



By Janet Wang

EAST SIDE COASTAL RESILIENCY: Lessons Learned and the Path Towards a More Inclusive Future

In the concrete jungle of New York City, where skyscrapers tower over the hustle and bustle of urban life, in the Lower East Side this project holds the key to the city's resilience against the threats of climate change. The East Side Coastal Resiliency (ESCR) Project is a monumental coastal resilience project born out of the devastation caused by Hurricane Sandy. It aims to protect vulnerable communities from the looming threats of rising sea levels and storm surges. As the city forges ahead on this ambitious endeavor, it becomes crucial to criticize the nuances, analyze its complexities, and understand the future implications

of this project. Within the ESCR Project lies not only the potential for a more resilient New York but also valuable lessons for the future of climate adaptation in urban landscapes.

The Path Towards Climate Resiliency:

In the wake of Hurricane Sandy's devastating impact on New York City in 2012, the urgent need for resilient solutions became clear. The city responded by participating in the Rebuild By Design competition, launched by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to promote innovative and comprehensive

approaches to enhancing resiliency in Northeastern coastal areas. Out of this competition, the East Side Coastal Resiliency (ESCR) Project emerged as a shining example of the city's commitment to addressing the imminent threats posed by climate change.

The East Side Coastal Resiliency (ESCR) Project aims to address the pressing challenges posed by climate risks. With a substantial budget of \$1.4 billion, the project is funded by both the city and the federal government, specifically through the Department of Housing



A rendering created by the design company Bjarke Ingels group

and Urban Development (HUD). Construction is projected to be completed by 2026.

At its core, the ESCR Project seeks to integrate innovative engineering technologies to establish a comprehensive flood protection system. This approach aims to mitigate the risks of coastal storm surge flooding while also enhancing accessibility to the East River Park waterfront. Moreover, community input from neighboring areas such as the Lower East Side, East Village, Stuyvesant Town, and Peter Cooper Village has played a crucial role in shaping the project's design and implementation.

Collaborative efforts involve several key city departments and agencies

including the NYC Department of Design and Construction (DDC), the Mayor's Office of Resiliency (MOR), and the Department of Parks and Recreation (Parks). Additionally, the project engages other agency partners such as the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the Department of City Planning (DCP), and the New York City Economic Development Corporation (NYCEDC).

New Yorkers, especially residents in the Lower East Side were hopeful of this project as they experienced the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy and other hurricanes. There is a sense of optimism that New York City was taking the threat of climate change seriously.

However, as the project progressed, it also brought to light a set of challenges and complexities involved in planning for climate resiliency. There were changes to the overall plan and budget for the park, backlash from the surrounding

communities, and questions about the longevity of this project to protect the city from sea level rise. Analyzing how the project came to be and how it has been executed can provide invaluable insights into the complexities of large-scale green infrastructure initiatives and highlight areas where improvements can be made. By learning from the lessons of the ESCR Project and incorporating

community input, New York City and other urban centers can pave the way towards a more resilient and sustainable future that prioritizes both environmental preservation, equitable



Area of where the former amphitheatre of the East River Park and was demolished for new construction

access, and long-term security for coastal communities.

Putting Communities at the Forefront:

Amidst the concerns surrounding the ESCR Project, the community's voice has found expression through individuals like Nina Watkins and Tommy Loeb, both long-time residents of the Lower East Side (LES). Interviewing people in the community can give insight into what the concerns are directly. Even though these two accounts are not all-encompassing, it is insightful to hear their concerns and desires for the ESCR project.

Nina Watkins, who has lived across from the East River Park area for her whole life and sees the changes with her own eyes. Watkins expressed concerns about how the construction has been going on for years but there did not seem to be much progress. Due to the construction, Nina now has very limited choices in her access to green space near her residence. She also voiced concerns about her children not being able to have access to park space and she does not have the ability to participate in recreation, such as bike riding. Nina's story is not unique to her but many others in the community face the same limited choices for access to greenspace.

Tommy Loeb, a key organizer in the East River Park Action Group, is an active community member that voices his concerns and demands regarding the project. With a background in local New York City politics and investment in the community, he has expressed concerns about the new construction happening. Tommy disliked how the existing park was demolished in a much larger section than he imagined and had the desire to preserve more parts of the existing East River Park throughout the construction period, especially through the preservation of the existing mature trees, that provide environmental and community benefits. Tommy also expressed that he wanted a more comprehensive park design that is more successful in combatting the consequences of disasters and sea level rise.

“December 2019, all of a sudden, with no notice to the community board, the elected official, the city announced that they were going to demolish the whole park, they had a new plan” - Tommy Loeb

Tommy has played an instrumental role in fostering dialogue between the community and city officials. Through community meetings, grassroots organizing, and activism, he has amplified the voices of his fellow residents, ensuring that their interests are prioritized in the planning process.

Listening to these community residents has brought attention to the potential disconnect between the project’s current execution and the desires of the local community. The activism and community organizing efforts have sparked important conversations about the need for greater transparency, inclusivity, and collaboration

in the planning and execution of the ESCR project. By amplifying the concerns of residents, a more comprehensive approach by engaging with residents as active stakeholders, fostering trust, and building a shared vision for their neighborhood that addresses environmental risks but also prioritizes their social and recreational needs.

Examining Critiques:

Amid the grand vision of the East Side Coastal Resiliency (ESCR) Project, two troubling aspects emerge the division of the LES residents, the erasure of community participation, and the long-term viability of the project.

Within the context of the East Side Coastal Resiliency (ESCR) Project, community leaders have fostered a divisive atmosphere between the residents of the Lower East Side. By framing the project as a necessity for vulnerable residents, particularly those residing in NYCHA housing, and portraying protesters as obstacles to progress, tensions escalated. This divisive narrative has overshadowed the underlying concerns and valid perspectives raised by community members. Rather than promoting collaboration, the community has been fragmented, hindering the formation of a collective voice that could advocate for the best interests of all residents. Resolving this divide requires a renewed emphasis on inclusivity and finding common ground, acknowledging that the path to resilience lies in understanding and addressing



Protests have occurred over how the ESCR project has been executed

the multifaceted needs and aspirations of the entire community.

In the pivotal 2019 event, where residents were meant to be engaged and updated on the project's development, plans were abruptly altered, leaving the community in the dark. This lack of communication and inclusion has fueled frustration and skepticism, particularly as the project's price tag has increased from an initial estimate of \$750 million to a staggering \$1.4 billion. With costs soaring and community voices marginalized, concerns about accountability and decision-making processes are at the forefront of the resident's minds, casting a shadow over the project's intentions and implementation.

There was also a promise of Pier 42 being an open space that the community can use while the East River Park was under construction however the area is still going through ongoing construction and has not provided the same park amenities.

Proceeding with these events, with a disregard for community engagement, transparency, and empty promises, there is a profound sense of mistrust between the residents and the decision-makers. As the project's costs continue to escalate, skepticism mounts, amplifying concerns about accountability and the underlying motivations behind the project.

The erosion of trust underscores the urgent need for authentic collaboration, where communities are not merely spectators, but active participants in shaping the future of resilient urban landscapes. There are voiced concerns about this park being executed for economic development purposes and felt the sense it has been rushed and the new park will not benefit them in the way they first assumed.

Another critical aspect of the ESCR Project is its engineering approach, which focuses on addressing the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) flooding estimates for the year 2050. However, there remains uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of the project in safeguarding against flooding and rising sea levels beyond that point. This concept is also outlined in the city's climate resiliency

A diagram showing the elevation the park will be raised to in order to accommodate for the 2050 FEMA flood projections

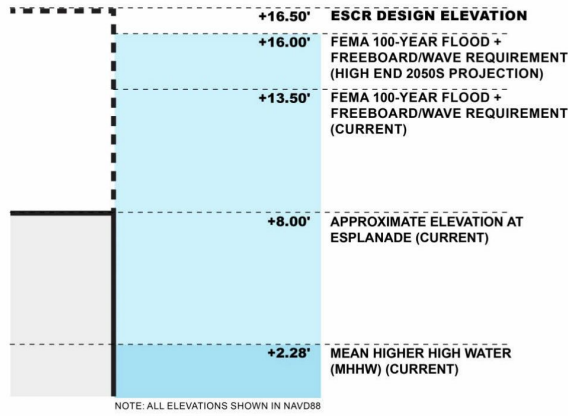


Figure 2. Project Design Elevation

design guidelines in the 2020 and 2022 reports. The report, outlines that projects are facilities should be designed to withstand climate conditions projected for the end of the facility's full useful life and these life timelines are divided into decadal projections. They are not specifically designed for the long-term future in terms of climate projections. Specifically, the ESCR project it is designed for a certain time period of projections, which in this case is 2050 projections.

The primary strategy employed involves raising the park by 8 feet to provide protection against floodwaters and the use of flood gates.

While this approach offers a level of resilience in the near term, concerns arise about the project's long-term viability in the face of accelerating climate change. With sea levels projected to rise beyond 2050, there is a need to consider the potential limitations of the current design and its ability to adapt to future challenges.

Moreover, the reliance on raising the park's elevation as the primary means of protection raises questions about the project's ability to address other critical aspects, such as flash flooding and water displacement. For example with Hurricane Ida, the rainfall surges were at the rate of 3 inches per hour as compared

with Hurricane Sandy which had a rate of 1.75 inches per hour. The park design can handle Hurricane Sandy but it may not account for situations like Hurricane Ida. Also, without large areas for water retention, flood water from this area will get displaced to other parts of Manhattan and Brooklyn. Therefore there are recognized flaws in the design of this project.

Following along with the NYC climate design guidelines, this document primarily prioritizes engineering solutions and aims to incorporate climate change data into the design of capital projects. While this technical focus is crucial for addressing the challenges of a changing climate, it raises questions about the extent to which community input is considered in the decision-making process. Often, community concerns



Construction of the ESCR project under the Williamsburg Bridge in September 2022

and aspirations come into the conversation only when they intersect with the costs or impacts of a project. To truly achieve comprehensive and equitable resilience, it is essential to prioritize meaningful community engagement from the outset, ensuring that the design and implementation of projects reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of the communities they aim to protect. By embracing a more inclusive approach that amplifies community voices, we can foster resilience strategies that not only address climate risks but also enhance the social fabric and well-being of our neighborhoods.

The East Side Coastal Resiliency (ESCR) Project serves as a microcosm of the complexities involved in pursuing climate resilience. The division among NYCHA and non-NYCHA residents and the erasure of community participation has created barriers to effective collaboration and hindered the formation of a collective voice. Furthermore, concerns about the project's long-term viability and the prioritization of limited engineering solutions raise questions about its ability to address future climate challenges beyond 2050. To overcome these hurdles, it is crucial to prioritize inclusivity, community input, and a holistic environmental

engineering approach that places the well-being of the community at the forefront.

Looking Ahead:

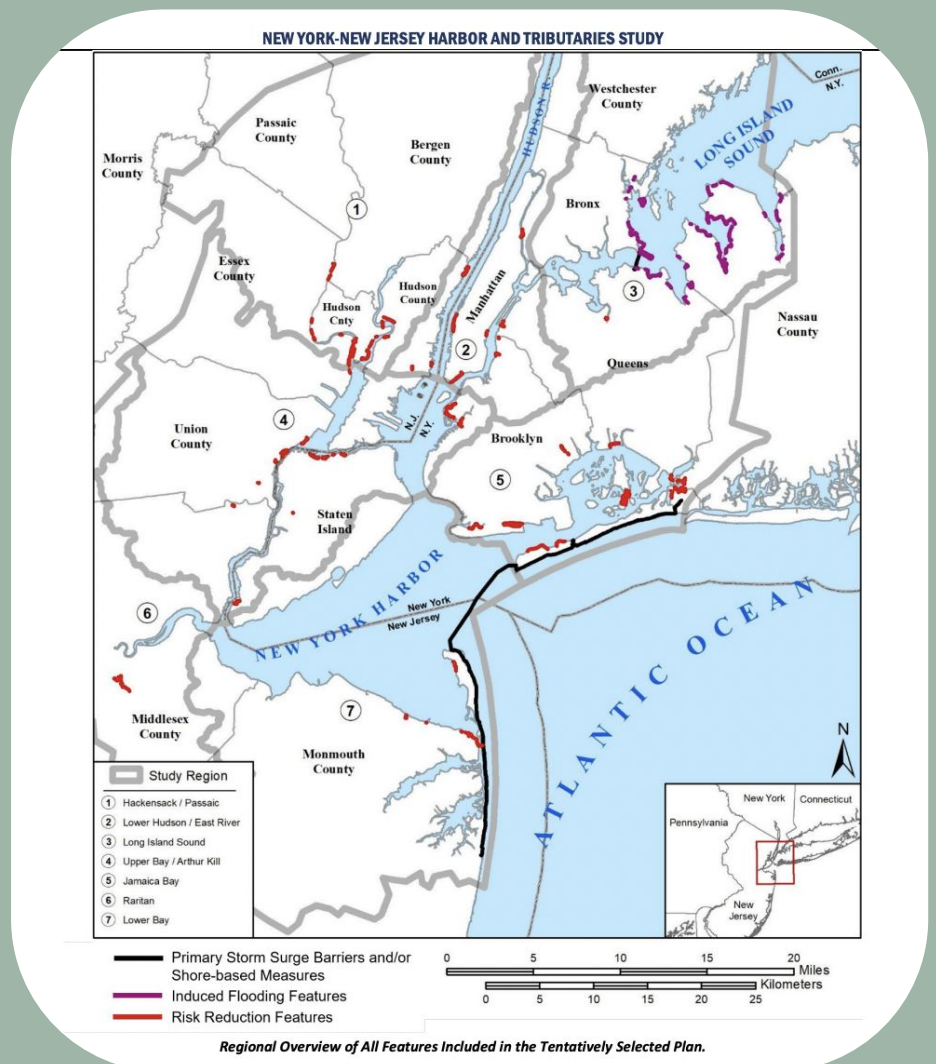
In the pursuit of coastal resilience, cities must broaden their perspective beyond engineered solutions and economic considerations but also emphasize the importance of the health and well-being of their communities. While financial aspects are crucial, addressing climate change requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses community interactions with the environment. By placing the needs and desires of residents above the city's pursuit of financial security, cities can foster a harmonious relationship between urban development and environmental sustainability. The East Side Coastal Resiliency (ESCR) Project serves as a prime example,

demonstrating the significance of community engagement and the need to address the concerns of all residents. By recognizing the interconnectedness between communities, the environment, and urban development can we create a future that safeguards us from environmental hazards while cultivating vibrant urban spaces for generations to come.

As we delve deeper into the complexities of coastal resilience projects like the ESCR, a myriad of questions arise. Is it equitable for a single community to bear the burden of construction and disruption for the benefit of the entire city and future generations? Can we explore more efficient and impactful ways to allocate a substantial budget for such projects? What are the costs and consequences of prioritizing economic benefits over the

protection of communities and the environment? These questions prompt us to critically examine the trade-offs and ethical considerations associated with large-scale infrastructure initiatives, challenging us to seek innovative solutions that balance the needs of all stakeholders

and ensure a sustainable and equitable future.



Further projects for coastal resilience in the outer boroughs of New York City and new Jersey

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