

**Lowline Community Engagement
Public Workshop 2 Analysis
Submitted by Karp Strategies on March 10, 2017**

Workshop Date: March 2, 2017, 6:30 PM to 8:00 PM

Number of Attendees: Approximately 38 attendees spread out over nine breakout tables, a majority of whom were from the Lower East Side.

Invited by/Who are attendees: The group was made up of community members and local leaders, recruited by the Lowline, including residents of the Lower East Side, Community Advisory Board and Task Force members, Lowline Young Ambassadors, representatives from Community Board 3, the Chinese American Planning Council, and CAAAV (Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence).

Facilitators: Ali Sutherland-Brown, Arlita McDonald, Erik Kath, Evelyn Thomas, Ian Chan, Kay Xie, Michael Walker, Oana Circei, Rebecca Karp

Note takers: Arielle Hersh, Gagarin Zhao, Gary Lam, Konstantinos Psychogios, Malena Silva, Matthew Waldman, Nurjehan Mawaz-Khan, Vivian Huang

Other volunteers and Lowline staff: Courtney Surmanek, Dan Barasch, Dennis Edemeka, Jessica Kluge, Justin Rivera, Melanie del Rosario, Nerissa Moray, Robyn Shapiro, Sam Richman

Young Ambassadors: Amy Daniel, Charisma Hernandez, Cindy Zhao, Fraya Salzman, Jordan Counts, Kelsey Spalding, Liying Wang, Mandy Lee, Melanie Goris, Michael Nuñez, Michael Santiago, Nasir Mouzon-Cooley, Olivia Wilk, Shannon Li, Veronica Vasquez, Wyman Huang

Introduction

This memo is designed to provide a preliminary analysis of the information gathered at the Second Public Community Workshop designed by Karp Strategies and conducted by the Lowline and Karp Strategies, as part of the Lowline's formal and expanded community engagement process. The analysis collates feedback raised by participants and organizes them into key themes, paying special heed to specific comments or suggestions that were voiced repeatedly, or were particularly insightful.

Community engagement is a continuous and iterative process; the findings of this meeting hence are not presented as conclusive evidence of the community's perspective. Karp Strategies presents this analysis as a section of the engagement process and will continue to assess information as more meetings are held.

Key Themes/ Findings from Each Table

Breakout Table 1

This table deliberated diversity and inclusivity in the Lowline. They raised questions regarding the role of the Chinese-American community, seniors, and other members of the local community; and how the Lowline would engage with their needs and concerns, suggesting the Lowline learn from successful neighborhood organizations. The table also discussed the nature of lighting in the space, and role of technology. The primary language of discussion was English.

Breakout Table 2

This table was concerned with the effects of commercialization on the neighborhood, and wanted the Lowline to be a refuge space. To this end, they suggested plentiful greenery and spaces with fluid, unfixed programming. They were also keen on promoting educational programming within the space. The primary language of discussion was English.

Breakout Table 3

Ideas regarding the physical design of the space were raised in this table. They were interested in the design of entrances and exits, connections to the subway, and avoiding congestion. The table also raised questions about security, safety and equitable access. The primary language of discussion was English.

Breakout Table 4

Access, hygiene, commerce, and funding were discussed in this table. They raised specific ideas about the design and feel of the Lowline, and materials used within the space. They prioritized transparency and connectivity in design; and discussed ideas for funding the park. This table also spoke about gentrification and its potential impact on local merchants if chain stores start to appear in the area. The primary language of discussion was English.

Breakout Table 5

This table had a single participant with many suggestions and ideas about how the Lowline could serve the youth in the community and future generations of users. He was keen on a large proportion of the park being dedicated to green spaces, with arts and educational programming and space for community sports. The participant was hard of hearing, and the meeting was carried out in Spanish and through non-verbal communication.

Breakout Table 6

This table discussed safety, access, public amenities, and commerce. Participants emphasised the importance of inclusive measures like providing gender-neutral and accessible restrooms so the space may be inviting to everyone alike. Local interests were central to ideas presented; and the table discussed using local vendors to provide diverse food choices that represent the ethnic makeup of the area as well as creating spaces for local artists to display their work. The discussion was conducted in Cantonese.

Breakout Table 7

This table raised questions and concerns about the intended user groups for the Lowline, and whether it would adequately reflect the needs of the local community. They suggested the inclusion of community facilities with an emphasis on education and programming for seniors. The primary language of discussion was Mandarin.

Breakout Table 8

This table had specific ideas regarding design and programming within the Lowline, suggesting an open plan and the creation of ‘quiet zones’ for meditation and reflection. They weighed the necessity for funding against equitable and free access, concluding that the local community be given preference for free access, with visitors being charged for special events and concerts. The table further suggested including recreational community facilities, art installations and educational programs. Participants also had questions about lighting and ventilation in the underground space. The discussion was conducted in English.

Breakout Table 9

This table envisioned the Lowline as an indoor open space to ‘escape from winter’. Their ideas included directing plentiful sunlight into the park, and creating greenhouse-like spaces with water features and hills. They were further interested in creating programs to activate the space, including art installations, an open theatre, cafes, and playgrounds and courts. This discussion was conducted in English.

Key Themes Across All Tables

Local Emphasis

That the Lowline should serve the needs of the community before those of outside users was a theme that resonated across most of the breakout tables. This idea manifested in discussions of commerce and business; where breakout tables asked that local business owners and food vendors be given ample opportunity to operate within the Lowline to provide diverse and place-specific food, produce, and handmade goods. It manifested as a wish to see murals created by the local community, and rotating displays of artwork by local artists; and to ensure that installations, displays, educational programs and aesthetic design choices embody the history and cultural diversity of the Lower East Side. Continuity with local history was raised by one table, who suggested that relics from the old trolley station become exhibits in the Lowline. The notion of the local extended to preferential access for local communities. Three tables expressed an apprehension that the space would be taken over by visitors and tourists to the detriment of long-term residents. To counter this fear, participants expressed a desire to see free and unlimited access for local residents and an inclusion of community recreational facilities.

Funding vs. free access

A majority of the breakout tables grappled in some way with balancing the realities of generating funds to maintain the Lowline with the concept of free and equitable access for all. Multiple tables were firm that the park be free to all; some others suggested charging a nominal fee those residing outside the neighborhood. Other innovative ideas were suggested to fund the Lowline's maintenance costs, many centering around programming spaces to support events such as concerts, TED talks, or movie screenings. There was support for allocating free or lottery-based access to these events for residents of the neighborhood. One table suggested inviting technology companies to create rotating installations that could in turn fund the allocation of space to local artists for free; another suggested a "buy a brick" fundraiser where donor names could be carved into bricks used in site renovations.

Flexibility

Many participants voiced the view that the Lowline would be used to its fullest potential if its spaces are flexible and not rigidly programmed. There was support across tables for the Lowline to act as a space of respite from the city; designed for fluidity of movement and ease of access. In order to support temporary events, programs, and installations, participants emphasized the need to keep much of the Lowline free of permanent and rigid programming. One table mentioned including 'pop-up' containers similar to those used in Bryant Park to facilitate temporary events. Another described a free flow pathway through green that had breakout spaces to be used flexibly for spontaneous programming.

Learning from other green public spaces

Much of the participants' ideas and concerns came from past experiences using public green space. The Highline was mentioned regularly, both as a cautionary example of a space that contributed to gentrification and that does not include the local community in an obvious way, as well as a space whose design many admired. Some participants chafe at the Highline's flashy, tourism-oriented image and hope that the Lowline will be a more locally situated enterprise, catering to locals and representing the culture, diversity and history of the Lower East Side. One table explained their experiences with NYC parks and the issues they face accessing it. The participants expressed that there is a lack of adequate outreach and information about facilities and events at public parks and facilities, and that spaces are under-utilized for this reason.

Integrating the Lowline into existing networks and spaces

All nine tables spoke about entry and egress from the Lowline, and how it could be integrated efficiently or safely with existing road and subway networks. Pedestrian traffic from current transit stations, road traffic at busy intersections, and potential congestion were raised as concerns to be noted while designing entrances and exits to the Lowline. Three groups preferred that the space have multiple entrances and exits for ease of access. One table suggested constructing an overhead pedestrian bridge across Delancey Street to facilitate entry into the Lowline. Another table spoke about visual integration, suggesting glass walls between the adjoining subway and the Lowline park so visitors could watch trains go by.

Programming for inclusivity and accessibility

The desire to see the Lowline be a truly inclusive and accessible space was a theme that resonated across tables. A particular emphasis was placed by two tables on programming that is inclusive to seniors in the community; three other tables mentioned programming recreational spaces, playgrounds and courts with children and young adults in mind. The need for inclusivity also manifested in the emphasis places on plentiful accessible bathrooms; one table raising the need to have gender-neutral facilities. Four tables emphasised the need for elevator access to the space. Two tables spoke about adequately representing the culture and interests of the Chinese community in the neighborhood, as well as those of any other ethnic minorities.

Programming: Arts + Culture

Nearly every table presented arts and cultural programming as a key desire for the future Lowline, with several tables articulating specific ideas. Notable was the variety of arts programming described by participants, with ideas that crossed mediums. A few tables suggested performing arts, with flexible space dedicated to local artists via a rotational schedule or spontaneous performance offering opportunities for theater, dance, and musical performance. Visual art, including murals, installations, and temporary exhibits, were suggested, utilizing spaces including between the columns or other created spaces. There is a strong theme of preferring art be local – by local artists and to involve the local community, regardless of medium. Several tables also suggested connecting art and local history of the LES to pay tribute to the space and neighborhood’s history.

Programming: Flexible Community Facilities + Uses

Across tables, the desire for a flexible community area was strong. Participants described a flexible facility that can be used as a meeting area, envisioned as a respite space to offer a variety of social services and community support. The space could offer programming dedicated to community needs, including seniors and youth. One table suggested that this area can be rented out for family birthday parties and similar local uses. Relatedly, some tables described this space as one that could also be used for educational activities, ranging from technology showcases to mentorship sessions to a lending library.

Programming: Recreation

Recreation and active, physical use of space within the Lowline was expressed as another key theme by participants across tables. Separately, tables suggested playgrounds scaled for age/size: small kids, teenagers, and adults (each table making one of these suggestions.) While there is not consensus across a suggesting recreational use, participants suggested a range of activities including a human-sized games area, workout classes, a gym the size of a classroom, and bocce courts, basketball courts, and a skate park. These discussions demonstrate participants’ desire to recreate in the space, as well as reflect in green space as discussed earlier.

Safety

The need for safety and security was raised by four tables, but in different ways. Some emphasised the need for security and surveillance, and one table specifically mentioned shutting down the park after dark. One table emphasised the need for fire safety in the form of sufficient sprinklers, alarms and emergency exits since the Lowline is an underground space. Another table preferred that alcohol not be sold on the premises, so as to maintain a family-friendly atmosphere.

Lighting, ventilation and hygiene

Many ideas and concerns raised by the participants centred around the fact that the Lowline is an underground space. Five tables spoke about the logistics and technology involved lighting; suggestions included using technology to 'pipe' light into the space, ensuring that it is lit on overcast days or at night, and using solar technology to light the space indirectly. Two tables were concerned with ventilation in the Lowline park, and about whether allowing pets, food or sports programming would contribute to bad smells in the space. One table was concerned about the presence of rats and other vermin, and others emphasised the need to provide adequate opportunities for waste disposal.

Acoustics

Two tables raised questions about the acoustics in the space, with one suggesting that landscape and other elements be used to absorb noises between adjoining areas. Others raised the idea that some spaces in the Lowline be used as quiet or meditation spaces, and required that noise-generating programming be separated from quiet spaces.

Green + Plants

Participants expressed a range of ideas regarding plants and green within the Lowline. Several tables commented that the Lowline should be lush, green space that is like a jungle or offers open meandering paths without restriction – in contrast to tables that suggested a more curated experience akin to a botanical garden. Multiple tables suggested utilizing the columns for plant life, as well as a water feature.