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Impressions: 2,618,150

GO CLIMB A TREE DEPT. SUBTERRANEAN



On a recent Thursday, at a dinner held in the butcher section of the old Essex Street Market, about two hundred guests—some having paid several thousand dollars for the privilege—raised their glasses to the mentally unbalanced. “Congratulations on being crazy,” Dan Barasch, one of the event’s hosts, told the room. “You have to be crazy to think something like this might be possible.”

“This” is the Lowline, a project that intends to take over an abandoned trolley terminal under Delancey Street, an area as large as the lawn in Bryant Park, and, using fibre optics to deliver sunlight from street level, transform it into an underground park, with self-sustaining trees, plants, and, one imagines, a Shake Shack.

Barasch and the Lowline’s creator, James Ramsey, who are both thirty-five, were hosting the dinner for two reasons: to fund-raise and to open *Imagining the Lowline*, an exhibit that offers a sample of the subterranean park. Hence the room’s centerpiece of live moss, ferns, oyster mushrooms, and a five-thousand-pound Japanese-maple tree, being kept alive (and photosynthesizing) by a faux skylight reminiscent of a geodesic dome. “Three days ago, I was hanging from the roof, cutting steel, covered in lead paint—do not tell my girlfriend this, by the way,” Ramsey said. “I’ve literally bled for this installation.”

Ramsey is the project’s left brain: his C.V. includes a B.A. from Yale, the proprietorship of the design firm RAAD, and a few years at NASA. (“You met a lot of absolute geniuses who could not cross the street on their own.”) Barasch is the project’s right brain, or perhaps its mouth. His ability to work a room comes from years at nonprofits, like UNICEF and PopTech, and a stint in marketing at Google. Not that he’s bragging. “It was back in the day when Google actually gave people jobs based on a hunch,” he said, before darting over to the table of Adrian Grenier.

Among the guests were supporters and friends of Barasch and Ramsey; most seemed to be a combination. They in-

cluded Mark Wigley, the dean of Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, and Stuart Blumin, a Cornell professor emeritus and an expert on the history of American cities.

“A hundred years ago, the Lower East Side is reputed to have been the most densely populated acreage on the planet,” Blumin said, between mouthfuls of gelato. “When Jacob Riis wrote his famous critique ‘How the Other Half Lives,’ the thing that he wound up focussing on, more than anything else—never mind rates of tuberculosis, crime, or work opportunities—was the absence of playgrounds for children. A very moving photograph that I always showed my students was a picture of young boys, sitting on a curb with their feet in the open sewer, and right next to them was a carcass of a rotting horse. That was where the kids could play. There is a park named for Riis now on the Lower East Side, but it’s not big. The Lower East Side still wants for space, public space.”

Barasch and Ramsey originally called the project the Delancey Underground, and avoided “the Lowline,” fearing comparisons to the High Line. Eventually, they discovered that the comparison was not only unavoidable but advantageous. “The High Line experience has trained people to think about the transformation of spaces,” Barasch said. “It’s this magical new space that no one thought was possible.” While the Lowline has a long way to go (Barasch puts the most optimistic completion estimates at five to eight years), the project recently picked up Audi as a sponsor, and has received considerable support from community-board and city-council members. “This is a cool space, and we should do something with it,” the real-estate manager for the M.T.A., which leases the site from the city, told the *Times* last year. Also, he admitted, “We need the money.”

Toward midnight, Ramsey, Barasch, and their friends headed around the corner to a restaurant called Sauce. As the older group squeezed through a crush of twenty-somethings, a young man in a baseball cap asked where they were coming from. Someone mentioned the Lowline, and he nodded. “They’re going to filter light down and make a park,” he said. “It’s awesome.”

—John Ortved