

Community Conservation

creating community resiliency through closure



MFA Design for Social Innovation, 2021 Thesis
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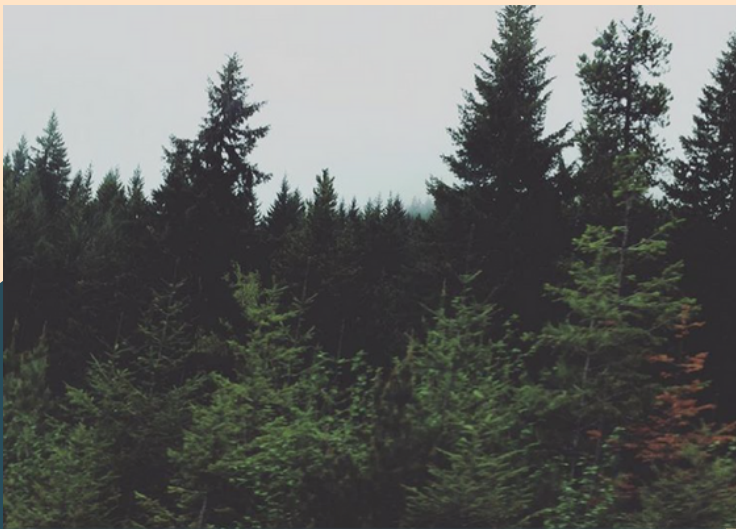


 CONTEXT



Introduction

research shows that the greater amount of green spaces in one's living environment, the greater the association with their general health ⁽¹⁾



According to the World Health Organization, “Urban green spaces, such as parks, playgrounds, and residential greenery, can promote mental and physical health, and reduce morbidity and mortality in urban residents by providing psychological relaxation and stress alleviation, stimulating social cohesion, supporting physical activity, and reducing exposure to air pollutants, noise and excessive heat.”⁽²⁾

Green areas and outdoor spaces are essential for the health and wellbeing of communities.

In New York City, this is particularly true

even more so due to COVID19

Quotes from NYC residents:

“It’s not just important to me, it is life.”

“I have to get out and be outside at least some part of the day.”

“I need the parks. I intentionally alter my various commutes so that I can walk through a green area.”

“We don’t have an outdoor area and our apartment has poor natural light, so going out and spending time in a park is essential.”

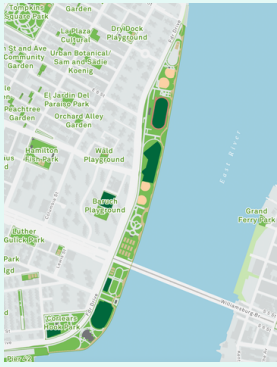
“I’m drawn toward green spaces. I find myself creating excuses to go outside and sit in a park or on a bench. It’s calming in such a busy city.”

Journey



This topic is of particular interest to me as a social designer, as a scientist, writer, cocktail artist, facilitator, conservationist, and hospitality professional. My academic background is in natural resource conservation. I've studied various aspects of geography, water systems, and biodiversity around the world - from aquatic ecology in the Baltic Sea, to glaciology in Denmark and Greenland, to environmental justice in France, to the river systems of the Pacific Northwest. I love being outside and I'm particularly drawn to water. Regardless of if I'm out in the woods or in an urban city, I find value and purpose among natural resources.





all photos courtesy of NYC Parks Department

East River Park

When I moved to New York City in 2019, I specifically chose to live in the Lower East Side because of its proximity to the East River. Along the river in this area of Lower Manhattan is East River Park, a 57.5 acre waterfront park that serves over 1.5 million people a year lines the river from Montgomery Street to East 12th. The park is home to bike and foot baths, ball fields, benches and tables, and open areas. It's also home to native flora and fauna, acting as permanent and migrational habitat to an abundance of species, and therefore contributing to a rich and biodiverse ecosystem. (3)

Like so many others, I'm inherently drawn to this open, beautiful, waterfront space. I visit the park at least 5 times a week, sometimes more than once a day. The value of this, and any, green space to New York City residents is profound.

East Side Coastal Resiliency (ESCR) Plan

I started off my thesis wanting to increase access to New York City's urban natural resources, including the East River. However, while doing preliminary research, the focus of my thesis abruptly took a turn. I discovered the East Side Coastal Resiliency (ESCR) Plan. Funded by New York City and the federal government, the plan aims to temporarily close the park for 3-5 years in order to raise it by 10 ft to protect lower Manhattan from volatile weather patterns such as surge and flooding caused by climate change and sea level rise. The specific date of park closure is ambiguous, but may potentially occur in the summer of 2021. (4)

The plan does have a recommended phased closure of 60 percent at a time, but whether or not that recommendation is followed is still yet to be determined. Regardless, the closure of East River Park creates a large barrier to the community's access to urban natural resources.



all photos courtesy of NYC Parks Department

The Issue

Due to the ESCR plan, the East River Park Community is losing access to an urban natural resource that is necessary to their health and wellbeing, and will cause major disruption to their lives.



DESIGN PROCESS



Research

To understand the experiences and needs of the community in regards to the closure of East River Park

PRIMARY & SECONDARY

Articles
Official Documents
City Plans
NYC Park's Presentations
Community Board Meeting Notes

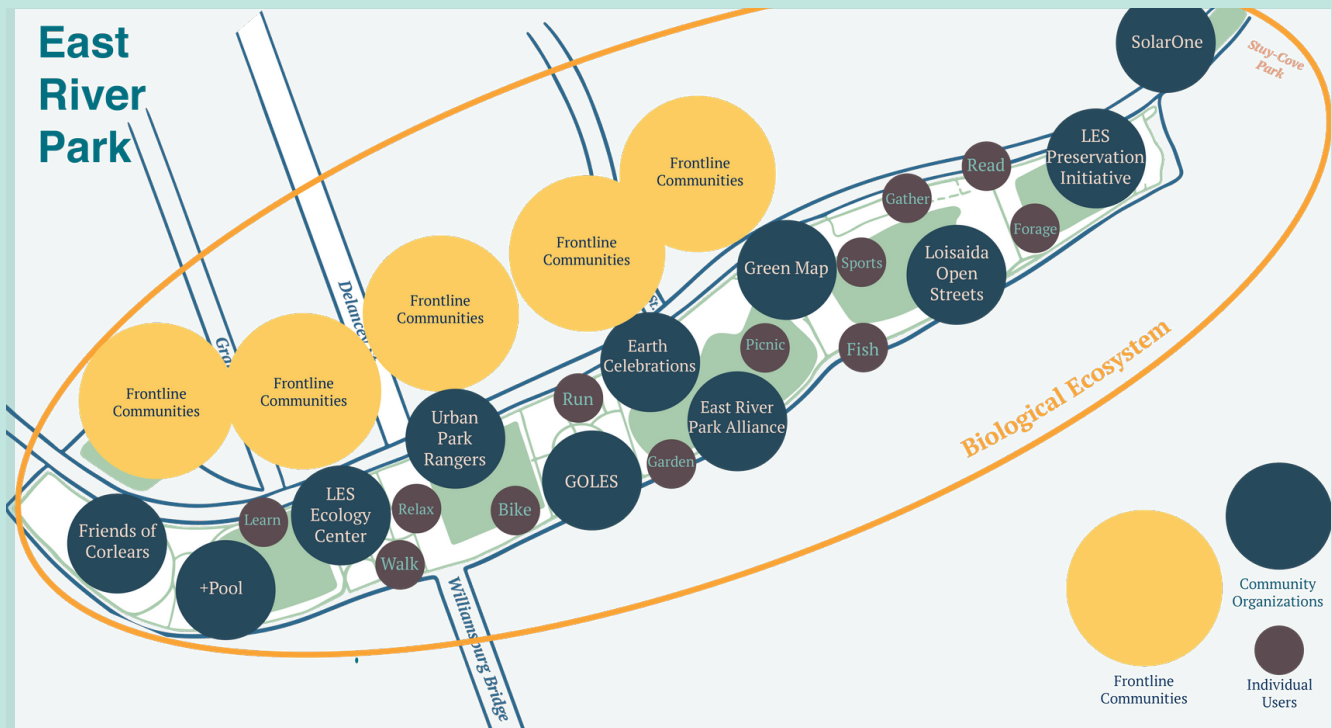
OBSERVATIONS

>400 hours
In East River Park
Community Board Meetings
Parks Dept. Meetings

INTERVIEWS

80
park users
community leaders
organizations
city representatives

Stakeholders



There are many stakeholders of the East River Park Community including the abundance of ecosystem stakeholders. So many people rely on that green space for so many different reasons, from biking, running, commuting, gathering, fishing, foraging, gardening, and just enjoying the open, waterfront space.

In addition to the residents of the Lower East Side, Chinatown, and the East Village, there's a large housing community that sits adjacent to the park whose residents rely heavily on the open green space that the park provides.

The park is also home to many community organizations that are losing access. These organizations work in many different arenas, such as housing, stewardship, sports and recreation, preservation, history, foraging, and education.

Not only are community members and organization leaders' lives being disrupted by park closure, the ESCR plan is quite detrimental to the local environment. The plan will remove over 1,000 mature trees and tear up habitat and infrastructure, causing localized damage to urban wildlife, migration patterns, as well as increasing exposure to harmful pollutants.

Insights

01. Park users do not know that the park is closing
02. Park users have no idea what they're going to do when the park closes
03. There are many stakeholders in the park, however they're disconnected from each other
04. There is a lot of tension around the ESCR plan and park closure

*The community of East River Park is not prepared for park closure.
They do not know where to go or what to do.*

**How might the East River Park
Community feel prepared for
park closure and loss of access
to this urban natural resource?**

Concept Development

Community Resiliency

Community resiliency is the sustained ability of a community to access available resources, to prepare for, respond to, withstand, and recover from challenging situations (6). It's the capacity of a community to recover quickly and adapt to adversity.

As a conservationist, this is super relevant. Conservation is the preservation and protection of something, and that something in this case is community and sense of place.

Intervention Concept

Based on this, my intervention concept developed. Why don't we bring people to East River Park, celebrate it (while we can), let people know it's closing, provide resources to alternative green spaces, and connect them with organizations that can be of support to them during park closure. All to prepare people for the loss of access to the park and build community resiliency through connection and support?

My intervention concept is **3-fold**

1. Bring people to the park in the form of a Spring Event - to let them know it's closing and connect them with community organizations that can be of support to them
2. Produce and distribute a map of alternative green spaces, that's live and open sourced for anyone to add to, effectively encouraging shared resources
3. Develop a community building platform for people to connect before/during/after park closure.

Prototypes

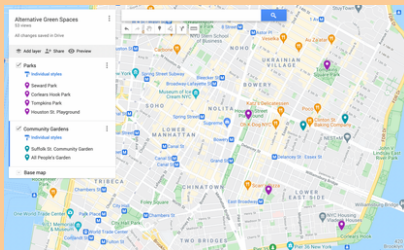
GOOGLE MAPS VS. GREEN MAPS

One artifact of this project is the alternative green space map. To determine which platform was best for making this I tested two prototypes. I wanted to test for how easy each platform was to use, if you could add things on a mobile phone, and the aesthetics of the map. The first platform I tried was Google Maps, using the available open-sourced feature. The second prototype was using Green Map. I tested the maps myself and with 3 users each.

In terms of feedback regarding the Google Map platform the strengths were that it's a familiar platform for most people, it's pretty easy to use, and you could categorize sights on the map by their function (ie. green garden, park, playground). The weaknesses were that you're not able to add sights to the map from your phone, you cannot link to other maps or attach photos to a sight, and it clutters up your personal google map.

For the Green Map platform, the strengths included the fact that it's a sustainability focus map-making platform, you're able to add sights from your mobile, add photos, link to other maps, and it has specific icons for the function of the sight. The weaknesses are that it's not a well known platform and therefore takes a second to get used to, and to find a sight you must zoom in on the point on the map, rather than typing in the address.

Google Maps



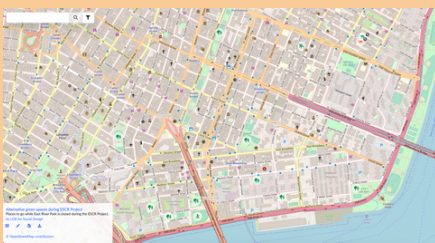
Strengths

- familiar
- accessible
- able to organize spaces by function
- open-sourced

Weaknesses

- not able to add things via mobile phone
- simple icons
- not able to attach photo
- not able to link to other maps
- clutters previously saved maps

Green Map



- map-making platform
- add sites from mobile
- specific icons per site usage
- add photos to site
- link to other maps on platform
- open-sourced

- specific platform
- must find site directly on map

Given these two prototypes and the user feedback I received, I moved forward with the Green Map platform



COMMUNITY
PARTNERS



COMMUNITY PARTNERS

I am working with the Lower East Side Ecology Center, Earth Celebrations, Urban Park Rangers, Green Map, SolarOne, Friends of Corlears Park, GOLES, + Pool, Lower East Side Preservation Initiative, East River Alliance, Loisaída Open Streets Community Coalition, _Around and other community organizations to build community resiliency through park closure.



I first connected with the Lower East Side Ecology Center in February of 2020, who ended up being my main community partner. The Ecology Center loved the idea of a Spring Event in the park and the alternative green space map. Once I connected with the Ecology Center, they helped me get in touch with other organizations that work in the park - 12 in total.

The Lower East Side Ecology Center has been a longtime participant of stewardship and sustainability in East River Park, connecting with the community through educational programming as well as running the largest community compost program in Manhattan. They've been operating out of the historic Fireboat House in East River Park for some time. When the park closes they'll be forced out of the Fireboat House and relocate to Seward Park, .5 miles inland from the water. Being my main community partner, they acted as a home-base on the day of the spring event, as well as a sounding board for my ideas and concerns. During the event, they hosted a stewardship volunteer day, a table with information about the work they do, and gave an informative tour of their compost yard.



Earth Celebrations is an organization aimed at connecting with communities to work on ecological and social change through the arts. They had already planned to collaborate with the Ecology Center for their Art and Climate Solutions Flag Painting Workshop as part of their Ecological Cities workshop series with their artist in residence. They were interested in joining the spring event and therefore coordinated their activity with the event.



Urban Park Rangers work in and around the park, focusing on history, ecology, and storytelling. Some members of the Rangers have long worked in East River Park and are popular among the community. As a part of New York City's Parks Department, they offered to do a tour to alternative spaces, starting at the Fireboat House and ending at Seward Park.



Green Map came into the picture early on in my thesis process as well. They are an open-sourced, internationally recognized map making platform, centering sustainability and resource sharing. Just before the event, they had developed a new feature to their platform that let users add emotion and feelings to their maps, which they showcased during the event.



Even though SolarOne is technically located in Stuy-Cove, north of East River Park, they're also losing access to their green space due to the ESCR plan. SolarOne is a green energy education center that has taken a previously industrial site and developed favorable conditions for a productive and abundant ecosystem. They do incredible work in the regenerative stewardship space, with programs centered around urban foraging and sustainable management. For the event, they hosted a foraging and herbalism workshop.



Friends of Corlears Hook Park is located across the bridge from the East River Park Amphitheater in Corlears Hook Park. They're also losing a portion of their park due to ESCR, and are a vital organization to the surrounding community. For the event, they hosted a stewardship day, inviting people to plant, weed, and prepare the park for spring. They also invited a local girl scout group for a kid friendly scavenger hunt.



Good Old Lower East Side, or GOLES, is an amazing organization that supports the frontline communities most vulnerable to flood and surge events in Lower Manhattan. For the event, they set up a table with information about the work that they do, and hosted a yoga movement activity.



+ Pool is an organization aimed at reclaiming recreational access to the East River and educating about New York City's water quality. They're designing the world's first water filtering, floating swimming pool, to be set in the East River and open to all. During the event they hosted a table with information about the work that they do and games to engage the community.



East River Alliance is an organization formed out of the need for support during the ESCR project. They aim to sustain waterfront access while highlighting the history and needs of the community. They joined the event to supply information and answer questions about park closure.



Loisaída Open Streets Coalition is an organization that spearheads the caretaking of Avenue B, a designated open street that hosts activities and aims to reclaim the public and open spaces of streets in Manhattan. For the event, they supplied information about the work they are doing and upcoming events on Avenue B.

Lower East Side Preservation Initiative is an organization aimed at preserving the historical and cultural architecture in the Lower East Side. They joined the event to share information about the historic buildings in East River Park, such as the Fireboat House, tennis house, and track house.

_Around is an SVA DSI thesis project by Jiayi Boa that joined the event to share information about urban wildlife in New York city. They had information and games to encourage participants to reimagine their relationship with urban wildlife.





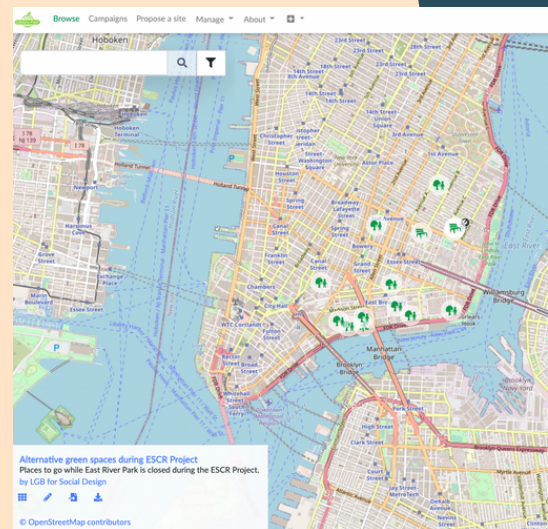
INTERVENTION



Intervention

Together with my community partner organizations, we co-designed a **multi-activity event** in East River Park on Saturday, April 17th, 2021. 12 organizations hosted 14 events across the park, ranging from foraging workshops, to sustainability oriented crafts, stewardship activities, tours to alternative spaces, games, and tabling.

I also developed an **alternative green space map** that is live and open-sourced, so people may add to it anytime and share alternative spaces that they've found. Lastly, I developed the **East River Park Community Facebook Group** for members of the community to connect with one another before, during, and after park closure.



Goals

bring people to the park
celebrate it
let people know it's closing
provide resources to alternative
green spaces
connect them with organizations
that can be of support to them
during park closure

=

To prepare people for park
closure, and build community
resiliency through connection
and support

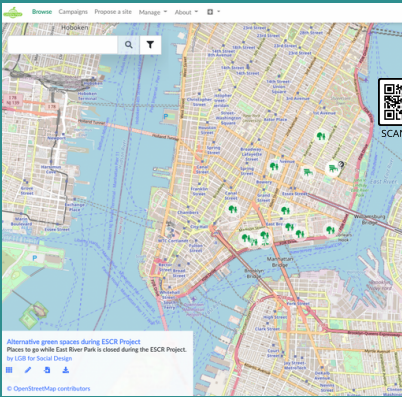
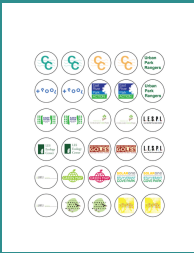
The spring event, the alternative space map, and the community building platform were all aimed to meet the goals of preparing the community for park closure, by letting them know the park is closing, providing them with an alternative space resource, and connecting them with multiple organizations that can be of support to them before/during/after park closure. Even though there are tensions and ambiguity around park closure, this intervention is valuable regardless because there is value in the process of building community resiliency through connection and support.

Materials

To make everything streamlined and as easy as possible for participating organizations, I developed a promotional poster for them to send out on their channels. I also designed a schedule of events for the day, with a link QR code to the alternative green space map and the East River Park Facebook Group, as well as a map of the park for the day of the event with each organization's location.

Finally, the participating groups supplied their logos, which were printed on individual stickers for them to hand out to park users.

Schedule of Events			
Saturday, April 17th in East River Park			
Time	Organization	Event	Location
10am-4pm		event headquarters	Sea Lion Sculpture (in front of Fireboat House)
10am-1pm	Lower East Side Ecology Center	Stewardship Volunteer Day	Fireboat House
10am-1pm	Friends of Corleas Hook Park	Spring It's My Park Day	Corleas Hook Park
11am-2pm	SolarOne	Herbalism Workshop	Stay-Cove Park
11am-3pm	+Pool	Table & Activity	North of Fireboat House
11am-3pm	_Around	Urban Wildlife Activity	North of Fireboat House
12pm	Lower East Side Ecology Center	Compost Yard Tour	Compost Yard
12pm	GOLES	Soul Stretch Movement Event	NE of Amphitheater
12pm-3pm	Earth Celebrations	Climate Flag Solutions Workshop	Fireboat House
12pm-3pm	LES Breathe & Greenmap	Storytelling Activity	S of Williamsburg Bridge
12pm-3pm	East River Alliance	East River Park Information	Near Tennis Courts
12pm-3pm	Lolaila Open Streets Community Coalition	Open Streets Information	Near Tennis Courts
12pm-3pm	Lower East Side Preservation Initiative	East River Park History & Information	Near Tennis Courts
12pm-3pm	GOLES	Table & Information	North of Fireboat House
1pm	Urban Park Rangers	Parks Tour	Starting at Fireboat House



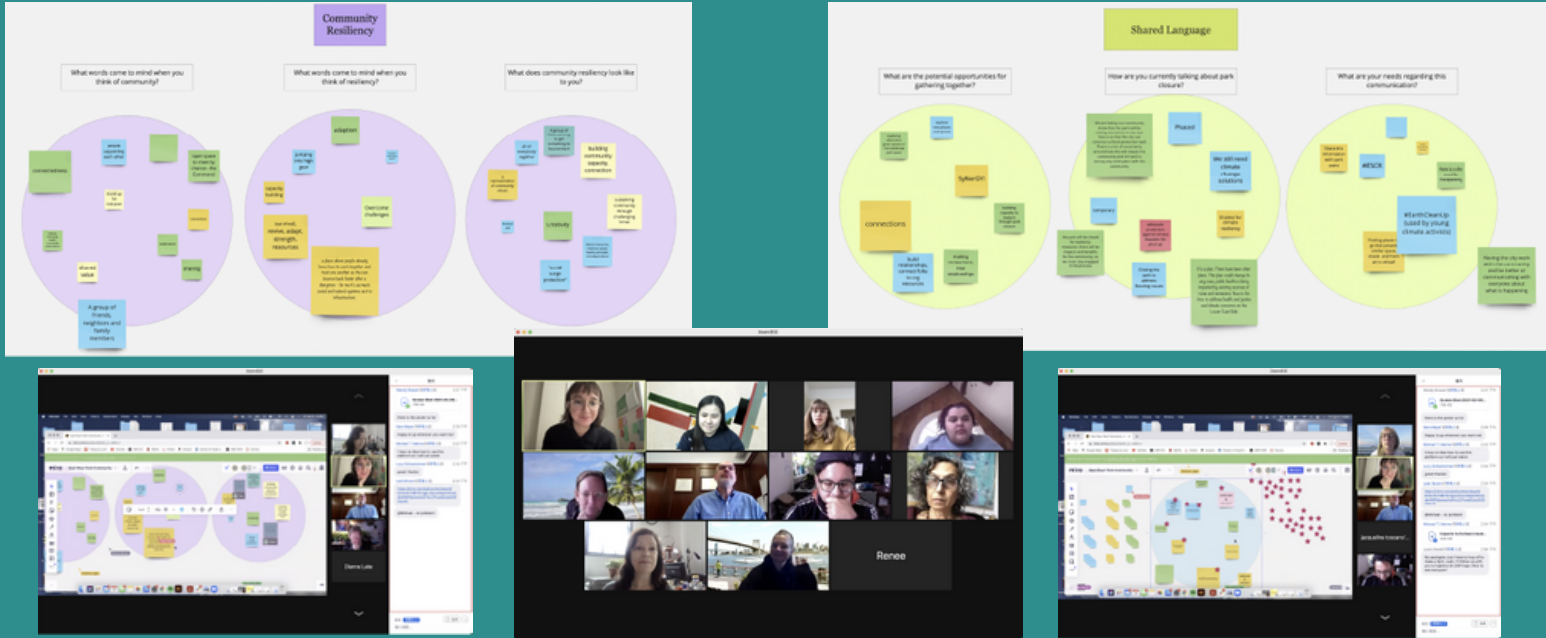
Facilitation

The week before the event, I hosted a facilitation with the participating organizations. Even though all of the participants work in and around the park, some had never met each other. So the goal of the event was to connect everyone as well as do a few community building activities.

One activity included sharing what community resiliency meant to them. Some words that came up around this were adaption, synergy, shared resources, mutual aid, and community connection.

Another activity was to create some shared language around park closure. Since there's so much tension and no one wants the park to close, how were we planning on communicating this to the community? Language that came up around this was phased, temporary, a plan, climate resiliency, protection, climate.

The facilitation had a lot of positive feedback and was positively received by the participants.



Implementation

The spring event took place on Saturday, April 17th in East River Park. As each organization arrived, they received a package of 2-sided pamphlets with the 'Schedule of Events' and the 'Day of Map'. They also received their logo stickers to pass out.

We also hosted a small activity near the Fireboat House that invited community members to share what community resiliency looks like to them. Building off of the facilitation with the participating organizations, we offered them sticky notes, and pens and asked people to share their thoughts.



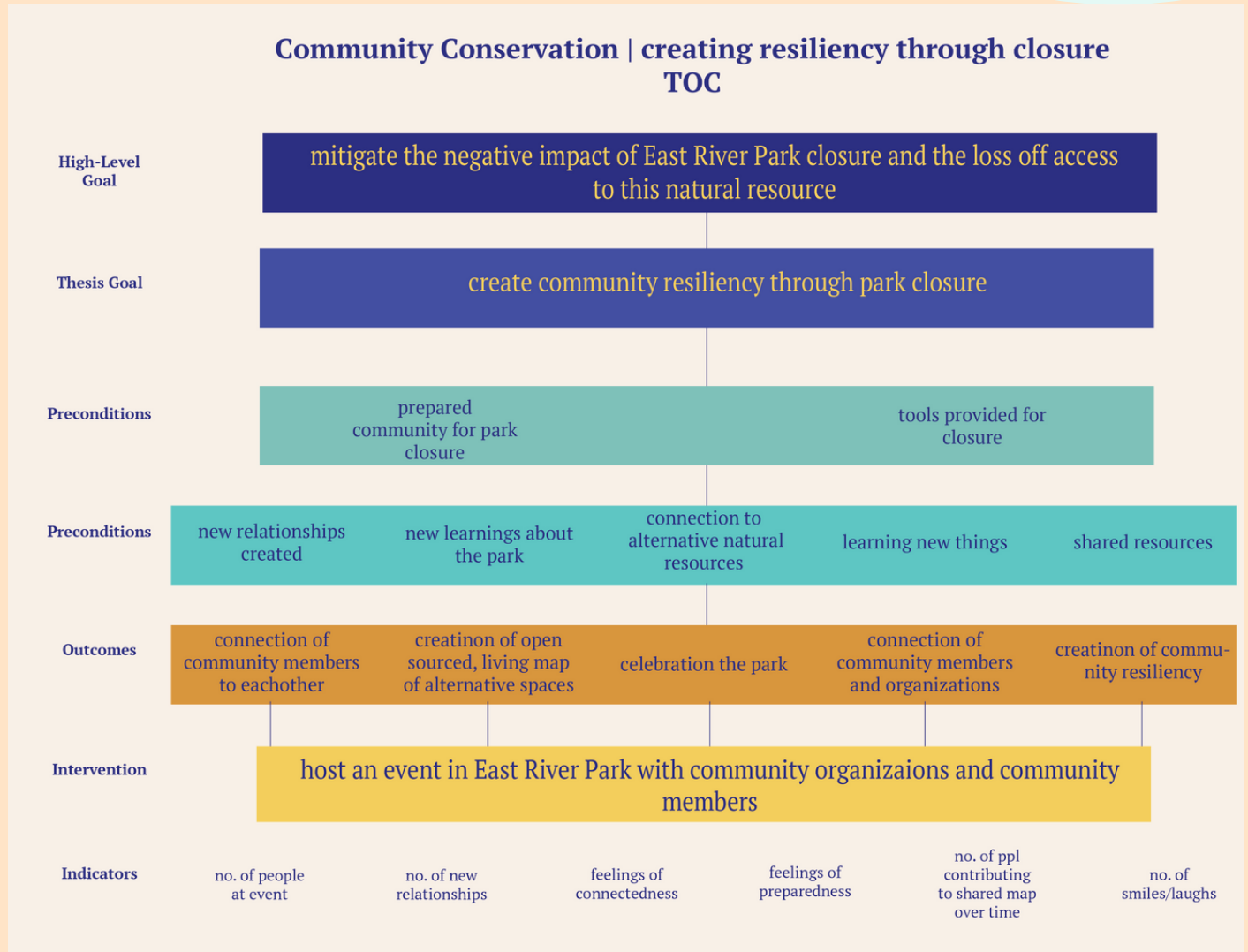
To the East River Park Community, community resiliency looks like

- shared resources
- collective power
- power interdependence
- creativity
- sustaining community through challenging times
- all in! everyone together
- a group of folks working to get something to bounce back
- building community capacity, connection
- mutual aid
- Solidarity + Support
- listening and actively responding to the needs of neighbors
- coming together in a unified way
- shared public spaces
- interdependence, we are all in one
- good mental health and strength through others
- sources for public input + civic engagement
- green space
- looking after each other
- optimistic humor
- connection
- shared understanding and support
- boundaries dissolving
- common goals and community support
- sacred urban ecology
- understanding everyone's needs
- community gatherings in different spaces
- talk and listen to people

THEORY OF CHANGE

High level goal - to mitigate the negative impact of East River Park closure and the loss of access to a valuable urban natural resource

Thesis goal - create community resiliency through park closure



A little over 100 people showed up for the event and activities that had pre-registered. There was also quite a bit of people not registered that joined the event, stopped by each of the tables, and met new organizations. The types of users that came through ranged from runners to children to city council candidates.

The measurement of success for this event was measured quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative measurements included the amount of people who registered for the event, who accessed the alternative map, who joined the East River Park Facebook group, and the amount of new subscriptions/follows for each organization. Based on the amount of event registrations, new subscriptions, and follows, I can say that people left learning something new about park closure or met a new organization, which equates to being more prepared for park closure than whn they arrived.

Qualitative measurements included the amount of smiles, laughs, conversations, and general feelings about their experience at the event. Based on the positive feedback from organizations and park users, it can be said that participants left feeling more connected or supported, therefore being more prepared for park closure than they arrived.



OUTCOMES



Exit Surveys

After the event, I sent out exit surveys to the participating organizations to get an understanding of their experience. Overall, they had a positive experience and felt supported by each other and the community.

“You handled this situation with such grace, we are super grateful for all of your hard work.”

“That was the most people at our compost yard tour that we’ve ever had!”

“Wow, there’s so many people here!”

“People seem to be really interested in the things we’re doing as an organization.”

“There’s something really special about all of these groups coming together for this.”



Exit surveys were also done for a few park users. Overall, they left knowing more about park closure and most of them met at least one new organization.

“I definitely have a better understanding of the park closing and what to expect.”

“It was so cool to walk through and meet all of these organizations, they’re doing some really cool stuff.”

“This is so great!”

“It was really nice to get out in the park and be with people.”

Learnings

WHAT WORKED

- Working with organizations that are also losing access to the park was beneficial, because the support between them grew with the sharing of solidarity. It also opened the door for more and more orgs to join, further reaching a larger community.
- Resource sharing between organizations happened quickly and easily.
- The similarities in the values and goals of each the organization made collaboration and co-creation natural. These groups were all planning on doing events in the park for spring and were happy to coordinate on a single day
- The differences of each organization also made the types of activities and communities diverse, offering abundance to the event.

KEY INSIGHTS

- The closure of the park is a tense and challenging issue. No one wants the ESCR plan to move forward. There are differing tactics and views forward from different stakeholders regarding the issue. However the need for climate resiliency is necessary and the park will close at some point for this reason. That said, everyone has the same goal of wanting and needing the park, and through this type of engagement, we generated community connection, and contributed to process of community building - which will be beneficial regardless.



LOOKING
FORWARD



Building from here



Coming together to support one another through challenging times has such great opportunity to thrive. I imagine this type of event collaborating could be a reoccurring occasion, whether as a series regarding park closure, or as an annual event rotating through different parks in the city.

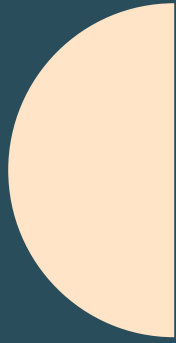
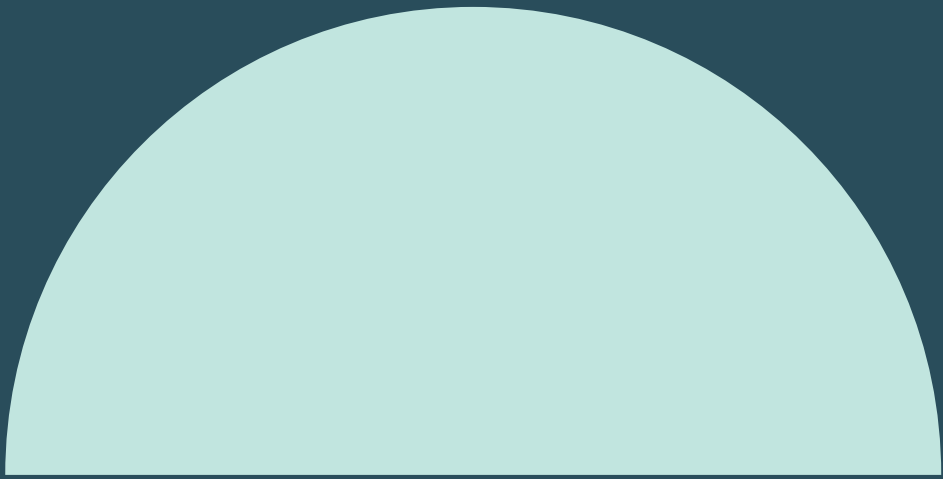
The generated artifacts from this project can continue to support the community and the park. I imagine the shared resource map to grow in usage, potentially to other communities and other areas of the city. It's such a great resource sharing platform, and I see it supporting many people in many ways. Additionally, the East River Park Community group can offer longterm support for the community, and can help sustain communication and information sharing.

Finally, the park will close at some point, but it will also re-open. I imagine this project to be just the beginning of this process, documenting the park, the plan, the closure, and therefore setting up the community to collectively welcome back the park. I imagine that the connections made at the event and through this collaboration will continue to grow.

For myself and my design practice, I'd like to continue to grow as a facilitator and a continue to create spaces for people to come together through connection and support - whether to solve a problem or to celebrate a moment.

Links to references

- (1) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2566234/citedby/>
- (2) https://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/321971/Urban-green-spaces-and-health-review-evidence.pdf
- (3) <https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/east-river-park/history>
- (4) <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/escr/index.page>



Big thanks

To my community partners, for all the work you do and for collaborating with me on this project. I'm so grateful for you and the chance to work with you.

To Jaimie Cloud for your generosity, care, wisdom, for reconnecting me to nature, and for reminding me why I love what I do.

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