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Whole Foods in Gowanus Symbolizes Area's Redevelopment

Residents Have Mixed Reactions to the Grocery Store

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Some locals are enthusiastically for it, and others are adamantly against it. But residents of Gowanus, Brooklyn, generally agree on one thing: The Whole Foods opening this month will irrevocably change the neighborhood.

The 56,000-square-foot market will feature a 20,000-square-foot rooftop greenhouse and an in-house ramen chef; the new building is adjacent to the famous canal, designated a Superfund site by the federal government in early 2010.

For some New Yorkers, Whole Foods markets have come to symbolize a less gritty city, where the more affluent pay up for organic fruits and vegetables and hormone-free meats. And Brooklyn's first Whole Foods is being viewed no differently.

"Everyone here is bracing," said Marlene Donnelly, a longtime resident and a member of Friends and Residents of Greater Gowanus, which worked to get the Superfund designation. "We're all



thinking: What's going to happen?"

With the store set to open Dec. 17, other large-scale changes are taking shape. Community groups led by City Council member Brad Lander are pushing for improvements to infrastructure—such as open space and waterfront access—and to protect artist studios and affordable housing through rezoning.

Mr. Lander will begin meeting with community members Monday to come up with a proposal they hope will shape plans for the neighborhood under May-or-elect Bill de Blasio.

And moneyed professionals—and the Pilates studios they patronize—are being attracted to the once-industrial dumping ground. In September, the

Environmental Protection Agency completed a plan to clean up the contaminated canal, making the area fertile for development. The city also recently approved a new 700-unit rental complex, the neighborhood's largest residential development.

"The old-timers see: We are losing" said Katia Kelly, a Gowanus blogger and longtime local. "Whole Foods is one more example of stores catering to the affluent newcomers."

Whole Foods sees itself as "competitively priced with other options in the neighborhood ... it is our company's belief that healthy foods should be accessible to all," said Michael Sinatra, a spokesman for the market.

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Plenty of fresh-faced Gowanus residents have championed the grocery store and believe it will make the neighborhood better.

"Gowanus is hot," said Hans Heselein, the 32 year-old director of the Gowanus Canal Conservancy, an environmental group. "I mean, c'mon, it's

Backyard mind-set. "I've seen a lot of Whole Foods go in, with no deleterious effects."

On the other hand, Mr. Benepe said, "It may well lead to further development, and the neighborhood needs to make sure it has open space."

In Harlem, some longtime locals have

Planning is under way for another Whole Foods in Harlem, this one on 125th Street.

Whole Foods considers a variety of factors when looking at possible locations, like the density of college graduates and available space, Mr. Sinatra said.

The Gowanus store is intended to appeal to environmentally conscious locals. "This is one of the most forward-thinking, sustainably-designed buildings that has ever been put into place," he said.

Those opposed to the Whole Foods are unswayed. To them, the market is "a destination store" that will bring traffic and folks from out of the area. Ms. Donnelly said it reminds her of "a suburban strip mall." The store has a parking lot, and "in this neighborhood, driving is a sin," said David Gurin, a Gowanus resident and city planner.

Others expect benefits, such as new jobs, local economic growth, and health-conscious eating. Craig Hammerman, a local community board member, said the store is "considering the needs of the community."

On a recent Saturday morning, construction crews were manning the site while onlookers rode by on bikes. The surrounding area was largely quiet.

Some residents who have seen Whole Foods move into their neighborhoods shrugged off the market's impact. Photographer Linda Pitt, an East Village resident for more than 30 years, said the area changed a lot after the market moved to the Bowery in 2007, but, "I don't think it was a supermarket that changed this neighborhood."

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Brooklyn! We welcome people coming, supporting business, and generating momentum."

Adrian Benepe, the former city parks commissioner, has seen plenty of area infighting over development. In the storied tradition of New York neighborhood battles, he said, both sides may be overstating their cases. "New York is characterized by a kind of hysterical NIMBYism," he said, referring to the Not In My

complex feelings about their Whole Foods, which opened on 97th Street in 2009, one of seven in Manhattan. "Whole Foods is a symbol of: 'This place doesn't belong to us anymore,'" said Alicette Torres, a Harlem-born artist.

A grocer catering to low-income people in Harlem just blocks from Whole Foods has since closed, and a Best Yet Market—similar in many ways to Whole Foods—has opened.