

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT: CONSTRAINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES



Illegal Access to the East River



Restricted Access to the East River

For more than a decade, a number of local community coalitions and the Community Board One Waterfront Committee held public participation forums and workshops focused on Greenpoint and Williamsburg waterfront planning. Those who participated in the many community forums described the current state of the waterfront as inaccessible and underutilized, envisioning instead a cleaned-up and accessible waterfront with market rate and affordable housing, promenades, a ferry, a marina, and cultural and educational activities.

The vision of a revitalized Greenpoint presented in the plan is a response to a number of issues:

- Increased pollution and environmental degradation of Greenpoint.
- A decline in heavy manufacturing and a high vacancy rate along the industrial East River waterfront
- Rapidly increasing rents caused by illegal conversions to residential lofts, creating displacement of compatible non-polluting industry.
- The demand to rezone the East River waterfront, in particular large vacant lots, (currently zoned for manufacturing) for residential and commercial uses.
- A dramatic rise in the demand for housing and related community facilities due to a great increase in immigration in the area.

Since 1995, Community Board One and local community groups have begun treating the 197-a Plan as a means of responding to these pressures and synthesizing views and ideas voiced in Greenpoint's and Williamsburg's public forums. Given the diversity of interests, issues, and the structural differences between the two communities, it was determined that two 197-a Plans covering the two geographically distinct areas of Williamsburg and Greenpoint should be prepared.

The Williamsburg 197-a Plan focuses on a linear stretch of three interconnected neighborhoods along the East River waterfront, while the Greenpoint Plan focuses on a neighborhood, a clearly identifiable community with an easily identifiable "main street," Manhattan Avenue. The Avenue functions as the commercial focal point and integrator of this diverse waterfront community. Greenpoint's waterways -- Bushwick Inlet, the East River, and Newtown Creek -- define most of its boundaries and surround the neighborhood on three sides. The Brooklyn-Queens Expressway and McCarren Park outline the eastern and southern sections of Greenpoint.



Milton Street Looking East towards St Anthony's Church in the Heart of Greenpoint's Historic District

Greenpoint has a unique blend of diverse land use patterns with vigorous small businesses, moderate-density residential neighborhoods, and the vital commercial spine of Manhattan Avenue, which serves as a unifying corridor running through the community. Just off this vibrant commercial center in Greenpoint lie some of New York City's hidden treasures - the quiet residential blocks of Kent, Noble, Calyer, Milton, Oak and other streets that lead west towards the East River. This residential neighborhood contains a Landmark District and many individually landmarked buildings. Its streets are filled with a mixture of residential and small-scale manufacturing buildings, and on the waterfront, entire building complexes of vacant and underutilized warehouses, heavy manufacturing and storage facilities. This mixed land use pattern is also characteristic of the streets running parallel with Manhattan Avenue towards the north and northeast that lead to Newtown Creek.

Much of Greenpoint's East River Waterfront with its splendid and dramatic views of the Manhattan skyline remains unused and or underutilized and inaccessible. Some of the neighborhood's waterfront sites are held vacant by their owners who hope for zoning changes that would allow superstores or a high density residential development to take place. Others appeared to be prepared to come forth with proposals that would lead to publicly accountable and compatible residential and open space development of this treasured waterfront area with its spectacular views of Manhattan.

Zoned for manufacturing, the Greenpoint East River waterfront from North 12th Street up to Newtown Creek is lined with petroleum storage tanks, parking lots, storage facilities, fenced off vacant lots, and even an entire vacant building complex -- the Greenpoint Terminal Market. With the exception of the Lumberyard Exchange, one of the few active sites on Greenpoint's East River waterfront and the India Street Pier, the only publicly accessible pier (before its collapse in May 1997), currently no site on Greenpoint's waterfront offers residents and workers an opportunity to stroll along the river, or simply view the Manhattan skyline. Noble Street pier, used to be accessible but was fenced off for security reasons several years ago. Local residents have broken into many sites and used them illegally. The Plan recommends that these sites be safely secured and where appropriate the community obtain a temporary use permit for these "reclaimed" sites along the waterfront while the community, the city and the owners negotiate permanent agreements.

In addition, residents of Greenpoint have proposed a range of alternative uses for vacant buildings such as the Greenpoint Terminal Market. The new uses would allow greater public access to the water's edge, promote greening of the environment, develop contextual housing, and generate economic development opportunities.