

Lowline Community Engagement
Public Workshop 1 Analysis
Prepared by Karp Strategies on January 31, 2017

Workshop Date: January 25, 2017, 6:30 PM to 8:30 PM

Number of Attendees: Approximately 70 people across 10 breakout tables, over half of whom were from the Lower East Side community

Recruited by/Who were attendees: Largely community members and local leaders recruited by the Lowline, including tenant leaders and residents of Two Bridges, Community Advisory Board Task Force members, representatives from Community Board 3 and the Chinese American Planning Council, Ed Litvak from the Lo-Down, and residents of Grand Street Guild

Introduction

This memo is intended to provide a summary analysis of the ideas shared in the latest Public Community Design Workshop conducted as part of the Lowline's formal community engagement process. The analysis here synthesizes and presents prevailing themes heard across the various breakout tables, and focuses on specific comments or suggestions that were particularly insightful. This document is not intended to be representative of the views of all members of CD3 or the Lower East Side, or to draw definitive conclusions regarding the needs of the community. It is presented as part of an iterative engagement process, and will be used alongside findings from other public community design workshops and small engagement activities to form a more complete picture over time.

Key Themes/ Findings from Each Table

Breakout Table 1

This table was primarily concerned with the type and number of community facilities provided, including recreational, educational, and art-related programming, as well as a variety of green spaces. They were also concerned with prioritized access for the local community, security, entrance locations, and emergency exits.

Breakout Table 2

This table came up with ideas about the variety of usage and programming of the green space, both for public and community use. They raised questions about how security could be ensured, measures against flooding and other adverse weather events, and hygiene. The table was concerned with how the **local** community could benefit from the Lowline.

Breakout Table 3

Gentrification, crowd and traffic management were themes raised by this group. Specifically, they were concerned with price and rent increases resulting from the Lowline, and how this could be countered by encouraging local businesses. They proposed design ideas including spatial organization, and aesthetic

choices such as material usage. This table also spoke about youth engagement via programming and space usage.

Breakout Table 4

Table 4 summarized their expectations for the Lowline as: ‘A multi-purpose space featuring community art, music, theater, green spaces, and activity space with programming for all ages, intended to serve as a destination for everyday and special occasions.’ They were comfortable with the idea of the Lowline being funded by private events, but also proposed recreational, arts, and education programs for the community. Their concerns about security centered on safety in a dark underground space and homelessness. The table had strong, specific feelings about the type of plants they wish to see grown in the space.

Breakout Table 5

Technology, capacity, and user groups were some of the themes raised by this table. These participants spoke about incorporating the local history and diverse culture of the neighborhood into the Lowline through educational programs and artwork. They suggested funding the maintenance of the park through paid entry or suggested donations. They explored how usage by different groups such as tourists, fitness enthusiasts, or families could be efficiently separated. Green space was a key theme.

Breakout Table 6

This table was concerned with issues of continued affordability, support for the local community, and transit. They want the Lowline to be returned to its original use as a transit hub with space allocated for bus parking, with ideas around a waterfall and community center. This table also spoke about the community engagement and outreach process itself.

Breakout Table 7

This table produced design ideas for the organization of the green space in the Lowline. They had many suggestions related to educational programs for children, young adults, and adults; and recreational community facilities. Further, the table would like a space dedicated to experimental activities or programs related to arts, food, and education. Green spaces and prioritized local access were also discussed.

Breakout Table 8

This table discussed the nature of underground space in the Lowline, citing concerns about ventilation, lighting, and safety. They suggested including plentiful public amenities and recreational spaces. They were in favor of encouraging local commerce. This table also discussed how columns are bad luck in some cultures, and presented ideas for countering this notion.

Breakout Table 9

The major themes that arose from discussion at this table were diversity and history, recreation, personal space, accessibility, and safety inside and outside the Lowline. They were interested in making the space

food-centric, suggesting urban agriculture, horticulture lessons, and spaces to sell food prepared from local ingredients. They were in favor of showcasing the history and diversity of the Lower East Side.

Breakout Table 10

This table was focused on maintaining the Lowline primarily as a green space, with flexible spaces for temporary activities and events. They discussed the scope of community facilities, and the design of spaces for public and private events as a source of funding for the park. They spoke about the viability and efficacy of solar technology in the space.

Key Themes Across All Tables

The findings across breakout tables represent a broad but largely consistent set of interests, concerns, and ideas. The most prevalent findings are listed below by topic with supporting details. Two issues, however, warrant special call out: All things **local**, and the debate between **activity and rest**.

Local Emphasis

Across most of the other key themes addressed herein, one overarching participant concern emerged: that the Lowline serve the multi-faceted needs of local community (despite the acknowledged reality that many tourists will visit). Breakout tables discussed this idea in myriad ways pertaining to who would use and feel welcome at the Lowline, who would benefit from it, what art would be included, how to capitalize on Lower East Side history, and what vendors would be allowed. The overwhelming answer was that it should reflect the spirit, culture, and people of the Lower East Side above all else through all versions of access control, including procurement, vending permits, and priority and/or free access, and space utilization.

Activity and Rest

Many tables discussed the need to establish tranquility in this space, and the important role the Lowline could play in promoting a quiet ‘time out’ for locals. In the reverse, many tables - some times the same ones - sought to program the Lowline with a glut of activities and uses. This tension is borne out in related concerns about creating a lot of greenery below ground and mitigating noise levels, while also programming the space for many different kinds of users. Aside from the local/tourist dynamic, the dichotomy of rest and activity is at play through many of the findings below.

Green Space and Urban Agriculture

Ten out of ten tables discussed specific program and design ideas for green space in the park. The vision for the green space varied greatly across tables, some tending towards urban agriculture and community gardens; others towards recreational public and community space, and some proposing a combination.

Three tables suggested creating a community garden and four tables were interested in exploring the potential and utility of urban agriculture. Proponents of urban agriculture saw it as a potential source of local produce, a source of income, as well as an educational opportunity. One table suggested making the space food-centric, with programming that would allow local vendors to sell locally grown and prepared food.

Five tables suggested creating a green space for its own sake, coupled with flexible or temporary uses that could occupy it. Three tables saw the green space as more recreational and suggested creating meandering walking paths coupled with meditation or ‘quiet’ spaces; aquariums; and one table suggested fish ponds and multi-use interactive spaces. Other ideas raised included whether or not to allow dogs into the green space, and the separation of noisy and quiet activities within the green space. One table was strongly opposed to water features as they are often breeding grounds for vermin.

Education

Nine of ten tables hoped to see educational uses at the future site in a way that would support a range of ages and user groups. Some participants sought a section set aside explicitly for educational use - like a small lending library or classroom - while others saw the Lowline’s greenery and diversity as a classroom in and of itself. In this scenario, no separate area would be needed and the emphasis would be on programming. Specific educational events and pop ups mentioned included: walking tours, workshops, temporary libraries, and scavenger hunts to learn about different plants.

Overall, there was agreement about on capitalizing on the practical STEAM education that the Lowline already provides at the Lab, and that though much of this programming should be targeted towards local students, a multigenerational approach was also needed. Concertedly partnering with local schools and students was also viewed as an opportunity and necessity.

Community Facilities and Events

Aside from the emphasis on green space, community facilities were the programmatic and design focus of most groups (though, as participants described them, green spaces and community facilities did not conflict). Participants were interested in both permanent design features and rotating or temporary events that would largely foster one of two things: recreation and arts/culture experiences.

Suggested recreational uses were wide-ranging and took into account varying degrees of reality. Groups suggested everything from batting cages, bowling alleys, and zip lines, to yoga and tai chi. Skateboarding and general exercise areas were mentioned across tables. Participants proposed these ideas as both permanent, flexible, and temporary spaces and activities, and there was no consensus about specific times or groups of use.

Arts and culture experiences were more consistent across tables. A popular suggestion was that the Lowline host various local performances, including dance, poetry, readings, music, and indie movies. Rotating art installations were another leading idea, and encompassed both sculpture and painting. Connecting the Lowline to the history of the Lower East Side was a concept considered at most tables, though its format did not become fixed. Ideas on how to integrate history ranged from placards to walking tours, from interactive booths to a more traditional exhibit.

Finally, a few tables discussed facilities and events that would build community capacity on the ground. One table discussed both a bulletin board that advertised local events, as well as job training workshops. Another table worried about the Lowline feeling too much like an event space, and sought instead to house a community center proper underground.

Security

Some attendees expressed concern about the security in the Lowline given that it is an underground space. Five out of ten tables discussed the possibility of employing security for the property and considered keeping it open for limited hours in a day as opposed to 24/7. Others mentioned a potential use of neighborhood watches to prevent criminal activity. A concern that was repeated at two tables was whether or not the consumption of alcohol should be permitted, and whether homeless populations would pose an issue.

Access

Physical access to the space was another key area of discussion. Four out of ten tables discussed the number and placement of entrances and exits. All four tables supported multiple entrances or exits because of concerns related to accessibility, crowding, safety and emergency egress. Some suggested separate entrances for tables, and separate entrances for dogs. A concern was raised that an entrance on Clinton Street would strain an already busy intersection and make it unsafe. One table specifically opposed an entrance on Attorney Street; another table suggested entrances directly above areas designated for kids and playgrounds to help families get in and out more easily.

Access for Those with Special Needs

Five of ten tables brought up the importance of underground accessibility to those with special needs. This was broached by all as a question and concern as to how the Lowline would become ADA compliant with a ramp or elevator, and how wheelchairs would be able to navigate around the space.

User Groups: Various Age Groups, Including Children, Young Adults, and Seniors

Breakout tables expressed both inclusivity and priorities when discussing who would and should be able to use the Lowline. Most agreed that local access should be prioritized. Few offered ideas as to how this would work in practice, though one group suggested either a local membership card or locals-only hours. Another table assumed that most of the local activity would occur during weekdays, and that visitors and families with children would escape from their apartments to the Lowline (especially in the winter) on weekends.

Aside from the local/tourist groups, age was the prevalent way that participants broke down future Lowline users. Children and seniors were age brackets that participants were particularly interested in thinking about. For children, many tables suggested a combination of a playground, a creative, interactive play space, and educational facilities and activities. For seniors, mentions harkened back to the need for a peaceful space for older people to recreate. For tourists, some tables specifically created tourist “zones” or separation of uses. One table suggested a special feature that might attract a selfie moment, separating the tourist crowd from local use.

Governance

Breakout table participants were interested in governance as it relates to decision making power, ownership, and accessibility. Three tables discussed governance and operational power explicitly, while all considered the question of who would determine Lowline accessibility. Specific governance concerns

included: who owns the public plaza/traffic median above the Lowline and if extra permissions and partnerships would be needed with New York City DOT or Essex Crossing to make changes there; who owns the air rights above the Lowline and what will happen with that space; and whether the community would have an ongoing say beyond the official engagement process.

Public Amenities

Participants across tables were largely consistent about the types of public amenities they would like to see at the Lowline. Seating was the most popular amenity mentioned. This included not just benches but hammocks, lounge chairs, and cafe style tables and chairs. Requests for adequate trash cans, clean bathrooms, and water fountains followed closely. These amenities all relate to overarching concerns about hygiene and the logistics of building underground in an enclosed space; participants wanted to ensure that their experience remain comfortable, convenient, and free of vermin. Free Wi-Fi was also mentioned.

Funding

Participants were realistic about the Lowline's need to generate revenue for future upkeep and operations, and offered actionable ideas to this effect. Among the suggested funding models were charging an entrance fee or asking for a suggested donation, but in each of these cases, only doing so for non-locals. It was thought that revenue could also be generated through different events and rentals, including: select private events; public concerts, shows, and activities; and equipment usage on a smaller scale (hourly rentals of the hammocks strung between the columns were one suggestion).