

Gowanus Lowline: Connections

by David Briggs and Anthony Deen

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Years of industrial dumping, contaminated run-off and sewer overflows have turned the Gowanus Canal and its surrounding neighborhood into one of New York's most notorious toxic hotspots. The Canal's designation as a Superfund site in 2010, a controversial decision that shifted clean-up responsibility to federal agencies rather than allowing the City to pursue its own remediation plan, brought national attention to this local problem. But the hostile waters and lands of the Gowanus still play host to diverse wildlife and thriving residential, commercial, industrial and recreational communities, and plans to develop the area have not been deterred by the contamination.

Frustrated by the lack of a cohesive vision for the neighborhood and concerned by a failure to connect development plans with broader issues of community services, infrastructure and sustainability, architects and Brooklyn residents David Briggs and Anthony Deen founded the advocacy group Gowanus by Design in 2009. Briggs and Deen wanted to encourage new clean-up and development strategies based on community input and the needs and opinions of those who work and live along the Gowanus. They soon realized that what they saw as the primary challenges for the site could be addressed through a series of design competitions, which would serve to provoke conversation, encourage community engagement and, hopefully, steer future development of the area. The first of these competitions, Gowanus Lowline: Connections, invited designers across disciplines to explore the potential for pedestrian-oriented development that engages with the canal and the surrounding watershed. Here, Briggs and Deen tell us more about the motivations behind and future plans for Gowanus by Design, and share the winning designs from Connections. —C.B.



The Gowanus is a canal and neighborhood under constant assault. For every contamination clean up there is an illegal dumping; for every marine species that returns to the canal there is a toxic overflow from the local CSOs. The nearby areas of Carroll Gardens, Cobble Hill and Boerum Hill are neighborhoods of four and five story buildings, but the City

has approved 12-story buildings for two separate major development projects in Gowanus. The fact is, the area suffers because there is no master plan. When the Gowanus Canal was listed on the EPA's Superfund National Priorities List in early 2010, it was a welcome pause to what was becoming a rapid development process that did not address vital urban issues, such as contextual zoning, mass transit, community services or infrastructure.

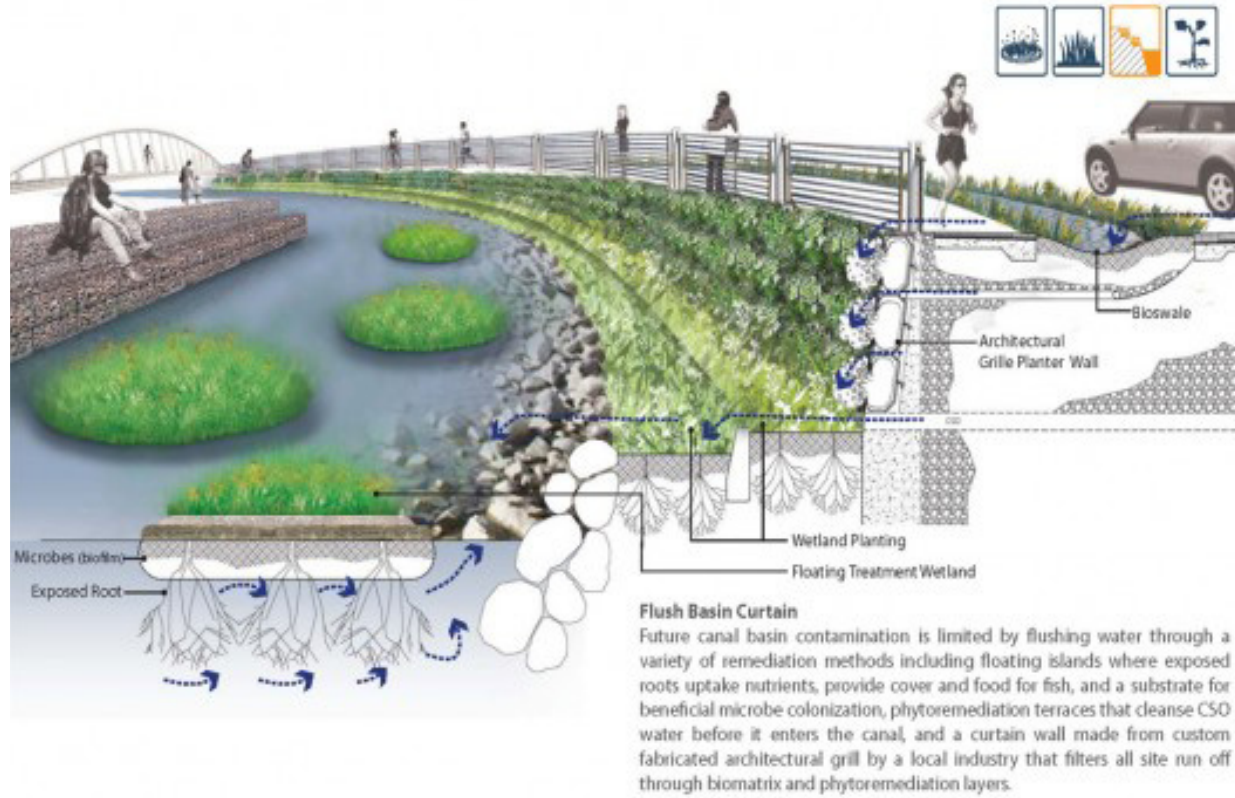
The pending development of the Gowanus can also be seen as a local case study of a global trend. As more of our population move to cities — if current trends continue, 70% of the global population will live in urban environments by mid-century — pressure will increase to develop brownfield sites and other contaminated urban areas that were previously considered off-limits due to the extensive remediation they require.

In 2009, we founded Gowanus by Design as a community-based urban design advocacy group in response to these global shifts, our concerns about the trajectory of the proposed development and our desire to help remake our corner of the city. Our mission is to promote sustainable development that enhances the Gowanus Canal community without replacing the historic character and working class origins of the neighborhood, while responding intelligently to the environmental damage wrought by local industry over the past 150 years. Our members are local residents and industry professionals — architects, planners, cartographers and transportation experts. Our aim is to propose and advocate for new strategies for the development of the Gowanus area and to explore the larger urban planning challenges that the world will face as the global population migrates to the world's cities.

After the Gowanus Canal was designated a Superfund site, our focus shifted towards documenting the cleanup process and taking a step back to consider long-term planning challenges. When discussing how to effectively move forward, we realized that we had to sort through the myriad complex issues being raised in a comprehensive, yet understandable way. By identifying a series of broad questions about the latent problems at the canal, and connecting them to the future of transportation, education, sustainability, infrastructure and community services, we hoped that we could spark conversations that would lead to more research and community input. As our list of questions developed, we decided that each one could form the basis of a design competition, the results of which could create a mappable, online database that would serve to inspire new thinking on urban development.



The Gowanus Lowline jury



HONORABLE MENTION

Domestic Laundry: Flush Basin Curtain Mattress Pillow

Agergroup: Jessica Leete, Claire Ji Kim, Shan Shan Lu, Winnie Lai and Albert Chung
 Boston, Massachusetts

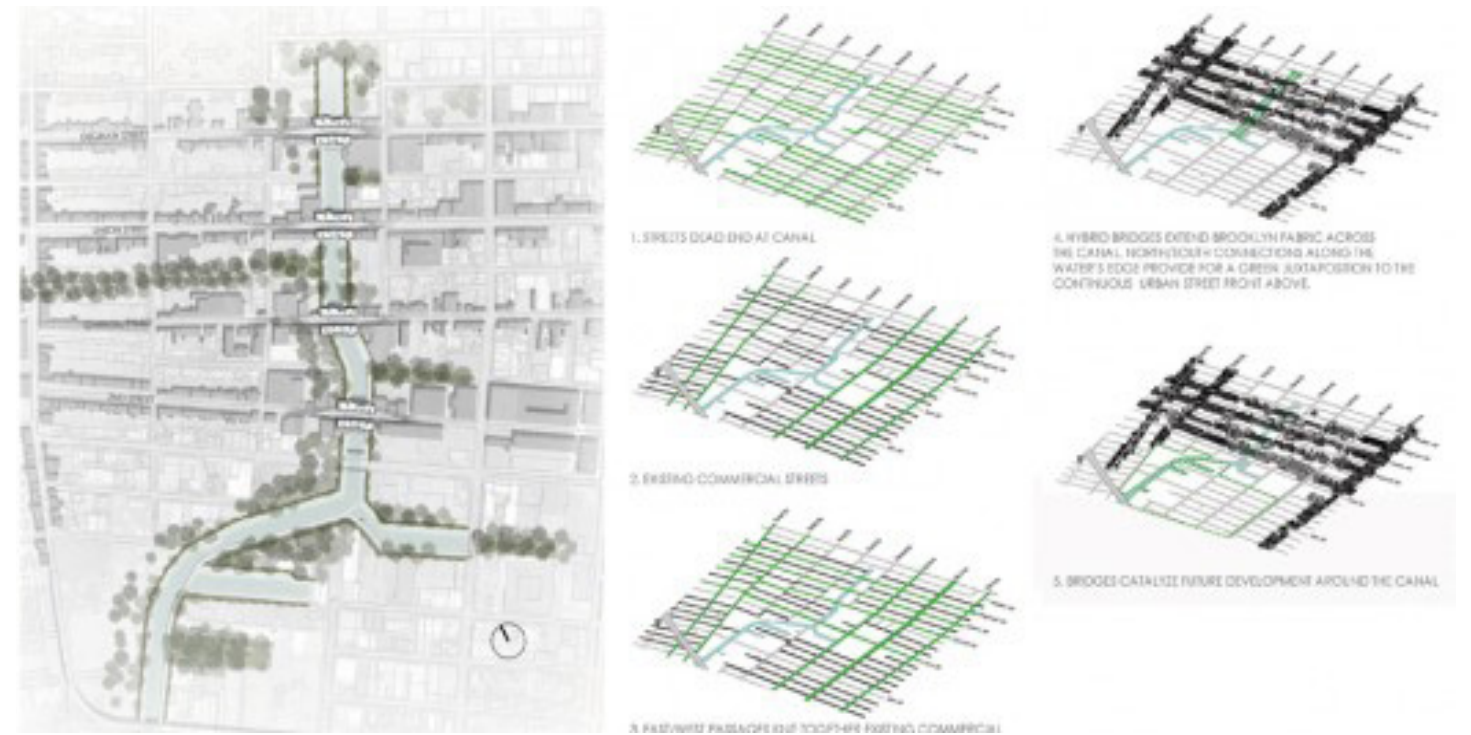


HONORABLE MENTION

Gowanus Canal Filter District
 burkholder|salmons: Sean Burkholder, Dylan Salmons
 University Park, Pennsylvania

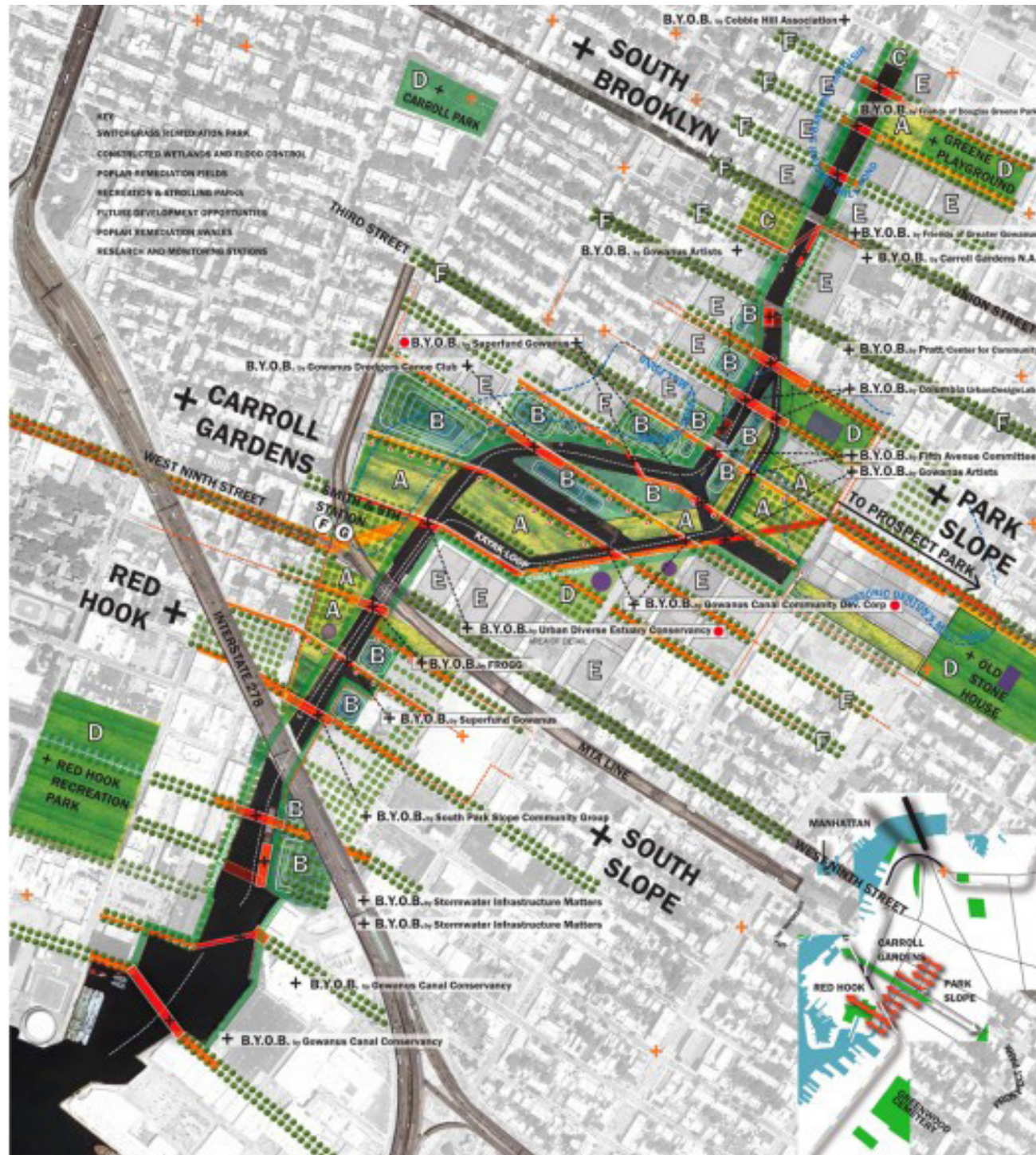
Originally, the competition brief indicated that there would be three honorable mentions. But as the deliberations proceeded through the afternoon, the jury focused on four entries that formed two pairings: “Gowanus Canal Filter District” and “Domestic Laundry: Flush Basin Curtain Mattress Pillow”; and “Made in Brooklyn: Bridges For Local Artisans & Industry” and “B.Y.O.B. (Build Your Own Bridge).”

“Filter District” and “Domestic Laundry” both accepted the existing conditions as a starting point, yet offered different solutions: “Filter District” proposed that three areas south of 3rd Street on both sides of the canal be depressed to promote tidal flushing and create a node point for peripheral development. “Domestic Laundry” offered a range of solutions along both sides of the canal, suggesting a phased, realistic approach that embraced the myriad technologies that the canal cleanup would require.



HONORABLE MENTION

Made in Brooklyn: Bridges For Local Artisans & Industry
 Nathan Rich and Miriam Peterson
 Brooklyn, New York



HONORABLE MENTION

B.Y.O.B. (Build Your Own Bridge)

Austin+Mergold LLC: Jason Austin, Alex Mergold, Jessica Brown, Sally Reynolds
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Both “Made in Brooklyn” and “B.Y.O.B.” relied on a more traditional typology to link the neighborhoods on both sides of the canal: the bridge. However, each team was careful to expand on the structure’s conventional use. “Made in Brooklyn” proposed the bridge as a catalyst for growth on either side of the canal by creating a commercial spine on the crossings that would nurture current interest (and pride) in Brooklyn industry. “B.Y.O.B.” proposed various bridge prototypes, designed by local stakeholders, that reflect the existing neighborhood character while connecting current and proposed adjacencies.

After deliberations concluded, we asked the jurors to reflect on Gowanus Lowline and comment on what they’d like to see in future competitions. Several of them noted that more emphasis should be placed on understanding Brooklyn, its character, the local climatic conditions, and, in this particular case, the topography around the canal. Additionally, since the science required to properly remediate the area is truly complex, they suggested that future competitions be designed around some of the specific remediation solutions currently being developed by the EPA as part of the Superfund cleanup process.

As we move forward, our competitions will take the ideas and feedback generated from Gowanus Lowline and continue to explore the broad questions that we think will help people better understand the changes taking place at the canal and in the surrounding neighborhood. We will advocate for new strategies and a sustainable approach to urban development and plan to share our work with local groups, other like-minded professionals, and New York City’s Department of City Planning.

These winning entries from Gowanus Lowline: Connections, along with approximately twenty other thought-provoking entries selected by the committee, and three projects from the seventh grade class of the Brooklyn School for Collaborative Studies, a local middle school, will be on display at the SET Gallery, 287 Third Avenue, Brooklyn for two weeks in September. The show will open on Thursday, September 15, from 6—9pm. For more information, [click here](#).

After graduating from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, David Briggs worked in upstate New York and for William McDonough in New York City. He opened his own office in 1993 and began working on residential, commercial, and restoration projects that addressed sustainable design issues. In 1997 Mr. Briggs was awarded the AIA New York City Chapter Stewardson Keefe LeBrun Travel Grant. He has also served as a Visiting Critic for the Weimar Bauhaus-Universität “Summer Academy in Rome” as well as the University of Pennsylvania and taught as an adjunct professor at Philadelphia University. Since 2002, he has served on the Board of Trustees for the Amber Charter School in Harlem where he chairs the Facilities Committee and has been Board Secretary for the past four years. Mr. Briggs is a LEED Accredited Professional and is licensed to practice architecture in New York, New Jersey, Louisiana, and Washington DC. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife and two sons.

Anthony Deen is a co-founder of Gowanus by Design, and owner of deenstudio. His projects include work for jetBlue, British Airways and Chelsea Market in New York. Prior to starting deenstudio, Anthony was the Senior Design Director at The Phillips Group, and served as Vice President of Design and Development for the Virgin Megastores in North America. Anthony was also a senior architect with the Rockwell Group where he helped found the Interaction Lab, developing digital media for built environments. Anthony began his career with Samuel Anderson, Winka Dubbeldam and James Garrison, where he won an AIA-NY Project Award. Anthony earned his undergraduate degree at the Cooper Union, graduate degree from Parsons School of Design and did additional study in urban design at the City College of New York. Anthony teaches design studio in the School of Art, Media and Technology at Parsons School of Design where he was the founding director of Parsons’ Design + Technology department. Anthony is also a member of the EPA’s Gowanus Community Advisory Group and lives in Carroll Gardens with his family.

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