

How Your Story Could Save Brooklyn

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Brooklyn is a borough of blocks. Dozens of languages, cuisines, and cultures inhabit the landscape of cracked concrete and verdant parks, tree wells and vacant lots. Life hums in all its forms. But this intricate balance is not always just; goods, services, and decision-making authority are rarely distributed equitably within and between these borough-defined systems. Whether through oversight or intention, these disparities result from a failure to listen to the various voices of our community.

In early March of last year, as the COVID-19 pandemic first - and [disproportionately](#)-ravaged Central Brooklyn, this imbalance became evident. The summer wave of the virus spiked as the oppressive heat rose. Some locals sweated it out in Herbert Von King Park, their stereos humming with bass, their pitbull's tongue lolling. Many were pushed indoors, however, as air-conditioned community spaces shut down. Tree covered, natural cool greenspaces were scarce. Mourning doves and European starlings took advantage of scattered canopies between Herbert Von King and Brower Park where a lone kid shot jumpers on the baked asphalt. Mutual Aid groups mobilized to deliver life-saving water to the elderly, many too vulnerable to shop for themselves, many even more vulnerable after being exposed to a lifetime of air pollution and unsafe building materials in public housing. Steel drums entertained a group of out-of-work folks lined up outside a West Indian church offering household supplies. Between every block was a [social-ecological system](#) all its own.

Urban planning in New York City, as with many major metropolitan areas, has [historically isolated underserved and disadvantaged minority populations](#) and blocked their access to vital ecosystem services. More affluent, often white, communities are afforded access to greenspaces and are the target of urban greening initiatives while [minority communities see substantially less funding and attention](#).

[According to a 2015 study](#), the benefits of urban greenspaces improve the wellbeing of a community in a number of ways. [Parks, coastline, and even vacant lots provide myriad services](#) including carbon sequestration, stormwater retention and filtration, air filtration, local climate regulation, and recreation. These urban ecosystem services are partially responsible for determining the environmental quality of a neighborhood, and therefore, the, quality of life for its residents. Communities with adequate access to greenspace experience greater overall physiological and psychological well being, have more robust social networks, and [increased resiliency](#). The issue, however, is that these ecosystem services are not equitably distributed.

Consider the neighborhoods of Crown Heights and Park Slope. According to the [United States Census Bureau](#), the population of Park Slope is 76% white. Planters and old-growth London plane trees line Seventh Avenue. There are a number of community gardens, green roofs, and even an urban farm. Prospect Park, with its acres of green lawns, trees, a zoo etc., is readily accessible. Compare that to Crown Heights, whose population is 57% Black. These streets are predominantly lined with concrete and asphalt. A few small parks serve this densely populated Brooklyn neighborhood. A weedy and overgrown lot borders the public housing at Prospect Plaza. Crown Heights' lack of greenspace means fewer trees to maintain air quality,

higher temperatures due to the amount of concrete, and less space to exercise, socialize, and play. For this reason, the [Crown Heights community is vulnerable](#) to higher rates of respiratory and cardiovascular disease, cancer, obesity, heat-related illness, anxiety, and depression.

Combined environmental and social pressures result in high vulnerability for the population of Central Brooklyn. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention developed a [Social Vulnerability Index](#) (SVI) that measures the potential negative impact on communities from external stresses on human health. External stress can be anything from disease outbreak to environmental degradation to vital service access. Central Brooklyn scored an average of 6.9 SVI, considered a moderate to high level of vulnerability. Problems like these need to be addressed on a number of fronts, from the grassroots to the policy levels, from mitigation to prevention.

There are several local organizations hustling every day to improve this predicament. Organizations like [Bed-Stuy Strong](#) and [Crown Heights Mutual Aid](#) are working to address the most urgent issues to the community including food insecurity, heat-vulnerability, and COVID-19 relief. [Green City Force's](#) AmeriCorps program provides work opportunities in environmental stewardship, building green infrastructure, and urban farming for young people living in New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) buildings. [New York City Environmental Justice Alliance \(NYC-EJA\)](#) is an inter-borough network of environmental justice organizations in underserved communities and communities of color that leverages its network to: mobilize support for environmental justice issues; affect local and state policy; and to foster social cohesion. The network member in Central Brooklyn is the [Brooklyn Movement Center](#), a strong voice in the community.

These groups are fully immersed in the communities they serve and have a robust network of volunteers to support their outreach. Being so in touch with the community allows these organizations to listen closely to their constituency and tailor their efforts to address the greatest needs. This level of community immersion is also a hedge against the [gentrification](#) that can result from urban 'greening' initiatives. Paradoxically, when a neighborhood is afforded greater access to greenspace and the requisite benefits, it can drive up housing prices, property values, and the cost of living. This gentrification displaces the very communities that the 'greening' efforts were intended to help. [Involvement at every stage](#) of outreach and policy development helps to insure that the community remains intact and sees the benefits of improved access to greenspace.

In Central Brooklyn, where Roti joints struggle as real estate developers gobble up store fronts; where Betsy Head Park is the best aftercare many parents can afford - a hyper-local, community-centered approach to outreach, stewardship, and policy development makes all the difference. Just as each block has its own patois, its own rhythm, so too do they have their own needs and priorities. The Central Brooklyn organizations and individuals working on environmental and social justice issues listen intimately to the communities they serve. The intersection of social and environmental issues has never been more evident, and the collective voice of the communities on the frontline deserve to be heard.

A Call to Action: Aid & Amplify

I am a Crown Heights resident myself. When the pandemic hit Central Brooklyn, we saw first hand how vulnerabilities and comorbidities from inadequate greenspace could compound the crisis. In this time of grief, I was inspired to see our community rally to the cause, provide aid to our neighbors, and foster support and solidarity. I want to continue this positive momentum in my work as a communicator and an educator. I am working on an audio project that amplifies the voices and documents the needs of individual Central Brooklyn communities. I foresee this approach benefiting our community on two levels. First, I hope that dedicating a platform and a space to the spoken word of affected communities will draw the attention of policymakers and shapers. Second, I hope to connect community members with the organizations already doing the work relevant to their specific needs.

Where environmental injustice and inequity devastate many Central Brooklyn communities, local organizations and individuals work tirelessly to ameliorate and solve these injustices. Our best approach for this undertaking is to listen to our neighbors and try our best to understand and meet their needs. So listen to the story of Brooklyn and perhaps you (like me) will see the need to hold a space for the unheard voices in our community.

Want to get involved with this project? Contact the author at: patter40@miamioh.edu.

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