alter the civic urban fabric of lower income communities can be paired with anti-displacement strategies that allow people to stay through positive neighborhood change. For instance, High Line founder, Robert Hammond regrets his myopic focus on improving urban infrastructure without considering how it might harm their neighbors. “Instead of asking what the design should look like, I wish we’d asked, ‘What can we do for you? People have bigger problems than design.’ In Washington, D.C., the 11th Street Bridge Park Project has formed a community-engaged coalition in order to ensure they do not make the same mistakes. The 11th Street Bridge Park team first focused their fundraising efforts on wealth generation and home ownership strategies to help residents resist displacement pressures as the adaptive reuse of this bridge attracts speculative development capital.

At P2P42, this tension was resolved through a myriad of different approaches to the work. First, a community-driven decision-making body chose every project and linked each artist with appropriate community partners. Second, the built worlds are all ephemeral in nature, so there are no permanent changes that would exacerbate market pressures. Third, these temporary projects served to intentionally hold space for the People’s Plan to gain the financial momentum it needs for implementation. Fourth, the community engaged events to build social capital provided a social and physical space for LES Ready! to convene as it sought to connect residents with recovery assistance and to process trauma just after Superstorm Sandy.

Through community-engaged artistic and design practices, P2P42 re-connected residents with their waterfront, with each other, and with a future vision for a People’s Waterfront. After the first three-year project, the city asked the Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES), the community organizing partner on the project team, to keep the programming on the Pier alive while they continued to fund-raise and get the remediation plans in order. The “rusty shed” was demolished in fall of 2018, with Phase 1 design installations coming first, and full completion of the park scheduled for 2020.

**Resources:**


Wright, Andrew (June 18, 2016). "Can the 11th Street Bridge Park Slow Gentrification in DC?" ASLA The Dirt. https://dirt.asla.org/2016/06/18/can-the-11th-street-bridge-park-slow-gentrification.

**This excerpt is adapted from Chapter 4 in Wilson’s recent book, Resilience for All: Striving for Equity through Community-Driven Design (Island Press, 2018).**